

## Exam 2 Essay 1

The Pre-Socratics were the first group of people to question religious traditions and start thinking philosophically about the nature of the world. They are also referred to as the nature philosophers or protoscientists. They focused on questions about the nature of the world, such as “what is the true nature of reality?” and “what is the best way to live?” Unlike the supernaturalistic thinking that was dominant during this period (around 600 B.C.) such as Homer’s myths about heroes and gods, the pre-Socratics began thinking in a naturalistic way. Naturalistic thinking involves using reason and empirical observation to draw conclusion about reality instead of explaining the world in terms of God’s will. The problems that the pre-Socratics grapple with are “the one in the many” which asks if reality is one, then what accounts for the many different things we experience. Secondly they questioned “reality versus appearance” by asking if reality is what it appears to be why our senses sometimes deceive us. Also, the pre-Socratics are also concerned with the question of what is permanent behind the illusion of change, which is referred to as “permanence versus change.” Lastly, they questioned the “basic stuff” in our material world and if reality can be understood in terms of material (materialist), or if there is reality beyond our material form.

The man whom Aristotle refers to as “the founder of philosophy” is Thales, of Miletus. He along with contemporaries such as Anaximander and Anaximenes held a theory about the material world known as material monism, which states that all things derive from a single element. According to Thales, the cause and element of all things is water and all things are filled with gods. Even though this theory has aspects of the divine, this is an important leap in philosophical thinking because Thales is suggesting that things and experiences do not need an explanation from something outside themselves, such as a God, to explain their existence. For Anaximenes the element that all things derive from is air, and it is also where all things will return. It seems that both Thales and Anaximenes chose certain elements that have strange properties, such as water’s ability to quickly change from liquid to solid to gas. Unfortunately they do not account for how or why everything derives from a single element. Anaximander is the first pre-Socratic to account for our origins without appealing to the “gods of Homer and Hesiod.” He uses reasoning to conclude that everything must have a beginning and this poses a problem because it seems to be endless, unless there is something itself that has no beginning. He calls this “the boundless” and it is infinite and divine. The boundless contains all things in a “chaotic mixture” and over time has separated to create the world we experience. Although these theories have numerous flaws, they mark a shift from religious explanations about reality and supply a new idea that purpose and intention might not be fundamental in the creation of our existence.

Heraclitus and Parmenides focus much of their philosophy on examining “permanence versus change” as well as “reality versus appearance” although both come up with very different theories. Heraclitus claims that reality is a flux. According to him, reality is like a river. This can be understood better in Plato’s words “you cannot step into the same river twice.” By this he means that the concept of a particular river being one in time will stay put, but as time progresses the water at a particular point in the river completely changes, so in reality if you step in a second time your foot will be in different water. He claims these things are the one that hold together the many, or in other words they are changing while keeping their identity intact. Heraclitus also claims that all things come into reality through opposition. One example is that a guitar would produce no music if there was no tension on the strings. Tension, opposition and conflict are necessary for existence, and produce their opposite; order. The “world order” is divine and guarantees that a balance of opposite forces will remain. He calls the “world order” the “logos,” which is not easily

defined but can mean a structure or pattern that is spoken and rational. In contrast, Parmenides strange theory of reality begins with the premise that “thinking and being are inseparable” because we can only think about what is and it is impossible to think “nothing”. Parmenides believes that Heraclitus’ flux in which things are coming into being and passing out of being is mistaken. If something comes into being then it must have previously been “nothing” and we do not have the ability to think about “not being”. If this is true than the experience that things have a beginning and an end is just an illusion and ultimately change is impossible. Furthermore, time is also impossible because the past and the future involve thinking about what is no longer or not yet. Therefore all that is must exist all at once in a continuous present, and the concept of change and time is all an illusion. Parmenides comes to this conclusion by falling reason to wherever the argument leads. Parmenides is considered the first rationalist because he believes reason alone can reveal reality.

**Comment [dp5]:** following

The atomists create a theory that incorporates aspects of Heraclitus’ account of reality being change ordered by the logos, as well as Parmenides’ theory of one unchanging reality. Their main focus is on “the basic stuff” that makes up our world. Melissus, a follower of Parmenides claims that if there is a many, then each thing would have to have the characteristics of “the one” and be indivisible, full and eternal. Democritus and Leucippus, two important figures in developing atomism agree, and claim there are an infinite number of these things, called atoms. Parmenides’ theory depends on there being no such thing as empty space, but according to atomists empty space exists and is characterized by having no material in it; they call this “the void.” According to them, reality consists of tiny, indivisible, and eternal atoms, and the void. The void is essential because it provides the space in which the atoms can move. The atoms have different characteristics and hook together to make different things randomly. Even the soul is just another type of atom. **HOWEVER**, Atomists are materialists because they believe that all of reality is knowable through material substances, namely atoms. The problem with this theory is that it does not account for abstractions that are non-material and it leaves no room for human-free will because reality is merely random atom connections.

**Comment [dp6]:** The atomist completely agree with Parmenide’s logical requirements of Being and that there cannot be nothing. However, they claim that the void is not just nothing. It is a kind of container and so is something in which atoms can be in their multiplicity, while retaining their Parmenidean irreducible singularity by being unsplitable, unchanging, and eternal in themselves.

The Sophists were a group of teachers who claimed to teach skills that foster political and personal success. Their main tool was rhetoric, which is a form of persuasive speaking. Practiced Sophists could argue for both sides of an argument and make the weaker side into the stronger. They categorized reality into two groups, “physis” which is the natural world which humans have no control over and “nomos” which is the world of customs and conventions that humans create and control. The Sophist’s were skeptical about human’s ability to know the true nature of the world of nomos. In the world of physis, the Sophists were relativists meaning that they believed that the individual was the only judge of reality. Therefore, whichever argument persuaded the most people was the right argument for those people.

**Comment [dp7]:** The issue is not so much what new theories this led to, though, of course, that iss important, but more important is the fact that this type of reductive abstract theoretical explanatory accounting for the world and ourselves and the associated logic of propositions came to completely dominate our thinking to the point that it dominates religion, morality, theories of beauty as esthetics, understanding of politics, economics, etc.. Contrast that with philosophical hermeneutics that does not begin with theoretical explanation, but phenomenological seeing as the basis to understand the process of interpretation that is in fact deeper than theoretical explanation and is the condition of possibility for theoretical thinking and thus provides a way to see its limits.

The pre-Socratics introduced a new way of thinking that would take hold in the Western world and lead to many new theories about human nature and reality. Many Philosophers, such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle addressed the same questioned that the pre-Socratics did. They took the first step in breaking away from the traditional way of understanding the reality through religion and marked the birth of philosophical thinking in the Western world.

**Comment [dp8]:** Parmenides, though his idealism/non materialism and pure rationalism do not dominate our thinking, his conception of reality and requirements for being are at the core of our religious belief and even still play a role in the sciences as presuppositions for the possibility of science.

**Some minor problems here and there, main problem is the need to get clearer on the type of thinking introduced by the preSocratics and its significance. Nothing in the development of Western thinking is as revolutionary. Otherwise, you lay out most of the issues in the various thinkers well.**

**GRADE: B+/A-**