

History of Philosophy

01 The Beginning of Greek Philosophy

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Abstract:

This lecture by Dr. Arthur Holmes explores the origins of Western philosophy in ancient Greece, identifying the Aegean area as a vital crossroads for cultural and intellectual exchange. Early thinkers, often described as pre-scientific scientists, shifted from mythology to rational inquiry regarding the physical cosmos and the underlying moral order of the universe. The text categorizes these Pre-Socratic philosophers into groups such as monists, who sought a single unifying element like water or air, and pluralists, who believed reality consisted of multiple substances. Key debates highlighted include the tension between sensory experience and abstract reason, as well as the conflict between mechanistic materialism and teleological explanations involving a cosmic mind. Ultimately, Holmes argues that these ancient figures established the foundational metaphysical and ethical agenda that continues to define Western intellectual disciplines today.

Briefing Document:

The Foundations of Western Thought: The Pre-Socratic Philosophers

Executive Summary

The emergence of Western philosophy in the Aegean area (600–400 BC) represents a pivotal shift from mythological explanations to rational, pre-scientific inquiry. Triggered by cross-cultural stimulation at trade crossroads and a growing conviction that a moral order exists within the natural world, early Greek thinkers—the Pre-Socratics—established the foundational agenda for Western intellectual history.

This briefing outlines the transition from qualitative monism (seeking a single basic element) to complex pluralism and the eventual divide between mechanistic and teleological worldviews. Key takeaways include:

- **The Shift to Naturalism:** Early philosophers sought "basic elements" (water, air, fire) and causal processes to explain the physical cosmos.
- **Monism vs. Pluralism:** A central debate emerged regarding whether reality is numerically and qualitatively "one" (Monism) or composed of "many" (Pluralism).

- **The Double-Aspect Theory:** Figures like Pythagoras and Heraclitus identified a duality in nature—constant change (flux) governed by an underlying, traceable order (Logos or Mathematics).
- **The Logical Extremes:** The Eleatics (Parmenides and Zeno) argued that change and plurality are entirely illusory, relying on pure logic over sensory experience.
- **Mechanism vs. Teleology:** The period concluded with a split between those viewing the universe as a product of blind, mechanistic forces (Democritus) and those seeing an ordering intelligence or purpose (Anaxagoras).

The Genesis of Greek Philosophy

The rise of philosophy in the Aegean—specifically in Miletus on the west coast of Asia Minor—is attributed to three primary factors:

1. **Cross-Cultural Stimulation:** Positioned at the crossroads of East and West, the Meander Valley trade routes allowed for the interaction of diverse cultures, challenging traditional mythologies and prompting basic questioning.
2. **Pre-Scientific Inquiry:** Early philosophers acted as primitive cosmologists, asking what basic elements underlie the "furniture of the heavens and the earth" and what causal processes account for variation and change.
3. **The Integration of Moral Order:** Early literary figures (Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles) introduced the conviction that cosmic order includes a moral dimension—"cosmic justice." Philosophy thus split into two lines: reflection on the physical cosmos and reflection on the moral order.

Categorization of Pre-Socratic Thought

The Pre-Socratic era is primarily defined by the tension between Monism (the "One") and Pluralism (the "Many").

I. The Milesian Monists (Qualitative Monism)

The earliest philosophers sought a single substance to explain all reality.

Philosopher Basic Element Rationale

Thales	Water	Essential for life/vegetation; adaptable (liquid, solid, vapor).
Anaximander	<i>Apeiron</i> (The Undefinable)	Argued that since nature contains opposing qualities (wet/dry, heat/cold), the basic element must be an "undefinable" substrate without boundaries (<i>keras</i>).
Anaximenes	Air	Focused on condensation and rarefaction as the process of change.

II. Double-Aspect Theories: Order in Change

Pythagoras and Heraclitus independently observed that nature exhibits both constant change and predictable uniformity.

- **Heraclitus:** Proposed that the basic element is **Fire**—always flickering and changing. However, this change is governed by the **Logos**, an intelligible, traceable order.
- **Pythagoras:** While acknowledging a changing universe (and "fiery vapor"), he focused on **Mathematical Order**. He believed the universe could be represented numerically and geometrically, suggesting that a rationally ordered universe requires a rationally ordered life.

III. The Eleatics: Absolute Monism

The Eleatics, including Parmenides and Zeno, rejected pluralism and change entirely, favoring abstract logic over sensory experience.

- **Parmenides:** Declared that change, motion, and plurality are illusory. To find truth, one must think in abstraction from the senses.
- **Zeno's Paradoxes:** Zeno defended absolute monism by showing the logical "absurdity" of plurality and motion:
 - **The Hare and the Tortoise:** The hare can never catch the tortoise because it must always reach the point the tortoise just left, ad infinitum.
 - **The Millet Seed:** If one seed makes no sound when dropped, logically 10,000 seeds should make no sound ($0 \times 10,000 = 0$). Since they do make a sound, the senses are proven illusory.

The Pluralist Response

Later thinkers attempted to account for the diversity of the world while explaining its unity.

- **Empedocles:** Proposed four basic elements—**Earth, Air, Fire, and Water**. He explained the integration and disintegration of these elements through the cyclical forces of **Love (attraction)** and **Hate (repulsion)**.

- **Anaxagoras:** Postulated an infinite diversity of "seeds" (bone, skin, hair). To explain how these seeds form an ordered unity, he introduced the **Nous** (Cosmic Mind), a divine ordering force.

- **Democritus:** Developed a **Mechanistic Materialism**. He was a qualitative monist (all atoms are the same material) but a quantitative pluralist (infinite numbers of atoms). He argued that atoms of different shapes collide and hook together by "sheer chance" in a cosmic vortex, rather than by divine design.

The Philosophical Agenda and Legacy

The 200-year span from Thales (600 BC) to Socrates (400 BC) formulated the agenda that has governed Western thought across three main branches:

1. Metaphysics (The Nature of Reality)

The Pre-Socratics introduced the fundamental debates regarding the natural world:

- **Mechanism vs. Teleology:** Is the universe a result of blind forces (Democritus) or an ordering intelligence (Anaxagoras)?
- **Substance:** Is reality composed of matter, or is there an immaterial, rational reality?
- **Determinism vs. Free Will:** Are all occurrences the result of causal processes?

2. Epistemology (Theory of Knowledge)

The conflict between the Eleatics and the Pluralists established the two major schools of knowledge:

- **Empiricism:** Knowledge derived from sense experience (Thales, the Pluralists).
- **Rationalism:** Knowledge derived from abstract, logical thought, often disparaging the senses (Parmenides, Zeno).

3. Ethics and Social Philosophy

The Pre-Socratics tied their physical theories to human conduct:

- **Pythagorean/Heraclitean Ethics:** If the universe is rationally ordered, humans must live rationally ordered lives to fit into that cosmos.

- **Democratean Ethics:** In a mechanistic universe of pleasure and pain, one must use reason to understand causal processes, thereby minimizing pain and pursuing pleasure.

Conclusion: The Seedbed of Science

Natural philosophy, as practiced by these figures, served as the "seedbed" for all modern sciences. Astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology emerged as "spin-offs" from these original philosophical inquiries into the basic elements and causal forces of the cosmos.

Study Guide:

The Foundations of Greek Philosophy: A Study Guide

This study guide explores the origins of Western philosophy in the Aegean region, focusing on the pre-Socratic thinkers who established the foundational agenda for metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Based on the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes, this document synthesizes the transition from mythological explanations to rational inquiries into the natural and moral order.

Part I: Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided source material.

1. **How did the geographical location of the Greek colonies contribute to the rise of philosophy?** The Greek colonies were situated at the crossroads of East and West, particularly along trade routes like the Meander Valley. This position led to cross-cultural stimulation, where the interaction of different traditions and mythologies prompted thinkers to ask fundamental questions about the natural world.
2. **What were the primary "scientific" questions asked by early Greek philosophers of nature?** These thinkers focused on identifying the basic elements that underlie the "furniture of the heavens and the earth." They sought to understand

the causal processes responsible for the variation and changes observed in the cosmos.

3. **Explain the distinction between qualitative and quantitative monism.**

Qualitative monism asks whether there is only one basic type of element that accounts for everything, such as water or air. Quantitative monism concerns the numerical status of the universe, questioning whether reality is a single, all-inclusive sphere or composed of many distinguishable things.

4. **Why did Thales identify water as the primary element (arche) of the universe?**

Thales observed that water is remarkably adaptable, existing as a liquid, solid, and vapor. Furthermore, he noted that water is essential to all life, including human existence and vegetation, making it a plausible candidate for the "basic stuff" of reality.

5. **What is the meaning of Anaximander's term *apeiron*, and why did he propose it?**

The term *apeiron* refers to something that is undefinable and lacks a boundary or demarcation line. Anaximander proposed this because he recognized opposing qualities in nature, such as wetness and dryness, and concluded that the basic element must be something neutral that cannot be defined by one specific property.

6. **How do Pythagoras and Heraclitus explain the "double aspect" of nature?**

Both thinkers observed that while everything in nature is in a constant process of change, there is also an underlying uniformity and predictability. Heraclitus associated this change with fire and the order with *logos*, while Pythagoras identified the order as being mathematical in nature.

7. **What was the central argument of the Eleatic philosophers regarding sense experience?**

The Eleatics, such as Parmenides and Zeno, argued that change, plurality, and physical motion are entirely illusory. They maintained that the senses provide only the "way of illusion" and that the "way of truth" can only be found through abstract, logical thought.

8. **Describe Zeno's paradox of the millet seeds and its philosophical purpose.**

Zeno argued that if one dropped millet seed makes no sound, then 10,000 seeds should also make no sound (zero times 10,000), yet the senses hear a sound when the sack is dropped. This paradox was intended to show that the senses are contradictory and that pluralism is rationally impossible.

9. **How did Anaxagoras account for the ordered unity of the diverse "seeds" of the universe?**

Anaxagoras postulated an infinite diversity of basic elements or "seeds" for every different kind of thing. To explain how these diverse seeds form an ordered

unity, he introduced the concept of the *nous*, or a cosmic mind that drills things into an ordered direction.

10. **In what way is Democritus both a qualitative monist and a quantitative pluralist?** Democritus is a qualitative monist because he believed all atoms are made of the same indivisible material and are qualitatively alike. However, he is a quantitative pluralist because he believed the universe is composed of a vast, numerical multitude of these individual atoms.

Part II: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Shift from Mythology to Natural Philosophy:** Analyze how early Greek thinkers transitioned from mythological explanations of the world to "pre-scientific" inquiries. Focus on the role of trade, cross-cultural interaction, and the search for basic elements.
2. **Order Amidst Change:** Compare and contrast the ways in which Heraclitus, Pythagoras, and the Milesians addressed the problem of change versus stability in the physical cosmos.
3. **The Limits of Reason and Sensation:** Evaluate the Eleatic rejection of the physical world. Discuss whether a philosophy that labels all sense perception as "illusion" can be sustained, or if it is inherently self-defeating as suggested in the text.
4. **Mechanism versus Teleology:** Contrast the worldview of Democritus with that of Anaxagoras. Discuss the implications of viewing the universe as a product of blind, mechanical chance versus a product of a directing cosmic mind (*nous*).
5. **The Pre-Socratic Legacy:** Dr. Holmes argues that the pre-Socratics formulated the "philosophical agenda" for the next 2,000 years. Trace how their inquiries into nature laid the groundwork for the modern disciplines of physics, biology, and ethics.

Part III: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
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Alpha Privative	A prefix (the letter alpha) used in Greek to negate the meaning of a word, such as in <i>apeiron</i> (not-defined).
Anaxagoras's Seeds	The infinite diversity of basic elements representing every qualitative thing (bone, skin, flesh) that makes up the universe.
Apeiron	A term used by Anaximander meaning "undefinable" or "boundless"; the basic element that lacks specific qualities like wet or dry.
Arche	The beginning, origin, or fundamental principle of all things.
Atoms	Literally meaning "indivisible"; the infinitesimal pellets of matter that Democritus believed composed all physical things.
Cosmic Justice	The notion found in early Greek poetry (Hesiod, Aeschylus) that the natural order of the cosmos is also a moral order.
Double Aspect	The theory that reality has two sides: constant change (flux) and intelligible order (uniformity).
Eleatics	A school of absolute monism (including Parmenides and Zeno) that argued plurality and change are illusions of the senses.
Epistemology	The branch of philosophy concerned with the theory of knowledge, including the reliability of senses versus abstract reason.
Logos	An intelligible, traceable, or rational order that governs the processes of change in the universe.
Mechanistic Explanation	A view of the universe where blind forces and material atoms combine by sheer chance without a specific purpose or goal.
Metaphysics	The branch of philosophy that deals with the nature of reality, including the study of the cosmos, mind-body relations, and the existence of God.
Monism	The philosophical view that variety in the universe can be explained by a single underlying substance or principle.
Nous	A term for "mind"; used by Anaxagoras to describe a cosmic intelligence that provides order to the diversity of the seeds.

Pluralism	The view that the universe is composed of many basic elements or substances rather than just one.
Qualitative	Relating to the kind or nature of a substance (e.g., what <i>kind</i> of elements exist).
Quantitative	Relating to the number or amount of things (e.g., <i>how many</i> distinct things exist).
Teleological Explanation	A view that accounts for the order of the universe by citing an end-oriented purpose or a directing intelligence.