

# The Classical Review

<http://journals.cambridge.org/CAR>

Additional services for *The Classical Review*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

**The Presocratics (P.) Curd, (D.W.) Graham (edd.)  
*The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy.*  
Pp. xii + 588. New York: Oxford University Press,  
2008. Cased, &pound;85. ISBN: 978-0-19-514687-5.**

Jenny Bryan

The Classical Review / Volume 60 / Issue 02 / October 2010, pp 366 - 368  
DOI: 10.1017/S0009840X10000168, Published online: 28 September 2010

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0009840X10000168](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0009840X10000168)

**How to cite this article:**

Jenny Bryan (2010). Review of (P.) Curd, and (D.W.) Graham 'The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy' The Classical Review, 60, pp 366-368 doi:10.1017/S0009840X10000168

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

## THE PRESOCRATICS

CURD (P.), GRAHAM (D.W.) (edd.) *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*. Pp. xii + 588. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Cased, £85. ISBN: 978-0-19-514687-5.

doi:10.1017/S0009840X10000168

This volume collects twenty diverse and, on occasion, explicitly and excitingly divergent articles by some of the most prominent and well established scholars of Presocratic philosophy. The scope of the collection is wide ranging in terms both of its subject matter and the various approaches adopted by individual authors. The essays are divided into four sections. The first, 'Background', sets the Presocratics and their thought in some kind of context. The second, 'Figures and Movements', offers a collection of essays on all the major early Greek philosophers (including, not uncontroversially, the Sophists) in chronological order. The third, 'Topics', presents a series of general thematic discussions of the Presocratics. The fourth and final section, 'Reception', describes the afterlife of Presocratic thought in antiquity.

In one sense, the first of the two essays included under 'Background' might be thought better placed in 'Reception': D. Runia's piece 'The Sources for Presocratic Philosophy' is not a discussion of the roots from which early Greek philosophy grew, but rather a survey of the sources of *our* knowledge of Presocratic thought. Runia considers our understanding of the Presocratics as necessarily filtered through

the philosophers, doxographers and interpreters by whom their thought is preserved. In this, he takes the fundamental work of Diels as a sort of paradigm, albeit one ripe for re-evaluation. In fact, he provides a useful preface for the rest of the volume, since we are repeatedly reminded of the influence of Plato and Aristotle in particular in shaping our understanding of their predecessors. In the second chapter, W. Burkert points out that the extent of the influence of the East on the origins of Greek philosophy merits more attention than it has previously been afforded. Burkert, like Runia, presents a sort of call to arms. Much remains to be done in the field of Presocratic scholarship. Indeed, the more we do, the more there is to be done. Both articles suggest possible directions for future research.

The eleven essays collected under the heading 'Figures and Movements' admirably demonstrate the heterogeneity of both Presocratic philosophy and modern scholarship in this field. Some present an original approach to familiar and fundamental issues while others open up quite novel avenues of inquiry. S. White takes the Milesians' interest in measurement as the basis for his discussion of their cosmological thinking. A. Mourelatos investigates Xenophanes' assimilation of astral phenomena to clouds, ending with a suggestive comparison with Ionian material monism. G. scrutinises the possibility and nature of knowledge and order in Heraclitus' world of flux. R. McKirahan offers a systematic and illuminating treatment of Parmenides B8, and in particular its rejection of 'not-being'. In her essay on Anaxagoras, C. explores the unquestionable importance of *nous* for the formation and understanding of his pluralist *kosmos*. O. Primavesi presents a fascinating case for reading Empedocles' use of myth as elucidating the physical foundation of his ethics. The importance of the Presocratics to their philosophical heirs in the ancient world is admirably demonstrated by C. Huffman's piece on Pythagoreanism. Huffman considers the extent of Plato's reputed Pythagoreanism before going on to investigate who counts as a Pythagorean and why. Continuing the theme of philosophical heritage, both D. Sedley and G. consider the Eleatic background of atomism. Sedley argues that Democritean atomism can usefully be viewed as a kind of neo-Eleaticism, whilst G. suggests that one significant difference between Leucippus and Democritus lies in their ontology: Leucippus is an Eleatic, Democritus 'a reformer of Eleatic theory' (p. 347). A. Laks emphasises the need to view Diogenes of Apollonia as more than just a curious footnote in the history of teleology. In the final essay of this section, M. Gagarin and P. Woodruff give a general defence of the Sophists against various aspects of their Platonic caricature. Of course, some might balk at the notion that the Sophists are in any real sense representative of 'Presocratic philosophy'. In fact, however, the sheer diversity of topics treated across the volume ensures that this piece does not look out of place.

P. van der Eijk provides the first of the five synoptic articles collected under the heading 'Topics'. Eijk presents a stimulating introduction to the philosophical aspects of Greek medicine, pointing out that much remains to be done in bridging the gap between the histories of medicine and philosophy. M.R. Wright gives a thematic survey of various Presocratic cosmologies. R.J. Hankinson considers the Presocratic attitudes to cause and explanation, praising their achievement in overcoming the murky randomness of mythic non-explanations. A similar note is struck by J.H. Leshner's article on Presocratic epistemology. Leshner argues that the epistemic optimism of the Presocratics can usefully be contrasted with the pessimism displayed in early Greek poetry. In the final essay of this section, T.M. Robinson presents a chronological summary of Presocratic attitudes to the divine.

It is a pity that no extended synoptic treatment of Presocratic ethical thinking is included here (particularly if the Sophists are rightly included in the previous section). That is not to say that ethics is completely absent; it is treated tangentially in the pieces by Lesher, Eijk and Robinson as well as by Wright's essay on cosmology in a disappointingly brief conclusion on man's place within the *kosmoi* of the Presocratics. As Primavesi's article on Empedocles makes clear, we should be wary of accepting that no one prior to Socrates has anything of interest to say about how one should live one's life.

The final section presents two fascinating articles on the ancient reception of the Presocratics. Just as D. Runia's article on our sources for the Presocratics might have been included here, so M. Frede's piece on Aristotle's account of the origins of philosophy in *Metaphysics* 1 could just as well have opened the volume. It offers a sensitive and highly intriguing study of one of the earliest examples of Presocratic scholarship. J. Palmer concludes the book with an argument for acknowledging the influence of Sophistic representations of the Presocratics on their reception by Plato and Aristotle.

One quibble about the collection as a whole is that the fundamental and, to a certain extent, positive influence of the early Greek poets on many of the Presocratics is sidelined. More than once, one is faced with the familiar and rather simplistic notion that the Presocratics mark a welcome shift from naïve *mythos* towards rational *logos*. Without doubt, many of the Presocratics were offering a critical response to their poetic predecessors, but the use of poetic metre and allusion and the linguistic subtlety of many of these figures deserve more attention. Two articles that stand out for their sensitivity to these issues are G.'s discussion of Heraclitus and O. Primavesi's treatment of Empedocles. Elsewhere, however, the poetics of many of the Presocratics is given too short shrift.

The Editors' introduction states that this collection is aimed at 'both specialists and upper-level students in the field of Greek philosophy' (p. 4). In appealing to this audience it undoubtedly succeeds. Indeed, anyone interested in early Greek philosophy will find this volume a rich resource. I rather suspect, however, that those essays collected under the heading 'Topics' and offering general surveys of Presocratic cosmology or theology will be of more value to the student than to the specialist.

A further aim espoused by the Editors is that of 'giving a picture of the state of Presocratic studies today and also setting problems for future scholarly work' (p. 4). Here their success is only partial. A large number of the articles do indeed offer provocative and original readings and will stimulate lively debate. Others, however, feel more familiar and, perhaps as a result, less up to date. Several are reworkings of material that has appeared elsewhere. More than one article cites nothing published in the last five years; one bibliography includes nothing published in the last ten. On this note, in so far as this is a 'handbook', the omission of a general bibliography is unfortunate.

This is a volume of impressive depth and breadth, as one would expect of such a gathering of luminaries, both ancient and modern. In introducing new subjects and novel approaches to more familiar subjects, it will stimulate research on the Presocratics both as a movement and as a group of fascinating individual thinkers.

*Homerton College, Cambridge*

JENNY BRYAN  
jb304@cam.ac.uk