

CAN PHILOSOPHY HAVE A BEGINNING?

ABSTRACT

If philosophy began, how clear or obvious should we expect its origins to be? The historical argument contends that philosophy began with the shift to naturalistic explanation by the Presocratics. If philosophy did begin with them, we should expect to inhabit a different epistemic situation than we in fact do - one where we have a static understanding of the term. The evidence available for its start should be so definitive that it would be prudent for us to rule out what is and isn't philosophy, irrespective of the era. In this paper, I propose, through an examination of the problem, definition, Aristotle's work, and historical developments, a genealogical understanding of the origins of philosophy.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Can philosophy have a beginning? The question seems historical at first: it appears to ask for a date, a place, a first instance; however, it is not, because answering it requires us to determine what philosophy is. To ask when philosophy began is to ask whether philosophy can be defined and on what terms. If philosophy has a fixed criterion, we can search for it in its first instance; however, if it is an evolving practice, searching for a single origin risks mistaking retrospective classification for historical fact.¹

The dominating location of the beginning of philosophy is the Presocratics, whereby the shift from appealing to anthropomorphic gods to appealing to general, impersonal, and debatable naturalistic explanations marks the beginning.² Aristotle, among other authors, arranges earlier thinkers into a sequence of investigations of causes and principles, affirming the view that the Presocratics inaugurated something recognizably philosophical.³ The term "Presocratics" is a scholarly construction that misleads if taken as purely chronological since it suggests that these thinkers are merely preparatory, significant only for anticipating later philosophy.⁴ Furthermore, the term "philosophy," derived from *philosophia*, did not designate a sharply defined discipline, but referred more broadly to a mode of intellectual engagement oriented toward inquiry and cultivation.⁵

This paper proposes a genealogical view whereby philosophy emerges when later thinkers recognize earlier inquiries as belonging to a specific field, thereby rendering the views of chronology moot to

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- 1 Bernard Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline* (Princeton University Press, 2006); Alasdair MacIntyre, "The Relationship of Philosophy to Its Past," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J.B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner (Cambridge University Press, 1984).
 - 2 John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy* (A. & C. Black, 1892); F.M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy* (Edward Arnold, 1912); G.E.R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).
 - 3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1982).
 - 4 Laks, *Concept of Presocratic Philosophy*; James Warren, *Presocratics* (University of California Press, 2007).
 - 5 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase (Blackwell, 1995); Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (University of California Press, 1998). For early uses, see Herodotus, *Histories* 1.30; Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40.



acts of interpretation.⁶ This claim does not deny the importance of the Presocratics or the significance of the shift toward naturalistic explanation: it emphasizes that chronology alone cannot determine philosophical membership. What matters instead are the shifting standards through which explanations become intelligible, persuasive, and acceptable. It is these standards that allow later authors to distinguish myth from theology, science from philosophy, and to place earlier thinkers within or outside these categories. Before examining how such standards operate, we must first ask: what counts as philosophy?

II. THE PROBLEM OF DEFINITION

“To be or not to be?” is the question of definitions. Any claim about philosophy inherently presupposes an answer to what philosophy is: it distinguishes what it is from what it is not. To define philosophy, we must know which activities belong inside the category and which don’t, yet philosophy resists this separation. Its boundaries are difficult to specify. One might ask whether any reflective inquiry falls entirely outside philosophy or whether it emerges gradually from broader activity with no clear point of separation.

Using contemporary definitions to classify earlier thinkers’ definitions risks anachronism and presentism by projecting categories from modern institutions onto periods where they did not exist.⁷ Early Greeks did not operate within a discipline called philosophy. Applying the modern category to them presupposes that philosophy has a stable definition capable of extending across historical change.

For such an approach to succeed, philosophy would need an absolute definition that is fixed across time, yet many things change without losing their identity. A person remains the same individual despite constant physical and psychological change. Properties shift, but identity persists. Definitions can tolerate change without collapsing. The problem is whether philosophy has a comparable stability. Compare this with natural kinds. Consider water: earlier speakers described it as a clear, drinkable liquid, while modern chemistry identifies it as H₂O. The description changed, but the substance did not. The object remains stable as our understanding improves. Definitional re-

6 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” trans. Donald F. Bouchard, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Cornell University Press, 1977); Raymond Geuss, “Nietzsche and Genealogy,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (1994).

7 Quentin Skinner, “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969).

finement does not imply instability in the object described.⁸ However, philosophy is different. Water exists independently of human description. Philosophy exists only through human activity. It is not a natural substance but a historically evolving practice. As traditions develop, meanings shift, boundaries change, and activities move between fields. Natural philosophy became physics. The study of the soul became psychology.⁹ What once belonged to philosophy can migrate into new disciplines as methods and institutions change.¹⁰ This creates a dilemma to define philosophy narrowly by modernity, and early thinkers are excluded because they lived before those standards developed. While defining philosophy broadly as reflective inquiry about fundamental questions would expand to include mythic cosmology, theological speculation, and poetic reflection, each definition reshapes what counts as the beginning of philosophy.

This argument recognizes the possibility that philosophy might have an underlying unity, but it is possible that its essence is not fully articulated. Irrespective of this, such an essence cannot be assumed in advance when determining the origins of philosophy.¹¹ Instead of searching for philosophy’s first instance under a fixed definition, we can ask when earlier inquiries become intelligible as philosophy within later traditions. This shifts the focus from identifying a starting point to understanding how intellectual lineages are constructed. To see how such retrospective organization operates, we must examine the thinker who most shaped the familiar origin story: Aristotle.

III. RETROSPECTIVE LINEAGE AND THE MYTH–NATURE SHIFT

The case for locating philosophy’s beginning with the Presocratics is rooted in Aristotle’s way of writing intellectual history. In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle presents earlier thinkers as participants in a common inquiry into “causes and principles,” Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes

8 Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning,’” in *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 2 (Cambridge University Press, 1975); Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Harvard University Press, 1980).

9 Andrew Cunningham, “Getting the Game Right: Some Plain Words on the Identity and Invention of Science,” *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 19, no. 3 (1988); Gary Hatfield, “Remaking the Science of Mind: Psychology as Natural Science,” in *Inventing Human Science*, ed. Christopher Fox, Roy Porter, and Robert Wokler (University of California Press, 1995).

10 Stephen Toulmin, *Human Understanding: The Collective Use and Evolution of Concepts* (Princeton University Press, 1972).

11 Jonathan Barnes, “Aphorism and Argument,” in *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. Kevin Robb (Hegeler Institute, 1983).



sought the fundamental constituents of reality and explained change through underlying principles. Aristotle claims that Thales “says the principle is water,” and offers conjectures about why: nourishment and growth depend on moisture, whereby disparate projects become stages in a single investigation.¹²

This has a two-fold negation. First, Aristotle’s narrative arranges earlier thinkers as contributors to a shared investigation and makes their diverse projects look like a continuous enterprise. Second, this retrospective organization introduces a controlled anachronism wherein the Presocratics theorize in Aristotelian terms, yet he interprets them through the language of causes and principles to render them intelligible as predecessors, as inherited by modern scholarship.¹³ As Cherniss shows, reconstructing the Presocratics’ thoughts through Aristotle’s vocabulary filters their ideas through categories that belong to him, not to them.¹⁴

The retrospective construction interacts with another narrative central to the traditional origin story: histories of early Greek thought describe the Presocratics as marking a transition from myth to naturalism. Hesiod’s *Theogony* exemplifies the mythological stage, wherein the origins of the cosmos are a genealogy of divine powers. Chaos comes before the earth and primordial forces, and it is these forces that govern the world. But it is misleading to treat Hesiod as devoid of inquiry; he responds to questions later philosophy will inherit, explaining how the present cosmic order emerged and why it possesses stability rather than chaos. What distinguishes his account from later naturalism is not the absence of explanation but its form: narratives of divine agents and their genealogical relations.

The cultural authority of myth is visible. Herodotus remarks that the Greeks “did not know until yesterday” whence the gods came. Homer and Hesiod composed a theogony, assigned the gods their names, and distributed their honors. Whether accurate, Homeric and Hesiodic poetry shaped the Greek imagination of divine order. Mythic narratives formed the background against which later reinterpretations would emerge.¹⁵

Against this background, the Presocratic shift becomes intelligible. Xenophanes on Iris addresses a phenomenon embedded in

Homeric imagery. In the *Iliad*, Iris is Zeus’s messenger, conveying divine commands. Xenophanes reinterprets her: “And she whom they call Iris, this too is by nature a cloud.”¹⁶ As Leshner notes, Xenophanes’ audience would have recognized Iris both as divine messenger and as an atmospheric phenomenon often regarded as a sign from the gods. Xenophanes removes the religious framework and replaces it with natural observation.¹⁷

The transition from myth to naturalism should not be described as a simple replacement of superstition by reason. Xenophanes’ reinterpretation presupposes the vocabulary it challenges. “Iris” already carries religious meaning, and his claim gains force by reassigning that meaning within a different framework. What changes is not the existence of inquiry but the standards by which explanations are judged satisfactory.

The same tension appears in figures grouped together by later historians. Heraclitus writes, “Much learning does not teach understanding; otherwise, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus.”¹⁸ The remark functions as a polemical sorting device. Heraclitus acknowledges continuity of inquiry while distinguishing genuine understanding from accumulated information. The grouping reveals that Hesiod represents mythic poetic authority, Pythagoras combines religious and mathematical speculation, Xenophanes criticizes traditional religion, and Hecataeus develops prose accounts that question inherited Greek stories. These figures do not occupy separated domains. They illustrate how boundaries between poetry, theology, cosmology, and emerging critical inquiry remained fluid and contested.

Hecataeus’ opening statement makes this explicit. He begins by declaring that he writes what seems true to him because the accounts of the Greeks are many and laughable.¹⁹ This statement does not simply reject earlier narratives. Rather, it introduces a self-conscious stance toward inherited stories. The emphasis falls on evaluating traditional *logoi* according to standards of plausibility and truth. What persists across these figures is, therefore, not a shared doctrine but a

12 Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1982).

13 Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 1982).

14 Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism*.

15 Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 1998).

16 Xenophanes, in *Early Greek Philosophy*, Volume III: Early Ionian Thinkers, Part 2, ed. and trans. André Laks and Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 2016), fragment B32.

17 J.H. Leshner, *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments* (University of Toronto Press, 1992).

18 Heraclitus, in *Early Greek Philosophy*, Volume III: Early Ionian Thinkers, Part 2, ed. and trans. André Laks and Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press, 2016).

19 Heraclitus, *Early Greek Philosophy*



common space of questions accompanied by evolving criteria for acceptable answers.

Within this shifting intellectual landscape, the emergence of classical philosophy marks an additional development. The activity of philosophy gradually acquires a reflexive self-description. In Plato's *Symposium*, Diotima characterizes the philosopher as occupying a position between wisdom and ignorance.²⁰ The philosopher is neither already wise nor contentedly ignorant but instead desires wisdom and pursues it through inquiry. This description does not yet define philosophy as an institutional discipline, but it provides a conceptual orientation toward a distinctive intellectual activity centered on reasons, understanding, and the pursuit of truth.

Once such self-descriptions stabilize, retrospective construction of philosophical lineage becomes possible. Aristotle presents earlier thinkers as “early philosophers,” and later historians inherit his narrative as if it were neutral discovery. What appears as philosophy's beginning is inseparable from the interpretive frameworks through which later thinkers organize the past. The Presocratics become the first philosophers not simply because of what they said, but because later traditions recognized their inquiries as belonging to the history of philosophy.

IV. GENEALOGY, UNITY, AND REGRESS

Two distinctions help address the relationship between unity and continuity. First, one should distinguish unity of inquiry from unity of discipline. Unity of inquiry concerns whether later thinkers recognize earlier activity as pursuing related questions (cosmos, order, explanation). Unity of discipline concerns whether that activity belongs to “philosophy” under a later description. The standard origin story conflates the two: it takes unity of inquiry as sufficient for unity of discipline. The genealogical view separates them: inquiry can be continuous while disciplinary membership is retrospectively negotiated.

Second, one should distinguish continuity in questions from discontinuity in acceptable explanations. Continuity persists at the level of inquiry; discontinuity lies at the level of accepted explanation. Xenophanes' *Iris* fragment illustrates: the phenomenon remains; what counts as a satisfying account changes. Divine messaging becomes optional, then suspect, then discarded in favor of physical causes.

20 Plato, *The Symposium*, trans. Robin Waterfield (Oxford University Press, 1994).

One might object: does the acceptance of an explanation determine continuity? Suppose the Presocratics reject Hesiod; does that break continuity or constitute it by keeping the earlier account in view? The genealogical view answers: rejection can be inheritance. Hecataeus treats Greek stories as laughable yet writes in relation to them. Heraclitus criticizes Hesiod because Hesiod holds authority. Xenophanes targets Homeric theology because it matters to his audience. In each case, past inquiry persists as a reference point organizing the present.

This is why “beginnings” are prone to regress. If philosophy begins with the Presocratics because they reject myth for naturalism, we must ask what makes their rejection intelligible as a step in the same story rather than a wholly new practice. The answer cannot be purely doctrinal, because new doctrines break earlier accounts. Instead, the story trades on continuities of question, language, and cultural reference—continuities that extend back through Homer and Hesiod and, by Herodotus' testimony, through the broader cultural uptake of divine genealogy and naming.²¹

At this point, philosophy's “beginning” resembles familiar problems of identity over time. We treat an entity as the same across radical change because we maintain a narrative of continuity that selects certain relations of memory, causal connection, and institutional lineage as identity-preserving.²² Likewise, calling the Presocratics “the beginning of philosophy” is less like discovering a birth certificate and more like adopting a principle of narrative organization: we decide the shift in standards of explanation is the identity-preserving thread worth tracking.

This genealogical perspective asks: what kind of story do we want the “history of philosophy” to tell? If we prioritize explanatory standards of naturalistic causes, lawlike order, and criticizable reasons, then the Presocratics become salient. If we prioritize other features (say, philosophy as a way of life, oriented toward self-transformation and spiritual exercise), then the story shifts toward later schools and practices, as emphasized by Pierre Hadot's influential thesis that ancient philosophy is better understood primarily as a way

21 On the relationship between myth and early philosophical thought, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, *The Origins of Greek Thought* (Cornell University Press, 1982); and G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

22 On personal identity and continuity across change, see Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford University Press, 1984); and Marya Schechtman, *The Constitution of Selves* (Cornell University Press, 1996).



of life rather than as doctrine alone.²³ The “beginning,” on the genealogical view, is therefore not merely found; it is argued for.

V. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Perhaps the meaning of “philosophy” changes, but the practice itself retains a stable essence. On this view, the question of origin remains meaningful because it asks when that activity first appeared. The “natural kinds” analogy is often invoked. Water’s meaning changed, but the referent remained stable because the underlying substance was always H₂O. One might suggest philosophy is similar: its definition evolves, but the activity has a stable nature gradually recognized.

The difficulty is that philosophy does not resemble a natural kind. Putnam and Kripke argue that reference is fixed by an external structure independent of human practices. Water has a chemical composition that determines what counts as water regardless of how speakers describe it. Philosophy, by contrast, exists only through human practices.²⁴ The historical record shows that the extension of *philosophia* was shaped by institutions, rhetorical conventions, and disciplinary boundaries. Early uses refer broadly to intellectual cultivation; later uses designate a more specialized inquiry.²⁵ This resembles the gradual stabilization of a practice, not the discovery of a hidden essence.

A second objection appeals to the rupture between myth and naturalistic inquiry. The transition associated with early Greek thinkers, especially Xenophanes, is sometimes treated as a decisive turning point: explanations based on divine agency are replaced by accounts grounded in natural principles. Xenophanes’ claim that Iris is a cloud exemplifies this shift. If this represents a genuine intellectual revolution, philosophy begins when explanations first appeal to internal natural principles.

This captures something important, yet it depends on retrospective interpretation. Xenophanes’ reinterpretation is intelligible as a challenge only where Iris already possesses mythic significance. The shift presupposes the conceptual vocabulary inherited from earlier traditions. Even Aristotle complicates the picture. When discussing Thales, he remarks that earlier mythic accounts involving Ocean and

²³ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

²⁴ Hilary Putnam, “The Meaning of ‘Meaning.’”

²⁵ On the semantic range of *philosophia*, see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; and Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (University of California Press, 1998).

Tethys may contain ideas that resemble naturalistic principles.²⁶ By framing history this way, Aristotle blurs the boundary between myth and nature and renders earlier narratives interpretable as proto-naturalistic. What appears as a clear beginning depends on later reinterpretation.

A third objection concerns acceptable explanations. If the argument relies on changes in explanatory standards, can such standards mark discontinuity? Explanations are rarely final. They remain open to revision. If so, it seems difficult to identify any clear point where one form genuinely replaces another. But discontinuity concerns justificatory norms, not logical possibility. Earlier explanations do not become impossible. They cease to function as persuasive within a particular intellectual community. Iris as divine messenger is not refuted like an incorrect measurement. It loses its status as acceptable once new norms emphasizing observation and natural causation gain authority. The shift concerns the standards by which explanations are judged, not the metaphysical impossibility of earlier accounts.

One might worry that the genealogical view makes philosophy’s beginning arbitrary. If origins are retrospective constructions, couldn’t any starting point be chosen? But the genealogical approach does not hold that all origin stories are equally valid. Rather, historical narratives must be evaluated by the explanatory work they perform. Different accounts highlight different features of intellectual development. Some emphasize the emergence of naturalistic explanation; others stress philosophy as a way of life or ethical reflection.²⁷ The genealogical view does not abandon the search for beginnings. It reframes the task: beginnings depend on interpretive choices about which forms of continuity we regard as most significant.

VI. CONTEMPORARY IMPLICATIONS

If philosophy’s beginning is a retrospective judgement about what counts as part of “our” lineage, contemporary philosophy inherits two responsibilities: clarify the standards for inclusion and examine the consequences of the historical narratives through which the discipline represents its past.

²⁶ On Aristotle’s doxographical method, see Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle’s Criticism*.

²⁷ For the “way of life” interpretation, see Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. For the naturalistic emphasis, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Magic, Reason and Experience* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).



The first implication concerns method. The genealogical view supports the methodological restraint emphasized by contextualist approaches.²⁸ Interpreters should not assume philosophical problems remain identical across time or treat earlier texts as contributors to modern debates. Rather, interpretation must reconstruct what could plausibly be meant within the conceptual environment where a text was produced. This does not prohibit engagement with earlier thinkers. It requires distinguishing two conflated activities: historical reconstruction and philosophical appropriation. The first seeks to understand what earlier authors were doing in their own context. The second asks how those texts might contribute to contemporary inquiry.

A second implication concerns the narrative that philosophy emerges by replacing myth with rational explanation. The analysis of the myth–nature transition suggests this is too simple. Many texts that introduce naturalistic explanation remain connected to earlier frameworks. Xenophanes criticizes traditional gods while developing his own theology. Heraclitus attacks polymaths but appeals to a logos that structures the cosmos. Aristotle treats mythic narratives as containing rudimentary insights about nature.²⁹ These examples suggest the shift from myth to naturalism is not a clean break. The boundary between myth and philosophy emerges gradually through changing standards of explanation.

Recognizing this complexity changes how we understand philosophical unity. Unity does not require a single method, set of problems, or origin. It may consist in an ongoing practice of reinterpretation through which the discipline revises its boundaries and reconsiders what belongs within its tradition. Historical narratives shape how philosophers identify predecessors and organize conceptual inheritance.

Here, Pierre Hadot is instructive. He argued that many ancient schools understood philosophy not primarily as doctrines but as a way of life structured by intellectual and ethical exercises.³⁰ If correct, the history of philosophy contains multiple conceptions of what the activity consists of. Such plurality makes it unlikely that any single origin story captures the full range of philosophical practice.

These considerations point to a final implication. If philosophy begins when it becomes possible to reflect on its own beginning, metaphilosophy is not optional but internal to inquiry. Questions

about origin reveal the standards by which the discipline recognizes itself. They bring into view what counts as explanation, whose voices count as predecessors, and which forms of discourse are excluded as myth, poetry, or religion. The question of philosophy's beginning belongs not only to historical investigation but to philosophy's continuing effort to interpret its own activity.

VI. CONCLUSION

The familiar answer that philosophy begins with the Presocratics is defensible relative to a particular standard of explanation: these thinkers mark the beginning because their accounts appeal to principles internal to nature, relying on observation, criticism, and argument rather than divine genealogy. Yet this criterion is historically situated. It becomes authoritative only through retrospective interpretation, most clearly in Aristotle's organization of earlier thinkers into a unified search for causes and principles.

Once we distinguish continuity of inquiry from continuity of disciplinary identity and recognize that rejecting earlier explanations can constitute inheritance, the idea of an absolute beginning becomes difficult to sustain. Hecataeus on Greek logoi, Xenophanes on Iris, and Heraclitus on earlier authorities show that later inquiry can remain continuous with traditions it rejects. What persists is not a stable set of doctrines but a field of questions and practices through which earlier accounts continue to shape later reflection.

Philosophical origins are, therefore, best understood genealogically. Philosophy begins when later thinkers recognize earlier inquiry as part of their own past. The beginning is not a moment to be discovered but a judgement about how certain practices come to be described. Philosophy begins whenever inquiry turns back and claims a lineage.

28 On contextualism in intellectual history, see Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969).

29 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism*; Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*.

30 Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.





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