


# **A Presocratics Reader**

*Patricia Curd (Editor) , Richard D. McKirahan (Translator)*

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Ideal for a two-to-three week introduction to the Presocratics and Sophists, this volume offers a selection of the extant remains of early Greek philosophical thought on cosmology, metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, together with unobtrusive, minimally interpretive editorial material: an introduction, brief headnotes, maps, and a concordance.

## A Presocratics Reader Details

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# From Reader Review A Presocratics Reader for online ebook

## August Denys says

This is an earlier edition which does apparently leave out some fragments that have been included in another, later addition, as seen from colleagues who are also reading the book, so that is why I only gave it three stars. As for the content, I would say it is necessary if you wish to understand Philosophy better and understand where it came from. It is not an easy read because 1) if one has not studied logic or philosophy before, they might have a hard time grasping more than is stated in the pages and 2) they are fragments, and one has to be generous in interpreting what is being said. This generous attitude will definitely lead to misunderstanding.

For that purpose, one who reads this will have to look up supplementary material. For example, the class I read this for started with Hesiod's *Theogony*.

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## Veronica says

"What are the Isles of the Blest? Sun and Moon. What is the oracle at Delphi? The tetractys, which is the harmony in which the Sirens sing."

Iamblichus, *Life of Pythagoras*

This is a brilliant but compact collection of Presocratic thought. If you haven't yet read much of the early philosophers like Pythagoras and Anaximander, I couldn't recommend this book more.

The Presocratics contemplated the nature of the cosmos in a time before mathematics and poetry and science and creativity were oppressively divided into categories. Science was poetry, and the beautiful enigma of the cosmos was ineluctably linked to the chaos of elemental changes, the rapid strikes of lightning, the air, the fire. In seeking to explain the indeterminate—the ineffable—they conjured a formula of substances to pinpoint the original substance, *archē*?

The vision of the Presocratics is consummate, enrapturing. They drove the transcendent qualities of the natural universe into language. From Anaximander's *apeiron* to the eternal logos of the 'Riddler'—or even Xenophanes and his astrophysics of clouds—their collective speculations were written *sub specie aeternitatis*.

"You shall know...the destructive deeds of the shining sun's pure torch and whence they came to be, and you shall learn the wandering deeds of the round-faced moon and its nature, and you shall know also the surrounding heaven, from what it grew and how Necessity led and shackled it to hold the limits of the stars."

Clement, *Miscellanies*

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## Jacob says

Not recommended. Most of the quotes and fragments included focus on ancient metaphysics, which is of academic interest only these days. There's almost nothing on epistemology or ethics, two topics where ancient Greek thought would still be interesting.

Instead I'd recommend Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* which has several excellent chapters on early Greek thinkers.

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## Frankie Della Torre says

A compilation of primary source material from the Presocratic philosophers in ancient Greece. Though this is not the book's fault, it is often times difficult to piece together an entire philosophical position when all we're working with a compilation of random fragments. Other than that, this was a helpful book for understanding the pioneers of Western philosophy.

My favorite thinkers were the Sophists, especially Protagoras, because he basically didn't care to operate within the strict metaphysical, political, and epistemic bounds of his predecessors. Also, the Sophists share a deep suspicion of absolute truth claims, similar to our postmodern friends, since they too understood that language, culture, experience, etc. deeply influence our perspectives on what is true.

“Concerning the gods I cannot know either that they exist or that they do not exist, or what form they might have, for there is much to prevent one's knowing: the obscurity of the subject and the shortness of man's life.” ~ Protagoras

This above quote would have shocked people since Protagoras, by rejecting "the gods," wasn't only rejecting the Greek gods of the Pantheon, but also all attempts to discuss the existence of a grand-sweeping metaphysical Being or Force that explained all of existence.

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## Claire says

It's like a big book of ancient Greek fortune cookies.

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## R.a. says

4.8 stars

Substance. Motion. “Being” and being. And, *not* being. Air—condensation and rarefaction. Cosmos as arrangement, as ratio, as number.

The “transmigration of the soul. The “limited” and “unlimited.” A *one* god, (God); and, Universal Law.

The “Big Bang,” astronomical-geological differentiation, the transferability of energy, and the notion of dimensions.

Atoms, Nietzsche’s “cosmic symphony,” String Theory, and constant motion.

The Nature-Nurture dynamic . . .

C.S. Peirce’s “interpretant” . . . and,

Law as “agreement,” (Hobbes; Rousseau) . . .

All of these represent but some of the ideas with which the Presocratic philosophers grappled approximately 2,500 years ago.

Since then, some of the notions within Natural Philosophy not only have been refined but have been “proven” within the now mature fields of the sciences.

*A Presocratics Reader* presents, as subtitled, “selected” fragments and testimonia.

Although the subject matter here for most of the philosophers is either natural or metaphysical phenomena, both ethics and epistemology come under discussion as well.

Unfortunately, as the text explains, “Not a single Presocratic book has survived intact.” And, this compact little text excels in providing source information with regard to what we *do* have. Further, *A Presocratics Reader* provides maps and a “Location-philosopher” timeline for reference.

The introductory essays are excellent and act as a touchstone with which to quickly compare and contrast the postulates of earlier and later philosophers within the volume.

Given treatises of some later famous philosophers as well as Western scientific advancement, some of the thoughts here, 2,500 years old, with the “beginning” of *formal* philosophy, still surprise and provoke.

“Wanting more” becomes the single critique.

And, Anaxagoras and the Atomist philosophers become favorite sections.

Simply, either this or another comparable volume is “a must” for anyone interested in the metaphysical “big questions.”

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## **Phillip says**

This is a very interesting collection for anyone interested in the roots of Western philosophical thought. The anthology brings together excerpts from and commentary on the thought of many Greek philosophers who predated Socrates (and who are not really unified by anything else). As the introduction explains, one of the criteria used to determine a presocratic ‘philosopher’ is a faith in rationality and interpreting observations about the nature of the world, as opposed to the acceptance of revealed truth through religion or mythology.

In pursuit of this rational examination of the world, these philosophers considered disciplines as wide-ranging as physics and metaphysics, medicine, rhetoric, poetry, theology, politics, ethics, and biology. However, most of the excerpts in this anthology focus principally on metaphysical questions, especially: what is the nature of existence? There are competing schools of thought, influence, and response to this question. But in choosing that focus, the editors have given short shrift to issues like rhetoric, poetics, and aesthetics, which I would be more interested in.

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### **John says**

Rescued this from a box of book's Hannah was donating, so read it as more context for *The Cave and the Light: Plato Versus Aristotle, and the Struggle for the Soul of Western Civilization*, which I've restarted. Definitely enjoyed reading it in that context, though it truly is a collection of fragments and thus a highly, well, fragmented read. Still, great window into the ancients struggling with scientific as well as philosophical questions (which were of course one and the same thing), and in ways that begin to anticipate Western scientific thought (if not method; that seems to wait for Aristotle).

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### **me says**

One of my favorite books from college. They thought so radically different. I wish I had more time with it.

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### **Mary says**

Milesians. Heraclitus. Parmenides

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### **Sarah says**

This book is very fascinating. I feel the people who are discussed are the first true philosophers. They talk about the origins/ or rather how there was no origin to the Universe. I especially appreciated the chapter on Parmenides. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in philosophy.

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### **Bob Nichols says**

In the introduction, the editor states that in 585 BC Thales “reportedly predicted an eclipse of the sun” and that this marked the beginning of philosophy and science in Western thought. Some of the presocratics (Milesians and atomists) sought to explain the world by the material elements and forces they saw (e.g., water, air, water; atoms reacting to each other), in contrast to “appeals to the Muses or to divine warrant, and breaks in the connection between theory and evidence.” While some of the presocratics fall more in the former category, it could be argued that others such as Pythagoras, Parmenides, Heraclitus and Zeno fall into the latter category at least for some of their ideas and, interestingly, they laid the theoretical groundwork for some of the philosophy of Socrates and Plato.

The points of view of those presocratics covered in this book are gleaned from the introductory text. The philosophers themselves or what others said of them are so fragmented that it is difficult to decipher their meaning or significance. The maps in the first part of the book are excellent.

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### **Anna Keating says**

A great resource for teaching Plato.

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### **Daniel Toker says**

Extremely fascinating. I'm not going to go into too much detail, but it's interesting to see the foundations of Western philosophy evolving through these ancient thinkers.

[I'll probably expand on my review later:].

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### **Hadrian says**

Collection of fragments from the various 'Pre-Socratic' philosophers. Shame that this is their grouping, and that they might be assumed to be 'before Socrates' and that's it. It's also a shame that they're all so fragmentary. Imagine the stuff we missed.

Included in this edition are fragments of:

Thales - first attempts to explain the world w/o mythology, founder of ancient Greek and therefore Western philosophy

Anaximander - the 'indefinite' as origin of the universe.

Anaximenes

Pythagoras - philosopher/mystic/mathematician - reincarnation, early mathematics. Relations of mathematics and ratios.

Xenophanes - Popper cites him as the basis of critical rationalism

Heraclitus - On the *logos*, how people dream in their own worlds, riddles. Continuous eternal change. 'One ought not to act as a man asleep.'

Parmenides - Wrote in verse. Claimed truth cannot be known by the senses (!) I think Heidegger wrote a book on him. Vaguely reminds me of Taoism.

Zeno - Paradoxes as means of investigation

Empedocles - Love and Strife, the 4 classical elements. Daimones.

Anaxagoras - 'Nous', or mind, which controls all things.

Leucippus/Democritus - Atoms.

Melissus of Samos

Philolaus

Diogenes of Apollonia

The Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Prodicus, Hippias, Antiphon)

As well as selections from the Derveni papyrus.

It's a shame I haven't read actual selections from these guys earlier. Fascinating stuff. You can start to see how later philosophers pick through them for ideas to expand upon. Now you can go after everybody from Plato to Heidegger in a new light.

Might go for the Diels/Kranz edition later if when I can understand either German or Greek.

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