

РЕЦЕНЗИИ / REVIEWS

LAKS, ANDRÉ, trans. Glenn W. Most. *The Concept of Presocratic Philosophy. Its Origin, Development, and Significance*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018, Pp. X | 137. Hardback, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-691-17545-4.

André Laks' *The Concept of Presocratic Philosophy* is a translation by Glenn Most of *Introduction à la "philosophie présocratique"* (Paris 2006), and follows on Most and Laks' new nine volume set of Loeb Classical Library texts, *Early Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2016). The first two chapters discuss how we came to refer to philosophers before Socrates as 'Presocratic,' an anachronism; in Anaximander's time there existed no Socrates for him to precede. Laks identifies two conceptual caesurae, one marked by Cicero, and the other by the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition. Cicero identifies Socrates with a movement from natural philosophy to ethics, a change in content, whereas the Platonic-Aristotelian delimitation sees in Socrates a methodological change via the Socratic search for definitions. According to Laks, the methodological rupture is first brought out by Plato via the critique of Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo*. The 18th Century neologism "Presocratic" emerges against the backdrop of Diogenes Laertius' bifurcation of early philosophy into the Italian and Ionian schools, but also under the influence of the observations of Cicero and Aristotle. It would take a century for the terminology to be cemented, the result of Nietzsche's re-evaluation of the Presocratics, and Diels' publication of *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* in 1903. Laks assesses the evolution of Nietzsche's re-evaluation at length and explores various historiographical approaches of scholars like Zeller and Hegel.

Having looked at ways in which Socrates marks a caesura for the Presocratic philosophers, Laks discusses in what way they were philosophers. Definitional attempts fall under two oppositions, namely myth vs. reason, and scientific vs. philosophical rationality. Unlike *muthos*, *logos* excludes traditional divinities and employs strict logical connectives; unlike medicine or astronomy, philosophy's content and form change interdependently. The emergence of a specialized differentiation of philosophy from other enterprises is explored in several ancient texts. The Socrates of Plato and Xenophon specializes in a protreptic search for happiness; a Hippocratic text demarcates distinguishes medicine as practical from philosophy as theoretical; the agonistic nature of philosophy is stressed in Gorgias' *Helen*; the Sophists distinguish the philosopher from the statesman. Given the im-

possibility of clean lines of content demarcation, Laks advocates a functional distinction: “the distinction between science and philosophy calls for a discussion analogous to the distinction between myth and reason: a functional approach is just as advisable here as there.” (51) In the final analysis, a specialized discipline called philosophy emerges in terms of two parameters: inquiry into nature as a whole, and rationalization of nature leading to formal argumentation.

Laks next examines Vernant’s attempt to diminish the idea of the ‘Greek miracle’ of rationality. According to Vernant, Greek rationality is neither the same as nor continuous with our own, and it evolved alongside the development of the Greek polis. To this Laks counters that the Panhellenic ideal in which Greek philosophy evolved is something that transcends the polis. Whereas Vernant had seen the political and cultural upheavals of the 7th and 6th centuries as a mutation of discontinuity, Jaspers observes them as a part of a teleological and axiological trajectory. Whether seen as a continuity or a mutation, the ‘originary’ nature of Greek reason in relation to our own is undeniable. The question becomes how to understand the nature of ‘origin’ in terms of epochs marked by reference events. The danger here is that reference points are susceptible to at least two fallacies. The first is ‘exhaustive subsumption,’ whereby we reduce an epoch to a reference event, and the second is ‘causal’ whereby we mistake the reference event for the cause of the epoch. Laks employs Said’s appeal to ‘beginnings’ marked by ‘authorizations’ whereby the pursuit of certain avenue of thought is given credence by an initial observation methodology or content.

The final chapter discusses two ‘continental’ approaches to the Presocratics, that of Gadamer and Cassirer. Gadamer maintains that only Parmenides is of primary importance, since other Presocratics can only be understood in relation to him. Gadamer’s anti-relational account, in which none of the Presocratics engaged with one another, is a rejection of the Aristotelian approach, and the Hegelian dialectical approach. This is problematic insofar as we are so heavily dependent on Aristotle for accounts of them, and are incapable of assessing them on their own terms. Laks maintains that Cassirer offers “one of the best available introductions to Presocratic philosophy.” (85). The book concludes with a six page assessment of his thought. Although deeply Hegelian, Cassirer sees ancient philosophy not as part of the evolution of an absolute spirit, but rather in terms of the self-discovery of the logos in the process of a discipline that is creating its own contents through “the extrication of thought from determinations that are external to it.” (92) Cassirer distinguishes himself from Hegel by distinguishing the form and contents of philosophy in a way that Hegel did not.

In the end, one may ask – what difference does it make how we classify these thinkers known as Presocratics, for surely they can be appreciated independently

of such historiographical frameworks? To put the question this way however, would be to fail to contemplate, to sediment or refuse to grapple with the nature and form of that appreciation. It is in the service of this appreciation of the significance of the Presocratics for our own time and our history that Laks has provided an invaluable guide. The text is a remarkable achievement, in so far as it succinctly and eloquently captures so much in just under 100 pages. It is deeply thought provoking, not only for its presentation of the quandaries involved in assessing the Presocratics, but also for those engaged in historiography generally, for its applications extend far beyond merely the questions raised by the development of Greek philosophy.

Some critical remarks follow. 1. With regard to Laks' identification of the *Phaedo* as Plato's line of demarcation between Socrates and the Presocratics, I would argue that Socrates is at pains in the *Apology* to distinguish himself from Anaxagoras in terms of content. To most members of Socrates' jury, philosophy would have meant something like natural science, whereas Plato presents Socrates as more of a protreptic Sage. Thus we might think of the *Apology* as the more important text for the caesura. Given that Anaxagoras died in or around the year that Plato was born, Plato's own use of moon imagery in *Republic I* would mark a conceptual break from Anaxagoras' philosophy. 2. It is worth recalling Aristotle's remarks at *Metaphysics* 982b19 that ὁ φιλόμυθος φιλόσοφος problematizes the nature of the distinction between *muthos* and *logos* that Laks highlights in this regard. 3. With regard to Laks' critique of Vernant, which is quite correct, consider Diogenes' accounts of the tripod stories in his chapters on Thales and Bias. In three accounts, the seat of wisdom is the Oracle at Delphi, but in one account it is the Oracle at Didyma, suggesting, agonistically, that Asia Minor, and not Attica is the seat of wisdom in the Greek world; the agonistic emergence of philosophy is seen as regional, as with Diogenes' Italian and Ionian schools, and not political, i.e. tied to the evolution of the polis per se.

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