



Bridging Minds: Ancient Greek and Chinese Philosophy

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Καλώς ήρθατε στην Αθήνα!

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Athens, July 2025



Bridging Minds:
Ancient Greek and
Chinese Philosophy

Wisdom across civilizations

Core Questions in Philosophy

What is a good life?

How should we live?

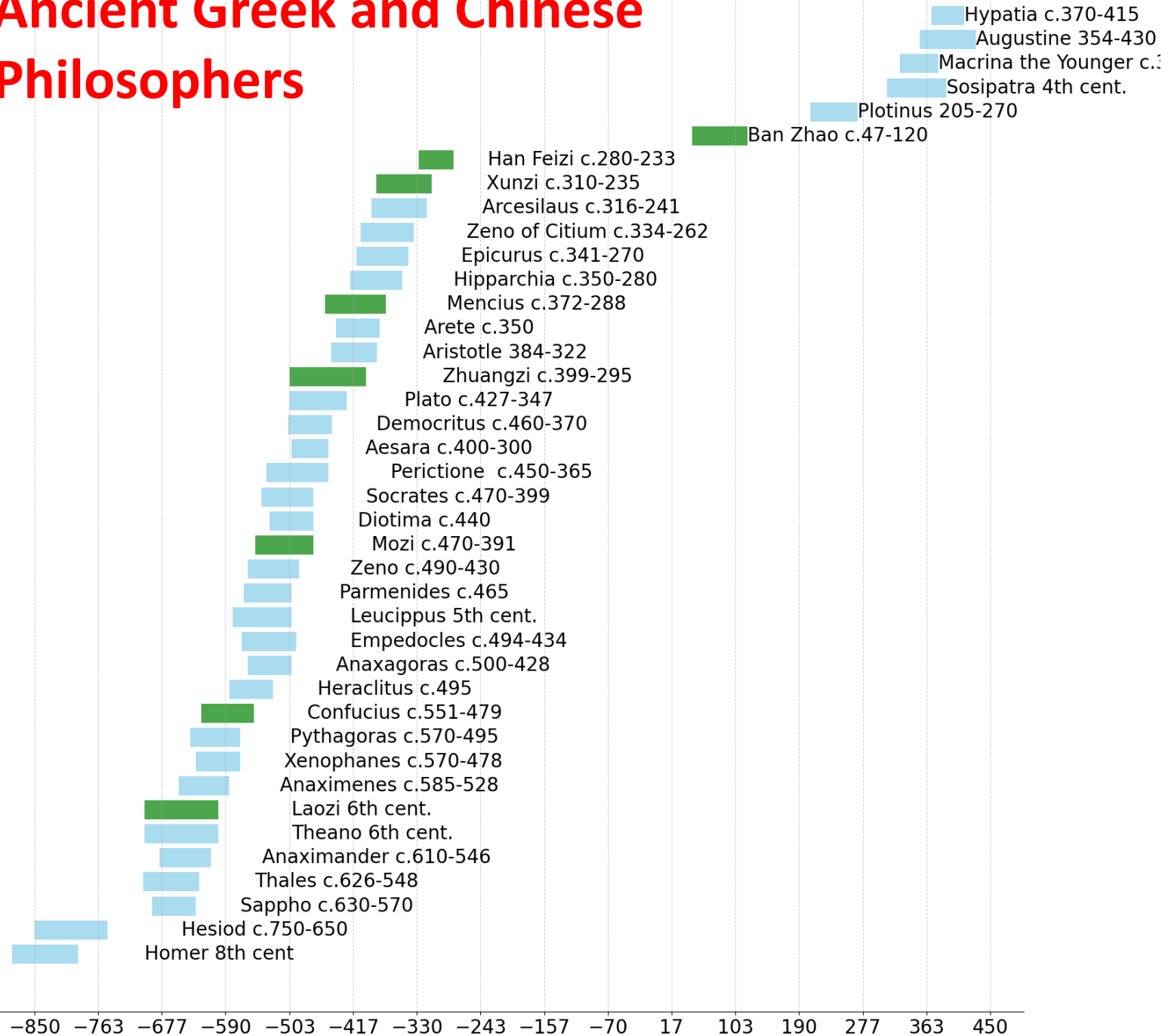
What is the nature of the world?

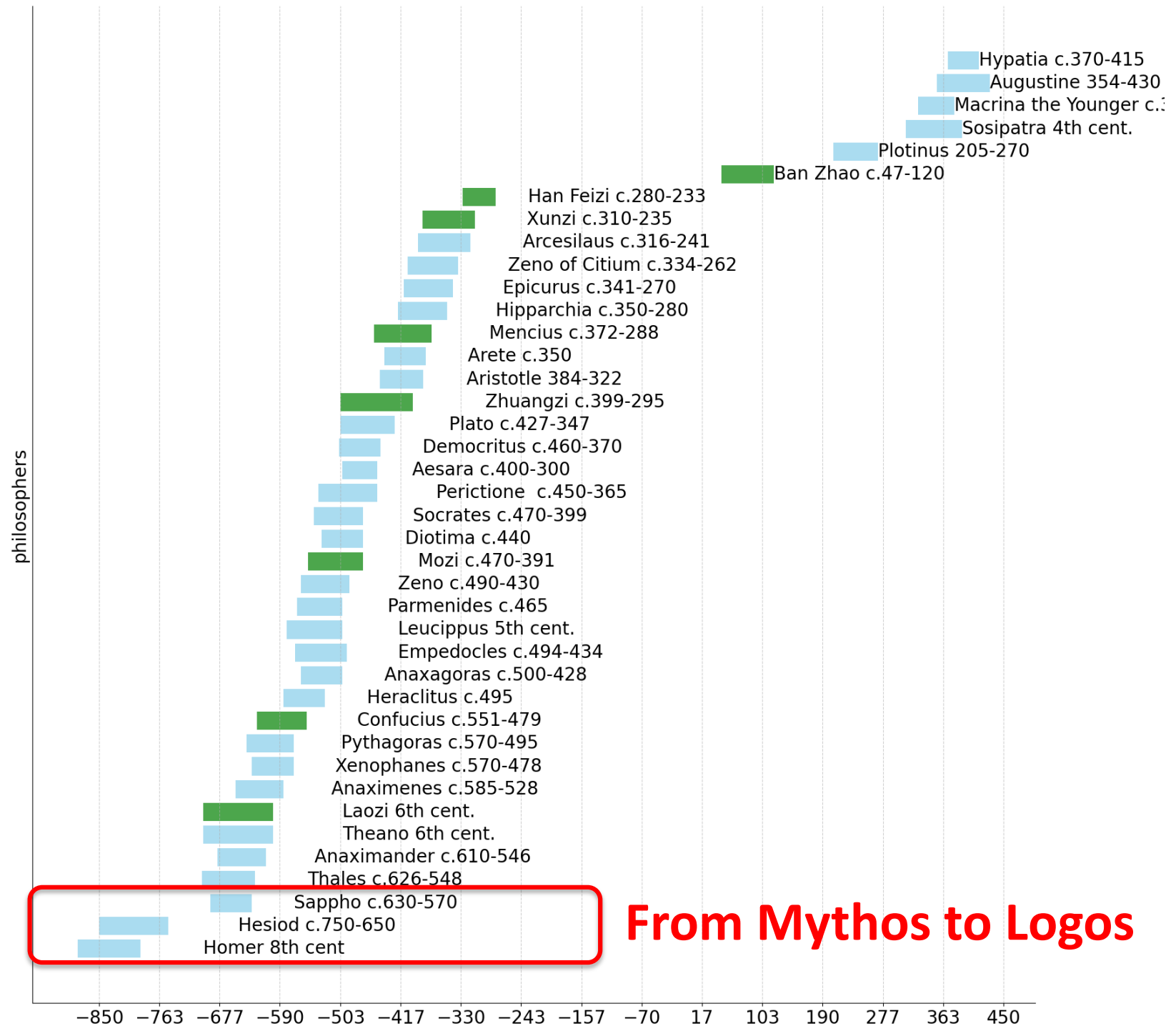
How do we know truth?

These questions were central to both traditions.

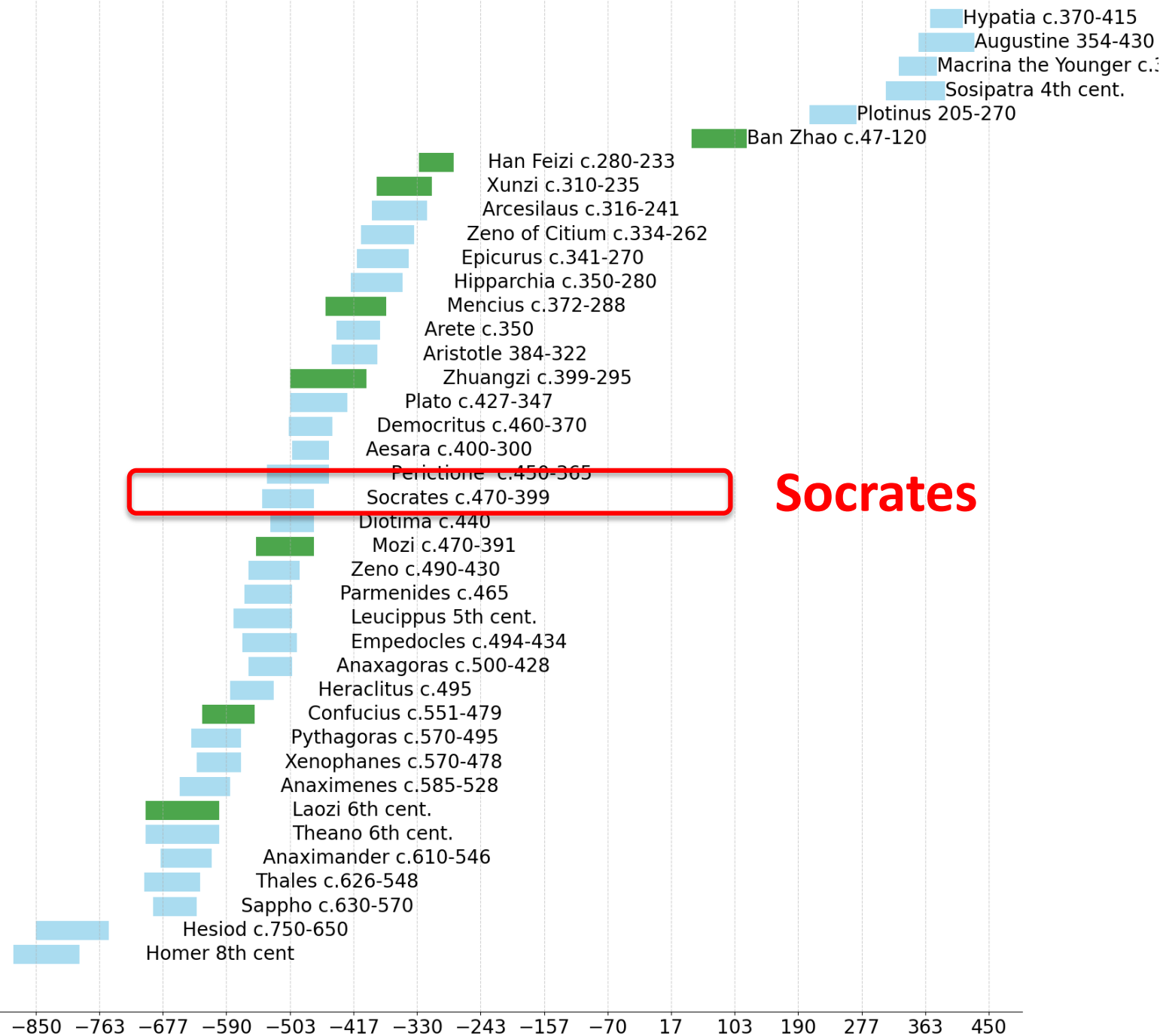
Ancient Greek and Chinese Philosophers

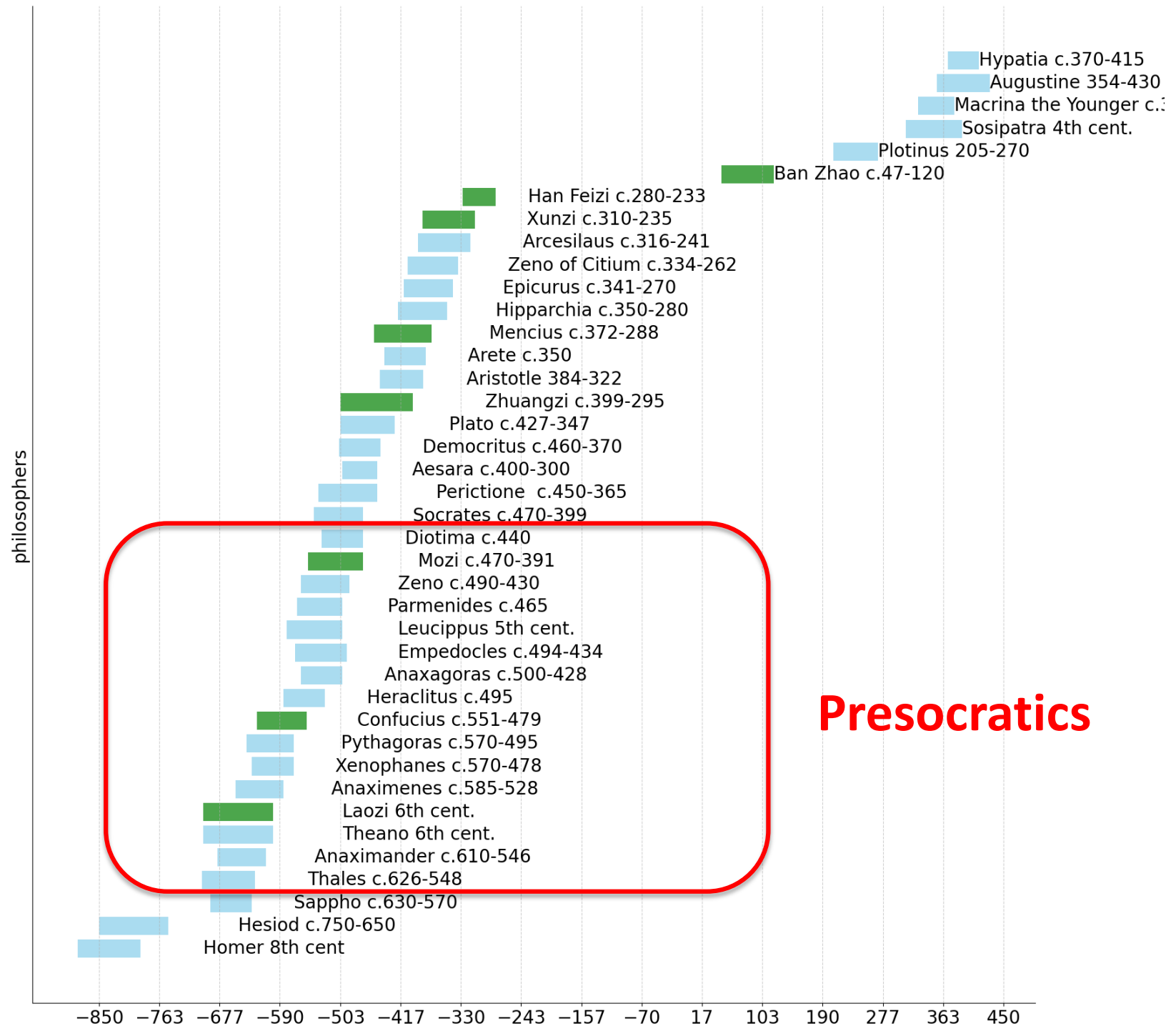
philosophers

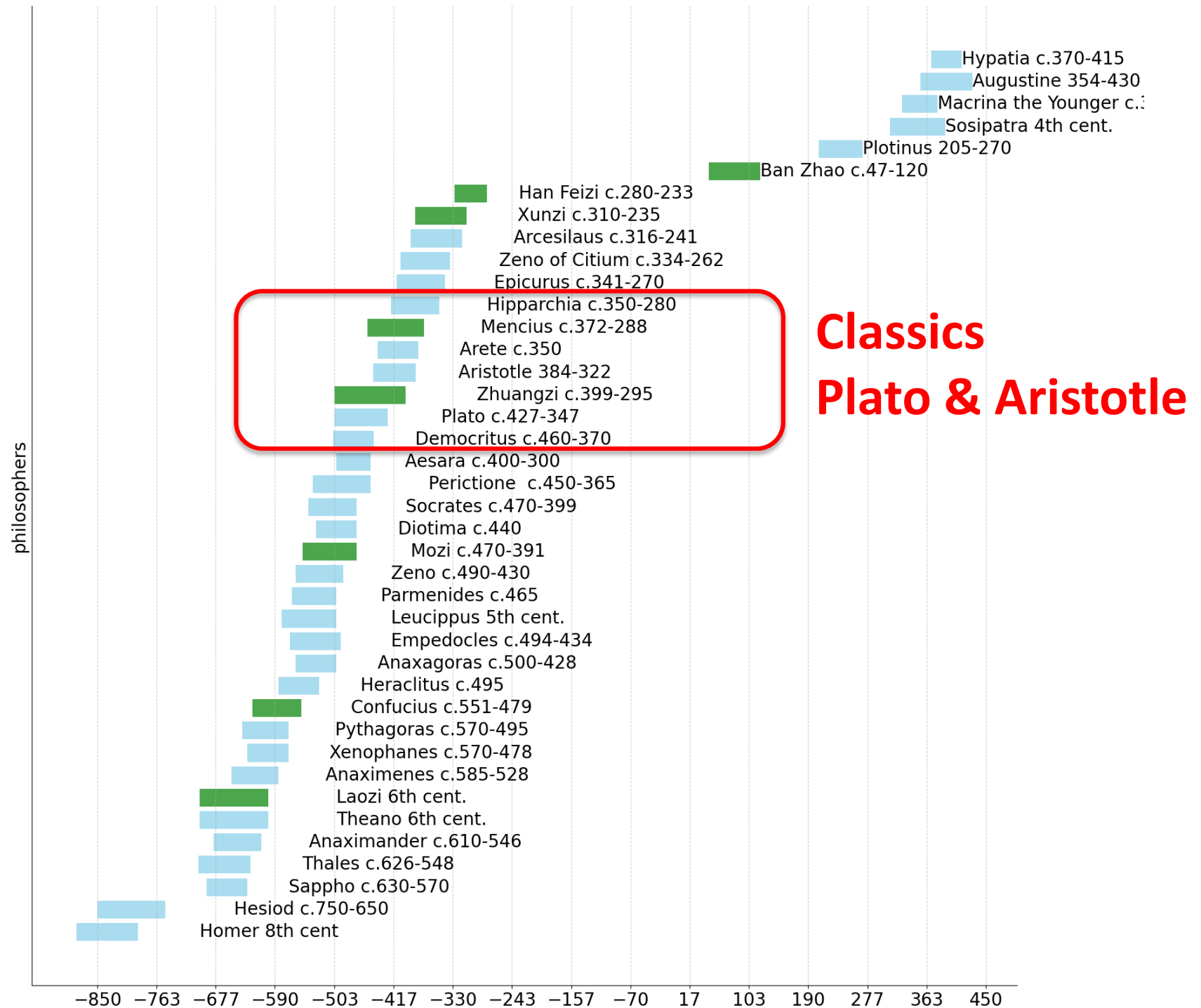




philosophers







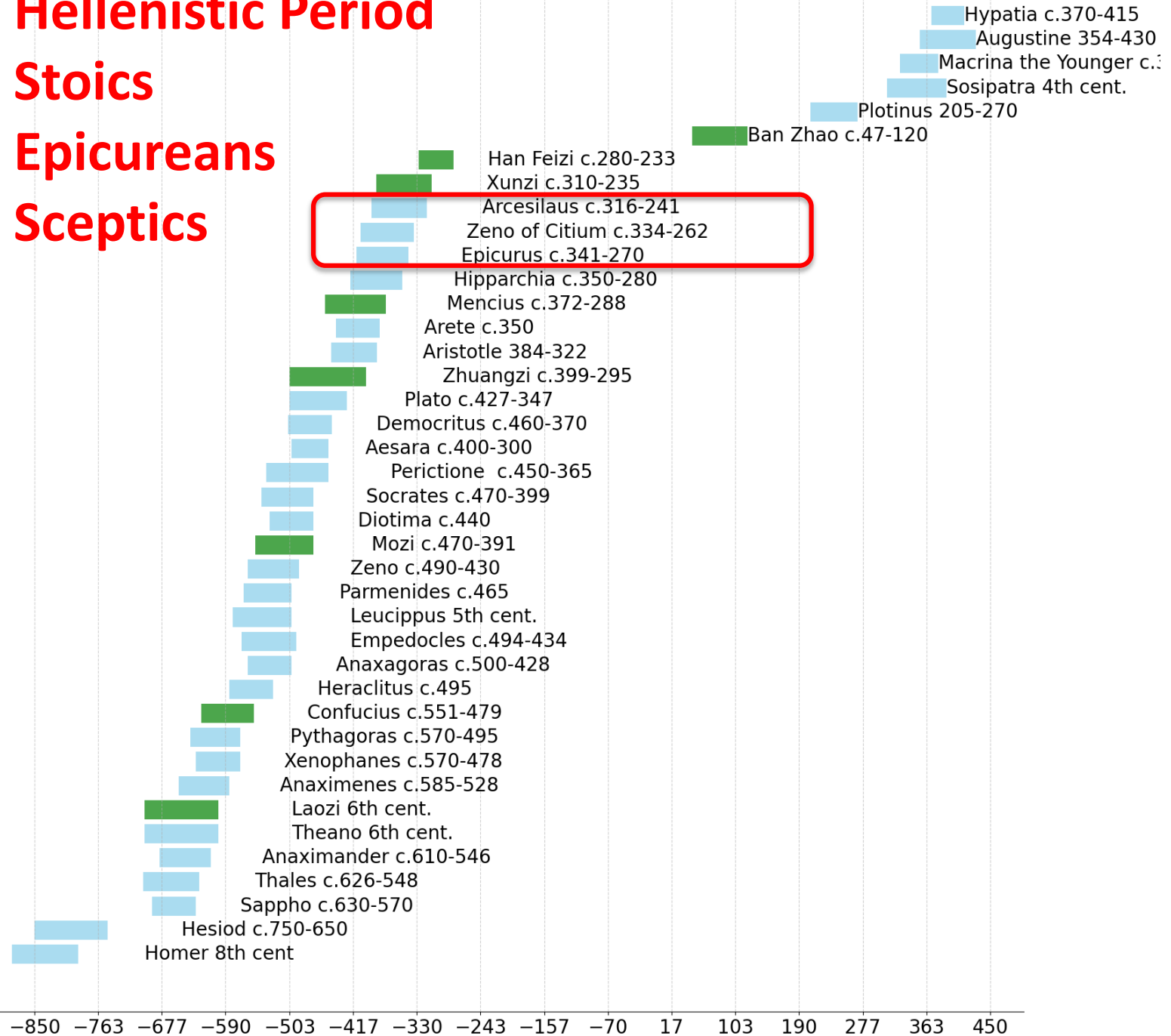
Hellenistic Period

Stoics

Epicureans

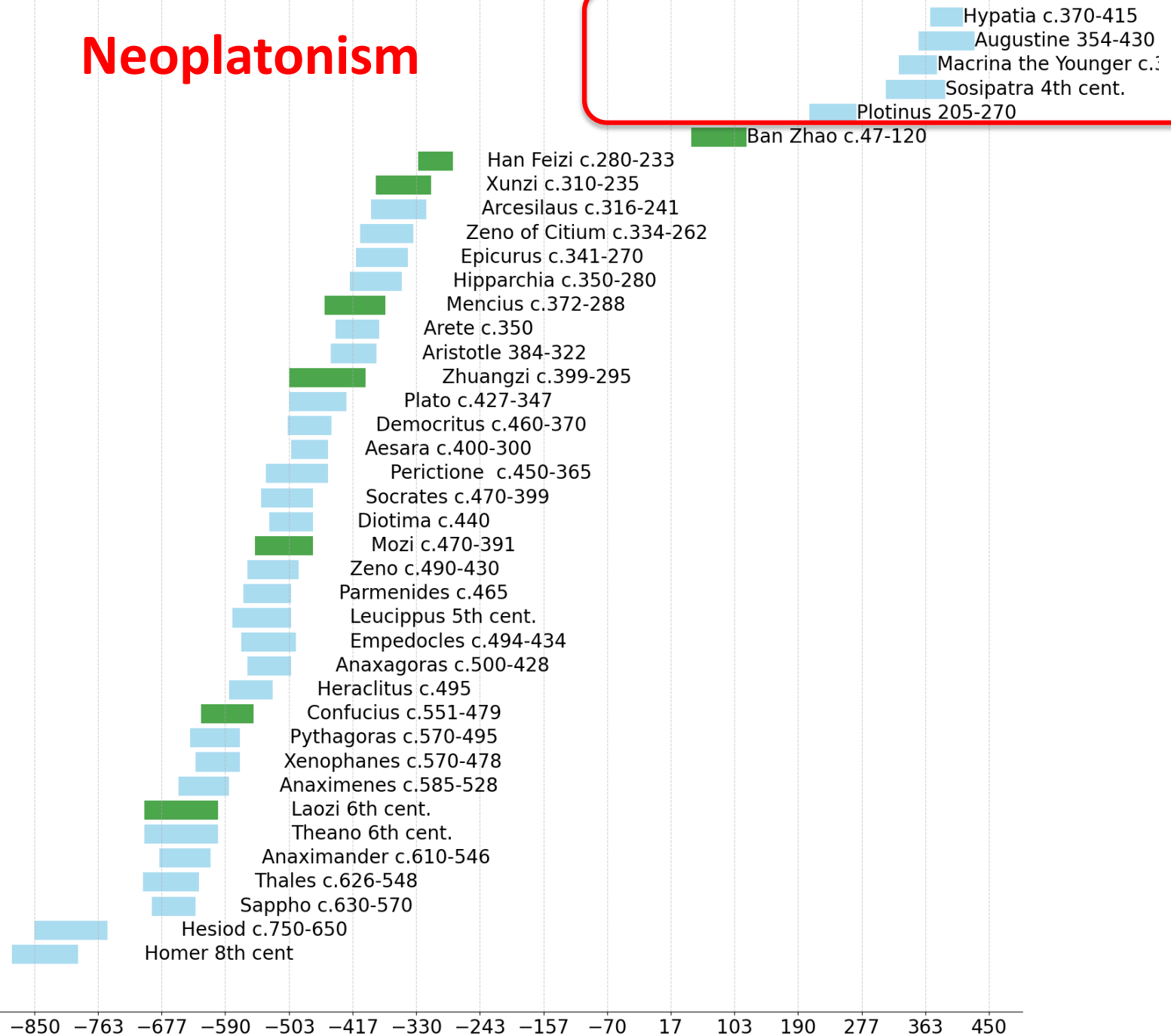
Sceptics

philosophers



Neoplatonism

philosophers



From Mythos to Logos

- The Greeks had begun to speculate very early on metaphysical questions - the origin and nature of the universe - time and love
 - poems of Homer, Hesiod, Sappho
 - But relied on mythology and on personal experience to provide the answers
- Later, they discarded religious mythology to answer these questions and developed a secular methodology based on observation and logic
- With this development came **the birth of philosophy**

The birth of philosophy

Philosophy originated in the Greek city states along the coast of Asia Minor around 600 BC



- Because they were not as bound by tradition as city-states on mainland Greece

- Because they were also constantly in touch with the ancient science and speculation of the Middle East

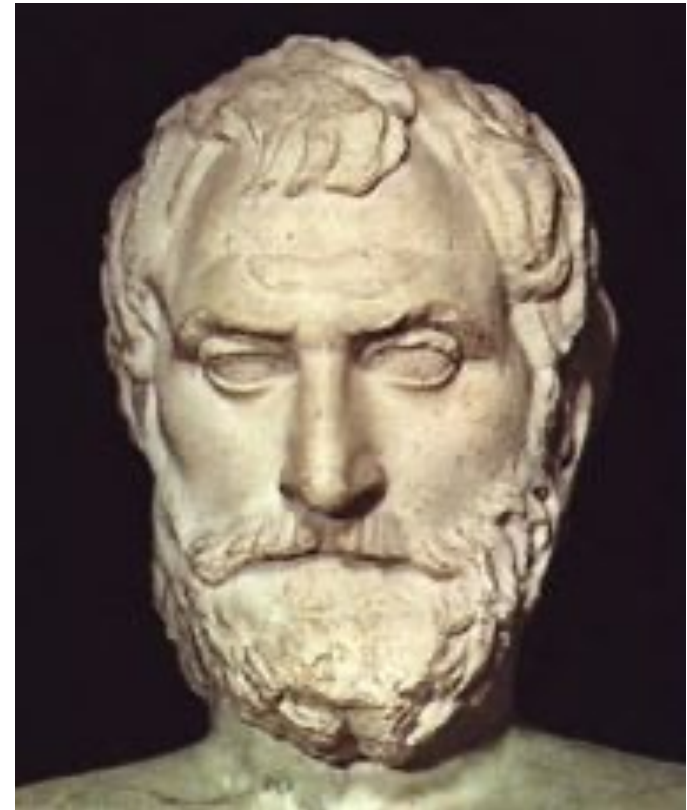
They were more open to intellectual innovation and speculation than counterparts on the mainland

Philosophy Before Socrates

- **Presocratics** : The First Philosophers of Nature
 - lived before Socrates (6th–5th c. BCE) and shifted from myth to reason.
 - Focused on nature, change, and the cosmos.
 - Asked: What is the world made of?
How does change happen?
 - First philosophers of natural explanation (physikoi).

THALES OF MILETUS

- Born around 625 BC
- Became a well-known astronomer and correctly predicted a solar eclipse
 - Also developed theories about size and orbits of the sun and moon



THALES' THEORY OF THE UNIVERSE

- Divided all matter in the universe into two categories
 - Material objects
 - Which had their origin in water
 - Animate spirits
 - Had the ability to move on their own
- We all know that his theory was wrong, but he nonetheless did something important:
 - Saw universe as tangible, finite, and knowable
 - Not a mysterious and nebulous entity that only the gods could understand

THALES OF MILETUS

First (West) Philosopher

- Asserted that the universe could be known by men
- Rejected theological and mythological interpretations of the universe and instead sought rational explanations
- Opened the door for a whole new series of questions once the age-old obstacle of relying on the gods for all answers had been overcome
 - What is man and what is the best society for man?
 - What is truth and how can one recognize it?
 - What is virtue and how can one acquire it?

The Milesian School – The First Scientists

Early thinkers from Miletus who sought the substance of all things:

- **Thales** – Everything is made of water
- **Anaximander** – The 'Apeiron' (the Boundless) is the origin
- **Anaximenes** – Everything is air, condensed or rarefied

Heraclitus of Ephesus

'Everything flows' – Panta Rhei

- Philosopher of change and conflict
- Believed in unity through opposites
- The world is made of fire and governed by Logos (reason)

Famous quote:

'You cannot step into the same river twice.'

Parmenides of Elea

Change is an Illusion

- In contrast to Heraclitus, Parmenides argued that change is impossible
- Reality is one, unchanging, eternal.
- Senses are deceptive – only reason reveals truth

Famous idea: Being is, non-being is not

Why the Presocratics Matter

- Their legacy shaped philosophy and science.
- First rational explanations of the universe.
- Influenced Plato, Aristotle, and later thought
- Asked fundamental questions still debated today

THE SOPHISTS



Greeks quickly commercialized spirit of intellectual liberation

- Men trained in philosophy set themselves up as teachers of various fields
 - Their basic premise was that men were capable of self-improvement through education and education would make men more successful
 - Offered idea of human progress through one's own efforts
- Became very popular and were concentrated in Athens

THE SOPHISTS

RHETORIC

Most popular sophists taught rhetoric

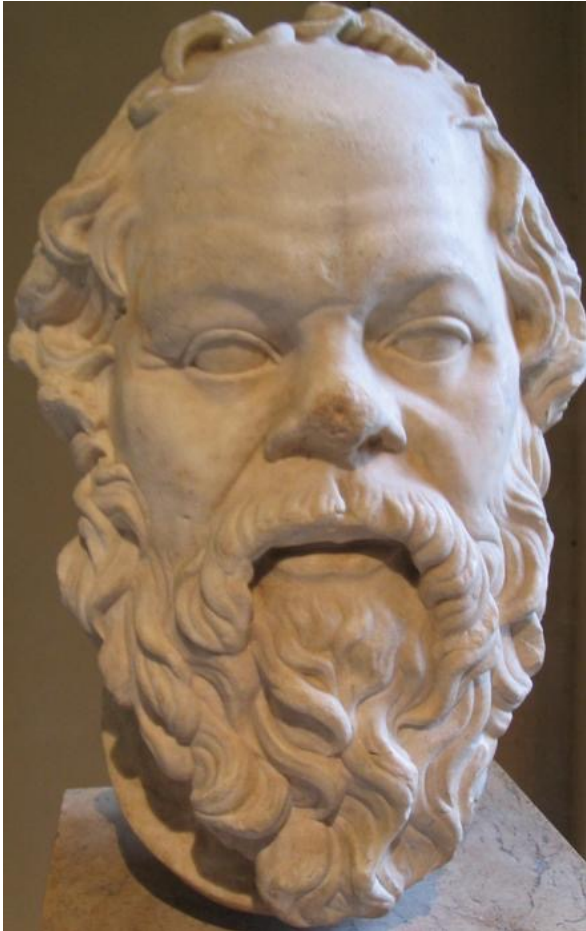
- They promised that the humblest man on the street could speak in the Assembly and law courts, confound their opponents, and reap all the financial benefits of public life if they knew rhetoric
- Offered to teach people how to win any arguments, regardless of the side they took
- Argued that no truth is universally valid
Good and evil, truth and falsehood were matters of individual judgment
There were no universal standards

Socrates (470–399 BCE)

The Moral Philosopher

- focused on ethics and the examined life
- Left no writings — known through Plato's dialogues
- Used the Socratic Method:
asking questions to seek truth.
- Famous quote: 'The unexamined life is not worth living.'
- Challenged Athenian norms; executed for impiety and corrupting youth
- Legacy: model of moral integrity and philosophical inquiry

Socrates



- Felt sophists had attacked old system of beliefs but had not provided a constructive replacement
- Employed intellectual methodology that sophists had created to address questions that they had either neglected or ignored
- Felt that sophists had taught skills but had no insight into the questions that really mattered
 - What is the purpose of life?
 - What are the values by which man should live?
 - How does man perfect his character?

Socrates

Central concern was the perfection of individual human character

- Believed moral values were attained when the individual regulated his life according to objective standards arrived at through rational reflection
- An individual would be able to ascertain the values necessary to live a good and just life when reason became the formative, guiding, and ruling agency of the soul
- True education meant the shaping of character according to values discovered through the active and critical use of reason

Socrates

The Power of Reason

Socrates taught that rational inquiry was a priceless tool that allowed one to test opinions, weigh the merit of ideas, and alter beliefs on the basis of knowledge

Believed that when people engaged in critical self-examination and strove to perfect their characters, they liberated themselves from accumulated opinions and traditions and based their conduct instead on convictions they could rationally defend

Socrates

Socratic Method

- Believed that knowledge was innate in the human mind
 - To extract it out into the conscious, he developed a question-and-answer method
- Attracted loyal audience of young men
 - Mostly from well-off families
 - Encouraged them to debate the most fundamental concepts of human behavior in an attempt to define the guidelines of ethical conduct

Socrates

Socratic Method

- Would begin debates with students with searching questions into traditional assumptions that everyone took for granted and then proceed to show that these assumptions were rooted more in custom and prejudice than they were in logic
- Would then lead students (with more questions) into developing more precise definitions of such concepts as piety, justice, good, and evil
- He never formulated rules of conduct.
Instead he believed that by giving his followers the habits of rigorous questioning and logical thought processes, he was creating a mentality that could perceive correct conduct under all conditions

Socrates

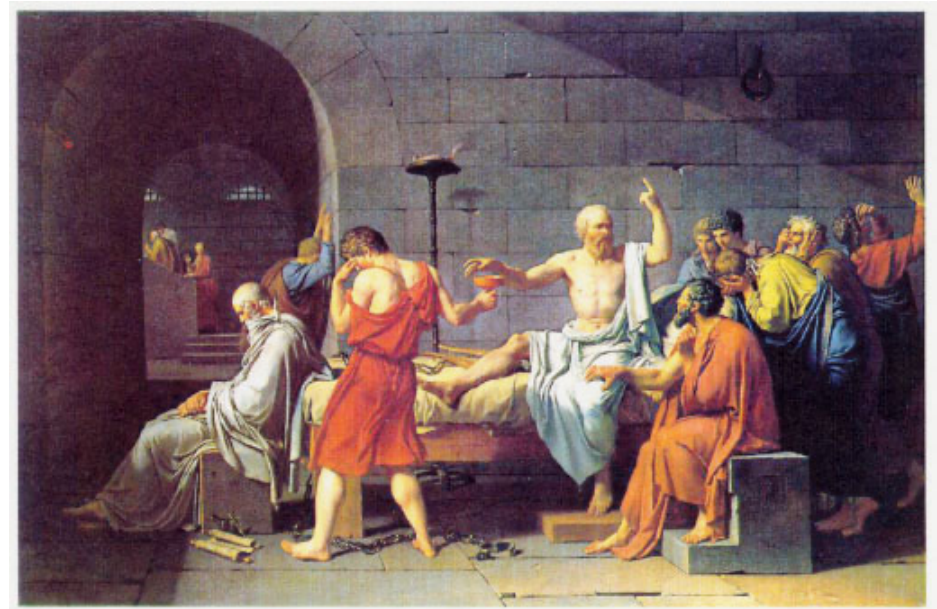
Most in Athens dismissed Socrates as a eccentric sophist

- But his students developed a fanatical loyalty to him
- Political leaders, whose ability and judgment he continually questioned, hated his guts
- some enemies brought Socrates to trial on charges of “corrupting the youth of Athens”

Socrates denied charges but refused to grovel and beg forgiveness

Was found guilty and ordered to kill himself by drinking hemlock

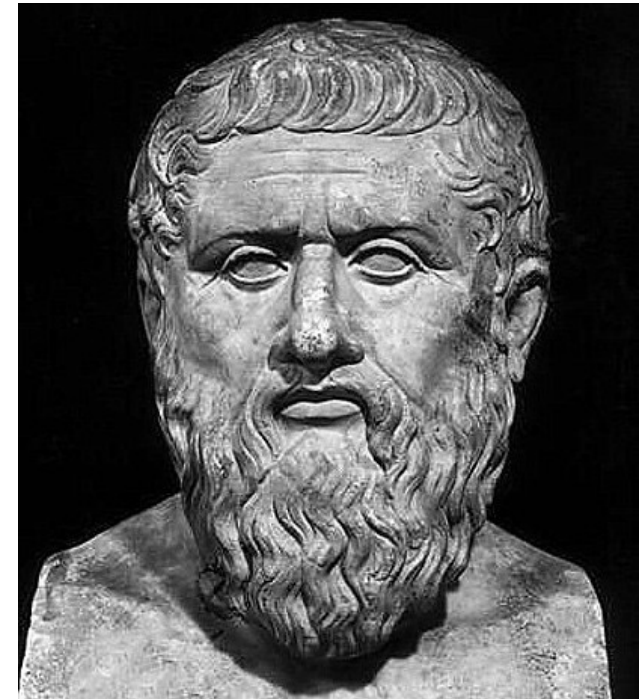
He refused to alter his principles and drank it



Plato (427–347 BCE)

The Idealist - World of Ideas

- student of Socrates, founded the Academy in Athens
- Developed the Theory of Forms — eternal, perfect ideals beyond the physical world
- Wrote dialogues: Republic, Symposium, Phaedo, etc
- The Allegory of the Cave: knowledge through philosophical enlightenment
- Believed philosopher-kings should rule
- Emphasized reason, education, and the soul's immortality



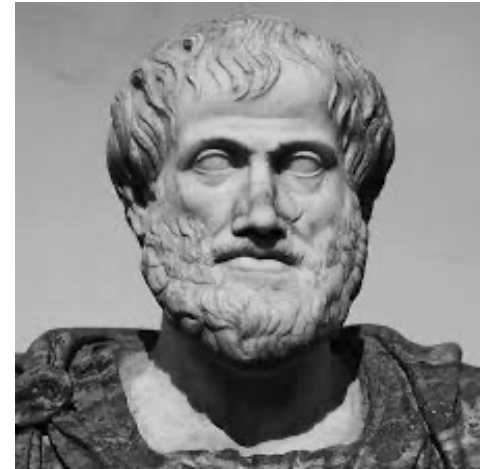
Plato

The World of Ideas

- Truth resides in the World of Ideas. Not in the world made known through the senses
- People form opinions of beauty or justice from observing what they think is beautiful or just in the material world
 - But since nothing is perfect in the material world, this opinion is distorted and imperfect
 - One who aspires to true knowledge must go beyond sensory perception and try to grasp with their mind the Idea of Beauty or Justice in the World of Ideas
- Plato saw the material world as unstable, transitory, and imperfect while the World of Ideas was eternal and universally valid
 - True wisdom is obtained through knowledge of the Ideas, not the imperfect reflection of these Ideas that we perceive with the senses

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

The Empiricist



- student of Plato, tutor of Alexander the Great, Founded the Lyceum
- Studied biology, logic, ethics, politics — founder of many sciences
- Rejected Plato's Forms; believed knowledge comes from observation
- Ethics: the 'Golden Mean' — virtue lies between extremes
- Politics: best government balances monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy
- emphasized classification and logic

Virtue and the Good Life in Greece

- Socratic ethics: "The unexamined life is not worth living"
- Aristotle: eudaimonia (flourishing)
golden mean
"Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom."

自知之明是智慧的开始

Ancient Greek Philosophy Overview

- Pre-Socratics
 - Heraclitus - change
 - Pythagoras - order
- Socrates - questioning, ethics
- Plato - ideal forms, the soul
- Aristotle - virtue, logic, purpose



Wisdom across civilizations

Ancient Chinese Philosophy

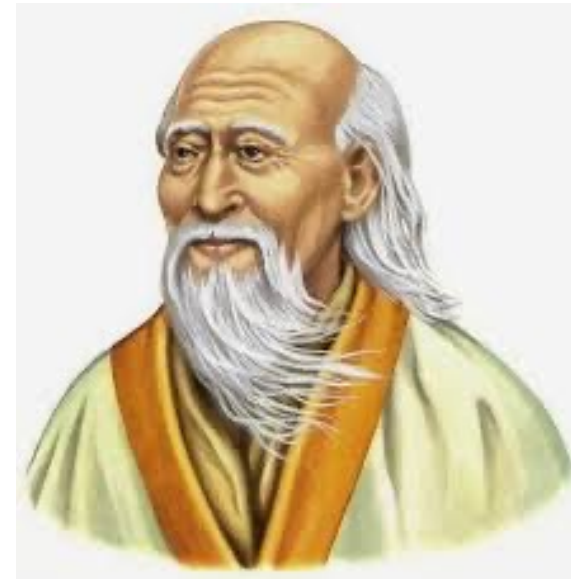
哲学 (zhéxué)
study of wisdom

- Chinese philosophy emerged during the Eastern Zhou dynasty, particularly the Warring States period
- Focused on harmony, morality, governance, and nature
- The 'Hundred Schools of Thought' flourished around 6th–3rd century BCE
- Major traditions:
Confucianism, Daoism, Mohism, Legalism

Laozi (6th c. BCE)

The Philosopher of the Dao

- Laozi is credited with writing the Dao De Jing (道德经)
- Dao (道): the natural way of the universe
- Wu Wei (无为): non-action or effortless action in harmony with nature
- Valued simplicity, humility, and natural order over rules and ambition



Confucius (551–479 BCE)

The Teacher of Humanity

- emphasized ethics, education, and social harmony

- Core virtues:

Ren (仁, benevolence)

Li (礼, ritual propriety)

Yi (义, righteousness)



- Stressed filial piety and moral leadership
- Believed good society starts with cultivation of virtue
- Collected teachings in the Analects (论语)

Mencius and Xunzi

Confucian Debate

Two major Confucian thinkers with contrasting views of human nature

- Mencius (孟子): Humans are naturally good; society should nurture this
- Xunzi (荀子): Humans are naturally selfish; need ritual and education to be good

Both emphasized moral education and virtuous leadership

Zhuangzi (4th c. BCE)

The Free Spirit of Daoism

- Zhuangzi used stories and paradoxes to express Daoist philosophy
- Emphasized spontaneity, freedom from rigid thinking
- Questioned absolute knowledge and distinctions
- Famous story: the butterfly dream – reality and illusion are relative
- Daoism as liberation from social roles and rigid values.



Mohism and Legalism

Alternative Schools

Other influential traditions in Chinese thought

- Mozi (墨子): Universal love (Jian Ai 兼爱), meritocracy, opposition to war
- Legalism (Han Feizi 韩非子): Strong laws and punishments; humans need control

Confucian Ethics and Cultivation

- Focus on family, community, social harmony
- Lifelong self-cultivation

Quote: "君子和而不同"

The gentleman seeks harmony, not uniformity

Daoism and the Nature of Change

- Dao as the natural way
- Embrace of paradox, flow, mystery

Quote: 道可道， 非常道

The Dao that can be spoken is not the
eternal Dao

Comparison and Legacy

- Chinese philosophy shaped not only China but much of East Asia
- Confucianism: foundations of education, family, state
- Daoism: harmony with nature, health practices, mysticism.
- Philosophy as practical wisdom for daily life and governance.
- Continues to influence modern ethics, politics, and spiritual thought.

Chinese Philosophy – Overview

- Confucius (Kongzi): 礼 (li) ritual
仁 (ren) humaneness
- Laozi: 道 (Dao) the way
无为 (wu wei) non-action
- Zhuangzi: spontaneity, freedom from rigid categories



Wisdom across civilizations
Comparative Insights

Comparative Insights

Greek & Chinese Philosophy

- Let's explore how two great traditions approached ethics, metaphysics, and knowledge
- This section encourages reflection, not judgment — finding resonance and contrast

Virtue Ethics

Aristotle and Confucius

- **Aristotle**: Ethical virtues through rational moderation (the golden mean)
- **Confucius**: Ethical roles and moral cultivation through ritual (li) and humaneness (ren)

Both aimed at personal excellence and social harmony.

Logos and Dao: Order in the Cosmos

- Greek: Logos as rational order
- Chinese: Dao as dynamic way

Both articulate an underlying structure, but one is analytic, the other poetic.

Methods of Inquiry: Dialectic vs. Analogy

- **Socratic Method:** Questioning to expose contradictions
- **Confucian Method:** Teaching through parables, historical analogy

Greek emphasis on critique

Chinese on harmonizing tradition

Change and Constancy: Heraclitus and Zhuangzi

- **Heraclitus**: “Everything flows” (Panta Rhei)
- **Zhuangzi**: Reality is dreamlike, flowing, paradoxical

Both challenge fixed categories and embrace becoming

Philosophy and Society

- **Greek:** Public debate, independent schools
- **Chinese:** Scholar-officials, moral governance

Philosophy as civic virtue vs. Confucian moral-political integration.

Bridges Between Traditions

- Heraclitus and Laozi: change, flow, mystery
- Confucius and Aristotle: ethics, virtue, cultivation
- Socratic method vs. Confucian guidance

Common Ground: The Reflective Life

Despite cultural and historical distance:

- Both valued self-knowledge, ethics, and harmony
- Both shaped political theory, education, and science

Dialogue Across Cultures

- No single truth — only deeper understanding
- Philosophy as bridge-building,
not competition
- 对话而不是对抗
Dialogue, not confrontation

谢谢大家！

