ABSTRACT
It is widely believed that the ancient Greeks thought that Thales was the first philosopher, and that they therefore maintained that philosophy had a Greek origin. This paper challenges these assumptions, arguing that most ancient Greek thinkers who expressed views about the history and development of philosophy rejected both positions. I argue that not even Aristotle presented Thales as the first philosopher, and that doing so would have undermined his philosophical commitments and interests. Beyond Aristotle, the view that Thales was the first philosopher is attested almost nowhere in antiquity. In the classical, Hellenistic, and post-Hellenistic periods, we witness a marked tendency to locate the beginning of philosophy in a time going back further than Thales. Remarkably, ancient Greek thinkers most often traced the origins of philosophy to earlier non-Greek peoples. Contrary to the received view, then, I argue that (1) vanishingly few Greek writers pronounced Thales the first philosopher; and (2) most Greek thinkers did not even advocate a Greek origin of philosophy. Finally, I show that the view that philosophy originated with Thales (along with its misleading attribution to the Greeks in general) has roots in problematic, and in some cases manifestly racist, eighteenth-century historiography of philosophy.

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Philosophy is generally acknowledged even by the most learned of the Grecians themselves, to have had its Original in the East.

Thomas Stanley, The History of Philosophy (1662)¹

One of the cities [in Ionia], Miletus, was home to Thales, regarded by the Greeks themselves, and by all historians of philosophy since, as ‘the Father of Philosophy’.

A.C. Grayling, The History of Philosophy (2019)²

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¹Stanley, History, 757.
²Grayling, History, 9.

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Introduction

A commonplace of contemporary histories of ‘Western Philosophy’ is that Thales (fl. 585–545 BCE\(^3\)) was the first philosopher,\(^4\) and that this view was widely shared among Greek thinkers themselves.\(^5\) Even specialists of Greek philosophy still widely believe that the view was common in antiquity.\(^6\) This paper challenges this assumption, arguing that no major ancient Greek philosopher and vanishingly few ancient doxographers and thinkers who expressed views about the history and development of philosophy endorsed the idea that Thales was the first philosopher. I further show that most Greek thinkers did not even advocate a Greek origin of philosophy.

To this end, I first discuss pre-Aristotelian accounts of the development of philosophy, noting that Thales does not occupy a privileged position therein.

Second, I argue that not even Aristotle claimed that Thales was the first philosopher. While this insight is not altogether new,\(^7\) the contrary view continues to be something of a ‘cliché’ even in the specialized scholarship.\(^8\) This paper goes beyond showing that Aristotle did not endorse the view, however. It specifically highlights how and why doing so would have run counter to his deepest philosophical commitments and interests. In other words, it accounts for why Aristotle could not have accepted the view, given the kind of philosopher that he was.

Third, I argue that beyond Aristotle, hardly anyone in later antiquity accepted the view that Thales was the first philosopher. Here again, the evidence suggests that doing so would have been fundamentally at odds with the most common approaches among this period’s thinkers to the early history of philosophy. Remarkably, these thinkers predominantly held that philosophy had emerged among non-Greeks long before the tradition of Greek poetry and philosophy.

Fourth, I show that the mistaken supposition that Thales was seen by the Greeks as the first philosopher has roots in late eighteenth-century histories of philosophy. This period marked a turning point in the European historiography of philosophy: European philosophers for the first time became invested in the idea of a Greek origin of philosophy. Here I focus especially on how Thales acquired the status of the first philosopher. One of the reasons for this development, I argue, was the rise of pseudo-scientific racism. This is particularly

\(^3\)For Thales’ dates, see Thibodeau, Chronology, 74–91.

\(^4\)See e.g. Gottlieb, Dream, 7–8; Garvey and Stangroom, Story, 20, 33; Grayling, History, 12–13.

\(^5\)As seen in the epigraph above, Grayling ascribes the view not only to the Greeks but also to “all historians of philosophy since”.

\(^6\)Warren (Presocratics, 23), for instance, attributes the view quite broadly to ancient writers.

\(^7\)Palmer, “Theologians”, 181, 188 see Barney, “History”, 89, n. 52.

\(^8\)See Mansfeld, “Aristotle”, 109 (who apparently accepts the ‘cliché’, see 114, 122). Other specialists who think Aristotle viewed Thales as the first philosopher include Warren, Presocratics, 23–5; Frede, “Philosopher”, 6; (cautiously) Sassi, Beginnings, 4–5; Betegh, “Eudemus”, 351; Laks, Concept, 51, 73–4 (though see 74, n. 26).
clear in the case of Christoph Meiners – the first European historian of philosophy to suggest that philosophy began with Thales.

(1) Pre-Aristotelian views on Thales

My aim here is not to provide a comprehensive overview of the complex and ambiguous ways in which classical Greek thinkers thought about *philosophia* and the figure of the *philosophos*. Rather, I more narrowly seek to highlight the relatively unremarkable status that Thales was afforded in the development of Greek thought in extant sources antedating Aristotle, and to demonstrate that even in cases where a recognizably positive and quasi-technical notion of *philosophia/philosophos* was available to the author in question (as in Plato), Thales is not afforded any particular intellectual primacy, nor is he given any special role in the development of *philosophia*.

The sophist Hippias of Elis (late fifth century BCE) apparently authored a work pairing similar opinions of poets and authors of ‘prose-writings’ (συγγραφαίς), both Greek and non-Greek. In our sole surviving fragment – which probably belonged to the work’s introduction – Hippias explicitly distinguished between Greek and ‘barbarian’ sources, and set out to engage with *all* of these sources (Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI.2.15 = DK86 B6). Many scholars have speculated that he paired the views of Homer (whom he mentions in the fragment) with those of Thales, suggesting they held similar philosophical positions. However, it is unclear whether Hippias had Thales in mind here as one of the authors of prose-writings whom he presumably discussed in his lost work. It is also unclear whether the prose-writings at issue necessarily belonged to thinkers we would now be inclined to identify as philosophers. What is clear is that Hippias set out to discuss views which he deemed to be of *the same kind* (ὁμόφυλα, DK86 B6), whether of poets or of prose-writers. Hence, we can hardly presume that Hippias would have drawn a distinction

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9 On the term *philosophos* and its seemingly pejorative connotations in the late sixth century BCE (see Heraclitus DK22 B35), possibly in reaction to an earlier Pythagorean coinage, see e.g. Moore (*Names*, 1–106) and Lloyd (“Philosophy”, 150–1); on the etymological force of the *phil-* prefix and its negative ring in the sixth–fourth centuries BCE, as opposed to the positive *soph-* element (found in both *philosophos* and *sophos*), see Moore (*Names*, 73–106).

10 Barney (“History”, 88–92); Ford (“Hesiod’s”, 143–4); Betegh (“Eudemus”, 349–351); Algra (“Beginnings”, 51–2); Palmer (“Theologians”, 184–5, with n. 5); Mansfeld (“Aristotle”, 114–5); and Snell (“Die Nachrichten”, 178–80) have argued that Hippias is in the background of Aristotle’s allusion to a view according to which Thales and Homer held similar positions at *Metaph.* I.3, 983b27–984a2 (discussed in section (2.i) below).

11 One reason to doubt that he did is that several ancient sources suggest that Thales left no writings behind (see Simplicius, *In phys.* 23.32–33 = Th 409 and D.L. I.123 = Th 237), and that the first prose writings, in the Greek context, ought to be attributed to Pherecydes (Pliny, *Natural History* VII.205; Apuleius, *Florida* 15; D.L. I.43, 116; Strabo I.2.6) or to Anaximander (Themistius, *Oration* 26.317B–C = Th 300).
between philosophers and poets (assuming the distinction was even available to him) – and thus, a fortiori, the very question of identifying the first philosopher becomes moot.

The idea that Thales was the first philosopher is similarly absent from other pre-Aristotelian sources, some of which even suggest a non-Greek origin of philosophical ideas. Herodotus (fifth century BCE) claimed that the theory of the transmigration of souls came from Egypt (II.123; see also II.81), only mentioning Thales in discussing his military achievements (I.75 = Th 11; I.170 = Th 12) and with passing reference to his approximate prediction of an eclipse (I.74 = Th 10). The rhetorician Isocrates (late fifth to fourth centuries BCE) even claimed that Pythagoras brought “all of philosophy” to the Greeks from Egypt (Busiris 28), but had nothing to say about Thales’ philosophy in our sources.

While Thales is the only Milesian that Plato’s dialogues mention, nowhere does Plato credit Thales with founding a new kind of philosophy, let alone philosophy as such. It is sometimes remarked that Socrates’ reference to a “kind of wisdom (ταύτης τῆς σοφίας) that is called the inquiry into nature (περὶ φύσεως ἰστορίαν)” in Plato’s Phaedo (96a6–7) is a precursor of the Aristotelian category of natural philosophy (physiologia) and informs Aristotle’s label for many ‘Presocratics’ as natural philosophers (physikoi or physiologoi). However, Plato does not identify Thales as an inquirer into nature; rather, he tends to identify Thales as one of the traditional “seven [wise men]” (Protagoras 343a2 = Th 20), or as one “wise man” (sophos) among many (Republic X.600a4-6 = Th 22; [Letter II 311a4–7 = Th 23]; see Hippias Major 281c4–6 = Th 21). There appears to be a practical (rather than theoretical) orientation to sophos as it relates to the category of the seven wise (sophoi) men. This is not to say that, for Plato, being a sophos precludes one’s also being a philosophos; however, the sense of intellectual excellence

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12 The term philosophos and its cognates is not attested between the time of Heraclitus (late sixth century BCE) and that of Herodotus at the end of the fifth century (see φιλόσοφοι, I.30). For an overview of rare late fifth century usages, see Moore (Names, 62–3, 127–56) and Laks (Concept, 43–48). For Plato’s representation of Hippias as accepting labels like sophos and sophia (rather than philosophos and philosophia), including in relation to Thales (Hippias Major 281c4–6 = Th 21), see Moore (Names, 262–7).
13 Diogenes Laertius (I.23 = Th 237) reports that Thales’ achievements in astronomy earned him Herodotus’ and Xenophanes’ admiration, and were reported by Heraclitus and Democritus.
14 While Isocrates commonly presented philosophia as effective rhetoric or useful teachings in relation to ethical, cultural, and political matters (Moore, Names, 210–17), at one point he also presented philosophia as an ability to investigate into the nature of things (τὴν φύσιν τῶν ἄντων ζητήσας, Busiris 22), which he specified as pursuits in e.g. astronomy, arithmetic, and geometry (Busiris 23), and associated with an older Egyptian philosophy (Busiris 22, 30).
15 See also Plato’s Lysis 214b4–5 and Philebus 59a2.
16 Aristotle himself uses the phrase περὶ φύσεως ἰστορίας at DC III.1, 298b2.
17 Laks, Concept, 1–4; Lesz, “Unity”, 367–9.
18 The seven likely earned their status as sophoi due to exceptional technical or practical competence (particularly in offering political advice). See further Moore, Names, 93–6.
19 After mentioning the seven wise men (Protagoras 343a1–5 = Th 20), Plato associates not just Thales, but also the other six (none of whom are familiar early Greek philosophers), with a tradition of ‘ancient
is less salient in the former. In other passages, Plato also presents Homer and Hesiod as \textit{sophoi}.\textsuperscript{20} For Plato, then, Thales was a wise man with precursors.

In the \textit{Theaetetus} (174a4–b6 = Th 19), he implies that Thales was a philosopher with an interest in abstract questions (such as the nature of a human being) – presenting him as an emblematic case of the comically distracted philosopher\textsuperscript{21} – but does not lend him any primacy.

That Plato showed great admiration for ancient Egyptian wisdom (\textit{sophia}) is also significant: even if we look to \textit{sophia} for some sort of starting point for philosophy, his "wise men" in the Greek-speaking world had precursors in Egypt.\textsuperscript{22}

None of these Classical writers suggests that Thales ‘invented’ or ‘initiated’ philosophy. Furthermore, they tended to acknowledge earlier non-Greek traditions, sometimes crediting them explicitly with influencing Greek philosophical ideas.\textsuperscript{23}

\section*{(2) Aristotle and the ‘origins’ of philosophy}

It is to Aristotle that modern interpreters typically look for an ancient precedent for the view that Thales was the first philosopher. Yet nowhere does Aristotle make any explicit statement to this effect. In this section, I develop four arguments for why he could not have held this view: (i) for Aristotle, theologians prior to Thales achieved philosophical insights; (ii) natural philosophy, for Aristotle, does not amount to philosophy as such; (iii) on his account of philosophical development, there is an important continuity between theology (both Greek and non-Greek) and natural philosophy; and (iv) he had a non-linear conception of philosophical development, which speaks against any single origin of philosophy.

\footnotesize

\begin{itemize}
\item philosophy\textsuperscript{’} (\textgreek{τῶν παλαιῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας, 343b4–5), characterized by its style of laconic brevity, rather than a theoretical interest in \textit{physis}.

\item For Hesiod as \textit{soφos}, see \textit{Republic} V.466b4-c3; \textit{Laws} IV. 718d7–719a2. For Homer, see \textit{Republic} X.600a1-7. Plato also identifies the poets as “fathers and conductors in wisdom (\textgreek{πατέρες τῆς σοφίας … καὶ ἠγε-μόνες})” (\textit{Lysis} 214a1–2), alluding to Homer.

\item The fifth-century playwright Aristophanes similarly mocks Thales, comparing him to an absent-minded Socrates (\textit{Clouds} 168–180 = Th 17), and elsewhere associates him with geometry (\textit{Birds} 992–1009 = Th 18).

\item Plato associates the Egyptians with inventing numbers, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and letters (\textit{Phaedrus} 274c5-d2; see Philebus 18b6-d2) and presents Egyptian lore as ancient compared to Greek wisdom (\textit{Timaeus} 21e1–22b8). Boys-Stones (\textit{Post-Hellenistic}, 26, n. 33) thus argues that Plato believed philosophy to have been developing in Egypt long before it emerged among the Greeks. Plato evidently also had a philosophical interest in Persian philosophy (\textit{Alcibiades} I 122a1–2; see also \textit{Statesman} 269e6–270a2: two opposed cosmic forces might refer to Zoroastranism and/or Empedocles, see Skemp, \textit{Statesman}, 146, n. 1). Horky (“Persian Cosmos”) analyses biographical accounts linking Plato to the Persians, which he argues trace to the \textit{early Academy}.

\item Note that, although Greek-speaking and active in Miletus, Thales himself is reported to have been of Phoenician descent in early biographical accounts (see especially Herodotus, I.170 = Th 12). Whitmarsh (\textit{Battling the gods}, 56) has also noticed that ‘thal’, in Phoenician, means ‘liquid’ or ‘moisture’, which, in light of Thales’ most famous theory, hardly seems a coincidence.
\end{itemize}
(i) The philosophical insights of theologoi

When a defence of the view that Aristotle took Thales to be the first philosopher is attempted, scholars tend to draw attention to Aristotle’s distinction between theologians (theologoi) – who are associated with cosmogonical myths – and natural philosophers (physiologoi). They assume that on Aristotle’s view, only the natural philosophers are philosophers, whereas theologians are at best pre-philosophical. At stake is whether Thales, as the first natural philosopher, according to Aristotle, should therefore be taken as the first philosopher tout court. The assumption that the two categories are equivalent seems to have taken shape in the late eighteenth century (as discussed in section (3.iii) below).

Aristotle does not claim that Thales is the father of philosophy tout court, but rather the founder of a specific type of philosophy:

Most (οἱ πλείστοι) of the first philosophers (τῶν … πρώτων φιλοσοφήσαντων) thought that principles in the form of matter (τὰς ἐν ὑλής εἰδεί … ἀρχὰς) were the only principles of all things [….] Thales, the founder (ἀρχηγός) of this type of philosophy (τῆς τοιαύτης … φιλοσοφίας), says that it is water.  

(Metaph. I.3, 983b6–8; 20–21 = Th 29)

The type of philosophy at issue is evidently natural philosophy, which, in its most primitive instantiations (beginning with Thales), we are told amounted to the idea that a principle in the form of matter is the only principle of all things.

Later, at 983b27–30 (= Th 29), Aristotle further reports that: “There are some who think that the men of very ancient times (τούς παμπαλάιους)

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24Aristotle identifies the poets Homer, Hesiod, Orpheus, and apparently Xenophanes, as theologoi. He also implies that Pherecydes and the Persian Magoi (Zoroastrian priests) partly count as theologoi (as discussed in section (2.iv) below). See Palmer, “Theologians”.

25Wolfsdorf (“Hesiod”), 345, with n. 4; see Bollack, “L’interprétation”, 140 and Laks, “Aristote”, 215–7) suggests we should understand theologoi not as philosophers per se, but as proto-philosophers, drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between theologoi and physiologoi. But this Aristotelian distinction does not map onto a ‘theologian’ versus ‘philosopher as such’ dichotomy (pace Betegh, “Eudemus”, 351–2, 355), as I argue below.

26Trans. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, Presocratic, 89; emphasis added.

27Rather than, say, material monism in particular (pace Tredennick, Metaphysics, vol. I, 19, n. b). Note that if Thales were more narrowly being heralded as the founder of material monism, Anaxagoras and Empedocles would not subsequently be introduced as belonging to the same school of thought, since the latter are associated with distinguishing between several material elements (I.3, 984a11–16; 1.4, 985a25–985b2) as well as with recognizing the efficient and final causes, if still vaguely (I.3, 984b5–l.4, 985a31). In his commentary on Metaph. I.3, 983b6, the Peripatetic philosopher Alexander of Aphrodisias (early third century CE) specifies that by “this kind of philosophy” (τοιαύτης), Aristotle does indeed mean natural philosophy (τῆς φυσικῆς [φιλοσοφίας]), and that Thales is therefore presented as the “earliest of the physikoi (τῶν … φυσικῶν ἀρχαιότατον)”. See In Aristotelis Metaphysica commentaria 24.7–25.10 (ed. Hayduck) = Th 189. See also Asclepius of Tralles, In metaph. 26.14–27 = Th 461.

28According to Johansen’s (“Monism”, 23–8) recent interpretation, the novel view that Aristotle attributes to Thales is the idea that all beings derive their causal properties (whether directly or indirectly) from one material substance, in this case water – hence why water is identified as the principle (arché).
[...] who first speculated about the gods (ἡθελογήσαντας), also held this same opinion about the primary entity.”

He then alludes to Homer (983b30–32), indicating he has in mind earlier sources than Thales. Aristotle’s own view is that Thales was the first to conceive of water as a principle (archê) of all things — making him the first physiologos. But the qualification that his account applies to most (and not all) of those who first philosophized suggests that he is not here making claims about the beginning of philosophy more broadly.

Aristotle certainly saw cosmogonical myths as possible receptacles of philosophical theories — despite his often-noted criticism of theologoi and general preference for physiologia. He credited the theologoi Hesiod (seventh century BCE) with anticipating some of his own metaphysical concepts, like the ‘efficient cause’ and ‘final cause’ (Metaph. I.4, 984b23–29). Evidently, Hesiod has a place in Aristotle’s history of philosophy. As John Palmer has stressed, although Aristotle tended to criticize the theologoi in discussions of physiologia, he still engaged with them seriously in separate metaphysical discussions on the nature of first principles (e.g. Metaph. XIV.4, 1091a29–b6; XII.6, 1071b22–

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29 Trans. Tredennick, Metaphysics, vol. I, 21.
30 For Okeanos and Tethys, see ll. XIV.201, 246, 302; for the River Styx, see ll. II.755, VIII.369, XIV.271, XV.37. For Styx as Okeanos’ daughter, see also Hesiod, Theogony 383, 389, 776.
31 Aristotle alludes to a Homeric cosmogonical framework in which water (represented by the river Styx) played a role (see also also the creating gods Okeanos and Tethys), but appears to resist the idea that Homer conceived of water as a principle (archê). Hence Thales, and not Homer, counts as the first physiologos. Note that at Poetics 1447b17–20, Aristotle makes clear that Homer does not qualify as a physiologos. He affirms that Homer and Empedocles share only the verse form, and claims it is right to call Homer a poïetês and Empedocles a physiologos. However, the suggestion that Homer was the founder (archêgios) of natural philosophy is well-documented in later sources. On Ps. Heraclitus (first century CE; see Allegoriae 22.2 Buffière) and Ps. Plutarch (author of De Homero, late second century CE; see De Homero 2.93 = Th 187), see Mansfeld, “Aristotle,” 124. Plutarch (c. 45–c. 120 CE) even suggested that Thales’ and Homer’s alleged views on water as archê originated in Egyptian ideas (Isis and Osiris 34.365C–D = Th 116), and elsewhere referred to a tradition of ‘ancient physiologia’ (ἡ παλαιὰ φυσιολογία) traceable to Greek and non-Greek mythological texts (Plutarch, fr. 157.16–25 Sandbach = Eusebius, Preparation for the Gospel, III.1.1, 83c; see Boys-Stones, Post-Hellenistic, 108).
32 Aristotle is nevertheless cautious about ascribing definite doctrines to Thales, whose views he repeatedly makes clear he knew only indirectly (Metaph. I.3, 983b22, 984a2-3 = Th 29; DC II.13, 294a28–32 = Th 30; DA I.2, 405a19 = Th 31; DA I.5, 411a8 = Th 32; Politics I.11, 1259a8, 10, 18 = Th 28). See e.g. Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, Presocratic, 90; Snell, “Die Nachrichten”, 170–3; Barney, “History”, 86, with n. 41.
33 Granted, that myths might function as a medium for conveying philosophical theories does not in itself imply that myth-makers are themselves philosophical thinkers (see Boys-Stones, “Allegory”), since myth-makers need not even be aware of the presence of these philosophical theories (a view held by e.g. early Stoics). However, Aristotle’s charge that cosmologists like Hesiod are merely concerned with what is convincing to themselves (Metaph. III.4, 1000a9–10) presupposes that he at least sometimes attributes self-conscious theoretical claims to them (see further Barney, “History”, 89–90). Moreover, Aristotle singles out the Zoroastrian Magoi precisely as not saying everything in mythical form and pioneering dualism (see section (2.iv) below). This suggests that at least some thinkers associated with a mythological tradition could develop philosophical theories not transmitted through myth.
34 See Barney (“History”, 89); Sassi (Beginnings, 21–22); Palmer (“Theologians”, 188); Long (“Scope”, 8); Laks (Concept, 15). For Aristotle’s allusions to Hesiod in cosmological and metaphysical discussions, see also Wolfsdorf, “Hesiod”, 345; for his reference to Hesiod in an ethical context, see Folch, “Plato’s Hesiods”, 317.
35 Wolfsdorf, “Hesiod”, 345. This is consistent with Aristotle’s cyclical theory of history (discussed in section (2.iv)): Hesiod plays a role in the current cycle, culminating with Aristotle.
Aristotle sometimes even referred to the *theologoi*'s views in the realm of *physiologia*, depicting their views as being no more simplistic than those of the *physiologoi*. Palmer concludes that: “Simply put, it is not the case that for Aristotle the history of philosophy begins with Thales”.

But what if philosophy is about clarity of thought? Might *physiologia* – rather than the tradition of cosmogonical mythology – offer the promise of clarity of thinking? Surely not: Aristotle plainly denies that clarity of expression is a hallmark of *physiologia* in the *Metaphysics*, Book I. He notes that inquirers into “the causes described in the *Physics*” can speak too “vaguely” or “obscurely” (ἀμυδρώς I.10, 993a13), criticizing Empedocles (a *physiologos*) as a case in point (993a11–24).

Now it is true that Aristotle later contrasts the *theologoi* with “those who use the language of proof (τῶν δι᾽ ἀποδείξεως λεγόντων)” (*Metaph.* III.4. 1000a19–20), which might prima facie suggest that he drew a neat distinction between *theologoi* and philosophers. However, this would have the problematic consequence that even the *physiologos* Empedocles would thereby fail to qualify as a philosopher, since Aristotle here also criticizes him, and not just *theologoi*, for arbitrarily deploying causal principles. Indeed, much like the *theologoi*, Empedocles has failed to provide an explanation of his position and to speak in the language of proof (1000a24–29).

Thus we do not find a clear criterion here for distinguishing between unphilosophical and philosophical thinkers. If anything, this passage further speaks to Aristotle’s readiness to criticize the views not just of *theologoi* but also of *physiologoi* in passages where he engages with their theoretical claims.

(ii) The scope of natural philosophy in early Greek philosophy

Furthermore, *physiologia* does not exhaust the types of philosophical inquiry that Aristotle associated with familiar early Greek philosophers. He identified the Pythagoreans, Alcmaeon, Xenophanes, Melissus, and Parmenides with *philosophia*, but distinguished them from those thinkers concerned with *physiologia* by associating them with an Italian tradition of philosophy (*Metaph.* 1072a9).
I.6, 987a31: τὴν τῶν Ἰταλικῶν ... φιλοσοφίαν). Separately, he denied that Xenophanes, Parmenides or Melissus were physiologoi or physikoi, ostensibly because (i) they banished motion from their accounts of being (Metaph. I.5, 986b16–17; Physics I.2, 184b16; GC I.8, 325a13) and (ii) their supposed monism was incompatible with the idea of there being something of which there is a (distinct) principle (Physics I.2, 184b25–185a5). However, even though Aristotle denied Parmenides the status of a physiologos or physikos, Parmenides still raised important philosophical problems worthy of Aristotle’s attention (Metaph. I.1, 986b27–28; Physics I.2, 185a17-20). Here again we find that Aristotle’s concept of physiologia does not track what he himself understood as philosophical inquiry as opposed to other (non-philosophical) activities – nor does it track what most historians of philosophy now generally recognize as philosophy versus non-philosophical activity. After all, few modern scholars would deny Parmenides a place in the history of philosophy. Yet attributing to Aristotle the view that only the natural philosophers are genuine philosophers implies the exclusion not only of Thales’ predecessors from his history of philosophy, but also of Parmenides. This is patently absurd.

(iii) The continuity between theology and (natural) philosophy

We have seen that both theologians and natural philosophers are invoked in Aristotle’s philosophical discussions. There is also separate evidence that Aristotle envisaged a basic kind of continuity between lovers of myth on the one hand, and lovers of wisdom on the other. In a famous passage of the Metaphysics, he makes two central claims: (i) “It is through wonder that men now begin and originally began to philosophize (φιλοσοφεῖν)” (I.2, 982b12–13); and (ii) “the myth-lover (φιλόμυθος) is in a sense (πώς) a philosopher (φιλόσοφος), since myths (μυθοί) are composed of wonders” (982b18–19). We learn that a shared sense of wonder in the face of obvious perplexities (I.2, 982b13–14) is what grounds this continuity
between the two kinds of thinkers, for it is nothing less than the starting-point of philosophical activity.\footnote{On Aristotle’s gradualist conception of the development of philosophy (discussed in section (2.iv) below), the first people who began philosophizing \textit{(in a given cycle of development)} are not yet philosophers in the fully-fledged sense – hence the qualification signalled by \textit{pós} (compare \textit{Metaph}. I.4, 985a5 and I.10, 993a15–16: even the \textit{physiologos} Empedocles is associated with a faltering kind of philosophy). Still, even the myth-lover, in wondering at the complexity of the world, already is \textit{in a way} a philosopher.}

In Book XII of the \textit{Metaphysics}, he argues:

\begin{quote}
A tradition has been handed down by the ancient thinkers of very early times (\παρὰ τῶν ἀρχαίων καὶ παμπαλαίων), and bequeathed to posterity in the form of a myth (ἐν μύθοι σχήματι), to the effect that these (οὕτωι) [i.e. ‘these heavenly bodies’; or: ‘these highest substances, acting as primary movers of the heavenly bodies’\footnote{Following Segev’s (\textit{Aristotle}, 126) gloss on \textit{houtoi}.}] are gods, and that the Divine pervades the whole of nature. The rest of their tradition has been added later in a mythological form (μυθικῶς) […]; they say that these gods are human in shape or are like certain other animals, and make other statements consequent upon and similar to those which we have mentioned. Now if we separate these statements and accept only the first, that they supposed the primary substances to be gods, we must regard it as an inspired saying; and reflect that whereas every art and philosophy (ἐκάστης καὶ τέχνης καὶ φιλοσοφίας) has probably been repeatedly developed to the utmost and has perished again, these beliefs of theirs have been preserved as a relic of former knowledge. To this extent only, then, are the \textit{views of our forefathers and of the earliest thinkers} (ἰ…πάτριος δόξα καὶ ἢ παρὰ τῶν πρώτων) intelligible to us.

\textit{(Metaph. XII.8, 1074a38–b14; trans. Tredennick)}
\textit{(Metaphysics, vol. II, 163); my emphasis)}
\end{quote}

Aristotle here took some of his most foundational theologico-philosophical concepts to have been anticipated by more ancient thinkers, whose thought he believed was only later transmitted in mythological form.

Depending on how we interpret the reference of \textit{houtoi} (‘these’) at 1074b3, Aristotle took “the ancient thinkers of very early times” to have grasped the divinity of either (i) the \textit{heavenly bodies} or (ii) the \textit{primary movers} of the heavenly bodies.\footnote{See Palmer, “Theologians”, 198 with n. 26.} On the first reading, Aristotle envisaged a parallel between these remote thinkers’ contemplation of the stars as being \textit{divine} and his own conception of eternal celestial substances.\footnote{Aristotle apparently considered stars divine (see fr. 23 Rose = Cicero, \textit{ND} II.15.42; Segev, \textit{Aristotle}, 93–94).} On the second reading, he rather credited them with achieving an even more sophisticated philosophical insight: the idea of divine beings moving the heavens without themselves being moved.\footnote{This latter reading is defended by e.g. Palmer, “Theologians”, 197–200; Segev, \textit{Aristotle}, 126–7; Segev, “Foreign Civilizations”.}
His point that the view that “the divine pervades all of Nature (physis)” is an extremely old one, antedating mythological narratives that anthropomorphize or ‘zoomorphize’ the gods, is also significant. The concept of physis is salient in the philosophies of many of the early Greek philosophers and is central to Aristotle’s own philosophy. On the second reading of houtoi, we can glean a further parallel here with Aristotle’s view that the unmoved mover is responsible for the motion of the outermost heaven.\(^{50}\)

But who are these remote thinkers? It is likely that Aristotle here had in mind both Greek and non-Greek predecessors. Consider the internal textual evidence: (i) the παμ- prefix in παμπαλαίων seems to emphasize a primeval heritage;\(^{51}\) (ii) the zoomorphism mentioned in the passage likely alludes to Egyptian gods;\(^{52}\) and (iii) the last sentence of the passage distinguishes between “the doxa of our forefathers (ή ... πάτριος δόξα) and (και) “the doxa of the earliest/first [thinkers]” (ή παρὰ τῶν πρώτων).\(^{53}\)

The first reading of houtoi suggests earlier Egyptian and/or Babylonian thinkers. Indeed, in De Caelo, Aristotle recognizes that both Greeks and “barbarians” have intuitions that celestial bodies are divine (DC I.3, 270b5–24).\(^{54}\) He also specifies that Egyptians and Babylonians observed the stars “from the remotest past” (ἔκ πλειστῶν ἐτῶν), noting that they transmitted their astronomical insights to the Greeks (DC II.12, 292a7–9). On the second reading of houtoi, he might instead have in mind thinkers from civilizations which were then no longer in existence, since there is no indication that he took the Egyptians, Babylonians or Zoroastrian Magoi to have proposed a concept of an unmoved mover.\(^{55}\) In either case, however, he apparently had in mind not only philosophical predecessors to Thales, but also non-Greek philosophers.

(iv) Aristotle’s non-linear conception of philosophical development

Across his corpus, Aristotle famously asserts that the same truths have appeared infinitely many times throughout human history – a theory he...
illustrates by the antiquity of the Egyptian political system (Politics VII.10, 1329b25–33). In his cyclical theory of history, the sciences and arts are perfected innumerably often after periodic cataclysms. The Metaphysics XII.8 passage itself asserts that philosophy has repeatedly developed to the utmost and perished again, suggesting the full process of philosophical development recurred in previous cycles of human civilization. On Aristotle’s view, a single, absolute beginning of philosophy does not make sense.

Even within the current cycle of development, in fact, philosophy traces not to Thales but to non-Greek traditions. In Metaphysics, Book I, Aristotle specifically cites Egyptians as having developed theoretical inquiry because the priests had sufficient leisure (I.1, 981b23–25); a little later, he adds that it was “recreation and pastime” which allowed for philosophical speculation to develop (I.2, 982b22–24), echoing Plato’s view that philosophy developed through leisure.

He also identifies the Zoroastrian Magi as “mixed [thinkers] (μεμιγμένοι)”, in the sense that they “do not say everything in mythical form” and “make the first generator the best thing” (Metaph. XIV.4, 1091b8–10). The Magi’s postulate that the originating principle is “good” or “best” (and not subsequent to the other principles61) is a key metaphysical principle which he thinks anticipated the dualist theories of the physiologoi Empedocles and Anaxagoras. Aristotle may thus have taken them to be part theologians, part natural philosophers – a hybrid status which would aptly illustrate the extent of continuity which he was prepared to envisage between the theologoi and physiologoi.

Aristotle also credited the Egyptians with a pivotal role in developing mathematics (Metaph. I.1, 981b20–5), and (alongside the Babylonians) with important discoveries specifically in astronomy (the philosophical significance of which we explored above), eventually passed down to the Greeks. The rise of the theoretical sciences in Egypt and Babylonia means that the beginning of philosophy quite broadly, even within the current cycle, traces to non-Greeks. This is consistent with what Aristotle reportedly

57See also Politics II.5, 1264a3–5; DC I.3, 270b16–20; Meteor. I.3, 339b27–30; fr. 13 Rose = Synesius, Calvit. Encom. 22.
58See Segev, “Foreign Civilizations”; Barney, “History”, 97–8; Boys-Stones, “Allegory”, 191–2; Palmer, “Theologians”, 196-201; Johansen, “Myth and Logos”, 290–1; Bollack, “L’interprétation”, 140–59.
59See Palmer, “Theologians”, 202. Presumably the ‘end’ of philosophy in Aristotle’s own generation (fr. 53 Rose = Cicero, Tusc. III.28.69) is relative to that historical cycle. One could still speak of the beginning, say, of physiologia within a particular cycle; in Aristotle’s cycle, this would occur with Thales (even though physiologia has already been perfected infinitely many times before Thales was born). That Zeno or Plato represent the starting-point of dialectic (see D.L. VIII.57, IX.25 and Metaph. I.6, 987b32–33 respectively) presumably also applies only to the current cycle.
60See Plato, Th. 172c2–d9 and Statesman 272b8–c2.
61Metaph. XIV.4, 1091a29–33. See Segev, “Foreign Civilizations”.
62See similarly Plato, Phaedrus 274c5–d1.
said in his lost work *On Philosophy*. According to Diogenes Laertius (third century CE), Aristotle here highlighted Zoroastrian and Egyptian philosophy, which he took to be more ancient than Greek philosophy.

It is noteworthy that Diogenes Laertius broadly associated Aristotle with the view that philosophy had emerged among ‘barbarians’ (D.L. I.1–8). It is hard to imagine him falsely attributing the view to so eminent an authority as Aristotle, since he himself was hostile to the idea of a non-Greek origin of philosophy (D.L. I.1–4).

(3) Thales in the historiography of philosophy

(i) The contested Peripatetic model

Aristotle’s successor, Theophrastus, similarly identified Thales as the first to “reveal the investigation of nature (τὴν περὶ φύσεως ἱστορίαν) to the Greeks”, adding that “though he had many predecessors, he was so much their superior as to outshine them all” (apud Simplicius *In phys.* 23.29–32 = Th 38, Th 409). There was no intellectual vacuum into which Thales suddenly emerged as the inventor of philosophy. Rather, a new school of philosophy emerges – one characterized by an interest in *physiologia*, Theophrastus’ and Aristotle’s preferred type of inquiry.

However, another Peripatetic student of Aristotle’s, Dicaearchus (fourth century BCE), apparently refused to consider Thales a philosopher at all, suggesting that his pursuits were practical rather than theoretical (D.L. I.40 = Th 237). It is also unclear whether Eudemus (late fourth century BCE), another one of Aristotle’s pupils, accepted the view that Thales was the first to engage even in natural philosophy. Eudemus extensively discussed the cosmogonies of the Babylonians, Persians, Phoenicians, and Egyptians (in a work that also contained a paraphrase of the first lines of the Babylonian

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63Note also that at *Politics* VII.7, Aristotle claims that Europeans are full of spirit (θυμοῦ) but lacking in intelligence (διανοιας) and skill (τεχνης, 1327b24–25), whereas Asians have souls that are intelligent (διανοητικα) and skilful (τεχνικα, 1327b27) but lack spirit (ἄθυμα, 1327b28). The Greeks, for their part, are presented as occupying a middle position between the two (1327b29–30). I cannot here address the controversial question whether this passage reflects a putative Aristotelian commitment to environmental determinism. The important point, for my purposes, is that Aristotle’s claim that the Asians (which in ancient cartography comprise the Babylonians and Persians and sometimes also the Egyptians) are intelligent squares well with the idea that philosophy might have developed among peoples to the east and south of Greece.

64See fr. 6 Rose = D.L. I.8.

65Theophrastus intriguingly claimed that it was Prometheus who first gave men a share in philosophy (Σ Ap. Rhod. *Argon.* 2.1248–50). Fortenbaugh (*Theophrastus*, 150–6) argues this claim should be taken allegorically rather than historically.

66For the same reason, Dicaearchus denied that the ‘seven wise men’, Thales included, were genuinely wise (see also Cicero, *De Amicitia* 7; *De Officiis* III.16). See Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic*, 17 with n. 20.
creation myth, the *Enûma Eliš*, and possibly saw them as being continuous with Greek natural philosophy. In short, Thales’ status as a pioneering natural philosopher was contested even in the Peripatetic school within a generation of Aristotle’s time.

(ii) Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic accounts

The Hellenistic and post-Hellenistic periods saw a marked tendency to locate philosophy’s beginnings before Thales and beyond the Greek world. This was not just among Hellenized Jewish and Christian thinkers (as one might expect, given their shared motivation to trace philosophy’s origins to the Patriarchs), but also among Stoic, Platonist, and Neoplatonist philosophers.

George Boys-Stones has demonstrated that later Stoics like Posidonius (late second–first century BCE) and Cornutus (first century CE) believed that philosophers had emerged long before the traditional Greek poets, since they took philosophers to have counted among the earliest of peoples, in what they took to be the ‘golden age’ of human history. They held that these first peoples were endowed with philosophy to counteract human vice, and possessed the purest and most certain claim to philosophical wisdom. Cornutus effectively founded a tradition in the historiography of philosophy, seemingly challenging earlier Stoics. He boldly claimed that the earliest philosophers had themselves spoken *in allegorical form* – allegories that were foundational for the poets’ stories – and that foreign mythological traditions derived their stories from the original philosophers (*Introduction to Greek Theology*, 35, 75.18–76.5 Lang and 17, 26.7–12 Lang).

On this account, ancient poetic traditions offered a reliable way into the earliest peoples’ philosophies. This Stoic framework was adopted by Jewish writers

67 As reported by the Neoplatonist Damascius (sixth century CE), *Pr*. 123–25, 1.316–24 Ruelle = Eudemus Fr. 150 Wehrli; see Burkert, “Prehistory”, 60. Damascius himself took non-Greek theologies to be continuous with an Aristotelian study of first principles more broadly (Betegh, “Greek Philosophy”, 632–3).
68 Wehrli (“Eudemos”, col. 658) thinks that Fr. 150 may have belonged to *Eudemus’ Physics* (rather than a separate theological work, as argued by Betegh, “Eudemus”). If true, Eudemus presumably traced the beginning of natural philosophy to non-Greek sources.
69 See Mansfeld, “Aristotle”; Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic*; Ridings, *Attic Moses*; Burkert, “Prehistory”; Sassi, *Beginnings*, 5; Lloyd, “Debt”, 281.
70 See Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic* and “Allegories”. This Stoic doctrine builds on the Hesiodic myths of the Golden Age and of the Age of Kronos (*Works and Days* 106–201), which in turn have older, and likely non-Greek, roots (Sassi, *Beginnings*, 33; El Murr, “Golden Age”, 284, with n. 17; Baldry, “Who Invented”). A Platonic variation appears at *Statesman* 269c4–274e1.
71 See further Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic*, 45–54.
72 Boys-Stones, *Post-Hellenistic*, 49–59.
73 Josephus (first century CE) argued that the Patriarchs were the first men to philosophize, playing a role in developing Greek philosophy (for his specific reference to Thales, see *Against Apion* 1.2 = Th 108). Philo (late first century BCE) claimed that some ‘Presocratics’ and even Aristotle were indebted to the Jews, and believed Greek mythology was philosophically relevant. Note that the earlier Alexandrian Jewish philosophers, Artapanus (late third - second century BCE) and Aristobulus (second century BCE) had argued independently for Jewish influences on Greek philosophy, claiming Jewish
and Christian thinkers,74 as well as Platonist and Neoplatonist philosophers.75 Despite their differences – and sometimes outright hostility to one another – these thinkers viewed a range of early non-Greek texts as receptacles of privileged philosophical truths. It is remarkable that Thales is often altogether omitted from this period’s accounts of early philosophy, which instead emphasize the philosophical authority of Homer and non-Greek thinkers such as the Persian thinker Zarathustra.76 Only extremely rarely is Thales mentioned as the first philosopher tout court. Pseudo-Plutarch (early second century CE?), author of Placita philosophorum, is the only ancient writer to advance the view in propria persona – and he does so tentatively: Thales, he writes, seems to have founded philosophy (δοκεῖ … ἄρξαι τῆς φιλοσοφίας). He adds that Thales practiced philosophy in Egypt (rather than Ionia), and that he only moved to Miletus in his old age (Placita philosophorum 1.3.875E=Th 147). The view that Thales is the first philosopher is attested on only four other occasions in Graeco-Roman antiquity, but in all of these cases it functions as a foil for counterargument.77 In short, the

Scripture had influenced e.g. Pythagoras, Homer, Hesiod, Plato, and Aristotle. This move was possibly a reaction to antisemitic views aired in the Greek literature at the time, to the effect that the Jews were a misanthropic, corrupt people, whose religious tradition was devoid of philosophical significance. See Boys-Stones, Post-Hellenistic, 60–95.

Early Christians (including Justin, Clement of Alexandria, and the Latin author Tertullian) adapted Jewish arguments to the effect that Greek (pagan) philosophy derived from the Hebrews (Boys-Stones, Post-Hellenistic, 151–202).

( Neo-)Platonists who engaged with non-Greek theologies as philosophical sources include Celsus, Plutarch, Numenius, Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Damascius. While Plato’s authority was obviously central to the (Neo)platonists’ views, they did not take him to be the first philosopher, and instead tended to trace philosophy’s origins to the earliest humans. I cannot go into the complex reasons for this here. See further Boys-Stones, Post-Hellenistic, 105–22.

For instance, the only familiar ‘Presocratics’ that Celsus (second century CE) included in his list of philosophers who grasped the ‘true doctrine’ (i.e. philosophical truth) are Heraclitus and Pythagoras (apur Origen, Against Celsus, I.16, VI.42). He also acknowledged Homer and Zarathustra, without mentioning Thales (Boys-Stones, Post-Hellenistic, 118–9).

The Christian writer Eusebius (third—fourth century CE) quotes the passage from Ps. Plutarch almost verbatim (Preparation for the Gospel XIV.14.1 = Th 271), but does not endorse Ps. Plutarch’s view. Rather, the context of the reference is a discussion of the disagreements found among early Greek philosophers, which are opposed to the consistency of the “true and religious philosophy” (τὴν ἀληθῆ καὶ εὐσεβῆ φιλοσοφίαν) of the more ancient Hebrews (see Preparation for the Gospel XIV.3.1). The claim that Thales was the first philosopher is used as a foil in three other late-ancient sources. The first is a Latin dialogue by a Christian writer, Marcus Minucius Felix (third century CE), which presents a fellow Christian apologist, Octavius Januarius, as advancing the view that Thales is the ‘first philosopher’ (philosophi principalis, Octavius XIX.4–5 = Th 229). The latter’s aim is to persuade pagans that the truth of Christian theology can be traced to philosophers whom they themselves recognize as their own, so that “they are refuted by the opinions of their own philosophers” (Octavius XX.2). The second is a Greek text by a Christian apologist, Pseudo-Justin Martyr (early fourth century CE), who, in challenging pagans’ reliance on Greek poetry and philosophy as sources of wisdom, polemically engages with the premise that Thales was the first philosopher among them (ὁ πρῶτος παρά αὐτῶν τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἀρξας; Cohortatio ad Graecos 5.4 Marcovich = Th 292). The third is a report by the Christian writer Lactantius (third—fourth century CE) concerning Cicero’s lost work Hortensius, in which Cicero apparently had his rival Hortensius claim that Thales was the first philosopher – albeit in the context of an argument apparently intended to discredit philosophy (due to its relatively recent origins) as falling short of true wisdom (Lactantius, Divinae institutiones, 3.16, 12–16 = Th 257). Note that Cicero himself argued that while the term philosophos was coined relatively recently by Pythagoras (Tusc. V.3.8), still philosophy traces not to Thales or Pythagoras but to the
supposition that the Greeks widely viewed Thales as the first philosopher has virtually no basis in our sources.

As we saw, even Aristotle’s weaker view that Thales was the founder of a specific kind of philosophy – natural philosophy – remained controversial throughout antiquity, including within the Peripatetic school.\(^{78}\) Not even Diogenes Laertius – who was adamant that philosophy was a Greek invention – accepted that Thales was the first philosopher, or even the Ionian school’s figurehead.\(^{29}\)

### (iii) The late eighteenth century historiographical shift

This historiographical consensus did not wane in the European Middle Ages and much of the early modern period.\(^{80}\) Despite Diogenes Laertius’ marked influence on European histories of philosophy throughout these periods, it is remarkably difficult to identify European sources that unambiguously advocate a Greek origin of philosophy until the late eighteenth century.\(^{81}\) Thus the first history of philosophy to be written in English, Thomas Stanley’s seventeenth century *History of Philosophy* (1655–1662), still reflected the view that the ancient Greeks themselves had widely believed philosophy to have non-Greek origins.\(^{82}\)

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\(^{82}\) See the epigraph above and Park, *Africa*, 71. See also Bernasconi, “Parochialism”, 212, 217.
Christoph Meiners (1747–1810) was the first European historian of philosophy to suggest that Thales was the first philosopher. While in his *Grundriss der Geschichte der Weltweisheit* (“Outline of the History of World Wisdom”, 1786; 2nd ed. 1789), he does present an overview of earlier ‘Barbarian’ thought, what emerges from his discussion of non-Greek traditions is a denial that they ever developed philosophy—an achievement he instead traces to Ionian philosophy, starting with Thales. Meiners established an implicit correlation between the history of philosophy and the rise of ‘scientific civilization’ among the Greeks, which served to ground the exclusion of non-Greek traditions from the early history of philosophy. It is because Thales was supposedly the first thinker to achieve ‘scientific’ knowledge that he marks the true starting point of philosophy.

It is unsurprising, then, that a central theme running through Meiners’ history of philosophy is the attempt to undermine the then-popular view that the sciences had their origins in Africa and Asia. One of Meiners’ strategies here was to claim that no ancient Greek writer ever attributed his nation’s sciences to the ‘barbarians’ (*Weltweisheit*, 7). As we saw, this is obviously false: we need not look beyond Plato and Aristotle for counterexamples. Here and elsewhere, he systematically dismissed evidence, in both the ancient doxography and in more modern historiographical accounts, attesting to the existence of theoretical sciences, and philosophy in particular, in Africa and Asia.

Underlying Meiners’ selective use of the evidence was a pseudo-scientific racial anthropology, laid out in his *Grundriss der Geschichte der Menschheit* (“Outline of the History of Mankind”, 1785) – published a year earlier. In this work, he broke down humanity into two sub-groups: the ‘Caucasian’ (*Kaukasischen*) and the ‘Mongolian’ (*Mongolischen*). He described the latter as “much weaker in body and mind (viel schwächer von Körper und Geist),” and “much more depraved and vicious (viel übel gearteter und tugendleerer)” than the former (*Menschheit*, 1st ed., preface). In the work’s second (1793) edition, Meiners nevertheless identified Aristotle as one of the best sources for reconstructing earlier thought (*Weltweisheit*, 3–4, 95–6). See Park, *Africa*, 77–80.

83Park, *Africa*, 78–9; König-Pralong, *La colonie*, 156–7.
84Meiners, *Weltweisheit*, 27. See Longo, “Popularphilosophie”, 573–4.
85This emerges especially clearly from his earlier work, *Geschichte des Ursprungs*, published five years earlier, in which he had already questioned that the sciences had ever developed among non-Greeks. In this work, he referred to Thales as “[t]his first teacher and inventor of scientific knowledge” (*Dieser erste Lehrer und Erfinder wissenschaftlicher Kenntnisse*, 140), and went to great lengths to deny that Thales drew any of his scientific reflections and observations from the Egyptians and Phoenicians (144–5).
86Park, *Africa*, 78–9.
87He further claimed that most of the ancient evidence attests to “the infancy and mediocrity” (*die Kindheit und Mittelmässigkeit*) of the knowledge possessed by Asian and African peoples (*Weltweisheit*, 7). See Park, *Africa*, 79; Longo, “Popularphilosophie”, 573.
88Meiners nevertheless identified Aristotle as one of the best sources for reconstructing earlier thought (*Weltweisheit*, 3–4, 95–6). See Longo, “Popularphilosophie”, 579.
89Park, *Africa*, 77–80.
90Park, *Africa*, 81, n. 87.
edition, Meiners replaced these two categories with the “white, or light-coloured, and beautiful (weiße, oder hellfarbige, und schöne)” and the “dark-coloured and ugly (dunkelfarbige, und häßliche)” respectively (Menschheit, 2nd ed., 5–6).\(^9^1\) The former he further broke down into three white “races” (Racen), classifying the Greeks as well as Germans and Britons (among other European peoples) as belonging to an intellectually and morally superior “Celtic” race (Menschheit, 2nd ed., 29–30, 75).\(^9^2\) In the midst of discussing these supposed racial differences he emphasized that only European nations were able to develop the sciences (Menschheit, 2nd ed., 30–31).\(^9^3\)

It is striking that the first historian of philosophy to depart from earlier historiography in (i) denying the existence of philosophy in Africa and Asia, and in (ii) advocating a Greek origin of philosophy, with Thales as its starting point, subscribed to a pseudoscientific white-supremacist theory implying not just modern European but also ancient Greek racial superiority.\(^9^4\)

The second history of philosophy to present the claim that philosophy begins with Thales was Dietrich Tiedemann’s (1748–1803) six-volume Geist der spekulativen Philosophie (“The Spirit of Speculative Philosophy”), published between 1791 and 1797. In the book’s preface, Tiedemann acknowledged that the consensus among historians of philosophy was still that philosophy had come from Asia and Africa (Geist, vol. I, xviii).\(^9^5\) However, Tiedemann’s book presents an early example of a questionable interpretation of Aristotle’s Metaphysics, Book I as an authoritative source for the claim that Thales was the first philosopher.\(^9^6\) We also encounter the trope, already present in Meiners (with whom Tiedemann had a lifelong friendship\(^9^7\)), that philosophy never appeared among the Chinese, Indians, and Egyptians, because they supposedly lacked a “scientific approach” (wissenschaftliche Behandlung, Geist, vol. I, 21–22).\(^9^8\)

The Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Gottlieb Tennemann (1761–1819), who succeeded Tiedemann as chair of philosophy at the University of Marburg, was the third historian of philosophy to proclaim Thales the first philosopher and to exclude earlier non-Greek thought from the history of philosophy\(^9^9\) – ostensibly building on Kant’s own views concerning the origins of philosophy

\(^9^1\)Park, Africa, 81, n. 88.
\(^9^2\)Park, Africa, 81, n. 89; König-Pralong, La colonie, 157. For Meiners’ claim of the ‘white and beautiful’ racial superiority of the Greeks, Romans, and Europeans, see also Menschheit, 2nd ed., 122. For Meiners’ qualification that the Greeks and Romans, unlike e.g. the Germans and Britons, were “not completely pure or unmixed (nicht ganz reine oder unvermischte)” Celts, see Meiners, “Über die Grossen”, 212.
\(^9^3\)See Park, Africa, 82, n. 91; König-Pralong, La colonie, 155–7.
\(^9^4\)See Park, Africa, 81–2.
\(^9^5\)Park, Africa, 83.
\(^9^6\)Longo, “Popularphilosophie, 651, 658, 678–80.
\(^9^7\)Park, Africa, 82; Longo, “Popularphilosophie”, 639.
\(^9^8\)Longo, “Popularphilosophie”, 658.
\(^9^9\)See his 1798–1819 Geschichte; see also its abbreviated 1812 version, Grundriss.
and science. Unlike his predecessors, Tennemann barely defended his assertion that philosophy had begun in Greece (or acknowledged the as-yet unorthodox nature of his position). He, too, suggested that the start of scientific philosophy (wissenschaftlichen Philosophie, Geschichte, Vol. I, 5) could be traced to the Greeks, starting with Thales, citing, by now unsurprisingly, Aristotle’s report about Thales at Metaphysics I.3 (see e.g. Manual, 55–56) – which he took to establish that Thales was the first true philosopher.

The assumption that the beginning of scientific or natural philosophy is tantamount to the birth of philosophy as such, and that Thales is its originator, thus has a clear eighteenth-century origin. In the case of Meiners, the first to frame the origins of philosophy in these terms, we can confidently conclude that the singling out of Thales as a starting point was partly, if not mainly, rooted in racism.

More than any other thinker, however, it was Hegel who, in the early nineteenth century, entrenched the view that philosophy begins with Thales. In his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, he squarely declared that “Mythology must remain excluded from our history of Philosophy” (Lectures, 83), and stated that “With Thales we, properly speaking, first begin the history of Philosophy” (Lectures, 171). It is worth noting that Hegel misrepresented Aristotle’s views concerning the relationship between cosmogonic myths and philosophy, misleadingly attributing to Aristotle the view that, “It is not worthwhile to treat seriously of those who philosophize (philosophieren) in a mythical way” (Hegel, Lectures, 88; translation modified). What Aristotle actually wrote in the relevant Metaphysics passage was that “it is not worthwhile to consider seriously those who use subtleties (or sophistries, τῶν … σοφιζομένων) in a mythical way (μυθικῶς)” (Metaph. III.4, 1000a18–19). Aristotle did not oppose mythology to philosophy here. Rather, the context was a criticism (which we considered above) of cosmologists like Hesiod, but also of the physiologos Empedocles, for including unsatisfactory explanatory details in their cosmologies (1000a18–29).

Despite their problematic distortions of Aristotle’s views concerning the origins of philosophy, such eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiographical approaches to the origins of philosophy have left a deep mark on the scholarly study of Greek philosophy to this day. Indeed, contemporary

100 For Kant’s view (dating to the 1770s/1780s) that science, and by extension philosophy, began with the Greeks, see Micheli, “Kantian Turning-Point”, 726–30; for the probable connection between Kant’s racism and this view, see Park, Africa, 91–5. For a possible Humean influence on Kant’s and Meiners’ views about the rise of the sciences and philosophy in Greece (and their racist subtext), see Flory, “Race”, 53.

101 Park, Africa, 84–5; Bernasconi, “Parochialism”, 218.

102 Micheli et al, “Kantianism”, 870.

103 See König-Pralong, La colonie, 95, 147-9, 157, 210–11.

104 On Hegel’s role in rendering this view canonical, see Beall, “Hegel”. Hegel influenced major scholars of ancient philosophy, notably Eduard Zeller (1814–1908); see Laks, “Histoire critique”, 468–77.
specialists continue to cite Aristotle as an authority for the view that philosophy begins with Thales.

**Conclusion**

No major Greek thinker unambiguously proclaimed Thales to be the first philosopher. Strikingly, the view is almost never explicitly advanced in the extant evidence. But beyond the argument from silence, this paper has shown that there are reasons why such a claim is virtually unattested in our sources. Broadly speaking, to insist that the Greeks (implicitly) accepted the view that philosophy begins with Thales is to impute to them contradictory commitments, since the view runs afoul of their most common and deeply held attitudes to the early history and development of philosophy. Aristotle, to whom contemporary specialists typically turn to claim a Greek pedigree for the view, is a case in point.

As we saw, the dominant view in the classical, Hellenistic, and post-Hellenistic periods was that philosophy emerged among non-Greeks long before the time of Thales. This historiographical consensus, which cut across philosophical and religious affiliations, left a deep mark on European historiography of philosophy well into the early modern period.

The notion that philosophy originated with Thales, and that this view supposedly goes back to Aristotle, gained currency only in the late eighteenth century. Since then, it has been repeated to the point of being accepted as truth. It is high time that historians of philosophy recognize it for what it is: a relatively recent fabrication tracing to problematic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century historiography, with hardly any basis in Greek sources.

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