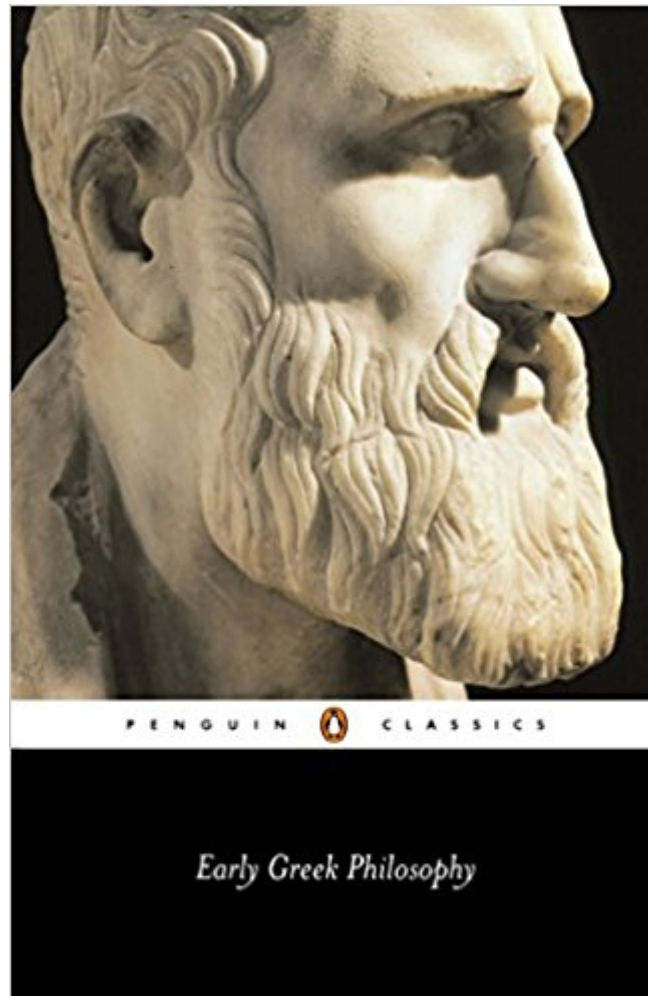




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# Early Greek Philosophy (Penguin Classics)



## 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

Jonathan Barnes is Professor of Ancient Philosophy at the University of Geneva. He has held visiting posts at the University of Chicago, at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst and at the University of Texas. He was also a fellow of Oriel

College, Oxford. His publications include *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* and *The PreSocratic Philosophers*.

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." Some of their key concepts were order (kosmos), nature (physis), origins (arche), and reason (logos). ----- These Greek words are supercharged with meaning. I used one English word for simplicity sake. How supercharged? The author does a fine job elaborating. The words of the Presocratics have come down to us as fragments. Here are several of my favorites: Xenophanes "But if cows and horses or lions had hands and drew with their hands or made the things men make, then horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, cows like cows, and each would make their bodies similar in shape to their own." Heraclitus "The uncomprehending, when they hear, are like the deaf. To them applies the saying: though present they are absent." Democritus "To a wise man the whole earth is accessible; for the country of a great soul is the whole world." "The desire for more destroys what is present - like Aesop's dog." "One should tell the truth, not speak at length."

It should be noted that there are two works on Presocratic philosophy by Dr. Barnes: this work, and

a more esoteric work entitled "The Presocratic Philosophers." That said, this work, the exoteric counterpart, serves its primary purpose: appealing to the general public. It features an excellent collection of quotations from a variety of sources. Barnes is cautious about the validity of these sources, and admits their dubious character where necessary. His introduction gives an adequate overview of contemporary scholarship on and interpretations of presocratic thought, and its place in the history of philosophy. The work lacks two things. First, because it is exoteric in its design, it lacks a vigorous interpretation of the texts given, beyond the short introduction. Second, its organization is often inadequate; arranged by subject in some places, and sources in other places. The reader is left to organize and interpret the information much by their own discretion. Whether this is ultimately an advantage or disadvantage, I will not here decide.

Bought this for elective classes, it's got a lot of notes written in it, but that's perfect since it helps me get through some of the tougher parts.

Insightful and a great supplement for anyone exploring philosophy and spirituality

It was a lot to read. Was a lot of "the son of this, who was the son of that, and the son of this who... etc". Other than that, this book offered interesting and important info regarding philosophers and about philosophy.

The book contains essentially the complete writings of the pre-socratics in readable translation. The actual texts are printed in bold, with commentary by both pagan and Christian writers up to the medieval period. The editor's own comments are helpful and clear.

great

Nice primer on Pre-Socratic thought.

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