

ASPECTS OF WESTERN PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Sreekumar Nellickappilly
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
IIT Madras



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Chapter One

Greek Philosophy: An Introduction

Key Words: Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Atomists, naturalists, cosmologists.

This chapter gives an overview of some important features of the Greek civilization, which has laid foundations for the intellectual and creative endeavours of the European civilization. We shall also see some important early contributions to philosophy in this chapter. These include the theories of early Greek thinkers starting from Thales, who is hailed as the father of Western philosophy. These thinkers are called cosmologists or naturalist philosophers as their theories dealt primarily with the fundamental nature of the natural world around us. The two important problems with which they were preoccupied were the problem of the primordial substance and the problem of change.

Before we start examining the philosophical contributions of the early Greek thinkers, we shall have an overview of the Greek civilization and culture that fostered critical, philosophical reflections.

Greek Civilization: A Brief Overview

The Greeks should be credited for developing a civilization in the European world. Yet the origins of this civilization are still surrounded by debates and controversies. According to some historical accounts, the Greeks owe a lot to the oriental world in developing their philosophical views, especially to the Egyptians and to the Babylonians. Even they seem to have borrowed a lot from ancient Indians, who had a very rich philosophical heritage since the Vedic age during 2000-1500 BCE. Many European historians today deny this. But the fact remains that, many of their views about the world, their cosmological assumptions and religious and scientific conceptions about the universe were very similar to those which were held true by these ancient non-western civilizations. Even during its more matured era, the Greek thought exhibits such similarities in approaches and outlook with the oriental world. The materialistic

and nihilistic trends in Greek philosophy have parallels in the Indian school of materialism. Besides, there are many other factors that bring these various ancient civilizations together. But it would be too immature to argue that one has developed out of the other. We may content that there were active interactions among these ancient people, which would have led to the trading off of ideas as well.

For our purpose, we need not go deep into this controversy. But it is important to see and appreciate the similarities and differences to understand the unique features of Western philosophy. We shall do that in the course of our analysis. A historical account of Western philosophy can be conveniently commenced from an analysis of the Greek contributions to the world of ideas. The ancient Greeks have laid foundations, not only for the exercise of philosophical contemplations in the western world, but also for expeditions in the domains of arts, science and other intellectual enquiries.

Many civilizations like Indian and Chinese have much older histories than the Greek world. Their intellectual, spiritual and philosophical traditions were also older. But the Greeks occupy a unique position in human intellectual history because the problems they have raised and the issues they have pondered upon are still being examined and debated by philosophers. In other words, the western intellectual tradition, which the Greeks initiated, is still a living tradition, so much so that, Alfred North Whitehead, a leading thinker of the 20th century philosophy, once remarked that all later philosophies in the west are nothing but footnotes to two of the Greek tradition's most influential and most celebrated thinkers: Plato and Aristotle.

Bertrand Russell observes that, in all history, nothing is so surprising or so difficult to account for as the sudden rise of civilization in Greece. He says that those whom we know as the Greek people came to Greece in three successive waves. From around 2500 B.C. to 1400 B.C. the Minoan culture existed in the island of Crete. This was spread all over the mainland of Greece by around 1600 B.C. The Minoans primarily engaged in commerce and they exhibited well advanced artistic skills. But this civilization could not flourish beyond 999 B.C. during which they were attacked and conquered by the Greek-speaking Mycenaeans.

The Ionians who had adopted the Cretan civilization were followed by the Achaeans who defeated them and they were followed by the Dorians, who ultimately destroyed the Achaean civilization. The Greek civilization which we try to understand—as the birth place of European philosophy—was the result of a blend of these various civilizations and their religious beliefs and their rudimentary philosophical assumptions.

The Greeks gradually evolved a political system which can be termed as a form of **Democracy**, though their version of democracy may lack many of the important features which we consider integral to it today. Broadly it was a system of government by all the citizens, excluding women and slaves. With advancements in agriculture and maritime trading, the Greeks developed a civilization that gradually showed up its fruits through creative works in art, literature and philosophy. They developed a written script after learning the art of writing from the Phoenicians. They undertook serious literary adventures and with the composition of *Iliad and the Odyssey* by Homer between 750 to 550 B.C, writing had touched the peak of its creative potentials. During the 6th century in Greece, science, philosophy and mathematics had already emerged as separate disciplines.

Historians affirm that after the fall of the Mycenaean civilization around 1200 BC, there was a dark age that had separated the early Greek civilization from the later. The Greek and East Mediterranean cities had their origin around 800 BC. Greece was divided into a large number of small independent states, each consisting of a city with some agricultural territory surrounding it. Among the several city states, Athens was the most prominent one. It was a gateway to Asia Minor and had a very good port and a great maritime fleet which it developed by converting its naval force after it fought and won the war with the Persians during 490-470. The cultural interactions made possible by trading enabled their cultural enrichment. Trading necessitated the growth of mathematics and contacts with other civilizations like India and Egypt enabled them to learn mathematics, philosophy and astronomy. Economic prosperity brought leisure and security, which also was an impetus for speculative thinking

The Pre- Socratic Period: General Characteristic Features

This period in Greek history witnessed the emergence of several different schools of philosophy, the prominent among them being the Ionian school, the Pythagoreans, the Eleatic School and the Sophists. The Ionians were preeminently naturalist thinkers and they eventually developed physics. The Pythagoreans developed not only a system of abstract philosophy modeled after the concept of numbers as ultimate realities, but also developed religion and ethics. The Eleatic school developed dialectics, which thereafter had a significant influence on the European mind and with the Sophists who advocated cognitive and moral relativism and individualism, the scientific tendency in Greek intellectual tradition started declining.

Zeller observes that, Pre-Socratic philosophy had arisen from the inclination of natural science to enquire about the essence of the natural phenomena. The early Ionians were cosmologists. Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes were arguably the first thinkers who developed their ideas about the universe by sharing the belief that everything in the universe was made from a primordial material substance.

The early Ionian thinkers were comprised of a number of outstanding thinkers who exhibited remarkable originality in their approaches towards the world around them. Among them, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes were the prominent ones and Aristotle calls them **the first physiologists** or students of nature. They were also called the naturalists as all of them were preoccupied by the problem of the origin and laws of the physical universe. They all have argued that the world has originated from a primitive substance; the diversity the universe exhibit in terms of its different objects, have actually come from one primordial substance.

Thales, who is reputedly known as the father of western philosophy, held that the whole world has been originated from the primordial substance, which for him was water. Matter in all forms has its origin in water and objects in the universe which have distinct features and qualities ultimately go back to this primordial state. Anaximander followed this path of enquiry, but had stated that the primordial substance is not water but an indefinite, infinite, boundless, and

unlimited substance. His disciple Anaximenes in turn argued that the primordial substance is air.

Heraclitus Empedocles, and Anaxagoras are known as later Ionians and like their predecessors, they too have dealt with issues related to the problem of the origin and nature of the universe. The other significant Ionians who contributed to the development of ancient Greek thought are, the Pythagorians, the Eleatic Schoolmen and the Atomists.

Thales: The Father of Western Philosophy

Most historians of philosophy call **Thales** as the father of western philosophy, though this is not a matter, which is completely free from disputes. But that is not an important concern for us. We learn that Thales was born in the year 640 BC, in Miletus, in Asia Minor and died at the age of 78 and was regarded as one of the seven wise men. He had contacts with the Babylonians and Egyptians from where he had respectively learned astronomy and geometry.

In one sense Thales deserves the title, the **father of western philosophy**, as he was probably the first thinker to adopt a completely rational approach to substantial questions about human reality. He raised the question of primitive causes of things and tried to provide explanations that are free from mythological assumptions. He considered water as the primitive, ultimate substance and held that everything comes out of it and returns to it. He thus adopts a materialistic, scientific, rational and philosophical approach.

Anaximander

Following the approach adopted by Thales, Anaximander, who was a disciple of Thales (not accepted by all historians of philosophy), presented a different view. He held that the fundamental substance cannot be any definite substance like water as Thales supposed, but is an eternal, infinite, boundless and imperishable substance. All qualities of things in the empirical world are derived from it and water itself comes out of this primordial substance. All things in this world come from this great mass of undifferentiated matter. Anaximander differentiates himself from other cosmologists of his age with his emphasis on a substance which is abstract. We may say that, with his doctrine of boundless substance he

has inaugurated a tendency towards an abstract mode of thinking in the history of Greek philosophy, which later became prominent.

Pythagoras

Pythagoras (560-480 BC) is one remarkable thinker, who was also instrumental in developing a peculiar religious approach to reality, apart from his outstanding contributions to mathematics and geometry. He had studied under Thales and later went to Egypt and Mesopotamia, from where he would have perfected his understanding of mathematics. He held that numbers which are abstract, are the ultimate realities. The focus is on the abstract form and relations and Pythagoras had argued that measure, order, proportion and uniform recurrence can be expressed in numbers and therefore, they are the true realities.

Heraclitus and Parmenides: The Problem of Change

Another important problem discussed by these ancient Greek cosmologists was the problem of change. Heraclitus and Parmenides were two important thinkers who held contradictory views with regard to this problem; Heraclitus advocating change and Parmenides permanence.

Heraclitus held that change constitutes the very life of the universe and all permanence we experience is an illusion. Heraclitus has famously stated that, "one cannot step into the same river twice." He held that the entire universe is in a state of ceaseless change and reality is an endless process of becoming. He identified fire as the primordial substance of the universe, as it would symbolize the ceaseless activity that is the principle of the universe. Fire is the vital principle in the organism and the essence of the soul.

Heraclitus affirmed that everything in this world is changed into its opposite and no thing has permanent qualities. According to him every object is a union of opposite qualities and hence there is contradiction and change. If they are not so, the world would have stagnated. Hence, in one sense, everything is both is and is not. He explains harmony as resulting from the union of opposites.

But, this ceaseless change which the universe and its objects undergo, is not arbitrary, but is a law-governed rational process. Heraclitus believed that the logos or reason in things is permanent and therefore, a life based on reason is superior to a sensuous life.

Parmenides, on the other hand advocates permanence and vehemently opposes change and asks, how can a thing can both “be” and “not be”. He wonders how can a thing possess contradicting qualities. How can one quality become another quality? He argues that something cannot come out of nothing and something cannot become nothing. If being is a process of becoming, then it must either have come out of not being or being. If from not being, then it has come from nothing which is impossible. If from being, then it has come from itself and hence is identical with itself.

Parmenides argues that from being only being can come and no thing can become anything else. Hence he concludes that there is only one eternal, underived, unchangeable being, which is immovable and is identical with thought. What cannot be thought cannot be, Parmenides concludes, and what cannot be (not-being) cannot be thought

The Atomists

Atomism is another philosophical theory propagated by some Greek thinkers where ultimate reality has been identified with infinite number of atoms which are simple substances. With this idea the natural-scientific views of the universe developed by the Greek cosmologists reaches another important milestone.

The Atomists conceive the universe as constitutive of fundamental, changeless, eternal substances called atoms. These primordial substances are simple, invisible, impenetrable, indivisible spatial entities. They differ from each other only in form, weight and size and are separated from one another by empty space. They have extension and are physically indivisible and are compact physical units. They are qualitatively alike and being the building stones of reality everything in this world is a combination of atoms and spaces.

The atomists held that motion is inherent in atoms and therefore, they were not in need of any external mythical entities to explain change. But while advocating change they also affirmed that absolute change is impossible, as atoms don't change. Since motion is inherent in atoms and they are always in motion, things in the world, which are constituted of combinations of atoms, are also in constant motion. The atomists thus explain everything in terms of atoms, their motion and combinations.

Early Greek Philosophy: An Assessment

In the endeavours of all these thinkers of early Greek philosophy, one can trace the beginning of rational philosophical and scientific thinking. Russell rightly observes that the Milesian school is important, not for what it achieved, but for what it attempted. They were attempting to explain phenomena by natural causes, independent of mythical accounts. The fundamental question raised by all of them was with regard to the idea of essence. They enquired what the basal substance was and tried to answer in terms of evidence gathered from sense perception. Subsequently they have located the essence of material reality in one of the four basic substances; earth, water, fire and air. They should be credited for not getting entangled with mythological and religious accounts of reality. These bold attempts laid foundations for critical rational thinking in the Greek world.

Nevertheless, not all of these early thinkers were scrupulously rational, as their thoughts were a unique mix of scientific, moral philosophical and religious reflections about the reality around them. Undoubtedly, the early Greek thinkers were influenced by the Babylonians and Egyptians. It was also the beginning of a period of active philosophical contemplations about certain fundamental philosophical questions concerning the nature of the material world. The whole of pre-Socratic philosophy, therefore, was in its aim and content a philosophy of nature.

Quiz

1. Who is the father of western philosophy?
(a) Heraclitus (b) Parmenides (c) Thales (d) Anaximenes
2. Who among the following is a later Ionian thinker?
(a) Thales (b) Anaximander (c) Anaximenes (d) Anaxagoras
3. Who held that the primordial substance is an eternal, infinite, boundless and imperishable substance.
(a) Anaximenes (b) Parmenides (c) Thales (d) Anaximander
4. Who said "one cannot step into the same river twice?"
(a) Heraclitus (b) Parmenides (c) Thales (d) Anaximenes
5. Which among the following is not advocated by the atomists?
(a) Absolute change is impossible (b) Atoms are simple and invisible
(c) Atoms are not extended (d) Motion is inherent in atoms.

Answer Key:

1. (c)
2. (d)
3. (d)
4. (a)
5. (c)

Assignment

1. Discuss the major contributions of the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers.
2. Examine the problem of substance and the problem of change as discussed by early Greek thinkers.

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