



The Condensed Edition
of

**The First
Philosophers**
...in just 3900 words

"Philosophy begins with Thales -
Bertrand Russell"

**Reading time: about 25
minutes**

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INTRODUCTION TO *The First Philosophers*

Of course, these aren't the First Philosophers at all, philosophy ought to be a lot older than two-and-a-half thousand years.

Consider those famous, rather accurate, rather charming, paintings in the caves around Lascaux in France. They appear to be from some sixteen thousand years ago, and, even if we don't really know who made them, we can rather reasonably assume that it was someone in some society clever enough to make pigments, to formulate paints, to devise and make brushes and to draw and paint. Someone who wanted to communicate with others through images. It seems rather unlikely, to me at least, that such a person didn't also stare at the stars and wonder why, and how, it is that things appear to be the way they are, which is all that is needed to be a philosopher.

But the painters of Lascaux didn't write anything down, at least not in words that make sense now. So philosophy has to begin, for us in The West, with the Greek-speaking sages of the Mediterranean, around 500BC. They wrote things down. Almost everything they wrote down is now lost, but has been sort-of reconstructed from bits and bobs and odd notes. So here they are, always presumed from their, rather fanciful, portraits to be the very image of what a philosopher is supposed to be - bald, bearded, toga-clad and more than slightly mad.

ABOUT THIS SQUASHED EDITION

This version is almost entirely based on the '*The Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*' by Diogenes Laertius, compiled around 200AD from a variety of earlier sources.

THE VERY SQUASHED VERSION OF...



, 1835

The First Philosophers

"Philosophy begins with Thales - Bertrand Russell"

Thales of Miletus (c580BC): Predicted eclipses, divided the year into 365 days. Said that water was the basis of all things.

Anaximander of Miletus (c530BC): Said that the primary element was Infinity. Drew a map of the earth.

Anaximenes of Miletus (c535BC): Said that the principle of everything was air, and the Infinite; and that the stars moved around the earth.

Pythagoras (c526BC): Gained thousands of followers in Crotona in Italy. He understood geometry, and musical harmony, but had his disciples keep them secret. Held to many obscure sayings: do not eat beans, do not piss in the sunshine etc. He was killed by enemies when he refused to cross a field of beans.

Xenophanes (c500BC): Wrote poems. He held there to be four elements, and that God was spherical, God being like man was just a human invention - horses would have invented horse-gods.

Melissus of Samos (c500BC): The Universe is infinite, unsusceptible of change.

Leucippus (c550BC): All things are infinite, and interchanged; the universe is a vacuum full of bodies. He was first to speak of atoms.

Heraclitus (c505BC) "The Weeping Philosopher": Claimed that he knew everything. His doctrine is something to do with fire being an element, but he is very obscure.

Parmenides of Elea (c470BC): Asserted that the earth was spherical. There are two elements, fire and earth; man was made out of clay, the mind and the soul are the same thing.

Anaxagoras (c455BC): All things were mixed up; then Mind came and arranged them. The sun is a mass of burning iron, bigger than Peloponnesus, and the moon has houses.

Zeno of Elea (c460BC): Opposed Nearches the tyrant, biting his ear. There are several worlds, there is no vacuum; the nature of all things is of hot and cold, and dry and moist.

Empedocles (c460BC): A pupil of Pythagoras, who gave away his secrets and was expelled. He practiced magic and tried to pretend he was a god by faking a leap into a volcano. Said there were four elements, fire, water, earth, and air. Heaven is like crystal.

Democritus (c400BC): Atoms and the vacuum were the beginning of the universe; everything else exists only in opinion. Nothing was created out of nothing. Atoms produced all the combinations that exist; fire, water, air, and earth.

Protagoras (c450BC): "Man is the measure of all things"

Diogenes of Sinope "The Cynic" (c355BC): Known as 'the dog', he lived in a barrel, and was unbelievably rude to everyone, including Alexander the Great.

The First Philosophers

1835

Squashed version edited by Glyn Hughes © 2009

Thales of Miletus (620-540 BC)

Thales was the first man to whom the name of Wise was given. He wrote two books about the solstice and the equinox, for he is said to have been the first who studied astronomy, and who foretold the eclipses and motions of the sun. He asserted water to be the principle of all things, that the world had life, and was full of spirits: they say that it was he who first divided the year into three hundred and sixty-five days. He never had any teacher except the priests of Egypt. Hieronymus says that he measured the Pyramids: watching their shadow, and calculating when they were of the same size as that was. He said that there was no difference between life and death. "Why, then," said one to him, "do not you die?" "Because," said he, "it does make no difference." When he was asked what was very difficult, he said, "To know one's self." And what was easy, "To advise another." When asked how men might live most virtuously, he said, "If we never do ourselves what we blame in others. The apophthegm, "know yourself," is his." *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Anaximander of Miletus (610-546 BC)

Anaximander, the son of Praxiadas, used to assert that the principle and primary element of all things was the Infinity, giving no exact definition as to whether he meant air or water, or anything else. And he said that the parts were susceptible of change, but that the whole was unchangeable; and that the earth lay in the middle, being of a spherical shape. The moon, he said, had a borrowed light, from the sun; and the sun he affirmed to be the purest possible fire. He was the first discoverer of the gnomon, he also made clocks and was the first person to draw a map of the earth and sea, and to make a globe. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Anaximenes of Miletus (585-525 BC)

Anaximenes said that the principle of everything was the air, and the Infinite; and that the stars moved not under the earth, but around the earth. He corresponded by letter with Pythagoras. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Pythagoras (582-496 BC)

Pythagoras was the son of Mnesarchus, an engraver, a native of Samos. As a young man he left his country, and learned the Greek, the barbarian, the Egyptian and the Cretan sacred mysteries. He returned to Samos, and finding it under the ruthless rule of Polycrates, fled to Crotona in Italy where he established laws and gained a very high reputation, together with his scholars, who were about three hundred.

Heraclides Ponticus says that Pythagoras accounted himself the son of the God Mercury, who had given him the gifts of perfect memory, and to allow his soul to transmigrate into whatever plants or animals it pleased. Pythagoras wrote books on Education, on Politics, and on Natural Philosophy. He forbade men to pray for themselves, because they do not know what is good for them. He asserted that the property of friends is common, and that friendship is equality. He is said to have been of the most dignified appearance, and to have had a golden thigh.

It was Pythagoras who carried geometry to perfection, when he discovered that the square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the squares of the sides containing the right angle, which mystery, according to Aristoxenus, the Pythagoreans held secret.

He was noted for symbolic sayings, as; "Do not stir the fire with a sword." "Do not sit down on a bushel." "Do not devour your heart." "Do not aid men in putting down a burden, but in lifting one." "Efface the traces of a pot in the ashes." "Do not wipe a seat with a lamp." "Do not piss in the sunshine." "Do not walk in the main street." "Do not cherish swallows under your roof." Now 'not to stir fire with a sword' meant, not to provoke the anger of powerful men; not to sit on a bushel is to have an equal care for the present and for the future. And more

He used to have his disciples repeat each evening: "In what have I transgress'd? What have I done? - What that I should have done have I omitted?" He taught that people should not make their friends enemies, but to render their enemies friends. Another rule was not to destroy or injure a cultivated tree, nor any animal either which does not injure men. He forbade his disciples to eat beans.

Alexander says, in his Successions of Philosophers, that he found the following dogmas of Pythagoras: That the monad was the beginning of everything; that light and darkness, and cold and heat, and dryness and moisture, were equally divided in the world; that the air around the earth was immoveable, and pregnant with disease; and that the soul is something different from life and is immortal. He also says that the soul of man is divided into three parts; into intuition (nous), and reason (phren) and mind (thymos)

Of how Pythagoras died, one says that he was trying to escape his enemies he refused to cross a field of beans, and so he was murdered.

from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers

While at the Olympic games, an eagle stopped, and came down to Pythagoras. After stroking her awhile, he released her. Meeting with some fishermen who were drawing in their nets heavily laden with fishes from the deep, he predicted the exact number of fish they had caught. At Tarentum seeing an ox taking beans, Pythagoras went and whispered in the ox's ear. The beast would never touch beans thereafter.

He himself could hear the harmony of the Universe, and understood the universal music of the spheres, and of the stars which move in concert with them, and which we cannot hear because of the limitations of our weak nature. Pythagoras went to Metapontum, and everywhere arose great mobs against him, of which even now the inhabitants make mention, calling them the Pythagorean riots. *from: Porphyry, Life of Pythagoras, c300AD*

Xenophanes (570-470 BC)

Xenophanes was the son of Dexius, a citizen of Colophon. Having been banished from his own country, he lived at Zande, in Sicily, and at Catana.

He wrote poems in verse; and he wrote iambics against the things Hesiod and Homer said about the Gods. His doctrine was, that there were four elements of existing things; and an infinite number of worlds, which were all unchangeable. He thought that the clouds were produced by the vapour which was borne upwards from the sun. That the essence of God was of a spherical form, in no respect resembling man; that the universe could see, and that the universe could hear, but could not breathe; and that it was in all its parts intellect, and wisdom, and eternity. He was the first person who asserted that everything which is produced is perishable, and that the soul is a spirit. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

But if (horses) or cows or lions had hands
To draw and produce works of art as men do,
Horses would draw the figures of gods like horses
And cows like cows, and they would make their bodies
Just as the form which they each have themselves.
Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black,
And Thracians that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.

from: The Fragments of Xenophanes, in 'The First Philosophers of Greece', trans Arthur Fairbanks, (1898)

Leucippus (c550 BC)

Leucippus was a native of Elea, but some say, of Abdera; and others, Melos.

He was a pupil of Zeno. And his principal doctrines were, that all things were infinite, and were interchanged with one another; and that the universe was a vacuum, and full of bodies; also that the worlds were

produced by bodies falling into the vacuum, and becoming entangled with one another; and that the nature of the stars originated in motion, according to their increase; also, that the sun is borne round in a greater circle around the moon; that the earth is carried on revolving round the centre: and that its figure resembles a drum; he was the first philosopher who spoke of atoms as principles. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Heraclitus (535-475 BC) "The Weeping Philosopher"

Heraclitus was a citizen of Ephesus. He was above all men of a lofty and arrogant spirit, as is plain from his writings, in which he says that he knows everything, and had taught everything to himself. But some people affirmed that he had been a pupil of Xenophanes.

There is a book of his extant, which is about nature generally, and it is divided into three discourses; on the Universe, Politics, and Theology. He deposited this book in the temple of Diana, having written it intentionally in an obscure style, in order that only those who were able men might comprehend it, and that it might not be exposed to ridicule at the hands of common people. Theophrastus asserts, that, out of melancholy, he left some of his works half finished.

His doctrines are of this kind. That fire is an element, and that it is by the changes of fire that all things exist; being engendered sometimes by rarity, sometimes by density. But he explains nothing clearly. He also says, that everything is produced by contrariety, and that everything flows on like a river; that the universe is finite, and that there is one world, and that is produced from fire, and that the whole world is in its turn again consumed by fire at certain periods, and that all this happens according to fate. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Parmenides of Elea (510-440 BC)

Parmenides was a pupil of Xenophanes. He was the first person who asserted that the earth was of a spherical form; and that it was situated in the centre of the universe. He also taught that there were two elements, fire and earth; and that one of them occupies the place of the maker, the other that of the matter. He also used to teach that man was originally made out of clay. Another of his doctrines was, that the mind and the soul were the same thing, as we are informed by Theophrastus. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Anaxagoras (500-428 BC)

Anaxagoras was a citizen of Clazomenae, a pupil of Anaximenes, and was the first philosopher who attributed mind to matter, saying: "All things were mixed up together; then Mind came and arranged them all in distinct order."

He asserted that the sun was a mass of burning iron, greater than Peloponnesus, and that the moon contained houses, and also hills and ravines: and that the primary elements of everything were similarities of parts; that the milky way was a reflection of the light of the sun. The comets he considered to be a concourse of planets emitting rays: and the shooting stars he thought were sparks. The winds he thought were caused by the rarification of the atmosphere, which was produced by the sun. Thunder, he said, was produced by the collision of the clouds; and lightning by the rubbing together of the clouds. Earthquakes, he said, were produced by the return of the air into the earth. All animals he considered were originally generated out of moisture, and heat, and earthy particles: and subsequently from one another. And males he considered were derived from those on the right hand, and females from those on the left. They say, also, that he predicted a fall of the stones which fell near Aegospotami. He went once to Olympia wrapped in a leathern cloak as if it were going to rain; and it did rain. And they say that he once replied to a man who asked him whether the mountains at Lampsacus would ever become sea, "Yes, if time lasts long enough."

Sotion says, that he was persecuted for impiety by Cleon because he said that the sun was a fiery ball of iron. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Zeno of Elea (490-430 BC)

Zeno was by adoption the son of Parmenides. [Aristotle](#), in his *Sophist*, says that he was the inventor of dialectics, and he was a man of the greatest nobleness of spirit, both in philosophy and in politics. There are also many books extant, which are attributed to him, full of great learning and wisdom.

He, opposing Nearches the tyrant, was arrested, as we are informed by Heraclides, and he named all the friends of the tyrant as his accomplices, and then said that he wished to whisper something privately to the tyrant; and when he came near him he bit him, and would not leave his hold. Hermippus says that Zeno was put into a mortar, and pounded to death.

His chief doctrines were, that there were several worlds, and that there was no vacuum; that the nature of all things consisted of hot and cold, and dry and moist, these elements interchanging their substances with one another; that man was made out of the earth, and that his soul was a mixture of the before-named elements in such a way that no one of them predominated.

They say that when he was reproached, he was indignant; and that when some one blamed him, he replied, "If when I am reproached, I am not angered, then I shall not be pleased when I am praised." *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Empedocles (490-430 BC)

Empedocles, as Hippobotus relates, was a citizen of Agrigentum. Timaeus, in his ninth book, relates that

he was a pupil of Pythagoras, saying that he was convicted of having divulged his secret doctrines, in the same way as [Plato](#) was, and therefore that he was forbidden thenceforth to attend his school.

Satyrus tells us that he used to say that he had been present when Empedocles was practising magic. Heraclides says that Empedocles kept the corpse of a dead woman for thirty days dead, and yet free from corruption; on which account he has called himself a physician and a prophet.

[Aristotle](#) says, that he was a most liberal man, since he constantly refused sovereign power when it was offered to him.

Hippobotus says that he went away as if he were going to mount Etna; and that when he arrived at the crater of fire he leaped in, and disappeared, wishing to establish a belief that he had become a God. But afterwards the truth was detected by one of his slippers having been dropped.

The following were some of his doctrines. He used to assert that there were four elements, fire, water, earth, and air. And that that is friendship by which they are united, and discord by which they are separated. And he asserts that the sun is a vast assemblage of fire, and that it is larger than the moon. And the moon is disk-shaped; and that the heaven itself is like crystal; and that the soul inhabits every kind of form of animals and plants.

His writings on Natural Philosophy and his Purifications extend to five thousand verses; and his Medical Poem to six hundred. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Melissus of Samos (fl c450 BC)

Melissus was a pupil of Parmenides; but he also had conversed with Heraclitus. He was a man greatly occupied in political affairs, and held in great esteem among his fellow citizens; on which account he was elected admiral. And he was admired still more on account of his private virtues. His doctrine was, that the Universe was infinite, unsusceptible of change, immoveable, and one, being always like to itself, and complete; and that there was no such thing as real motion, but that there only appeared to be such. As respecting the Gods, too, he denied that there was any occasion to give a definition of them, for that there was no certain knowledge of them. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Democritus (460-370 BC)

Democritus was a native of Abdera, or some say a citizen of Miletus.

He was a pupil of some of the Magi and Chaldaeans. He was one of three brothers who divided their patrimony among them; and he took the smaller portion, as it was in money, which he required for the purpose of travelling. And Demetrius says that his share amounted to more than a hundred talents, and that he spent the whole of it.

He also says, that he was so industrious a man, that he cut himself off in a small cottage in the garden of his house. "He used to practise himself," says Antisthenes, "in testing perceptions in various manners; sometimes retiring into solitary places, and spending his time even among tombs."

Now his principal doctrines were these. That atoms and the vacuum were the beginning of the universe; and that everything else existed only in opinion. That the worlds were infinite, created, and perishable. But that nothing was created out of nothing, and that nothing was destroyed so as to become nothing. That the atoms produced all the combinations that exist; fire, water, air, and earth. The chief good he asserts to be cheerfulness. These were his principal opinions.

Of his books, Thrasyllus has given a catalogue; The Pythagoras; a treatise on the Disposition of the Wise Man; an essay on those in the Shades Below; the Tritogeneia; a treatise on Manly Courage or Valour; an essay on Cheerfulness; a volume of Ethical Commentaries; The Great World; A treatise on the Planets; the first book on Nature; two books on the Nature of Man, and others. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Protagoras (481-420 BC)

Protagoras was a native of Abdera, as Heraclides Ponticus tell us. But, according to Eupolis, he was a native of Teos. He was a pupil of Democritus.

He was surnamed Wisdom, and was the first person who asserted that in every question there were two sides to the argument exactly opposite to one another. And he used to employ them in his arguments, being the first person who did so. But he began something in this manner: "Man is the measure of all things: of those things which exist as he is; and of those things which do not exist as he is not." And he used to say that nothing else was soul except the senses, as [Plato](#) says, in the Theaetetus; and that everything was true. And another of his treatises he begins in this way: "Concerning the Gods, I am not able to know to a certainty whether they exist or whether they do not. For there are many things which prevent one from knowing, especially the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of the life of man." And on account of this beginning of his treatise, he was banished by the Athenians. And they burnt his books in the market-place, calling them in by the public crier, and compelling all who possessed them to surrender them.

He was the first person who demanded payment of his pupils; fixing his charge at a hundred minae. He was also the first person who gave a precise definition of the parts of time; and who explained the value of opportunity, and who instituted contests of argument, and who armed the disputants with the weapon of sophism. He too, it was, who first invented that sort of argument which is called the Socratic, and practised regular discussions on set subjects. The writings of his which are still extant are these: a treatise on the Art of Contention; one on Wrestling; one on Mathematics; one on a Republic; one on Ambition; one on Virtues, and others. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

Diogenes of Sinope "The Cynic" (c412-323 BC)

Diogenes was a native of Sinope, who was forced to flee from his native city, as his father kept the public bank there, and had adulterated the coinage. He came to Athens, and betook himself to a simple mode of life, living in a barrel which he found in the Temple of Cybele, for his house.

He was very violent in expressing his haughty disdain of others. He used to say, "when he beheld pilots, and physicians, and philosophers, he thought man the wisest of all animals; but when again he beheld interpreters of dreams, and soothsayers, and those who listened to them, and men puffed up with glory or riches, then he thought that there was not a more foolish animal than man." Diogenes once asked [Plato](#) for some wine, who sent him an entire jar full; and Diogenes said to him, "Will you, if you are asked how many two and two make, answer twenty? On one occasion, when no one came to listen to him while he was discoursing seriously, he began to whistle. And then when people flocked round him, he reproached them for coming with eagerness to folly, but being indifferent about good things. When some people said to him, "You are an old man, and should rest for the remainder of your life;" "Why so?" replied he, "suppose I had run a long distance, ought I to stop when I was near the end, and not rather press on?" Once, while he was sitting in the sun in the Craneum, Alexander was standing by, and said to him, "Ask any favour you choose of me." And he replied, "Cease to shade me from the sun." A man once asked him what was the proper time for supper, and he made answer, "If you are a rich man, whenever you please; and if you are a poor man, whenever you can." Having lighted a candle in the day time, he said, "I am looking for a man." On one occasion he stood under a fountain, and as the bystanders were pitying him, [Plato](#), who was present, said to them, "If you wish really to show your pity for him, come away;" intimating that he was only acting thus out of a desire for notoriety.

When asked what he would take to let a man give him a blow on the head?" he replied, "A helmet." Seeing a youth smartening himself up, he said to him, "If you are doing that for men, you are miserable; and if for women, you are profligate." When asked what wine he liked to drink, he said, "That which belongs to another,"

Once Alexander came and stood by him, and said, "I am Alexander, the great king." "And I," said he, "am Diogenes the dog." And when he was asked why he was called a dog, he said, "Because I fawn upon those who give me anything, and bark at those who give me nothing, and bite rogues."

He said that in reality everything was a combination of all things. For that in bread there was meat, and in vegetables there was bread, and so there were some particles of all other bodies in everything, communicating by invisible passages and evaporating. Music and geometry, and astronomy, and all things of that kind, he neglected, as useless and unnecessary. But he was a man very happy in meeting arguments, as is plain from what we have already said.

His own greatest friends, as Antisthenes tells us in his Successions, sanction the story of his having died from holding his breath. Several books are attributed to him. *from: Diogenes Laertius - Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*

