

On The Pre-Socratics

The pre-Socratics introduced a way of thinking that moved away from blindly accepting the gods as being the final explanation for why things are. Rather than just accepting religion as the explanation through myth, the pre-Socratics attempted to find *alethea* through reason. The questions they brought up asked what the basic components of things were, if everything is one unified being or many separate things, where things changed or remained the same, and what is real compared to what is not.

From these questions the pre-Socratics used nature to explain them rather than the Gods. This process was **theoretical** in application and materialistic in nature. This is because the previous method of thinking dealt with explanations that were dependant on the myths such as those of Homer and Hesiod. However the explanations of the pre-Socratics were dependant on **what could be seen and observed** (very much theoretical on the grounds of observation).

Comment [dp1]: Go into what this reductive thinking is and what it does.

Comment [dp2]: For Pythagorus, Parmenides and Zeno, what could be THOUGHT. Remember there were two main groups of preSocratics, not just materialists. What did they ALL have in common and what problems did they all try to address?

The pre-Socratic philosopher Thales uses the element of water as his answer for what the origin of things is. Thales's motto was "Account for what you can see and touch in terms of things you can see and touch". This very much is a departure from using the mythical as the explanation for what things are. Thales uses water as his answer because everything requires water to thrive. Water can take on many forms and serve multiple purposes, as of such it is very easy to trace all living things to water due to it being a necessity for life. As a result, the many forms of water were used by Thales to explain why the many things that don't resemble water are in fact founded by water. In effect he found water in all living things, thus his reasoning for water being the origin of things.

Anaximander explained all things as belonging to the Boundless, or infinite. He used this as an explanation because the reasons given by Thales do not explain the beginnings of things. The Boundless as an origin explains origin by reason of it being the beginning, as an infinite entity the Boundless is timeless and thus progenitor to everything. The reason for this is that before things were, there was always the Boundless, and after things pass then it will remain boundless. Anaximander regards the Boundless as a vortex of chaos that gives rise to the order of things. The Boundless is described as a swirling vortex filled with the elements, as the vortex swirls the elements produce the things we come to observe and recognize. This chaos gives order and the order brings balance to the world, a recurrent theme in Greek thought is that of moderation and Anaximander makes it obvious that he too believes in it.

The question of reality in accordance to appearance is attempted to be answered by Heraclitus. He states that reality is in flux, and like Thales he likens it to an element. The element Heraclitus chooses is fire, but unlike Thales he compares reality to an element not literally, but figuratively. The reason for doing so is that fire has constant change in its form, just as how reality is ever changing; it is coming into existence and leaving continuously. This isn't wild fire though; rather it is a controlled flame since it keeps the order of things. This is how the one symbol of fire as a whole representative for everything can be broken down into the many different components of what we consider different things. Heraclitus brings up the logos in his statements, which is understood as what is; the reality of things. The logos is the structure of things and it follows in nicely with his claim of fire being likened to reality. Although fire (reality) is in constant flux,

Comment [dp3]: As you give the distinctive thought of each thinker, you should also show in each case or in an overall separate paragraph how each thinker represented the same basic new style of thinking not merely as an alternative to supernaturalism, but who what was most distinctive about it beyond this that has had such a profound impact on our thinking up to the present day.

there is order/structure (logos) to it and again this is evident with the reverence the Greek's had towards balance.

Comment [dp4]: Indicate more clearly the importance of retaining identity through change in order to meet the basic requirements all these thinkers thought was necessary to reality.

The pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides says that reality is not in a flux as Heraclitus claims, but it is constant. Parmenides claims that reality does not come in and out of being; rather it is one timeless entity that simply changes appearance yet effectively remains the same being (differing appearance in reality). This is Parmenides answer to the question of permanence and change; he states that all things within reality merely change their appearance. This concept is brought up due to Parmenides' refusal of Heraclitus's idea of reality being in flux because nothing cannot create any thing. To clarify this, Parmenides says that since Heraclitus states that reality is in flux, it at one point was not existent; one cannot get something from nothing. This is why Parmenides states that there is only a one; a singular existence. This rationalist notion differs from the materialistic nature of his predecessors (Thales, Anaximander, and Heraclitus); Parmenides' statements do not deal with the senses as valid methods of explanation (your senses can be wrong). Parmenides attempts to explain permanence using rational thought through pure reasoning, with reason it is then that one can grasp at further understanding.

Comment [dp5]: Can only be thought, not empirically observed. What can be empirically observed is merely appearance, not reality. This view is also at the core of modern science, even though it begins with observation and empirical theories.

Zeno was a philosopher who did not rely on the senses for according to him the senses lead to a dependence on common sense; in turn this dependence leads to self-contradiction. Zeno uses paradoxes to explain why it is that common sense based on the senses fails in the face of reason. He gives the example of Achilles racing a turtle, however the turtle starts with a head start, common sense tells us that Achilles will win the race but Zeno explains that he will never win against the turtle. The reason for being so is that if Achilles is at point A then the turtle will be at point B, once Achilles reaches

Comment [dp6]: Right. Even ALL empirical theories are purely rational responses in thought to what is observed.

point B the turtle will have reached point C, this continues indefinitely but it becomes apparent that common sense has failed.

Leucippus and Democritus introduced atoms as the explanation for what the basic stuff was. The reason for it was that everything was made up of tiny particles called atoms that were all the same; one in many. Reality is just atoms within a void. Things come into being when atoms link together; likewise they fade from being when their parts separate themselves. This falls into Parmenides' theory of the one very neatly, atoms are timeless and when linked together form things of differing appearances, yet these atoms remain the same in that one they unlink they will return to existing within the void. Effectively all of what reality is (in regards to what the senses experience and not the intelligible) could be explained by atomism.

Comment [dp7]: Right. This is indicative of ALL preSocratic thinking: permanence and identity through apparent change, multiplicity versus unity, reduction to unifying single principle.

This new way of thinking helped shape Western thinking in moving philosophy towards the intelligible and away from the materialistic. This thinking introduced atomic theory to the sciences, from this contribution the sciences have been able to greatly expand in the realm of physics. Without it the shift from materialism would have taken much longer and the contribution of the pre-Socratics to the philosophical world would have been less great. Likewise religion moved in the direction of spirituality's role and away from the explanatory role science has. This is seen in western thinking due to religion being confined to religion and not attempting to explain the tangible through the divine. This is not to say that religion is science, but that what was once explained by religion (divine reason) is now explained through science (theories). Thanks to the contribution of these philosophers philosophy now takes rationale as a fundamental

Comment [dp8]: Western thought still embraces forms of materialism and modified rationalism. However, what is most distinctive of ALL the preSocratics that pervades almost all our thinking about everything in religion and the sciences?

Comment [dp9]: But what basic preSocratic presupposition do religion and the sciences share?

Comment [dp10]: Need to say this more clearly

Comment [dp11]: Doctrinal religion functions as a kind of general theory of reality, even though it does not employ the modern scientific method of testing (since that would be inappropriate to it). But it is still shot through with preSocratic and Platonic & Aristotelian thinking. Need to focus on this most general feature of Greek thought that still pervades our way of understanding things.

component in itself and its findings; no longer relying on the empirical for proof, the
divine as purpose, or the senses as reliable.

Comment [dp12]: What has emerged as a bit more distinctive than other modern approaches to thinking is philosophical hermeneutics. Even this has its roots in Greek thinking but it does not subscribe to the metaphysics of presence most of western thought has and still does.

Comments: Good job of laying out each thinker's view, but need to more fully grasp the revolutionary style of thinking common to all of them and the impact on subsequent western civilization.

GRADE: B