Preface

Anyone who has the temerity to write a book on the Presocratics requires a remarkably good excuse. The surviving fish from the Presocratic shoal, fortuitously angled from Time's vast ocean, have been gutted, anatomized, and painstakingly described by generations of scholars; and it might reasonably be supposed that further dissection would be a vain and unprofitable exercise.

The lucubrations of scholars have for the most part dwelt upon the philological and historical interpretation of Presocratic philosophy: the sources have been studied, weighed, and analysed; the fragments have been microscopically investigated, their every word turned and turned again in the brilliant light of classical scholarship; and the opinions and doctrines of those early thinkers have been labelled and put on permanent exhibition in the museum of intellectual history.

Yet if the linguistic expression and the historical context of the Presocratics have been exhaustively discussed, the rational content of their thought has been less thoroughly scrutinized. By and large, scholars have asked what the Presocratics said, and what external circumstances may have prompted their sayings; they have not asked whether the Presocratics spoke truly, or whether their sayings rested on sound arguments.

It is those latter questions with which my book is primarily concerned. My main thesis is that the Presocratics were the first masters of rational thought; and my main aim is the exposition and assessment of their various ratiocinations. The judicious reader will decide for himself the value of that essay and what success it may have achieved: it constitutes my sole excuse for offering this volume to his perusal.

My aim has imposed certain restrictions on the scope and nature of my treatment of early Greek philosophy; and it is proper for a Preface to acknowledge those limitations.

First, then, the book presents little in the way of philological scholarship. No writer on ancient philosophy can entirely forego scholarly suggestions; and any investigation of Presocratic thought will constantly make philological judgments and take sides in scholarly controversies. But classical scholars have raised great monuments to their art over the bones of the Presocratics. I rely largely on that work; indeed, I should not have had the audacity to write on the Presocratics at all had they not been richly provided with wise and learned philological commentary.

Second, I have little concern with history. It is a platitude that a thinker can be understood only against his historical background; but that, like all platitudes, is at best a half-truth, and I do not believe that a detailed knowledge of Greek history greatly enhances our comprehension of Greek philosophy. Philosophy lives a supracelestial life, beyond the confines of space and time; and if philosophers are, perforce, small spatio-temporal creatures, a minute attention to their small spatio-temporal concerns will more often obfuscate than illumine their philosophies. History, however, is intrinsically entertaining. A few external facts and figures may serve to relieve the reader from a

purely abstract narrative: I hope that my occasional historical paragraphs may be of use to that end, and may do something to placate the historically minded reader.

Third, my treatment of early Greek philosophy is discriminatory. I shall, it is true, say something about most of the inmates of Diels-Kranz' *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker;* and Diels-Kranz' magisterial volumes are customarily taken to define the extension of early Greek thought. Yet such a definition is not wholly felicitous: it gives an artificial unity to a body of thought and doctrine that is, in reality, disparate in conception and various in purpose and intent; and it excludes those early thinkers-I have in mind the Hippocratic doctors, Euripides, and Thucydides-whose works had the good fortune to survive intact. I adhere to the convention that 'the Presocratics' are the men in the *Fragmente;* and the convention is, after all, not wholly without merit. But it follows that I cannot pretend to give a comprehensive account of early Greek philosophy.

Fourth, I shall have nothing to say about many of the interests of the Presocratics. We know a vast amount about Presocratic 'meteorology' and very little about Presocratic epistemology: I have little to do with the former subject, and much to say about the latter. The Presocratics did not work in departments and faculties as we do, and they saw nothing incongruous in treating ethics and astronomy in a single book. For the most part I have restricted myself to topics which would now be classified as philosophical. I shall not be greatly moved by the charge that my classification seems at times to be arbitrary; for in the last resort I have chosen to deal with those issues which happen to interest me and to fit my notion of what a philosopher might reasonably busy himself about.

My debt to the published literature on the Presocratics is incalculable; and it is only in part acknowledged in the Notes and the Bibliography. It would be invidious to pick out a short list of names from the long and learned catalogue of Presocratic scholars; but no one, I think, will object if I say that the writings of Gregory Vlastos have always proved a source of particular stimulation; and I wish also to confess an especial indebtedness to Professor Guthrie's invaluable *History of Greek Philosophy*.

My interest in the Presocratics was first aroused when, as an undergraduate, I attended a course of lectures given by Professor G.E.L.Owen. The views expressed in this book owe a lot to that masterly exposition; and I fear that Professor Owen, should he read my remarks, will find in them many a distorted ghost of his own former opinions. He has my apologies as well as my thanks.

The book was begun and ended at the Chalet des Mélèzes, a living reminder of a lost and better world. An early draft of the first part of the work formed a set of lectures which I gave at Oxford in 1973; but most of the labour was done in Amherst during the Fall of 1973, when I was a visiting professor in Classical Humanities at the University of Massachusetts. I am deeply grateful to the University for the honour of its invitation, and for ensuring that my time there was spent in a pleasant and fruitful fashion; and I must thank the Provost and Fellows of Oriel for granting me sabbatical leave for Michaelmas Term 1973. In Amherst I received valuable help from many hands; in particular, I thank Vere Chappell, John Guiniven, and Gary Matthews, whose criticism-keen, constant, but kindly-brought innumerable improvements to my rude thoughts.

Various parts of the book have been read in various places. An early version of Chapter IV, on Heraclitus, was delivered at Brooklyn College; pieces of Chapter VI, on Pythagoras, formed a paper read at Vassar College; some Eleatic thoughts were aired at the University of Minnesota, and others before the B Club at Cambridge; a part of

Chapter XIII, on Zeno, was incorporated into a piece read at the University of Keele. On all those occasions I, at least, profited; and members of my different audiences may expect to see their pillaged suggestions in the following pages. In 1974 I gave a class on Zeno in Oxford, and the discussions there largely moulded my views on that enigmatic figure: I gained greatly from the acute comments of Nicholas Measor and David Sedley.

Work on the Presocratics has occupied me, on and off, for some three years. Thoughout that time I have been aided and encouraged, sometimes inadvertently and often from importunate request, by very many pupils, colleagues, and friends; they will, I hope, accept this book as the tangible reward or punishment for their kindnesses. I am also deeply indebted to Mrs D.Cunninghame and Mrs E.Hinkes, who laboured long hours to produce an elegant typescript from a large and messy manuscript.

Finally, I must thank Ted Honderich, the editor of the series in which this book appears, and David Godwin, of Routledge & Kegan Paul: faced with a typescript far longer than they had anticipated, they reacted with self-control, sympathy, and helpful kindness. In particular, the division of the book into two volumes was their suggestion: the book was written as a unitary whole, and the two volumes should be considered as twin halves of a single work; but each volume has, I think, a certain unity of its own. (The division has occasioned one minor inelegance; for the Bibliography would not split as readily as the text. But that should not cause the reader any serious inconvenience.)

In studying the Presocratic philosophers I have constantly been impressed by the sagacity of Leibniz' judgment: 'these men of old had more worth than we suppose'. If any reader is encouraged by this book to join the Leibnizian party, I shall be well content.

J.B.

Chalet des Mélèzes