



Sources in Presocratic Philosophy

1. Thales

Most of the very early philosophers thought the material principle of things was only one. For that of which things are composed out of which at first they arise, and into which they finally pass away, the Reality enduring though changing in attributes, — this they say is the substance and first principle of things. And for this reason they think that nothing really either comes into being or is destroyed, since there is a substance of this kind which is always conserved. . . . For there must be some natural substance, whether one or more than one, out of which all things arise, being itself everlasting. But as to the number and the nature of such principles all do not say the same thing. Thales, the founder of this kind of philosophy, says it is water; (therefore, also, he represented the earth as floating upon water), deriving this suggestion perhaps from seeing that the nourishment of all things is moist, that even heat is derived from and sustained by it, (and that out of which a thing comes is its first principle) . He derived the suggestion from this and also from the fact that the seed of all living things is moist in character, and water is the first principle of what is moist. Thales thought all things were full of gods.

Thales said the mind of the universe is God, and that everything is alive and full of divine powers.

It appears that Thales, from the accounts given of him, supposed the soul to be a cause of motion, if indeed he said the lodestone had a soul because it moved iron.

Thales said the stars were made of earth, but fiery hot. (A 17a).

They say that Thales first proved that the circle is bisected by the diameter. . . . He is said first to have noted and said that in every isosceles triangle the angles next to the base are equal. . . . He also proved this theorem : that when two straight lines intersect the vertical angles are equal.

2. Anaximander

[Anaximander] said the first principle and elemental substance was the ‘boundless’, not defining it as air or water or any other specific thing. The parts of it change place, but the whole is unchangeable. The earth stands in the middle of things, holding the central position and having the form of a sphere. The moon shines by reflected light and is illuminated by the sun. The sun is no smaller than the earth, and is of the purest fire.

Of those who spoke of one moving and boundless substance Anaximander, son of Praxiades, of Miletus, who had been a pupil and successor of Thales, said the first principle and elemental substance was 'the boundless', being the first one to give this name to the first principle. He says it is neither water nor any other of the so-called elements, but a different kind of substance — indeterminate — from which all the heavens and the worlds within them originated. And into that from which things have their origin do they also return in accordance with necessity; for they make amends and give satisfaction for wrong to each other in the course of time ; — speaking thus in rather poetic terms.

He says the earth is cylindrical in form, and that its depth is one third of its breadth. . . . Further, he says that man was produced in the beginning from an animal of a different form; arguing from the fact that all others quickly come to support themselves, but man alone needs nursing for a long time; wherefore in the beginning if he had been of this kind he would not have survived.

3. Anaximenes

Anaximenes, son of Eurystratus, of Miletus, . . . represented the fundamental principle of all things as air; for from this all things come, and into it again they are dissolved. "As our soul", says he, "which is air holds us together, so breath and air surround the whole universe".

Anaximenes . . . said the boundless air was the first principle from which come all things that are, that have been, and that will be, even gods and divinities ; and all other things are the offspring of this. The nature of the air is as follows: when it is in its ordinary condition it is invisible, but is revealed by its coldness or warmth or wetness or motion; and it is always moving, for it could not bring about the changes which it does if it did not move. . . . The stars arose out of the earth, from the moisture arising from it, which becoming rare develops into fire, and from the fire floating on high the stars were composed.

Anaximenes . . . , like his predecessor, says the underlying substance is boundless, yet not — as he had said — undetermined, but of a definite kind, namely air; and it varies in different substances through rarity and density. When it becomes rarer it is fire, denser wind, then cloud, and when still more — water, then earth, then stones. All other things are composed of these. And he also regards as eternal the motion through which change occurs.

Upon contraction of the air, he says, the earth first came into existence, being quite flat, hence it was readily borne upon the air ; and the sun and the moon and the other heavenly bodies had their source in the earth. Therefore he declares that the sun is made of earth, but because of its swift motion it has acquired its very high temperature.

4. Heraclitus

The opposed agree; out of different tones comes the most beautiful harmony; and all things

arise through strife.

War is the father of all things, and king of all; some it made gods and others men, some slave, some free.

This world, the same for all, no god or man created; but it always was, and is, and will be, an everliving fire, being kindled and quenched in certain degrees.

The transformations of fire are: first sea; of the sea one-half earth, half hurricane. . . . The sea is spread round and measured in accordance with the same Reason which was before the earth was.

The one, which alone is wise, will and will not be called by the name of Zeus.

The stupid, when they hear, are like the deaf; the saying fits them — ‘though present they are absent’.

Into the same river we step and do not step, we go and do not go.

To those who go into the same river ever new water is flowing.

God is day, night; winter, summer; war, peace; surfeit, famine; and he changes as fire does; when it is mingled with spices it is given the name of the fragrance of each.

They are at variance with the Reason which disposes all and with which they are most constantly in converse; and the things with which they meet from day to day appear strange to them.

One ought to know that war is universal; justice is strife; and all things occur through strife and necessity.

Those who speak with intelligence must arm themselves with that which is the common possession of all, as the city with law, — and even more strongly; for human laws are sustained by the one divine law ; it has as much power as it pleases; it suffices for and overcomes all.

5. Xenophanes

There is one God, greatest among gods and men, like mortals in neither body nor mind.

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all things which among men are a reproach and shame, — stealing, adultery, and deceiving one another.

But if oxen and horses or lions had hands and could draw and produce works such as men do, horses would have depicted the forms of gods like horses, oxen like oxen, and each would have given them bodies in form such as they themselves had.

The Ethiopians say their gods are flat-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs are blue-eyed and red-haired.

The whole of Him sees, the whole of Him thinks, and the whole of Him hears.

Without effort he controls all things by the power of his mind.

Ever in the same place He remains unmoving; nor is it fitting for Him to move now hither now thither.

Mortals think that gods are born, and have clothing, voice, and body like theirs.

Not from the beginning have the gods revealed all things to mortals, but in time by seeking they learn better. (B 18).

Xenophanes said that those who assert that the gods were born are as irreverent as those who say they die; for in either case at some time the gods do not exist.

Xenophanes, the first of these monists (for Parmenides is said to have been a pupil of his), said nothing clearly, nor does he seem to have seized upon any one thing as “nature”, but looking up at the whole heaven said the One is God.

6. Parmenides

Never I believe shall you learn that Being can be of what is not;
Wherefore do you withdraw your mind from this path of inquiry,
Neither let habit compel you, while treading this pathway of knowledge,
Still to employ a visionless eye or an ear full of ringing.
Yes, or a clamorous tongue; but prove this troubled demonstration

Uttered by me, by reason. And now there remains for discussion
One path only: That Being both be — and on it there are tokens
Many and many to show that what is is birthless and deathless,
Whole and only-begotten, and moveless and everenduring:
Never it was or shall be; but the ALL simultaneously now is,
One continuous one; for of it what birth shall you search for?
How and from where it has sprung? I shall not permit you to tell me.
Neither to think: ‘Of what is not,’ for none can say or imagine
How Not-Is becomes Is; or else what need should have stirred it,
After or yet before its beginning, to issue from nothing?
Thus either wholly Being must be or wholly must not be.
Never from that which is will the force of Intelligence suffer
Anything to become beyond being itself. From there neither production
Neither destruction do Justice permit, never slackening her fetters;
But she forbids. And herein is contained the decision of these things;
Either there is or is not; but Judgment declares, as it needs must.

One of these paths to be uncomprehended and utterly nameless.
No true pathway at all, but the other to be and be real.
How can that which is now be hereafter, or how can it have been?
For if it hath been before, or shall be hereafter, it is not:
Thus generation is quenched and decay surpasses believing.
Nor is there anything distinct; for the ALL is self-similar always.
Nor is there anywhere more to debar it from being unbroken ;
Nor is there anywhere less, for All is sated with Being;
Wherefore the All is unbroken, and Being approaches to Being.
Moveless, moreover, and bounded by great chains' limits it lie,
Void of beginning, without any ceasing, since birth and destruction
Both have wandered afar, driven forth by the truth of conviction.
Same in the same and abiding, and self through itself it reposes.
Steadfast thus it endures, for mighty Necessity holds it —
Holds it within the chains of her bounds and round secures it.
Wherefore that that which IS should be infinite is not permitted ;
For it is lacking in nothing, or else it were lacking in all things.

7. Zeno, the Eleatic

There are four sayings of Zeno about motion which present difficulties to those who would solve them. First, the one to the effect that a thing can not move, because it must traverse half the distance before it traverses all. . . . The second is the so-called "Achilles". This is that the slowest runner will never be overtaken by the swiftest; for the pursuer must first come to where the one pursued set out, so that the slower must always be somewhat in advance. . . . The third is the one now styled "The Flying Arrow Rests". It results from the assumption that time is composed of instants. . . . For, he says, if everything is either at rest or in motion, and is not moving when it is at a certain point, (and that which is moving is at a point at every instant), then the flying arrow is motionless. . . . The fourth is the one regarding the equal masses moving in a course in opposite directions side by side, some from the end of the course, and some from the middle, with equal speed ; in which case he thinks half the time is equal to double it.

Having presumed that if the real had no size it would not exist, he continues: but if it exists, each part of it must have some size, and thickness, and one part be at some distance from another. And the same statement is true of the part next smaller than it. For it too will have size, and will have a next smaller part. But to say this once is as good as to endlessly repeat it; for no such part of it will be ultimate, nor will there ever be one which is not related to another. So if there are many things, they must be both small and large, so small as to have no size, and so large as to be infinite.

"Tell me, Protagoras," said he, "Does one grain or a ten thousandth part of a grain make a sound when it falls?" When he said that it does not, "But does a bushel of grain make a sound when it falls, or not?" When he said that the bushel did make a sound, "How then !" said Zeno, "Is; not the ratio of the bushel of grain to the one the same as that of the one to the ten thousandth part?" And when he said it was, "Why, then," said Zeno, "will not

the ratio of the sounds be the same to each other? For as are the sounding bodies so are the sounds; but if this is so, and if the bushel of grain makes a sound the one grain will also make a sound; and likewise the ten thousandth part of a grain”.

8. Empedocles

Of a twofold process will I speak; at one time one single substance came to be out of many, again at another several out of one. Twofold is the origin of mortal things, and twofold their cessation. In the one case the union of elements begets and destroys things; in the other the product of the scattering of elements is again scattered. And these things never cease alternating, at one time all things coming together through Love, at another again being borne apart through the hatred of Strife. Since one is accustomed to come out of many, and again many come out of one by its separation, things are always arising and their duration proves not lasting; but since they never cease alternating continuously, they are forever unmoved from their cycle. . . . At one time there came to be one thing only out of many, and then again many came out of one, fire and water and earth and the boundless height of air, and destructive Strife beside them equal in weight everywhere, and Love among them, equal in length and in breadth; all these elements are equal and the same in birth ; each holds a different office; each has its own character; and each in turn rules as time rolls on. Nothing comes into being in addition to these, nor does anything perish from them; for if they continually perished they would not exist any longer; and what could be added to the whole, and whence could it come? And how could it perish, since there is nothing beside these? These alone exist, and as they course among each other now one thing now another arises, and the like goes on always forever.

9. Anaxagoras

All things were together, infinite in multitude and in smallness; . . . and while all things were together nothing was manifest, — because of its smallness; for air and ether, both boundless, surrounded all things, for these are preponderant in all things, both in multitude and in size.

Air and ether were generated out of the vast surrounding mass ; and the surrounding mass is infinite in quantity.

. . . One must believe that many things, of varied kinds, are in all worlds; and the ‘seeds’ of all things, having all kinds of forms, colors and flavors. Men and all other animals which have life have been composed out of these. And the men possess inhabited cities and tilled lands as with us, and have a sun and moon and the other bodies as we; and the earth produces many things of varied kinds, the most useful of which they gather into their abodes and use. . . . But before these things were differentiated, while all were together no color was manifest, for the mixture of all things prevented ; — the wet and the dry, the warm and the cold, the light and the dark, with much earth therein and seeds infinite in quantity, in no respect like one another.

In everything a portion of everything — except mind — is contained ; but in some there is

mind also.

Mind is boundless, and self-determining, and mixed with nothing, but exists by itself alone. For if it were not by itself, but had been mixed with something else it would have shared in all things. . . . And that which was mixed with it would have hindered it from controlling anything so well as when it exists alone by itself. For it is the most subtle of all things, and the purest, and understands all things, and has the greatest power. All things, great and small, which have life, — mind directs them. And mind ruled all the revolution, so that it began to revolve in the beginning.

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