

PRESOCRATICS

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By James Warren

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James Warren's *Presocratics* is the latest instalment in Acumen's introductory series on Ancient Philosophies. The aim of this series is to provide students of both the classics and philosophy with foundational books on various aspects of ancient thought. The previous instalment, *Stoicism* by John Sellars (Acumen 2006), certainly managed to fulfil this aim and Warren has not strayed far from the objective of the series. The book fulfils all the functional requirements as an introductory text, including a chronology and a guide to further reading. There is very little in this work that could be considered controversial and it includes no major reinterpretations of Presocratic thought. This, however, works entirely in Warren's favour. Warren's method is to put forward, in the simplest terms possible, the central claims of a number of Presocratic thinkers.

The opening line of the book introduces the book's theme of Presocratic views on "the nature and origin of the world, our knowledge of it and how we should act in it" (1). Nonetheless Warren is keen to note, at various points in the book, that this remains a limited picture. Although the point is not forcibly pushed it is indicative of Warren's conservative approach.

Warren's cautiousness can be best observed when he is delineating the arguments of the Presocratics. As a rule Warren is indifferent to the conclusions of these arguments knowing that undergraduate students are likely to dismiss the Presocratics as archaic.

Warren is more interested in revealing the process of argumentation involved, and how this process places the Presocratic thinkers at the origins of the philosophical tradition. Warren carefully guides his readers through the arguments drawing out their potential interpretations without settling on any particular one. As an introductory text there is no doubt that this may frustrate readers seeking an easy answer, but as philosophical training it is an effective method.

The point is that it is his argumentative *style* which makes Thales worthy of our attention. Making this point is the traditional stumbling block for introductory texts on the Presocratics, but Warren manages to navigate it well. Other than this focus on the process of argumentation, Warren sticks to familiar terrain. He adopts the classical account of the Presocratics as most suitable for his audience and therefore he also employs the standard Diels and Kranz translations from *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Weidmann, 1985).

Warren notes that there is sufficient reason for expanding the definition of a Presocratic thinker to include poets, doctors, politicians, and rhetoricians, but wisely leaves this “daunting task” for others to tackle (2). Warren does not emphasise biographic details of the Presocratic philosophers in order to avoid turning these thinkers into caricatures. Anecdotes are only included where relevant or necessary to illustrate a point. For example, the claim that Thales predicted an eclipse is confined to the final paragraph in his section and put forward only to supplement the thesis that Thales took more than a passing interest in natural phenomena. Warren is also careful to avoid restricting Thales to Aristotle’s “framework for the history and development of this species of metaphysical investigation” (26). That is, Warren is avoiding designating Thales as a metaphysical thinker and instead opens up the possibility that Thales was more likely a physicist or naturalist attempting to explain that from which all things are composed. The point is that this type of investigation opened up the possibility for subsequent metaphysical inquiry, but was not in itself metaphysical.

Here we have touched upon two strengths of this work. The first is the sparse employment of unnecessary anecdotal evidence and secondly we have Warren’s open approach to the possible ways in which to understand a Presocratic thinker. By being plunged directly into the content of Thales’ thought and argumentation the reader will grasp the main thesis that with “...Thales, at least, we have some clear indication of interest in what Aristotle is happy to call ‘philosophical’ matters” (24)

Warren abandons caution in his treatment of Anaximander; in his overall crisp and clear overview, we find the claim that the *apeiron* (‘the boundless’) represents something akin to an *a priori* argument “about what is necessary to provide a reason for any anything whatsoever...” (33) Warren’s critique regarding Aristotle’s interpretation of Thales as a metaphysical thinker could be applied to Warren’s own treatment of Anaximander. However, it is easier to accept Warren’s general conclusion that Anaximander represents our first properly systematic thinker. Warren also makes a decent attempt to resituate Anaximenes into the ‘canon’ where he is considered as a disciple of Anaximander rather than a striking philosopher in his own right. The case put forward here is that Anaximenes, although clearly an inheritor of Anaximander’s worldview, strengthens the ideas that he inherits and deserves attention for opening up the question of dynamism with his own *arkhē* known as *aēr*.

Pythagoras is given far less attention than could be expected given the work that has been done to rehabilitate the great mathematician into the Presocratic narrative. Warren follows Kirk and Raven, who are also

disappointing on Pythagoras in their definitive *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge University Press, 1957). What makes this oversight noticeable is that having skimmed over Pythagoras, Warren proceeds to devote a considerable section of the book to a treatment of the relatively unknown Xenophanes. Warren does however manage to justify this treatment by setting up Xenophanes, by way of his deeply context-bound cosmology and epistemology, as the first thinker of sceptical inquiry, thereby showing us that there are “distinct echoes” of the issues raised by Heraclitus (56). Xenophanes is considered the first sceptical philosopher because he argues for the circumstantial nature of our beliefs. We find the same scepticism regarding human access to knowledge in Heraclitus.

The treatment of Heraclitus is less satisfactory than the other Presocratics although this can be attributed to the overabundance of material related to Heraclitus. As a result Warren outlines the numerous possible interpretations on offer and manages to provide us with a remarkably clear discussion of the *logos*. There is a small problem to be found in Warren’s treatment of the river fragments. Warren introduces the possibility that Heraclitus “raised the question” of personal identity (74). Warren also states that Heraclitus “shows no sign of offering us an answer here” (74). The introduction of contemporary problems is at times more confusing than helpful. We find another example in the summation of Parmenides’s *Way of Truth*:

The “Way of Truth” rules out coming to be and change in a challenging way, not on empirical grounds (since it contends that the senses are terrible guides to reality, as can be seen once we check his conclusions against how the world seems to us) but on *a priori*, non-empirical grounds (79).

Warren guides his audience through the infamously tricky world of Parmenides’ poem highlighting Parmenides’ contribution to ontology – an area all too easily overlooked by students unfamiliar with the Presocratics. It is clear that Warren intends to place Parmenides at a critical juncture for philosophy as such. To this end, he includes an entire section devoted to the reactions to Parmenides. Included under this rubric are Zeno and Melissus, and this section leads nicely into what Kirk and Raven name the post-Parmenidean systems encompassing Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Archelaus, The Atomists, and Diogenes. Warren does not follow Kirk and Raven’s schema slavishly. He devotes chapters to Empedocles and Anaxagoras but allows Archelaus to disappear entirely from view, but this is understandable in an introductory text. Anaxagoras is explained as

the thinker who introduces *nous* “as some kind of casual principle” (119). Diogenes emerges for a short appearance in the epilogue alongside the Pythagorean Philolaus. Philolaus earns his place for his influence upon Aristotle’s understanding of Pythagorean philosophy, but for little else besides.

The strongest individual section in this book is the treatment of Empedocles. Warren is at his best drawing together all that is problematic in Presocratic criticism. What makes this possible is the relatively new discovery of the Strasbourg papyrus fragments of Empedocles, discovered in 1990. Here, in all its muddy glory, students can comprehend the gritty problem of Presocratic interpretation in its proper contemporary context. The multiplicity of viewpoints regarding these fragments serves as a nice way to draw the book toward its conclusion, and perhaps explains why Empedocles comes before Anaxagoras chronologically. Diels and Kranz controversially divided the fragments into two books known as *On Nature* and *Katharmoi* (or *Purifications*). Conscious of the immense influence that Diels’ arrangement has had on the study of Empedocles and the Presocratics in general, the discovery of the new fragments acts as a wonderful example of the cautiousness required in Presocratic interpretation that Warren hopes to convey.

The fragments allow Warren to give an explicit voice to the subtle critique which emerged in the opening pages regarding the extraneous aspects of a thinker which the classical tradition ignores. In Warren’s own words:

Empedocles is therefore an excellent case in which we have to think carefully about what we assume to be the nature of early Greek philosophy; it is certainly not possible to ignore what we might initially take to be “un-philosophical” or “religious” aspects of his work and concentrate on the cosmological sections without the risk that we might thereby seriously misconceive the overall tenor of his thought (137).

Empedocles is more than just another cog in the development of the philosophical tradition. We should not allow ourselves to dismiss the influence of the un-philosophical on his philosophical thought.

The final chapter dealing with the Atomists Democritus and Leucippus contains a general analysis of their cosmology. Heeding his own advice regarding what gets left to one side Warren is wise enough to include a discussion on Democritus’ ethical and political views. The short epilogue

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ends by discussing Philolaus and Diogenes as thinkers who come to display “a sophisticated and self-conscious approach to philosophy,” but also retain fundamental links which run backwards to the “very beginnings of Ionian enquiry” (179). Warren’s cautiousness is exhibited until the end:

In short, therefore, the temptation to consider the Presocratics as a single group separate from Socrates and his classical legacy and despite the temptation to agree with Aristotle’s account of Presocratic cosmological speculation in terms of a simple narrative of progress, there are good reasons to be wary of both lines of thought (180).

In other words the Presocratics exceed our neat accounts of them.

Warren’s contribution, it has to be said, is one of the better introductions to the Presocratics in a number of years. It includes just enough critical distance on the part of the author that the Presocratics are allowed to speak for themselves. It is clearly not intended for students already well-grounded in the tradition, but is meant as a springboard for undergraduates or lay readers. To this end it should also satisfy the needs of educators seeking a text which avoids spoon-feeding students, and manages to convey the spirit of Presocratic thought. This is no easy feat, and Warren should be commended for making these archaic debates lively. The critical voice that Warren, for the most part, chooses to subdue throughout this introductory text is bound to come alive elsewhere.

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