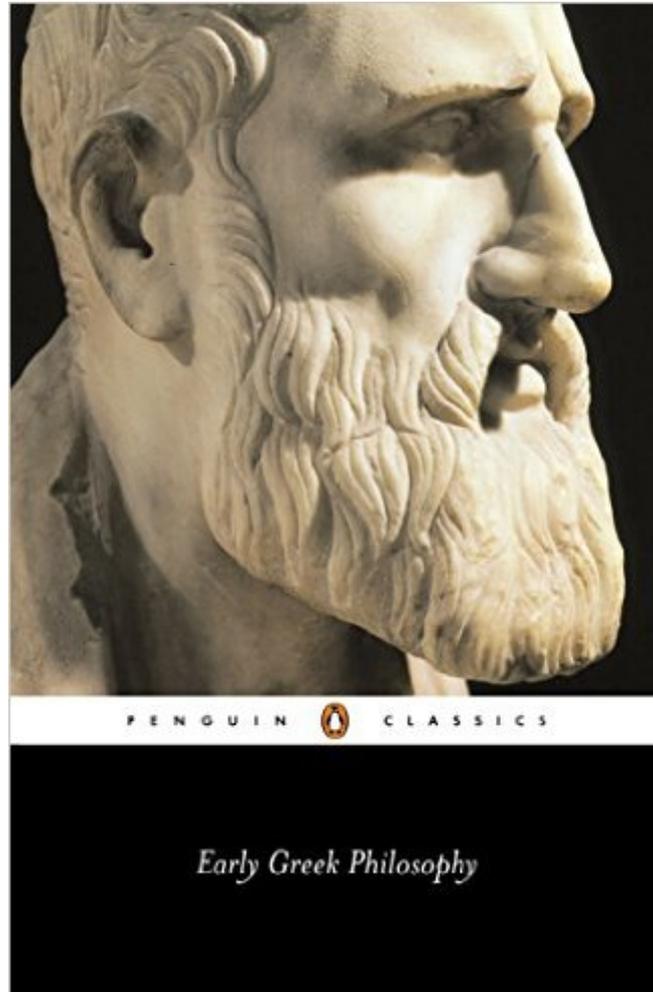


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Early Greek Philosophy (Penguin Classics)



Synopsis

The works collected in this volume form the true foundation of Western philosophy—the base upon which Plato and Aristotle and their successors would eventually build. Yet the importance of the Pre-Socratics thinkers lies less in their influence—great though that was—than in their astonishing intellectual ambition and imaginative reach. Zeno's dizzying 'proofs' that motion is impossible; the extraordinary atomic theories of Democritus; the haunting and enigmatic epigrams of Heraclitus; and the maxims of Alcmaeon: fragmentary as they often are, the thoughts of these philosophers seem strikingly modern in their concern to forge a truly scientific vocabulary and way of reasoning. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

I don't profess to be an expert in ancient Greek philosophy (or any other kind, for that matter), but I have wondered what roots Plato, via his Socrates, had drawn upon for his splendid work in a wide variety of subjects. This book is a solid introduction to those roots and cheap at the price. The Pre-Socratics are important because they provide the first tenuous link in a great shift from

explanation via religious belief to explanation via rational inquiry. These men, scattered throughout the Greek world and across several centuries, looked at the world around them and tried to construct the "first principles" that would explain how that world came to be and what it was made of. Democritus, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, Parmenides and the many other authors presented here aren't household names, but they are the foundation of our view of the world both as physical object and mental representation. It is striking how much of this thought will sound very familiar to anyone with exposure to current physics or, say, Heideggerian philosophy. The Pre-Socratics have much to say to our culture in particular despite the vast differences in intellectual frame of reference between the two. That said, this is a good starting point for studying the Pre-Socratics. Johnathan Barnes has worked scrupulously to overcome a seemingly insurmountable historiographic roadblock -- the fact that most of these philosophers are known to us only third-hand by quotation in works produced centuries after their deaths by Roman and medieval scholars. His documentation of the textual sources of the material is very helpful, although its arrangement on the page is often confusing and we're not sure whether we're listening to Barnes or one of the intermediary scholars.

The early Greek philosophers, thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Leucippus, are foundational for the Western intellectual tradition. I couldn't imagine a better book than this one on the subject. Below are a few quotes from Jonathan Barnes's excellent 40 page introduction along with my brief comments: "First and most simply, the Presocratics invented the very idea of science and philosophy. They hit upon that special way of looking at the world which is the scientific and rational way. They saw the world as something ordered and intelligible, its history following an explicable course and its different parts arranged in a comprehensible system. The world was not a random collection of bits, its history was not an arbitrary jumble of events." ----- This is central to their spirit of inquiry, an approach compatible with a modern physicist or chemist. "Nor was the world a series of events determined by the will or the caprice of the gods. The Presocratics were not atheists: they allowed the god into their brave new world, and some of them attempted to produce an improved and rationalized theology in place of the anthropomorphic divinities of the Olympian pantheon. But their theology had little to do with religion, and they removed most of the traditional functions of the gods. Their thunder was no longer the growling of a minatory Zeus." ----- Again, the Presocratics have kindred spirits in the science departments at modern universities. Jonathan Barnes goes on to write how the Presocratics explained the world in ways that were systematic and economical, that is, these early philosophers wanted to "explain as much as possible in terms of as little as possible."

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