



COMMENTARY

Reply to Thomas Greaves

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I am delighted that Thomas Greaves has found my provocation piece, “A NeoPresocratic Manifesto,” so provocative that he has honored it and me with a rejoinder.¹ I am very grateful, as well, for his kind compliments on my philosophical legacy generally. And I want herewith to return the favor by offering him and the readers of this journal a thoughtful reply.

Greaves forthrightly acknowledges that he reads the Presocratics through a lens ground by Martin Heidegger. I continue to be amazed by how much influence Heidegger’s idiosyncratic interpretation of Presocratic philosophy has enjoyed. If we were to weigh up Presocratic scholarship on an old-fashioned scale and in the left-hand tray put Heidegger’s and that of any actual classicists specializing in Presocratic philosophy who follow him, and in the right put that of all the rest, going back to Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, the weight of that on the right would catapult away that on the left. In the first two volumes of W. K. C. Guthrie’s magisterial *History of Greek Philosophy* (published in 1962 and 1965, respectively)—both of which are devoted to the Presocratics—Heidegger is not cited. Not even once. Guthrie’s neglect of Heidegger’s reading of Presocratic philosophy is not for want of scholarly industry; his scholarship is exhaustive, nor is it limited by Anglocentrism; Guthrie copiously cites and quotes works by French, Italian, and, yes, German scholars (in the original French, Italian, and German). Serious students of the Presocratics—the majority of them European and the majority of the Europeans themselves German classicists—simply do not take Heidegger’s interpretation of early Greek philosophy seriously. So why should I? Or, really, why should anyone else? As I say, it is a mystery to me.

According to Greaves, “Callicott explicitly takes his narrative from Aristotle’s retrospective reconstruction of the progress of Greek thought.” That is true; I do. Aristotle provides the earliest systematic account of the philosophy that preceded his own and on which he built his own. Further, according to Greaves, “Aristotle was confused about what Presocratic philosophy was trying to achieve.” That is not an entirely unfair accusation because it is not entirely untrue. But also, according to Greaves, Callicott “takes Presocratic ‘natural philosophy’ to be concerned above all with determining the so-called ‘material cause.’” Now

¹ The original Provocation appeared in *Environmental Humanities* Volume 2 (2013) and Thomas Greave’s reply was published in Volume 3 (2013).

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that, however, is false; I do not. Like Heidegger, Aristotle himself also interprets the Presocratics through a lens of his own grinding: the four-causes schema. I do not think that the Presocratics were in search of *aitia* in Aristotle's sense of the word. But that does not mean, as Greaves insinuates, that they were not doing *natural* philosophy. Because the Presocratics were not "concerned above all with determining the so-called "material cause" (or for that matter the efficient cause or formal cause) does not mean that they were not trying to figure out what the world is composed of (water, the *apeiron*, air, homoeomerics, atoms), what forces (or perhaps better what motives) make it dynamic (Love and Strife, Mind), and what laws make it a cosmos (Cosmic Justice, the Limit, the Logos) and not a chaos. Every new thinker in the interrupted but not unbroken long tradition of Western natural philosophy—down to Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and Peter Higgs—has built on the work of his or her predecessors in the tradition going all the way back to the Milesians, Pythagoras, and Heraclitus. Copernicus acknowledged Aristarchus's heliocentric model of planetary motion, nor would Aristarchus have been able to contrive his model but for the deficiencies of Eudoxus's geocentric model, which was developed in Plato's Academy.² Newton adopted the ontology of Leucippus and Democritus (each atom perfectly exemplifying Parmenides's characterization of being, by the way).³ And Darwin cites Empedocles as having anticipated, albeit crudely, his ideas of chance mutation and natural selection.⁴ As well, Empedocles crudely anticipates the way modern chemistry conceives of compound substances to be composed of elements in ratios of whole numbers—two parts hydrogen to one of oxygen yields water (H₂O), for example, in modern chemistry; two parts earth, two parts water, and four parts fire yields bone (E₂W₂F₄), according to Empedocles).⁵

What we students of the Presocratics can do, well acquainted as we are with Aristotle's philosophical system, is read his account of the Presocratics through a corrective lens and thus get a less distorted view of what Aristotle's predecessors were up to. Moreover, Theophrastus, Aristotle's younger associate and successor to Aristotle as Rector of the Lyceum, wrote a much more detailed history of Greek philosophy, *Physikai Doxai* (*The Opinions of the Natural Philosophers*), than did Aristotle himself. Tragically that work did not survive the vicissitudes of the subsequent intellectual decadence of Roman imperialism, Hellenistic religions, and the European Dark Age. But it was the primary source used by the subsequent sources of our own scant knowledge of the Presocratics. So if we dismiss Aristotle wholesale, because he was a little confused about what Presocratic philosophy was trying to achieve, and Theophrastus as having been hopelessly tainted by association with Aristotle, there is very little left from which

² See Edward Rosen, *Copernicus and His Successors* (The Hambleton Press, 1995). Rosen cites, Nicholas Copernicus, *Complete Works*, 1 (London / Warsaw, 1972).

³ See Andrew G. van Melson, *From Atomos to Atom: A History of the Concept Atom*, trans. Henry J. Koren, (Pittsburg, Penn.: Duquesne University Press, 1952). Melson makes a particularly strong case that the Parmenidean concept of being was the intellectual ancestor of atomism.

⁴ Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favored Races in the Struggle for Life*, Fifth Edition, (London: John Murray, 1869).

⁵ DK B96. Richard D. McKirahan, trans., *Philosophy Before Socrates, An Introduction with Texts and Commentary*, Second Edition (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2010), 242 and 261.

to learn about what the Presocratics were trying to achieve, except of course what we can learn about that from the fertile and self-absorbed imagination of Martin Heidegger. One can use high-sounding words to characterize the Presocratic project—"what takes place when the world becomes manifest to us in the first place"—but what does that mean? And what is the "first place"? As if the world was not already manifest to Hesiod if not to Homer (and if it were not also already manifest to Homer, I suppose that was only because Homer was blind). And doesn't it seem as implausible as it is megalomaniacal to imagine that a philosopher can "bring about the manifestation of the world." I would have thought that the world had manifested itself "always already," long before Heraclitus attempted to account for how the manifest flux of the world was also an orderly flux, indeed long before late-coming naked apes showed up on the planet filled with shameless hubris. Oh, right; I forgot: humans are "world-forming" and nonhuman animals are "poor in world."⁶

A general reading of Presocratic philosophy is not, however, what Greaves proposes to establish. Rather he adopts a trope of Heraclitus to express an alternative way of relating the humanities (or better, he thinks, the "arts") to the sciences. I have no quarrel at all with Greaves's interpretation of how Heraclitus's *logos* orders the manifest flux of the world as a dynamic equilibrium of warring opposites or as Greaves puts it: a "unity in strife." Indeed, to the fragments he quotes, I would add:

(DK B8) What is opposed brings together; the finest harmony is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be in accordance with strife.

(DK B53) War is the father and king of all . . .

(DK B80) It is necessary to know that war is common and justice is strife and that all things happen in accordance with strife and necessity.⁷

Nor am I inclined to contest how Greaves would unify the humanities (or arts) and the sciences through Heraclitean strife. Instead I offer just a comment or two.

In part, how best to unify the "two cultures" (*sensu* C. P. Snow) is a matter of intellectual taste. I think that Heidegger and those in his thrall are essentially romantics. (Heidegger's romantic concept of *Bodenständigkeit*—the rootedness of the German *Volk* in the German soil is consistent, by the way, with the romantic *Blut-und-Boden* ideology of the Nazis, as Charles Bambach has demonstrated.⁸) And one hallmark of romanticism is suspicion of if not downright hostility toward science. While romanticism has an honored place in my panoply of isms, my intellectual tastes are not so narrowly circumscribed.

And let me confess at once that I can be irascible and acerbic, but at the end of the day, I prefer cooperation, collaboration, and making common cause in the face of the enormous

⁶ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans., William McNeil and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1995), 192.

⁷ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 117 and 120.

⁸ Charles Bambach, *Heidegger's Roots: Nietzsche, National Socialism, and the Greeks* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003). See also Michael Zimmerman, "Rethinking the Heidegger-Deep Ecology Relationship," *Environmental Ethics* 15 (1993): 195-224.

social, political, and environmental challenges the world today faces. My difference with Greaves could thus also amount to little more than temperament as well as intellectual taste.

Greaves imagines that the arts positioning themselves in opposition to the sciences can lead to some unspecified Heraclitean unity of the arts and sciences. In my institutional experience—my department is housed in a structure called the Environmental Education, Science, and Technology Building—opposing science with Heideggerian romanticism (as some of my colleagues and many of our postgraduate students actually do) achieves the antithesis of unity. What it achieves is isolation and mutual contempt. On the other hand, those of us who have become conversant with the sciences relevant to environmental philosophy—principally ecology and conservation biology—find ourselves to be valued members of externally funded interdisciplinary research teams and collaborators on exciting international research projects. I sit on the editorial board of *Conservation Biology* (the journal); I am the author of a chapter titled “Conservation Values and Ethics” in the leading textbook in that field, *Principles of Conservation Biology*; and I am a coeditor of a book published by Springer in 2013 titled *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World: Values, Philosophy, and Action*. Three of the five editors of that book hold PhDs in ecology (as do about half the contributors) and one of them is a past president of the Ecological Society of America—S. T. A. Pickett, who, by the way, is keenly aware that theoretical ecologists are among the natural philosophers of the present day. Believe me, such an intimate and influential working relationship with scientists would never have come about if I went around vacuously prattling about how poetry provides a deeper understanding of the natural world than does science.⁹

As some readers of this journal may know, the touchstone of my environmental philosophy is the work of Aldo Leopold, who did not hold a PhD in anything and was as great a literary stylist as he was an ecologist. Leopold’s friend the ecologist Charles Elton (also an able stylist) defined “ecology” as “scientific natural history” and because the word itself is contested by Greaves, let Elton’s definition stand as what I take “ecology” to signify as well as what Elton and Leopold took it to mean. In an essay titled “The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education,” Leopold notes that “All the sciences and arts are separate only in the classroom. Step out on the campus and they are immediately fused. Land ecology is putting the sciences and arts together for the purpose of understanding our environment.”¹⁰ Ken Dickson, an aquatic toxicologist, was the person who envisioned the interdisciplinary design of the Environmental Education, Science, and Technology Building of the University of North Texas and insisted that it also be the home of the UNT Department of Philosophy and Religion Studies and the UNT Center for Environmental Philosophy, the publisher of *Environmental Ethics* (the journal). Ken asked me to find some words that would capture the essence of his vision in Aldo Leopold’s literary corpus. The building’s dedicatory plaque slightly redacts the

⁹ For Heidegger’s claim that science is inferior to poetry in regard to thinking about nature see Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans., Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971)

¹⁰ Aldo Leopold, “The Role of Wildlife in a Liberal Education,” in *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold*, ed. Susan L. Flader and J. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991): 301-305, 303; originally published in *Transactions of the 7th North American Wildlife Conference, April 8-10, 1942* (Washington: Wildlife Management Institute, 1942): 485-489.

words of Leopold that I commended: "Environmental education is putting the sciences and arts together for the purpose of understanding our environment."

In other words, when it comes to uniting the arts and sciences, I feel less affinity with Heraclitus than with Empedocles, who lamented "putting [his] trust in raging Strife" (DK B115); for "In Anger," he thought, "they are all apart and have separate forms, but they come together in Love and yearn for one another" (Strasbourg papyrus, ensemble c, line 315).¹¹

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¹¹ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 231 and 239. See Alain Martin and Oliver Primavesi, *L'Empédocle de Strasbourg (P. Strasb. gr. Inv. 1665-1666): Introduction, édition, et commentaire* (Strasbourg: Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg, 1999).