A History of Philosophy
01 The Beginning of Greek Philosophy 1
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The area of the world that I hope you recognize as the Aegean Sea, with Greece and Asia Minor. The first known philosopher who talked about, at least, Thales of Miletus came from just about that location in the center of the west coast of the Asia Minor Peninsula. In other words, the Greek colonies were scattered around the Aegean.

Now, a question that one usually starts with is, how do you account, then, for the rise of Western philosophy there in the Aegean area in ancient Greece? And there are several lines of explanation that are important. One is, of course, that it stands at the crossroads between east and west, where traditional ideas would be challenged by the interaction with eastern culture, simply because of the way in which the trade routes came through Asia Minor and down the Meander Valley. The river Meander meanders down to the Aegean Sea, so this is the Meander Valley there, and the trade routes come that way.

So, all right, cross-cultural stimulation led to the asking of some basic questions. A second thing that is emphasized a great deal, and I think appropriately, is that the early Greek philosophers were really pre-scientific scientists. They were asking questions about the natural world, about the natural order, about the natural processes.

They raised questions about basic elements. What basic element or elements underlie all of the rich furniture of the heavens and the earth that we see? What are the causal processes that account for the variation of things and the changes that occur? That sort of question. Early philosophy of nature, primitive cosmology, and questions about the origin of the cosmos as we know it began to arise.

And you could see how they could be connected with the differences between east and west, and the stimulation that comes with the mythology of the two interacting and coming into some degree of conflict. But there is a third feature that is tremendously important, and I think I've come to think increasingly of particular importance. The earlier Greek poets and dramatists had the conviction that the cosmic order, which we observe in nature, is also a marrow order.

A notion of cosmic justice is something that surfaces among some of those early literary figures. In between the Odyssey and the Iliad, it begins to appear. In Hesiod, it's explicit.

In Aeschylus and Sophocles, it's present. So the question is whether there is an order to the cosmos that includes a moral order. If this is a moral universe, how do we

explain that fact? So then we have really two philosophical lines of thought in accounting for the origin of Greek philosophy here.

One that focuses simply on reflection about the physical cosmos, and the other about reflection on the moral order, which they believed to exist in the processes of nature. So what I want to do today is to focus on the first of these, their attention to the physical order, and then next time to turn our attention to the moral order. Take a look at that.

Okay? Now, with that in mind, take a look at the outline that I've just given you of the pre-Socratic philosophers, those prior to Socrates. You notice I've grouped them. Where the principal grouping is in terms, you notice, of various kinds of monism under Romans 1, 2, and 3, as against pluralism.

That is to say, the question as to whether there is one basic element that accounts for everything, or whether there are many basic elements. That would be, obviously, a kind of qualitative monism and pluralism, as the case may be. Qualitative.

Is it the one basic element? Are there many basic elements? But it also involves a quantitative question, whether the universe is numerically one, all-inclusive, solid kind of sphere, or whether there are numerically many distinguishable things. Now that sounds abstruse, for the simple reason that you think you are something different than I am, which implies there are many different things. So, where quantitative monism is going to arise, some very fundamental questions about the reliability of our sense experience arise.

Because if sense experience tells us we are many in number, but the theory becomes that everything is one in number, there's something wrong either with the theory that everything is one, or else something wrong with our sense experience. So that will arise later on when we get down to the group labelled Eleatics, absolute monism, named Eleatics after Elea, which is in the Toe of Italy, where some of these people were. So that quantitative issue arises there.

But at the outset, we're dealing in that naive monism of the Milesians with a qualitative pluralism, or qualitative monism. How many basic elements are there? Now remember, they'd never been in the chemistry lecture hall. They'd never seen the table of the elements.

And impressed as they are by the ordered arrangement of things, the initial tendency is to look for one basic element. And as you read these materials, and I hope you will have read through the primary and secondary materials on the pre-Socratics by the end of this week, as you read these materials, you'll find that Thales thought that everything was ultimately reducible to, derived from, the one element he called

water. Now, for the moment, disregard the fact that you don't think it's an element, H2O.

He wasn't to know that, poor Thales. You'll see. It still sounds like a rather wild hypothesis.

Everything is composed of water. Well, wait a minute. Water is a remarkably adaptable kind of thing.

It comes in liquid, solid, and vapor. It is essential to life. Not only to your life and mine, but to vegetation.

Notice how brown everything is around here. We've had quite a drought this summer. I think I've mowed my front lawn once since early June.

Which is a welcome change, but it's a tragic one. You'll see. No, water is so fundamental to everything that goes on.

That necessity. So understandably, Thales conjectured that maybe this is the basic stuff. Well, he wasn't the only person in the Midwest.

And you notice the name of Anaximander, who, because he recognized that you have not only wetness, but also dryness. You also have dryness. He began to see that you have opposing qualities.

And the same in other regards. Heat and cold. Light and dark.

Male and female. And inasmuch as if you have opposing properties, no one can be more basic than the other. He supposed that the basic element must be something that is undefinable.

And that's what the word epiron means. It cannot be defined. It cannot be delineated, marked off.

The Greek word keras means a border, a demarcation line. The alpha privative makes it negative. So epiron, it has no definition.

It's undefinable. You'll see. Anaximenes, on the other hand, thought that air was the basic essential.

And so you begin to get this variety. And what's surfacing, if you're familiar with Greek literature, what's surfacing is the fact that they are playing with the various elements that the Greeks talked about even in their literature. Earth, air, fire, and water.

Those are the four classic Greek elements. Some have suggested that they represent the four necessities of life. Bath, food, air, breath, fire, warmth, water, something to drink, nourish.

Earth, air, fire, and water, four necessities of life. But you notice that here we have Anaximenes. Here we have Thales.

Later on, we'll find Heraclitus and some of the Stoics plugging in on fire. You'll see. In other words, in terms of the elements as they conceived them, the elements with which they were familiar, which one of these is most basic? Or is it none of these? As Anaximenes supposed.

Well, the Milesians were asking these rather simple questions. Processes of change, they thought, could be explained in the case of air with condensation, which produces moisture. You'll see.

So there are all sorts of possibilities in these proposals. On the other hand, Pythagoras and Heraclitus. Incidentally, that's the Pythagoras you meet in mathematics.

The mathematician who produced what became known as Pythagoras theorem, that the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides. Remember that, Pythagoras? Pythagoras and Heraclitus, seemingly independently of each other, in the late 6th century, that is, before 500, and in the late 8th century. Now, you can get perhaps a rough idea of what I mean by double aspect.

If you consider the question about an object that's almost becoming rare in this culture, a saucer. You know, this is the age of mugs, rather than delicate English, china with teacups and saucers. But at least you know the shape of a saucer.

Is a saucer concave or convex? Yes. From one point of view, looking down on it from above, it's concave. From the other point of view, looking up at it as somebody carries it along, it's convex.

Two aspects to it. So to say that a saucer is both concave and convex is to talk about the double aspect nature of the saucer. Now, what Pythagoras and Heraclitus are impressed with is that there are two aspects to everything in nature.

On the one hand, everything seems to be in a process of change. On the other hand, there is order, what we call uniformity of nature, predictability. Yes, sir? Oh yes, to think of that change, Heraclitus suggested that the basic element is like fire.

You know, fire is always changing. Have you noticed that when sitting around a fireplace in the winter, you get sort of mesmerized by the flickering flames that are always changing? Yes, sir? It's almost hard to concentrate on reading philosophy around a fire. For that reason, constant change.

Yes, sir? Yet on the other hand, this is an ordered universe. There's regularity. You know how certain kinds of wood will burn, and when they're wet, how they burn.

So you have both change and order, change and order. And Pythagoras and Heraclitus, independently of each other, tried to talk about precisely that. The way in which Heraclitus does it is to suggest that what we have is fire or some fiery vapor, heat rising, steam rising, everything rising and changing and flickering and burning down and so forth, fire, plus some sort of intelligible, traceable order that he calls logos.

Now you've run across that word before. That's the word that the Apostle John is going to use in the first line of his gospel. In the beginning was the word, he's in the arche logos.

Beginning the logos. Yes, sir? This is where it first begins to appear in Greek thought. John later adapts the Greek conception in the light of Hebrew conceptions to his purposes.

Watch it. Now, on the other hand, Pythagoras, the mathematician, also talks of things changing, and the idea of fiery vapor is something he alludes to. But instead of talking of logos, what he talks about is a kind of mathematical order to things.

A mathematical order to things so that you can represent all sorts of different shapes numerically. Yes, sir? And this is a mathematical kind of universe where you can trace out the mathematical order. This is why he was interested in geometry.

Yes, sir? So you have these two emphasizing that there is an orderedness to nature for all the processes of change. And footnote, in anticipation of the theme next time, that means that amidst all of life's changes, we should have a rationally ordered life. Yes, sir? The ethic arises from this.

Well, Pythagoras and Heraclitus. On the other hand, when you get to the early Attics, they want absolutely no pluralism, no discrimination of two aspects, no world of change. And Parmenides, in a very forthright fashion, declares that change is illusory.

Plurality is illusory. Physical motion is illusory. The senses are simply the way of illusion.

If you want the way of truth, you have to think in abstraction from all of the senses. Think abstractly. And if you want to see more of what is meant by thinking abstractly, well, you can read the Parmenides selections in the Kauffman Anthology.

But give attention to Zeno, because Zeno tried to make the case for this absolute monism by posing paradoxes. Change is a paradoxical, self-contradictory thing that couldn't occur. For instance, take for instance a hare that is chasing a tortoise.

Does the hare ever catch the tortoise? No. Because, you see, here is the line along which the tortoise is moving. By the time it gets there, the hare has gotten that far.

By the time the tortoise gets there, the hare gets that far. By the time the tortoise gets there, the hare gets that far. And because the hare keeps advancing, the tortoise, because the tortoise keeps advancing, the hare never catches the tortoise.

They'd say, he's already eating it, and that's illusory, they'd say. Does a chicken ever cross the street? No, because if this much is the street, then first the chicken halves the distance, h-a-l-v-e-s, halves the distance, then the chicken halves the remaining distance, then it halves the remaining distance, then it halves the remaining distance, then the remaining, then the remaining, then... never gets across the street. interesting Millet seeds, which were regarded as the smallest seeds that there are.

Millet seeds. Now, to show the paradoxical nature of pluralism, Zeno poses this. How much sound would one millet seed make if you drop it? No sound.

All right, drop a sack of 10,000 millet seeds. How much sound will it make? Zero times 10,000, which is zilch. No sound.

But you heard the third illusion. Rationally, it's impossible. The way of illusion is the way of the senses.

The plurality of things that we see are illusory as plurality. Processes of change and motion are illusory. From a strictly logical standpoint, there can be no change, no plurality.

Now, I don't think that there has ever developed a school of thought known as Zenoism or Parmenideism, because those people represent a sort of logical terminus that nobody wants to follow. It's one thing to say that the senses are sometimes illusory. It's one thing to say that sense perception is relative and changing.

Sure, and we'll find lots of people, Plato and so on and so forth, say that. But to say that they are completely illusory, well, if you say that, why would you say it? To whom would you say it? And why utter any sound in saying it, if that position is correct? Why even record what Zeno and Parmenides said, if that position is correct?

It's self-defeating. But the point is not the position that they came up with, but the kinds of issues they're posing.

What does it mean to say that everything is one whole, that this is a universe? Well, presumably, it doesn't mean what Parmenides thought it meant. Yes, sir. But on the other hand, is this a world of radical pluralism with everything disassociated? Radical individualism in an anarchistic kind of cosmos with no law and order? Yes, sir.

In effect, what the pre-Socratics did for us was to pose the issues, and very often, it's far more important what question surfaces than what answers surface. Yes, sir. It certainly is with these people.

Well, when you get to the pluralists, you might say, this is a breath of fresh air. Because here you have people, Empedocles and Hexagoras, Democritus, who see a multitude of different things. Empedocles, in fact, picks up on all four.

Earth, air, fire, and water. All four elements. And in order to explain the kind of process that's involved, he comes up with some sort of a cyclical view of cosmic history.

You see, seeing things going that way with integration and disintegration of the elements all the way through the history of the cosmos. The four basic elements. And Hexagoras, on the other hand, thinks there must be basic elements of every kind of qualitative thing, no matter how different.

He calls them seeds. So, your body will have seeds of bone, seeds of skin, seeds of flesh, seeds of blood, seeds of muscle, seeds of hair, so on and so forth. And there are some suggestions that it might be seeds of dark hair or seeds of light hair, seeds of curly hair or seeds of straight hair.

We're going to stop this sort of pluralism. But then, having postulated such an infinite diversity of different things, all of these seeds, how are you going to account for the ordered unity of the human body? And for that matter, of the universe. And so, what Hexagoras does is to talk about what he calls the noose or the mind.

As if there is some cosmic mind drilling things into ordered unity in an ordered direction. Some sort of divine noose. You can see that in groping for the source of cosmic order, they're groping towards some concept of a supreme being.

He'll say, the beginnings of theology in the ancient Greeks, in distinction from some of their mythology. You'll see.

But on the other hand, when you get to Democritus, the picture is different. Because while Empedocles and Anaxagoras were qualitative pluralists, okay, qualitative

pluralists, Democritus is a qualitative monist. Everything is of one and the same quality.

But a quantitative pluralist. That is to say, physical things are composed of infinitesimal atoms. An atom, the word literally means it cannot be split.

It cannot be cut. It's an indivisible pellet of matter. Okay.

So physical things that we know are composed of vast numbers of atoms. Indivisible pellets. And the qualitative differences between cats and cabbages and cauliflowers and kale.

You'll see. The qualitative differences are due to the combinations of atoms. Producing those qualitative differences.

Different combinations for a king than for a cauliflower. Now the idea is that the atoms come in different shapes. And whirling around in some sort of cosmic vortex.

Natural kind of motion. Whirling around in this cosmic vortex, collide, hook onto each other, and combine so larger aggregates form. And as a result of sheer chance, mechanical processes.

The whole body of things in heaven and earth has been formed over the course of history. So what you get from these last people is particularly interesting. Because whereas an exaggeration is suggesting a teleological explanation.

A teleological explanation. That is to say, there is this cosmic mind that orders things in these intelligible ways. Okay.

On the other hand, Democritus has a purely mechanistic explanation. Has a purely mechanistic explanation. Blind forces combine by chance to produce the kinds of conglomerates that make up the cosmos.

It's as if somebody took the whole bundle and bundles and bundles of individual letters and whirled them around long enough. And out came the Sunday edition of the Chicago Tribune. You see, that sort of explanation, the sheer chance.

But obviously, here you have two philosophers heading in vastly different directions. You see. A mechanistic kind of materialism in which nothing exists but material atoms being moved by chance forces.

Okay. And on the other hand, a teleological explanation. Which is pushing in the direction of either some kind of theistic metaphysic or some kind of idea.

Not idealism, but some explanation which sees some immaterial reality of a rational sort accounting for the orderedness of the cosmos. Now. That's been a quick rundown.

And before I pick up and pull some threads together, let me pause. Did you get the story? What do you want to get clear again? Ruth? Oh. You said that the noctis is a qualitative monist, but a quantitative monist. Why? Yes, because all of the atoms, individual atoms, are qualitatively the same.

Qualitatively alike. So a qualitative monist. But a quantitative pluralist.

Many of them. But all of them are qualitatively alike. Yeah.

Does that make sense? Getting the terminology under your belt and as part of your active vocabulary is part of the task at this juncture. Yes. I just have a question.

That dog was really done. Who? First one. And the quarrels.

Oh, and pedigrees. Okay. Okay.

Did you say that this model is mechanistic? I'm inclined to say no. I think he's groping towards a teleological view for this reason. That in that cyclical picture of the elements combining and disassociating, he ascribes that cyclical process to two forces that he calls love and hate.

Attraction, repulsion. Now, depending on how you take those terms, love and hate, they could be simply metaphorical terms for attraction and repulsion as we think of them in magnetism and electricity. Yes.

In which case, it would be a mechanistic thing. But on the other hand, if you take love and hate to be some inner directedness because of natural affinity, you see, it doesn't have to be conscious. Any more than a daffodil growing up in the spring or turning to the light implies consciousness.

You see, but as long as there is an order that is end-oriented, then you could say this is the beginning of a teleology. So I'm inclined to say that Empedocles isn't out into the clear yet one way or the other. But I think he's edging towards the teleological tale.

Yeah. Okay. No, I want you to get this general structure of the pre-Socratic period.

Down as well as you can. We're not going to spend a lot of time on it just today and next time. But we'll be referring back to it again and again.

It'll become point of reference. Okay. So keep in mind the Milesians.

Okay. Qualitative monists of a rather simplistic sort. The Milesians.

The double-aspect theories of Pythagoras and Heraclitus. The Iliadics, their absolute monism. The pluralists who pose the mechanism versus teleology question.

And the reading that you're doing will put the flesh on these bumps. The structure is important. Now, what I want to underscore is the kind of question that these people are raising.

We think of Thales as about 600 BC. Okay. Thales lived about 600 BC.

By the time we get down to Socrates, we're about 400 BC. So we've got essentially a 200-year span in which the pre-Socratics are at work. 200-year span.

In which, in effect, they are formulating the philosophical agenda that Western philosophy has worked with ever since. They are formulating a philosophical agenda that Western philosophy has worked with ever since. Now, maybe you're inclined to ask, well, why should we take their agenda? Well, the thing is that it is so interwoven into Western thought patterns in every discipline, not just in philosophy, in every discipline.

For the simple reason that the later sciences emerged as spin-offs from philosophy. You see. Have you noticed how your science professors have Doctor of Philosophy degrees? And many of them never saw the inside of a philosophy classroom, except for people like Dr. Chappell here, who audits philosophy courses.

Bless her heart. You see. Simply because natural philosophy, so-called, philosophy of nature, natural philosophy, the sort of thing that these guys are doing, is the seedbed out of which the empirical and mathematical sciences develop subsequently.

You see. If you take Dr. Spradley's courses in the history of science, you'll find that the history of science up through, oh, approximately the Renaissance, is essentially one strain of what we do in the history of philosophy. You see.

And then you begin to get the development of astronomy and physics, independently of philosophy, later of chemistry, and of biology. Sociology doesn't begin until the mid-19th century. Psychology, as a science, did not emerge until the early 20th century.

It's as late as 1910. What's now the Journal of Philosophy was called the Journal of Philosophy, Psychology, Scientific Method, etc. I know that's a mouthful, but that's the way it was.

So, the agenda that is created, you'll see, by the pre-Socratics, was carried on in natural philosophy in ancient and medieval times, and transmitted into modern times. So, in a sense, the question we're asking is still, what are the basic elements, or if not basic elements, what's the basic stuff? You see. Whether you want protons or quarks, take your choice.

We're still asking the same kinds of questions. How do you describe the causal processes and the causal forces at work that produce change? Same type of questions. But what is that agenda? What is that agenda? And I think you can see pretty clearly that it's the kind of agenda that you should have been introduced to, more or less.

In your introductory course, where we usually try to get questions in what we call metaphysics, whether or not they're labeled that way. Questions in metaphysics have to do with the nature of reality. Whether it be questions about the natural world, mechanism, or teleology.

Or questions about whether matter is real in itself, or not, as George Berkeley thought. You see. Whether mind and matter are two different kinds of substances in the mind-body problem, when talking of the nature of persons.

Whether everything that occurs is due to causal processes in a deterministic scheme, or whether there's such a thing as free will. Whether there is an ultimate source of cosmic order, whether in fact God exists. Those are metaphysical questions.

And you can see that that is part of the agenda, then, posed by the pre-Socratics. I've also suggested that, secondly, there is a further agenda, under the surface, in epistemology. Theory of knowledge.

I'll say. Where you find there are some of these ancients who are thorough-going empiricists, saying all that we know comes from sense experience. And indeed, Thales seems to talk like that.

Certainly, the pluralists do. Though they do have occasional speculation beyond that. They're basically empiricists.

As distinct from rationalists like Parmenides and Zeno, who disparage completely sense experience, and say that only abstract logical thought. Really, gives us reliable knowledge. And so, epistemological questions are posed about how we know just how reliable experience is.

Just to what extent can abstract rational thought provide knowledge? How are these two related? You see that agenda. Thirdly, there is an agenda about ethics, and

about society, if you like, social philosophy. Because, as I hinted, both Pythagoras and Heraclitus maintain that if this is a rationally ordered universe, then we should live rationally ordered lives if we want to fit into the universe.

Want to find our place. You'll see. And even Democritus suggests that a life guided by reason is of value in a mechanistic, materialistic universe.

How come? Well, these blind forces cause pleasure and pain. So if you gain enough understanding of the causal processes, and guide your life by what you know of the causal processes, you can then minimize the pain and pursue the pleasure. But that takes a rationally guided life.

So out of these positions flow ethical positions. What is the good life? And what do we have to do to pursue it? You're right. So this whole agenda of Western philosophy, then, seems to be implied, spelled out, at least in its basic terms, by these Presocratics.