

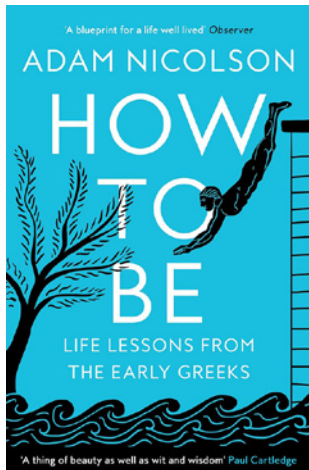
Book Review

How to Be: Life Lessons from the Early Greeks

Nicolson (A.) Pp. 358, ill., maps, colour pls.
London: Harper Collins Publishers, 2023. Cased,
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This fascinating book opens with its mariner author sailing around the birthplace of Presocratic philosophy. The opening chapter ('Harbour Minds') proposes that harbours and seafaring open us up to new ways of thinking, and that people who lived in the busy port-cities all around the Mediterranean found themselves forced to encounter new cultures while trading the new commodities which arrived on their shores. These ports produced thinkers who traded ideas and their words have even more resonance for us today now

that we all live in the endless exchange which is the world wide web.

If the book's subtitle leads you to expect corny fortune-cookie clichés ripped from the Greek sources, then you will be disappointed. If (on the contrary) you would like a book which unpacks the ways in which life and thought interacted in the archaic Greek world, seeing the birth of philosophy against the background of the teeming ports and the seething social and political changes of the time, then look no further. We meet the major Presocratic philosophers, but we also meet a lot of other people who (while not strictly philosophers) were conducive to the growth of our awareness of who we are – writers such as Homer, Sappho and the lyric poets, whose poetry is elegantly set amidst the domestic world of the symposium and the wider political world around them. Nicolson shows us the symposiast who can 'look into this bowl and find a capacity for happiness that comes...from a life of adventure and openness to any wind that might blow' (p. 147). The life-lessons as such start in chapter three, where we meet thinkers who grappled with the nature of matter itself. His reading of Anaximenes, for instance, prompts him to comment that 'we are as the world is. We live in an envelope of breath...and we are as transient as a cloud or breath of wind'.

These philosophers are shown in the flesh, so that Xenophanes (for example) displays a mind which is both urbane and sceptical – savouring the good things of life while mocking the cult of athletes and anthropomorphic gods. His chapter on Heraclitus is a joy to read for its sheer range – we read Nietzsche's take on Zoroaster and we meet Hipponax ('the poet of lushness' [p. 184]) as well as being guided around the wonderful world of Ephesus to see the 'weeping philosopher' on his home turf.

Nicolson tells the right stories at the right time, so that, in the course of reading about philosophers, we also meet such very unphilosophical characters as Phalaris of Acragas (with his bronze bull), Theron the Sicilian tyrant, his super-rich compatriot Tellias, Milo of Croton with his Herculean strength, and so on. Nicolson also has an acute eye for the relevant visual imagery, both verbal and physical – and this book has almost 100 fine illustrations – and even ties Presocratic philosophy to architecture. Clarity is not easily achieved in books on philosophy, and it is striking how thinkers like Parmenides (whose cryptic surviving works have furrowed the brows of the greatest brains ever since) are in this book rendered not only comprehensible but positively enticing. Time after time Nicolson drove me to pull these arcane Greek texts down from the shelf and read them again: he also made me long to visit the sites he describes so brilliantly.

This project is not without risk. To do justice to (say) Anaximenes in a couple of pages (pp. 106–8) requires simplifying the arguments, and sometimes Nicolson's urge to tell a good tale plays fast and loose with the facts. He tells us (p. 67) that Odysseus returns to Ithaca 'poor and filthy' when in fact Odysseus brings back (and hides) a large stache of treasure donated by the Phaeacians and is only rendered 'filthy' by the agency of Athene so that he can pass for a beggar in his own house. Broad statements are easy to critique: 'it is unthinkable that [Athene] might grab Odysseus or anyone else by the hair' (p. 66) seems to ignore the massive impact which the goddess has on the battle in the hall in books 21–22. He also cuts out topics which others would have included – there is almost nothing on the Delphic oracle, for instance, and not a word on the Eleusinian mysteries.

This is perhaps to miss the point, however. Covering all the bases would have made this book ten times the size and only reduced its appeal. It is aimed at people who want to know why and how philosophy was able to grow in the world of archaic Greece and Southern Italy and why the ideas which these people produced are of relevance to us today. The closing pages seek to draw together some of these thoughts and show how the motives and the insights they contain have ethical as well as philosophical weight: this conclusion serves both to remind us of the ground we have covered and also to let us see how none of these people worked in a vacuum. This skilful guide shows the development of thinking from the Milesian monists to the Italian metaphysicians, to the mystic realms of a Pythagoras or a Parmenides, and he ends his voyage neatly with the Empedoclean vision of a world ruled by love and strife. The book reads like a labour of Empedoclean love, bringing to life the earth, the air, the fire and above all the water of the ancient world into a synthesis of the sheer joy of being alive then – and now.

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