HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Epic poetry and early Greek philosophy.

The epic imagination privileged comprehensive poetic visions of the order of the cosmos and of the passions displayed by the noble figures of adventure and folk thought. In other words the epic vision, even in a sometimes prosaic writer like Hesiod, inclines to imagine the big picture. While sharing this big picture poetic concern, the philosophical imagination took a different path into the description of what the world is. We may best consider that path as one of analysis, the taking apart of the experienced world, to see what makes it tick, as distinct from the epic poet's embrace in formalized language of the outflowering meanings of the human and natural world. We can see the *philosophical* dimension of thought in the earliest Greek rational analysis, emerging from the Greek speaking cultural centers of Asia Minor. While it may seem that the three Milesian 'philosophers,' working from Asia Minor in the sixth century, created kinds of mythology of the chief elements of the physical world--*air, fire*, *water*—we will find, upon looking further, that the *analytical* impulse is what prevails in the thinking of these men.

The analytic imagination. Epic poetry delights in narratives built on narratives, and on extensive—and of course meaningful—adventuring into implication, meaning, and interpretation. The earliest forms of *philosophy* in Greece grew up through the mists of Greek cultural awareness, and in the forms of mythology, the complex of tales the Greeks worshipped and fabulated through, meanings of the physical and spiritual world were constantly put into play. (The dance of fantasy with hard thought is what makes a great mythology like the Greek of lasting interest.) But mythology is only a step toward analysis…and rarely pursues its narratives to a conclusion. With the Milesians, from the cultural center of Miletus in Asia Minor, with its face toward the older and more sophisticated cultures of the East—Babylonian, Egyptian—the mythic impulse began to assume the form of a reflective address to the tales told by the Greeks from immemorial time. Into these world narratives was inserted a question: *what is the essence of the dramatic life epic and myth bring before us?*