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The pre-Socratic philosophers.

Dr Phillip Walden Bowen

University of Sunderland (London).

Abstract: *This journal article surveys the major figures of pre-Socratic philosophy, tracing the development of early Greek thought from the Milesian school through the Eleatics, Atomists, and Sophists, and concludes with the transition into the classical period. Beginning with Thales of Miletus, the study outlines how early thinkers seek naturalistic explanations for cosmology, change, and the structure of reality, rejecting mythological accounts in favor of rational inquiry. It examines the fragmentary nature of pre-Socratic evidence and the reliance on later writers such as Aristotle and Theophrastus for reconstructing their ideas. The article then explores the diverse contributions of Xenophanes, Heraclitus, Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno, Melissus, Leucippus, Democritus, and key Sophists including Protagoras, Gorgias, Antiphon, Hippias, Prodicus, and Thrasymachus. Finally, it situates these thinkers within the broader intellectual shift toward classical philosophy, showing how their investigations lay essential foundations for the systematic ethical, political, and epistemological frameworks developed by Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Isocrates, and Aristotle.*

Keywords—Pre-Socratic philosophers; cosmology; metaphysics; apeiron; monism; doxa; atomism; logos; relativism; elenchus; rhetoric

1. INTRODUCTION

The pre-Socratic philosophers are amongst the earliest Greek thinkers to seek rational explanations for the nature of reality, emerging in the sixth and fifth centuries before common era (BCE) (Evans, 2018; Nelson, 2015; Russell, 2000). To try and explain the world around us, Western thought often refers to a mystic and divine perspective (Brague, 2003; Brisson, 2008). However, rather than relying on mythological and divine intervention, the pre-Socratic philosophers reject mythological accounts and instead pursue systematic inquiry into cosmology, metaphysics, and the principles underlying change and existence. They seek naturalistic rational explanation and reasoning to help address things that are observed, experienced and felt (Laks, 2017; Tor, 2017). They try to understand how the world works and explain things with reason rather than relying on mythology and religion (Arieti and Barrus, 2010; Evans, 2018; Rajiyung, 2024).

Early thinkers such as Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus, and Parmenides propose influential ideas about the nature of matter, change, and the organization of the cosmos. Although their positions often diverge, together they form the intellectual foundations of Greek philosophy, creating the context in which Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle later develop more systematic methods of philosophical inquiry.

Only limited fragments of the pre-Socratics' original writings survive (Cornford, 2016; McKirahan, 2011). Much of their thought is reconstructed from later authors who quote, summarize, or interpret them (Heidel, 1913). Knowledge of early Greek philosophy, therefore, relies heavily on figures such as Aristotle, Theophrastus, and subsequent ancient writers, whose accounts preserve these philosophical ideas (Cherniss, 1935; Kirk, Raven and Schofield, 1983; Stratton, 2024). This dependence on secondary testimony means that any study of pre-Socratic philosophy must remain attentive to both the fragmentary nature of the evidence and the interpretive influence of those who transmit it.

This journal article provides a summary of key pre-Socratic philosophers commencing with Thales of Miletus and concludes with Thrasymachus. It concludes with a short discussion around the classical period that includes Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Isocrates and Aristotle.

2. THE MILESIAN SCHOOL (THALES OF MILETUS, ANAXIMANDER AND ANAXIMENES)

The earliest Western philosopher is identified as Thales of Miletus who founds the Milesian school. He is described as the father of philosophy and, as described in Plato's Protagoras, the first of the seven sages/ seven wise men (Arieti and Barrus, 2010; Cai, 2025; O'Grady, 2002; Musacchio, 2025; Silvermintz, 2015). The other seven sages include: 2) Pittacus of Mytilene, 3) Bias of Priene, 4) Solon of Athens, 5) Cleobulus, 6) Myson of Chenae, and 7) Chilon of Sparta (Arieti and Barrus, 2010).

2.1 Thales of Miletus

Thales of Miletus is considered to be the first scientist who argues that water is the fundamental primordial substance (arkhe/ arche) of all matter and seeks to explain things from a rational point of view rather than relying on mystical or divine intervention (De Santo, Bisaccia, Bilancio, Romano and Cirillo, 2009; Korczak, 2013). Thales of Miletus postulates that the earth lies on a bed of water and that all living things possess souls (Graham, 2018; O'Grady, 2017). Whereas Anaxagoras (fifth century BC) put forward that the moon and sun are celestial bodies, the sun being a fiery red-hot stone and the moon receiving its light from the sun; it is more commonly associated with Thales of Miletus (Connes, 2020; Pierce, 2016). Thales of Miletus is also known for discovering a number of geometric theorems including angles between two intersecting lines are the same, and the angle that is inscribed in a semi circles is a right angle (Allman, 1877,1889; Cai, 2025; Mueller, 2023).

2.2 Anaximander

Anaximander is a student and successor of Thales of Miletus. He refers to the term apeiron (infinite/ boundless) as being the origin of all things. Rather than water as Thales of Miletus suggests, Anaximander considers apeiron to be the fundamental substance of reality (Finkleberg, 1993; Gregory, 2016a; Torres, 2025). Anaximander is also reported to estimate the diameter of the world at 4,500 miles and, whereas it is considered inferior, he is reputed to be the first Greek to produce a map of the earth (Burch, 1949; Gregory, 2016a).

2.3 Anaximenes

Anaximenes is a student of Anaximander and is the last philosopher associated with the Milesian school before Miletus is destroyed by the Persians in 494 BCE (Vamvacas, 2014). Anaximenes considers Anaximander's use of the term apeiron as being too vague. Instead, he proposes that air is the primary element that can be transformed through observable processes (Vlastos, 1950). This includes rarefaction (transforming into fire) and condensation (creation of water, earth, stone and cloud) (Graham, 2003; Hensley, 2024).

3. Xenophanes of Colophon, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras

Three other pre-Socratic thinkers come from neighboring Ionian towns, now in modern Turkey. These are identified as Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Pythagoras who are forced to emigrate following the invasion by the Persians (Graham, 2013; Wright, 2014).

3.1 Xenophanes of Colophon

Xenophanes of Colophon continues the view that natural phenomena can be explained without the need to refer to divine or mythological intervention (Granger, 2007). He also proposes that rather than many Gods, there is a single God that does not take physical/ human form (Lesher, 2014). He is therefore thought to be the first monotheist in Western thinking (Finkelberg, 1990; Ray, 2021; Wilkens, 2024). Xenophanes also argues that one can never know the absolute truth but should see things through with sceptic thought where opinions are formed through experience rather than acceptance of certain knowledge (Harris, 2009; Kubok, 2016; Metcalf, 2018). It is not a rejection of truth but the ability to recognize absolute truth with certainty (Tor, 2013; Van Nispen, 2018).

3.2 Heraclitus

Heraclitus is also from Ionia, in modern Turkey (Baloyannis, 2013; Esikot and Michael, 2023; Ozturk, 2023). He puts forward the philosophical view that the only constant in the world is change/ flux (Jegede, 2014; Kirk, 1951; van der Leeuw and Dirks, 2026). He also refers to the unity of opposites where opposing terms are interconnected with each other (Courakis, 2025; Emlyn-Jones, 1976; Papamichael-Paspalides, 2005). Heraclitus is associated with the Milesian school as he believes that fire is the primary element and that logos (reason/ discourse) is a divine law that can give structure and meaning to the world (Breidenstein, 2023; Desta, 2023; Hoffman, 2006; Tantray and Khan, 2021).

3.3 Pythagoras

Pythagoras is born in Samos, Ionia that is now part of Turkey. He emigrates to Croton in the south of Italy where he establishes his own school of mathematics and philosophy (Graddon, 2021; Klepeis, 2019; Morrison, 1956). He explains that the universe is governed by mathematical principles and are the building blocks of reality and that everything can be structured through geometric and numerical properties (Gorman, 2025; Hahn, 2017; Tegmark, 2008). This is contrary to earlier Ionian philosophers who consider water (Thales of Miletus), air (Anaximenes) and fire (Heraclitus) as the primary element. Pythagoras puts forward the terms Monad and dualism (Cornford, 1923). Monad is considered as the origin, the foundation and primal unity. It is associated with terms such as hot, dry, light, male, etc (Cornford, 1923; Patras, 2020; Schimmel, 1994). In contrast, Peebles (2026) describes the dyad (two) as having differing qualities and the possibilities of many. They are connected but don't become one. For example, repulsion and attraction; pulling and pushing (Peebles, 2026). Another example is where the soul is considered immortal, and divine, and is, therefore, associated with the Monad (Abraham, 2006; Bordoy, 2013; Horky, 2021). The soul lives on after death transferring/ reincarnating to other animals (Horky, 2021; Macris, 2014). In contrast, the body is considered to be mortal and is associated with the dyad (Horky, 2021). Pythagorean cosmogony is therefore explained where the Monad emerges in the first instance (single/ one) from which comes the Dyad (many/ others) (MacLennan, 2019; Zhmud, 2013).

4. The Eleatic School (Parmenides, Zeno of Elea and Melissus of Samos)

Elea is founded approximately 540BCE (Wear, 2016). It is now called Velia and is located in the southern part of modern-day Italy (The Elea Foundation, Nd). Parmenides is the founder of the Eleatic school and is reported to be active in the fifth century BCE, circa 515-450BCE. (Bussotti, 2023; Palmer, 2008; Vamvacas, 2014).

4.1 Parmenides

Parmenides argues that reality can be considered as a single, indivisible and unchanging entity (Austin, 1984). This is referred to as monism (Crystal, 2002; Curd, 1991; Palmer, 2009). The core of the argument is that either something exists or it does not (Lazerowitz and Ambrose, 1976; Mansueto, 2010). Vamvacas (2014) points out that the views put forward by Parmenides of Elea are in contrast with those of Heraclitus of Ephesus and suggests two views of reality. The first is the way of truth (Aletheia) and that existence is uniform and timeless (Gallop 1991; Hockney, 2015). Aletheia, therefore, explains what true reality is (Wolenski, 2004). It relies on pure reason and is dependent on a rationalist and an epistemological view (Christians, 2019). The second view Parmenides puts forward is opinion and belief that is described as Doxa

(Cordero, 2010; Mackenzie, 1982). The term Doxa continues to exercise the minds of scholars (Johansen, 2016). However, it is explained where one's own senses can lead to possible deceitful and false conceptions (Bryan, 2025; Curd, 1998). Doxa relies on superficial appearance (Bengtson, 2017; Lundin, Dodillet and Christensen, 2018). It is associated with common sense and how one experiences the world (Eagleton and Bourdieu, 1992; Wacquant, 2004; Vakalopoulos, 2023).

4.2 Zeno of Elea

According to Plato, Zeno of Elea is a student of Parmenides (Fraser, 1988; Vamvacas, 2014). He is identified as the first person to use debate and logic to test the truth in other people's arguments (Booth, 1957a; Solmsen, 1971). He supports and defends Parmenides view of monism and seeks to destroy the belief that the world is made up of many separate parts and full of change (Booth, 1957b; Campbell, 2026; Vlastos, 1975). He argues against the absurdism that if separate parts exist then they can be divided into an infinitely large and small number (Makin, 1982; Vlastos, 1975). However, the paradox exists; they cannot hold opposite traits at the same time (Marietta, 2016; Micheli, 2014). Hence, Zeno of Elea's conclusion that reality is a single and undivided whole (Sedley, 2017; Stefanov, 2013; Yousef, 2018). This skepticism gives way for people to question the reliability of reason (Dietrich, 2020; Pinto de Brito, 2022).

4.3 Melissus of Samos

Melissus of Samos is last key pre-Socratic associated with the Eleatic School of philosophy (Cherniss, 1951; Chondros, 2017; Graham, 2008). Whereas Parmenides considers that reality/ being is complete/ one because the world is made up of self-contained distinct and bounded units, Melissus of Samos engages in the view that reality has no beginning and has no end (Coxon, 1934; Domanski, 2007; Drozdek, 2001; Harriman, 2015; Mourelatos, 1976; Turner, 2006; Ueberweg, 1875). He continues, if nothing exists beyond/outside then it is infinite and unlimited in all directions, and nothing can stop it (Bremond, 2019; Obertello, 1984; West, 2015). Therefore, reality/ being must be infinite (Harriman, 2015, 2019; McDermott, 2010; Piergiacomi, 2014).

5. The Atomists (Leucippus and Democritus)

The key philosophers associated with the atomists are Leucippus and Democritus (Hasper, 2018; Taylor, 2010). Their revolutionary thinking is that the universe is made up of indivisible particles (atoms) that move through empty space/ a void (Henry, 2000; Rooney, 2013). The void is therefore real and not an illusion as described by Parmenides (Chalmers, 2009; Morrison, 1992). Rather than explaining life through religion and mythology, the atomists consider that at death atoms disperse (Furley, 1987; Vaughn, 2015). Therefore, the soul is not immortal (Oppenheimer, 1991; Stokl, 1887).

5.1 Leucippus

Leucippus is referred to as the founder of atomism (Benn, 1911; Bury, 1916). He is the first person who describes the origin of the cosmos, including the earth sun and stars, as being created by a vortex of particles that collide with each other (Graham, 2018; Heath, 1991; Rubenstein, 2014). By doing so, the particles need to pass through void/ space (Inwood, 1981). Therefore, the void exists (Schlagel, 2001). Schlagel (2001) adds that atoms are infinite in numbers and indestructible. When they collide, they create vortices from which worlds are created (Gregory, 2016b). Leucippus also explains that nothing happens randomly and by chance (Edmunds, 1972; Gregory, 2013). Everything happens for a reason (Buckingham, 2011; Everitt

5.2 Democritus

This deterministic view is expanded through the philosophical views of Democritus. He distinguishes the difference between reality and appearance (Baldes, 1978). Particles and the void/ space are real (Danezis, Theodossiou, Dimitrijevic, Dacanalis, and Katsavrias, 2010). Particles and void/ space are described by Piergiacomi (2017) as the only true objects. In comparison, appearances occur from particle interaction with the senses (for example, smell, touch, taste, etc.) (Kahn, 1985; Rudolph, 2011; Vlastos, 1945). As explained by Ueberweg (1884), sensation is experienced through material images of objects. Democritus is also referred to as the laughing philosopher who regards euthymia (cheerfulness), moderation of stress, and inner feelings of tranquility, as important balancers of the state of the soul (Johnson, 2020; Luft, 2024; Wolfsdorf, 2013). Thus, the ultimate goal of human life, the thing we are meant to strive for ethically, is happiness that is achieved through culture and justice (Ueberweg, 1884). The views of Leucippus and Democritus's help shape modern atomic theory and thinking (Kirk, Raven and Scofield, 1983; Milton, 2002; Stocker, 1948; Triarhou, 2016).

6. The Sophists (Protagoras of Abdera, Gorgias of Leontinoi, Antiphon of Athens, Hippias of Elis, Prodicus of Ceos and Thrasymachus).

Whereas presocratic philosophers such as Leucippus and Democritus are associated with materialist theory arguing that everything is made up of invisible and indestructible particles and empty space (the void), the Sophists focus on language, political persuasion, rhetoric, human society/ affairs, truth, morality and ethics (Broadie, 2003; Crick, 2010; Gilbert, 2003; Johnstone, 1980). Thus, the Sophists maintain a contrasting philosophical view to the atomists (Jammer, 1964; Jones, 1952; Shand, 2014). Sophists are described as travelers in the fifth century BC who teach via the use of argument and rhetoric (Jarratt, 1987; Kennedy, 1994; Notomi, 2022). This, in turn, shapes the way in which people engage in democratic debate and in the art of persuasion (Gagarin, 2001; Hogan, 2013; Mitchell, 2015). They are the final generation of philosophical thinkers who are active before and during Socrates' time.

6.1 Leucippus Protagoras of Abdera

Protagoras of Abdera is considered to be the first Sophist who travels ancient Greece and charges a fee for instruction in politics, philosophy and rhetoric (Bartlett, 2016; Lampert, 2010; Woodruff, 1999). He refers to the term that man is the measure of all things, and that truth, reality and morality are judged based on human experience and perception (Ajei and Ramose, 2008; Burrell, 1932; Denery, 2009; Versenyi, 1962; Watson, 1907). Thus, truth is relative to a person's perception (Lee, 2005). An example of this is one person may feel the temperature of the wind warm another cold (Levi, 1940). Protagoras considers both can be true as it is based upon individual perception (Bradley, 2008; Zilioli, 2016). There is no independent and objective reality (Denery, 2009). Truth is based on subjectivism; a person's interpretation based upon their own experience and senses (Gillespie, 1910; Keeling, 2020; Levi, 1940; Lozar, 2018). Protagoras, therefore, suggests that there is no absolute truth (epistemological relativism) (Jordan, 1971; Knoll, 2023; Zilioli, 2016). There are no universal moral standards (ethical relativism) and it is not possible to know if God exists (agnosticism) (Antonites, 2005; Drozdek, 2005; Ladd, 1985; Levi, 1940).

6.2 Gorgias of Leontinoi

Gorgias of Leontinoi is also around at the same time as Protagoras. Gorgias introduces the concept of absurdity by explaining that no matter how "what exists/ being" is defined, the term contradicts itself (Cascardi, 1983; Kohak, 1979; Plochmann and Robinson, 1988; Porter, 1993). If something exists already then, it must either be generated or eternal/ infinite (Bremond, 2025; Critchley, 2019; Kerferd, 1955; Plato, 2017; Zilioli, 2023). If something is generated, then it must come from that which already exists or from that which does not exist (Kerferd, 1955; Porter, 1993; Schiappa, 1997). If it already exists, then it cannot be generated (Critchley, 2019; Thomson, 2016). It cannot come from something that does not exist (Hays, 1990). In other words, nonexistence cannot produce existence (McComiskey, 1997). If something is eternal, then it has no beginning and no end (Rodriguez, 2019; Voegelin, 1949). It is unlimited. If something is unlimited then it cannot be placed in a container that is bigger than that which is unlimited (Cornford, 2001). Therefore, it is nowhere and cannot exist (Kerferd, 1955; McComiskey, 1997). The conclusion drawn therefore, is that whether something is generated or eternal/ infinite, both are impossible. The absurdity of this argument is that nothing exists (Kerferd, 1955; Kolby, 2023).

6.3 Antiphon of Athens

Another sophist, called Antiphon of Athens, is around approximately at the same time as Gorgias (5th century BCE) (Plant, 1999; Rossetti, 2023). Arguments remain as to whether there is one Antiphon or two (Antiphon the sophist and Antiphon of Rhamnus) (Gagarin, 1990; Katula and Murphy, 2003). A single Antiphon is considered in this journal article. Antiphon's teaching relates to nature and law/convention that are often in conflict with each other (Buccioni, 2007; Graham, 2020). Nature (physis) is described as what is necessary; it is universal and beneficial to every person (Moulton, 1974; Mundhenk, 2014; Preus, 2015). Whereas the law/convention is considered artificial; it can be harmful and restrictive (Balot, 2006; Buccioni, 2007; Saunders, 1977). Antiphon's teaching is associated with natural law where the natural needs of people precede social rules (Reesor, 1987). In other words, one should follow nature and not law when they oppose each other. As explained by Barker (1947), Antiphon refers to coercive laws rather than natural law. He explains that every person needs to breathe, they feel pleasure and pain and require the same basic needs of life (Bonazzi, 2020). Antiphon uses this to criticize ethnic prejudices and the role of slavery that is normalized in ancient Greece that makes up approximately 30% to 40% of the population; citizenship of Athens ancient Greece, is restricted; and foreigners have limited rights (Guthmann and Scheidel, 2024; Moulton, 1972; Nabolsy, 2019; Owens, 2019; Ray, 1989; Tuplin, 1999). Antiphon also explores the study of the human mind and the inner self (Lear, 2015; Takhtajan, 2022). For example, he seeks to understand the meaning of dreams and contemplates the relationship between fear and desire (Holowchak, 2002; Holton, 2022). He also discusses the role of political philosophy advising that moderation and self-control are essential for political stability and states/ cities can collapse when people seek personal advantage over wider public harmony (Ehrenberg, 1947; Johnson, 2019; Konstan, 1997; Moore, 2023). In summary, Antiphon points out that conflict can arise from ignorance of what is beneficial to society (Gagarin, 2002; Kamtekar, 2018; Riesbeck, 2011). Riesbeck (2011) adds that even when nature pushes people towards self-interest, society requires cooperation. Antiphon also teaches the power of speech and that persuasion can reshape society (Gagarin, 2002; Pendrick, 2010). This view lays the foundation for forensic rhetoric that is used in modern day courtroom arguments (Pendrick, 2010).

6.4 Hippias of Elis

Hippias of Elis is a contemporary to Antiphon of Athens (Gagarin, 1990; Giorgini, 2023; Young, 1911). Hippias holds similar views as Antiphon that all people are fundamentally similar, and that natural (unwritten) law (physis) is above/ superior to man made all laws (Nomos) (Adams, 1945; Eustacchi, 2021; Giorgini, 2023; Gulenc and Petak, 2016). Hippias observes that laws vary widely from one Greek city state to another and within local customs (Eustacchi, 2021; Guthrie, 1977). Justice is therefore not absolute (Kerferd, 1981; Letwin, 2005). Amongst other Sophists, Hippia criticizes the social divisions in society and considers humanity to be one cosmopolitan community (Bett, 1989; Bosman, 2007). Hippias also seeks to define abstract concepts and ideas such as justice and beauty (Hoerber, 1962; Hyland, 2008). He further believes in the unity of excellence and knowledge where virtue, understanding and skill are inseparable (Kerferd, 1981; Loh, 2025). Kerferd (1981) adds that Hippias considers excellence (arete) requires the person to be competent across a multiple of arts. Hippias is, therefore,

associated with the term's egalitarianism, natural law, human rights and cosmopolitan thinking (Adams, 1945; Giorgini, 2023; Havelock, 1934; Maritain, 1964).

6.5 Prodicus of Ceos

Prodicus of Ceos is also a contemporary of Antiphon of Athens (Duke, nd; Raymond, 2023). Plato describes him as being obsessed with the correct use of words and precise definitions (Orthoepeia) (Castagnoli and Valentina, 2012; Corey, 2008; Most, 2023). He is thus considered as the father of linguistic semantics and moral allegories (Brancacci, 2017; Corey, 2008). For example, words such as pleasure and enjoyment are closely related synonyms, however Prodicus seeks to distinguish the difference between such words (Reesor 1983; Woodruff, 1999).

6.6 Thrasymachus

Thrasymachus holds similar views to Antiphon claiming that it is advantageous to break the law if it is possible to avoid being caught (Jang, 1997; Ladikos, 2006). Justice is considered to be nothing other than the advantage of the stronger (Anderson, 2016; Hourani, 1962; Maguire, 1971). Thrasymachus considers that laws are made by the rulers to serve their own interests rather than the desire to reflect genuine higher moral truth (Lycos, 1987; Siemsen, 1987; Sparshott, 1966). Moral values are socially constructed and what are considered to be just changes to the law depends on who holds position in authority (Barney, 2004; Everson, 2020). Thus, those in political positions and power may fare better.

7. THE CLASSICAL PERIOD (SOCRATES, PLATO, XENOPHON, ISOCRATES AND ARISTOTLE).

Thrasymachus is one of the final representatives of the Sophistic movement, thus marking the chronological boundary between the pre-Socratic thinkers and the fully classical philosophical era (Barney, 2004; Roberts, 2024).

The pre-Socratic philosophers are characterized primarily by their attempts to explain the fundamental nature of reality, focusing on cosmology, metaphysics, and the underlying principles of the physical world (Curd, 1991; Kirk, 1951; Long, 1985). Their inquiries center on questions of substance, change, and the structure of the cosmos (Cherniss, 1951; Palmer, 2009; Stamatellos, 2012). In contrast, the classical philosophers shift the focus of Greek thought toward the ethical, political, and epistemological dimensions of human life (Charles, 1984; Kahn, 1981; Kraut, 1979). By the time Thrasymachus is teaching, Socrates is already active in Athens (Jang, 1997; Nederman, 1981).

7.1 Socrates

Socrates' philosophical method represents a decisive shift in ancient Greek thought, moving inquiry away from cosmology and toward ethical self-examination. Central to his approach is the elenchus. This is a dialectical technique through which Socrates interrogates interlocutor's/ participant's beliefs to expose contradictions and stimulate moral reflection (Dyson, 2024). Rather than accepting their initial claims at face value, he asks a sequence of precise, logically connected questions that require the interlocutor to clarify, justify, and refine what they think they know (Meckstroth, 2012). As the discussion progresses, Socrates highlights tensions between their stated belief and other commitments that they may already accept. When these inconsistencies become visible, the interlocutor/ participant is compelled to recognize that their position is unstable or inadequately supported (Benson, 2011; Brickhouse and Smith, 1994). This process is not merely argumentative: its deeper purpose is ethical (Fiore, 2020; Gendron, 1999). By confronting contradictions in their own thinking, individuals are encouraged to reflect more seriously on the nature of virtue, knowledge, and the good life (Moore, 2015; Nehamas, 2000; Smith, 2021). This moment of recognizing inconsistency is central to the elenchus, because it forces the interlocutor to confront the fragility of their own reasoning and encourages them to rethink the foundations of their moral and intellectual outlook (Fiore, 2020; Magrini, 2017; Makwinja, 2017). In this way, the elenchus serves as a moral exercise that cultivates intellectual humility and motivates the pursuit of more coherent and responsible beliefs (Gendron, 1999).

Rather than offering positive doctrines, Socrates positions himself as a midwife of ideas, guiding others toward intellectual clarity while professing his own ignorance (Jarczewski, 2026). This approach frames Socrates, not as a transmitter of knowledge but as a mentor who cultivates critical thinking and intellectual and cognitive integrity within the community (Hung, 2025; Kotsonis, Lytra, Pritchard and Scaltsas, 2021; Kubyshkina and Petrolo, 2023). His focus on virtue, happiness, and the moreal integrity of the soul underscores his conviction that ethical understanding is inseparable from living well (Cooper, 2013; Howland, 1998, 2006; Woodruff, 2023). Contemporary analyses also highlight Socrates' role in redirecting philosophy toward universal moral principles, marking a turning point in the history of Western thought (Brague, 2003; Nelson, 2015; Thi, 2025).

7.2 Plato, Xenophon, Isocrates and Aristotle

As well as Socrates, the classical philosophers include Plato, Xenophon, Isocrates and Aristotle. Plato systematizes/ classifies and codifies metaphysics (the study of the fundamental nature of reality, existence, and the universe) as well as political theory (Fine, 1978; Kahn, 1992; Miller, 1999; Reeve, 1988). Xenophon takes the ethical questions and practical concerns central to Socrates' teaching and develops them into a coherent body of thought (Dorion, 2006; Hobden, 2020; Walton, 1978). The emphasis is on how Socratic ideas can guide everyday conduct, leadership, and civic responsibility (Christ, 2020; Johnstone,1994). Xenophon seeks to demonstrate how Socratic principles can be applied to real situations in politics, household management, and personal behavior (O'Connor, 2011; Higgins, 1977; Sebell, 2021). Isocrates develops an educational program that regards

rhetoric not merely as a tool for persuasion, but as the central discipline for cultivating intelligent, morally responsible, and politically effective citizens (Leff, 2004; Morgan, 2004). Subsequently, Aristotle undertakes systematic research in areas such biology and logic to ethics and politics (Knight, 2007; Lennox and Leunissen, 2006). These investigations establish the foundational frameworks that help shape later philosophical thought (Leunissen, 2015; Torres, 2021). Thus, classical philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Xenophon, Isocrates and Aristotle develop systematic approaches to moral reasoning, civic organization, and the nature of knowledge, marking a decisive transition from early natural speculation to a more comprehensive examination of human conduct and social institutions.

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