

The Pre-Socratic Philosophers

The early Greeks by necessity were men of action - hunting farming fighting took up most of their time. Entertainment and knowledge were combined in the epic stories, the myths and legends of the peoples which were handed down from generation to generation. By story, by parable, by allegory the history and religion of the Greeks was passed on, embroidered, variegated, but unquestioned.

For men to ask questions about the meaning of life, the existence of gods, the nature of the world at large (the cosmos) as well as the nature of the immediate world there needs to be time for thought for reflection, for discussion, for theorising - there needs to be leisure (for which the Greek word is *scholē* - the origin of our word school).

Such "free time" can only occur in a peaceful context, where people are sufficiently prosperous to have leisure time. So for the Greeks the study of "philosophy" - of first principles- began not on mainland Greece, but among their colonies.

c600 B.C. in Ionia (notably at Miletus) the curious began their inquiry into the cosmos:

What is the world in which we live, they asked.

They looked on the whole for a scientific explanation; hence they are known as the first physicists, for they were looking into the "nature" -*physis* - of the world - what it was made of.

1. they were looking for what was permanent, inspite of apparent change: ie. they were trying to find what persists > the underlying identity > the fundamental simple and stable factor which they beleived was discernable through reason.

2. hence they rejected the evidence of the senses as being unstable; they recognised that decay destroys stability, and that the plurality of unrelated objects renders them "unsimple".

3. at the same time stability exists; it must sought in the essential substance from which the world was made. All material elements are in a state of flux and decay and renewal, but the structure or form is permanent; so newly changed matter fits to that basic structure.

As a result of this way of thinking - of trying to postulate a single essential principle behind all the created universe - the first four Ionian physicist-philosophers are usually grouped together:

1. THALES: (early C6) from Miletus: he took water as his first principle of created matter, believing that all kinds of matter are modifications of the single uncreated imperishable substance. We don't how he explained his theory, but water fairly obviously can appear as gas, liquid and solid.

2. ANAXIMANDER: (born c 610) from Miletus: He did not take a material thing as his primary principle of the universe, but something he called the "infinite" and eternal: by separation this "infinite" gave rise to the four common aspects of matter - air, water, fire, earth.

Three of the sayings attributed to him:

i. "The earth is a heavenly body, controlled by no other power, and keeping its position because it is at the same distance from all things".

ii. "Animals came into being through vapours raised by the sun".

iii. "Man came into being through another animal, the fish".

3. ANAXIMENES: (late C6) from Miletus: he beleived air to be the first principle of the universe, giving rise to all other sorts of matter by means of rarification and condensation.

4. HERACLITUS: (early C5) from Ephesus: he adopted more complex approach; he rejected his predecessors' static conception of reality with their ideas of a permanent basic element persisting within all its modifications; he held that everything was in a state of flux - ie. matter is constantly changing from one state to another. The cosmos lives in and through change, resting on a kind of give-and -take harmony of the primary opposites (hot and cold, wet and dry).

In its purest form the essential "stuff" of this world is fire - the first principle; this passes perpetually into all other sorts of matter in a kind of recurrent cycle. BUT he does not think of fire as being purely material but identifies it with the divine reason (*logos*) which controls the universe.

His sayings include the famous: "All things are in motion". "All things are one." "A man cannot cross the river which he crossed yesterday; the man has changed, and the river has changed. It is another man who crosses another stream" (often paraphrased as "no man steps into the same river twice")

But there were other ways of approaching philosophic thinking too about this time.

PYTHAGORAS was not only a mathematician, but established a school, or sect, in South Italy where the study of the kosmos - the universe - and the relationship between gods, nature and the world was combined with a deliberately chosen "way of life" - the acceptance of a particular moral code.

And from now on the central point of philosophic thinking was increasingly to be man-based- how he ought to live: ethics not physics will become the real issue.

Meanwhile, and perhaps not unconnected with this new emphasis of inquiry, the old anthropomorphic gods are being constantly pushed into the background as philosophers continued their search for the "first principle" which lay behind the creation of the universe.

PARMENIDES for example distinguished two ways of understanding the cosmos:

The way of Truth - which meant knowing The Being, the one single reality of existence, and thus rejecting the other way:

The way of Opinion- which meant accepting The Becoming, the many illusions of existence.

Abstract thought is beginning to rule the systems of philosophy which developed about this time:

EMPEDOCLES for example thought that Love and Strife, by combining with or dividing the four basic elements of matter, formed our universe; and that though our senses are untrustworthy they are our only source of knowledge, however inadequate.

Other forces were at work in Athens too besides the philosophic schools. In the post-Persian wars period there was a new spirit of enterprise -creativity in art and literature, wealth and new contacts in commerce, and above all the exploration of moral problems in tragic drama.

All this, combined with the advances in physical science and the new thinking, helped towards the rejection of old codes, old gods, old ideas.

By the time Pericles was Athens' accepted leader, many ordinary people were confused about: WHAT TO BELIEVE; WHAT STANDARDS TO FOLLOW.

The key philosophical figure in all this turmoil was

ANAXAGORAS; a philosopher -scientist from Ionia, he moved to Athens about 460 B.C., where he became a close friend of Pericles. He applied his questionings to the nature of the universe & suggested that: MIND (or intelligence) produced ORDER out of CHAOS.

His comments that the sun was a red-hot stone, the moon a mass of earth produced a backlash from "conservative" Athenians who persuaded the Assembly to pass a decree banning the study of astronomy as sacrilegious. Impiety was now a crime; the charges against Anaxagoras set a precedent; but such charges were rare; the legal system was not really designed for this sort of thing.

Anaxagoras' pupil ARCHELOUS was traditionally Socrates' teacher; he was a physicist who also "considered truth, goodness and justice" -obviously it was the moral side of his teaching which made the most lasting impression on Socrates.

But Anaxagoras chose exile to avoid the charge of impiety; Pericles died; a new breed of politician arose, men of all classes (Alcibiades and Cleon were from very different "sides of the tracks") who used personality and rhetoric to sway the voters, with personal ambition (instead of/as well as patriotism) as their motive: it was important to present an argument well rather than to have a good argument to present.

Then too the decline in military success and prosperity in the Peloponnesian War had brought a further decline in the old ideas of morality and religion. Agnosticism, scepticism, indifference to any moral code were rife.

Hence arose the New thinking of the Sophists: the philosopher-teachers who sought to sell knowledge and to debate truth - very different from the Pre-Socratics who were philosopher-scientists who sought truth, sometimes claimed to have found, but never stopped asking questions.