

The background of the cover is a reproduction of Raphael's fresco 'Plato's Academy'. It depicts a group of ancient Greek philosophers in a grand, classical building with arches and columns. Plato is shown at the top right, pointing upwards, while Aristotle is at the bottom right, gesturing downwards. Other figures include Pythagoras, Socrates, and various mathematicians and scientists. The scene is filled with intellectual activity, with some figures writing, some teaching, and others in discussion.

The GREAT CONVERSATION

A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO PHILOSOPHY

NORMAN MELCHERT
DAVID R. MORROW

EIGHTH EDITION

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A WORD TO INSTRUCTORS

Philosophy is both argument and innovation. We try in this introductory text to provide students with excellent examples of both in the ongoing story of a basic part of our intellectual life. We aim to teach students how to think by apprenticing them to a succession of the best thinkers humanity has produced, mainly but not exclusively in the Western tradition, thereby drawing them into this ongoing conversation. So we see how Aristotle builds on and criticizes his teacher, Plato, how Augustine creatively melds traditions stemming from Athens and Jerusalem, how Kant tries to solve “Hume’s problem,” and why Wittgenstein thought most previous philosophy was meaningless.

This eighth edition continues to represent the major philosophers through extensive quotations set in a fairly rich cultural and historical context. The large number of cross-references and footnotes continue to make the conversation metaphor more than mere fancy. And the four complete works—*Euthyphro*, *Apology*, *Crito*, and *Meditations*—are retained.

New to This Edition

A number of new features will be found in this edition. Throughout, the text has been tightened up and minor sections were deleted to make room for new material. In addition, several larger changes have been made. These changes include the following:

- Three new chapters introduce students to the beginnings of philosophical conversations in India and China, with one chapter on ancient Indian philosophy and two chapters on ancient Chinese philosophy.
- A new chapter is devoted entirely to philosophy in the Islamic world.
- A section on Hildegard of Bingen in a chapter on medieval thought and new sketches of Hypatia and Margaret Cavendish, and a profile of Émilie du Châtelet.

Again, for this edition, a student web page is available at www.oup.com/us/melchert. Here students will find essential points, vocabulary flashcards, sample multiple-choice questions, and further web

resources for each chapter. The latter consist mainly, though not exclusively, of original philosophical texts. This means that if you want to assign students to read, say, Hume's *Enquiry* or parts of Plato's *Republic*, these texts are easy for them to find. An Instructor's Manual is available at the same site.

The text is again available both as a single hard-back edition and as two paperback volumes, so it can be used economically in either a whole-year or a single-semester course. Although the entire book

contains too much material for a single semester, it provides a rich menu of choices for instructors who do not wish to restrict themselves to the earlier or later periods.

In this era, when even the educated have such a thin sense of history, teaching philosophy in this conversational, cumulative, back- and forward-looking way can be a service not just to philosophical understanding, but also to the culture as a whole.



A WORD TO STUDENTS

We all have opinions—we can’t help it. Having opinions is as natural to us as breathing. Opinions, moreover, are a dime a dozen. They’re floating all around us and they’re so different from each other. One person believes this, another that. You believe in God, your buddy doesn’t. John thinks there’s nothing wrong with keeping a found wallet, you are horrified. Some of us say, “Everybody’s got their own values”; others are sure that *some* things are just plain wrong—wrong for everybody. Some delay gratification for the sake of long-term goals; others indulge in whatever pleasures happen to be at hand. What kind of world do we live in? Jane studies science to find out, Jack turns to the occult. Is death the end for us?—Some say yes, some say no.

What’s a person to do?

Study Philosophy!

You don’t want simply to be at the mercy of accident in your opinions—for your views to be decided by irrelevant matters such as whom you

happen to know or where you were brought up. You want to believe for *good reasons*. That’s the right question, isn’t it? Which of these many opinions has the best reasons behind it? You want to live your life as wisely as possible.

Fortunately, we have a long tradition of really smart people who have been thinking about issues such as these, and we can go to them for help. They’re called “philosophers”—lovers of wisdom—and they have been trying to straighten out all these issues. They are in the business of asking which opinions or views or beliefs there is good reason to accept.

Unfortunately, these philosophers don’t all agree either. So you might ask, If these really smart philosophers can’t agree on what wisdom says, why should I pay them any attention? The answer is—because it’s the best shot you’ve got. If you seriously want to improve your opinions, there’s nothing better you can do than engage in a “conversation” with the best minds our history has produced.

One of the authors of this book had a teacher—a short, white-haired, elderly gentleman with a

thick German accent—who used to say, “Whether you will philosophize or won’t philosophize, you *must* philosophize.” By this, he meant that we can’t help making decisions about these crucial matters. We make them either well or badly, conscious of what we are doing or just stumbling along. As Kierkegaard would say, we express such decisions in the way we live, whether or not we have ever given them a moment’s thought. In a sense, then, you are already a philosopher, already engaged in the business philosophers have committed themselves to. So you shouldn’t have any problem in making a connection with what they write.

Does it help to think about such matters? You might as well ask whether it helps to think about the recipe before you start to cook. Socrates says that “the unexamined life is not worth living.” And that’s what philosophy is: an examination of opinions—and also of our lives, shaped by these opinions. In thinking philosophically, we try to sort our opinions into two baskets: the good-views basket and the trash.

We want to think about these matters as clearly and rationally as we can. *Thinking* is a kind of craft. Like any other craft, we can do it well or poorly, with shoddy workmanship or with care, and we improve with practice. It is common for people who want to learn a craft—cabinetmaking, for example—to apprentice themselves for a time to a master, doing what the master does until the time comes when they are skillful enough to set up shop on their own. You can think of reading this book as a kind of apprenticeship in thinking, with Socrates, Plato, Kant, and the rest as the masters. By thinking along with them, noting their insights and arguments, following their examinations of each other’s opinions, you should improve that all-important skill of your own.

This Book

This book is organized historically because that’s how philosophy has developed. It’s not just a recital of this following that, however. It is also intensively *interactive* because that’s what philosophy

has been. We have taken the metaphor of a conversation seriously. These folks are all talking to each other, arguing with each other, trying to convince each other—and that makes the story of philosophy a dramatic one. Aristotle learns a lot from his teacher, Plato, but argues that Plato makes one big mistake—and that colors everything else he says. Aquinas appreciates what Aristotle has done but claims that Aristotle neglects a basic feature of reality—and that makes all the difference. In the seventeenth century, Descartes looks back on his predecessors with despair, noting that virtually no agreement has been reached on any topic; he resolves to wipe the slate clean and make a new start. Beginning with an analysis of what it is to believe anything at all, C. S. Peirce argues that what Descartes wants to do is impossible. And so it goes.

Not all the philosophers in this book have been involved in the same conversation, however. While this book focuses mainly on the Western tradition—the philosophical conversation that began in ancient Greece—other cultures have had their own philosophical conversations. Philosophy arose independently in India and China as well, and the conversations in South and East Asia have been as rich as those in the West. This book cannot hope to convey those conversations in their entirety, but it will introduce you to some key ideas in each of them. Examining early Indian and Chinese philosophy alongside Western philosophy helps illuminate both the commonalities among those traditions—the questions that human beings have wrestled with all over the globe—and the differences between them.

To emphasize the conversational and interactive aspect of philosophy, the footnotes in this book provide numerous cross-references, mainly within Western philosophy but also between Western and non-Western thinkers. Your understanding of an issue will be substantially enriched if you follow up on these. To appreciate the line one thinker is pushing, it is important to see what he is arguing against, where he thinks that others have made mistakes, and how other thinkers have approached the same problems. No philosopher simply makes

pronouncements in the dark. There is always something that bugs each thinker, something she thinks is terribly wrong, something that needs correction. This irritant may be something current in the culture, or it may be what other philosophers have been saying. Using the cross-references to understand that background will help you to make sense of what is going on—and why. The index of names and terms at the back of this book will also help you.

Philosophers are noted for introducing novel terms or using familiar words in novel ways. They are not alone in this, of course; poets and scientists do the same. There is no reason to expect that our everyday language will be suited, just as it is, to express the truth of things, so you will have some vocabulary to master. You will find key words in boldface and a list of them at the end of each chapter. Use this list to help you review important concepts and arguments. Many of these boldfaced terms are defined in the Glossary at the back of the book.

The Issues

The search for wisdom—that is, philosophy—ranges far and wide. Who can say ahead of time what might be relevant to that search? Still, there are certain central problems that especially concern philosophers. In your study of this text, you can expect to find extensive discussions of these four issues in particular:

1. *Metaphysics*, the theory of reality. In our own day, Willard Quine has said that the basic question of metaphysics is very simple: *What is there?* The metaphysical question, of course, is not like, “Are there echidnas in Australia?” but “What kinds of things are there fundamentally?” Is the world through and through made of material stuff, or are there souls as well as bodies? Is there a God? If so, of what sort? Are there universal features to reality, or is everything just the particular thing that it is? Does everything happen necessarily or are fresh starts possible?

2. *Epistemology*, the theory of knowledge. We want to think not only about what there is, but also about *how we know* what there is—or, maybe, whether we can know anything at all! So we reflectively ask, What is it to know something anyway? How does that differ from just believing it? How is knowing something related to its being true? What is truth? How far can our knowledge reach? Are some things simply unknowable?
3. *Ethics*, the theory of right and wrong, good and bad. We aren’t just knowers and believers. We are doers. The question then arises of what wisdom might say about how best to live our lives. Does the fact that something gives us pleasure make it the right thing to do? Do we need to think about how our actions affect others? If so, in what way? Are there really goods and bads, or does thinking so make it so? Do we have duties? If so, where do they come from? What is virtue and vice? What is justice? Is justice important?
4. *Human nature*—Socrates took as his motto a slogan that was inscribed in the temple of Apollo in Delphi: know thyself. But that has proved none too easy to do. What are we, anyway? Are we simply bits of matter caught up in the universal mechanism of the world, or do we have minds that escape this deterministic machine? What is it to have a mind? Is mind separate from body? How is it related to the brain? Do we have a free will? How important to my self-identity is my relationship to others? To what degree can I be responsible for the creation of myself?

Running through these issues is a fifth one that perhaps deserves special mention. It centers on the idea of *relativism*. The question is whether there is a way to get beyond the prejudices and assumptions peculiar to ourselves or our culture—or whether that’s all there is. Are there *just* opinions, with no one opinion ultimately any better than any other? Are all views relative to time and place, to culture and position? Is there no *truth*—or, anyway, no truth that we can know to be true?

This problem, which entered all the great conversations early, has persisted to this day. Most of the Western philosophical tradition can be thought of as a series of attempts to kill such skepticism and relativism, but this phoenix will not die. Our own age has the distinction, perhaps, of being the first age ever in which the basic assumptions of most people, certainly of most educated people, are relativistic, so this theme will have a particular poignancy for us. We will want to understand how we came to this point and what it means to be here. We will also want to ask ourselves how adequate this relativistic outlook is.

What we are is what we have become, and what we have become has been shaped by our history. In this book, we look at that history, hoping to understand ourselves better and, thereby, gain some wisdom for living our lives.

Reading Philosophy

Reading philosophy is not like reading a novel, nor is it like reading a research report in biology or a history of the American South. Philosophers have their own aims and ways of proceeding, and it will pay to take note of them at the beginning. Philosophers aim at the truth about fundamental matters, and in doing so they offer arguments.

If you want to believe for good reasons, what you seek is an **argument**. An argument in philosophy is not a quarrel or a disagreement, but simply this business of offering reasons to believe. Every argument, in this sense, has a certain structure. There is some proposition the philosopher wants you to believe—or thinks every rational person ought to believe—and this is called the **conclusion**. And there are the reasons he or she offers to convince you of that conclusion; these are called the **premises**.

In reading philosophy, there are many things to look for—central concepts, presuppositions, overall view of things—but the main things to look for are the arguments. And the first thing to identify is the conclusion of the argument: What is it that the philosopher wants you to believe? Once you have identified the conclusion, you need to look for the reasons given for believing that

conclusion. Usually philosophers do not set out their arguments in a formal way, with premises listed first and the conclusion last. The argument will be embedded in the text, and you need to sniff it out. This is usually not so hard, but it does take careful attention.

Occasionally, especially if the argument is complex or obscure, we give you some help and list the premises and conclusion in a more formal way. You might right now want to look at a few examples. Socrates in prison argues that it would be wrong for him to escape; that is the conclusion, and we set out his argument for it on p. 144. Plato argues that being happy and being moral are the same thing; see an outline of his argument on p. 176. Anselm gives us a complex argument for the existence of God; see our summary on p. 314. And Descartes argues that we have souls that are distinct from and independent of our bodies; see p. 319.

Often, however, you will need to identify the argument buried in the prose for yourself. What is it that the philosopher is trying to get you to believe? And why does he think you should believe that? It will be helpful, and a test of your understanding, if you try to set the argument out for yourself in a more or less formal way; keep a small notebook, and list the main arguments chapter by chapter.

Your first aim should be to *understand* the argument. But that is not the only thing, because you will also want to discover how good the argument is. These very smart philosophers, to tell the truth, have given us lots of poor arguments; they're only human, after all. So you need to try to *evaluate* the arguments. In evaluating an argument, there are two things to look at: the truth or acceptability of the premises and whether the premises actually do support the conclusion.

For an argument to be a good one, the reasons given in support of the conclusion have to at least be plausible. Ideally the premises should be known to be *true*, but that is a hard standard to meet. If the reasons are either false or implausible, they can't lend truth or plausibility to the conclusion. If there are good reasons to doubt the premises, then the argument should not convince you.

It may be, however, that all the premises are true, or at least plausible, and yet the argument is a poor one. This can happen when the premises do not have the right kind of relation to the conclusion. Broadly speaking, there are two kinds of arguments: **deductive** and **inductive**. A good deductive argument is one in which the premises—if true—*guarantee* the truth of the conclusion. In other words, the conclusion couldn't possibly be false if the premises are true. When this condition is satisfied, we say that the argument is **valid**. Note that an argument may have validity even though the premises are not in fact true; it is enough that if the premises *were* true, then the conclusion *would have to be* true. When a deductive argument is both valid and has true premises, we say it is **sound**.

Inductive arguments have a looser relation between premises and conclusion. Here the premises give some support to the conclusion—the more support the better—but they fall short of guaranteeing the truth of the conclusion. Typically philosophers aim to give sound deductive arguments, and the methods of evaluating these arguments will be those of the preceding two paragraphs.

You will get some help in evaluating arguments because you will see philosophers evaluating the arguments of other philosophers. (Of course, these evaluative arguments themselves may be either good or bad.) This is what makes the story of philosophy so dramatic. Here are a few examples. Aristotle argues that Plato's arguments for eternal, unchanging realities (which Plato calls Forms) are completely unsound; see pp. 198–199. Augustine tries to undercut the arguments of the skeptics on pp. 267–268. And Hume criticizes the design argument for the existence of God on pp. 456–458.

Sometimes you will see a philosopher criticizing another philosopher's presuppositions (as Peirce criticizes Descartes' views about doubt, pp. 596–597) or directly disputing another's conclusion (as Hegel does with respect to Kant's claim that there is a single basic principle of morality, pp. 512–513). But even here, it is argument that is the heart of the matter.

In reading philosophy you can't just be a passive observer. It's no good trying to read for

understanding while texting with your friends. You need to concentrate, focus, and be actively engaged in the process. Here are a few general rules:

1. Have an open mind as you read. Don't decide after the first few paragraphs that what a philosopher is saying is absurd or silly. Follow the argument, and you may change your mind about things of some importance.
2. Write out brief answers to the questions embedded in the chapters as you go along; check back in the text to see that you have got it right.
3. Use the key words to check your understanding of basic concepts.
4. Try to see how the arguments of the philosophers bear on your own current views of things. Bring them home; apply them to the way you now think of the world and your place in it.

Reading philosophy is not the easiest thing in the world, but it's not impossible either. If you make a good effort, you may find that it is even rather fun.

Web Resources

A website for this book is available at www.oup.com/us/melchert. Here you will find, for each chapter, the following aids:

- Essential Points (a brief list of crucial concepts and ideas)
- Flashcards (definitions of basic concepts)
- Multiple-Choice Questions (practice tests)
- Web Resources (mostly original works that are discussed in this text—e.g., Plato's *Meno* or Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*—but also some secondary treatments)

The web also has some general resources that you might find helpful:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu>
- Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://www.iep.utm.edu>

Both these encyclopedias contain reliable in-depth discussions of the philosophers and topics we will be studying.

Philosophy Pages: <http://www.philosophypages.com>

A source containing a variety of things, most notably a Philosophical Dictionary.

Project Vox: <http://www.projectvox.org>

A source containing information about selected women philosophers of the early modern period,

whose philosophical voices and contributions are being recovered and recognized by historians of philosophy.

YouTube contains numerous short interviews with and about philosophers, such as those at <https://youtube/nG0EWNzFl4> and <https://youtube/B2fLyvsHHaQ>, as well as various series of short videos about philosophical concepts, such as those by Wireless Philosophy at <https://www.youtube.com/user/WirelessPhilosophy>



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Comments relating to this new edition may be sent to us at norm.mel@verizon.net or dmorrow2@gmu.edu.

I was aware that the reading of all good books is indeed like a conversation with the noblest men of past centuries who were the authors of them, nay a carefully studied conversation, in which they reveal to us none but the best of their thoughts.

—*René Descartes*

We—mankind—are a conversation.

—*Martin Heidegger*

In truth, there is no divorce between philosophy and life.

—*Simone de Beauvoir*

CHAPTER

1

BEFORE PHILOSOPHY

Myth in Hesiod and Homer



Everywhere and at all times, we humans have wondered at our own existence and at our place in the scheme of things. We have asked, in curiosity and amazement, “What’s it all about?” “How are we to understand this life of ours?” “How is it best lived?” “Does it end at death?” “This world we find ourselves in—where does it come from?” “What is it, anyway?” “How is it related to us?”

These are some of the many philosophical questions we ask. Every culture offers answers, though not every culture has developed what we know as philosophy. Early answers to such questions universally take the form of stories, usually stories involving the gods—gigantic powers of a personal nature, engaged in tremendous feats of creation, frequently struggling with one another and intervening in human life for good or ill.

We call these stories *myths*. They are told and retold, taught to children as the plain facts, gaining authority by their age, by repetition, and by the apparent fact that within a given culture, virtually everyone accepts them. They shape a tradition, and traditions shape lives.

Philosophy, literally “love of wisdom,” begins when individuals start to ask, “Why should we believe these stories?” “How do we know they are true?” When people try to give good reasons for believing (or not believing) these myths, they have begun to do philosophy. Philosophers look at myths with a critical eye, sometimes defending them and sometimes appreciating what myths try to do, but often attacking myths’ claims to literal truth. So there is a tension between these stories and philosophy, a tension that occasionally breaks into open conflict.

This conflict is epitomized in the execution of the philosopher **Socrates** by his fellow Athenians in 399 B.C. The Athenians accused Socrates of corrupting the youth because he challenged the commonly accepted views and values of ancient Athens. But even though Socrates challenged those views, his own views were deeply influenced by them. He was part of a conversation, already centuries old among the Greeks, about how to understand the world and our place in it. That conversation continued after his death, right down to the present

day, spreading far beyond Athens and winding its way through all of Western intellectual history.

If we want to understand this conversation, we need to understand where and how it began. We need to understand Socrates, and we need to understand where he came from. To do that, we need to understand the myths through which the ancient Greeks had tried to understand their world. Our aim is neither a comprehensive survey nor mere acquaintance with some of these stories. We will be trying to understand something of Greek religion and culture, of the intellectual and spiritual life of the people who told these stories. As a result, we should be able to grasp why Socrates believed what he did and why some of Socrates' contemporaries reacted to him as they did. With that in mind, we take a brief look at two of the great Greek poets: Hesiod and Homer.

Hesiod: War Among the Gods

The poet we know as **Hesiod** probably composed his poem *Theogony* toward the end of the eighth century B.C., but he drew on much older traditions and seems to have synthesized stories that are not always consistent. The term *theogony* means "origin or birth of the gods," and the stories contained in the poem concern the beginnings of all things. In this chapter, we look only at certain central events, as Hesiod relates them.

Hesiod claims to have written these lines under divine inspiration. (Suggestion: Read quotations aloud, especially poetry; you will find that they become more meaningful.)

The Muses once taught Hesiod to sing
Sweet songs, while he was shepherding his lambs
On holy Helicon; the goddesses
Olympian, daughters of Zeus who holds
The aegis,* first addressed these words to me:
"You rustic shepherds, shame: bellies you are,
Not men! We know enough to make up lies
Which are convincing, but we also have
The skill, when we've a mind, to speak the truth."
So spoke the fresh-voiced daughters of great Zeus
And plucked and gave a staff to me, a shoot
Of blooming laurel, wonderful to see,

And breathed a sacred voice into my mouth
With which to celebrate the things to come
And things which were before.

—*Theogony*, 21–35¹

The Muses, according to the tradition Hesiod is drawing on, are goddesses who inspired poets, artists, and writers. In this passage, Hesiod is telling us that the stories he narrates are not vulgar shepherds' lies but are backed by the authority of the gods and embody the remembrance of events long past. They thus represent the *truth*, Hesiod says, and are worthy of belief.

What have the Muses revealed?

And sending out
Unearthly music, first they celebrate
The august race of first-born gods, whom Earth
Bore to broad Heaven, then their progeny,
Givers of good things. Next they sing of Zeus
The father of gods and men, how high he is
Above the other gods, how great in strength.

—*Theogony*, 42–48

Note that the gods are *born*; their origin, like our own, is explicitly sexual. Their ancestors are Earth (Gaea, or Gaia) and Heaven (Ouranos).^{*} And like people, the gods differ in status and power, with Zeus, king of the gods, being the most exalted.

There is confusion in the Greek stories about the very first things (no wonder), and there are contradictions among them. According to Hesiod, first there is *chaos*, apparently a formless mass of stuff, dark and without differentiation. Out of this chaos, Earth appears. (Don't ask how.) Earth then gives birth to starry Heaven,

to be
An equal to herself, to cover her
All over, and to be a resting-place,
Always secure, for all the blessed gods.

—*Theogony*, 27–30

After lying with Heaven, Earth bears the first race of gods, the **Titans**, together with the

^{*}Some people nowadays speak of the Gaea hypothesis and urge us to think of Earth as a living organism. Here we have a self-conscious attempt to revive an ancient way of thinking about the planet we inhabit. Ideas of the Earth-mother and Mother Nature likewise echo such early myths.

*The *aegis* is a symbol of authority.

Cyclops—three giants with but one round eye in the middle of each giant’s forehead. Three other sons, “mighty and violent,” are born to the pair, each with a hundred arms and fifty heads:

And these most awful sons of Earth and Heaven
Were hated by their father from the first.
As soon as each was born, Ouranos hid
The child in a secret hiding-place in Earth*
And would not let it come to see the light,
And he enjoyed this wickedness.

—*Theogony*, 155–160

Earth, distressed and pained with this crowd hidden within her, forms a great sickle of hardest metal and urges her children to use it on their father for his shameful deeds. The boldest of the Titans, Kronos, takes the sickle and plots vengeance with his mother.

Great Heaven came, and with him brought
the night.
Longing for love, he lay around the Earth,
Spreading out fully. But the hidden boy
Stretched forth his left hand; in his right he took
The great long jagged sickle; eagerly
He harvested his father’s genitals
And threw them off behind.

—*Theogony*, 176–182

Where Heaven’s bloody drops fall on land, the Furies spring up—monstrous goddesses who hunt down and punish wrongdoers.†

In the Titans’ vengeance for their father’s wickedness, we see a characteristic theme in Greek thought, a theme repeated again and again in the great classical tragedies and also echoed in later philosophy: Violating the rule of **justice**—even in the service of justice—brings consequences.

The idea repeats itself in the Titan’s story. Kronos, now ruler among the Titans, has children by Rhea, among them Hera, **Hades**, and **Poseidon**. Learning of a prophecy that he will be dethroned by one of these children, Kronos

seizes the newborns and swallows them.* When Rhea bears another son, however, she hides him away in a cave and gives Kronos a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes to swallow. The hidden son, of course, is **Zeus**.

When grown to full strength, Zeus disguises himself as a cupbearer and persuades Kronos to drink a potion. This causes Kronos to vomit up his brothers and sisters—together with the stone. (The stone, Hesiod tells us, is set up at Delphi, north-west of Athens, to mark the center of the earth.) Together with his brothers and their allies, Zeus makes war on the Titans. The war drags on for ten years until Zeus frees the Cyclops from their imprisonment in Tartarus. The Cyclops give Zeus a lightning bolt, supply Poseidon with a trident, and provide Hades with a helmet that makes him invisible. With these aids, the gods overthrow Kronos and the Titans and hurl them down into Tartarus. The three victorious brothers divide up the territory: Zeus rules the sky (he is called “cloudgatherer” and “storm-bringer”); Poseidon governs the sea; and Hades reigns in Tartarus. Earth is shared by all three. Again, the myths tell us that wickedness does not pay.

Thus, the gods set up a relatively stable order in the universe, an order both natural and moral. Although the gods quarrel among themselves and are not above lies, adultery, and favoritism, each guards something important and dear to humans. They also see to it that wickedness is punished and virtue is rewarded, just as was the case among themselves.

-
1. Why are philosophers dissatisfied with mythological accounts of reality?
 2. What is the topic of Hesiod’s *Theogony*?
 3. Tell the story of how Zeus came to be king of the gods.
 4. What moral runs through these early myths?
-

*This dank and gloomy place below the surface of the earth and sea is known as Tartarus.

†In contemporary literature, you can find these Furies represented in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *The Flies*.

**“Kronos” is closely related to the Greek word for time, “chronos.” What might it mean that Kronos devours his children? And that they overthrow his rule to establish cities—communities of justice—that outlive their citizens?

Homer: Heroes, Gods, and Excellence

Xenophanes, a philosopher we will meet later,* tells us that “from the beginning all have learnt in accordance with **Homer**.”² As we have seen, poets were thought to write by divine inspiration, and for centuries Greeks listened to or read the works of Homer, much as people read the Bible or the Koran today. Homer, above all others, was the great teacher of the Greeks. To discover what was truly excellent in battle, governance, counsel, sport, the home, and human life in general, the Greeks looked to Homer’s tales. These dramatic stories offered a picture of the world and people’s place in it that molded the Greek mind and character. Western philosophy begins against the Homeric background, so we need to understand something of Homer.

Homer simply takes for granted the tradition of gods and heroes set down in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. That sky-god tradition of Zeus, Athena, and Apollo celebrates clarity and order, mastery over chaos, intellect and beauty: fertile soil, one must think, for philosophy.

Homer’s two great poems are *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Here, we focus on *The Iliad*, a long poem about a brief period during the nine-year-long Trojan war.† This war came about when **Paris**, son of the Trojan king **Priam**, seduced **Helen**, the famously beautiful wife of the Spartan king **Menelaus**. Paris spirited Helen away to his home in **Troy**, across the Aegean Sea from her home in Achaea, in southern Greece (see Map 1). Menelaus’s brother, **Agamemnon**, the king of Argos, led an army of Greeks to recover Helen, to avenge the wrong against his brother, and—not just incidentally—to gain honor, glory, and plunder.

*See “Xenophanes: The Gods as Fictions,” in Chapter 2.

†The date of the war is uncertain; scholarly estimates tend to put it near the end of the thirteenth century B.C. The poems took form in song and were passed along in an oral tradition from generation to generation. They were written down some time in the eighth century B.C. Tradition ascribes them to a blind bard known as Homer, but the poems we now have may be the work of more than one poet.

Among Agamemnon’s forces was **Achilles**, the greatest warrior of them all.

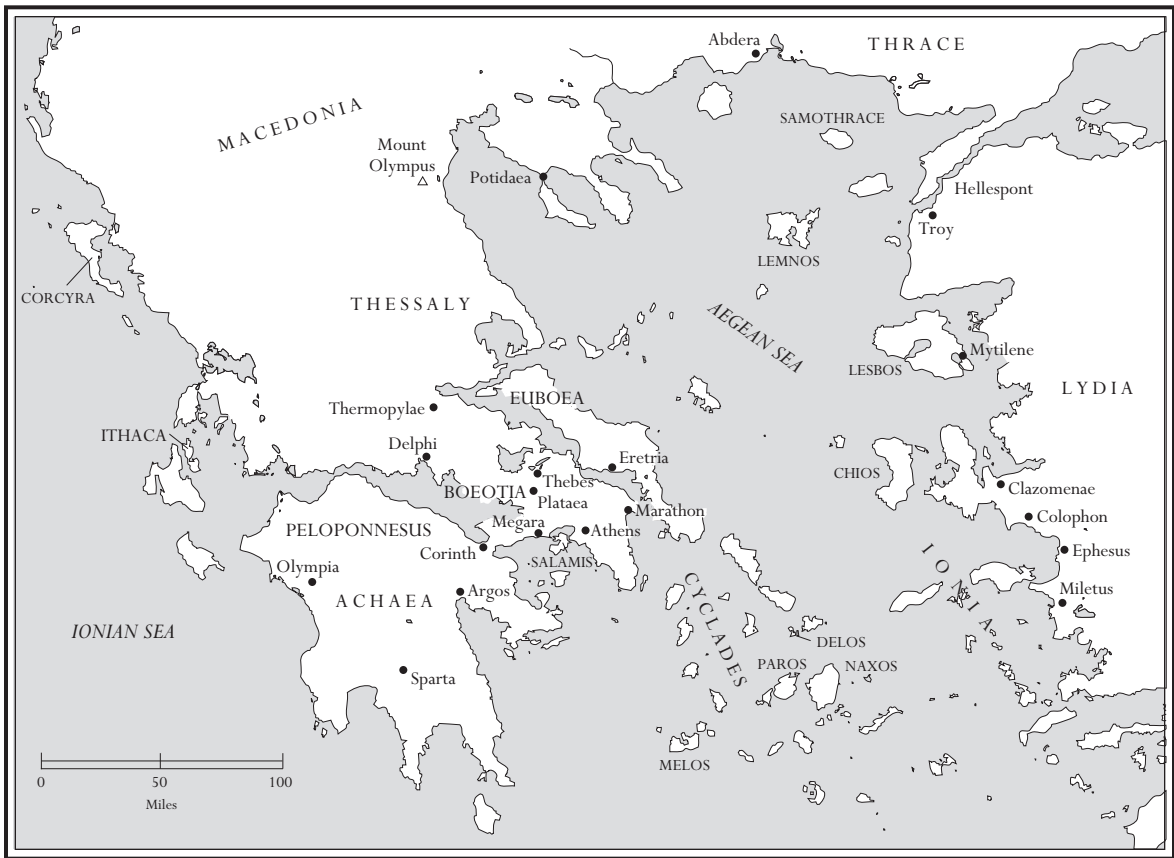
Here is how *The Iliad* begins.

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’
son Achilles,
murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans
countless losses,
hurling down to the House of Death so many
sturdy souls,
great fighters’ souls, but made their bodies carrion,
feasts for the dogs and birds,
and the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles.
What god drove them to fight with such a fury?
Apollo the son of Zeus and Leto. Incensed at
the king
he swept a fatal plague through the army—men
were dying
and all because Agamemnon had spurned
Apollo’s priest.

—*The Iliad*, Book 1, 1–12³

The poet begins by announcing his theme: rage, specifically the excessive, irrational anger of Achilles—anger beyond all bounds that brings death and destruction to so many Greeks and almost costs them the war. So we might expect that the poem has a *moral* aspect. Moreover, in the sixth line we read that what happened was in accord with the will of Zeus, who sees to it that flagrant violations of good order do not go unpunished. In these first lines we also learn of **Apollo**, the son of Zeus, who has sent a plague on the Greek army because Agamemnon offended him. We can see, then, that Homer’s world is one of kings and heroes, majestic but flawed, engaged in gargantuan projects against a background of gods who cannot safely be ignored.

The story Homer tells goes roughly like this. In a raid on a Trojan ally, the Greeks capture a beautiful girl who happens to be the daughter of a priest of Apollo. The army awards her to Agamemnon as part of his spoils. The priest comes to plead for her return, offering ransom, but he is rudely rebuffed. Agamemnon will not give back the girl. The priest appeals to Apollo, who, angered by the treatment his priest is receiving, sends a plague to Agamemnon’s troops.

MAP 1 *The Greek Mainland*

The soldiers, wanting to know what is causing the plague, appeal to their seer, who explains the situation and suggests returning the girl. Agamemnon is furious. To forfeit his prize while the other warriors keep theirs goes against the honor due him as commander. He finally agrees to give up the girl but demands Achilles' prize, an exceptionally lovely woman, in exchange. The two heroes quarrel bitterly. Enraged, Achilles returns to his tent and refuses to fight anymore.

Because Achilles is the greatest of the Greek warriors, his anger has serious consequences. The war goes badly for the Greeks. The Trojans fight their way to the beach and begin to burn the ships. Patroclus, Achilles' dearest friend, pleads with him to relent, but he will not. If Achilles won't have pity on his comrades, Patroclus says, then at least let him

take Achilles' armor and fight in his place. Achilles agrees, and the tactic has some success. The Greeks drive the Trojans back toward the city, but in the fighting Patroclus is killed by **Hector**, another son of Priam and the greatest of the Trojan warriors.

Achilles' rage now turns on Hector and the Trojans. He rejoins the war to wreak havoc among them. After slaughtering many, he comes face to face with Hector. Achilles kills him and drags his body back to camp behind his chariot—a profoundly disrespectful thing to do. As the poem ends, King Priam goes alone by night into the Greek camp to plead with Achilles for the body of his son. He and Achilles weep together, for Hector and for Patroclus, and Achilles gives up the body.

This summary emphasizes the human side of the story. From that point of view, *The Iliad* can be

thought of as the story both of the tragedy that excess and pride lead to and of the humanization of Achilles. The main moral is the same as that expressed by a motto at the celebrated oracle at Delphi: “Nothing too much.”* **Moderation** is what Achilles lacked, and his lack led to disaster. At the same time, the poem celebrates the “heroic virtues”: *strength, courage, physical prowess*, and the kind of *wisdom* that consists in the ability to devise clever plans to achieve one’s ends. For Homer and his audience, these characteristics, together with moderation, make up the model of human excellence. These are the virtues ancient Greeks taught their children.

The gods also appear throughout the story, looking on, hearing appeals, taking sides, and interfering. For instance, when Achilles is sulking about Agamemnon having taken “his” woman, he prays to his mother, the goddess Thetis. (Achilles has a mortal father.) Achilles asks Thetis to go to Zeus and beg him to give victory to—the Trojans!

Zeus frets that his wife Hera will be upset—she favors the Greeks—but he agrees. If Zeus grants an appeal, that will be done. (Recall the sixth line of the poem.) Homeric religion, while certainly not a monotheism, is not exactly a true polytheism either. The many powers that govern the world seem to be under the rule of one.† That rule gives a kind of order to the universe.

Moreover, this order is basically a just order, though it may not be designed altogether with human beings in mind. Zeus sees to it that certain customs are enforced: that oaths are kept, that supplicants are granted mercy, and that the rules governing guest and host are observed—the rules that Paris violated so grossly when he seduced Helen away from her husband, Menelaus. Homer suggests that the Greeks eventually win the war because Zeus punishes the violation of these customs. However, the Greeks are punished with great losses

before their eventual victory because Agamemnon had acted unjustly in taking Achilles’ prize of war.

The Homeric idea of justice is not exactly the same as ours. The mortals and gods in Homer’s world covet **honor** and glory above all else. Agamemnon is angry not primarily because “his” woman was taken back to her father but because his honor has been offended. Booty is valued not for its own sake so much as for the honor it conveys—the better the loot, the greater the honor. Achilles is overcome by rage because Agamemnon has humiliated him, thus depriving him of the honor due him. That is why Thetis begs Zeus to let the Trojans prevail until the Greeks restore to Achilles “the honor he deserves.”

What is just in this social world is that each person receive the honor that is due, given that person’s status and position. Nestor, wise counselor of the Greeks, tries to make peace between Agamemnon and Achilles by appealing to precisely this principle.

“Don’t seize the girl, Agamemnon, powerful as you are—

leave her, just as the sons of Achaea gave her, his prize from the very first.

And you, Achilles, never hope to fight it out with your king, pitting force against his force: no one can match the honors dealt a king, you know,

a sceptered king to whom Zeus gives glory.

Strong as you are—a goddess was your mother—he has more power because he rules more men.”

—*The Iliad*, Book 1, 321–329

Nestor tries to reconcile them by pointing out what is just, what each man’s honor requires. Unfortunately, neither one heeds his good advice.

The gods are also interested in honor. It has often been remarked that Homer’s gods reflect the society that they allegedly govern; they are powerful, jealous of their prerogatives, quarrel among themselves, and are not above a certain deceitfulness, although some sorts of evil are simply beneath their dignity. The chief difference between human beings and the gods is that human beings are bound for death and the gods are not. Greeks often refer to the gods simply as “the immortals.” Immortality makes possible a kind of blessedness among the gods that is impossible for human beings.

*This was one of several mottoes that had appeared mysteriously on the temple walls. No one could explain how they got there, and it was assumed that Apollo himself must have written them.

†We shall see philosophers wrestling with this problem of “the one and the many.” In what sense, exactly, is this world *one* world?

As immortals, the gods are interested in the affairs of mortals, but only insofar as they are entertained or their honor is touched. They are spectators of the human comedy—or tragedy; they watch human affairs the way we watch soap operas and reality television. In a famous passage from the *Iliad*, Zeus decides to sit out the battle about to rage below and simply observe, saying,

“These mortals do concern me, dying as they are. Still, here I stay on Olympus throned aloft, here in my steep mountain cleft, to feast my eyes and delight my heart.”

—*The Iliad*, Book 20, 26–29

The gods both deserve and demand honor, punishing humans who refuse to give it. We saw that Apollo sent a plague because Agamemnon refused the ransom offered by Apollo’s priest. When humans dishonor the gods or do not respect their prerogatives, they are guilty of arrogance, or **hubris**. In this state, human beings in effect think of themselves as gods, forgetting their finitude, their limitations, their mortality. Hubris is punished by the gods, as hero after hero discovers to his dismay.

The gulf between Homeric gods and mortals—even those, like Achilles, who have one divine parent—is clear and impassable. In closing this brief survey of Greek myths, we want to emphasize a particular aspect of this gulf: Those whose thoughts were shaped by Homer neither believed in nor aspired to any immortality worth prizing. There is a kind of shadowy existence after death, but the typical attitude toward it is expressed by Achilles when Odysseus visits him in the underworld.

“No winning words about death to me, shining Odysseus!

By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
than rule down here over all the breathless dead.”

—*The Odyssey*, Book 11, 555–558⁴

For these conquerors who glory in the strength of their bodies, nothing after death could compare to glory in this life. They know they are destined to die, believe that death is the end of any life worth

living, and take the attitude expressed by Hector when faced with Achilles:

“And now death, grim death is looming up beside me,
no longer far away. No way to escape it now. This, this was their pleasure after all, sealed long ago—
Zeus and the son of Zeus, the distant deadly Archer—
though often before now they rushed to my defense.
So now I meet my doom. Well let me die—
but not without struggle, not without glory, no,
in some great clash of arms that even men to come will hear of down the years!”

—*The Iliad*, Book 22, 354–362

Again, even at the end, the quest for honor is paramount.

-
1. Describe the main characters in Homer’s poem *The Iliad*—for example, Agamemnon, Achilles, Apollo, Zeus, and Hector.
 2. Retell the main outline of the story.
 3. What is the theme of the poem, as expressed in the first lines?
 4. How are honor and justice related in Homer’s view of things?
 5. What virtues are said to constitute human excellence?
 6. Describe the relationship between humans and gods. In what ways are they similar, and how do they differ?
 7. What is hubris, and what is its opposite?
 8. Do Homer’s heroes long for immortality? Explain.
-

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. Gather examples of mythological thinking that are current today. What questions would a philosopher want to ask about them?

KEY WORDS

Socrates	Justice
Hesiod	Hades
<i>Theogony</i>	Poseidon
Titans	Zeus

Homer	Achilles
Paris	Apollo
Priam	Hector
Helen	moderation
Menelaus	honor
Troy	hubris
Agamemnon	

2. Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948), 22.
3. Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1990). All quotations are taken from this translation; references are to book and line numbers.
4. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1996). References are to book and line numbers.

NOTES

1. Hesiod, *Theogony*, trans. Dorothea Wender, in *Hesiod and Theognis* (New York: Penguin Books, 1973). All quotations are taken from this translation; numbers are line numbers.

CHAPTER

2

PHILOSOPHY BEFORE SOCRATES



If the great conversation of Western philosophy is rooted in the poetry of Hesiod and Homer, it first sprouted in the protoscientific thought of Ionia (see Map 1). A little more than a century before Socrates' birth, Greek thinkers on the eastern shore of the Aegean Sea began to challenge the traditional myths with attempts at more rational explanations of the world around them. Western philosophy was born in these attempts and in the conversation that it began. So, it is to these first Greek philosophers that we now turn.

It is seldom entirely clear why thinkers raised in a certain tradition become dissatisfied enough to try to establish a new one. The reason is even more obscure in the case of the earliest Greek philosophers because we have a scarcity of information about them. Although most of them wrote books, these writings are almost entirely lost, some surviving in small fragments, others known only by references to them and quotations or paraphrases by later writers. As a group, these thinkers are usually known as the “pre-Socratics.” This name

testifies to the pivotal importance put on Socrates by his successors.*

For whatever reason, a tradition grew up in which questions about the nature of the world took center stage, a tradition that was not content with stories about the gods. For thinkers trying to *reason* their way to a view about reality, the Homeric tales and Hesiod's divine genealogy must have seemed impossibly crude. Still, the questions addressed by these myths were real questions: What is the true nature of reality? What is its origin? What is our place in it? How are we related to the powers that govern it? What is the best way to live? Philosophy is born when thinkers attempt to answer these questions more rationally than myth does.

In early Greek philosophical thought, certain issues took center stage. There is the problem of

*In this chapter, we look only at selected pre-Socratic thinkers. A more extensive and very readable treatment of others—including Anaximenes, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras—can be found in Merrill Ring, *Beginning with the Pre-Socratics* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999).