

Thales: The First Philosopher of the Western World?

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Although Thales has traditionally been seen as the first philosopher in the Western tradition, this is not as well supported as it first seems. Thales' place as the "first philosopher" rests on his physical doctrine that all things come from one element: water. Although many ancient authors record this material monist doctrine of Thales, they all rely on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Aristotle's conception of Thales was adopted by his successor Theophrastus, who was quoted by Aetius. Aetius in turn became the source for many writers on ancient philosophy in later antiquity. Throughout this long span of time (nearly 1400 years from Thales to later authors such as Suda) Aristotle's testimony was simplified and accepted as fact.

Since Thales' reputation as the first philosopher rests on his physical doctrine, and since our knowledge of this doctrine rests on Aristotle's testimony, whether Thales can be properly called the "first philosopher" depends on the veracity of one passage in the *Metaphysics*.

By examining these sources, I argue that Aristotle is not a completely reliable historian of philosophy. He was not interested in impartial reporting as much as interpreting philosophical progression through his own teleological system. Aristotle also informs us that he did not have access to anything Thales might have written. This places Thales in the oral tradition, a tradition into which spurious stories easily enter. I further argue that Aristotle committed some demonstrable misinterpretations in this passage in order that the progression of philosophy fit his schematic. Most likely Aristotle or his sources analogized Thales to later physical philosophy on the basis of another reported doctrine. This second doctrine stands a much better chance of being genuine since it was not so easily incorporated into Aristotle's philosophy. I will conclude that, while Thales becomes a more shadowy figure in the progression from cosmogonic poetry to philosophy, his immediate successors (who are better attested) come to the fore.