The Blackwell Guide to
Ancient Philosophy
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Series Editor: Steven M. Cahn, City University of New York Graduate School

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The Blackwell Guide to Ancient Philosophy

Edited by

Christopher Shields
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Editor’s Introduction

General Purpose and Intended Audience

This book guides students through more than a millennium of Western Philosophy, beginning with its earliest period in the sixth century BC and extending down what is conventionally regarded as the end of the ancient period, in the sixth century AD. As a guide, this volume contains authoritative yet accessible introductions to all of the principal figures and movements of this period. It begins with philosophy as it existed before the transformations wrought by Socrates and Plato, by reviewing the contributions of the Presocratics, the first philosophers, and the Sophists, a loosely knit group of intellectuals and teachers who did much to challenge what were until their arrival conventional patterns of thought and comfortable modes of moral decision making. It then turns to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, all towering figures active during Greece’s Classical Period. Thereafter, it treats the primary Hellenistic Schools, whose works have received a welcome renaissance of interest over the last half-century: the Epicureans, Stoics, and Skeptics, both Academic and Pyrrhonist. It concludes, finally, in the Late Antique period with an overview of the difficult and sorely neglected philosophy of Neoplatonism.

Although intersecting in various ways, each chapter is free-standing and self-contained. This guide is not, therefore, a continuous intellectual history, conceived and executed from a single point of view. It is, instead, a presentation of the main developments and accomplishments of Ancient Philosophy, intended to serve both as an introduction to the novice and as a stimulus to further research and reflection for those already possessing some familiarity with the period. Throughout, the authors offer clear expositions of the positions advanced by the principal figures treated, together with varying amounts of critical assessment and evaluation. In different ways, each chapter invites the student first to understand the views it expounds and then to form an independent appraisal of their merits. Our ultimate hope is that this volume will serve as a springboard to advanced research in Ancient Philosophy, an activity the individual authors have all themselves found richly rewarding.
How to Use This Book

This book contains six main sections, divided, where appropriate, into subsections of more specialized natures. Students wishing to investigate a particular topic in Ancient Philosophy may therefore turn directly to the relevant chapter, though they are encouraged, if they have no experience at all of the period or figure in question, first to read the introduction at the head of the section in which their chosen chapter appears. These introductions aim to orient the novice by providing brief biographical and general background information. Students who do not yet have a particular topic in view are advised simply to begin by familiarizing themselves with the main periods and figures of Ancient Philosophy by reading this general introduction, together with section introductions, before turning to a specific topic of inquiry.

Scholars conventionally divide Ancient Philosophy into discrete periods. This volume employs the following main divisions:

1. Philosophy before Socrates
2. Socrates
3. Plato
4. Aristotle
5. Hellenistic Philosophy
6. Late Antique Philosophy

These divisions are intended to reflect pivotal moments of philosophical progress; the relative importance of individual contributors; the emergence of coordinated fields of inquiry and investigation; and, to some extent, broader historical trends and events. For the most part, though, these sections correspond to the sorts of divisions a student might well encounter in an undergraduate or early graduate curriculum. Such curricula are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they reflect settled patterns of presentation which in turn draw on a broad scholarly consensus regarding the central accomplishments of Ancient Philosophy.

Because our sources of evidence vary from period to period, we have in some cases considerable data in the form of continuous treatises, but in others only fragmentary material, often preserved in the form of direct quotations and paraphrases by early chroniclers and historians of philosophy. Where it is appropriate, individual authors focus on scholarly questions pertaining to matters of source and evidence; in other cases, because our sources are relatively full and secure, they pass over such matters in silence. In general, we have a wealth of material for Plato and Aristotle, fragmentary evidence for the Presocratics, Sophists, and Hellenistic Schools (where the evidence, though fragmentary, is extensive nonetheless), mixed sources for Late Antiquity, and disputed data for Socrates, who wrote little but engendered an entire genre of composition, the Socratic dialogue. In view of these facts, it has been possible to subdivide some of the main six sections into specialized subsections, in order to pursue well-supported topics of interest in greater depth. Thus, in particular, the sections on Plato and Aristotle each have four subsections dealing
with central facets of their work. The divisions employed carve up their works in ways in which Plato and Aristotle themselves did not. This does no violence to their philosophy, which should, in any case, be experienced first hand by reading their own output. Instead, these divisions help direct their readers to salient substantive issues which continue to concern philosophers and other reflective thinkers today. Our view is that their views matter, and that we are likely to improve and refine our own thinking by taking their works seriously, as live philosophy, and not as exhibits in a museum of intellectual history.

At any rate, the bibliography contains recommendations for additional reading. For each section, there are first, and most importantly, primary texts in translation. Thereafter, there are included additional secondary sources for further study. The bibliographies do not aim at comprehensiveness. Rather, each recommends only those works to which a reader of this book might usefully turn after having exhausted what this guide has to offer. A general bibliography at the end of the volume contains additional works especially suited for student research. Again, though, our first impulse is to direct you to the primary sources themselves. These may be read and reread with profit many times over.
Philosophy before Socrates is piecemeal. We are left to discern the philosophical accomplishments of the earliest philosophers mainly from the reports of those who followed them, including, most notably, Aristotle, who was the first systematic historian of philosophy. So, we face formidable problems of interpretation. In the first instance, this means that we read today only fragments of what they actually wrote – snippets of works now long lost, wrenched from their original contexts and often quoted for plainly polemical purposes. Still, all is not lost. In some cases, we possess reasonably lengthy quotations; in others, it is possible to conjecture the likely positions of the earliest thinkers on the basis of paraphrases and reports whose primary purpose was the transmission of the views of the ancients to posterity, so that we can see directly, without inference, what they intended to maintain.

On the basis of the surviving evidence, it is reasonable to focus on two distinct groups of thinkers who are, if in very different ways, important for our understanding of the course taken by philosophy through the Classical and Hellenistic periods, and so, eventually, even into the Late Antique period. These are the Presocratics and the Sophists. The earliest philosophers included among the canonical Presocratics are those whom Aristotle called the natural philosophers (physiologoi) because of their tendency to identify the principles and causes of things in naturalistic terms (Metaphysics 983b6–984a4). According to Aristotle, these thinkers differ in important ways from some of their own predecessors and contemporaries who propagated mythological explanations, which tended to be framed in terms of the often whimsical and utterly unpredictable activities of supernatural gods.

Others among the Presocratics engage in recognizably epistemological argumentation. From very early in its history, philosophy has been an intensely self-critical discipline. No sooner did the earliest natural philosophers ridicule the forms and standards of explanation implicit in mythology than they faced challenges to their own preferred idiom of naturalistic explanation, including challenges put by skeptics who sought to undercut all claims to human knowledge of any form. In the wake of such skeptical challenges came ever more sophisticated rejoinders, engendering a dialectic of skeptical challenge and response which persisted through the Hellenistic period and beyond.
Part I: Philosophy before Socrates

McKirahan recounts the story of the earliest philosophers, emphasizing the ways in which their thought is at once philosophical and scientific. He not only describes their views, but suggests how they influenced subsequent generations of thinkers. For this reason, those altogether unfamiliar with the history of Ancient Philosophy will find his chapter an indispensable point of departure.

As McKirahan notes, the Presocratics were less concerned with social-political philosophy and ethics than were Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. These later philosophers were not the first, however, to introduce speculation into these matters. On the contrary, they often found themselves in the position of responding to the views put forward by the Sophists, a loosely knit group of professional intellectuals and teachers active in Greece in the mid-fifth through the first quarter of the fourth centuries, a time of broad political and cultural upheaval. During this period, matters regarding which there had hitherto been broad forms of cultural consensus came in for intense questioning and scrutiny: the objectivity of value; the force and validity of custom, tradition, and law, both natural and conventional; the worth of higher education; the legitimacy of rhetorical persuasion within a democratic context; and, indeed, the legitimacy of Sophistry itself, especially insofar as it was conducted as a commercial enterprise. That is, the Sophists asked for – and received – handsome sums for the instruction they offered, mainly to the sons of socially prominent families with aspirations for political ascendency.

As Gibert observes, attitudes regarding the Sophists divide rather sharply, today as in antiquity. Some view them as having had a liberating effect: their unapologetic refusal to defer to traditional mores helped usher in new forms of social awareness. Others, including to some extent both Plato and Aristotle, saw them as having a destabilizing, even pernicious effect: however right they may have been to question traditional modes of moral thinking (a critical activity embraced, after all, by both Plato and Aristotle), the Sophists seem self-serving in their easy and expedient refusal to provide grounded alternatives for the views they rejected. In particular, both Plato and Aristotle fault them for embracing naïve forms of relativism, thereby initiating a debate about the foundations of morality and science which remain with us even today.

That said, as Gibert rightly argues, it would be a mistake to adopt a monolithic attitude towards the Sophists, to treat them, that is, as if they themselves reached consensus about core philosophical concepts or rallied themselves around any sort of unifying credo. To begin, the problem of sources for them, as for the Presocratics, is especially acute. It is not always easy to ascribe determinate views with confidence to an individual Sophist. Moreover, insofar as it is possible to judge with confidence what a particular Sophist actually believed, it also becomes necessary to distinguish distinct and often incompatible positions among the strains generally understood as constituting “the Sophistic Movement.” Gibert surveys both the question of sources and the broad range of positions falling under that general designation.

As McKirahan and Gibert both point out, an understanding of all of Ancient Philosophy begins with an appreciation of philosophy as it existed before Socrates.
Part I: Philosophy before Socrates

They posed questions and challenges which the philosophers who followed them could not escape addressing.

Note

1 On using this form of citation to Aristotle’s works, see Part IV, “Aristotle,” n. 1.
Greek philosophy began in the early sixth century BC in the Ionian city of Miletus, on the Aegean coast of Asia Minor. By the end of the fifth century it had made astonishing leaps in sophistication and had framed many of the issues that have remained central to philosophical investigation until today. This period is known, not altogether appropriately (since some of the most important “Presocratics” were contemporaries of Socrates), as the Presocratic era. The Presocratics stand at the beginning of the Greek and therefore of the entire Western philosophical tradition. In an important sense they were also the first scientists the Western world produced and their accomplishments in the study of nature are the direct ancestors of science as we know it. Since none of the writings of the Presocratics survives, our knowledge of the men and their ideas comes from other ancient sources which quote their actual words or summarize and sometimes criticize their theories, a situation which leaves room for differing interpretations. The thinkers discussed in this chapter were selected partly for their importance, partly because of the wide range of interests and the differing approaches they display, and partly because of the fascination they continue to have for people living two and a half millennia after their time.

Ionian Beginnings

*Thales*

Thales, we are told, predicted an eclipse of the sun that took place May 28, 585 BC. In addition to this astronomical feat, the ancients regarded him as the earliest Greek mathematician and attributed to him certain specific results in geometry. His declaration that water is the primary kind of material made him the founder of what was later called “natural philosophy.” He is also said to have declared that all things are full of gods and that magnets have souls because they move iron. He gave military
and engineering advice to King Croesus of Lydia, and political counsel to the Greek cities in Ionia. Later tradition also made him the first absent-minded professor, alleging that once he was so absorbed in looking at the heavens that he fell into a well.

How much of this is true we cannot be sure, because Thales was already a legendary figure by the time our information about him was being written and he would be just the person to attach discoveries to in order to establish a venerable pedigree for a discipline such as geometry. In fact, Thales is a shadowy figure many or all of whose claims to fame can be disputed, but who must have been a figure of great importance nevertheless, since there is no better way to account for the fact that so many different things are attributed to him. It is worth mentioning that Thales is said to have learned geometry in Egypt and that it is from Egypt too that he imported his doctrine that the earth floats on water; and if he actually did predict an eclipse of the sun, it can only have been on the basis of the astronomical records that had been kept in Babylon since 747 BC. It is possible, then, that the beginnings of Greek mathematical and scientific speculation owe a heavy debt to the older civilizations of Mesopotamia and the Nile, even though the Greeks developed these and other ideas in novel ways.

Thales’ view that water is the primary kind of material has been interpreted as meaning that all things are somehow composed of water and, alternatively and perhaps more plausibly, that in the beginning (although no longer) there was only water, and that from the primeval moisture there developed the diversity of things present in the world today. His reasons for proposing this view are unknown (Aristotle, writing in the fourth century BC, was reduced to guesswork). It is also unknown whether he was following Egyptian mythology here or introducing a new way of thinking about the world, a way that is characteristic of later Presocratics and already prominent in Thales’ immediate successors, according to which it is no longer the actions of anthropomorphic gods but the behavior of natural substances that account for the things and events in the world around us.

*Anaximander*

Thales was followed by two other Milesian thinkers, Anaximander and Anaximenes. Anaximander was regarded as Thales’ successor in investigating nature, and Anaximenes as Anaximander’s student and associate. Biographical information is practically nonexistent for these men, although we are told that Anaximander was sixty-four in the year 546 and that he travelled to Sparta, where he constructed some kind of sundial and predicted an earthquake. He is also said to be the first Greek to draw a map of the world and to have been the leader of a colony of Miletus on the Black Sea. Anaximander’s range of interests was narrower than that of Thales, more closely confined to what we would call the scientific. He sketched an account of the origin and structure of the world and accounted for such phenomena as eclipses, thunder and lightning, and other meteorological events, as well as the origin of life. In connection with this last topic, he identified and offered a solution to a problem that arises in accounting for the origin of humans. Babies cannot fend for themselves,
but need parents; but parents grew from babies. How did this cycle begin? Anaximander “declares that in the beginning humans were born from other kinds of animals, since other animals quickly manage on their own, and humans alone require lengthy nursing. For this reason, in the beginning they would not have been preserved if they had been like this.” He “believed that there arose from heated water and earth either fish or animals very like fish. In these humans grew and were kept inside as embryos up to puberty. Then finally they burst and men and women came forth already able to nourish themselves.”

Anaximander is best known for his view that the origin of the world is the *apeiron*, an eternal substance, boundlessly large and without any definite characteristics: neither hot nor cold, neither wet nor dry, neither white, black, nor any other color. Again, his reason for introducing such an unfamiliar origin for our world, in contrast to Thales’ view that the origin of all things was water, can be reconstructed with some probability. The world around us is marked by contrasts: some parts of it are wet, others are dry, and so on. But if the origin of the world were wet, it is hard to account for the existence of anything that is not wet. The originating material must therefore not be either wet or dry, neither hot nor cold, and so on. It must, in fact, be indefinite (one English meaning of *apeiron*). Also, if it is the origin of everything, it cannot have a beginning itself: hence it is eternal. (The Greek philosophers are unanimous in supposing that anything that is without a beginning is also without an end.) And it must be boundlessly large (“boundless” is another meaning of *apeiron*) in order to be able to generate not only our world but also an indefinitely large number of other worlds that according to Anaximander come into existence and perish at different times and in different places.

What survives of Anaximander’s account of how our world was formed goes as follows: “what arose from the eternal [i.e., the *apeiron*] and produces hot and cold was separated off at the coming to be of this world, and a kind of sphere of flame from this grew around the dark mist about the earth like bark about a tree. When it was broken off and enclosed in certain circles, the sun, moon and stars came to be.” Anaximander gave the dimensions of our world: “the earth is cylindrical in shape, and its depth is one-third its breadth.” “The sun is equal to the earth and the circle [on which] it is carried is twenty-seven times the size of the earth.” “The circle of the sun is twenty-seven times [that of the earth] and that of the moon [eighteen times].” Particularly noteworthy here are the assumptions that the world has a simple geometrical structure and that the sizes and distances of the earth and the heavenly bodies are related by simple proportions, as well as the lack of any conceivable empirical basis for making these claims.

Anaximander also wrote the first surviving fragment of any Greek philosopher, an incomplete sentence that seems to describe how a variety of phenomena in our world, such as day and night, and the seasons, take place. “[The things that are perish into the things out of which they come to be,] according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time.” The bracketed words are most likely not to be Anaximander’s, but the remainder, with its images of necessity, justice, and punishment, is apparently original, some of the very earliest surviving Greek prose. The picture is that of not
just a world but an ordered world, a *kosmos*, in fact, which is characterized by regular processes of change and alternation (say, between hot and cold weather, or between daylight and darkness) that are governed by an impersonal judge, namely time, who guarantees that each contender holds sway to the right degree and for the appropriate duration. In fact, the talk of justice and punishment is unlikely to be a mere metaphor, but rather an expression of the widespread early view that there is no clear dividing line between humans and the rest of the world, that the same forces and processes that we experience in our human life are found elsewhere in the world as well, that man is a part of nature.

**Anaximenes**

Anaximenes too concerned himself with matters scientific. A less original thinker than Anaximander his best-known contribution is the view that the origin of all things and the fundamental form of matter is air. He was able to justify this divergence from Anaximander’s compelling argument for an indefinite originative material by explaining how air (which is already a fairly indefinite material with few clear properties) changes form. “It differs in rarity and density according to the substances [it becomes]. Becoming finer it comes to be fire; being condensed it comes to be wind, then cloud, and when still further condensed it becomes water, then earth, then stones, and the rest come to be out of these.” By means of becoming more dense and more rare, air changes into different forms just as water changes into ice and steam, “and the rest come out of these” – the remaining substances are formed through combinations of the different forms of air. Anaximenes held that other qualities depend on rarity and density, hot and cold for example: “a person releases both hot and cold from his mouth, for the breath becomes cold when compressed and condensed by the lips, and when the mouth is relaxed, the escaping breath becomes warm through the rareness.” In addition, air, which constitutes our soul or principle of life, “holds us together and controls us” and it plays a similar role in the context of the *kosmos* as well, surrounding it, pervading it and keeping everything in its right place and functioning in the appropriate way. Bearing in mind the remarks made above concerning justice and punishment in Anaximander’s fragment, we are able to infer that for Anaximenes not only humans and animals, but the *kosmos* as a whole is a living thing.

**Xenophanes**

One of the most unexpected features of early Greek philosophy is the way it accounts for the origin and functioning of the world in naturalistic terms. No more are the gods of Greek mythology responsible for events in the world; rather it is substances like water, air, and the *apeiron*, and processes and events like separation, condensation, and rarefaction that make things happen. Moreover, the world is seen as a place of order rather than chaos, where natural laws, not the capricious desires
and rivalries of personified gods hold sway. The implicit criticism of the Olympians and the ways of accounting for phenomena in the world that are based on belief in such gods became explicit in the poetry of Xenophanes (c. 570 to after 478 BC). Xenophanes was born in Colophon, another Ionian city of Asia Minor, and spent much of his life as a bard, travelling from city to city and singing the poems of Homer and others, including himself, for his supper. Two of his most famous fragments (about forty survive) challenge the anthropomorphic view which the Greeks had of their gods:

Ethiopians say that their gods are flat-nosed and dark, 
Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired. (frag. 16)

If oxen and horses and lions had hands
and were able to draw with their hands and do the same things as men,
horses would draw the shapes of gods to look like horses
and oxen to look like oxen, and each would make the
gods’ bodies have the same shape as they themselves had. (frag. 15)

There is no good reason other than vanity or limited imagination to suppose that the gods look like Greeks, or the larger than life and more beautiful Greeks that we see in the artwork that survives from ancient Greece. Not that Xenophanes or his Milesian forebears were atheists. Anaximander’s apeiron was divine, as was Anaximenes’ air. And Xenophanes sketches his own view about the divine:

God is one, greatest among gods and men,
not at all like mortals in body or thought. (frag. 23)

He always remains in the same place, moving not at all,
nor is it fitting for him to go to different places at different times. (frag. 26)

All of him sees, all of him thinks, all of him hears. (frag. 24)

But without effort he shakes all things by the thought of his mind. (frag. 25)

It is disputed whether fragment 23 means that Xenophanes believed in a single god, or a god supreme among others, but it is clear that there is only one god who controls the events of the world, and he does so not through physical means but by his thought or will. It is also clear what Xenophanes’ criterion was for determining the nature of god: what “is fitting,” that is to say, what he, a mere human thinking for himself, judged appropriate for the ruler of the universe to be like. For instance, the activities of the Olympian gods are not fitting for a true divinity, as the following fragment indicates:

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all deeds
which among men are a reproach and a disgrace:
thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another. (frag. 11)
Rejecting the Olympians in this way was a revolutionary move in more than one way. It meant changing beliefs, but more profoundly it meant changing attitude as well. No longer is cultural tradition (embodied preeminently in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod) seen as an unquestionable source of truth. Rational criteria replace tradition as a way of justifying beliefs, and the world becomes different. There is a rational order to it, and knowledge of it can be attained: a rational god rules it and as rational beings we can for the first time hope to understand how it works.

To Xenophanes too we owe the beginnings of reflection on the difficulty of finding out the truth and of the skeptical tradition that knowledge cannot be attained, as the following fragments show:

By no means did the gods reveal all things to mortals from the beginning, but in time, by searching, they discover better (frag. 18)

No man has seen nor will anyone know the truth about the gods and all the things I speak of. For even if a person should in fact say what is absolutely the case, nevertheless, he himself does not know, but fashions belief over all things (frag. 34)

The first of these fragments is a statement of the possibility of discovery through research, whereas the latter, while distinguishing between truth, knowledge, and belief, denies the possibility of absolute knowledge, at least about the kinds of difficult and remote topics that were the concern of Xenophanes and the other Ionian philosophers of the sixth century.

**Conclusions**

Most of the subjects treated by the earliest philosophers would nowadays be considered scientific, not philosophical. The origin of the world, its composition and present structure, how it functions, how life arose – these are topics in astronomy, physics, meteorology, biology. And discussions of the nature of the divine are more at home in theology than philosophy. On the other hand, Xenophanes, who is clearly a member of the Ionian tradition of thought, first raised questions that are still with us in epistemology, and these were questions that would naturally arise for a thoughtful person engaged in the critical work that is characteristic of the early thinkers.

One of philosophy’s historical roles has been to serve as the source of other disciplines. For example, psychology was considered a part of philosophy until the late nineteenth century, and only when it developed its own distinctive methods was it acknowledged as a separate subject. Science too was commonly called natural philosophy until the eighteenth century. From this perspective, it is not surprising that no distinction was made in theory or in practice between science and philosophy in the very beginning, and it is an artificial and anachronistic project to distinguish the philosophical from the scientific side of the Presocratics.
Aside from their particular views, though, many of which from our point of view may have little or no relevance to philosophy, there is a common feature of their approach that is evidently original with them and which is still very much characteristic of philosophy. I call this feature rational criticism. Each of the thinkers we have considered reflected on current ideas and the views of his predecessors. They identified objections and produced new theories immune to those objections. They rejected theories because they failed to fit observed facts or because they did not satisfy rational criteria. Theories were not accepted or rejected through mysterious processes controlled by a few privileged individuals, but were accessible to all and the grounds for accepting and rejecting them were publicly stated – because the standard for acceptance was “what is fitting” rather than what tradition says or what the gods approve. The practice of rational criticism led in the initial stages to rapid advance, with each successive theory improving in certain respects on its predecessor. Traditional mythological accounts were speedily eliminated from this kind of discourse since mythology and authority based simply on the familiarity of long tradition are not in position to withstand critical scrutiny or to mount a rational defense.

Another feature the speculations of these early thinkers have in common with philosophy as we know it today is that many of the theories that were proposed are not easily open to refutation on empirical grounds. It would be hard to imagine what kind of data could be brought to refute the view (possibly Thales’) that water was the origin of all things, or (Anaximander’s) that the world had its beginning in some *apeiron* substance, or (Anaximenes’) that all kinds of things are compounds of fire, air, wind, and so forth, or (Xenophanes’) that all events in the world are governed by a divinity that is “not at all like mortals in body or thought.” They were accepted or rejected on grounds of rational plausibility, not because they were hypotheses confirmed by evidence, much less the experimental method. In fact, in the entire history of ancient science we find very little use of the experimental method as we understand it, although in some cases, such as Anaximenes’ observation that the temperature of our breath is affected by whether we exhale rapidly or slowly, observational evidence is brought to bear, sometimes with imagination and sophistication. And this is only to be expected, since one of the primary goals of these men was to understand important observed features of the world that surrounds us.

The remainder of this chapter will focus on three Presocratic philosophers of very different stripes. All of them share with the first philosophers a serious interest in the nature and structure of the physical world, but their thought ranges more widely, and as we shall see, the elements in it that are recognizably philosophical soon come to the foreground.

**Heraclitus**

Born a generation later than the thinkers so far considered, Heraclitus (c. 540–480 BC) of Ephesus, a Greek city located not far from Miletus, was an arrogant and
enigmatic figure who broadened the scope of enquiry from cosmology, the principal pursuit of the early Ionians, to include matters more properly considered philosophical. Over 120 original fragments survive from his book, most of them short and pithy sayings whose precise meanings are unclear (in antiquity Heraclitus was known as “the obscure”) and whose significance and interconnections are left for us to discover. Heraclitus expressed views on many subjects, including the faults of earlier and contemporary writers from Homer to Pythagoras and Xenophanes, and the stupidity of ordinary people. He had positive views on cosmology but also on matters concerned with ethics, politics, and religious practices, and also on the nature of god and of the soul or mind. In addition he had much to say on how and how not to go about inquiring into the true nature of things. But the most striking ideas of Heraclitus are more general and underlie all his work. His fundamental principles are encapsulated in the following words:

This *logos* holds always, but people always prove unable to understand it, both before they hear it and when they have first heard it. For even though all things happen in accordance with this *logos*, people show their lack of experience when they experience such words and deeds as I set out, distinguishing each one in accordance with its nature and saying how it is. (frag. 1)

Listening not to me but to the *logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one. (frag. 50)

Things taken together are whole and not whole, something being brought together and brought apart, in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity, and out of a unity all things. (frag. 10)

Heraclitus claims to have made a great discovery, one that accounts for no less than absolutely everything that is and that comes to pass in the world. It is a single principle, which he calls *logos*, that holds completely generally and explains all things and all events. Except for Heraclitus and despite his efforts to teach it, no one understands the principle, a (or the) primary implication of which he states at the end of fragment 10: “out of all things there comes a unity and out of a unity all things.” The world is a single dynamic whole made up of many things related to one another in various ways. We need to understand both the many and the one: how the one world works and how the many things in it work as well, and to do so involves understanding that the many things are interrelated in many and unexpected ways, and understanding that they work together, not each on its own, and how they do so; likewise it involves understanding how the world is a unity composed of many parts and how each part contributes to the whole. Two case studies of this one–many relation appear in the following fragment:

They do not understand how, being at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and lyre. (frag. 51)
In order to function, bows and lyres require their strings to be stretched. Otherwise no arrows will be shot, no music played. Two things happen simultaneously in order for the tension (“being at variance”) in the string to occur: the wood must be pulling on the string and the string must be pulling on the wood – and the pulling must be equal, or either the string will snap or the wood will break. Consider the bow as simply a piece of wood and a string, and you cannot understand what makes it work, what makes the wood and string a bow. It is their special mutual relationship of balanced tension that accounts for their working together as a functioning bow. On the other hand, the tension by itself does not make up the bow, because the tension cannot exist without the wood and the string. Once we understand how the bow works, we also have a better understanding of its components. The wood and string are no longer just wood and string, but things with properties that enable them to work together in certain specified ways. While the bow and the lyre are typical of how things in the world work, they also represent the world as a whole.

Heraclitus employed other familiar phenomena as well to illustrate his “one and many” doctrine. Several of his examples are based on things that are opposites of one another, presumably because opposites would seem to be obvious counter-examples to the principle of “all things are one.” The most elaborated of these examples is the following:

The sea is the purest and most polluted water; to fishes drinkable and bringing safety, to humans undrinkable and destructive. (frag. 61)

Here the opposites are the superlatives “purest” and “most polluted,” and Heraclitus’ insight is that one and the same thing can have both properties – as long as it has them in relation to different kinds of living things. In fact, the two properties go hand in hand: an environment that is “purest” for fishes must be “most polluted” for humans, and this tells us something important not only about those two opposite properties, but also about seawater and about fishes and humans as well.

It is important to point out that Heraclitus never states simply that any pair of opposites is “the same.” He always gives examples, and he states them so as to make clear how to resolve the apparent paradox. Indeed, as soon as we identify any such paradox in the world we must already have solved it. Also, the way Heraclitus states these apparent paradoxes makes it clear that he is using them as teaching devices to illustrate the workings of the logos in the world, so that we can gain experience in understanding how the world works and in due course go on to conduct our own investigations. When we fully understand the world (if we ever do), we will also understand everything in the world and how it all fits together and works together to make up the world. And despite the apparent diversity and discord, or rather because of it, we will understand how the world is a harmonious whole.

Such a message is open to attack on two fronts. First, it may seem too general to have any concrete content: nothing could possibly count as disproof of the claim, so the claim tells us nothing in particular about the world. Second, it may seem to counsel a kind of blind and fatuous idleness and optimism in the face of the world’s disasters: everything fits together to make a harmonious world, so don’t try to
change how things are and don’t be distressed by misfortune because it is all part of a happy bigger picture. As to the first objection, we should begin by recalling that even if it is valid, Heraclitus fares no worse on this count than the other thinkers we have considered, whose theories were, as noted above, not easily open to empirical tests. But more important is that Heraclitus put forward this general principle as something that can be confirmed, and confirmed only with effort, imagination, and dedication:

Men who are lovers of wisdom must be inquirers into many things indeed. (frag. 35)

Unless he hopes for the unhoped for, he will not find it, since it is not to be hunted out and is impassible. (frag. 18)

The enquiry needed to discover the workings of the principle in the world is partly empirical, partly introspective:
All that can be seen, heard, experienced – these are what I prefer. (frag. 55)

I searched myself. (frag. 101)

and few are able to carry it out:
Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to people if they have souls that do not understand the language. (frag. 107)

For many, in fact all that come upon them, do not understand such things, nor when they have noticed them do they know them, but they seem to themselves to do so. (frag. 17)

They are at odds with the *logos*, with which above all they are in continuous contact, and the things they meet every day appear strange to them. (frag. 72)

He offered many examples of how the *logos* applies in widely differing situations, and made it plain that some phenomena are difficult to explain.
Nature loves to hide. (frag. 123)

The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign. (frag. 93)

Further, the proper explanations will appear confusing to those who do not understand (frag. 1, quoted above). He even suggests that we should devote our lives to understanding the principle:

Wisdom is one thing, to be skilled in true judgment, how all things are steered through all things. (frag. 41)
Right thinking is the greatest excellence, and wisdom is to speak the truth and act in accordance with nature, while paying attention to it. (frag. 112)

As to the second objection raised above, we should first notice that the counsel to understand and accept one’s place in the world and not fight against destiny need not be shallow and need not be intended as comforting, as the following fragments (which are probably intended to convey symbolic as well as literal meanings) indicate:

It is necessary to know that war is common and justice is strife and that all things happen in accordance with strife and necessity. (frag. 80)

War is the father of all and king of all, and some he shows as gods, others as humans; some he makes slaves, others free. (frag. 53)

And Heraclitus is explicit that some things are worth striving for. The people must fight for the law as for their city wall. (frag. 44)

It belongs to all people to know themselves and to think rightly. (frag. 116)

The best renounce all for one thing, the eternal fame of mortals, but the many stuff themselves like cattle. (frag. 29)

In concentrating on the one – many principle this brief sketch has omitted many important aspects of Heraclitus’ thought. I will mention three very briefly, first the prominence of fire:

The kosmos, the same for all, none of the gods nor of humans has made, but it was always and is and shall be: an ever-living fire being kindled in measures and being extinguished in measures. (frag. 30)

All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods. (frag. 90)

These and other fragments establish that fire is the basic material of the world in somewhat the same way as air was for Anaximenes. But fire has an active, violent nature absent from the material principles of Heraclitus’ predecessors which makes it more suitable for directing and controlling events in a dynamically active world:

For fire will advance and judge and convict all things. (frag. 66)

Thunderbolt steers all things. (frag. 64)

Second, the river fragments:
Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow. (frag. 12)

It is not possible to step twice into the same river. (frag. 91)

As the basis of the doctrine of “Heraclitean flux,” that there is no stability in the world but all things are constantly changing in all respects, the second of these statements has enjoyed a great deal of attention from the time of Plato, who discussed it critically in his dialogues Cratylus and Theaetetus. However, many scholars believe that fragment 91 is unauthentic, a misremembered and misquoted version of fragment 12, which has the appearance of a typical Heraclitean fragment on the unity of opposites (here “same” and “different”) and in which there is no difficulty about stepping more than once into the same river.

Third, two puzzling fragments about the soul, which may show that Heraclitus had grasped the paradoxical nature of self-consciousness.

You would not discover the limits of the soul although you travelled every road: it has so deep a logos. (frag. 45)

The soul has a self-increasing logos. (frag. 115)

**Parmenides**

Parmenides (c. 515 to after 450 BC) and Zeno (born c.490), both from Elea, a Greek city in southern Italy, together with Melissus (probably a little younger than Zeno), from the Aegean island of Samos, are known as the exponents of a new style of philosophy called Eleatic after the birthplace of its founder. The two principal innovations of Eleatic philosophy are its use of deductive argument and its subject matter. Until this time, as far as we can tell, the Greek philosophers had presented their theories without arguing for them. The Milesians told “likely stories” about how the world came into being and how it functions, and even though we can detect some ways in which one account might be thought more likely than another, and can construct arguments they might have used to show the superiority of their views over others, there is in fact no trace of argument in the source materials. Even Xenophanes’ attacks on traditional views of the gods are not stated in the form of arguments, although we can supply the additional premises needed to reach the conclusions he intended, and Heraclitus’ brief and frequently cryptic pronouncements are devoid of the logical connective tissue found in philosophy from Parmenides onward.

One reason why the Eleatics may have chosen to employ arguments is that their views needed this kind of support because they go so strongly against what people deeply believe. A basic characteristic of deductive reasoning, in which one or more premises are stated and a conclusion is declared to follow from them, is that if we