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# The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy

A.A. Long, *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. + 427. \$19.95 (pb).

## Review by

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The format of this book is not a new one for treating the early Greek philosophers. The first ‘companions’ were composed by Fifth Century B.C. sophists, and were consulted by Plato and Aristotle. For most of the last two and a half millennia, some form of ‘companion’ volume was used by just about everyone who worked on ancient philosophy. These books have always been organized either according to individual philosophers, or by topic (The present volume contains both types of essay.) Several of these, treating similar subject matter as the present volume, have been published in the last thirty years (see bibliographic entries #139-161). This volume compares favorably, but does not totally supersede them. *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy* (CCEGP) is recommended especially to undergraduates interested in any aspect of philosophy, graduate students specializing in ancient philosophy, and professional scholars interested in the history of philosophy. As a graduate student specializing in ancient philosophy, I find the book a tremendous resource, which manages to consolidate a lot of information, summarize recent scholarship, and, in many cases, introduce novel ways of approaching the material. Professional ancient philosophers might find the volume more hit-and-miss than *Presocratics*. But even they will probably find it a useful ‘conspectus of recent developments’, a sort of *Presocratics* version 9.0 or *Presocratics* 2000, for those who have not updated their files and operating system lately.

The first two essays deal with overarching issues fundamental to the study of the early Greek philosophers – their scope and sources. The following two essays deal with two tribes of early Greek philosophers, the Milesians and the Pythagoreans. The next five deal with individual philosophers, followed by four topical essays. Finally, there are two essays on the sophists, and a ‘coda’ on poetics. Rounding the volume out is a 550-entry annotated bibliography (focusing on recent, standard, or English works), an index of passages (sources and philosophers), and a crucial name and subject index (many of the philosophers and topics are treated in multiple essays).

The official program starts with the editor’s effort to define “the scope of early Greek philosophy.” This is difficult in the extreme, because we are dealing with several figures and movements that are discrete geographically, temporally, and in dialect, yet interpenetrate intellectually and topically. Already in the ancient world some of them were considered ‘ancient’ and obscure. They are far-flung: they spanned about 20 degrees of longitude, and two and a half centuries; they practiced variously as doctors, lawyers, politicians, priests, professors, engineers, and entertainers; they wrote in poetry, prose, paradoxes, and technical handbooks. (So the CCEGP conveniently contains a map, chronology, and summary of what is known about their lives and writings.) The question of what unites them, besides the fact that they lived before, say, Aristotle (some of the

most important of them were contemporaries of Socrates), is basically a question about what kind of person was a ‘philosopher’ before people started self-consciously designating themselves as such, when ‘philosopher’ became a term of art in Academic circles. The answer to this question obviously adverts to one of the hardest questions in the world, namely, what is philosophy? With the possible exception of Pythagoras, none of the philosophers treated in this volume “identified himself expressly as a ‘philosopher’ or called his project ‘philosophy’” (p. 3). But nonetheless they each contributed in important ways to what later became definitive philosophical topics such as cosmology, chemistry, physics, rhetoric, linguistics, logic, literary and political theory, etc. But we do not merely confer honorary philosophy degrees upon them as thanks for all this important work. We call them philosophers because they attempted to explain all things — literally everything, the universe, τὸ πᾶν —, and ‘philosopher’ is the only term we have ever had for people adventuresome enough to engage in that kind of investigation. So Long at the beginning of the *Companion*, and Most at the end, uses as a touchstone the idea of giving an account of “all things” (p. 10, p. 348). Consider the following:

“The first principle is ... some other nature which is indefinite, out of which come to be all the heavens and the worlds in them” (Anaximander, DK 12B1).<sup>1</sup>

“All things that come into being and grow are earth and water” (Xenophanes, DK 21B29).

“All things come to be in accordance with this logos” (Heraclitus, DK 22B1).

“There is a need for you to learn all things” (Parmenides, DK 28B1).

“All things were together” (Anaxagoras, DK 59B1).

“the four roots of all things” (Empedocles, DK 31B6).

“No thing happens at random but all things as a result of a reason and a necessity” (Leucippus, DK 67B2).

“A human being is the measure of all things” (Protagoras, DK 80B1).

“In my opinion, to sum it all up, all things that are, are differentiated from the same thing and are the same thing” (Diogenes of Apollonia, DK 64B2).

Of course, Hesiod had also endeavored to tell about all things, that is, “of things that are and that will be, and were before” (*Theogony* 38). But we do not label him, nor Homer, as ‘philosophers’ (and certainly not as ‘Presocratics’). That is because the *logoi* of the philosophers are fundamentally different from the *mythoi* of their predecessors. Long sums up the “general project of early Greek philosophy” as “giving an account of all things that is (1) explanatory and systematic, (2) coherent and argumentative, (3) transformative, (4) educationally provocative, and (5) critical and unconventional” (p. 13). Long succeeds in carving out a space for early Greek philosophy that is broad, inclusive, and workable. He makes several important methodological points: against anachronism, for a full consideration of the poetic aspects, for the inclusion of sophistic, medical, and historical material. In the middle of it all he delivers a trenchant critique of the name “Presocratics”. All in all it is an admirable overview of considerations that should be taken into account as we pursue early Greek scholarship into the next millennium.

The second great difficulty in dealing with the early Greek philosophers is the status of their texts — they do not really exist anymore. We don’t possess any complete works by any of the figures treated in the CCEGP. We are totally dependent upon quotations and reportage found in later writers. What we would like to have is a direct tradition, manuscripts of original works that we could use as a basis for authoritative texts. What we have are bits and pieces embedded in many different contexts, which range from biographical, doxographical, and exegetical, to dialectical and polemical. These bits and pieces were extracted by Hermann Diels, organized according to individual philosophers, and published in 1903 under the title *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. This work was later revised by his associate Walther Kranz. This volume, known as “Diels-Kranz” or simply “DK” has been for the last century the basic text for the ‘Presocratics’, on which all subsequent texts, translations, commentaries are dependent. Everyone cites the fragments according to the DK code (as in the passages quoted above), often supplementing this information by citing the original source in which it was found by Diels. Everyone depends on DK, directly or indirectly, but few of us know much about the complicated story of how the book came together as it did, and what are the methodological assumptions of its compilers.

Professor Mansfeld deals with all of the important source issues and the nature and status of Diels’ work in a thorough and pithy essay on sources. For many readers, this will be the most informative piece in the book. After explaining the basic notion of doxography, established by Diels, Mansfeld moves on to discuss the key sources themselves, Plato, Aristotle, Theophrastus, Diogenes Laertius, Hippolytus, Sextus, Clement, Stobaeus

and the commentators, especially Simplicius. He shows how the compilation of quotations by philosophers started in antiquity, and how such collections were continually revised, augmented, edited, cut and pasted, reassembled, and edited anew. We may not be able to reconstruct the original sourcebooks, as the ideal doxographer would, but by paying attention to the advice and warnings of Professor Mansfeld, we can at least be critical and realistic about the sources that we do have.

In Keimpe Algra's essay "The beginnings of cosmology" we get a treatment of the Milesians (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes). Algra compares myth and cosmology, especially Hesiod and Thales, using the Aristotle passage from *Metaphysics A* (983b6-984a4) as a source for Thales. This serves as another lesson in source criticism: Algra shows how to differentiate between what Thales probably said and what Aristotle is interpreting him to have meant. It might have been better to devote some of this space to Anaximander, who gets a meager two and a half pages (compared to 5 for Thales). But beginning students at least will benefit from a careful dissection of the Aristotelian passage. Anaximenes gets a further two and a half pages, and then the essay concludes with some brief comments on "Milesian cosmology and the history and philosophy of science." The main point here is that we can't assign Baconian standards of experimental science to the Presocratics, theirs were questions of a different order and they made fundamental contributions nonetheless. Algra concludes by recommending that we regard them as "protoscientists" (p. 63).

Carl Huffman's chapter on "The Pythagorean tradition" is an insightful summary of recent research into Pythagoreanism. The textual problems surrounding Pythagoreanism are a worst-case scenario, even by 'Presocratic' standards, for there are layers upon layers of legend and myth that must be removed before one can begin to get a clear picture of what exactly Pythagoreans contributed to Greek philosophy. It is hard, by focusing on the figure of Pythagoras himself, to make any real progress. Pythagoras can be all things to all people: to scientists the paragon of rationality, who made mathematics the key to the order of nature, and to mystics a "wonder-working shaman" (p. 67). Huffman tries to combat both of these tendencies, and this is certainly needed, but he perhaps closes too many doors by asserting that the Pythagorean transmigration theory is unrecoverable (p. 70). And it might be a little bit too pessimistic to say, regarding the correspondences of the first four whole number ratios with the concordant musical intervals, that "none of the late stories that assign the discovery of these correspondences to Pythagoras are in fact scientifically possible" (p. 74). Huffman does not give reasons for this depressing assertion. Huffman shifts the focus of Pythagorean research to Philolaus of Croton, for whom we do actually have some credible evidence in fragments, which, although fragmentary, are "crucial primary texts for early Pythagoreanism" (p. 78). Philolaus offers a complex metaphysics of the Limit and the Unlimited, which Huffman makes comprehensible by explaining it as at least in part a response to Parmenides and Anaxagoras (although Huffman does not tell what evidence there is that Philolaus actually read or intended to respond to them; see p. 81-3). There is a fruitful discussion at the end of the use and abuse of Pythagoreanism and of Philolaus by Plato and Aristotle.

Edward Hussey's article on Heraclitus is an adequate introductory summary of the points in Heraclitean scholarship about which there is now more or less agreement. There is a good discussion of the significance of logos, of the unity-in-opposites theory, process oriented cosmology and the significance of fire, and finally, the application of all of the foregoing to a theory of the soul. I especially appreciated Hussey's emphasis on the "unity" part of the "unity-in-opposites" doctrine (p. 96) as a welcome departure from the popular caricature of Heraclitus as a "flux" theorist. Hussey ends with the intriguing methodological comment that "the interpreter has to construct Heraclitus as a Heraclitean unity-in-opposites, with the systematic and the aporetic as his



opposed aspects” (p. 109), reminding us that Heraclitus is more useful as a provocation to private philosophical meditation and exercise than as a springboard for a grand theory or doctrine. Hussey’s article successfully conveys this idea, even if it doesn’t break much new ground.

David Sedley’s contribution on “Parmenides and Melissus”, on the other hand, does forge a new path for the interpretation of ‘Eleaticism’. He starts out with the provocative assertion that, “too much has been written on Parmenides ... too little on Melissus” (p. 113). He cuts right to the chase, not attempting to do justice to the proem (which is fortunately treated in several other contributions), and begins analysis of “The Way of Truth”. Sedley does not get bogged down in a minute discussion of the sense of the verb ἐστὶ, and he recommends glossing it as “is something.” As for all of the ‘predicates’, he argues for a “unashamedly spatial reading” (p. 114) so that Parmenides is literally talking about a sphere. He treats “The Way of Seeming” as an attempt by Parmenides to offer a cosmology that, “will be the best of its kind, a successful competitor” (p. 123). He points out passages from the second part of the poem that support his spatial reading of the first part. A full third of the article is devoted to Melissus. Melissus is presented as an Ionian physicist who is addressing in plain language a scientifically sophisticated audience. The main difference between Parmenides and Melissus is that the former steps out of, but the latter remains steadfastly in, the bonds of the great physical tradition. But they are both at the forefront of a new metaphysically oriented viewpoint which, by appealing to “a priori” principles, breaks out of the strictly empirical methodology of the earlier cosmologists and paves the way for the development of inferential methods.

Each of the subsequent articles on individual philosophers assumes or argues that their subjects are in some way influenced by Parmenides. It is a little bit odd that this is more or less taken for granted in the case of the pluralists and the atomists, but considered with hesitation only in the case of Zeno. McKirahan’s article on Zeno is framed by the question of whether or not Zeno was actually defending Parmenides (a question that, in my humble opinion, is more of a red herring than a clear framework for thinking about the paradoxes). I will discuss McKirahan’s article in a minute. But I want to pause to consider why it has become so easy to assume that Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus all accepted Parmenides’ arguments and built their cosmologies on the foundation of his logic. For example, Graham argues that “both Empedocles and Anaxagoras wholeheartedly endorse Parmenides’ rejection of coming-to-be and perishing, without qualification or implicit criticism. And neither one ever argues explicitly against him in the fragments on any other issue... Empedocles and Anaxagoras agree with Parmenides without explicitly disagreeing” (p. 167). Taylor simply asserts that “Atomistic physics is one of a number of attempts to accommodate the Ionian tradition of comprehensive natural philosophy to the demands of Eleatic logic” (p. 199). Patricia Curd’s recent book, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, which I reviewed for this journal (BMCR 99.06.21), also takes this stance (1998; see pages 8, 128, 242). I think that there are some good interpretations which have been advanced under this assumption, but it might be going too far to consider these people “eleatic pluralists” (p. 176). It might be the case that, since there is no explicit criticism of Parmenides by these thinkers, they must have accepted all of his arguments. But there are alternatives: that they didn’t read him at all; that they read him and didn’t understand; or that they understood, but considered the position weak and ignored it (Inwood, p. 23-4); or that they accepted some of his arguments but not all (Schofield in KRS, p. 351). The inference from lack of disagreement to agreement seems particularly questionable since all of this work survives only in fragments.

McKirahan’s article is concerned to show that the purpose of Zeno’s treatise was in fact to vindicate the Eleatic philosophy, as Plato had claimed ( *Parm.* 128bc). After considering two of the paradoxes about infinity, McKirahan goes on to discuss the differences between *apeiron* and infinity. He says, “Zeno’s conception of *apeiron* is not identical with our notion of the infinite, to state the paradox in terms of the infinite and solve

those terms is to state and solve a different paradox” (p. 141). McKirahan’s discussion of the difference is good and right, but he then confusingly goes on to use the term ‘infinite’, both in his translations and commentary (pp. 145ff.). When dealing with the arguments against motion, many will, I suspect, disagree with McKirahan’s conclusions that the problems have been solved. See if you agree with the following: “The Dichotomy fails” (p. 148); “The Achilles fails because it trades on ambiguity” (p. 150); and “again, the problem of how the arrow goes from one position to another or from one time to another during its flight is solved by pointing out that that is precisely what it means for the arrow to be flying” (p. 155). I am not in a position to say whether Professor McKirahan has or has not shown that these paradoxes ‘fail’ or can be ‘solved.’ But I am concerned that readers for whom this book is an introduction will hastily conclude that there is not much point in researching further into this difficult philosopher who, at any rate, has already been refuted.

Daniel Graham’s essay, “Empedocles and Anaxagoras: Responses to Parmenides,” is another adequate summary of the standard interpretation of these two. He discusses Empedocles’ positions on love and strife, zoogony, and psychology, without getting drawn into the scholarly quagmire of the debate about love and strife. He proceeds to discuss Anaxagoras according to Kerferd’s (1969) five postulates, which twenty years later still makes for clear exposition. Graham’s comparison of the two ‘pluralists’ is insightful, and this is the justification for treating them together, although some readers will have wanted a separate chapter on Anaxagoras, about whom Vlastos once remarked, “no Pre-Socratic system has been studied more intensively” (p. 459). I have already commented briefly on Graham’s treatment of the pluralists under “the Parmenidean model of explanation” (p. 169ff.), and I leave it to the readers to evaluate that position for themselves.

C.C.W. Taylor’s essay, “The Atomists,” is concise and incisive. He manages to discuss physical principles, character, necessity, epistemology, psychology, ethics, and politics in twenty fast-paced and exciting pages. All this he does while linking atomism with preceding, contemporary, and subsequent doctrines. But one wonders if Taylor has done too good a job of showing the continuities with the tradition. His characterization of their world-view as “mechanistic” (p. 185-6) is fair (and we moderns are accustomed to thinking of atomism as a ‘mechanistic’ model), but Taylor does not really emphasize how radical this must have been when the dominant model (one that remained dominant for another thousand plus years) was a biologized one, holding that the universe was like a natural living thing, not a machine (a point that other contributors rightly emphasize in their own sections). Taylor ends with an appendix in which he takes a “middle of the road” position on the relation between atomistic physics and ethics, and this rounds off an exposition worthy of the intellectual strength of the movement he is discussing.

The first of the topical essays is Sarah Broadie’s “Rational Theology.” Professor Broadie reminds us that we do not really draw a sharp line between the theology of the early Greek philosophers and the rest of their accomplishments. For one thing, they usually label that which is fundamental to their cosmologies ‘divine’ (with the interesting exception of Parmenides, whom Broadie treats at length). She expounds Xenophanes’ rejection of anthropomorphism and then describes his unique brand of theism, which she argues is not monotheistic as has often been thought. She carefully considers the various roles of the divine in Empedocles’ poem, and discusses the implications of the atomists’ “truly naturalized natural world” (p. 221).

James Lesher’s “Early Interest in Knowledge” and André Laks’ “Soul, sensation, and thought” overlap considerably, as is to be expected in a discussion of Greek epistemology and psychology, which are never totally separable. Both essays start with a consideration of the poetic precursors to their subjects, and these are both valuable discussions. Lesher focuses on Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles, and he brings out several compelling parallels. Most important, of course, is the tendency to emphasize *physis* and *logos*,

which will have a major impact on both Plato and Aristotle. Laks mentions that the distinction between the sensation and thought was “a matter of course” (p. 257), but he goes on to discuss what exactly this amounted to. The notion that Parmenides “rejected the senses” is a popular one, and Laks responds to this with effective commentary on two key passages and a vivid comparison of these to a passage in Empedocles.

Mario Vegetti’s essay on “Culpability, responsibility, and cause” is unique for this type of volume, since it focuses on historical and medical texts roughly contemporaneous with the figures treated in the book. Vegetti begins by pointing out that the early Greek philosophers were not in possession of a concept of causality in the Humean sense. He references, approvingly, Michael Frede’s description of the later notion of cause (p. 274), and proceeds to flesh it out with a wealth of historical, rhetorical, and medical examples. Readers of G.E.R. Lloyd’s numerous writings about the intersection of the medical and philosophical traditions will already have been convinced that it is absolutely necessary to deal with this material in a discussion of the early Greek philosophers, but Professor Vegetti’s article, which will perhaps be circulated more widely, will serve to underscore that point well.

The most popular previous ‘companion’ volumes, such as those edited by Mourelatos (1974), and Allen and Furley (1970/1975) did not include any complete essays on the sophists (although there are exceptions, the most notable being Barnes 1979). Even the most widely-used sourcebook, KRS, does not provide any material on the sophists (though McKirahan 1994 does). In 1980, Kerferd called for a new interpretation of the sophists, asserting that the need for a reassessment was by then “a matter of some urgency” (p. vii). The inclusion in the CCEGP of two essays on the ‘sophists’ is a good sign that we are finally beginning to admit the likes of Protagoras, Gorgias, and Antiphon into the club of early Greek philosophers, after two thousand years of more or less complete exclusion. The first essay, Paul Woodruff’s “Rhetoric and relativism” treats Protagoras and Gorgias. Professor Woodruff wants to fundamentally revamp our perspective, arguing that “the traditional view that the sophists are relativists must give way to the recognition that what most characterizes the sophists as a group is their commitment to human nature as a subject of study. We must also give up the idea that the sophists are skeptics” (p. 305). The focus on ‘human nature’ would appear to situate Gorgias and Protagoras directly within the mainstream of the Greek philosophical tradition, except that Woodruff thinks that they, at the same time, turned away from the philosophers’ “fascination with knowing the hidden natures of things” (p. 309). If this is true, it would seem to set them even further away from the philosophers than they appeared to be before. Woodruff further argues that their central concerns, practical politics and law, forced them to emphasize good judgment (*euboulia*), instead of knowledge, as an expedient to deal with the reasoning by appeal to probability (*eikos*) that is inevitably employed in forensic deliberation. In the end, we are left with the sense that the philosophical importance of the sophists was more as challengers to the assumptions of the philosophers than as contributors to their projects.

Fernanda Decleva Caizzi’s essay, “Protagoras and Antiphon: Sophistic debates on justice,” treats the issue of justice with historical, poetical, philosophical (i.e. Platonic), and sophistic material. She frames the discussion of justice with the first two books of Plato’s *Republic*, especially the thought experiment of the ring of Gyges. In an insightful comparison of Plato’s and Herodotus’ versions of the Gyges story, she shows how Protagoras’ position is close to Herodotus’, while Antiphon’s is more like Glaucon’s. Another salient point of comparison (given Woodruff’s conclusions) is their “two radically different views on human nature” (p. 317). One interesting result of her study, however, is a conjecture that Antiphon was working in “a larger scientific context, marked by a concept of nature (and not just human nature)” (p. 327). If this is right, then we see just how much difference

there must have been within what we often call “the sophistic movement”, since Antiphon would have exploited a ‘philosophical’ concept of nature in his critique of law or convention ( *nomos*), while Protagoras (who was unwilling to polarize *nomos* and *physis*) did not.

My favorite essay of the volume was the last, Glenn Most’s “The poetics of early Greek philosophy.” The article makes a forceful case for the consideration of poetic issues in the interpretation of early Greek philosophy, something that is all too often ignored by commentators who are overly confident about their ability to determine the properly ‘philosophical’ content of the fragments. Most provides a useful taxonomy of the poetic aspects of early Greek philosophy: he uses the terms ‘immanent,’ ‘explicit,’ and ‘implicit’ to describe their poetics. Writers are *immanently* poetic when they use poetic devices in order to convey their philosophic messages. An obvious case of this would be writing in hexameters, as did Empedocles. Many of the early Greek philosophers *explicitly* wrote about and interpreted the poets. Examples of this are invective against the poets (and the ‘quarrel between philosophy and poetry’), and the development of allegorical techniques. Finally, all the early Greek philosophers are *implicitly* poetic as a result of their educational system which was focused on Homer and Hesiod. This is simply a recognition that those poets “inevitably shaped the discursive parameters within which the early Greek philosophers operated” (p. 334). The result is that we are obligated to examine the poetic aspects of these writers, even those that wrote in prose, or that seem to effect a transition out of the ‘mytho-poetic’ mindset. As Most says, very forcibly and very rightly, “it is particularly true in the case of the early Greek thinkers as a group that no account of their philosophy that considers only the structure of their arguments, and not also the form in which they chose to communicate those arguments to their public, can be considered fully satisfactory” (p. 335). This statement likely comes as no surprise to classicists, who would probably be shocked at how often this point is explicitly denied in ‘Presocratic’ scholarship, especially in reference to Parmenides, who wrote in fact a beautiful philosophical poem about logic and ontology in dactylic hexameters.

Many common themes run through several of the articles. In some cases these represent new positions on the interpretation of the early Greek philosophers, and in others they solidify positions that have been developed over the last century. Four examples stand out. The first is the necessity to consider many ‘nonphilosophical’ genres in doing early Greek philosophy, such as the historians, medical writers, dramatists, orators, and poets. The second is the admission that the term ‘sophistic’ does not designate a natural kind opposed to philosophy but is an extremely diverse philosophical movement. The third is the recognition of the centrality of Parmenides, and the question of the extent to which his successors incorporated his logic into their own cosmological speculations. The fourth is the reconsideration of traditional oppositions and alliances. For example, it is possible that Parmenides and Heraclitus might be closer together than it seems on the surface, and that Philolaus ought to be separated out from the Pythagorean morass. The contributors to the CCEGP challenge us to think about all of these things, and lots more. In philosophy, the best companions are the ones that challenge us.

## References and Abbreviations

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DK. The translations are McKirahan’s, in P. Curd (ed.), *A Presocratics Reader* (Indianapolis and Cambridge, 1989).

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## Notes

1. Fragments are listed by their number in the standard edition of H. Diels and W. Kranz; translations are by R.D. McKirahan in *A Presocratics Reader*, ed. P. Curd (Indianapolis 1995).