

Cambridge University Press  
0521469554 - Philosophy in Christian Antiquity  
Christopher Stead  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

PART I

*The philosophical background*

## CHAPTER I

*From the beginnings to Socrates.*

Philosophy was invented and given to the world by the Greeks. Although in some departments they drew on the experience of other nations (for instance, on Babylonian astronomy), it was the Greeks who developed philosophy into a wide complex of studies, which included the beginnings of what we now call natural science, and which was later to be summed up in the three headings of logic, ethics and physics. Physics was the name given to the study of the natural world and its explanatory principles; it therefore took in the question whether there are gods, or a single God, and whether the world was made, and is governed, by such beings. For those who believed in divine existence, theology was a branch of physics.

The Greek philosophers broke new ground through their ability to ask abstract and wide-ranging questions. Before their time, much common-sense observation was embodied in the working knowledge of sailors, farmers and builders, or expressed in proverbial sayings about human conduct. But for the large general questions about the world men had to resort to a primitive mythology which associated each of the main components of the world with a particular divine being; the heavens with Zeus, the sea with Poseidon, and so on. A philosophy recognizably distinct from mythology began when the sages of Miletus, in Asia Minor, attempted to explain the world in terms of inanimate things which could be expected to behave in a regular way in accordance with a few simple laws. It thus became possible to account for unusual events by looking for some combination of previously known factors, instead of attributing them to the caprice of all-too-human gods.

Of course the method of identifying natural causes was not established at once; the early sages continued to name the elements or processes which interested them as if they were divine beings. Moreover there was a long-established and persistent belief that objects capable of moving themselves, such as fire or fountains, must be in some sense alive and so presumably animated. It was perhaps for this reason that Thales, traditionally regarded as the founder of Greek philosophy, pronounced that 'All things are full of gods'; and it is still legitimate to speak, with W. Jaeger, of 'the theology of the early Greek philosophers'.

Our accounts of them derive in the main from Aristotle (384–322 BC), though a few details were given about a century earlier by Herodotus; these are certainly incomplete and sometimes untrustworthy. But it appears that the Milesian philosophers were not only interested in speculative questions, but were capable and practical men. Thales studied astronomy and is said to have predicted an eclipse of the sun which occurred in 585 BC; but he also showed King Croesus of Lydia how to get his troops across the river Halys by diverting part of its water. Anaximander is said to have been the first to draw a map of the inhabited world. But their main significance as philosophers lies in their attempts to account for all natural phenomena in terms of a few simple substances or principles.

Thales took over the ancient belief that the earth floats on water, but is said to have developed the much more important idea that water – or perhaps rather, moisture – is the principle from which all things are derived. He may have reflected that moisture is essential to life, and so might be the cause of all growth and development. Moreover water itself can exist in three distinct forms, as a solid, a liquid or a vapour; it could therefore be the hidden principle which gives rise to the varieties of things.

Anaximander, who is said to have been fourteen years younger than Thales, attempted to account for phenomena by a principle which he called *apeiron*. This word is sometimes translated 'infinite', and Anaximander may well have thought that an enormous amount of something was needed to produce the earth and the heavens. But more probably it means 'form-

less' or 'indeterminate', and it is just possible that he had some idea of the important axiom that any explanatory principle must be distinct from all the phenomena which it purports to explain; it is illogical to assert, say, that all things are derived from fire, when fire itself is one of the 'all things' which need to be explained. Starting with his basic principle, Anaximander evolved a striking theory of the origin of the universe, in which fire does indeed play a prominent part; amongst other innovations he held that the earth, shaped like a cylinder, rests freely in space without needing any support.

Anaximenes, the third of the Milesian philosophers recognized by tradition, identified his basic principle as air or vapour. This might seem to be a less sophisticated conception than the *apeiron* of Anaximander; on the other hand Anaximenes had an explanation to show how the basic material could be modified so as to produce the various phenomena we see; it could be compressed into a solid state, or rarified again, and these dynamic changes were associated with heat and cold; it is possible also that he compared the air which permeates the world with the breath within living bodies, and so saw the world as a kind of living organism.

Miletus was now declining in importance, as the Persians conquered Ionia in 546 BC, and the city itself was destroyed in 494. Meanwhile the spirit of enquiry was arising at the opposite end of the Greek world, in the Greek-speaking cities of southern Italy, and was taking a very different form. The great originator was Pythagoras, who emigrated from the island of Samos, some 40 km from Miletus, about 530 BC, and founded his school at Crotona in south Italy. Pythagoras appears to have been influenced by Orphic religion, which saw human nature as a blend of earthly and divine elements. Body and soul were sharply divided; the body was seen as a mere receptacle or instrument; it was the soul, the divine element, that gave us the power of thinking and acting. Orphics taught a doctrine of reincarnation, a return to this world in another body. But they also promised their followers a blessed life in another world, provided that they observed a strict regime of purification and asceticism.

Thus while the Milesian sages were talented individuals and

men of affairs, the Pythagoreans pursued their studies in the context of a religious community; though naturally some came to attach more importance to their ascetic discipline, while others valued intellectual enquiry. About Pythagoras himself it is difficult to get reliable information; it is said that he left no writings, and that his followers were sworn to secrecy. Nevertheless his sayings were passed on, and also embellished; legendary tales were told in his honour, and he was given credit for theories which in fact were discovered after his time. His leading thought, no doubt, was that the soul can be purified and regulated by 'music', understood rather generally as an education or culture in which a man acquires knowledge of pure and unchanging truths; and this element of rational order in the world is revealed above all by the study of numbers. The Pythagoreans considered music itself, in the modern sense, to be a means of purification, and tried to draw an analogy between the intervals of the musical scale and the movements of the heavenly bodies. The most striking discovery attributed to Pythagoras was that musical intervals can be explained by mathematical ratios, using the first four integers. Thus the octave corresponds to the ratio 2:1; for if a string is halved without altering its tension it sounds an octave higher.

In reaching this discovery, the Pythagoreans were perhaps using an idea derived from Anaximander, namely the contrast between 'limit' or 'measure', including that which is limited or measurable, and the unlimited; for instance, the contrast between music and mere sound. Later Pythagoreans developed a table of opposites representing such order and disorder, with odd numbers assigned to the first column and even to the second; and so also with the male and female sex. Unity is of course ranged on the side of order; but the number one came to occupy a special position: we are told that it was regarded as both odd and even, and as the source and origin of all numbers, and thus of the rational order in the universe. But the system failed to distinguish clearly between physical and non-physical realities; it thought of numbers as having spatial extent, while units seem to be treated sometimes like points, sometimes like atoms.

Ionia, despite its political decline, was to produce one more

figure of first-rate philosophical importance, namely Heraclitus (c. 544–480 BC). But something should first be said about another Ionian, namely Xenophanes. Xenophanes is difficult to place chronologically because of his unusually long life (c. 570–475 BC); moreover he is more of a theological poet than a philosopher; but he put forward religious ideas of great and permanent significance. In the modern phrase, his starting-point was comparative religion; he observed that the different nations pictured their gods as resembling themselves; the Thracians' gods had red hair and blue eyes, and so on. The Homeric gods indeed imitated men's vices. But why suppose that a god had a human form at all? Xenophanes therefore pictures God as a simple, unchangeable being, who needs no bodily organs for particular purposes but who perceives and wills and acts as a whole and in the same instant. Xenophanes may possibly have pictured this God as spherical, by association with the cosmos; but he does not seem to have made it clear whether God is coextensive with the cosmos or somewhere outside it.

Heraclitus was born and spent his life at Ephesus, some 60 km north of Miletus. He propounded a new and striking view of the world, though he professed to have acquired it simply by the intelligent use of observation, which most men fail to achieve. He expressed this view in boldly paradoxical epigrams, which puzzled both his contemporaries and later critics, and caused him to be known as 'the obscure'.

Heraclitus taught that the world is a unity, but a unity of a peculiar kind, in which opposing components or forces are held in tension. He seems to have interpreted this tension both in static terms, as a coexistence of opposites, and dynamically, as a rhythm in which sometimes one force prevails, sometimes the other. Thus he says that the sea is both poisonous (to men) and health-giving (to fish). Again 'day and night are the same', meaning probably that they have an underlying unity, since they cannot both be present together; they are not two *independent* phenomena. The theme of perpetual change is vividly expressed in the saying 'you cannot step twice into the same river'; we might say, there is indeed a river in the same place when you revisit it, but you will not encounter the same mass of

water. More generally, the things which appear as parts of the world, namely fire, water and earth, are perpetually changing one into another, both downwards, from fire through to earth, and vice versa; but always in fixed proportions. And it is fire that controls the changes. Fire, because of its lightness and rapid movement, is associated with thought – hence, *per contra*, ‘it is death for souls to become moist’ and ‘dry souls are wisest’ – and so with the rational pattern of the world-process, its *logos*. Heraclitus appears to have been the first thinker to make philosophical use of the term *logos*, though its meaning is not precisely fixed. It can mean simply his own teaching; but also, the rational order which he detects. This same rational order can be described, in appropriate contexts, either as fire, or as *logos*, or as God; for although Heraclitus was critical of contemporary religion, his philosophy was theistic.

He sees divine order in all things; though of course he insists that, among men, only a few are good and wise. Wise and disciplined souls, he believes, can survive death and unite themselves with the cosmic intelligent fire.

Heraclitus was unfairly treated in the later tradition. He saw, correctly, that processes of change can take place in a regular course and can be measured. This is taken for granted today, when we measure not only the velocity of moving bodies but their acceleration, the change in their velocity. But Heraclitus was directly contradicted by Parmenides, who denied the reality of change, and was misjudged by Plato, who encountered his teaching in a debased form presented by his follower Cratylus, and associated it with the subjectivist views of Protagoras (see below). Plato’s own theory of knowledge gave a central place to timeless truths such as those of mathematics, and he assumed in consequence that Heraclitus’ doctrine of universal change made genuine knowledge impossible. Nevertheless some authentic details of his teaching are recorded by scholarly Christians such as Clement, Hippolytus and Eusebius.

Parmenides of Elea in southern Italy (c. 515–450 BC) is said to have been introduced to philosophy by a Pythagorean named Ameinias. Parmenides wrote in the somewhat old-fashioned

medium of hexameter verse, and a good part of his work survives. Its opening allegory introduces a goddess, who promises to reveal 'the steadfast heart of well-rounded truth'. This 'way of truth' is contrasted with 'the way of seeming', which most men tend to follow, and which is later described. The way of truth is defined by a contrast expressed in the phrases 'is' and 'is not'. The subject of the verb is left undefined, and the argument turns on the implications of the Greek word *esti*, '(it) is'. This conveys both the existential sense '. . . exists' and the predicative '. . . is such-and-such'; moreover the present tense suggests unchanging persistence or timeless fact (as in, for instance, 'gold is a metal'); and the notion of existence shades into that of reality and truth. 'Is not' therefore conveys the notion of something unreal and delusive which can neither exist nor be known; and Parmenides goes on to argue that real being must be unchangeable and all-pervasive ('what is not' cannot be anywhere, so there is no empty space) and indivisible; moreover, since it must have a limit and be totally uniform, it is finite in extent and spherical in form. The 'way of seeming' then presents a view of the universe which is false, but seems obvious to ordinary men. This is of less interest; it seems to have included a corporealist view of perception and thought.

Parmenides' 'real being' resembles that of Xenophanes, as ancient critics observed, but is deduced by a totally different method. Although his conclusions are quite unacceptable to most modern thinkers, he set new standards of logical rigour by exploring every possible alternative and eliminating the impossible. He stated a fundamental principle of rationalist philosophy in arguing for a correspondence between thought and reality, expressed in an enigmatic phrase which perhaps means 'thinking and being are the same' (though Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, prefer 'For the same thing is there both to be thought of and to be', despite the active infinitive *noein*). 'Thinking' of course refers to his own 'way of truth'; and there is some force in his claim that human thought at its best must correspond with the structure of reality; after all, no sensible thinker would argue for a *total* lack of correspondence.

But modern logic has increasingly shown that the correspondence is imperfect; it has revealed logical distinctions which our traditional thinking obscures.

Parmenides' teaching was enormously influential; the next generation of philosophers had to make a crucial decision for or against. Again, he was deeply respected by Plato; and his concept of unchanging being left its mark on the traditional Christian doctrine of God.

The most talented of Parmenides' disciples was Zeno of Elea, born about 490 BC. Zeno defended his master's teaching by a dialectical method, attacking the common-sense assumptions that the world consists of a plurality of things, and that these are capable of motion. These assumptions, he argued, lead to contradictions and so must be false. Some of Zeno's paradoxes are still familiar, the best known being 'Achilles and the tortoise': the faster runner can never overtake the slower, since by the time he reaches the other's starting-point, he will have moved on; and by the time he reaches *that* point . . . , so that an infinite number of steps are required. This argument of course assumes that space and time are continuous; other arguments are intended to show that we fare no better on the assumption that space and time are discrete, i.e. are composed of 'points' having a minimum but finite extension, a view which compares with the Pythagorean view of numbers. Another argument may perhaps be presented as follows: if an arrow is in flight, it must be moving now. But any 'now' is an instant, which gives the arrow no time in which to move. It appears, however, that Zeno was not the only one to use such arguments; Plato tells us that he was replying to (unnamed) opponents who used similar *reductiones ad absurdum* against Parmenides.

Other philosophers of the fifth century BC tried to respond to Parmenides' radical conclusions in such a way as to account for the apparent variety and change in the world. This required, at the least, the assumption of a plurality of things and the possibility of locomotion. Only three such thinkers can be mentioned here.

(1) Empedocles of Acragas (Agrigento) in Sicily, c. 495–435, was highly regarded as a religious and moral teacher with a

strong sense of the contrast between this world and the higher world to which he believed his soul would return. To explain this world he assumed four elements, fire, air, water and earth; but also two entities called Love and Hate (or attraction and repulsion) which operate by turns, so that the elements are now drawn together so as to interpenetrate and form a unity, now completely separated. At present we are in an intermediate stage, in which individual beings are born and die. Empedocles also formulated a theory of development in which plants and animals arise by stages from the element of earth.

(2) Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (c. 500–428) was an Ionian who migrated to Athens. Like Empedocles, he denied the possibility of things having an absolute beginning or ending, and explained qualitative changes in things as combinations and separations of minutely small particles; these, however, have the same properties as the larger masses, and so were later called *homoiomeries*, i.e. ‘similar parts’. This theory, it might be said, enabled him to explain such processes as depend on the simple interpenetration and mixture of molecules (e.g. water blending with wine, or penetrating into porous clay), but could not account for chemical change, which produces new substances with quite different properties; cf. p. 48 below. Anaxagoras thought that the rational order in the universe could only be explained by postulating a single directing intelligence, *nous*, which exists in a pure state, unmixed with matter, and caused the world to evolve from an undifferentiated mass into an ordered structure.

(3) Democritus (c. 460–370) was born at Abdera, on the northern coast of the Aegean, and after extensive travels settled in Athens. Reacting against both Parmenides and Anaxagoras, whom he met, he explained phenomena in terms of ‘being’ and ‘not-being’, identified with matter and empty space. Matter consists of small dense bodies or atoms which persist eternally, and differ only in their shape and size; it is their position and arrangement which give rise to the perceptible qualities of things; ‘sweet, bitter, hot, cold, and colour are subjective [*nomōi*, literally “conventional”]; atoms and empty [space] are real’. Thus unlike Parmenides he makes ‘reality’ include ‘what is not’;