1 **In and Around the 6th Century B.C.E.**

- Concurrent Philosophical Figures
- Thinking About Myth
- One Way to Think About the Turn to Philosophy
- A Chronology of Ancient Greek Thinkers: Thales to Aristotle
- What is the fundamental principle or substance that governs the cosmos?

2 **Thinkers in and Around the 6th Century, B.C.E.**

- Lao-Tze in China, Zarathustra in Iran, the anonymous authorship of the Upanishads in India, and the Pre-Socratics in the Greek-speaking world provided some of the most important ideas still influencing us today.
- Concurrent, but independent, intellectual developments in various parts of the world heralded a shift away from mythological accounts of the cosmos, ethics, and society, toward a philosophical account. What does that mean?
- Wheelwright describes philosophical approaches to these areas as exhibiting "intellectual coherence" and an "interest in finding a method for distinguishing truth from error." (*Heraclitus*, Princeton University Press, 1959, p. 17) These are good conceptual frameworks for beginning to think about philosophy in general, but also the remarkable thinkers themselves.

3 **Thinking About Myth**

- The Ancient Greeks are known for their "myths," just as are the Egyptians, the Norse, the Romans (who adopted and renamed the Greek gods), many American Indian tribes, and various African cultures. Some include all religious stories in the category of myth.
- Myths deal with the most important features of human existence: birth and death, conflict and resolution, good and bad, fate and freedom, and cosmic cycles. In this sense, they are interested in much the same things as any philosopher.

What's the difference?

- One classicist (Peter Struck at the University of Pennsylvania) defines myth as follows:
  - "myth is "a sort of container into which people toss what is most valuable to them." Values change of time, so what gets tossed changes, and also influences the myth itself."

4 **Thinking About Myth, cont.'**

- Struck provides three basic categories of myth definitions:
  - Myth as true
    - It is "profoundly and resonantly true".
    - It "is universally true about humans".
  - Myth as false
    - It's what people believe, but is not true; in some sense, it's a lie.
    - It's what people believe, but it reflects a primitive and irrational mind; it has been replaced by science.
  - Myth as partially true, and partially false
    - It helps one understand what it means to be part of the culture that produced the myth.
    - It helps one understand oneself, since these stories, while about the past, are primal.
- The Greeks thought of myth (mythos or μυΘος) as
  - Speech (word or sound)
  - Label for specific kind of speech: narrative story
  - False story ("tall tale")
  - A tale with underlying or deeper truth

5 **One Way to Think About the Turn to Philosophy**

- Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* (8th or early 7th Century, B.C.E.) were central educational oral traditions. They present a world in which humankind and everything in the cosmos is subject to a number of powerful but mercurial gods.
- Hesiod (c. 8th Century, B.C.E.), whose *Theogony* is one of two complete works to survive, is a poem documenting the gods' origins ands genealogies.

- One can extract philosophical concepts and lines of reasoning from these works, but doing so in the formal way we now approach philosophy likely distorts their authors' aims. For example, *Works and Days* reflects Hesiod's contemplation of the excellence of the good life, and ethical concepts such as justice. At the same time, there is no conceptual framework holding a whole together.

6 **One Way to Think About the Turn to Philosophy, cont.'**

- "[Ancient Greek] thinkers do not belong to any unified school of thought, and they differed dramatically in their views. Yet they share intellectual attitudes and assumptions and they all display an enthusiasm for inquiry that justifies studying them as a group." (Patricia Curd, Introduction to *A Presocratics Reader*, Hackett, 2011, p. 16)
- Thales (c. 6th Century, B.C.E.), who is thought to be the first of the Greeks to attempt a sustained philosophical view of the world, gives us a solid example of the shift to philosophy:
  - Homer and Hesiod attributes responsibility for earthquakes to Poseidon's anger. (Poseidon is the Greek god of the sea.)
  - Thales proposes a novel explanation of earthquakes: Earth is held up by water. When it is rocked by waves, earthquakes occur.
  - Thales's account is naturalistic; it does not rely on any divine personage.

7 **One Way to Think About the Turn to Philosophy, cont.'**

- This shift did not, however, take place overnight. Important concepts and beliefs continued to influence the Greek mind even past Aristotle's day, such as:
  - Veneration of the hero
  - The individual constituted by the polis.
  - Justice is inextricably intertwined with the polis
- Not only that, but while there is an emphasis on natural explanations, rational evidence, and a generally critical approach to important questions, there are plenty of instances where these early thinkers resort to invocations of the Muses,

and engage in some flawed reasoning.

8 **A Chronology of Ancient Greek Thinkers: Thales to Aristotle**

- Steve Naragon of Manchester University provides this comprehensive timeline, which includes the period from Thales to Aristotle:

http://users.manchester.edu/Facstaff/SSNaragon/Ancient%20Philosophy/TL.htm

9 **What is the fundamental organizing principle or substance governing the cosmos?**

- Thales: Water
- Anaximander: Unlimited (Apeiron)
- Anaximines: Air
- Xenophanes: Earth and Water
- Pythagoras: Number
- Heraclitus: Fire
- Parmenides: The One
- Empedocles: Love and Strife
- Anaxagoras: Mind (Nous)
- Leucippus and Democritus: Atoms