

The Pre-Socratic Philosophers

1. European philosophy is generally said to begin with the Greek thinkers of the Ionian city of Miletus who sought to explain the apparent complexity of the universe in terms accessible to reason: Thales of Miletus (f. 585 B.C.E.), his successor, Anaximander (f. 570 B.C.E), and his pupil, Anaximenes (f.550 B.C.E.) They asked the question: what is the world made of? And Thales said water, and Anaximenes said air, and Anaximander said:

“The Boundless is the first principle of things that are. It is that from which the origin of things and it is that into which they return when they perish, by moral necessity, giving satisfaction to one another and making reparation for their injustice, according to the order of time.”
2. The Eleatic School:
 - a. Xenophanes: perhaps the first theologian (mid sixth century B.C.E.):

“God is one, supreme among gods and men, not all like mortals in body or in mind. It is the whole of God that sees, the whole that thinks, the whole that hears. Without effort he sets everything in motion by the thought of his mind.”
 - b. Parmenides: (probably early fifth century B.C.E.):

“There remains, then, but one word by which to express the true road: Is. And on this road there are many signs that What is has no beginning and never will be destroyed: it is whole, still, and without end....Thought and being are the same.”
 - c. Zeno: (mid-fifth century B.C.E.). No surviving fragments but several reports of his paradoxes.
3. Heraclitus (f. 504 B.C.E.) Sometimes called “the Obscure,” but also famous for:

“You cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet others, go ever flowing on.”
4. Empedocles: (c. 495-435 B.C.E.) Introduced the idea of the first basic elements: earth, fire, air, and water). He called them “the roots of everything.”
5. Anaxagoras: (c. 475 B.C.E) Tried to combine the ideas of Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Parmenides. His great prose work, On Nature, has in part survived giving us a sense of his thought. In brief, he thought that the coming into being of anything was the combination of seeds, all ceasing to be was the separation of already existing substances. All this is the work of a being whose knowledge and power stand over everything: the work of a thinking, rational, almighty being of Mind. Mind is “mixed with nothing,” it is the “finest and purest of things.”