

2ND SEMESTER
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CORE-3: GREEK PHILOSOPHY

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Unit I: Myth and Cosmology

In this unit we will introduce the origin and development of Greek philosophy, its history and its philosophers such as Thales, Anaximander, Anaximanes, Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Democritus and Parmenides. Most of these philosophers belonged to the Ionian school at Miletus, that is to say the coast of Asia Minor.

THALES (624-548 B.C)

As the founder of the earliest school of history, Thales of Miletus is generally accounted the founder and father of all philosophy. Thales was a pre-Socratic philosopher, astronomer, geographer and mathematician. He hailed from a place called Miletus on Ionia, Asia Minor. He was born about 624 B.C. and died about 550 B.C. He was named amongst Seven Sages of Greece.

According to Thales, water is the first principle. The universe is fundamentally water. In other words, water is the principle of everything—everything comes from water and returns back to water. Water is present in all three states, namely, solid, liquid and vapours. When water is heated, it assumes the form of vapour, when cooled, it becomes solid, and lastly, when allowed to flow in its natural form, it is liquid. Hence water exists in all the three different forms. It is for this reason, water is said to be the fundamental stuff of the universe. In other words, water is arche. Arche is a Greek word which means, “beginning, first cause, or origin.” Aristotle says that Thales “probably derived his opinion from observing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that even actual heat is generated therefrom, and that animal life is sustained by water, and from the fact that the seeds of all things possess a moist nature, and that water is a first principle of all things that are humid.” According to Thales, water is the ultimate source of the universe and he believed Earth to be a disc which floats on water.

Thales was also a scientific thinker, he gave birth to the scientific way of thinking. Thales paved the path for scientific thinking. For example, he took water to be the first cause of the universe. In other words, one single substance: water is the ultimate principle. According to Herodotus, Thales predicted the solar eclipse which took place in 585 B.C. He also describes the position of Ursa Minor and believed that constellation can be useful in navigation while at sea.

According to Bertrand Russell, Thales was a scientific thinker for two reasons;

1. He discovered how to calculate the distance of a ship at sea with the help of observations taken at two points.
2. He also discovered to calculate the height of a tree or a pyramid from the length of its shadow.

A lot of criticism has been pointed towards Thales's scientific thinking and philosophy for being crude in nature and for being undeveloped or incomplete philosophy. Yet, it is important to note that he laid down the foundation of scientific world-view. He is hence regarded as a naturalist philosopher, and not a theocentric philosopher. He believed in hylozoism, according to him, matter has life. According to Aristotle, in his work, *De Anima*, he writes, Thales believed that magnet is something living in nature for it attracts things towards itself. He also believed that all things are full of gods. Hence, matter has life and it contains souls.

*Two most important terms that are used by describing the philosophy of Thales are;

1. Naturalism and 2. Hylozoism

Naturalism- It is a philosophical view according to which there is nothing real except the natural elements, laws and principles.

Thales believes in concept of water to be the ultimate principle of the universe. Hence is regarded as naturalist.

Hylozoism- It is philosophical doctrine which believed that all matters have life or matter is living being, it has soul. Thales believed to be hylozoist because he believed magnet is something which has life because it attracts things towards itself.

ANAXIMANDER

The next philosopher of the Ionic school is Anaximander. He was an exceedingly original and thinker. He was probably born about 611 B.C. and died about 547. He was an inhabitant of Miletus, and is said to have been a disciple of Thales.

According to Thales, the primal source was water. For Anaximander, the primal stuff was formless, indefinite, and infinite matter. Lastly for Anaximenes, the arche was air. Hence the three main Ionians were materialist.

Anaximander like his master Thales believed that the ultimate principle of the universe is matter. But unlike his master, he regarded the ultimate of the fundamental stuff to be Apeiron and not water. Apeiron is the Greek word which means that which is unlimited, boundless, infinite and indefinite. Etymologically, the word Apeiron means without any limitations, boundaries or end. In other words, he believed that the ultimate reality is eternal, formless, characterless and infinite and boundless. It is neither subjected to decay or destruction. Hence, everything generates from apeiron and returns back to it. According to him, the formless, infinite, eternal mass is the fundamentals stuff of which the world is constituted. In other words, he believed that the formless general principle can account for the particulars, but not vice –versa. For examples, the formless mass can be converted into earthen pitcher, bricks, tiles, etc. But the earthen pitcher for instance cannot be converted into tiles or bricks or any other object. In order to give rise to bricks or tiles, the earthen pitcher has to be reduced again to the formless mass. This distinction of formless mass and particulars is further explained in detailed by Aristotle.

Anaximander unlike the other Ionians was the first philosopher to understand the term arche in a different way. According to Thales and Anaximenes, the term arche means the source of beginning or the source of origination. On the other hand, according to Anaximander, the term arche means that which is infinite, eternal, limit-less matter. Hence, his arche is called, “eternal and ageless”.

According to Anaximander, the world is governed by the opposites. He means that it is due to the opposites, like hot and cold, dry and wet, etc. the world is governed. In other words, it is by the way of working of the opposites the world goes on. In this way, it can be said that water, fire or air cannot be the arche or the ultimate stuff of the universe because if one of them is allowed to work uncontrollably then the world would either become too cold, or dry or watery and in that case the world would cease to be.

Anaximander was a cosmologist. According to him, earth was not a flat disc floating on water, nor was its spherical in shape. It was cylindrical in shape and he believed that men lived on the top of the cylinder. He also believed that Earth is cylindrical in shape and it moved freely in space. According to Anaximander, the world evolved in due course. At one time, according to him, there was only water everywhere and there were as a result only water creatures. By drying up of water, land appeared and the sea creatures were left on the dry land. Those creatures had to adapt themselves to dry land in order to survive. From this theory, one can easily see the germ of organic evolution in the theory of evolution by Anaximander.

ANAXIMENES

Like the two previous thinkers Anaximenes was an inhabitant of Miletus. He was born about 588 B.C. and died about 524. He wrote a treatise of which a small fragment still remains. For Anaximenes, the air is the fundamental stuff of the universe of which the world is composed of. He chose air to be the fundamental stuff of the universe primarily because of its mobility, changeability, and inner vitality. According to Anaximenes, the primarily stuff, air is regulated by the two opposed principles, namely, Condensation and Rarefaction. Condensation is identified with growing cold and Rarefaction is the same thing as heat or growing hot. According to Anaximenes, the world is not just vapours, liquid and solid. Rather, it is also colour, sound, coarse-smooth etc. he means that the two opposed principle of air- condensation and rarefaction admit of the quantitative difference in the world. So, he avers that quantity can explain the quality. In the modern times of scientific thinking, no scientific explanation is considered reliable unless it is put into quantitative formula. Therefore, in this way, out of all the Milesians, Anaximenes is considered to be the most logical and scientific philosopher.

According to Anaximenes, air is regarded as the arche because it is the only element which results in the formation of all other elements and material things. In other words, it is the air which results in the formation of the universe. He believed air to be “fundamental breath of the universe” (pneuma). It is also infinite and divine in nature, so, this breathing universe according to him is nothing but a living organism. Hence, for this reason Anaximenes is considered to be hylozoist.

According to Anaximenes, everything is made up of air. According to him, it is due to air or air's pressure, the flat disk of earth is created which he says was a table-like. He said that earth is

like a leaf floating on air. Anaximenes believed that earth let out an exhalation of air that rarefied (or became hot) and resulted in the formation of stars. Similarly he considered the moon and the sun to be flat and floating on streams of air. Earthquake according to him resulted due to the lack of moisture which leads to breaking of Earth because it gets weak and ultimately it dries up or becomes parched. He also suggested that earthquakes could result due to over abundance of water present on the earth which leads to causing cracks in it. Similarly, lightning is caused by the violent separation of clouds by the wind, creating a bright, fire-like flash. Lastly, rainbows are formed when densely compressed air is touched by the rays of the sun. Therefore, it can be said that Anaximenes used air or one cause to explain the diversifying events in the world, rather than attributing to god or gods. Hence, he was also a naturalist philosopher and not a theocentric philosopher.