

## The Pre-Socratic Role

The philosopher and professor of philology, Friedrich Nietzsche, remarked, “A great value of antiquity lies in the fact that its writings are the only ones that modern men still read with exactness.” The power held within the works of the ancient western philosophers is still achieved today. The first recognized words of western philosophy were uttered by Thales: “All is water.” This simple, seemingly naïve declaration is considered the first documented western philosophical thought. Although it is hard to believe, up until about eighty years ago the majority of scientists believed the universe was made up of hydrogen. The absolute ingredient was hydrogen, two thirds of what makes up water, H<sub>2</sub>O; Thales was not so naïve after all. The importance and genuine greatness of the pre-Socratic philosophers is somewhat easy to overlook given the magnitude of their successors, namely Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. However, the pre-Socratic philosophers were the first to deal with the immense discourse of philosophy and without them it is possible their successors would never have found such eminent paths in philosophy. The pre-Socratics pursued ideas in metaphysics, the question of what ultimately exists, and introduced a new mode of thinking: philosophical thinking through reason. This new way of thinking through reason helped shape and invent scientific reasoning and methodology, and transformed the role and power of religion in their day and forever on. Their thoughts have forever shaped the course and conclusions of philosophy and have inspired thinkers throughout time, up to the present day.

**Comment [dp1]:** This is hyperbole but Nietzsche often makes his point this way.

The mode of thought introduced by the pre-Socratics is philosophical thought; a mode of thinking governed by the questions raised, the means of arriving at a conclusion, and the consistency of the answer. This method was original and separate from previous religious

thoughts, and a precursor to the sciences of today, yet deals with a particular angle of questioning. This mode was born under the desire to understand nature, to observe and conclude a deeper meaning about reality. This scientific inquiry turned philosophical when those taking part in the experiment began questioning the experiment itself. The early Greek scientific and even religious answers were turned on their head when the process of visual knowledge was questioned and trusted axioms came under trial. The pre-Socratics were the pioneers of science because they utilized observation and nature to understand the world as opposed to religion before them, which took supernatural ideas and beliefs to answer questions regarding the nature of the world. Like all true philosophy, the beginnings of western philosophy are based on the desire and struggle to understand- to truly understand. Religion asks the question of how and utilizes faith as its tool and science asks the question of how and uses experiment and observation as its method; Philosophy asks why and utilizes reason and thought as its compass.

Prior to the pre-Socratics, religious answers were the only answers, and yet they were unsatisfying. After the birth of western philosophy, religion had a new role as faith, not as mediated knowledge. Philosophy was the precursor to science and the scientific method, but is a separate entity that goes beyond science and religion to the unanswerable yet ponder-able questions. Philosophy is in many ways untouchable and in many ways inherent. In a way, the pre-Socratics were pseudo-scientists since they asked probing questions about nature and came to their conclusions through observation and reason; however, these questions soon turned philosophical when the basis of observation itself was questioned. What does it mean that something endures through change? What is the relationship between what ultimately exists and its many appearances? The expansion and deeper understanding of the primordial questions

**Comment [dp2]:** They all make the distinction between appearance and reality, which in turn sets off a series of questions about either the basic stuff or some other way of reducing the multiplicity of appearance to an underlying unity together with shared basic assumptions about reality and permanence. These are the central feature of the theoretical style of thinking introduced by the preSocratics that still dominates our thinking down to this moment. Reduction of phenomena to purely abstract unifying theoretical principles however they may be linked to observation.

came about through the various problems created by the answers the pre-Socratics gave. It was through the questioning and subsequent problems that philosophical meaning developed.

The pre-Socratics started out by answering the simple question, “what ultimately exists?” and achieved a lasting legacy because of the problems their answers exposed; these problems deepened the question, gave birth to new questions, and heightened any meaning that could be found. Through the attempt to answer the question regarding what ultimately exists, came the problems of change versus permanence, appearance versus reality, and the many out of the one. The first of the pre-Socratics were material monists, this includes Thales, Anaximenes, and Anaxamander. Monism is the position that ultimately only one thing exists. Materialism is the position that what ever ultimately exists is a tangible, physical thing. Material monism is an answer that takes into account nature and supplies a natural, singular tangible substance as its basis of ultimate existence. This position while an achievement leads to many problems. How does the particular thing, for example water, become all the many particular things that exist? How does it change and why? Anaximander and Anaximenes try to solve these questions by supplying different monistic materials, yet the same problematic conclusions occur. Heraclitus, Parmenides, and the atomists attempt to solve the problems raised by the answers of these early pre-Socratics by expanding and thoroughly examining all the aspects involved. Their views, while more defined, do not offer any final solutions, but rather provide more insight into the complexity of these problems and philosophical thinking in general.

Heraclitus, Parmenides, and the atomists attempt to address the problems raised by the earlier pre-Socratic theories; their contradictory responses and development of further questions led to the skepticism of the sophists, yet it also led to some of the most powerful thinkers we

have ever known. Heraclitus made the radical assertion that when it came to the problem of change versus permanence, everything is constantly changing, there is no permanence. Heraclitus was the first philosopher to distinguish between appearances and reality. He claimed that although it may seem contrary to appearances, everything is constantly changing, always in flux. The ultimate substance responsible for this constant changing is *logos*. *Logos* is, on the particular level, the concept or reason, and on the universal level, it is the divine reason, the intelligence of the universe. The *logos* is responsible for the pattern behind the change. It constitutes the reason behind things and the change occurring. His vague answer does not solve the problem, but instead leads to more questions. How can something have an identity? How can we know anything if everything is constantly changing? Parmenides purposes the opposite view—that change does not occur at all, that all change is just an illusion, and that the substance that ultimately exists is the “One”. Parmenides had a radical answer to the problem of change by rejecting any existence of change, asserting that it is just an illusion. Parmenides proves that change does not exist through conceptual and linguistic analysis, with use of the *reductio ad absurdum* argument. He concludes that whatever ultimately is, is uncreated, indestructible, eternal, immovable, unchangeable, undivided/indivisible, homogeneous, and complete; Parmenides calls this the “One”. Heraclitus and Parmenides reject materialism yet reinforce the idea of monism, and further analyze and address the issues presented before them. However, their answers do not satisfy the questions. Although it is asserted that change ultimately exists or change ultimately does not exist, the problem of appearance versus reality is only widened. To all the problems still unsolved the atomists conclude that there is in fact an infinite multiplicity of one thing, very similar to Parmenides’ concept of the “One”. They call these infinite “Ones”, “atoms”. The interaction between these “atoms” leads to change and the multiplicity of “atoms”

create the many things we experience. This view however, leads to a new and most unsatisfying problem of determinism. All of these contradictory conclusions, proposals, and theories lead to skepticism, how can anything be known? The sophists asserted that nothing can be known. It is in this atmosphere of many problems and the unwanted conclusion of skepticism that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle's theories can be born. Through the iterative process of question, solution, new problems, new questions, new solutions, philosophy expands. The end result is not an unarguable solution, but a deeper, better understanding of the question and the nature of wisdom.

With all the problems encountered and discovered by the pre-Socratics, it is easy to conclude that their achievements were minimal; however, the opposite is true as modernity of pre-Socratic thinking is immense and their brilliance lasts today. Their achievements and methods resulted in the separation of science, religion, and philosophy: religion deals with faith and the sacred, science deals with fact and prediction, and philosophy deals with wonder and wisdom. The benefits of this separation were a service to all fields, and continue to be felt in modern times. In addition to forging a new discipline of philosophy and practicing a new mode of thought (philosophical thought), the pre-Socratic philosophers had revolutionary ideas under works. They were the precursor to the sciences we know today, the atomic theory, they greatly inspired Einstein and his theory of relativity through the paradoxes of Zeno, and also set the stage for future great philosophies. The fact that the pre-Socratics were challenging set beliefs and thinking with such originality in six hundred B.C.E. is a feat worthy of awe. The pre-Socratics gave an advantage to all philosophy to come by opening the door to questioning and speculation through reason.

**Good work! GRADE: A**

**Comment [dp3]:** Yet post Hellenic religions are just as shot through with preSocratic assumptions about the unity and permanence of reality as most of philosophy and science has been.

**Comment [dp4]:** Right. The founding assumptions of the preSocratics had become second nature in Plato and Aristotle and all subsequent thought up to the increasing challenges from Hume and Kant through Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and the so-called linguistic and postmodern turn in philosophy. What previous thinkers from the preSocratics through modernity had assumed was in the world in some sense, whether expressed in terms of metaphysical idealism or realism or epistemological empiricism or rationalism, came increasingly to be seen as reflexive structures of thinking and consciousness themselves. Thus, interpretation and language come to be recognized as the conditions of possibility of the process of inquiry itself that cannot be independent from the claims we make and the ways we understand anything. But the evolution of all our current insight has its roots in the preSocratics in their attempt to free inquiry from habit by testing our ideas through reason. Despite the hermeneutical breakthroughs of the past century, their assumptions about reality and knowledge in most respects still dominate our culture which is indicative of their legacy.