

Excluding the divine from the explanations of cosmogony

An analysis of the contribution of The Milesians

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Abstract

Human's earliest period in history had been awestruck by natural phenomena and the working of the universe. Greece was considered the cradle of Western civilization. They had sought peace and come to a compromise through beliefs connected to religion. As thoughts advanced, they became dissatisfied by this. The result was that men who began to think rationally started to find answers to the questions they faced excluding the involvement of the divine. The foremost person to present his ideas was Miletus. He was Thales. The second and the third to express themselves in the same context were Anaximander and Anaximenes, who was also from Miletus. The objective of this study is to trace if there is a connection between their ideas. Were they to be studied as separate philosophers or were they a part of a single process? Individual theories are examined with reference to the comments of the authors who later had examined them pitting them against the original fragments which are limited since they have not survived the test of time. Careful analysis show that the thoughts had emerged as a denial of the supernatural forces in solving the problem of becoming. Yet when the other two philosophers explored the alternative resolutions, they had gradually provided new suggestions of new possibilities. This is what is intended to explore in this study. The thoughts which started by rejecting religion seems to explore an affinity of the most important part in himself – the soul, and the primordial substance of the world process. The sense of justice, injustice and compensation and time limit. The question that arises is – are we to expect more in consequent thoughts that are to be explored later.

Keywords: Milesian philosophers, Cosmogony, Becoming, Divinity, Primordial substance.

1. Introduction

The paper consists of an in - depth investigation of the contribution of the pioneering Greek philosophers who were instrumental in rejecting the divine involvement in the question of 'becoming'. The thoughts that emerged as that of individuals who belonged to a particular school of thought, since they belonged to the same geographical area and the nature of their ideas. The inquiry would consist of the remaining of their original fragments and the often commented on or analyzed secondary sources that were considered as fundamental. The findings would consist of the conclusion arrived after the investigation, that the thoughts revealed a sense more things to be revealed later when the process evolved later, with other philosophers. Namely, the affinity with the human and the world process, involving such notions as justice, injustice, compensation, time limit, and the soul.

2. Methodology

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Ancient Greeks had been conditioned by their religious beliefs to attribute an importance to the divine. They particularly had conceived ideas on the power of the supernatural as omnipotent. The impact of such thoughts satisfied those who resented the older religious beliefs before the Dorian conquest. Yet when society and culture came to take more steps towards rational thinking it had become unconceivable to foster such notions. Hence one finds a restlessness among the more rationally oriented to seek other explanations to many questions that the supernatural had provided explanations to.

With the advance and progress of civilization, man began to ask questions and to seek explanations. This was an attempt to get beyond the symbolic and mystical thinking to get at the naked truth-to grasp what lies beyond. Though there would have considerable alternative suggestions through many, the pioneering thoughts of the Milesian philosophers came to shine as the most plausible. They had sought the explanations from mother nature, devoid of the external divine forces that the earlier beliefs fostered.

To philosophize is to wonder, to explore, to break free to ask questions, to seek in oneself the courage to ask questions. It means refusing easy answers. Of being willing to be disturbed by a willing uneasiness.

Doubt meant doubting one's own faith, which is nearly impossible. Of being brave enough to find answers in the name of truth and knowledge.

Some attribute this to the common motherland they shared, namely Miletus, in Asia Minor which had the opportunity to be exposed to alternative thoughts. The efforts highlighted the necessity for the ideas to be rational.

The purpose of this paper is to examine what contribution they had indulged in, deliberately or not, and thereby influenced the process of Greek philosophy.

Thales attempted to explain the universal on naturalistic grounds instead of the mythical. For people like him 'Dike' the world governing law and proportion had to be seen on a rationalistic ground, without the supernatural.

- 1) Thales (6th cen BCE) is the first of the Milesian or Ionian philosophers.

He is considered the father of Greek philosophy. The meaning of this is that he took the very first steps of a very long journey that was to last for centuries to come. It was Thales who gained the title as being the first Greek Philosopher 'since his were the first recorded thoughts on these lines.

His contribution took the form of an attempt to find answers excluding the divine and the supernatural from the world process. (Stace, 1919, p.21)

Only three fragments of his thought have survived the test of time.-these fragments are:

- 1) All things come from water and go back to water.
- 2) All things are full of gods.
- 3) Earth floats like a log on water. (Aristotle, Metaphysics,983,20-27)

When pondering on the above fragments one could arrive at certain conclusions, which seem quite logical. ie -

- 1) An analysis of the 1st fragment itself shows the tendency of his thoughts. The questions that Thales himself seemed to have asked himself, and has tried to answer regarding cosmogony and cosmology: These questions take the following form. -

- 1) From what does all this come?
- 2) To what does all this return?
- 3) What causes the change?

This in other words is the philosophical problem of "Becoming".

- Thales does not seem to be the originator of the selection of 'water' as the originative substance. We find various poetical sources giving water prominence. (Homer Iliad, 12,20) ie- 'Okeanos' -father of all However, the selection itself is important as it signifies -

- 1) A Single originative substance (It was natural for him to seek a 'one' substance) (Stace ,1919, p21)
- 2) From nature. (Hegel, 1955, p171)
- 3) Tangible and sensuous (philosophy being a process moving towards the non sensuous from the sensuous) (Ibid)
- 4) Material (tendency of philosophy moving from the material to the non material.) (Idem)
- 5) There was no god or supernatural being involved in the world process.

The above discussion would also prove that since all things emerge from a single substance there seems to be a notion of kinship of all things, even at this very early stage.

- ☆ A remarkable finding is that Thales' contribution seems to be in the expression, than in the actual selection of the substance. For it is very important to note the present tense used in the words 'come' and 'go' in the fragment. So it is not a world that had come into being once, and would be destroyed in the future that Thales spoke about.

It is a dynamic world in which a 'coming' and 'going' are happening at once and the same time. It is a simultaneous process that he refers to. Not a stagnant one. And a world full of flux and change.

2)The second fragment provides deeper speculation as well.

"All things are full of gods" is a fragment around which many scholarly arguments have taken place. The following are some of the popular observations.

1. By the word "god" Thales means 'water' and not the supernatural religious deities.
2. Thales' thoughts seem to be ahead of the language that was available to him at the time. Therefore what he seems to have done is explain the unfamiliar through a familiar term. Yet he was compelled to express nonmythical subjects in the available mythical language. Language had not been advanced enough to express unfamiliar thoughts. Communication had to be made through a mode that one could understand.

It would have been easier for the contemporaries to have understood the term 'god' than a newly coined terminology.

4. On the other hand Thales' primordial substance would have had many characteristics of the traditional term god. Namely – all important, everlasting, powerful, etc. etc.
5. Thales' primordial substance was energized -. Meaning that It did not need any other to move itself. But it could cause change in others.
6. Would have been all too ready to point out that gods were not only in selected things as in the traditional belief e.g.- certain trees, mountains, rivers, etc. but was in all things. So all the things in the world had the original substance in them.

3. The third fragment reminds us of the traditional belief pertaining to the Olympian religion. It was the underworld called Hades that was under our earth. All the dead (irrespective of what they did or did not do while living) – passed on to this gloomy place where they were nothing but shadow like figures according to the poets. Hence this was definitely not a thing to look forward to. Death was not something to look forward to. This made men fear death. (ie-to go to war on behalf of their country and lay down their lives)

Thales refutes this notion and explicitly says that it was not the underworld but water that was under the earth that we live in. (Some scholars are of the view that the geography of Greece and the constant earthquakes would have led Thales to speculate on the above possibility.)

Thales is respected more for the questions that he had asked himself and the trend that he set for philosophical speculation, than the actual answers he seemed to have provided. However, the influence he had on his followers is noteworthy. 2. 2.

2. Anaximander (A younger contemporary of Thales) is one of the Milesian philosophers. A younger contemporary of Thales but was not one of his pupils.

He is credited with the 1st map of the world. He is believed to have said that the earth was like a circle and the ocean was around it. Half of it was Europe and the other Asia. His philosophical thoughts along with his contribution to the development of Greek thoughts are significant.

Anaximander seems to have asked the same questions that Thales had asked. Thales' thoughts would have had an influence on him e.g. the very fact that he did not agree with Thales on the primordial substance is enough to prove this. He agreed on a single element, but did not agree that it was water.

1. For Anaximander, water was only one of four equal elements- Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

The primordial substance was the source of these four elements.

For 4 elements of such opposite qualities to emerge forth the first substance should be boundless in quality.

Hence Anaximander's' primordial substance was called "The Apeiron".`

(Simplicus Phys,24,13)

2. 'Peras' in Greek was boundary, when added an "A" – negative = Boundless or

Limit less. (Hussey, 1974, p17)

Hence that is contained the possibility of producing elements of different qualities. E.g. A quality would be a boundary. If something was hot it meant that it was not cold. If wet, not dry. Apeiron was the ultimate substance from which all qualities arose.

As for example it is easier to understand it in the following manner. I.e.- If you take away all the qualities from something, what you would be left with is the Apeiron.

It does not meet our senses in its natural state. In this world it is clothed with qualities.

1. The Apeiron is limitless in quantity as well. For it was ever present in the universe. If it was limited in quantity the universe would cease to be once it has run out of the primordial substance.

2. It is also limitless in age. The meaning is that he Apeiron had been present forever, it is here at present and it will be there in the future

3. Anaximander said that the Apeiron is Divine. By this he would have meant that it has the power to move within itself - It can change on its own. Yet this is definitely not the supernatural. (Aristotle, Physics,4,20367)

4. At the original stage all qualities were in a neutral state and all mixed together.

5. But as a result of movement – action – qualities came into existence.

6. The nature of the original movement had been a – spinning, rotating, a vortex kind of movement. It is due to this movement that the opposites – hot and cold came into being. From these originated the elements Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

7. These elements were opposites and were at war. All were equal. And therefore one could not be superior to the other. If one ruled the others, it would be injustice. E.g. water against fire. If one commits injustice on the other, it will have to pay compensation according to the time – the period, that the earlier injustice was committed. (West, ,1971, p 82)

8. This 'compensation' according to the 'period of time' sounds like a sentence. Bringing in 'injustice' and 'justice' to philosophical thoughts is interesting. Could he be associating morality or intelligence with the working of the universe? He does not say so. But one tends to wonder. (idem) (Freeman, 1966, p63)

9. Nature of the Apeiron – A philosophy deduced through mental calculation, speculation, and sheer logic. Piercing the ordinary vision. This proves that he was more a philosopher than Thales. Though it is a step taken from the concrete to the abstract, it points to a reality behind experience.

What he has to say about cosmogony and cosmology

- ✧ He believes that at the very beginning all qualities are in a neutral state.
- ✧ He says that it is as a result of the vortex like movement Hot and Cold are separated from the Apeiron.
- ✧ What Anaximander points out is that qualities meant limits. So once a change takes place, no longer can we refer to as the Apeiron.
- ✧ It is due to the vortex like movement that the 4 elements emerge : Earth, Air, Fire and Water – Due to the spinning the thicker come to the middle and the thinner go to the outside.
- ✧ Due to the rapidity of movement on the outer circles, the rings of Air and Fire break up in to 3 circles. The 1st ring of Fire is settled at the distance of 9 times to the earth, the 2nd 18 times and the 3rd 27 times.
- ✧ These 3 rings of Air encircle the rings of fire.
- ✧ We on earth see the fire in the outer rings through apertures (nozzle like) in the ring of air.
- ✧ There are several apertures in the first ring. And when we see the outer fire through the vessel like holes, we call them stars.
- ✧ The aperture in the 2nd ring is the moon.
- ✧ The aperture in the 3rd ring is the sun.
- ✧ He does not mention an Olympus where the gods are said to have lived or a Hades under the earth.
- ✧ There are also other worlds in the universe.
- ✧ He explains eclipses as partial or total closing off the apertures which result from the twisting of the tubes of air.

= here absolutely is no connection of the Divine regarding this. Hence the notions put forth hitherto by the poets are debunked

- ✧ The earth is described as a drum of a column. It's height 1/3 of its width. The surface is concave. We live on one side of the earth and the other side is called the antipodes. (again no Hades or an under world)

- ✧ The earth is in the middle of the rings for the simple reason to be in one direction in and not in the other.
- ✧ As a result of this, the Earth is positioned in the middle, then Water, which is followed by Air, and Air by Fire. It definitely is not held up by any supernatural super power.
- ✧ The winds, rain and even the thunderbolts are caused by natural phenomena. The thunder bolt is no weapon of Zeus as with the Olympians.
- ✧ Anaximander had completely eliminated the mythological and the supernatural from the cosmic scene.
- ✧ Anaximander had said that living creatures and the human beings arose due to the moist elements when it was evaporated by the sun.
- ✧ The first-ever human according to his explanation was that it had been living in a fish-like creature and finally when the human was able to tend for himself the creature had come onto the earth, its bark split, and out had walked the.

Human. Burnet comments that Anaximander would have conceived the idea of adaptation to the environment and survival of the fittest. (Freeman, 1966, p63)

But if one was to believe in this it would also lead to considering the Apeiron as an intelligent force. This cannot be possible since the Apeiron is not depicted as a systematic order. Nor was it a source of morality or universal justice. There is absolutely no possibility of the remotest thought of a 'being'. His intention would have been to observe and state the natural working of the universe as he conceived it. The reason for him to call it 'the Divine' is the fact that some of the qualities were much similar to the conventional divine ie- ever-present, powerful, and ability to influence.

ANAXIMENES

The last of the three Ionian Philosophers. Anaximenes was a pupil and an associate of Anaximander.

He seems to ask the same questions that Thales and Anaximander had asked. It also shows that he had thought on the same line, but had given a different answer to the questions regarding to Becoming . He had not agreed with the other philosophers on the primordial substance (Aristotle, Metaphysics, A .3,984a5)

You would learn that the difference of the primordial substance rested mainly on the type of the philosopher and his mentality. Since Anaximenes seemed to possess a scientific mind hence his ideas rested on experiments and their results.

1. Anaximenes said that the originative substance was Air - this Air is not the element 'air'. (Simplicius, Phy, 24, 26)

2. Air is an imperceptible substance present in the atmosphere. When it is in its neutral state – it does not meet our senses, but can see its modifications. But the underlying substance was one and determinable.

3. Air is not mysterious like the Apeiron. Nor is it hypothetical. Not indeterminate but determinable.

4. Air though without quality in its original state becomes other elements

5. Suggested a process through which Air becomes the elements. 1st example of a process of becoming. How the primordial substance became known elements.

6. The process explained through rarefaction and condensation.

Eg: Air when heated becomes gas – fire

When cooled – wind – water – earth and stone.

7. States a definite connection between quality and quantity. Explains in terms of

the density of a single material.

☆ Condensation – cool – harden Rarefaction – thinning out

8. Points to ponder – is there a connection between quantity, quality, heat and mobility as well?

9. All diversities are due to the presence of more or less of the substance given in a place. Once this step has been taken, it is no longer necessary to make the primary substance something distinct from the elements.

10. Air is important because of the process. Anaximenes seems to be more of a scientist – concluding through observation.

As mentioned earlier, the various suggestions made by the earliest of all Western Philosophers seem to be a conscious effort to reject the supernatural divine from their observations. Yet they seem to have understood the difficulties that the normal people might have when digesting them. This was one of the reasons they had had to use familiar words denoting the divine. (Cicero, NO, 1, 10, 26). For them the divine had been the all-important force- So what else could they have but used the term god- when referring to the best, all important potent and immortal?

Yet in the last philoppterid, Anaximenes a slight, yet more important single phase is left to us. (Ateius 1, 3, 4)

- ☆ “Just as our soul being air holds us together, so do breathe and air encompass the whole world”. – For the 1st time a connection is shown between our soul and the most important primordial substance in the universe.

The sentence points to the all-important question does this represent seeds or germs of more interesting things to come? But Guthrie, not unfairly insists that the theories of the Ionian thinkers had been on a rationalistic ground and in no way a result of faith. (Guthrie, 1954,p133)

The other reading one could indulge in is that if the all-important primary substance encompasses the whole world, does comparing that to the air that holds our soul together in us indicate the possibility of a better future for comparison? It leads one to believe that since the world encompassing Air is also referred to as the divine, the breath in us has a similar importance. The concentration on the individual is significant. It suggests an affiliation of the microcosm to the macrocosm.

3. Conclusion

The conclusion one could arrive at is that the Ionian thinkers had intentionally excluded the Divine from their explanations. Yet through the rational reasoning they had, maybe unintentionally come up with thoughts that would pave way with time, to a more acceptable notions of a unity or amalgamation of a positive outcome. The focus of the exploration in this paper had been done with the intention of highlighting these thought-provoking elements.

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