

Introducing philosophy to learners



I use this reading and speaking lesson to introduce philosophy to learners.

- Discussion** Which ancient Greek philosophers do you know? Which ones would be considered pre-Socratic? Why?
- Vocabulary** Match the words below with their definitions. Use a dictionary for help.

logos		universe, nature or order
cosmos		the process of changing from gas to liquid
void		a person who believes there is only one fundamental principle or substance
necessity		word, plan or reason implicit in the cosmos
apeiron		unlimited, boundless and infinite
monist		the state or quality of being unavoidable
condensation		a decrease in density (as opposed to compression)
rarefaction		emptiness

- Read** the text below. Which philosopher is associated with each of the following?

fire	four elements	Apeiron	water
atoms	air	Elea	Samos

- Originally from Miletus on the coast of Ionia, Thales is known as the father of philosophy. At the time, the earth was considered motionless and flat, and he believed that it floated on water. He therefore considered water the primordial substance in the universe, being both the origin and destiny of all things. Aristotle later wrote that this may have been due to the role waters plays in growth, nourishment and generation. Thales was also a pioneer in mathematics and astronomy, having predicted a solar eclipse and an olive harvest.
- Anaximander** thought that the earth was surrounded by hoops of air that enclosed fire. Holes in these hoops made it visible, allowing humans to see bodies such as stars and planets. Rather than something physical, the earth was supported by necessity, since it was located at an equal distance from everything. He believed that apeiron was the origin of all things on the grounds that change occurs via the interaction between opposites such as hot and cold, or wet and dry. Apeiron, as opposed to water, has an opposite – the definite.
- In Ancient Greek literature, air was associated with the soul – the breath of life. **Anaximenes** contended that the earth was supported by air and that this was the origin of all things. Condensation and rarefaction allowed things to change from air and back again. Fire, wind, water and clouds were thus seen as different stages of these processes.

- Originally from Ephesus, **Heraclitus** was known as ‘The obscure’ due to the nature of his output, which could prompt paradoxical interpretations. He believed that everyone should listen to the logos, but most don’t. Opposition is what generates unity, as occurs when producing sound by pulling strings away from the frame on a lyre. The cosmos is eternal and did not come into existence, while fire acts like a universal currency – a substance that fosters continuity through change.
 - Parmenides** hailed from Elea, in southern Italy, and is considered the most important pre-Socratic philosopher for having introduced extended argument with premises and conclusions. He prioritised reason over the senses, which can be misleading: while experience suggests change, reality is perfect and changeless. In his seminal poem ‘On nature’, he distinguished between the path of ‘what is’ – based on the truth – and that of ‘what is not’ – based on opinion. He thought that most mortals choose the confused path, a mixture of the two. He believed that ‘what is’ cannot originate from ‘what is not’.
 - Melissus** was also a monist Eleatic philosopher, despite being born on the island of Samos. He believed in a perfect, motionless reality, given that movement can only occur if there is emptiness or void and this is not the case with reality. No part of ‘what is’ can be ‘what is not’. He also believed that reality is extended in all directions and therefore unlimited.
 - Empedocles** introduced the four fundamental elements – earth, air, fire and water – as well as the two basic forms known as ‘love’ and ‘strife’. Like previous thinkers, he thought that there is no void and that nothing can come from nothing. Birth and death are merely a result of mixing and interchange.
 - Democritus** is famous for developing the influential philosophical-scientific theory known as ‘atomism’. Like Parmenides, he believed that ‘what is’ cannot stem from ‘what is not’, but thought that there must be emptiness to account for change and motion. Atoms are introduced as fundamental, basic units of existence that cannot be broken down and are unchangeable, but move within the void to move and combine.
- Thinking** Based on what you’ve read, who do you think made each of the following claims?

‘[Air] differs in essence in accordance with its rarity or density. When it is thinned it becomes fire, while when it is condensed it becomes wind, then cloud; when still more condensed it becomes water, then earth, then stones. Everything else comes from these.’

‘It is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.’

‘On those stepping into rivers staying the same, other and other waters flow.’

‘Nothing exists except atoms and empty space; everything else is opinion.’

‘[Opposite elements] give justice and reparation to one another for their injustice in accordance with the arrangement of time.’
 - Speaking** Which philosophers do you agree with and why?