

Fran: A Passion for Wisdom

A Very Brief History of Philosophy

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The Stuff of the World: Early Greek Philosophy

Before we attempt to review the progression of Greek philosophers prior to Socrates, we should note that the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. in Greece were innovative and productive in many ways. Most important was the explosion of technology. Into the midst of an essentially feudal agrarian society of wealthy landowners and peasants came a new class of craftsmen, tradesmen, and technicians. Inventors were numerous, and inventions were plentiful. The geometry and mathematics that the Greeks imported from Egypt and Babylon allowed them to make new breakthroughs in navigation and mapmaking. The

science and practice of medicine flourished. The great physician Hippocrates (c. 460–377 B.C.E.) summed up the new consciousness of the age by saying, "Men think [a disease] divine merely because they do not understand it. But if they called everything divine which they do not understand, why, there would be no end of divine things."

The first Greek philosopher is usually said to be *Thales*, who lived in Asia Minor (now Turkey) in the seventh century B.C.E. (624–546). Unfortunately, we know very little about him, as we possess nothing of his writings, and what little we do know comes from the not always reliable source of Aristotle. Thales suggested that the world is surrounded by and ultimately born of water, an idea that very likely came from earlier Greek cosmogony and other cultures' ideas. Breaking with the mythological tradition that explained all of nature in terms of gods, goddesses, and other spirits, Thales adopted what we might call a *naturalistic* outlook, a scientific viewpoint—an explanation of natural phenomena in terms of other straightforward natural phenomena. His speculations were quite at home in the midst of the pragmatic explosion of innovation and technology, reflecting society's fascination with *techne*, the new way of looking at nature.

The speculations of the pre-Socratic philosophers also had a political dimension, whether or not this is evident in what remains of their works. It was during the sixth century of Greek history that Solon "modernized" Athens and established democracy. After Solon, Athens would return to tyranny, experience a devastating invasion by Sparta, and suffer a local revolution. Democracy reappeared later, but this was not, as we would like to believe, an easy or peaceful process. We must place the first philosophers within this often violent context if we are to understand their passion for order and understanding.

Thales was taken to task by his younger contemporary *Anaximander* (610–545 B.C.E.), who rejected his elder's view of a world made of water and suggested a different vision. Anaximander organized traditional Greek cosmology, distinguishing earth, air, fire, and water, and explained how their various properties—the hot and the cold, the wet and the dry—acted upon and opposed one another. (We might note here another critical point of contrast between Greek and Chinese philosophy. Opposition is often basic to Greek philosophy, whereas the Chinese would rather talk about "harmony.")

Pressed for an answer to Thales' question about which of the elements was most basic, Anaximander's answer was, "none of those." The ultimate source of the universe and the basic ingredient of all

