

# GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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**Two groups of thinkers** From ancient Greek philosophical thought there remain to us two different blocks of creativity, that of the Milesian hylozoists in the sixth through fifth centuries, B.C.E. and that of the three fifth-to-fourth century thinkers--Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle--of whom Socrates was the teacher of Plato, while Aristotle was the pupil of Plato.

**The Milesian philosophers** Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes usually get first attention in this group. They were speculative materialists, living on the coast of Asia Minor, whose thinking appears to have been triggered by observations of nature or natural phenomena. Contemporary with the early Greek historians, lyric poets, and political theorists like Solon and Pericles, these Milesian philosophers probed the causes of the observable world, and theorized fruitfully over the ways events play out in human environments. We usually attach a tag, to each of the Milesians, identifying a key principle by which he chose to interpret phenomena: Thales (624 B.C.E.-546 B.C.E.) worked around water, a subject omnipresent on the Asia Minor Coast; Anaximenes (6<sup>th</sup> cent. B.C.E.) attended to the principle of the infinite air, a formative substance, from which his thinking inclined to derive the principal forms of matter; Anaximander (610-546 B.C.E.) theorized that 'the undefined,' to *apeiron*, was the material substrate from which the cosmos is formed. In each case, the key concept chosen became a wedge for inquiry into the labyrinthine paths by which the first principle generates a meaningful universe.

**Socrates and Plato** A subtle and complex progression of ideas joins the three philosophers—Socrates (469-399 B.C.E.), Plato (428-348 B.C.E.), Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.)—who write off the end of the classical moment of ancient Greek culture, and who ultimately offer very different interpretations of the interrelations among morality, analysis, and the intelligibility of the world. Socrates, still part of an oral and ethically inquiring social context, throws his weight behind dialectical argument, and thought chains by which the listener in conversation is led to discover the truth from within his own responses. Plato, whose thought interlocks with that of his teacher, Socrates, readily moves the discussion into epistemology and political theory, unfolding through a vast series of dialogues a theory of ideas whose reality occupies meaning on many levels of human being. His universe crackles with metaphors for insight and super sensuous awareness. Aristotle, instinctively analytical, carries the Platonic thought tradition into scientific researches and social/aesthetic inquiries, opening paths, in metaphysics and literary theory, which still jump out of the classroom into our daily lives.

**The character of Greek philosophy** If any single trait joins together the main traditions of Greek philosophy, it is restless and free-spirited inquiry, robustly addressing the essential questions of life: what are we made of? how should we act? where are we going? Western civilization still lives these inquiries, and in ways set down for us by Greek thinkers.

## Readings

Freeman, Charles, *Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, Oxford, 1996.

Nightingale, Andrea Wilson, *Spectacles of Truth in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge, 2004.

## Discussion questions

Make an effort to see the connections between the Milesian and the Socratic-Platonic movements in philosophy. Has the Milesian movement contributed to the shaping of Western thought?

Do you see in ancient Greek philosophy a potential for the development of scientific thought? Is Milesian thought promising for the disclosure of the ways nature works?

Is ancient Greek philosophy manifestly related to the poetry and the political thinking of the Greeks? Is Homer, who dominated all subsequent Greek thinking, in a recognizable sense a philosopher?

### **Early Greek Philosophy: The Milesians**

**Epic poetry and the early Greek philosophy of Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes.** The epic imagination privileged comprehensive poetic visions of the order of the cosmos and of the passions displayed by the noble figures of adventure and folk thought. In other words the epic vision, even in a sometimes prosaic writer like Hesiod, inclines to imagine the big picture. While sharing this big picture concern, the philosophical imagination took a different path into the description of what the world is. We may best consider that path as one of analysis, the taking apart of the experienced world, to see what makes it tick, as distinct from the epic poet's embrace in formalized language of the outflowering meanings of the human and natural world. We can see the *philosophical* dimension of thought in the earliest Greek rational analysis, emerging from the Greek speaking cultural centers of Asia Minor. While it may seem that the three Milesian 'philosophers,' working from Asia Minor in the sixth century, created kinds of mythology of the chief elements of the physical world--*air, fire, water*—we will find, upon looking further, that the *analytical* impulse is what prevails in the thinking of these men.

**The analytic imagination.** Epic poetry delights in narratives built on narratives, and on extensive—and of course meaningful—adventuring into implication, meaning, and interpretation. The earliest forms of philosophy in Greece grew up through the mists of Greek cultural awareness, and in the forms of mythology, the complex of tales the Greeks worshipped and fabulated through, meanings of the physical and spiritual world were constantly put into play. (The dance of fantasy with hard thought is what makes a great mythology like the Greek of lasting interest.) But mythology is only a step toward analysis...and rarely pursues its narratives to a conclusion. With the Milesians, from the cultural center of Miletus in Asia Minor, with its face toward the older and more sophisticated cultures of the East—Babylonian, Egyptian—the mythic impulse began to assume the form of a reflective address to the tales told by the Greeks from immemorial time. Into these world narratives was inserted a question: *what is the essence of the dramatic life epic and myth bring before us?* And above all, as the Milesians were basic inquirers, and lived on a coastline where material elements were conspicuous, *the question of essences directed itself to the phenomena of nature.* We are ready to address the particular answers the Milesians gave, to the question of essences, but we should not hurriedly move beyond the mere fact that a question of this sort was posed. The intervention of a question onto narratives interrupts the flow of telling, and organizes a demand on the listener.

**Thales (ca. 585 B.C.) and his question.** Thales' question was apparently *what is the first principle of reality, that from which all derives?* (Apparently: the few fragments that remain to us from Thales are embedded in the writing of other philosophers, especially of Aristotle, and can be very cryptic.) Aristotle gives the following, in explanation of Thales' answer: *Over the number, however, and the form of this kind of principle they (the Milesian philosophers) do not agree: but Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says it (the first principle) is water, and therefore declared that the earth is on water...(Metaphysics 983 b 6).* Thales' water-answer falls in line with the cosmological thinking of those Babylonian and Sumerian speculations—indeed with the perspective of the Book of *Genesis*—for which our just created world is imagined floating on a body of water, the mists from which gradually clear to reveal the firm contours of a landmass. In any case, we clearly see the difference between Thales' imagination, in addressing the meaning of the world, and that of the other two Milesian thinkers frequently joined to him.

**Anaximander (610-546 B.C.) and Anaximenes (585-528 B.C.).** Anaximander was a disciple of Thales. His imaginative turn was to pose to himself many questions about the nature, shape and movements of the earth and heavens, and above all about the first principle of all he observed on the earth. 'He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but some other indefinite nature, from which came into being all the heavens and the worlds in them.' (The Greek word, *to apeiron*, means 'the indefinable,' and is often translated as 'the cosmic infinite.' All things pass into and out of that *apeiron*, in a constant circular sequence of births and destructions.) Anaximenes was a pupil of Anaximander. Here is his view, as stated by a later Greek commentator: 'Anaximenes ... also says that the underlying nature is one and infinite like Anaximander, but not undefined as Anaximander said but definite, for he identifies it as air...being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones...'

**Is this Milesian thinking a form of imagination? Is it literature?** In this syllabus we are putting pressure on the terms *imagination* and *literature*. By *imagination* we mean, here, style of conceiving and reporting on the world.

The epic poet's style of doing this is different from that of the Milesian philosopher. The epic poet elaborates an artistically formalized account of the world; the Milesian philosopher cuts the richness of the world back to its essence. Is the word *literature* large enough to cover both of these kinds of action? The word *literature* will suffice, if we interpret it as the Milesians interpreted their world-stuff. Literature means a creation out of *litterae*, letters, and is one of the ways humans express themselves in sound and writing. The literary act is the act of working in letters, the language you are, to inflect your expression of the world. Interpreted in that way, the term *literature* expands to cover a variety of actions—epic poetry, philosophy, and other fields, like dramatic expression, lyric expression, and historical expression.

### *Reading*

*Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*, ed. Reginald Allen (New York, 1966.) (Read the section on the three pre-Socratic Milesians. Then explore farther in any of the several relevant works listed in the Collateral Reading at the end of this whole syllabus.)

### *Discussion*

When I am asked what 'philosophy' is I find it hard to answer. Too many answers come into my mind. Tracking philosophy to its historical roots, in a kind of inquiry, is useful for me. It helps me to understand some basic impulses of what today we call 'philosophy.' *Inquiry* itself is already a kind of mind-turn which leads to a distinctive kind of 'imagination,' as we are using that term here.

To note, and keep in mind. When we get to 'history,' the last of our five imagination-types, we will find that the word *history*—the Greek word *historia*—derives from the Greek verb meaning *to inquire, historeo*. *Please remember to ask yourself how the inquiry that takes place in 'history' differs from the inquiry that takes place in 'philosophy.'*

## Socrates

**Socrates (469-399 B.C.) as an Athenian.** Socrates, the most prominent Greek philosopher of the fifth century, saw the century out with his death. He belongs to his own time fiercely, as an ambulatory thinker and ‘gadfly,’ known for his lifetime of conversing with his fellow citizens. But he had other reasons to respect himself: as a military man who performed yeoman service in the many wars Athens fought in the mid-fifth century; as a senator from his district; as a householder with sons; in short as a full-complement citizen of Athenian democracy. His death, known to all, is a shame to Athens, but ‘makes sense’ from certain perspectives.

**Socrates and his place in Greek analytic thought.** Throughout his public life Socrates, who was a follower of Anaxagoras (500-428 B.C.), remained in or near Athens, often teaching and discussing in public. (Prefatory note: the life and thought of Socrates, who never wrote, is preserved for us by his pupil, Plato, and it is very hard to distinguish Socrates the man from the figure of Socrates who is an essential character in Plato’s work, appearing continually as a key figure in Plato’s dialogues. We will be reading, as our week’s assignment, three dialogues of Plato which document ‘the last days of Socrates.’) The main themes of his own teaching are simple, but his gift both for poetry and argumentation lifts those themes to world importance. Above all, Socrates remains true to the questioning tradition which dominated Milesian thought, and which we have seen marking out a path sharply different from the mythological thinking of archaic Greek epic poetry. (Chronology matters here. The Milesians we read flourished in the first half of the sixth century, Socrates in the second half of the fifth century: over a century passed here, in which early Milesian thought was being supplemented by a lineage of distinguished thinkers—Heraclitus, Parmenides, Pythagoras—who were all formative for Socrates. Socrates found himself at the end of a distinguished line of ‘analytical’ thinkers.)

**Socrates’ argument.** It is important to start with what Socrates did not do as a philosopher. He did not lay down doctrines, positions that could be repeated and analyzed by others. Instead, he argued out the implications of ethical decision, by challenging interlocutors to examine what was involved in their beliefs. For example, when those who talked with him expounded ideas of what constituted virtue, he led them to examine those ideas and, in every case, to show themselves up as not knowing what they meant and not knowing the implications of what they said. In mock humility, Socrates subjected himself to the same ruthless kind of critique. He referred—in the *Apology*, the trial statement which we will read this week—to the widely known response of the Delphic oracle that Socrates is the wisest of men. This verdict seemed to Socrates to be indefensible until he began to query men who considered themselves wise, and found that they had no understanding of, for instance, what constitutes virtue or courage. And in what did Socrates exceed these other candidates for wisdom? He knew that he was not wise, while all the others thought, mistakenly, that they were wise. This method of inquiry, by which the interlocutor is invited to trap himself in admissions of ignorance, is the basic form of Socratic argument, and was by subsequent critics called his *elenchos*, or cross-examination, technique. It will already be apparent, perhaps, that other philosophical positions will build from this *elenchos* work; it is clear that for Socrates an evanescent *truth* is the essence against which inquiry takes place. From that implication we may already site the influence of Socrates on the huge written opus of his pupil Plato.

**Who was Socrates?** Socrates remains a mysterious figure. He wrote nothing, and so we are dependent, for our knowledge about him, on others who wrote about him. (There are three main sources of this kind: Xenophon, the memoirist and military historian, who lived Socrates’ world; the comic writer Aristophanes, who pilloried Socrates in contemporary plays like *The Birds*—see readings for Week Fourteen--and Plato, for whom Socrates became a leitmotif for increasingly refined dialogues of thought.) What most grounds Socrates is his trial, his reaction to it, and the place he played in his time. The trial in question stemmed from a culture suspicious above all of religious unorthodoxy; and the initial charge was that Socrates was indifferent to traditional religious practices. The world in which Socrates was put to death, for suspicions of this sort, was one in which public self-confidence was at a low.

**The historical setting of the trial and death.** A history of Ancient Greece (like the text by Thomas Martin, recommended for our course) will help to guide you through the rapids of Greek cultural history from 700 to 350 B.C. Socrates died in 399 B.C., as you know, Plato (next week’s assignment) in

348 B.C., Alexander the Great in 323 B.C., Aristotle in 322 B.C. During the three centuries prior to Alexander’s death Athens—remember our emphasis is falling on *Athens*, though a coherent (if less interesting) history could have been written about Thebes, Corinth, Sparta, and other city-states—passed through many social/political turns: during the seventh century the city-state defined itself slowly off from the epic clan and family world of Homer,

making possible the growth, by the sixth century, of early forms of democracy, a coinage economy, a useable legal system, and a cohesive military force. The fifth century debuts with a huge challenge, The Persian Wars, which provide tumultuous victory followed quickly, in mid-century, by conflict and then War between Athens and Sparta, the two allies active in defeating the Persians. The teachings of Socrates occurred in an Athens which was on the verge of its eventual defeat by Sparta, and the death of Socrates coincided with post war confusion, and a shaky alternation between tyranny and return to democracy. In the midst of such rapid change, Athens found itself hungry for its old traditions, suspicious of new and tricky teachings like those of the Sophists—which Socrates had nothing to do with—and ready for a kind of Joseph McCarthy purge of unorthodox thinkers. Into that vortex Socrates fell.

### **Reading**

*The Last Days of Socrates: Euthyphro; The Apology; Crito; Phaedo*, trans. Tredennick (New York, 1993). (Read all four dialogues. You may well want to explore more Platonic dialogues this week: try *The Phaedo* or *The Symposium*).

### **Discussion**

How do you understand the cultural climate that led to the death of Socrates? Was his gadfly questioning so offensive to that many people of power? What were they afraid of? Did the Milesian philosophers, who queried the essence of nature, not equally disturb people? (It did not). Was it that Socrates went to the heart of the person, and stirred up internal anxieties? Would Socrates in any way resemble Jesus Christ, in his disturbing mission?

Have we any parallels to Socrates in contemporary society? Have you heard of I.F. Stone? Have you read H.L.Mencken? What do we do with gadflies?

## Plato

**The philosophic imagination and historical context.** By concentrating on imaginative styles, in this syllabus, we have had to limit our attention to ‘historical context.’ We are discussing styles of expression and thought in Ancient Greek culture, but at the same time, inevitably, sacrificing an analysis of the historical bedding of the uses of the imagination. It will be well to comment, no matter how briefly, on the world of post fifth century Athens, the world which saw at its beginning the tragic execution of Socrates.

The prosperity which had so buoyed Athens by the mid-fifth century, especially after the defeat of the massive Persian naval force at the Battle of Salamis (480 B.C.), found itself gradually eroded by such nagging calamities as the Peloponnesian War (finally lost conclusively to Sparta in 404 B.C.), the exhaustion of the Laurion Silver Mines, which had been a major source of military wealth for the polis, and politically reckless moves like the Sicilian expedition, on which the Athenians wasted money and manpower. The history of the fourth century in Greece will lack the clear cut drama provoked by Athenian brilliance a century earlier. The first forty years of the fourth century saw the major city states--Athens, Sparta, and Thebes--interlocked in family power-games and warfare, the old spirit of democracy slowly leaching from the political Athenians. When Philip II became King of Macedon, in 359 B.C. the profile of Greek history veered, giving way to the power of Greece’s northern neighbor, and to the powerful monarchical tradition that culminated in the reign of Alexander the Great, who from 333 B.C. to his death in 323 B.C. created a vast Empire which included Hellas within it, and reached to India. It is significant to our course, that even inside the turbulent fractures that disturbed the Greek polis during the fourth century, two of the greatest Western philosophers unfolded extensive commentaries on the nature of life. Plato died in 348 B.C., while his pupil Aristotle died in 322 B.C.

**Life of Plato.** Plato was born in 428 B.C., and was thus a young man during the Peloponnesian War, the public teaching of Socrates, and many of the greatest achievements of Greek tragedy and comedy. Born into a distinguished family, he naturally gravitated to the intellectually intense public life of central Athens, where he encountered the Sophists, and became a friend of the forty-years older Socrates, a conspicuous public figure and a contentious but admired gadfly of the society. Drawn to Socrates, for his wit, wisdom, and daring, Plato dedicated his own earliest writing—for he was from the start a thinker and man of letters—to dramatizing the implications of the death of Socrates. (Plato’s dialogues called *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Euthyphro* all treat of that death.) With those texts, and others, Plato launched a career of dialogue writing which was to grow in richness and depth until the end of his life. From that huge opus of dialogues we will, in this course, be devoting our attention to *The Republic* (389 B.C.), arguably Plato’s most realized and influential work. (We will have to content ourselves with a few references to other works.) He was by no means only active in writing, however. In 388 B.C. he traveled throughout Sicily and Italy, returning to Athens the following year to a period of intense writing—the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, *Symposium* and other dialogues were composed at this time—only to return again to Sicily in 367 B.C. and again in 361 B.C., at the invitation of Dionysius II. The purpose of these visits was to make a philosopher-king—the ideal ruler in Plato’s *Republic*—out of the young ruler of Syracuse. The results were hugely unsatisfactory, and Plato finally returned home to Greece, to care for and direct the extraordinary ‘first University in the West,’ the Academy of which he was the founder. He worked there, tutoring students of such global significance as Aristotle, until his death. (Interestingly enough the Academy itself survived all manner of geopolitical turmoil, to remain intact until 529 A.D., when the Emperor Justinian closed it down.) It was while directing the Academy, in the last twenty years of his life, that Plato wrote the deepest of his dialogues—*The Theatetus*, *The Sophist*, *The Timaeus*, *The Laws*.

**The perspectives of Plato’s philosophy.** The analytic trend, in which we have found the signature of Greek philosophy, beginning with the Milesians, developed alongside the practice of question-asking—which from the start we contrasted to the accumulative, generative thought practices of the epic poetic tradition. We have seen that the Milesian penchant for questioning the essential components of the universe translated, in Socrates—and through a formative tradition linking Socrates to his Milesian background—into a remorseless querying of individuals on issues of ethical values. That social turn of Socrates was always strong in Plato, for whom the dialogue form was naturally a dramatization of kinds of relations among individuals. With Plato, the dialogue form becomes a springboard into ever widening philosophical inquiries, *epistemological* (how do we know?), *metaphysical* (of what ultimate sort must reality be, for us to live it as we do?), *aesthetic* (is there such a thing as beauty itself, apart from beautiful objects?), and ultimately, into the intelligible foundations (the Forms) of the meaningfulness of the world we inhabit. Plato’s depth and ingenuity, in tracking these fundamental issues of philosophy, led one of the twentieth century’s great thinkers, Alfred North Whitehead, to say that all Western philosophy subsequent to Plato was a

series of footnotes to Plato. One of the most accessible and influential of Plato's dialogues, *The Republic*, will give us the idea of Plato's depth and artistry. In that dialogue he uses Socrates as his mouthpiece—a Socrates far different from the Socrates we see in the *Apology*—to lead the lengthy discussion into the deepest nooks and crannies of political philosophy. What makes this discussion of the ideal state unique is that in order to ground the very idea of that state the argument must be ramified enough to include the Forms, the ultimate principles of justice, reason, and beauty. We are as far from the Milesian areas of questioning as we are from the level on which politics and the polis are discussed today.

### **Reading**

*The Great Dialogues of Plato*, trans. W.H.D. Rouse (New York, 2008). (Our assignment will be to read *The Republic*.)

### **Discussion**

Does Plato's thinking, in the *Republic*, seem to build on the fundamental insights of Socrates' teaching? What is Socrates' political philosophy, as far as you can tell?

What relation do you see between the actualities of Athenian democracy, in the fifth century, and the ideal Republic Plato envisages? Is Plato fond of some aspects of democracy?

What do you think of the dialogue form as a vehicle of argument? Does this vehicle provide advantages over the single narrator form of philosophizing we tend to know today? Are there examples, even in modern philosophy, of effective use of the dialogue for argument? Bishop Berkeley? David Hume? Kierkegaard?