

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## GREEK ESSAY

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**Overview** The historical sense is less old than group memory, which we suppose coeval with the first organization of a society. Ancient Greek society opens to us in the Homeric epics, which though (especially the *Iliad*) they seem on the whole to be 'historical' are infused with imagination, creative design, and the interests of poetic technique. It would be hard to find other written work, between Homer and the fifth century, which was more narrowly 'historical' than Homer's. The lyric poets, the Milesian philosophers, and above all the dramatists: all these writing groups processed the past, but as myth or imagination. It is first with Herodotus and Thucydides, in the fifth century B.C.E., that the genre of 'history proper' begins to be written in Greece. This genre, though inflected by interests of poetry, imagination, philosophy, is meant to memorialize (not simply archive) a swathe of the past of Athens (and other Greek colonies and city-states of the time.)

**Herodotus (484-425 B.C.E.)** Herodotus was the first Greek historian. In his *History* he recounted the events and pre-war build up of the Persian Wars, in which the Athenians, and some other city-states, discovered their identity and group pride by defeating an army and naval force much larger than their own. In the course of recounting this life and death struggle—which has many elements of drama and poetry in it—Herodotus stops often along the way, to tell us of the curious and unfamiliar customs of the regions—Egypt, Persia—through which his main narrative takes us. He thus becomes the anthropologist, too, a figure attractive to many historians to come.

**Thucydides (460.B.C.E.-398 B.C.E.)** Thucydides wrote his great work of history about the Peloponnesian Wars, that struggle that broke out, after the Persian Wars, between the *poleis* of Athens and Sparta, the two pillars of Hellenism against the Persian invasion. Taking off where Herodotus left off, Thucydides worked from a realistic, first-person inquiry sense of *Realpolitik*, from which, in a style that was always careful, dry and pithy, he created a work that contrasted sharply with the style of Herodotus. While Herodotus is out to celebrate the glorious achievements of Athens, and to do so in an often folksy and anecdotal fashion, Thucydides packs tense international relations into sharp dialogue and aphoristic commentary, cutting to the bone and taking care not to take sides.

**Other historians** Mention should be made of two later Greek historians. **Xenophon** (430-354 B.C.E.), a pupil of Socrates, is familiar to most students of the Greek language, who teethe on the *Anabasis* (370 B.C.E.), a thrilling account of the return of 10,000 Greek mercenaries—Xenophon was one of their generals—from Persia to Greece. As a practicing historian, Xenophon is known especially for his *History* of the declining Hellenism of the late fifth and early fourth centuries. **Polybius** (264-146 BC.E.), writing in another era, gives his attention to the early formative period of the Roman Republic, excelling in his accounts of events like the sack of Carthage by the Romans (146 B.C.E.). It marks Polybius' work that he thinks in terms of admired models, like Philip of Macedon, from whom the reader can derive life-lessons.

## Reading

Luce, T. James, *The Greek Historians*, London, 1997.

Parmeggiani, Giovanni, *Between Thucydides and Polybius, the Golden Age of Greek Historiography*, Cambridge (Mass.), 2014.

## Discussion questions

What elements of Hellenic imaginative literature do you see in Herodotus? Has he anything in common with the view points of tragic (or comic) drama?

What is the difference between the attitude of Herodotus to Athens, and that of Thucydides? Do their attitudes differ because they wrote about different moments in Athens' history?

Herodotus is called both 'the father of history' and 'the father of lies.' Which name do you think fits him better? Explain.

## HEREDOTUS

**Herodotus The Father of History (490-425 B.C).** Herodotus wrote the first significant history of Greece and of his travels both in Greece and in other parts of the Eastern Mediterranean. Is he the father of history or, as some ancient critics claimed, 'the father of lies'? (Or, as more than one wit has queried, are history and lies the same?)

**The historical imagination.** By contemporary standards it might seem that epic, lyric, and drama clearly belong to the literary imagination, while questions could be raised about philosophy and history. I think that we can quell such doubts about 'philosophy,' by showing that it rose from an inquiry tradition seeking the central meaning of reality, and that right through Socrates and Plato Greek philosophy belonged to a restless inquiry distinctively targeting both the nature of physical reality and then, at its peak, the nature of ethical relationships, knowledge, and logic. Is not this kind of inquiry a close kin to the kind of 'address to the world' fundamental to epic, lyric, and drama, all of which propose, and observe, models of the world we live in? And is not history, at least in the Hellenic sense, just such an inquiry? The Greek verb *historeo*, *I inquire*, lies at the root of the word 'historia,' and while today, among scholars of history, there may be fierce debate about whether history is a science or simply a special kind of language, there is no doubt that for the Greeks of Herodotus' time history was just one more offspring of the Muses. Clio, after all, was the Muse of History, and took her place beside her sisters, all of them wellheads of the arts.

**What kind of history does Herodotus write?** The underlying purpose of Herodotus' work is to create a history of his time, with an end point at the Battles of Marathon (490 B.C.) and Salamis (480 B.C), that is at the point where the Greeks triumph over the vast Persian Empire. To achieve that historization of his own time Herodotus concentrates on the peripeties of the Persian monarchy from the time of Cyrus in the mid-sixth century to that of King Xerxes whose fleet the Greeks defeat at Salamis.

**Digressions.** In constructing his history Herodotus digresses constantly—he declares that digression is his plan—drawing on his own extensive travels in the Near East and Egypt, on travellers' tales, and on earlier Greek world historians, like Hecataios. While his digressions are never pointless, and are almost always amusing, they contribute only indirectly to the construction of his overall history. It will be well to look at a sample of Herodotus' historical thinking.

**How Herodotus thinks as an historian.** We need to consider the kind of mind work Herodotus carries out, in presenting a history. Take the story of Gyges and Candaules. (Book One, the beginning.) What does the telling of that story have to do with furthering Herodotus' history timeline? Start with this. Herodotus wants to locate King Croesus of Lydia in terms of his own lineage. Why? To construct the true architecture of known time. And why Croesus? Because Croesus is the King who, by capturing and subduing Greek city states in Asia Minor, first generated conflict between the Greeks and their neighbors to the East. So how to present the line of descent that led from the first Lydian King, Candaules, 'down to' Croesus, more than a century later? The way Herodotus 'chooses'—in fact the thought movement congenial to him throughout his history—is to start by dramatizing the events that led to the kingly transition from the first Lydian monarch, Candaules, to his successor, Gyges. We are talking, of course, about the 'story' of Gyges and Candaules. Herodotus moves the timeline through 'episodes.'

**What do you think about this kind of historicizing?** The kind of story-writing history, which Herodotus loves, is one way of building a time line. In a sense the tale of Gyges and Candaules is a 'date' on a list of time periods. In every sense of the word 'imagination' Herodotus is one with the other 'literary minds' who create ancient Greek culture.

## Reading

### **Primary Source Reading**

*Herodotus, The Histories, Revised*, trans. Aubrey de Selincourt, 2003  
OR

<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Herodotus/Herodotus1.html>

### **Secondary Source Reading**

Evans, J.A.S., *Herodotus, Explorer of the Past: Three Essays* (Princeton, 1991).

### **Further Reading**

De Selincourt, A., *The World of Herodotus* (London, 1962).

### **Suggested Paper Topics**

Herodotus sets out to trace the development of the Persian monarchy, from its origins in the mid-sixth century to its defeat under Xerxes at the hands of the Greeks. Are you able to follow this underlying history through the maze of tales and reports that make up the bulk of the history? Does it seem important, to Herodotus, that you should keep the fundamental timeline in mind?

Does Herodotus ever talk about himself? Or do you feel he reveals himself without talking about himself? How would he so reveal himself?

EXCERPT Book One Herodotus History

<http://mcadams.posc.mu.edu/txt/ah/Herodotus/Herodotus1.html>

[1.0] *THESE are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians from losing their due meed of glory; and withal to put on record what were their grounds of feuds.*

[1.1] *According to the Persians best informed in history, the Phoenicians began to quarrel. This people, who had formerly dwelt on the shores of the Erythraean Sea, having migrated to the Mediterranean and settled in the parts which they now inhabit, began at once, they say, to adventure on long voyages, freighting their vessels with the wares of Egypt and Assyria. They landed at many places on the coast, and among the rest at Argos, which was then preeminent above all the states included now under the common name of Hellas. Here they exposed their merchandise, and traded with the natives for five or six days; at the end of which time, when almost everything was sold, there came down to the beach a*

*number of women, and among them the daughter of the king, who was, they say, agreeing in this with the Greeks, Io, the child of Inachus. The women were standing by the stern of the ship intent upon their purchases, when the Phoenicians, with a general shout, rushed upon them. The greater part made their escape, but some were seized and carried off. Io herself was among the captives. The Phoenicians put the women on board their vessel, and set sail for Egypt. Thus did Io pass into Egypt, according to the Persian story, which differs widely from the Phoenician: and thus commenced, according to their authors, the series of outrages.*

*[1.2] At a later period, certain Greeks, with whose name they are unacquainted, but who would probably be Cretans, made a landing at Tyre, on the Phoenician coast, and bore off the king's daughter, Europe. In this they only retaliated; but afterwards the Greeks, they say, were guilty of a second violence. They manned a ship of war, and sailed to Aea, a city of Colchis, on the river Phasis; from whence, after despatching the rest of the business on which they had come, they carried off Medea, the daughter of the king of the land. The monarch sent a herald into Greece to demand reparation of the wrong, and the restitution of his child; but the Greeks made answer that, having received no reparation of the wrong done them in the seizure of Io the Argive, they should give none in this instance.*

*[1.3] In the next generation afterwards, according to the same authorities, Alexander the son of Priam, bearing these events in mind, resolved to procure himself a wife out of Greece by violence, fully persuaded, that as the Greeks had not given satisfaction for their outrages, so neither would he be forced to make any for his. Accordingly he made prize of Helen; upon which the Greeks decided that, before resorting to other measures, they would send envoys to reclaim the princess and require reparation of the wrong. Their demands were met by a reference to the violence which had been offered to Medea, and they were asked with what face they could now require satisfaction, when they had formerly rejected all demands for either reparation or restitution addressed to them.*

*[1.4] Hitherto the injuries on either side had been mere acts of common violence; but in what followed the Persians consider that the Greeks were greatly to blame, since before any attack had been made on Europe, they led an army into Asia. Now as for the carrying off of women, it is the deed, they say, of a rogue: but to make a stir about such as are carried off, argues a man a fool. Men of sense care nothing for such women, since it is plain that without their own consent they would never be forced away. The Asiatics, when the Greeks ran off with their women, never troubled themselves about the matter; but the Greeks, for the sake of a single Lacedaemonian girl, collected a vast armament, invaded Asia, and destroyed the kingdom of Priam. Henceforth they ever looked upon the Greeks as their open enemies. For Asia, with all the various tribes of barbarians that inhabit it, is regarded by the Persians as their own; but Europe and the Greek race they look on as distinct and separate.*

*[1.5] Such is the account which the Persians give of these matters. They trace to the attack upon Troy their ancient enmity towards the Greeks. The Phoenicians, however, as regards Io, vary from the Persian statements. They deny that they used any violence to remove her into Egypt; she herself, they say, having formed an intimacy with the captain, while his vessel lay at Argos, and perceiving herself to be with child, of her own free will accompanied the Phoenicians on their leaving the shore, to escape the shame of...*

## THUCYDIDES

**Who was Thucydides?** This observer of the grandeur and fall of the Athenians, during the second half of the fifth century, served as a general in the north of Greece, but apart from that evidence of his personal experience remains known almost solely for one book, his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. In that great work—some would say it, not Herodotus' *Histories*, was the first true History--Thucydides (middle fifth Century-399 B.C.) proved himself a drier, more analytical, more philosophical historian than his predecessor and on the whole admired model, Herodotus. Thucydides probes the causes and resolutions that created the Peloponnesian War—up to the year 411 B.C.-- in the last thirty years of the fifth century. He writes his history largely by means of constructed (remembered, reported) speeches, by a careful sifting of evidence—in conscious difference from Herodotus, who, as we have seen, was often considered the 'father of lies'—and by sticking closely to his topic, unlike Herodotus, who was the master of the digression which fitted into his plan. And Thucydides develops a narrative style, as well as a view of mankind, which makes him a true cross between the epic creator and a seasoned and relatively pessimistic judge of human affairs.

**How does Thucydides establish a history?** Thucydides creates his history out of defined vignettes in which events of the Peloponnesian war are cameoed, usually with little, or very spare, commentary from the author. (As a participant general in the army of Athens, Thucydides sticks to the detail of military affairs, and—in this like Herodotus, too—makes almost no reference to himself, with the exception of a famed reference, in the third person, to a certain Thucydides who 'fought in the north.')

**The Melian debate.** After the debacle of the Sicilian Expedition, in 415 B.C., the Athenians decided to add to their Aegean possessions, and proposed a takeover of the small island of Melos, which had so far maintained a neutral posture in the Peloponnesian War, despite historical ties to Sparta. It will be worth your while to examine Thucydides' account of the debate between the Athenian envoys to the Melians, and the leading Melians who are chosen to discuss the Athenian proposals. (By this time the Athenians and their island allies have already been ravaging the island of Melos; their debate proposal is strictly from power.) The dry reliance on force, which the Athenian representative displays, is 'brilliant':

*Melian:* 'But must we be your enemies? Would you not receive us as friends if we are neutral and remain at peace with you?'

*Athenian:* 'No, your enmity does not injure us as much as your friendship; for your enmity is in the eyes of our subjects a demonstration of our power, your friendship of our weakness.'

Never has *Machtpolitik* been so simply and clearly dissected. And so goes the description of the Melian episode, the interlocutors reduced to namelessness by Thucydides—not his usual practice—and the ruthless determination of the Athenians screwed tighter and tighter, but in the coldest possible language of diplomacy. It is no wonder that many 'modern historians' have turned back to Homer, for the model of the Thucydidean historian: as you will have seen, the *Iliad* is full of formally expressive delegations, carefully crafted hard-talk, and brutal resolutions. It hardly needs to be said that, at the end of the Melian debate, the Melian males were slaughtered and the women and children sold into slavery.

**The Funeral Oration of Pericles.** It being the custom in Athens that the elected leader of the Athenians should provide an oration for the military dead, each year, Pericles undertook this challenge after the end of the first year of the Peloponnesian War (431 B.C.). At that time Athens seemed manifestly in control of military affairs in Greece; the Long Walls were strong protection against invasion, trade was strong, culture was at its peak: men had been killed, of course, but it was time to frame those deaths fittingly. You will want to contrast the tone of Pericles—as Thucydides recreates it—with the tone of the Athenian representative at Melos; cold, logical, crushing. The mastery of such tone differences is the mark of Thucydides' brilliant inner ear for the sounds of history, and the true indicator of his allegiance to the tradition of epic narrative in Greece.

### Reading

*Thucydides, The History of the Peloponnesian War*, ed. M. I. Finley, translated by Rex Warner (London, 1954). (Please read the whole text.)

## Discussion

From the viewpoint of our focus, on types of imagination in Greek literature, the key question is: is Thucydides part of the epic or of the historical tradition? He memorializes, like a historian, but he does so (like Herodotus) in vignettes which are like 'scenes in a play,' often involving dialogue, and usually providing opposing sides of a given argument. His language is artful, strict, perceptive, hiding the person of its narrator but sensitive to the nuances of style that constitute character in language. An historian? An epic poet?

Are you happy with the analysis of Greek literature in terms of types of imagination? Do you see a genuine connection among the five types of imagination we isolated?

Aristotle commented that poetry is more philosophical than history, because poetry is concerned with what might have been rather than with what was. Was he right?

Despite the sharp differences, between the histories of Herodotus and Thucydides, do you think they converge in their use of short stories and vignettes to move the timeline along?

## Greek PHILOSOPHY

**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 Milesians philosophers probed to 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?