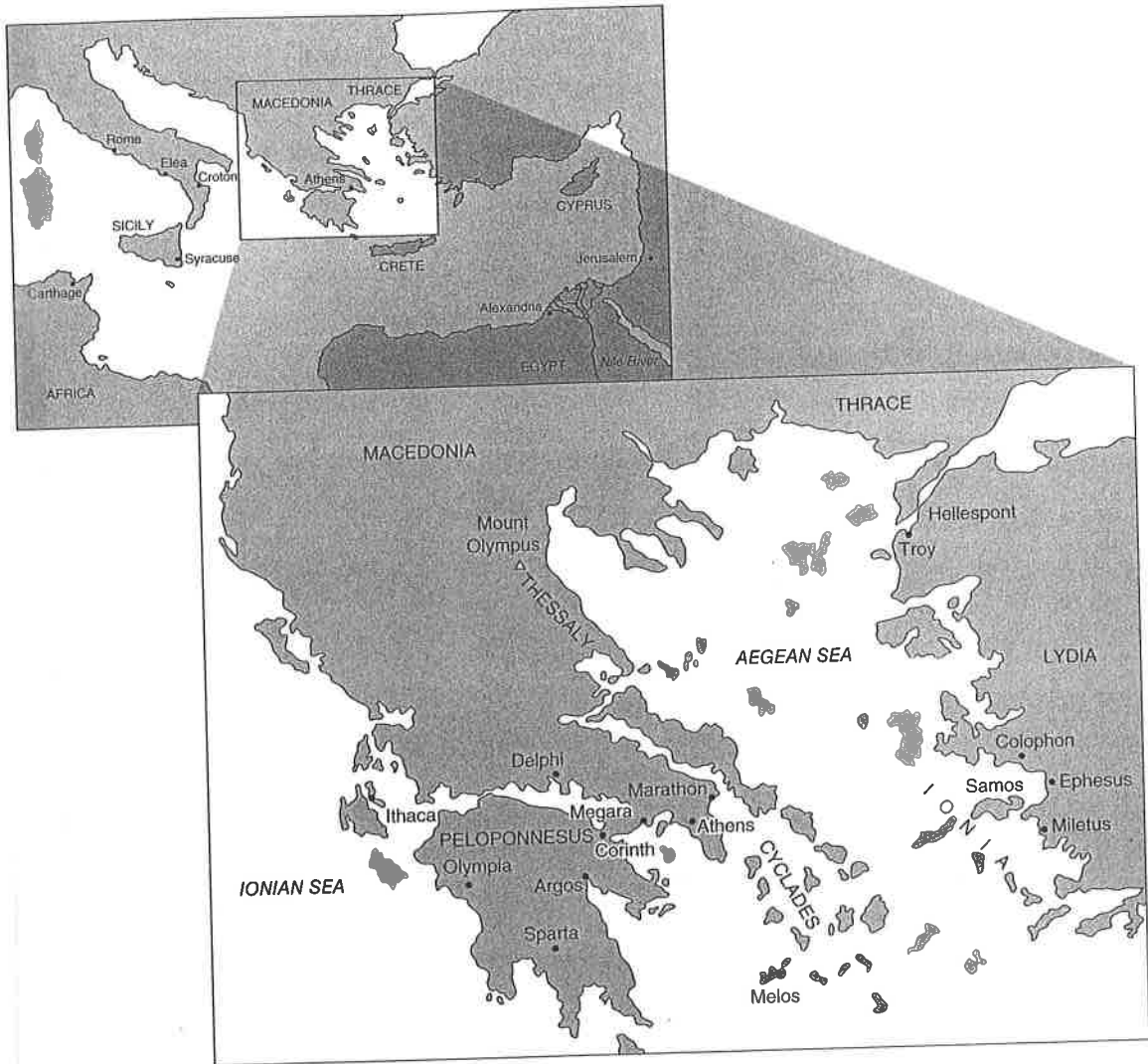


Map of Ancient Greece



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Philosophy in the Ancient World. This map identifies cities and regions of the ancient world where some of the philosophers discussed in the text lived and taught.



The Greek Cultural Context: From Poetry to Philosophy

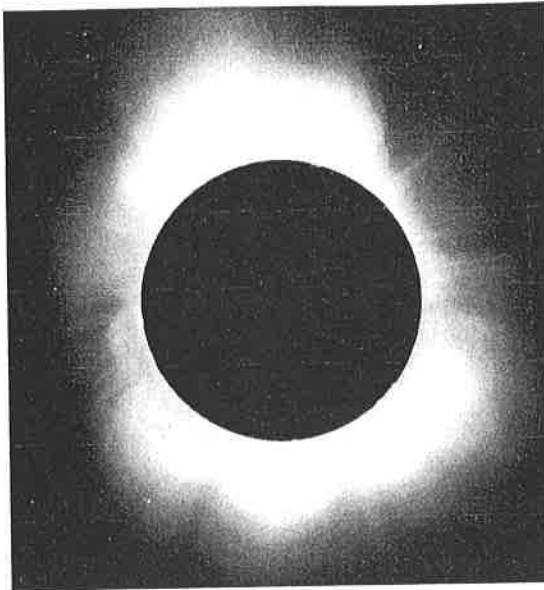
It was May 28, 585 B.C.E., and the sun beat down unmercifully as the six-year battle between the Medes and the Lydians raged on fiercely on the west coast of Asia Minor. Suddenly, a shroud of darkness began to cover the battlefield. Puzzled, the warriors on both sides lowered their weapons and looked up to the sky, where they discovered a black void where the sun had once stood. Was this a sign from the gods? Would worse calamities follow? Not wanting to know the answers to these questions, the soldiers of both armies threw down their arms and fled. Prudence, not military might, won the battle that day. However, in this same region a middle-aged merchant and engineer, who would later become known as a sage, was also looking upward. In contrast to the warriors, his face was not contorted with fear but showed only a knowing smile as he nodded approval at the cosmic event. Who was this wise man, and why was he the only one to welcome the darkness of the sun?

The sage in question was named Thales. Many ancient sources consider Thales the first philosopher in Western history. One of the most notable achievements attributed to Thales is his prediction of a solar eclipse. Scientists calculate that an eclipse did occur on May 28, 585 B.C.E., and we can assume this was the one that gave Thales his fame. He surely did not predict the exact date of the eclipse, but possibly he knew enough astronomy to pick the correct month. Given all

this, does Thales belong in a book on the history of astronomy? What possible connection could there be between his prediction and the birth of Western philosophy? To understand the significance of his prediction, we must back up to see what preceded it.

The Role of the Poets

The story of philosophy begins with poetry. The poets held a central position in Greek culture. They were not only tellers of interesting tales in flowery language (it is questionable whether any good poetry is only that). Instead, the poets developed, preserved, and conveyed the historical, scientific, and religious truths of the time. They were concerned with history, because their tales gave an account of the past and how various traditions, races, and cultures came to be. Furthermore, they attempted to answer cosmological questions by speaking about the origins, structure, and workings of the universe. They explained the causes that lay behind thunderstorms, abundant crops, drought, health, and sickness. They also served an important religious function. The poets told the stories of the gods, and their accounts were taken to be authoritative. The Greeks thought that the poets were inspired by the Muses—the goddesses of literature and the arts. *Inspired* means “breathed into.” Hence, for the Greeks, the poets were inspired or



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When the philosopher Thales predicted a solar eclipse in 585 B.C.E., he demonstrated that the world exhibits a consistent, natural order that our minds can understand.

filled with a divine spirit—no less so than biblical writers are seen as divinely inspired in the Christian tradition. Finally, the stories of the poets served an ethical function. By explaining how great heroes triumphed or fell, how the universe worked, and how human destiny was controlled by the gods and fate, the poets helped make clear what course people should take in life and what actions were appropriate or improper, advantageous or ruinous.

The poets explained the world through myths. Many people think of myths as simply fanciful and false stories. They are more than this, however. They represent the attempt to explain the unfamiliar and mysterious in terms of what is familiar and observable. They are symbolic expressions of how the deepest concerns of human life fit into a large-scale picture of the cosmos. The primary model of explanation available to pre-scientific people was that of human motives and actions. Hence, the gods of the ancient Greeks were very human. They acted according to familiar purposes and aims. However, they were also anthropomorphic in the sense that they were driven by passion, lust, and petty jealousies; they were easily offended, vengeful,

deceitful, and played favorites. In short, their enormous power was equaled only by their raging immaturity. The Greek gods had a division of labor: there was a separate god for each area of life—war, love, trade, hunting, agriculture, and so on. Both the favorable and the unfortunate events in life were attributed to the anger or the goodwill of this or that god. In short, even though they seem like extravagant fantasies to us, the myths of the poets tried to provide a comprehensive view of the world and the individual's place in it.

THE NATURAL ORDER ACCORDING TO HOMER

To set the stage for philosophy, it is worth looking at the most important Greek poet, Homer.* His authority within Greek culture is underscored by the fact that later philosophers found it important either to defend or to criticize his views. One of the earliest Greek philosophers, Xenophanes (about 570–478 B.C.E.), explains that he criticizes Homer because “All at first have learnt according to Homer.”¹ Homer's poems suggest several broad conceptions about the nature of the universe. First, what order we find in nature (the pattern of the seasons, for example) is the product of the steady purposes and aims of the gods. However, nature is sometimes unpredictable, because the gods are fickle and impulsive. A devastating earthquake or a sudden storm, for example, is caused by the sea god Poseidon, but does not fit into any long-term, rational purpose of his that would make his initiation of such events intelligible.

Second, the Homeric gods are a far cry from the omnipotent deity of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Not only can they be thwarted by other gods, including their own family members, but they are subject to such forces as fate or necessity. Although the fates are sometimes presented as several personal beings, their actions are usually so unintelligible and unpredictable

*The Homeric poems the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were originally songs that were passed on orally from generation to generation. We believe they were put in written form sometime in the eighth century B.C.E. Because of tradition, we attribute them to a blind bard known as Homer. But scholars suspect that they are actually the products of more than one poet.

that the human mind cannot penetrate their mysteries. Thus, from our standpoint, the collection of forces the Greeks called *fate* is more a principle of randomness than it is a law of nature.

THE MORAL IDEAL ACCORDING TO HOMER

The Homeric notion of virtue is quite a bit different from that found in later moral traditions. Homer's virtues were the virtues of the warrior-hero and can be summarized under the heading of *excellence*. Excellence was defined in terms of success, honor, power, wealth, moderation, and security, as well as courage, loyalty, and patriotism. Homer's heroes may be called on to look after the welfare of others and to take risks to meet the demands of loyalty. However, these moral duties are always for the sake of preserving one's honor and status, not typically because of the outcome for others.

Homer's conception of the gods was consistent with this picture. The gods' interests revolved around their own honor and status. They sat up on Mount Olympus, looking down on the spectacle of human affairs like spectators at the chariot races. Although the gods were able to suffer frustration, no one doubted that their lives were basically happy. Thus, when a mortal aspired to be godlike, this had more to do with enhancing his or her own status than it did with concern for others. When it came to their interaction with mortals, the gods did not reward virtue and punish evil as much as they expressed favoritism and reacted negatively when annoyed. Flattery, bribery, cajoling, and coaxing were as likely to win the gods' favor as moral goodness was. Service to the gods was motivated not by their goodness but by their power. Consequently, all interactions between mortals and the gods were, for both sides, a matter of calculating self-interest.

Homer's account of Zeus, however, provides some exceptions to this general picture. Zeus was the supreme god among Homer's collection of deities. Although he was stronger than all the rest and they looked to him for advice and approval, he still was limited both by external forces and his own personality flaws. Nevertheless, we sometimes get glimpses of his concern to see justice prevail within human

affairs. He becomes angry at the moral wrongs that mortals inflict on one another.² Homer's near contemporary, the eighth-century (B.C.E.) poet Hesiod, develops this line of thought even further. According to Hesiod, Zeus directs the other gods to measure humans' actions against a universal law of justice. As Hesiod states in his *Works and Days*,

The deathless gods are never far away;
They mark the crooked judges who grind down
Their fellow-men and do not fear the gods.³

In these sorts of passages, the will of the gods takes on the character of a uniform, moral order operating in the world. This picture provided fertile soil for developing the notion of an impersonal natural order, independent of the gods' will.

CONFLICTS WITHIN HOMER'S PICTURE

To simplify and summarize, Homer and the other poets established four notions of world order: (1) Some events in the world are caused by purposeful, though frequently capricious, human or divine agents. (2) There is an element of randomness in the world such that some events are as purposeless as the throw of a pair of dice. (3) The fates represent an unyielding, amoral order in the world to which both mortals and the gods, including Zeus, are subject. (4) In some passages, the gods respond to a moral order and judge mortals by a standard of objective justice. Unfortunately, Homer does not make clear what happens when two or more of these forces conflict.

Despite the crudeness of Homer's picture of the universe, it provided a starting point for Greek scientific and philosophical thought.⁴ It did this in two ways. First, the conflicts between his principles cry out for a more coherent view of the world. An inconsistent answer is no answer at all. Second, his last two principles (fate and justice) suggest a new sense of order that would lead beyond the Homeric myths. The notion of fate as an inescapable causal order is, in spite of its superstitious colorings, the predecessor of the notion of impersonal, natural laws. Also, the idea that Zeus sometimes lays aside petty, personal interests and is concerned with justice points toward the development of objective ethical principles.

Nevertheless, what we find in Homer are at best the seeds of theoretical thought. Only when these seeds break through the soil of myth and rise above the medium in which they took root will the fruits of philosophy begin to appear.

The Birth of Western Philosophy

Traditionally, the birth of Western philosophy has been located in the sixth century B.C.E., with the emergence of Thales and other early figures. The problem is, to say, *when* Western philosophy began requires an understanding of *what* philosophy is. However, to ask, "What is philosophy?" is to raise a philosophically controversial question. Hence, when and where one locates the birth of philosophy within a culture will depend on how narrowly or broadly one defines *philosophy*. There are strains of philosophy in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, and there are remnants of traditional, mythical thought throughout Greek philosophy. However, everyone agrees that Western philosophy did not leap into being from out of nowhere. Transitions in the history of thought are rarely that abrupt and great ideas do not arise from a vacuum. Historically, philosophy emerged within Western civilization the same way it emerges within our personal lives. Becoming philosophical is a gradual process in which cultures and individuals learn to look at the world in a new way by becoming self-conscious and critical. Although we cannot pinpoint the birth of Western philosophy the way we can a solar eclipse, we can point to significant landmarks on the continuum from mythological tales to fully aware, self-critical philosophical thought.

To return to the solar eclipse, Thales's prediction was a significant event in the story of philosophy because it represented a new concept of order. If Thales was able to predict this natural phenomenon, it meant that he realized (unlike many of his contemporaries) that events in the world were neither the result of the irrational and unpredictable will of the gods, blind chance, nor the work of a largely inscrutable fate. Instead, Thales realized that such events were the product of a consistent, impersonal, natural order that can be studied and made the basis of generalizations and predictions. This raised

questions about what this order must be like, if it is open to rational inspection and understanding.

As with any philosopher, Thales owed an intellectual debt to many sources. In his time, the Greeks benefited both economically and intellectually from their trade with other cultures. Because of the thriving commercial life of their coastal cities, they were in touch with the leading centers of civilization: Egypt and Phoenicia; Lydia, Persia, and Babylon. Thales, no doubt, acquired much of his knowledge about mathematics from the Egyptians and his knowledge of astronomy from the Babylonians. It is quite possible that his philosophical speculations about the universe were nourished by the traditions of the different cultures around him. Furthermore, the suggestions in Homer's and Hesiod's myths that Zeus applies a consistent rule of justice to the world may have inspired Thales to search for an impersonal order in nature.

Although Thales applied and continued some of the ideas of his predecessors, he brought to these materials the spark of a new way of thinking. This new style of thought was that of original, theoretical inquiry. Rather than appealing to tradition or the stories of the gods to support his conclusions, he sent his opinions out into the world to stand or fall on their own merits. Thales's contemporaries and successors produced a whirl of questions, arguments, theories, and critical dialogue, making clear that a new way of answering questions and resolving disputes was emerging in Western history. From the womb of this spirit of inquiry and argument, both science and philosophy were given birth.

CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS I: THE PHILOSOPHICAL TURN

Western philosophy began with the new sort of inquiry initiated by Thales. What are the risks of questioning the taken-for-granted answers of one's culture and tradition? What is to be gained by doing so? When did this attitude of critical inquiry begin in your life? When did you begin to question the answers of your parents or your society? When you were a little child, what sorts of philosophical questions came to your mind? What sorts of answers