

CHAPTER 1

Presocratics: Ancient Antecedents

THE TERM “PRESOCRATIC” IS A MODERN CREATION. THE EARLIEST attestation discovered so far is found in a manual of the universal history of philosophy published in 1788 by J.-A. Eberhard (the addressee of a famous letter by Kant): one section is entitled “Presocratic Philosophy” (“vorsokratische Philosophie”).¹ But the idea that there is a major caesura between Socrates and what preceded him goes back to Antiquity. In order to understand the modern debates that have developed around the Presocratics, it is indispensable to go back to these ancient Presocratics, whom by convention I propose to designate “pre-Socratics” (in lowercase, and with a hyphen), in order to distinguish them from the “Presocratics,” the historiographical category to whose creation they contributed but under which they cannot be entirely subsumed. Even if undeniable similarities make the ancient “pre-Socratics” the natural ancestors of our modern Presocratics, the differences between the two groups are in fact not less significant, in particular with regard to the stakes involved in both of them.

Antiquity knew of two ways to conceive of the dividing line between what preceded Socrates and what followed him: either Socrates abandoned a philosophy of *nature* for the sake of a philosophy of *man* (this is the perspective that I shall call Socratic-Ciceronian, which also includes Xenophon), or he passed from a philosophy of *things* to a philosophy of the *concept* (this is the Platonic-Aristotelian tradition). Although a bridge was constructed between these two traditions, notably by Plato in the *Phaedo* (a text that is both complex and decisive for the posterity of the Presocratics), they diverge not only in their tenor but also, and even more, in their effects: while

the former only thematizes a certain rupture, the latter by contrast brings to light the thread of a deeper continuity beyond it. This dissymmetry, which can be, and indeed has been, specified in different ways, is essential for understanding the modern fate of the Presocratics. It is worth examining precisely its presuppositions and its consequences.

At its origin, the Socratic-Ciceronian tradition is closely connected with Socrates's trial (399 BCE), in which, in order to respond to the accusation of impiety with which (among other things) he was charged, he needed to distinguish himself from an enterprise that had been known at least since the 430s under the name of "inquiry into nature" (*peri phuseôs historia*).

The *Phaedo* strongly suggests that the phrase "inquiry into nature" was still perceived as a technical expression at the dramatic date of the conversation it portrays (which is supposed to have occurred on the very day of Socrates's death), and we cannot exclude the possibility that this was still the case at the date of the composition of the dialogue, about fifteen years later. For the Socrates of the *Phaedo* says that when he was young he "was incredibly eager for the kind of wisdom *that is called* the inquiry into nature," which he expected would give him the knowledge of "the causes of each thing, why each thing comes into being and why it perishes and why it exists."² The specification "that is called" points to the novelty of the expression, if not to that of the enterprise itself.

In fact, none of the surviving texts that refer to such an "inquiry into nature" is older than the last third of the fifth century BCE. It is also around this time—and evidently not by chance—that the title "On Nature" comes into circulation, and that it is applied, in certain cases anachronistically, to older works that fell (or were thought to fall) within this genre.³

In chapter 20 of the Hippocratic treatise *On Ancient Medicine* (which also happens to present the first-known occurrence of the abstract term *philosophia*⁴), its author, a medical writer who advocates traditional methods, distances himself from writings "on nature" that he judges to be too speculative because of the presuppositions (or "hypotheses") they are led to adopt, and contrasts them

with medical inquiry as the sole legitimate source of knowledge about the nature of man:⁵

But what they are talking about belongs to philosophy, like Empedocles or others who have written about nature: what a human being is from the beginning, how he first appeared and out of what things he is constituted. But as for me, I think that whatever has been said or written by some expert [*sophistês*] or doctor about nature belongs less to the art of medicine than to that of painting,⁶ and I think that there is no other source than medicine for having some clear knowledge about nature.... I say that this field of inquiry [*tautên tèn historiên*] knows exactly what a human being is, through what causes he comes about, and everything else.⁷

The second passage is a fragment of Euripides that scholars tend to attribute to a lost tragedy, *Antiope*, which is known to have contained a debate, famous in Antiquity, between the two brothers Amphion and Zethus regarding the utility and the value of music, and by extension that of intellectual studies:

[Chorus:] Happy the man who, having attained
The knowledge deriving from inquiry [*tês historias ... mathêsîn*],
Aspires neither to trouble for his fellow citizens
Nor to unjust deeds,
But observes immortal nature's
Unaging order, where it was formed,
In what way, and how.
Never to men like this does the practice
of shameful actions come near.⁸

The third passage comes from an anonymous dialectical set of arguments known under the title of *Dissoi Logoi* (Pairs of arguments):

I think that it belongs to the same man and to the same art to be able to discuss briefly, to know the truth of things, to judge a legal case correctly, to be able to make speeches to the people, to know the arts of speeches, and to teach about the nature of all things, both their present condition and their origins.⁹

On the basis of these three texts, which echo the passage from the *Phaedo* and each other, we can see that “the inquiry into nature” involved two principal characteristics. On the one hand, it is directed toward a totality (it bears upon “all things” or upon “the whole”). On the other hand, it adopts a resolutely genetic perspective (it explains the existing condition of things by tracing the history of its development from the *origins*).

One can identify fairly well the stages that, after a process of rapid crystallization, ended up transforming the authors of treatises on “the nature of all things” into “natural philosophers,” those thinkers whom Aristotle called simply “naturalists” (*phusikoi*).¹⁰ In a passage of the *Memorabilia* that echoes the one in the *Phaedo*, Xenophon still has recourse to a comprehensive expression when, in the context of a defense of Socrates to which we shall return in a moment, he maintains that “he never discoursed, like most of the others, about the nature of all things [*peri tês tôn pantôn phuseôs*], investigating the condition of what the experts call ‘the world order’ [*hopôs ho kaloumenos hupo tôn sophistôn kosmos ekhei*] and by what necessities each of the heavenly phenomena occurs.”¹¹ Plato’s *Lysis* mentions the “totality” (named by the other term, *holon*, which Greek can use to designate a totality of things), but dissociates it from “nature”: the sages, who, together with Homer, maintain “that like must always be friend to like,” are presented as “speaking and writing on nature and on the whole” (*hoi peri phuseôs te kai tou holou dialegomenoi kai graphontes*).¹² But after the *Phaedo*, the term “nature” can come to stand in for whole expression. Thus Socrates asks in the *Philebus*, “And if someone supposes that he is conducting research on nature [*peri phuseôs ... zêtein*], do you know that he does research for his whole life on what has to do with this world, how it has come about, how it is affected, and how it acts [*ta peri ton kosmon tonde, hopê te gegonen kai hopê paskhei kai hopê poiei*]?”¹³ This substitution of the term “nature” for the more detailed expression leads to the threshold of the substantivizations of Aristotle, who employs very frequently, and as synonyms, “the authors (of treatises) on nature” (*hoi peri phuseôs*), “the naturalists” (*hoi phusikoi*), or sometimes “the physiologues” (*hoi phusiologoi*).¹⁴

In fact, there is a lineage of works among the Presocratic thinkers that corresponds to this description, of which the basic scheme very probably goes back to Anaximander.¹⁵ What is involved is a general history of the universe and of its constitutive parts, from its beginnings until a limit that seems most often to have gone beyond the current condition of the world and to have been constituted by the moment of its destruction (thus it would be more exact to speak of “cosmo-gono-phthorias” than of simple cosmogonies). The narrative comprised a certain number of elements that were more or less obligatory. From Anaximander to Philolaus and Democritus, by way of Anaximenes, Parmenides (in the second part of his poem), Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Diogenes of Apollonia, and others of lesser importance, the grand narratives “on nature” include an explanation of the way in which the universe, the heavenly bodies, and the earth were formed, with, already very early, discussion of more technical or specialized problems like the delimitation of the celestial and terrestrial zones, the inclination of the poles, the distance and size of the heavenly bodies, the luminosity of the moon, meteorological and terrestrial phenomena, rain and hail, earthquakes and tides, the origin of living beings and their reproduction, the sexual differentiation of embryos, the mechanism of physiological life, sleep and death, sensation and thought, and in some cases the development of life in society. In short: a cosmogony and a cosmology, a zoogony and a zoology, an anthropology and a physiology (in the modern sense of the term), which under certain circumstances could also be continued as a history of human civilization.¹⁶

Out of this complex whole, certain ancient texts retain essentially the cosmological aspect, and speak of “meteorology” and of “meteorologists”: for before the Aristotelian distinction between a supralunary region and an infralunary one, which tends to limit *meteôra* to the domain of “meteorological” phenomena alone, the term *meteôra* designated any phenomena occurring “on high,” and represented by synecdoche the whole of the inquiry into nature. In the opening scene of the *Protagoras*, the audience asks the sophist Hippias “a number of astronomical questions about nature and celestial phenomena [*meteôra*].”¹⁷ And it is only by contrast with “celestial

phenomena” that the author of the Hippocratic treatise *Fleshes* (who is opposed on this point to the author of *On Ancient Medicine*) delimited the field of medicine from the naturalists’ research:

I need say nothing about celestial phenomena [*peri tôn meteôrôn*] except insofar as I shall indicate their relevance to humans and the other animals—how they are born by nature and came to exist, what the soul is, what it is to be healthy, what it is to be sick, what is bad and good in the human, and whence it comes that he dies.¹⁸

But it is clear that the series of questions that Socrates enumerates in the *Phaedo* as having attracted the passion of his younger years also derives from the subjects the naturalists discussed within the framework of a totalizing program:

Are living creatures nourished when heat and cold undergo a kind of putrefaction, as some people say? Is it rather blood by which we think, or air, or fire? Or is it none of these, but rather the brain that supplies the sensations of hearing, sight, and smell, and from these latter that memory and opinion arise, and, when memory and opinion achieve a state of stability, does knowledge come about in accordance with these? And again, investigating the perishing of these processes, I also investigated what happens in the heavens and on earth.¹⁹

It is significant that the subjects mentioned by Socrates concern especially the physiology of knowledge, as though from the beginning Socrates had been more interested in questions that had, at least virtually, an epistemological scope than in accounts of the structure of the universe. Naturalism, born in Ionia, and in particular in Miletus, in the sixth century BCE, had been introduced into Athens by Anaxagoras, whom Pericles invited in 456/55 to become part of his entourage.²⁰ There it rapidly became an object of suspicion. The general tone is indicated by another fragment of Euripides, from an unknown play, that takes a position opposed to the praise for the life of study pronounced by Amphion in the *Antiope*:

Who when he sees these things does not begin by teaching
His soul to conceive of god,
And casts far away the crooked deceptions of those who study the
heavens,
Whose audacious tongue guesses at random about invisible
matters
without having any share in judgment?²¹

The debate regarding the harmlessness or harmfulness of meteorology was not at all merely theoretical. The decree of Diopethes, which permitted those who busied themselves with matters “on high” to be prosecuted under the charge of impiety, dates from 438/37. In the following year, its first victim was Anaxagoras (through whom Pericles was the intended target), for having maintained that the heavenly bodies were nothing but burning stones. Diogenes of Apollonia may also have been formally accused, several years after Anaxagoras, although this is disputed.²² Strange as it might seem, given that this tallies so badly with the image we have of Socrates on the basis of Plato’s *Apology of Socrates* and Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, Socrates was suspected of sharing the naturalists’ curiosity about the mechanisms of the universe and consequently their impiety. The key document in this connection is constituted by Aristophanes’s *Clouds*, staged in 423 BCE, which the *Apology of Socrates* denounces explicitly as the first real attack on Socrates, about twenty-five years before his trial in 399.²³

In fact, the *Clouds*, in anticipating the two accusations to which Socrates had to reply—corrupting the youth and introducing gods unknown to the city—displayed a Socrates who is indissociably both a “sophist,” someone capable of making “the weaker” argument “the stronger” one, and at the same time a “natural philosopher,” suspended in a basket and propagating scraps extracted parodistically from the doctrine of Diogenes of Apollonia, who maintained that the air on high was endowed with an intelligence that was greater because it was drier.²⁴

The *Apology* denounces this amalgam²⁵ as the product of a pure calumny: no one has ever heard Socrates discussing “what is below

the earth and in the sky.”²⁶ Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* repeats this: “No one ever saw Socrates doing, or heard him saying, anything impious or irreligious. For he never discoursed, like most of the others, about the nature of all things, investigating the condition of what the sophists call ‘the world order’ [*kosmos*] and by what necessities each of the heavenly phenomena occurs.”²⁷ So far from meddling with “divine things,” like the naturalists, Socrates directed his interest resolutely toward “human things” (*ta anthrôpina*), the good of man and the practice of virtue. Both in Xenophon and in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates becomes the figure of the first “humanist”—a humanism that is distinguished by its resolute rejection of all physical speculation. This is what is also meant, in a way that is at the same time more traditional and less transparent, by the well-attested formula according to which Socrates occupied himself not with physics but with ethics.²⁸

The simple and rhetorically effective opposition between pre-Socratic “naturalism” and Socratic “humanism” was intended in the first instance to mark a typological difference between two kinds of intellectual orientation. But it also opened the way for a historiographical interpretation, in virtue of which one orientation *follows* the other. The *Phaedo*, which also develops a more complex image of the relation between Socrates and ancient physics than the one presented in the *Apology* or the *Memorabilia*, indisputably favored such an interpretation by recalling what the *Apology* and the *Memorabilia*, for understandable reasons, had taken great care not to mention: namely, that Socrates himself had gone through a naturalist phase in his earlier years. We have already encountered this passage: “When I myself was young, I was incredibly eager for the kind of wisdom that they call the investigation of nature. For it seemed to me splendid to know the causes of each thing, why each thing comes into being and why it perishes and why it exists.”²⁹ The doxographic tradition provides more precise outlines for this statement when it makes Socrates the disciple of Archelaus, himself a natural philosopher located within Anaxagoras’s sphere of influence but one who is said to have dealt with ethics too (this last feature was perhaps intended to facilitate the transition).³⁰

Plato was perfectly capable of constructing a biographical fiction for the sake of the cause.³¹ But the idea of a Socrates who was once an adept of natural philosophy is not devoid of plausibility, not only from an intrinsic point of view (one has to start somewhere), but also because it lets us understand how Aristophanes could have put into Socrates's mouth statements that were typical of natural philosophy, even if in 423 Socrates, by then forty-six years old, and already celebrated for being the person he really was, was certainly no longer speculating about meteorological or physiological phenomena. In any case, from the point of view of the historicization of the pre-Socratics, the important point is that if the Socrates of the *Phaedo* does not practice physical speculation, this is not only because it is alien to him, but also and especially because by now he has *separated* himself from it. The two epochs of the history of thought that future histories of philosophy will distinguish—before Socrates and after him—are in origin two epochs of the life of the one and only Socrates himself, who practiced natural philosophy before he became himself.

The quasi-historiographical use of the pre-Socratics, detached from biographical considerations, is fully attested for the first time in the prologue of the fifth book of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, which by reason of its very large diffusion (and apparent simplicity) probably exerted the greatest influence on the constitution of the modern concept of the Presocratics.

This prologue contains a forceful encomium of philosophy as practical philosophy. Not only does philosophy assert that virtue is sufficient for happiness (a claim whose merits Cicero had every reason to appreciate in the particularly difficult situation in which he found himself while he was composing this work); it is also at the origin of all the benefits that humanity enjoys. For it is to philosophy that man is indebted for the formation of cities, with all the social, cultural, legal, and moral bonds that political life presupposes.³² Only the uneducated do not know that "those by whom the life of men was first organized were philosophers."³³ In such a perspective, the history of philosophy is coextensive with the history of civilization.

Cicero distinguishes three stages. In the first, primitive phase of the development of societies, philosophers exist, but under a different name, that of “sages.” These are not only the “Seven Sages,” of which there existed a traditional and more-or-less established list,³⁴ but also mythical or quasi-mythical figures like Odysseus, Nestor, Atlas, Prometheus, Cepheus, or Lycurgus. It is to Pythagoras that the role is assigned of having been the first to introduce the term “philosophy,” with which the wisdom of the sages takes a different turn. Pythagoras explains to the tyrant Leon, who is intrigued by this neologism, that unlike the sages, who are busy with their civilizing activity, the philosophers dedicate themselves to “theory,” observing for the sake of observation, without being guided by any other motive than the contentment that this observation provides them. The analogy he offers is celebrated: just as an athletic competition brings together not only athletes struggling for glory, and merchants and customers attracted by the commerce, but also spectators who have come to admire the competition, so too there exist in this life not only ambitious people and merchants but also the small group of those people who, “counting everything else as nothing, carefully examine the nature of things”: it is these, the pure “theoreticians,” who are called “philosophers.”³⁵ In Cicero’s presentation of him, Pythagoras still combines within himself “wisdom” and “philosophy”: no sooner has he given Leon the explanation mentioned above than he leaves to legislate in Magna Graecia. But by its nature, theoretical activity has a tendency to be exclusive. The philosophers who come after Pythagoras are no longer anything but pure theoreticians: henceforth they are remote from practical questions. It is to Socrates that the role will be assigned of having reintroduced these latter questions into the field of philosophy, which in this way he leads back (according to a celebrated phrase) “from the sky to the earth,” where it had originally been rooted but which in the meantime it had abandoned.

Although Cicero does not hesitate to identify the totality of the postsapiential and pre-Socratic philosophers with meteorologists, indeed with astronomers, the periodization he adopts, once it was accepted, inevitably led to a reinterpretation of the concept of “nature.” For although among the thinkers earlier than Socrates there

were indeed many who correspond to the characteristics of the inquiry on nature, this is not the case for all of them. Neither Parmenides, nor (even less) his disciples Melissus and Zeno, nor Heraclitus is a naturalist in the sense described above: in different degrees and each in his own way, their aim is instead to mark the limits of such an inquiry, indeed to put its very legitimacy into question. But the concept of “nature” is complex enough that thinkers who did not belong at all, or did not do so essentially, to the “inquiry on nature” were capable of being considered to have been “natural philosophers.” Xenophon already explains that one of the reasons for Socrates’s hostility with regard to the “natural philosophers” had to do with the uncertainties to which the knowledge they claimed was subject, and to which the divergence of their position regarding the question of knowing *what the number of beings is* testifies.³⁶ Now, in a way that is surprising at first glance, not only are those people who practice the inquiry into nature considered to be “natural philosophers” here, but also those who deny the existence of any change, and thus that of the “natural” processes of generation and corruption (i.e., Parmenides and his Eleatic disciples). “Among those who are preoccupied with the nature of all things, some think that what is is only one, others that it is infinite in number; the ones that all things are always in motion, the others that nothing could ever be in motion; and the ones that all things come into being and are destroyed, the others that nothing could ever either come into being or be destroyed.”³⁷

For the Eleatics to be capable of being understood as “natural philosophers,” the meaning of the term “nature” cannot be exactly identical with that in the *Phaedo*. It is easy to reconstruct the logic of the slippage that produces the transition from a narrow sense to a more general one. “Nature” (*physis*) can refer in Greek not only to the processes of genesis and corruption, that is, to the visible or official aspect of the inquiry into nature, but also to the “nature” that is deployed and subsists through these processes—what Aristotle will call the “principle” (*arkhê*) or “substrate” (*hupokeimenon*), “of which all beings are made, that from which they arise at the beginning and into which they return at the end.”³⁸ Then it is enough to interpret the originary “nature” ontologically, recognizing it as “what truly is” (by opposition to the things or composites that have arisen

from it), for the study of nature to be capable of including even the thesis of those who refuse to attribute all the determinations of “nature” in a more restricted sense to “what is,” that is, to “nature” in the broad sense. It is precisely this ontological conception of nature that Xenophon, or his source, puts at the basis of the debate among the naturalists, because this latter bears not on the sky and natural phenomena, but on the number and quality of *beings*. It is in this way that the pre-Socratics are also the first ontologists.³⁹

Antiquity never officially adopted the classification that has been sketched out here: as a general rule, the naturalists remained naturalists *stricto sensu*, even if ancient tradition reports that Parmenides’s writings, and even more Melissus’s, were entitled “On Nature,” like those of the “natural philosophers.”⁴⁰ Although Aristotle employed a concept of nature that was sufficiently differentiated to justify the transition from one sense of *phusis* to the other, he always respects the distinction between the majority of the ancient philosophers, constituted by the “natural philosophers,” and the others, who refuse nature (the Eleatics in general) or who only accept it as a kind of second best (Parmenides). Aristotle’s need to assign clear limits to physics from his own point of view, by distinguishing it not only from dialectic and mathematics but also from first philosophy, impelled him to maintain the demarcation, even if he does not coin a general designation for the second group. Only the Skeptic Sextus Empiricus, in a passage that refers to the Aristotelian demarcation, assigns the Eleatics the names of “immobilists” (*stasiôtai*) and “non-naturalists” (*aphusikoi*).⁴¹

The Socratic-Ciceronian tradition is characterized by the fact that it locates the rupture between Socrates and his predecessors at the level of a certain *content*, in certain cases linked to a definite epistemological attitude: before Socrates, nature, the sky, and more generally being, within a purely theoretical perspective; starting with Socrates, man, his action, and morality, within the perspective of an essentially practical philosophy. The Platonic-Aristotelian tradition, by contrast, locates this rupture at the level of the *method*, that is, of the instruments that allow the contents to become objects of thought: one might say that it attributes to Socrates a second-order

kind of thought, by opposition to the first-order kind that was characteristic of his predecessors.⁴² This shift toward epistemological questions, which evidently can open up the possibility of reinterpreting not only Socrates himself but also the pre-Socratics, occurs for the first time in the *Phaedo* of Plato. Just as Plato sketches out, by means of the theory of contraries and of the formal cause, the categories that direct Aristotle's physics as it is developed in the first book of his *Physics*, so too does he pave the way for the essentially continuist history of the beginnings of philosophy that Aristotle will narrate in the first book of his *Metaphysics*. It is all as though, at the end of a process that has now been concluded, and at the very moment that Socrates is about to be executed (as I recalled earlier, the *Phaedo* takes place on this very day), it at last becomes possible to deploy a more philosophically balanced vision than the one that was allowed by the needs of his defense.

In the story that Socrates tells about his own intellectual development, which constitutes a long digression within the last of his arguments in favor of the immortality of the soul, he recalls the circumstances that led him to undertake a "second sailing" (*deuteros plous*), once he had recognized the aporias of the physics that had at first aroused his passions and its inability to give an account of the final cause. This time, the rupture, deep though it is, occurs only on the basis of a shared philosophical project, as is suggested by the very metaphor of the second sailing, which presupposes that one and the same voyage is being continued, even if by other means.⁴³

Cebes has just formulated an objection against Socrates's last argument: to establish that the soul pre-exists our birth, Cebes remarks, does not in the least allow us to conclude that it is immortal.⁴⁴ For it is quite possible that, even if the soul did pre-exist, it could be corruptible in the end, and that its entrance into a body marked the beginning of a process of deterioration that will lead ineluctably to its destruction, and that this would be the case even if one had to agree that it would last for a certain time.

To answer this objection, Socrates acknowledges, is no light task. This presupposes "a profound investigation into the cause of generation and corruption in general." However, the "inquiry into nature," which is supposed to deal with this topic (it discusses "what comes

about and what is destroyed"⁴⁵), is not up to this task. So far from rendering explicit the cause (*aition*) of the processes of generation and corruption, it only talks about the material conditions that are necessary for their effectuation, what Plato in the *Timaeus* calls by the technical term of the "auxiliary causes" (*sunaitia*).⁴⁶ Indeed, only the cause that Aristotle will call "that for the sake of which" (the final cause) corresponds to what Socrates understands here under the name of cause. That is why, for a moment, he had placed his hopes in Anaxagoras, who was the only natural philosopher, according to the text of the *Phaedo*, to detach himself from the anonymous mass of his peers by maintaining that "intelligence organized the world and is the cause of all things."⁴⁷ The problem is that this statement in Anaxagoras, according to Socrates's reading of it, is not followed by any effect, given that he explains the formation of the world by what Socrates, using a pejorative plural, calls "airs, aethers, waters, and many other strange entities."⁴⁸

However, the second sailing, directed "toward the search for causes,"⁴⁹ does not lead directly all the way to the final cause. It borrows the path of a hypothetical procedure resting on a theory of the formal cause (the Forms as causes). The argument by which Socrates will establish the incorruptibility of the soul in order to respond finally to Cebes consists in saying that neither a Form itself, like Cold, nor any entity depending upon the presence of such a Form, like snow, would be capable of receiving within itself a contrary Form (in the present case, Heat). Either one or the other of two things must happen: they will have to "either perish or withdraw"—perish, if the entity in question is perishable, like snow; withdraw, if the entity in question is exempt from death by essence or definition. But this last hypothesis applies to life, of which the concept, according to Socrates, analytically implies "immortality." The soul too, which is its principle, will be immortal, and hence "incorruptible."

This argument, which could be called "biological" (as one speaks of the "ontological argument"), invokes an example belonging to "ethics" at one of its stages: if Socrates remains in prison, this is not because of his bones and muscles, which are only necessary conditions, but because he thinks this is right.⁵⁰ The use of these distinctively Platonic philosophemes makes the transition from the pre-

Socratics to Socrates coincide with the one from a purely Socratic Socrates to a distinctly Platonic Socrates.⁵¹ But the main argument, to which this example is subordinated, does not bear upon human affairs. Instead it sketches the outlines of a new physics, of which the distinctive mark would be that it is structured teleologically.⁵² Thus at the horizon of the “second sailing” of the *Phaedo* we glimpse the *Timaeus*, which, in renewing a connection with the “naturalists” cosmological project, constitutes a decisive moment in the reappropriation of the Socrates of the *Apology* by the science of natural phenomena. Suggestive evidence is provided by the final eschatological myth of the *Phaedo*, with the geographic-cosmological description of the world where the souls are divided up after death, including a hydrology that Aristotle criticizes in his *Meteorologica* as Plato’s theory “on rivers and the sea.”⁵³

Aristotle did not follow Plato on this path, which indubitably effaces what was distinctive about Socrates for the sake of a problematic that is no longer Socrates’s own. But nonetheless Aristotle takes over the idea that the pre-Socratics and Socrates are engaged in the same enterprise, of which the object is not what comes to be and what perishes, but more generally the search for causes. It is precisely this that earns them the name of “first philosophers,” or more exactly that of “the first ones to philosophize,” which Aristotle awards them in the first book of the *Metaphysics*.⁵⁴

Starting with chapter 3, *Metaphysics* 1, which opens with a characterization of the highest knowledge as “wisdom,” is dedicated to discovering among Aristotle’s predecessors (“the first philosophers,” but also Socrates and Plato) the emergence of the four causes, for which the *Physics* had presented the systematic table: first, the material cause, of which Aristotle wonders whether or not one can already attribute the notion to the poets and to the group of those whom he designates as “the theologians” (the authors of theogonies, like Hesiod or the Orphics) rather than to Thales; then, in order, the efficient cause, about which one might “suspect” that Hesiod had a notion even before Parmenides; the final cause, in Anaxagoras and Empedocles (chapters 3 and 4); and the formal cause among the Pythagoreans and Plato (chapters 5 and 6). Given that these are the “first philosophers,” what is involved is not so much discoveries as

rather anticipations. The final cause, in Empedocles, is called “Friendship” or “Love” (*Philia*); in Anaxagoras, it is implied by the directive function of the mind; the efficient cause, again, is called “Love” (*Eros*) in Hesiod and Parmenides. And the “bodies” themselves that the naturalists take as principles are nothing but the prefiguration of the substrate and of potentiality. In such a perspective, there is an unbroken continuity from Thales to Plato.⁵⁵ Although he mentions that Socrates “busied himself with ethical matters and not with nature as a whole,”⁵⁶ Aristotle, far from locating his contribution to the history of philosophy in this very choice, suggests instead its contingent character: what Socrates was the first to do, “seeking with regard to them [i.e., ethical questions] the universal,” was to interest himself in definitions.⁵⁷ This novelty is itself conceived as the premise for the Platonic theory of the Forms, the last theory of principles to be presented by Aristotle before the recapitulation in chapter 7, the criticism in chapters 8 and 9, and the conclusion in chapter 10, which confers upon Socrates a status of an intermediary rather than one of an initiator.

This interpretation of Socrates is found again in the parallel passage of Book 13 of the *Metaphysics* (except that there Aristotle specifies the contribution of Democritus and, earlier, of the Pythagoreans with regard to the search for definitions⁵⁸), and it is also deployed in the first book of the *Parts of Animals*.⁵⁹ The question is that of the method in biology. Pointing ironically, though implicitly, to the distance that separates the “natural philosophers’” pretensions from their accomplishments, Aristotle defends the idea that there exist two sorts of causes of which the naturalist must take account on pain of missing “nature”: the final cause (which in this context includes the formal cause) and necessity (which belongs to “matter”).⁶⁰ Aristotle explains that the reason why his predecessors were never able to envisage the final cause except by a lucky chance (they do nothing more than “stumble upon” it) is that the practice of the definition of essence had still been foreign to them: even Democritus, of whom it was true that he engaged himself in the search for definitions, does it because “he was guided by the thing itself” (in an unreflective way), and not “because it would be necessary for physics” (in a conscious way). Socrates, for his part, did indeed con-

tribute to the progress of the theory of definition, but since he followed the inclination, common to the philosophers of his era, “toward useful virtue and politics,” he provided no benefit to physics. From this point of view, Aristotelian physics—which gives a place to the final (and formal) cause next to the material cause, thanks to an explicit theory of definition and of essence—can be seen as a synthesis of the older Presocratic physics and of a Socratic impulse that turns out to be of an essentially epistemological nature.

Thus the image that emerges from Aristotle is complex. On the one hand, there does indeed exist a sequence passing from physics to ethics (and politics). But the attention directed to practice does not so much open a new era of philosophy as it characterizes the interest and spirit of a generation (the expression “the philosophers,” *hoi philosophountes*, in the plural, might even include the “sophists”). Even though Socrates himself has a share in this common interest, ethics is scarcely more than the domain or the material to which he applies a different kind of concern. Socrates, a philosopher of definition, is inscribed within the continuity of a tradition that he contributes to regenerating rather than concluding. In such a perspective, the Socratic caesura is at the same time maintained and subordinated.

Within ancient philosophical historiography, doubtless no manifestation of this relativization is more tangible than the place assigned to Socrates in Diogenes Laertius’s *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. The very fact that Diogenes Laertius divides the whole of Greek philosophy into two lineages—the “Ionic” lineage, which he derives from Anaximander (and Thales), and an “Italic” lineage, at the beginning of which stands Pythagoras (and Pherecydes of Syros)—precluded any division of a Ciceronian type, which presupposes a unilinear development of the history of philosophy.⁶¹ But in the very midst of the Ionic lineage, Socrates plays the role of an intermediary link between Archelaus, on the one hand, and Plato and the other Socratics on the other.⁶²

Thus a major discontinuity in the history of philosophy tended to be reabsorbed by the introduction of a middle term: as we saw above,⁶³ the doxographical testimonia on Archelaus suggest that if he was elevated to the dignity of having been Socrates’s teacher, this

was less because it was he in particular who was lurking behind the anonymous “natural philosophers” of the *Phaedo* than because, fully devoted to the study of “nature” though he still was, he had already discussed ethical questions, even before Socrates appeared on the scene. It is not that Diogenes Laertius knew nothing of the Socratic rupture. Returning to the relation between Archelaus and Socrates when he enumerates the parts of philosophy (physics, ethics, and dialectic), he notes—copies out—that “until Archelaus, there was the natural variety [scil. of philosophy]; starting with Socrates, there was, as has been said, the ethical variety.”⁶⁴ The chapter dedicated to Archelaus repeats this.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, it remains true that the occasional thematization of the Socratic rupture appears necessarily like a subordinate moment because of the construction of the whole. Not only are there no Presocratics in Diogenes Laertius: the pre-Socratics themselves do not enjoy anything more than a virtual existence there. From this point of view, the emergence in Eberhard of the formula “Presocratic philosophy”⁶⁶ confirms the fact, which is well attested otherwise, that the modern historiography of ancient philosophy was originally constructed against the schemes that had been inherited from Diogenes Laertius; needless to say, the Cicero-nian model played a decisive role in this reconfiguration.