



The Presocratics 1: The School of Miletus

John Marshall

1. THALES

For several centuries prior to the great Persian invasions of Greece, perhaps the very greatest and wealthiest city of the Greek world was Miletus. Situate about the centre of the Ionian coasts of Asia Minor, with four magnificent harbours and a strongly defensible position, it gathered to itself much of the great overland trade, which has flowed for thousands of years eastward and westward between India and the Mediterranean; while by its great fleets it created a new world of its own along the Black Sea coast. Its colonies there were so numerous that Miletus was named ‘Mother of Eighty Cities.’ From Abydus on the Bosphorus, past Sinope, and so onward to the Crimea and the Don, and thence round to Thrace, a busy community of colonies, mining, manufacturing, ship-building, corn-raising, owned Miletus for their mother-city. Its {2} marts must therefore have been crowded with merchants of every country from India to Spain, from Arabia to Russia; the riches and the wonders of every clime must have become familiar to its inhabitants. And fitly enough, therefore, in this city was born the first notable Greek geographer, the first constructor of a map, the first observer of natural and other curiosities, the first recorder of varieties of custom among various communities, the first speculator on the causes of strange phenomena,—Hecataeus. His work is in great part lost, but we know a good deal about it from the frequent references to him and it in the work of his rival and follower, Herodotus.

The city naturally held a leading place politically as well as commercially. Empire in our sense was alien to the instincts of the Greek race; but Miletus was for centuries recognised as the foremost member of a great commercial and political league, the political character of the league becoming more defined, as first the Lydian and then the Persian monarchy became an aggressive neighbour on its borders.

It was in this active, prosperous, enterprising state, and at the period of its highest activity, that Thales, statesman, practical engineer, mathematician, philosopher, flourished. Without attempting to fix his date too closely, we may take it that he was a leading man in Miletus for the greater part of the {3} first half of the sixth century before Christ. We hear of an eclipse predicted by him, of the course of a river usefully changed, of shrewd and profitable handling of the market, of wise advice in the general councils of the league. He seems to have been at once a student of mathematics and an observer of nature, and withal something having analogy with both, an inquirer or speculator into the *origin* of things. To us nowadays this suggests a student of geology, or physiography, or some such branch of physical science; to Thales it probably rather suggested a theoretical inquiry into the simplest *thinkable* aspect of things as existing. “Under what form known to us,” he would seem to have asked, “may we assume an identity in all known things, so as best to cover or render explicable the things as we know them?” The ‘beginning’ of things (for it was thus he described this assumed identity) was not conceived by him as something which was long ages before, and which had ceased to be; rather it meant

the reality of things now. Thales then was the putter of a question, which had not been asked expressly before, but which has never ceased to be asked since. He was also the formulator of a new meaning for a word; the word 'beginning' ((Greek) *arche*) got the meaning of 'underlying reality' and so of 'ending' as well. In short, he so dealt with a word, on the surface of it implying {4} time, as to eliminate the idea of time, and suggest a method of looking at the world, more profound and far-reaching than had been before imagined.

It is interesting to find that the man who was thus the first philosopher, the first observer who took a metaphysical, non-temporal, analytical view of the world, and so became the predecessor of all those votaries of 'other-world' ways of thinking,—whether as academic idealist, or 'budge doctor of the Stoic fur,' or Christian ascetic or what not, whose ways are such a puzzle to the 'hard-headed practical man,'—was himself one of the shrewdest men of his day, so shrewd that by common consent he was placed foremost in antiquity among the Seven Sages, or seven shrewd men, whose practical wisdom became a world's tradition, enshrined in anecdote and crystallised in proverb.

The chief record that we possess of the philosophic teaching of Thales is contained in an interesting notice of earlier philosophies by Aristotle, the main part of which as regards Thales runs as follows:

"The early philosophers as a rule formulated the originative principle ((Greek) *arche*) of all things under some material expression. By the originative principle or element of things they meant that of which all {5} existing things are composed, that which determines their coming into being, and into which they pass on ceasing to be. Where these philosophers differed from each other was simply in the answer which they gave to the question what was the nature of this principle, the differences of view among them applying both to the number, and to the character, of the supposed element or elements.

"Thales, the pioneer of this philosophy, maintained that *Water* was the originative principle of all things. It was doubtless in this sense that he said that the earth rested on water. What suggested the conception to him may have been such facts of observation, as that all forms of substance which promote life are moist, that heat itself seems to be conditioned by moisture, that the life-producing seed in all creatures is moist, and so on."

Other characteristics of water, it is elsewhere suggested, may have been in Thales' mind, such as its readiness to take various shapes, its convertibility from water into vapour or ice, its ready mixture with other substances, and so forth. What we have chiefly to note is, that the more unscientific this theory about the universe may strike us as being, the more completely out of accord with facts now familiar to everybody, the more striking is it as marking a new mood of mind, in which *unity*, though only very partially suggested or discoverable by the senses, is preferred to that infinite and indefinite *variety* and *difference* which the senses give us at every moment. There is here the germ of a new aspiration, of a determination not to rest in the merely momentary and different, but at least to try, even against the apparent evidence of the senses, for something more permanently intelligible. As a first suggestion of what this permanent underlying reality may be, *Water* might very well pass. It is probable that even to Thales himself it was only a symbol, like the figure in a mathematical proposition, representing by the first passable physical phenomenon which came to hand, that ideal reality underlying all change, which is at once the beginning, the middle, and the end of all. That he did not mean Water, in the ordinary prosaic sense, to be identical with this, is suggested by some [10] other sayings of his. "Thales," says Aristotle elsewhere, "thought the whole universe was full of gods." "All things," he is recorded as saying, "have a *soul* in them, in virtue of which they move other things, and are themselves moved, even as the magnet, by virtue of its life or soul, moves the iron." Without pushing these fragmentary utterances too far, we may well conclude

that whether Thales spoke of the soul of the universe and its divine indwelling powers, or gods, or of water as the origin of things, he was only vaguely symbolising in different ways an idea as yet formless and void, like the primeval chaos, but nevertheless, {7} like it, containing within it a promise and a potency of greater life hereafter.

2. ANAXIMANDER

Our information with respect to thinkers so remote as these men is too scanty and too fragmentary, to enable us to say in what manner or degree they influenced each other. We cannot say for certain that any one of them was pupil or antagonist of another. They appear each of them, one might say for a moment only, from amidst the darkness of antiquity; a few sayings of theirs we catch vaguely across the void, and then they disappear. There is not, consequently, any very distinct progression or continuity observable among them, and so far therefore one has to confess that the title 'School of Miletus' is a misnomer. We have already quoted the words of Aristotle in which he classes the Ionic philosophers together, as all of them giving a *material* aspect of some kind to the originative principle of the universe. But while this is a characteristic observable in some of them, it is not so obviously discoverable in the second of their number, Anaximander.

This philosopher is said to have been younger by one generation than Thales, but to have been intimate with him. He, like Thales, was a native of Miletus, and while we do not hear of him as a person, like Thales, of political eminence and activity, he was certainly the equal, if not the superior, of Thales in mathematical and scientific ability. He is said to have either invented or at least made known to Greece the construction of the sun-dial. He was associated with Hecataeus in the construction of the earliest geographical charts or maps; he devoted himself with some success to the science of astronomy. His familiarity with the abstractions of mathematics perhaps accounts for the more abstract form, in which he expressed his idea of the principle of all things.

To Anaximander this principle was, as he expressed it, the *infinite*; not water nor any other of the so-called elements, but a different thing from any of them, something hardly namable, out of whose formlessness the heavens and all the worlds in them came to be. And by necessity into that same infinite or indefinite existence, out of which they originally emerged, did every created thing return. Thus, as he poetically expressed it, "Time brought its revenges, and for the wrong-doing of existence all things paid the penalty of death."

The momentary resting-place of Thales on the confines of the familiar world of things, in his formulation of Water as the principle of existence, is thus immediately removed. We get, as it were, to the earliest conception of things as we find it in Genesis; before the heavens were, or earth, or the waters under the earth, or light, or sun, or moon, or grass, or the beast of the field, when the "earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep." Only, be it observed, that while in the primitive Biblical idea this formless void precedes in *time* an ordered universe, in Anaximander's conception this formless infinitude is always here, is in fact the only reality which ever is here, something without beginning or ending, underlying all, enwrapping all, governing all.

To modern criticism this may seem to be little better than verbiage, having, perhaps, some possibilities of poetic treatment, but certainly very unsatisfactory if regarded as science. But to this we have to reply that one is not called upon to regard it as science. Behind science, as much to-day when our knowledge of the details of phenomena is so enormously increased, as in the times when science had hardly begun, there lies a world of mystery which we cannot pierce, and yet which we are compelled to assume. No scientific treatise can begin without

assuming Matter and Force as data, and however much we may have learned about the relations of *forces* and the affinities of *things*, Matter and Force as such remain very much the same dim infinities, that the originative 'Infinite' was to Anaximander.

It is to be noted, however, that while modern science assumes necessarily *two* correlative data or originative principles,—Force, namely, as well as Matter,—Anaximander seems to have been content {10} with the formulation of but one; and perhaps it is just here that a kinship still remains between him and Thales and other philosophers of the school. He, no more than they, seems to have definitely raised the question, How are we to account for, or formulate, the principle of *difference* or change? What is it that causes things to come into being out of, or recalls them back from being into, the infinite void? It is to be confessed, however, that our accounts on this point are somewhat conflicting. One authority actually says that he formulated motion as eternal also. So far as he attempted to grasp the idea of difference in relation to that of unity, he seems to have regarded the principle of change or difference as inhering in the infinite itself. Aristotle in this connection contrasts his doctrine with that of Anaxagoras, who formulated *two* principles of existence—Matter and Mind. Anaximander, he points out, found all he wanted in the one.

As a mathematician Anaximander must have been familiar in various aspects with the functions of the Infinite or Indefinable in the organisation of thought. To the student of Euclid, for example, the impossibility of adequately defining any of the fundamental elements of the science of geometry—the point, the line, the surface—is a familiar fact. In so far as a science of geometry is possible at all, the exactness, which is its essential characteristic, is only attainable by starting from data which are in themselves impossible, as of a point which has no magnitude, of a line which has no breadth, of a surface which has no thickness. So in the science of abstract number the fundamental assumptions, as that $1=1$, $x=x$, etc., are contradicted by every fact of experience, for in the world as we know it, absolute equality is simply impossible to discover; and yet these fundamental conceptions are in their development most powerful instruments for the extension of man's command over his own experiences. Their completeness of abstraction from the accidents of experience, from the differences, qualifications, variations which contribute so largely to the personal interests of life, this it is which makes the abstract sciences demonstrative, exact, and universally applicable. In so far, therefore, as we are permitted to grasp the conception of a perfectly abstract existence prior to, and underlying, and enclosing, all separate existences, so far also do we get to a conception which is demonstrative, exact, and universally applicable throughout the whole world of knowable objects.

Such a conception, however, by its absolute emptiness of content, does not afford any means in itself of progression; somehow and somewhere a principle of movement, of development, of concrete reality, must be found or assumed, to link this ultimate abstraction of existence to the multifarious phenomena of existence as known. And it was, perhaps, because Anaximander failed to work out this aspect of the question, that in the subsequent leaders of the school *movement*, rather than mere existence, was the principle chiefly insisted upon.

Before passing, however, to these successors of Anaximander, some opinions of his which we have not perhaps the means of satisfactorily correlating with his general conception, but which are not without their individual interest, may here be noted. The word *husk* or *bark* ((Greek) *phloios*) seems to have been a favourite one with him, as implying and depicting a conception of interior and necessary development in things. Thus he seems to have postulated an inherent tendency or law in the infinite, which compelled it to develop contrary characters, as hot and cold, dry and moist. In consequence of this fundamental tendency an envelope of fire, he says, came into being, encircling another envelope of air, which latter in turn enveloped the sphere of earth, each being like the 'husk' of the other, or like the bark which encloses the tree. This concentric

system he conceives as having in some way been parted up into various systems, represented by the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth. The last he figured as hanging in space, and deriving its stability from the inherent and perfect balance or relation of its parts.

Then, again, as to the origin of man, he seems to have in like manner taught a theory of development from lower forms of life. In his view the first living creatures must have come into being in moisture (thus recalling the theory of Thales). As time went on, and these forms of life reached their fuller possibilities, they came to be transferred to the dry land, casting off their old nature like a husk or bark. More particularly he insists that man must have developed out of other and lower forms of life, because of his exceptional need, under present conditions, of care and nursing in his earlier years. Had he come into being at once as a human creature he could never have survived.

The analogies of these theories with modern speculations are obvious and interesting. But without enlarging on these, one has only to say in conclusion that, suggestive and interesting as many of these poor fragments, these *disjecti membra poetae*, are individually, they leave us more and more impressed with a sense of incompleteness in our knowledge of Anaximander's theory as a whole. It may be that as a consistent and perfected system the theory never was worked out; it may be that it never was properly understood.

By some authorities it is stated that Anaximander, the second philosopher of this school, was the first to use the word *arche* in the philosophic sense. Whether this be so or not, Thales certainly had the idea.

3. ANAXIMENES

This philosopher was also a native of Miletus, and is said to have been a hearer or pupil of Anaximander. As we have said, the tendency of the later members of the school was towards emphasising the *motive* side of the supposed underlying principle of nature, and accordingly Anaximenes chose Air as the element which best represented or symbolised that principle. Its fluidity, readiness of movement, wide extension, and absolute neutrality of character as regards colour, taste, smell, form, etc., were obvious suggestions. The breath also, whose very name to the ancients implied an identity with the life or soul, was nothing but air; and the identification of Air with Life supplied just that principle of productiveness and movement, which was felt to be necessary in the primal element of being. The process of existence, then, he conceived as consisting in a certain concentration of this diffused life-giving element into more or less solidified forms, and the ultimate separation and expansion of these back into the formless air again. The contrary forces previously used by Anaximander—heat and cold, drought and moisture—are with Anaximenes also the agencies which institute these changes.

This is pretty nearly all that we know of Anaximenes. So far as the few known facts reveal him, we can hardly say that except as supplying a step towards the completer development of the *motive* [22] idea in being, he greatly adds to the chain of progressive thought.

4. HERACLITUS

Although not a native of Miletus, but of Ephesus, Heraclitus, both by his nationality as an Ionian and by his position in the development of philosophic conceptions, falls naturally to be classed with the philosophers of Miletus. His period may be given approximately as from about 560 to 500 B.C., though others place him a generation later. Few authentic particulars have been preserved of him. We hear of extensive travels, of his return to his native city only to refuse a share in its activities, of his retirement to a hermit's life. He seems to have formed

a contrast to the preceding philosophers in his greater detachment from the ordinary interests of civic existence; and much in his teaching suggests the ascetic if not the misanthrope. He received the nickname of 'The Obscure,' from the studied mystery in which he was supposed to involve his {16} [23] teaching. He wrote not for the vulgar, but for the gifted few. 'Much learning makes not wise' was the motto of his work; the man of gift, of insight, that man is better than ten thousand. He was savage in his criticism of other writers, even the greatest. Homer, he said, and Archilochus too, deserved to be hooted from the platform and thrashed. Even the main purport of his writings was differently interpreted. Some named his work 'The Muses,' as though it were chiefly a poetic vision; others named it 'The sure Steersman to the Goal of Life'; others, more prosaically, 'A Treatise of Nature.'

The fundamental principle or fact of being Heraclitus formulated in the famous dictum, 'All things pass.' In the eternal flux or flow of being consisted its reality; even as in a river the water is ever changing, and the river exists as a river only in virtue of this continual change; or as in a living body, wherein while there is life there is no stability or fixedness; stability and fixedness are the attributes of the unreal image of life, not of life itself. Thus, as will be observed, from the *material* basis of being as conceived by Thales, with only a very vague conception of the counter-principle of movement, philosophy has wheeled round in Heraclitus to the other extreme; he finds his permanent element in the negation of permanence; being or reality consists in never 'being' but always 'becoming,' not in stability but in change.

This eternal movement he pictures elsewhere as an eternal strife of opposites, whose differences nevertheless consummate themselves in finest harmony. Thus oneness emerges out of multiplicity, multiplicity out of oneness; and the harmony of the universe is of contraries, as of the lyre and the bow. *War* is the father and king and lord of all things. Neither god nor man presided at the creation of anything that is; that which was, is that which is, and that which ever shall be; even an ever-living Fire, ever kindling and ever being extinguished.

Thus in *Fire*, as an image or symbol of the underlying reality of existence, Heraclitus advanced to the furthest limit attainable on physical lines, for the expression of its essentially *motive* character. That this Fire was no more than a symbol, suggested by the special characteristics of fire in nature,—its subtlety, its mobility, its power of penetrating all things and devouring all things, its powers for beneficence in the warmth of living bodies and the life-giving power of the sun,—is seen in the fact that he readily varies his expression for this principle, calling it at times the Thunderbolt, at others the eternal Reason, or Law, or Fate. To his mental view creation was a process eternally in action, the fiery element descending by the law of its being into the cruder forms of water and earth, only to be resolved again by upward process into fire; even as one sees the vapour from the sea ascending and melting into the aether. As a kindred vapour or exhalation he recognised the Soul or Breath for a manifestation of the essential element. It is formless, ever changing with every breath we take, yet it is the constructive and unifying force which keeps the body together, and conditions its life and growth. At this point Heraclitus comes into touch with Anaximenes. In the act of breathing we draw into our own being a portion of the all-pervading vital element of all being; in this universal being we thereby live and move and have our consciousness; the eternal and omnipresent wisdom becomes, through the channels of our senses, and especially through the eyes, in fragments at least our wisdom. In sleep we are not indeed cut off wholly from this wisdom; through our breathing we hold as it were to its root; but of its flower we are then deprived. On awaking again we begin once more to partake according to our full measure of the living thought; even as coals when brought near the fire are themselves made partakers of it, but when taken away again become quenched.

Hence, in so far as man is wise, it is because his spirit is kindled by union with the universal

spirit; but there is a baser, or, as Heraclitus termed it, a moister element also in him, which is the element of unreason, as in a drunken man. And thus the trustworthiness or otherwise of the senses, as the channels of communication with the divine, depends on the *dryness* or *moistness*,—or, as we should express it, using, after all, only another metaphor,—on the *elevation* or *baseness* of the spirit that is within. To those whose souls are base and barbarous, the eternal movement, the living fire, is invisible; and thus what they do see is nothing but death. Immersed in the mere appearances of things and their supposed stability, they, whether sleeping or waking, behold only dead forms; their spirits are dead.

For the guidance of life there is no law but the common sense, which is the union of those fragmentary perceptions of eternal law, which individual men attain, in so far as their spirits are dry and pure. Of absolute knowledge human nature is not capable, but only the Divine. To the Eternal, therefore, alone all things are good and beautiful and just, because to Him alone do things appear in their totality. To the human partial reason some things are unjust and others just. Hence life, by reason of the limitations] involved in it, he sometimes spoke of as the death of the soul, and death as the renewal of its life. And so, in the great events of man's life and in the small, as in the mighty circle of the heavens, good and evil, life and death, growth and decay, are but the systole and diastole, the outward and inward pulsation, of an eternal good, an eternal harmony. Day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger—each conditions the other, all are part of God. It is sickness that makes health good and sweet, hunger that gives its pleasure to feeding, weariness that makes sleep a good.

This vision of existence in its eternal flux and interchange, seems to have inspired Heraclitus with a contemplative melancholy. In the traditions of later times he was known as the *weeping* philosopher. Lucian represents him as saying, “To me it is a sorrow that there is nothing fixed or secure, and that all things are thrown confusedly together, so that pleasure and pain, knowledge and ignorance, the great and the small, are the same, ever circling round and passing one into the other in the sport of time.” “Time,” he says elsewhere, “is like a child that plays with the dice.” The highest good, therefore, for mortals is that clarity of perception in respect of oneself and all that is, whereby we shall learn to apprehend somewhat of the eternal unity and harmony, that underlies the good and evil of time, the shock and stress of circumstance and place. The highest virtue for man is a placid and a quiet constancy, whatever the changes and chances of life may bring. It is the pantheistic apathy.

The sadder note of humanity, the note of Euripides and at times of Sophocles, the note of Dante and of the *Tempest* of Shakespeare, of Shelley and Arnold and Carlyle,—this note we hear thus early and thus clear, in the dim and distant utterances of Heraclitus. The mystery of existence, the unreality of what seems most real, the intangibility and evanescence of all things earthly,—these thoughts obscurely echoing to us across the ages from Heraclitus, have remained, and always will remain, among the deepest and most insistent of the world's thoughts, in its sincerest moments and in its greatest thinkers.

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