

KIRK FITZPATRICK

**THIS IS
ANCIENT
PHILOSOPHY**

AN INTRODUCTION

WILEY Blackwell

THIS IS ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY



THIS IS PHILOSOPHY

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For Elizabeth and Forrest

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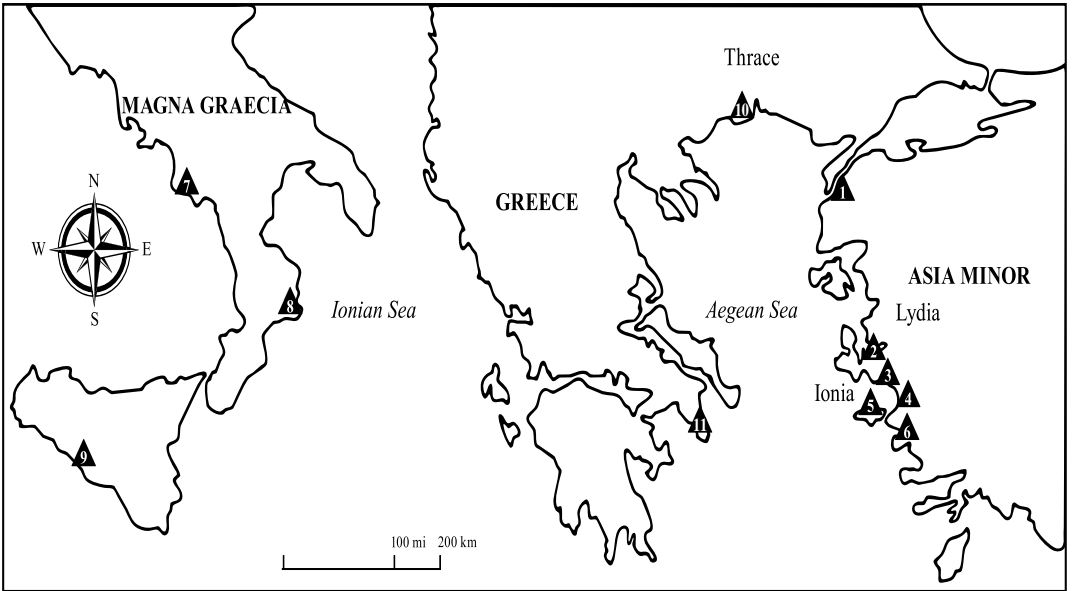
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MAP



ASIA MINOR

- ▲1 Troy
- ▲2 Miletus—Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes
- ▲3 Colophon—Xenophanes
- ▲4 Ephesus—Heraclitus
- ▲5 Clazomenae—Anaxgoras
- ▲6 Samos—Melissus

MAGNA GRAECIA

- ▲7 Elea—Parmenides, Zeno
- ▲8 Crotona—Pythagoras
- ▲9 Acragas—Empedocles

GREECE

- ▲10 Abdera—Leucippus, Democritus, Protagoras
- ▲11 Athens—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Antisthenes, Diogenes of Sinope, Epicurus, Zeno of Citium, Pyrrho, Arcesilaus of Pitane, Carneades

INTRODUCTION

The Precursors of Philosophy: Homer and Hesiod

Before Greek philosophy, there was Homer (c. 750 BCE), the cornerstone of all early Greek writings. He offers two epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.¹ The *Iliad* is a story about rage, courage, and honor. The *Odyssey* is a story for training in leadership and excellence (*arete*). Athena mentors Telemachus until Odysseus returns. The epic poems employ the gods as anthropomorphic and immortal beings. The gods meddle in natural and human events. They have demigod children with humans, and they suffer the same emotions as humans. Homer employs a worldview that he inherits and weaves into his epic poems. He mentions the heavens, the gods, and the underworld. He treats natural phenomena, such as rivers, as gods. He puts gods on the battlefield. When Ares gets wounded in battle, he wails like a baby and runs back up to Olympus.² What he does not offer is an account of the heavens, the earth, the underworld, or gods in their own right. Still, for the early Greek philosophers and Plato, these are essential readings. The philosophers do not adopt the teachings. They critique the stories and propose alternative views. Any student of ancient Greek philosophy should read these works carefully.

¹ Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are available online at the Perseus Digital Library. The *Iliad* is here: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0134:book=1:card=1>. The *Odyssey* is here: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0136>.

² *Iliad* V.860.

2 Introduction

It might seem that Homer's works were the Bible of the ancient Greek world. This accurately places Homer at the center of Greek thought, but it ignores certain important points. There are two main differences between Homer's texts and the Bible. The Bible is sacrosanct; it excludes any alternative view. Its stories cannot be altered or varied without heresy. The ancients took Homer's stories as more fluid. A poet could claim, for instance, that Helen was not to blame for the war on Troy since the Helen in Troy was a specter. Helen all the while was somewhere else. Modern religions do not allow reinterpretation of their scripture. Historically, every Christian who wrote a book to distinguish all the heretics eventually became a heretic. Heretics did not fare well. Good luck for the Greeks, since they did not interpret Homer as sacrosanct.

Hesiod (c. 700 BCE) offers an importantly different approach to the archaic Greek perspective. Though he inherits the worldview, Hesiod is concerned to offer a more detailed and systematic treatment of the heavens, the earth, the gods, and human beings. *Theogony* and *Works and Days* offer an account of the topics. "Theogony" means the coming to be of the gods, or the birth of the gods.³ The story that Hesiod tells connects the birth of the gods with the birth of the *Kosmos*, the ordered world. *Works and Days* tells of the cycles in the agricultural calendar, the regular cycles of the seasons, and the cycles in the many different ages of mankind.⁴ In this work, we get the story of Prometheus and Pandora. We also get the five ages of man.

According to Hesiod, the god Khaos (chaos) came into being first or has always been. This god is the space between heaven and earth. Next come the goddess Gaia (earth) and the god Ouranos (heaven). Then came the gods Tartaros (underworld) and Eros (love). Khaos begets Erebos (night). Erebos begets the gods Aether (topmost air) and Hemera (day). Gaia begets starry Ouranos (heaven) and makes him equal to her size. Heaven is so nice that it is begotten twice, according to Hesiod. She also begets mountains and nymphs. Gaia and Ouranos beget the twelve Titans. First comes Oceanos (sea); it encircles the earth and flows around it. Then they beget Kronos (time), Tethys (rivers), and Themis (justice). Oceanus and

³ Hesiod's *Theogony* is available here: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0130>.

⁴ Hesiod's *Works and Days* is available here: <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0132>.

Tethys beget Metis (wisdom). In the beginning, Ouranos ruled all the gods and nature. Ouranos ruled as the father of the other gods. One of Ouranos' Titans, Kronos, overthrew him and forced his way to rule. Time, then, comes to rule the gods and nature. Through time, Kronos and the Titaness Rhea (mother) beget six children. Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Poseidon, and Hades were her first five children. Kronos ruled through power. He was warned that his offspring would overthrow him, just as he had done to his father. So, Kronos swallowed his first five children whole. There, the five swallowed immortal gods were contained in him. Eating the children seems odd, but there are not many options for containing and controlling an immortal being. Zeus was the sixth offspring. Rhea saved Zeus by giving Kronos a rock to swallow, instead of her child. She hid Zeus in Gaia. Over time and by might, Zeus challenged and overthrew Kronos by giving him a potion that made him vomit. Thereby, he freed all his siblings that had been swallowed by Kronos. Zeus did not take kingship straightaway after freeing his siblings and overthrowing Kronos. After overthrowing Kronos, the gods voted to elect a ruler. Zeus won the election. He then swallowed Metis (wisdom), who was his first wife, and Themis (justice). Zeus rules through wisdom and justice. He provides rational and moral order to the *Kosmos*.

Hesiod adds curious features to his account. He says that heaven is the same size as earth. Possibly, though we do not know, he holds that the underworld is the same size as earth and heaven. He says that the distance between heaven and earth is calculated by the amount of time it would take for an iron anvil to fall for ten days and nine nights. The same calculation is used for the distance between the earth and the underworld. So, the earth is equidistant between heaven and the underworld. Hesiod offers a rational proportion among the top, the bottom, and the between of what is. In Hesiod's cosmology, an account of the *Kosmos*, the *Kosmos* is intelligible. Human beings can use reason to understand it and language (*logos*) to account for it. The *Kosmos* is guided by wisdom and ordered through justice.

Suppose we ask Homer or Hesiod how they learned such marvelous things. How might I discover such things? From the texts that we have, we can see that neither Homer nor Hesiod would have a justification that went beyond an appeal to tradition and an appeal to authority. They could say, "Believe me because we Greeks have always believed this or have believed it for a very long time." They might say, "Believe me because I am an authoritative source." As philosophers today, we can say that believing something

because it has been believed for a long time or believing something because of who said it are instances of the informal fallacies of appeal to tradition and appeal to authority. Homer and Hesiod had popular accounts of the *Kosmos*, and there was no comparable rival. The philosophers would change this by offering a different sort or kind of explanation.

This Is Ancient Greek Philosophy

The sources that we have for conveying information about the early Greek philosophers are far removed from the original texts. Manuscripts from the era were disseminated by scribes, making copies of a text. The text that formed the basis for the scribe was more likely than not a copy of a copy of a copy. Scribes are imperfect conduits of information. In addition to the challenges faced in ascertaining the accuracy of the base text, there are errors that often occur in the transcription of the base text. There are errors of omission: *Homeoteleuton* occurs when a transcription skips words because a subsequent word has the same or a similar ending. *Homeoarchy* occurs when the transcriber skips lines because of the similarity of the beginnings of the lines. *Haplography* occurs when the transcriber copies a term that appears twice in the base text. There are errors in addition. *Dittography* occurs when the transcriber writes a term twice that appears only once in the base text. *Contamination* occurs when a transcriber inserts text that is not in the base text. There are errors in transposition. *Metathesis* occurs when a transcriber reverses letters, words, or phrases from the base text. Finally, but not exhaustively, there are errors of alteration. These errors occur when a transcriber attempts, deliberately or not, to make sense of the base text in the transcription.

We would be fortunate if we had confidence that our sources were copies of copies that could trace their preceding texts straight through to the original text. We are not so fortunate. Instead, we encounter the ideas of the early Greek philosophers through subsequent texts that offer information that is drawn from original texts or copies of original texts. Since we do not have the original texts, we cannot determine what sort the base text was for the author recounting the thoughts of his predecessors. Our sources offer information of two sorts. *Testimonia* offers paraphrases of a focal author's text, of a transcription of the focal author's text, or of the focal author's ideas or reputed ideas. *Fragments* offer a quotation from the focal author's text or a transcription at some remove from the author's text. The fragments might be a quotation of a word, phrase, or selection of varying length from a base

text. We are fortunate today to have valuable collections of reference texts. This book makes use of certain standard sources.⁵

Ancient philosophy is distant in time and distant linguistically from us today. The manuscripts that we have often conflict with each other or only partially preserve the text. The expanse of time resulted in many works being partially or entirely lost to us. The ancient Greek language presents challenges of its own, since many of its terms cannot be directly translated into English. In this text, I have retained some of the central Greek terms. I offer the Greek terms in a non-technical phonetic form so that English readers can easily hear an approximation of the original terms.⁶ The phonetic rendition of the Greek terms fulfills another goal. It stresses that we are discussing the Greek ideas and not their English translations. For instance, the book uses and examines the Greek concept of *Kosmos* and not the English term “cosmos.”

It is common for texts on ancient philosophy to adopt one of two approaches, either focusing on certain philosophers or on certain themes. The following text adopts a hybrid approach by examining both philosophers and themes. There are three parts in this book and three chapters in each part. The three parts are organized in the same way. They start with two chapters on particular authors and conclude with a chapter on a theme. Part I of the book is Early Greek Philosophy. These

⁵ The Early Greeks: Richard D. McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994). Daniel W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy, The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics*, Part I and II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). The titles in the Loeb Classical Library collection are here: <https://www.loebclassics.com/view/LCL524/2016/volume.xml>. The Golden Age: John M. Cooper, *Plato: Complete Works*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997). Jonathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle* in two volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991). Hellenistic Philosophy: Long and Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987). A.A. Long, *Hellenistic Philosophy, Stoic, Epicureans, and Sceptics* 2nd ed., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986). Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, R.D. Hicks trans. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931) refers to philosophers in all three periods. Digital Libraries: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Classics (MIT): <http://classics.mit.edu/index.html>. Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org>. Perseus Digital Library at Tufts University has Greek and English texts here: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>.

⁶ To read the Greek words, pronounce the letter “c” as an English “k” and pronounce the letter “y” as a “u.”

philosophers turn from the mythological and theological explanation of the *Kosmos* to rational and material explanations. Thales holds that water is the basic stuff; Anaximenes holds that it is air; Anaximander holds that it is the unlimited (*apeiron*); and Empedocles holds that it is earth, air, fire, and water. Democritus holds that it is atoms. Some hold that the explanation of the *Kosmos* is more abstract. Empedocles holds that it is Mind (*nous*) and seeds. Xenophanes is skeptical about almost all that we think we know. Part I concludes with a chapter called “The Philosophical Turn.” This chapter examines the development of rational and material explanations through a comparative analysis of the early Greeks. We cannot overstate the importance of the early Greek philosophers. We continue to investigate and explain the world through rational and material explanations. Though science as we know it today did not sprout fully from the early Greeks, they turned us toward models and methods that continue to develop and guide us today.

Part II is The Golden Age. This part examines Plato and Aristotle’s texts. Plato offers an account of Socrates and the Sophists. He also offers his own philosophical system in the theory of forms. The Plato chapter concludes by examining the implications of the theory of forms for ethics and politics. These implications show that one form of government is just and all others are unjust, in varying degrees. Aristotle innovates the subject of formal logic. He also offers his own philosophical system, in his theory of Hylomorphism. Through the implications of his theory, Aristotle gives an account of ethics and politics. His theory of ethics argues that virtue is a mean between two extremes, one of excess and one of deficiency. The chapter on Aristotle concludes with his account of politics and justice in the state. Part II concludes with the theme of The Subjects of Philosophy, offering the distinctions among the subjects of philosophy as employed in the golden age and today.

Part III is Hellenistic Philosophy. This period of philosophy begins with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE. Aristotle died a year later. Under Alexander, the Hellenic world had expanded and unified in a way unmatched in western history. At the time of his death, Alexander’s empire spread from Greece, Egypt and North Africa to the western part of India. During the fragmentation of the Alexandrian empire and the civil wars, Hellenistic philosophy developed and flourished. There were four philosophies in the period: Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Skepticism. The Cynics reject conventional values and live a life according to nature. They live without possessions in a hand-to-mouth existence on the streets. They strive for happiness through minimalist living and control

over their desires. Epicurus adopts atomism, but he focuses on mental and physical quietude. He aims to embody imperturbability (*ataraxia*). Stoicism develops innovations in logic, by going beyond Aristotle's syllogistic logic and by offering an account of propositional logic. Despite this historically significant innovation, the Stoics are squarely concerned to develop a disciplined mind and body. They aim to control desires, passions, and assent to judgments. They consider it their duty to live according to nature. This disciplined life according to nature results in imperturbability and a happy life (*eudaimonia*). The Sceptics are the inheritors of Plato's Academy. They develop an account of argument that critiques the claims of other philosophers by opposing a thesis argument with an antithesis argument. They hold that any thesis can be opposed by an equally credible antithesis. So, they withhold assent (*epoche*) and suspend judgment. In this way, they avoid dogmatism (*dogmatikos*) to achieve both imperturbability and apathy (*apatheia*).

The theme of Part III is the focal concern of Hellenistic philosophy, the good life. Each movement aims at happiness. They find it through various means: imperturbability, apathy, and the suspension of judgment. They all agree that to live the good life, one must engage in purposeful voluntary action. They inherit accounts of voluntary action from Plato and Aristotle. These two golden age figures develop their accounts of voluntary action in the light of Socrates' claim that one cannot voluntarily act against one's better judgment. He denied that there are acts of moral weakness. This leads Plato and Aristotle to develop accounts of voluntary action and explain action against one's better judgment. The Hellenistic philosophers inherit the accounts of voluntary action, and they establish commitments in the early Greek philosophers. The materialism of the early Greek philosophers, especially the atomists, implies a fated outcome in the *Kosmos*. There is psychological determinism in Socrates' denial of moral weakness, in addition to the materialists' *Kosmic* determinism. Attempts to account for voluntary action against better judgment become attempts to account for voluntary action in contrapose to the necessity of the fated *Kosmos*. Each of the Hellenistic philosophers attempts to reconcile these conflicting concerns. This difficulty remains today as the question of the freedom of will.

Part I

EARLY GREEK PHILOSOPHY