

[An Overview of the History of Philosophy]

[Part 1: The Pre-Socratics]

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[Note: In transcribing these notes I have tried to stick as closely as is reasonably possible to my grandfather's words, as well as—to a large extent—the original layout. Some small changes have been made to improve grammar, punctuation and such in order to better communicate his intended meaning. Where I have felt less sure about what was intended, or made a more substantive change, I have enclosed my alterations in square brackets.]

—Jason Zarri]

Thales of Miletus

Philosophy was a creation of the Greeks and more particularly of the Ionian race. Thales, born in Miletus in Asia Minor about 640 B.C., was the first of philosophers.

No writing of his has come down to us; we have no primary sources, only secondary ones, mainly Aristotle's "Metaphysics", "De Anima", and "De Coelo". Also mentioned in Theophrastus' book "On the Physical Opinions" about 400 B.C. A fragment of his is found in Aristotle's "Metaphysics".

Personal History — Astronomer, mathematician, politician and philosopher. Traveled rather extensively.

Philosophy — 1. Water is the material cause of all things.

2. Earth floats upon water.

3. The magnet is a living thing (able to attract iron).

4. All Things are full of gods.

He was an “hylozoist” which means that he did not distinguish between living and dead matter.

Thales was searching for the ultimate constitution of physical universe; [and he was] led to it by visible changes about him. Of the four elements, earth and water, air and fire, he chose water as the basic element. Aristotle gives two reasons for this:

1. He thought that water nourishes everything – without it life dies and since the universe is essentially living he chose water as that most essential to the living universe.
2. Perhaps he was influenced by mythology by which the universe was originally in a fluid state.

Characteristics of Water

1. It was external.
 2. It was living.
1. He believed that matter contained internal force – a dynamist
 2. He was a materialist.
 3. He was a monist – he held that only one substance existed in the universe.
 4. Neglected substantial change in the universe – he thought that there was only accidental change. He treats of material substances only. No differentiation between soul and body.

Anaximander — (611 – 547 B.C.)

Most important philosopher of the Miletian school of Thales.

1. Came from Miletus in Asia Minor.
2. Politician, scientist – he drew the first map of the world.

3. Sources – first philosopher to have written a book “On Nature” – only two sentences survived.
4. Doctrine – Like Thales, he sought the primary substance of the universe. Did not, however, like Thales and others, choose a definite substance [from among] one of the traditional four opposites, but an entirely different substance which we cannot contact by experience, which he called “The Boundless” – **Apeilon**. This substance had two characteristics

1. It was quantitatively infinite.

2. It was qualitatively indeterminate.

5. “So that becoming may not fail”. Aristotle’s explanation of first doctrine above.

He held the world is eternal and change has gone on from eternity so for change to continue forever substance had to be unlimited in extent.

In the science of his day **four** opposites were conceived as mutually antagonistic – as at war with one another: hence he concluded that primary substance could not possibly be one of the four opposites, because then it would destroy any other opposite that tried to arise. Hence, primary substance had to be one, neither hot nor cold, dry nor wet but altogether different.

There is eternal change, and it consists of a separation from “The Boundless” of the four opposites from which everything we see developed.

The Cycles of Universe; An Innumerable Number of Worlds

He said: The opposites that separated out from boundless warred with each other. In this he sees injustice and necessity of satisfaction which consists in opposites being fated to return again into the bosom of the boundless. This is the basis of the teaching that there are innumerable worlds; one succeeding the other and the present universe is just one of them.

He held that there existed innumerable coexistent worlds as well.

He held that the universe was composed of earth as center of this universe – that stars are in reality great rings of fire encased in air or mist.

He explained all life by means of evolution. All forms of life started through the action of the sun on waters of the sea. The species we see today are a result of the survival of the fittest; Man did not have an origin as we see him today, but rose likewise from fish by evolution.

1. He introduced the notion of infinity.
2. Chose a more potential primary substance — an adumbration of Aristotle's doctrine of primary matter.

Anaximenes — Died about 528 B. C.

Discussed by Theophrastus. Said substance of universe was air. Everything evolved from air by means of condensation and rarefaction.

Pythagoreans

Pythagoras was born on the island of Samos off the coast of Asia Minor, in about 540 B.C. He moved over to Southern Italy (Croton) and established a religious community, but he had to flee due to difficulties over politics.

He left no writings, and it is impossible to tell what he held himself or what his disciples believed in.

In the 6th century B.C., there was a religious revival and Orphic religion was prominent. It was in opposition to Greek beliefs in that it held that the soul of man was all-important. The soul was first a companion to the Gods but was sent to a body (imprisoned in it) as a punishment. The only way to free the soul was by purification and a life of asceticism. Many taboos sprang up among them and medicine men.

Interested in music, mathematics and philosophy, as they took the mind off the body. They kept philosophy separate from religion.

Music and mathematics influenced philosophy. Pythagoras discovered that the notes on the musical scale had mathematical relations to each other. He tried to explain all philosophy by mathematics. He said that all *things* are *numbers*. Two principles (*odd* and *even*) make up the primary unit *one* and from *one* all other numbers proceed. He had in mind rather *figures* than numbers. *Odd* was a limited principle and *even* was unlimited.

They applied these mathematical equations to the soul also. *Ten* was their sacred number.

The right proportion of limited and unlimited produced *harmony*. The *spheres* produced music.

The wheel of Birth — The object was to free oneself from the cycle of birth.

The soul was a number and consisted also in the harmony of the body, which was in opposition to their theory that the soul was separate from the body.

Their philosophy was an advance over previous systems, as

- 1) It was an abstraction from sensible things
- 2) It was dualistic rather than monotheistic.
- 3) It leads to scepticism
- 4) It influenced Plato, whose philosophy was a rationalization of Orphic religion.
- 5) Foreshadowed the matter and form theory of Aristotle.

They introduced religion into philosophy, and new problems into consideration.

Eleatics

These came from Southern Italy and the chief representative of this school was Parmenides. Zeno, Xenophanes, and Melissus were also prominent.

Philosophy — They proposed this problem: How can *one* remain *one* and still be “*many*”? How can the immutable remain that way and still be subject to change? Parmenides believed he had to choose between them. He denied the “*many*”, and he denied *change*. This is called monism, material monism, and dialectical material monism because they arrived at their conclusion by a process of reasoning.

Xenophanes — (Ionian)

Born in about 655 B.C. in Colophon in Asia Minor. He left there at an early age and spent the rest of his life wandering about Greece and Southern Italy spreading his doctrine. He was more of a reformer than a philosopher. [He was a] theological reformer because he was in opposition to the Greek gods.

- 1) Homer had made men and women gods and goddesses, and
- 2) Made them weak morally.

He inveighed against the morals of his time.

He held that God was identified with the *universe*. It was material pantheism.

Parmenides — (542 B.C. —)

Born in Elea in South Italy, pupil of Xenophanes. Probably went to Athens later. Wrote a poem in three parts.

- 1) Introduction.
 - 2) Concerning Truth (The Way of Truth).
 - 3) The way of opinion (error).
- (Theory of cosmic origins).

- 1) In the introduction he was given a revelation by Sun Goddess.

In the 2nd part he stated that “*body*” exists – “it is”, but “*body*” is the only thing which can exist. But *Void* or empty space is understood as “non-body”; therefore, the Void does not exist, but if Void does not exist, multiplicity is impossible because it presupposes the Void as separating one thing from another.

- 2) *Locomotion is impossible* since it [pre]supposes space.

3) Any change whatsoever is impossible because if a “Body” “*becomes*” it proceeds either from non-Body or from Body, but not from non-body which cannot exist, nor from Body because can come from what already exists.

The universe is *one material body; eternal, immutable*; [this] was their main doctrine.

Body is *spherical* in shape.

Zeno (490 B.C.) — Pupil of Parmenides – called father of dialectics by Aristotle. Born about 490 B. C., He tried to disprove the possibility of change. He argued against Pythagoreans. An arrow in flight is at rest at any given moment of time. He held that no body can move from one point to another. To move one foot you had to move first half of that foot, and then half of that half foot, etc. ad infinitum.

Milissus – Held sphere to be infinite.

Heraclitus – (Born in 531 B.C.)

Held that the only thing existing is “*change*”. He was called the “flowing philosopher”.

Said, “You cannot step into the same river twice”.

He was a native of Ephesus in Asia Minor, born in 531 BC. He was known as [the word here is illegible] and “obscure”. He despised the common man—thought himself above common breed. He spoke against philosophers and Homer.

Philosophy — 1) Referred to “logos”. Said that nothing was permanent, everything was change. The ever-changing substance was fire. Out of fire everything evolves by “upward and downward way”. He said both processes were going on at the same time so that one] balanced the other, but the balance was not perfect.

2) He observed a certain arrangement in nature,. He said everything is ruled by wisdom or “logos”. But “logos” is *fire* itself. Man should be ruled by ethics, law.

Heraclitus influenced Plato and ancient philosophers to a great extent. He was one of the late Ionians. (540-420 B.C.)

Pluralists

Empedocles of Argrigentum (496 – 435 B.C.)

Problem was to reconcile philosophy of Parmenides and Heraclitus, which were at opposite poles.

- 1) He said [there is] only one immutable substance.
- 2) But this substance was not “one” but “many”. Change is effected by combinations of diverse elements.

Life — Came from Sicily (Argrigentum). He was a very fanatical follower of Orphic religion, so he resembled Pythagoras. [One] Difference was that Empedocles devoted himself to medicine. He wrote a book, called “Purifications” written in verse. Proclaimed himself to be a god, fallen through sin, and working out salvation. Acts as wonder-worker. Believed in transmigration of souls (metempsychosis).

Philosophy — Works – “Purifications”, “On Nature”

- 1) Holds that things are ultimately made of four roots—earth, fire, air and water, which eternal and intrinsically immutable.
- 2) He seeks to substantiate in this theory the doctrine of Parmenides. “Change” in the universe is a “running through” of the roots (or elements).
- 3) We find for the first time the sign of an external efficient cause.

Particles of roots are set in motion by love and strife, themselves material, [which are] similar to forces of attraction and repulsion. They act according to no law, so everything seems governed by chance and the “survival of the fittest”.

These Forces at Work — Four stages in universal change:

- 1) Four elements are indiscriminately mixed together. The force of love is within the sphere and strife without.

- 2) Strife begins to enter the sphere; love to leave, and now the four elements begin to separate out and form combinations.
- 3) Strife is entirely within the sphere; love entirely without. Now the elements are entirely separated and the likes are united to likes.
- 4) Love begins to re-enter; strife to leave. Different combinations are formed and other worlds are formed.

Theory of Life — Everything is pure chance; “survival of the fittest”.

Origin of animals is explained by mechanistic evolution.

Soul of man is not mentioned in any way, there is no distinction between sensation and reasoning. Sensation is explained by particles flying off and entering and modifying an organ of sense, “like” modifying “like”.

His was the first attempt to combine two philosophies: he was the first pluralist. Empedocles held [that there was] an infinite number of things, but of four varieties only. Particles were immutable, but they moved locally. To explain this he brought in the first external efficient cause; in fact, two—love and strife. The universe was purely mechanistic, devoid of all finality. A contradiction existed between his belief in Orphic religion and his philosophy.

Anaxagoras

Philosophy – Pluralistic like that of Empedocles, and also tried to reconcile the two opposite philosophies. It differs from the above in that first substance (called “seeds”) are as various as there are different substances that exist in the world today. Reason for this was:

- 1) To adhere more closely to the doctrine of Empedocles.
- 2) He did not think it possible that substances so different as flesh and hair could be accidental modifications of four elements.

3) Held each individual seed (infinite in number) is in turn composed of tiny particles of every possible variety of seed. One seed differs from another by the proportion of particular substances that it contains. Water is water because contains a greater amount of water [i.e., the *element* ‘water’] than any other seed.

4) Theory of Change. He is the first philosopher to introduce the notion of “*mind*” as the efficient cause of motion. Plato and Aristotle praised him because he alone realized the necessity of *mind* to explain order in the universe. They criticize him because after asserting the necessity of mind, he does not make it of use in his philosophy.

Nature of Mind

Authorities differ in whether his theory of the nature of mind [hold that it] was material or immaterial. Both are probably correct to a certain extend. He recognized the necessity of mind but spoke of it in material terms.

Leucipus

Nothing known of the above.

Democritus (460-370 B.C.)

Life Born in Thrace (Apdera) which is likewise the birthplace of the Sophists’ most famous exponent (Protagoras). He was very widely traveled and wrote very much, though little has survived.

Philosophy He tried to explain the nature of things in two ways.

1) The void was postulated by him in order to explain the motion of atoms.

2) The “full”, which is an infinite number of indivisible particles, differing one from another only in quantity (weight, form, etc.).

Theory of Change There is eternal motion of the atoms falling through infinite space by virtue of an internal necessity (that is, due to the weight of the atoms). Thus, the heavier atoms fall faster and become a center about which cluster the lighter atoms. There form different combinations by a kind of linking together in accordance with their different shapes.

Estimate of his Philosophy

- 1) This was pure materialism. The soul, being nothing but atoms of fire, there was no immortality. This was the basis of later philosophies, [such as] Epicureanism.
- 2) It also was purely mechanistic. Reduced everything to local motion.
- 3) Absolute denial of finality.
- 4) He held, as regards sensation, that all of it was untrustworthy with the possible exception of the sense of touch. He is very much praised by many modern philosophers.

End of Cosmocentric Period.

Anthropocentric Period (490 – 399 B.C.).

(490) Beginning of Persian Wars.

Main Facts of History

The 5th century [saw] the rise of Athens. With the 5th century came also the Persian wars, perhaps the most important in the history of mankind. The whole Western world was saved from Oriental despotism. But for this victory there would have been no Athens, no Plato, no Aristotle. Athens gained political supremacy. Greece became the center of the world. Athens also gained cultural supremacy.

The Spartans were militaristic, and unfriendly to strangers. They were aristocratic people. In Athens, however, people were democratic, alert, frugal, and friendly to strangers.

After the Persian war, Athens made use of funds obtained from confederacy to adorn the city, and thus became a mecca for men of culture from all [over] the Greek world.

Pericles particularly played a large part in bringing scholars to Athens. Thus came the age of enlightenment, the age of Pericles.

Causes

- 1) People were mentally alert—eager to know (the Athenians). They welcomed strangers to their city.
- 2) There was a practical necessity for cultural supremacy because they were very democratic. Speech-making became a very important function and in order to achieve success one had to be a good orator. Hence, there were two classes of men 1) rhetoricians and 2) dialecticians. The former practiced the art of public speaking, the latter the art of private argumentation. [They practiced] eristic—the art of sophistical reasoning.
- 3) People became critical in their attitude towards knowledge. This attitude showed itself in religion, politics, law, and philosophy.

Cosmologists had substituted water, air, etc. for the Greek gods, and helped bring about a critical attitude.

The Greeks believed “law” is valid of itself and obedience to it is to one’s advantage. The rise of tyrants who overthrew existing governments led people to believe that might is right.

In **philosophy** 1) The divergent views of *cosmologists* brought about a critical attitude. 2) Also this account was at variance with common sense views. Example: Parmenides, who held that there was no change, and Pythagoreans, who held all things are numbers. 3) The cosmologists themselves were critical, denying the objectivity of cognition.

As a result of this state of affairs the Sophists arose.

- 1) *Sophist* originally meant a “wise man”.
- 2) It also had the meaning of “teaching instructor”.
- 3) But in the time of Plato it had come to mean a captious reasoner, one who was not concerned with truth but only of [sic.] winning an argument. They were paid and demanded money from their hearers, and were mostly strangers. There were very many of them.

Sophists

Protagoras, Gorgias, Hippias and Prodicus were chief representatives of this school.

Thiasymachus and *Callicles* were two others of this school. *Denied all certitude.*

Protagoras (480 – 411 B.C.)

Philosophy — Man is the measure of all things. Based on philosophy of Heraclitus. Only that is true which appears true to the individual. Truth only consists in perception, only in what the individual perceives.

Gorgias (483 – 375 B.C.)

Life — Native of Leontinis.

Philosophy — The impossibility of (he taught) :

- 1) Existence
- 2) The knowledge of anything
- 3) The communication of the knowledge of anything.