


THOMAS A. BLACKSON



ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

FROM THE PRESOCRATICS
TO THE HELLENISTIC
PHILOSOPHERS



WILEY-BLACKWELL

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHY

"An ideal introduction to the study of ancient Greek philosophy. The beginning student will find Blackson's narrative compelling. The more seasoned scholar will be grateful for the extensively referenced footnotes."

Gareth B. Matthews, University of Massachusetts/Amherst

Ancient Greek Philosophy: From the Presocratics to the Hellenistic Philosophers presents a comprehensive introduction to the philosophers and philosophical traditions that emerged in the ancient Greek world from the period 585 BC to 100 BC. Coverage begins with the Milesian naturalists and the intellectual revolution that paved the way for the ancient philosophical tradition. Parmenides and the Pluralists are then addressed, followed by the central figure of Socrates and then Plato and Aristotle. With coverage of Epicurus and the Epicureans, the Stoics, and Academic Skeptics, we are then shown the key strands of thought that developed within the ancient philosophical tradition as the Hellenistic philosophers united in their opposition to perceived excesses of the classical tradition of Plato and Aristotle. Combining rich illustrative excerpts with rigorous scholarly analysis, *Ancient Greek Philosophy* is an illuminating introduction to the evolution of ideas that shaped Western philosophical tradition.

Thomas A. Blackson is a member of the Philosophy Faculty in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies at Arizona State University.

 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell

ISBN 978-1-4443-3572-9



9 781444 335729

9 0000

BLACKSON ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOC



WILEY-
BLACKWELL

Ancient Greek Philosophy

*From the Presocratics to the Hellenistic
Philosophers*

Thomas A. Blackson



WILEY-BLACKWELL

A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2011
© 2011 Thomas A. Blackson

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007. Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex,
PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

For details of our global editorial offices, for customer services, and for information about how to apply for permission to reuse the copyright material in this book please see our website at www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell.

The right of Thomas A. Blackson to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, except as permitted by the UK Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Wiley also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book are trade names, service marks, trademarks or registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publisher is not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is sold on the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering professional services. If professional advice or other expert assistance is required, the services of a competent professional should be sought.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blackson, Thomas A.

Ancient Greek philosophy : from the Presocratics to the Hellenistic philosophers /
Thomas A. Blackson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3572-9 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4443-3573-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Philosophy, Ancient. I. Title.

B171.B53 2011

180–dc22

2010039900

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

This book is published in the following electronic formats: ePDFs 9781444396072;
ePub 9781444396089.

Set in 10.5/13pt Minion by Thomson Digital, Noida, India
Printed in Singapore by Ho Printing Singapore Pte Ltd

Ancient Greek Philosophy

*In memory of my brother, Gary Lee Blackson
(4/21/59–11/9/01). He was wonderful.*

*In gratitude to my children, Wyatt Dashiell and Jarrett Lee.
May they find a better way than their father and his brother.*

Preface

I wrote this book for students in the ancient philosophy course required for a philosophy major in most American universities. In the case of my students, it had become clear that they were not satisfied with the traditional anthologies. The same was true for the newer, topically organized anthologies. The ancient texts are difficult to understand, and the anthologies contain little explanation.

The situation got worse when I supplemented the anthologies with some of the standard scholarly works. These works are narrowly focused, either on a period within the history or on a specific text, and my students found such detailed analysis difficult if not impossible to comprehend because so much of it presupposed a general understanding of ancient philosophy.

In the beginning, I failed to see a solution. It is impossible to give the necessary explanation in lecture, and this would not be desirable even if it were possible. Students are not interested in spending all their time taking notes. Most of them want to listen and think about the material as it is presented, and many want to be part of a discussion. For this to work, they must have explanations to consult outside class. And when I first thought about the form these explanations might take, I failed to appreciate the full range of possibilities. I thought that every form would suffer from the problem Julia Annas ascribes to those surveys that run “through a selection of works of some great ancient thinkers in chronological order.” In her anthology, she says that “we are now suspicious of these narratives” and that “a single authoritative narrative, particularly one that takes the student past a selection of Great Thinkers, is false to the spirit of ancient philosophy itself” because “[p]hilosophy in the ancient world was typically characterized by discussion and debate, and by an awareness of alternative points of view . . .”¹

In thinking more about the problem, I realized that the surveys Annas has in mind represent only one attempt to provide the necessary explanation. Instead of surveying the ancient philosophical tradition, I realized that it

would be better to focus on the development of certain key lines of thought within the tradition. This approach would avoid the problem that plagues the anthologies and the surveys Annas has in mind. These works have limited value because they do not show how the selected texts belong to, and are manifestations of, the various lines of thought that push the ancient philosophical tradition forward. A series of brief discussions that takes “the student past a selection of Great Thinkers” is unlikely to provide any insight into the history of philosophy.

It is true, as Annas notes, that ancient philosophy was “typically characterized by discussion and debate” and “an awareness of alternative points of view,” but this does not entail that every form of what one might term a “single narrative” is unacceptable. Arguments in philosophy rarely occur in isolation, and the arguments in the ancient philosophical tradition are no exception. The ancients constructed their arguments within the context of certain relatively continuous lines of thought, and only against this background can the student begin to understand what these philosophers thought and hence why certain interpretations of the texts are more plausible than others.

Since Socrates is the central figure in so much of the ancient philosophical tradition, my focus in this book is on lines of thought that in one way or another pass through him. I do not provide exhaustive philosophical and historical analyses of the texts that form these lines of thought. Nor do I catalogue and discuss the strong and weak points of even the most important alternative interpretations. Such extended and detailed analysis is the province of the traditional scholarly works. Similarly, I make little or no attempt to explain how different focuses would emphasize different lines of thought within the ancient philosophical tradition. In my opinion, there should be narratives that emphasize lines of thought I do not emphasize. There should also be narratives that provide different interpretations of the texts I connect into lines of thought. These narratives, I believe, would go a long way toward making ancient philosophy a little easier to appreciate for the fascinating and beautiful subject it is.² I hope this book is a step in that direction, but I am aware that the task is enormous and that my talents in the history of philosophy are limited.

I do not assume my discussion eliminates the need to read the works of the ancient philosophers. On the contrary, I intend this book to be read in conjunction with extended selections from their writings. I include translations of some of the most fundamental texts in the lines of thought I feature in this book, but it is necessary to read the context in which these texts occur. The traditional anthologies are helpful in this regard, and nowadays many older translations are available on the internet. The *Perseus Digital Library*

(<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>) is especially valuable. It provides both translations and Greek texts, as well as many other helpful resources. The MIT Internet Classics Archive (<http://classics.mit.edu/>) also provides translations, some of which, in the case of Aristotle for example, are not currently available in the *Perseus Digital Library*.

The format of my discussion in this book is familiar in all respects except for the notes. Rather than follow the more usual practice, I have divided the notes into footnotes and endnotes. The footnotes provide supplementary information directly relevant to the discussions in which they occur. The endnotes are primarily about the scholarly literature. This division within the notes preserves the integrity of the discussions and points the way to a more advanced study.^a

Notes

1. *Voices of Ancient Philosophy. An Introductory Reader*, 2001, xv. Annas's anthology is one of the two newer, topically organized, anthologies. The other such anthology is Terence Irwin's *Classical Philosophy*, 1999. The two primary older anthologies are *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy. From Thales to Aristotle* (ed. S. Marc Cohen, Patricia Curd, and C. D. C. Reeve, 2000) and *Hellenistic Philosophy. Introductory Readings* (ed. Brad Inwood and L. P. Gerson, 1997).
2. For examples of narratives that emphasize different lines of thought and take different pedagogical approaches, see Terence Irwin's *Classical Thought*, 1989, Christopher Shields' *Classical Philosophy*, 1989, and David Roochnik's *Retrieving the Ancients*, 2004. Shields and Roochnik cover the Presocratics through Aristotle. Shields intends his book to provide the reader with the sort of "encounter" he might have had with Socrates (ix). He makes less effort to set out the overall structure of ancient Greek philosophical tradition, but the suggestion is that the tradition begins with Thales and *a priori* reasoning about things, continues with the insistence on, and defense of, this sort of reasoning in Socrates and Plato, and finishes in the classical period with Aristotle's trenchant engagement with the Presocratics and with Plato (5, 36, 59, 110). Roochnik intends his readers to see, among other things, that "Plato and Aristotle are worth retrieving today because of their profound appreciation and attempt to comprehend the meaning of life" (6). To bring this out, Roochnik surveys the ancients "dialectically," in the sense of Hegel. In contrast to Shields and Roochnik, Irwin covers the entire thousand-year tradition. He begins with Homer and ends with Augustine. His primary intention is to allow the reader to "watch the growth of philosophical thinking"

^a For additional information in connection with this book and the undergraduate course in ancient philosophy I teach, see my university web page: <http://tab.faculty.asu.edu/>.

as it unfolds (3), but he places particular emphasis on the critical response to Homer by the Presocratic naturalists, the attempt by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle to overcome problems inherent in this Presocratic response to Homer, the attempt in the Hellenistic philosophers to produce systems of philosophy, and the revival of Platonism and the rise of Christianity (2–3, 6, 19–20, 67). These approaches, with their different emphases and methodologies, show how extraordinarily rich the ancient philosophical tradition is.

Acknowledgments

When I began to study ancient philosophy, I had little idea how to proceed. Gary Matthews showed me the way, by both example and instruction. In particular, he helped me appreciate that the texts are indications of past thought and that a primary goal in the history of philosophy is to construct a point of view that sees these texts as natural expressions of this thought. I have employed this methodology in this book, but of course the methodology itself does not carry a specific point of view. For that, I have relied heavily on the work of the late Michael Frede.

In my judgment, Frede's work is the best place to look for insight into the most general lines of thought that run through and unify the ancient philosophical tradition. Throughout this book I have relied on Frede's interpretations to help me understand the history, but I wish to acknowledge two points where my debt is particularly large. The first concerns the ancient concept of rationality. In a series of papers, Frede isolated a line of thinking about this concept that stretches throughout the ancient philosophical tradition. I have followed his interpretation. The second point concerns Aristotle's metaphysics. Aristotle's discussion is one of the most difficult in ancient philosophy, and I would have been lost if it were not for Frede's now classic work on this subject.

In addition to my debt to Matthews and Frede, I am pleased to acknowledge several more specific debts. Alan Sidelle commented on both a very early and a very late version of the manuscript. This helped me correct many errors, and more importantly he has been my good friend since we were colleagues so long ago. Many of the students in my undergraduate history class helped me improve my discussion in various places, either by making particular suggestions or, more often, by asking good questions. My teaching assistants read various drafts of the book and made many helpful suggestions. I am grateful to all these students and assistants, but I am especially grateful to Chris Burrell, Ryan Lind, Josh Reynolds, Heidi Speck, David Sundahl, and Ian Vandeventer. My colleague, Michael White, helped me better understand various parts of ancient philosophy. I am indebted to Julia Annas and Mark McPherran for invitations to the Arizona Colloquium

in Ancient Philosophy. Over the years, I learned a lot listening to the views presented and discussed there. I am grateful to my editors at Blackwell. Jeff Dean gave me a second chance and helped me through the first part of the process. Tiffany Mok, Sarah Dancy, and Rob Matthews helped me through the rest of the process. I am also indebted to the readers commissioned by Blackwell. Their reviews were detailed and insightful, and I believe they helped me greatly to improve many parts of this book.

Text Acknowledgments

The author and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permissions granted to reproduce excerpts from copyrighted material in this book:

Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd, eds., *The Greek Pursuit of Knowledge*, translated under the direction of Catherine Porter, pp. 5–6, 8, 9, 10, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. © 2000 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Michael Frede, *Essays in Ancient Philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press, 1987. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Michael Frede, "The Stoic Conception of Reason," in *Hellenistic Philosophy*, vol. II, 1994, pp. 54, 55–56, and 60. Reprinted with the permission of The International Centre of Greek Philosophy and Culture.

Michael Frede and Gisela Striker, eds., *Rationality in Greek Thought*. Oxford University Press, 1996. Reprinted with the permission of Oxford University Press.

Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson, eds., *Hellenistic Philosophy. Introductory Readings*, 2nd edn. © Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1998. Reprinted by permission of Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. All rights reserved.

G.S. Kirk, J.E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers. A Critical History With a Selection of Texts*, 2nd edn. © Cambridge University Press, 1983. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

A.A. Long and D.N. Sedley, eds., *The Hellenistic Philosophers*. Vol. I: *Translations of the Principal Sources, with Philosophical Commentary*. Cambridge University Press, 1987. Reprinted with the permission of Cambridge University Press.

