Presocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction

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Generations of philosophers, both ancient and modern, have traced their inspiration back to the Presocratics. Part of the fascination stems from the fact that little of what they wrote survives. Here Osborne invites her readers to dip their toes into the fragmentary remains of thinkers from Thales to Pythagoras, Heraclitus to Protagoras, and to try to reconstruct the moves that they were making, to support stories that Western philosophers and historians of philosophy like to tell about their past.

This book covers the invention of western philosophy: introducing to us the first thinkers to explore ideas about the nature of reality, time, and the origin of the universe.

About the Series: Combining authority with wit, accessibility, and style, **Very Short Introductions** offer an introduction to some of life's most interesting topics. Written by experts for the newcomer, they demonstrate the finest contemporary thinking about the central problems and issues in hundreds of key topics, from philosophy to Freud, quantum theory to Islam.

Presocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction Details

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Author	:	Catherine Osborne
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From Reader Review Presocratic Philosophy: A Very Short Introduction for online ebook

Jo Walton says

Brilliantly lucid, readable, and remarkably comprehensive for such a short book.

I bought this because I was enjoying Osborne/Rowett's papers on Academia.edu so much that I wanted to give her some money.

So Hakim says

Useful, but thematic organization let the book down.

It would have been better if the book divided chapters by thinkers or schools, focusing on their ideas. Unfortunately it didn't: instead the author tried to use a bird-eye-view perspective, connecting one thinker to others.

Better introductions to the Presocratics are available, and even public domain version is pretty good: John Burnet's *Early Greek Philosophy* (1908) comes to mind.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

?Presocratic philosophy : a very short introduction (Very Short Introductions #103), Catherine Osborne
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Maria Shury-Smith says

Really enjoyable, easy to read overview of presocratic philosophy with useful links to fragments throughout. Great way of exploring the multiplicity of interpretations of Presocratic philosophy!

Javad says

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Jake says

For a book of this length, Osborne does a fantastic job at giving the reader a glimpse of the development of philosophy before Socrates. Her exposition of the ideas of antiquity are engaging and far from dry; despite sacrificing the thoroughness and systematical edge of a chronological account, she achieves what a Very Short Introduction, for me at least, ought to: pique the reader's interest, and display the most crucial or notable ideas.

In addition, she does not shy away from the complexity of pre-Socratic philosophy, but inspects the dominant narrative of monism vs pluralism centred around the question of archai (origins), which is an admirable feat. Overall, a great way to launch the reader into further studies in ancient philosophy.

[Review 1 - 17/05/17.]

Erica Zahn says

“Once upon a time there lived a man called Thales. He was a bit of a scientist, and greatly impressed the people of his day by applying his new ideas in real life. This enabled him to achieve some notorious instances of military success and economic advantage. But what he became most famous for was the idea that the world stays where it is because it is floating on water, and – on the same theme – the idea that all the things in the world derive from water in some way. No sooner had Thales (who lived in a place called Miletus, right by the sea) put forward this wet hypothesis than others felt the need to take up the challenge: “not water”, said one, “but air”; “not air”, said another, “but earth”; “not any of those”, said a third, “but some other stuff that isn’t really anything in particular”. Everyone wanted to explain, as he thought best, how the world, as we know it now, could have originated from some single undifferentiated matter. This debate went on for some time, each contributor adding a plausible theory to explain how the world might have come to look as it now does, supposing his own idea of its origin were true.”
(p.29)

This is very simply written and accessible, so it works for a ‘very short introduction’. It can be quite dry but the varied format (pictures, text boxes, tables etc.) help make it a little more engaging – perhaps for entry-level information Wikipedia is useful for basic reviews too, but books like this are more trustworthy for all

the obvious reasons. Some of the introductory material seemed a bit obvious (explanations about what a fragment is etc.), but as a classicist things that seem obvious to me may not be to other people, and I'm sure the author just wants to make sure everyone is on the same page. I found there was good checking of our priorities (i.e. debate) where these assumptions might be anachronistic, and yet there is some evidence for the recognition of reasoned argument in the early stages, though Osborne points out that the natural philosophers didn't do much to defend their own views.

All in all, this is a pretty typical addition to the 'very short introduction' series: if you want to learn about a new subject, they will give you the basic insight, but in their strictly factual and objective format they are unlikely to instil much passion or enthusiasm in the process.

Marcus Vinicius says

One can relate to Presocratic philosophy as a history of thinkers trying to solve some few importants questions, specially the cosmology one. Catherine Osborne choses another path, one in which the presocratics examined various problems with no specifically order. This work introduces the reader to the ideas and doubts of men that lived in 5th and 4th centuries BC. The exposition is clear and the reader's benefits enormous.

Susan says

Dull. The information presented is like a wikipedia article without much else. Too cute by half.

Christopher says

This entry in Oxford University Press's series of "Very Short Introductions" aims give readers an overview in 168 pages of the Presocratics, the philosophers of the Greek-speaking world who lived before Socrates and were among the first to note down musings on the nature of reality and the physical makeup of the universe. In chapters dedicated slightly more to general themes than to individual thinkers, Catherine Osborne presents some of the major contributions that they made to philosophy: the theory that everything is made of tiny bits called atoms, the famous paradox of Zeno and the tortoise, and the puzzle of how any change or development is possible if reason leads us to conclude that the universe is unchanging.

Two things make this book stand out in popular introductions to the subject, revealing the Presocratics in a different light than I got in an undergraduate philosophy course years ago. The first is that Osborne underlines how their writings have not come down to us in full, but rather as fragmentary manuscripts and quoted snippets in other ancient sources, which requires scholars to do a great deal of interpretation and guesswork, and it also means that our understanding of their thought can change when new papyri are discovered. She uses Empedocles and an archaeological discovery in the 1990s as an example of this changing view. The second fresh concern of Osborne's work is to overturn the traditional presentations of the Presocratics as a straight line of development and progress, as it is unknown if they even actually read each other, and so we shouldn't think that each Presocratic figure was responding specifically to one before him.

Some Very Short Introduction titles are accessible to a practically universal audience. Though Osborne tries to avoid excessive jargon, her particular way of reiterating the Presocratics' arguments assumes that the

reader already has at least some background in philosophy. The author also clearly ran up against the space constraints of the Very Short Introduction series, and the approach she chooses ends up feeling curiously cut off at the knees within a mere 168 pages. Thus, while the fresh aspects of Osborne's presentation mentioned above are worth getting, the reader may well find another, less straitjacketed introduction more fulfilling. For what it is worth, Osborne does provide a Further Reading section at the end of this book.

Sonic says

This is a super excellent book! First to talk about this vast subject, is commendable, secondly to speak succinctly on this topic, is amazing, and thirdly the way Catherine Osborne engages us (the readers) is quite exceptional. Ms. Osborne is capable of asking good questions, and sometimes being satisfied with some good questions instead of reducing these concepts to erroneous and incomplete assumptions. She has an engaging and down-to-earth voice that is incredibly refreshing amongst the scholarly voices of this (A Very Short Introduction) series.
This is fabulous!

Daniel Wright says

The term 'Presocratic' seems to be something of a misnomer to be - 'Preplatonic' would be more accurate, since Socrates seems to have had no real philosophy of his own, and we now only see him through Platonic lenses (also Xenophon, but he gets rather neglected, being primarily a historian). In any case, it's a bit sad that the first thing that ever gets said about such deep and colourful thinkers as Thales, Parmenides and Heraclitus is that they came before Socrates - they are defined by someone who came immediately after them.

Dr Osborne in this delightful introduction brings to life the dramatic and poetic philosophy of these thinkers, who wrote at a time when these things were not so clearly delineated. Most of their work is known only through fragments, often when quoted by more notable names such as Aristotle. But what little we have is intriguing in its own right, even if it does lend a certain incoherence to their thought.

Erik says

Its been depressing me lately that I hadn't finished a single book this year. Potentially sad that the one I finally did finish was only 135 pages, but its still something. In a moment where Im having to reassess life as a whole I found myself looking back at something I was trying to do before my life was swept away for over a year now. Philosophy has been a love of mine ever since I got over thinking that something my Dad use to say to my brother and I when were kids was dumb and didn't make any sense. He use to say, "people don't make you angry, you make yourself angry." I remember thinking to myself how he could say something like that. As the years have gone on I have come to understand the wisdom behind many things my Dad would say, and decided at some point along the way to search for wisdom itself. How much of that is true in my "archai" is hard to say. It seems clear enough to point to. I appreciate these oxford classics having about 20 of them have only just finished one of them. I think that Oxford publishing has great merit to it, and find myself flipping through any of their books I see on subjects that interest me. I found this book to my liking in the authors attempt to not try to give the a linear history of philosophy, but to try something different. Its a chapter to chapter of ideas that the presocratics wrestled with, and that many of us have over the millennia. I

found the book to have good insight and a refreshing take on a history (for me). For anyone else looking to take a look into what it even is to be presocratic I would suggest this book. I was an enjoyable step on my path.

Abdullah Ba?aran says

Some verbalism and pieces from the original texts, nothing more.

Viji (Bookish endeavors) says

After having read Stace and Thilly and Copleston,this book really feels like what it is-a very short introduction. Still I would say that it didn't cover much of what is termed pre-Socratic philosophy. Most of the philosophers were just mentioned and their contributions were compressed to a single sentence. I understand completely that they have to limit it to some 150 pages but they could've reduced the number of pictures which most of the time didn't have any relevance,at least philosophically. But may be they did it to make it more appealing to the common reader. Anyway as an introduction to the subject,this book failed miserably. I would recommend W.T.Stace instead. The only problem with his book is the unjustified tarnishing he makes of Indian philosophy in the introduction to his book,but otherwise that book is an excellent introduction and a captivating read. And not a big one at that too. So you see,you can do a better job even with such a small book.
