

Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham, eds.
The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy.
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In today's deluge of companions, guidebooks, introductions, and encyclopaedias, the Oxford philosophy 'Handbooks' series manages to stand out thanks to its level of ambition. These handbooks aim at a scholarly audience as much as students, with state-of-the-art essays that are supposed to challenge old orthodoxies and promote new thinking. With the parameters set like this, though, an Oxford handbook on the Presocratics may strike some as a willfully perverse enterprise. What subject could be less cutting-edge? And where in it could there be room left for new discoveries? We possess a paltry number of sources, which in addition to being fragmentary are often enigmatic in the extreme, and we have had fifteen centuries to make up our minds about how best to read them. Simplicius clearly had superior access to the Presocratics, yet he already laments the difficulty many in his day had even in accessing Parmenides, let alone understanding him. Surely everything there is to be said about the Presocratics has already been said, likely many times over?

Well, hardly. As the contributions to the *Handbook* make clear, Presocratic philosophy is very much a live field of study, one whose character has evolved considerably over the past few decades alone. Partly this has to do with the normal process of scholarship, as grand narratives and sweeping generalizations gradually give way to a greater appreciation for the polyphony and sheer variety present in the materials. (Partly this has had to do with overcoming Aristotle's take on the history of early Greek philosophy; it is to be noted that Hegel was better at this than most.) The erosion of disciplinary boundaries also has had a salutary effect, with the insights of classicists merging with those of philosophers, Near Eastern scholars, historians of science and religion, and even literature scholars. Most astonishing of all, new texts do indeed surface on occasion. The recently discovered Strasbourg and Derveni papyri manage to shed considerable new light on the Orphic tradition and on Empedocles.

This Oxford *Handbook* handsomely showcases the current state of play. The structure follows a familiar pattern: first the ancient sources and the Near Eastern background are described, then a second (and by far the largest) part introduces the major players and movements. A handful of thematic chapters then follow, with the volume rounded out by a look at the impact of early Greek philosophy. Here, the focus is on later ancient philosophy, which occasions a minor critical notice. Given how the struggle to establish the meaning of the Presocratic fragments is inextricably bound up with our understanding of what the later Greek authors did with them, and to them, would it not have served the reader better to have these chapters foregrounded? Moreover, the two

chapters on reception, though in themselves both very fine, share an emphasis on the classical period, and particularly Aristotle. One wonders whether a chapter on Simplicius as a reader of the Presocratics would not also have been warranted, given his centrality to the textual tradition and the very particular nature of the late ancient take on the history of philosophy. Equipped with these tools the reader would be better placed to examine critically the sources for the more substantive chapters.

Perhaps, though, the point is to insist, *pace* Osborne and other critics, that we are indeed within our rights to speculate and even to speak with some confidence about what the Presocratics taught and thought (as opposed to what, say, Aristotle, Simplicius, or Hippolytus made of them). Seen in this light, what is most noticeable about the *Handbook* is how infinitely malleable it makes the Presocratic materials seem. One need not subscribe to the cynical view according to which one only ever sees in the Presocratics what one wishes to see. Instead, one may allow that outside the realm of academic acrimony and one-upmanship, multiple perspectives on a single body of texts may indeed each contain a measure of truth. To take a few examples:

Wonderfully poetic and brimming with allusions, Walter Burkert's chapter on the oriental background to early Greek speculation would not look out of place in a general 'Handbook of Mediterranean Civilization', or one on Greek Religion. Yet cheek by jowl sits a piece by Stephen White which resuscitates, whether by design or by accident, a thesis that has historically been considered its opposite number, namely, the idea that early Greek cosmologists, and the Ionian natural philosophers in particular, were attempting a rudimentary quantitative analysis of the world, which would make of them pioneers of the European scientific outlook. These two interpretations have often been advanced in stark opposition to one another, and in the hands of more grandiose authors they have reflected vastly different readings of the history of Western thought. This would be history as polemic: to their great credit, neither Burkert nor White do any such thing. Instead, we are invited to view the Ionians as comfortably inhabiting both worlds.

Speculation or science? Poetry or argument? The second question is just as apposite as the first, and again one of the pleasures of the *Handbook* is that it allows for multiple voices to arise out of the materials and stand in easy juxtaposition, sometimes in adjacent chapters. Daniel Graham treats Heraclitus with delightful delicacy, peeling back the layers of a few choice fragments and revealing in the process how Heraclitus carefully posits opposing notions either side of a pivotal qualifying term—a 'forever' here, a 'man' there. Depending on which way the qualifier is taken to lean, the intent shifts, sometimes subtly, sometimes quite dramatically: Graham's take is that in many cases Heraclitus wishes to teach both the necessity and the impossibility of true stereoscopic vision. A river consists of nothing but its flowing waters and so seemingly has no enduring identity; and yet, paradoxically, without this constant change the river, precisely as river, could not endure. Graham's reading is unabashedly poetic and in some ways strikingly reminiscent of what Jan Zwicky does in *Wisdom and Metaphor* (2003), right down to the discussion

of duck-rabbits and the like.

Richard McKirahan's follow-up contribution is equally admirable, yet starkly different in character: McKirahan unpacks the flow of Parmenides B8 in a highly analytic manner in an effort to adjudicate the claim that Parmenides was an argumentative philosopher. In another standout piece, Oliver Primavesi somehow manages to straddle the divide, masterfully tying in the well-known basics of Empedocles' physical theory with his less understood mythological statements and even his ethics. Because killing and eating animals contributes to the cycle of Strife, it finds its reflection in the primordial acts of aggression committed by the 'guilty god' who must therefore suffer penance before becoming purified in the ascendancy of Love. This is speculative writing at its finest, at once solidly argued and boldly suggestive.

Another great strength of the *Handbook* is its ability to suggest a culture of continuing discussion among the early Greek philosophers without resorting to the rigid notion of schools or a prescribed programme of inquiry. This again is the hallmark of a mature field of study. Thus Alex Mourelatos can present Xenophanes's cloud-physics as following in the footsteps of the Ionians and David Sedley can consider the notion that Democritus was responding to an originally Eleatic challenge—Daniel Graham adds a grace note, indicating that Leucippus should perhaps be considered an Eleatic himself; even as Carl Huffman takes a cautious and measured stance towards the notion of Pythagoreanism influencing Plato, and Sedley warns against taking the description of atomism in *Physics* 1.3 as referring to Democritus at all. (Sedley, like the ancient commentators, prefers to think that the reference is to Plato's *Timaeus*.)

The *Handbook* is not without flaws. References to current philosophical or scientific concepts sometimes feel plastered on, though thankfully there are not too many. In some cases, the desire to present a thinker in light of some overarching theme has come in the way of presenting a full account of the source materials, or indeed of the major interpretive options available in approaching them. In some cases a 'topical' chapter picks up a theme left untouched by a 'figure' heading, as in Xenophanes's famous contributions to theology: but then at least a reference to the later chapter would be helpful. One may also question some of the ways in which the materials are divided. Why are the sophists placed under 'figures and movements', for instance, while the medical tradition is considered a 'topic' for discussion? Both represent traditions of thought that in some ways hew closely to the Presocratic mainstream, while in other ways they are quite distinctive. Both show the porous nature of philosophy vis-à-vis its neighbouring disciplines in Greek intellectual culture. Finally, and inevitably, many questions are left dangling. To pick but one example, Patricia Curd presents Anaxagoras as navigating a middle course between what she calls the expansive and reductionist views concerning the basic building blocks of reality. For all that this is an attractive position, one can see why the more radical readings also have had their proponents; for on Curd's view, it becomes awfully hard to tell what in the end counts as a basic component for Anaxagoras and what

does not.

Still, to leave questions open is itself a hallmark of a vibrant and healthy scholarly culture. This is a splendidly rich volume, one that handily surpasses anything else that is on the market. One can only hope that a softcover is in the offing, since this is precisely the sort of book one would like to place in the hands of particularly bright students. In the beginnings of philosophy may yet lie its future.

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