

## THE PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS AND SOCRATES

Here we examine the beginnings of Western philosophy. We do this especially with an eye to exploring how what went before Plato might have influenced him, especially his theory of human nature. We shall focus on the views about knowledge and reality of some of the philosophers who wrote and taught during the ancient period of its history, up to and including the time of Socrates. Many of these men, called **Presocratic philosophers**, challenged ordinary ideas about knowledge and reality. Most of them thought that our ordinary, everyday worldview is not accurate and needs to be revised. Some wanted to add items to the common sense worldview, while others wanted to subtract them, and still others wanted to change it completely. By examining even the little of what we know about the Presocratic philosophers we will be in a better position to understand how it was that Socrates rebelled against what many of them had to say and especially how it was that Plato—influenced by both the Presocratics and Socrates, came to hold the views that he did.

One of the reasons many philosophers wanted to revise our ordinary ways of thinking about what is real is their belief that it rests on observation, and that any knowledge that depends on what we learn through our senses is unreliable. For them, knowledge through the mind, or reason, is far superior. This distinction between observation and reason is a common one in the history of philosophy, and is used as the basis for another distinction, that between **appearances** and **reality**. For many philosophers, what the lowly senses know, the common sense world and the world of science, is only the way that the real world *appears* to us. What really exists, beyond what we may observe, may only be discovered by reason, by thinking about what it is like. This is a task for philosophers, the task of discovering reality through reason. At least this is how the earliest philosophers thought of what they were doing. They viewed their job to be that of discovering the secrets of reality by thinking about its true nature, and by describing the results of this thinking in a set of statements that we may refer to as a metaphysical theory, or simply metaphysics. We will examine many versions of these theories below, especially those of the Presocratic philosophers.

### THE PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS

The Presocratic philosophers were men who lived in and around Greece during the fifth and sixth centuries B.C.E. They were the founders of Western philosophy, a new way of thinking about the world that arose out of the backdrop of mythological thought. In the mythological manner of understanding the world, the behavior of everything in nature was understood as having the personal choice of some god behind it, and was thus seen to be as unpredictable as the

behavior of human persons. There was no distinction between nature and persons, in fact, because what we now call nature was then seen to be just different sorts of persons or personal forces.

The Presocratics invented the idea of nature as a natural place, as a collection of objects. These objects operated according to a predictable pattern that could be discovered by human investigation. In this way they set the stage for an understanding of the world that is one of the central defining features of Western culture. We now call this way of understanding science; then it was called philosophy.

### Thales

Perhaps the most important of the Presocratic philosophers, the man who was the transitional figure between the mythological and the philosophical approaches to nature, was Thales of Miletus (624-546 B.C.E). As the earliest Presocratic philosopher, he is usually credited with being the first philosopher in the West. Thales' solution to the problem of the nature of reality will sound strange to your ears, but a closer inspection leaves it actually quite revealing. He said that everything is *water*.

Such an answer certainly seems strange to be sure, but so do many of the attempts of philosophers to take us beyond the obvious. Thales was a brilliant man so his answer should not be dismissed outright. With a closer look it is clear that there was *some* sense to his claim. Physical things take the form of either a solid, or a liquid, or a gas. Since water can assume all of these forms it is not impossible that everything is a form of water. Water is also essential for life. In fact, it appears to be the most abundant thing in existence, especially if you live on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, as Thales did, and believe that the Earth itself floated on a giant body of water.

But this is not the important lesson to be learned from Thales. Of course he was wrong, from the perspective of what we know about the world today, to say that everything is water. What is important to learn from Thales' statement has less to do with what it claims, and more to do with the kinds of questions Thales must have asked himself in order to come up with his claim that everything is water. Unfortunately, very little of what the Presocratics wrote has survived the ravages of wars and time, and what has survived has done so only as fragments of their original writings. Some of these fragments were preserved in the writings of later philosophers, who wrote commentaries on their work. So we must guess what was on his mind, but I think that we can make some good guesses at this point in time. If "everything is water" was his answer to a question, then the question must have been something like this: What is the one, fundamental thing of which all other things are composed? This tells us several things about what he must have believed.

*First*, Thales must have been thinking of reality as composed of only *one* thing, with all the *many* different sorts of things that we experience being nothing but various forms of this one thing. The task of metaphysics is to identify this One and to equate it with reality. *Second*, since what we perceive through the senses is not one thing, but many different sorts of things, Thales must have thought about another way of knowing the world besides observing it. He must have had in mind some idea that reality could be known by reasoning about it, by approaching it through *intellectual knowledge*, a way of knowing that was very different from *sense knowledge*. Unfortunately, we do not know if Thales had a clear formulation of this distinction or not, but it is implied by his saying “everything is water”, since everything cannot be observed to be water.

*Third*, Thales must have had at least implicitly in mind the distinction between *appearances* and *reality*. The common sense world, known through the senses, appears to be very different from the real world, known through the mind. After all, it cannot be observed that everything is water. Everything but water appears to be something else besides water. Rocks do not appear to be a form of water. If they are, as Thales claims that they are, then he must have assumed that what is real is different from what appears to my senses to be real. In the simple statement, “Everything is water”, we see that a new way of thinking about the world has emerged, one whose basic concepts are those of the one and the many, sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, and appearances and reality. In a word, this is metaphysical thinking.

This new way of thinking was guided by one main question: What is the one fundamental reality that underlies the many different things we observe? This question was not to be answered by gathering information, by observing the world and how it worked. Rather, it was to be answered by reason, by thinking about how the world must really be. Reason is the only way of knowing that takes us beyond appearances to reality itself. After Thales introduced this philosophical way of thinking about the world, a way that replaced mythological thinking, the search for the true nature of reality in the West was underway in earnest.

### Anaximander and Anaximenes

Two contemporaries of Thales, both from the town of Miletus, were Anaximander and Anaximenes. Here is how Anaximander, a student of Thales, describes his idea of the one basic reality:

“The Unlimited is the first principle of things that are. It is that from which the coming-to-be [of things and qualities] takes place, and it is that into which they return when they perish, by moral necessity, giving satisfaction to one another and making reparation for their injustice, according to the order of time.”<sup>1</sup>

My first reaction to a passage such as this is to mutter something like “What the heck does that mean?” to myself. As with Thales and most of the other Presocratics, very little of what Anaximander wrote survived, and so an understanding of his thought has to depend on what other Ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle, wrote about him.

There are two basic ideas of Anaximander that are especially important for us. One is mentioned in the above citation, his identification of the basic stuff of reality with the “Unlimited”. The Unlimited may mean something like we mean when we call God “infinite”, and mean by this that God is outside of time and space. But it is not clear that ‘unlimited’ means infinite for Anaximander, since he does say in the above passage that things come from and return to the unlimited “according to the order of time”. One thing seems clear, the Unlimited is not itself a particular kind of thing, such as water. Any particular kind of thing is limited to being a thing of that kind. The Unlimited, however, being of no particular kind, has no limits of this sort. Because of this all things may come from (their origin) and return to (their destruction) the Unlimited.

Anaximander explains the manner in which things of a certain kind originate from and dissolve into the Unlimited, by using an analogy with the moral order that holds among human persons. The fundamental notion is that every change involves a conflict of opposites, a position that he describes in moral terms in the last two lines of the above quote. There is also some reason to believe that he held a primitive theory of evolution to account in more detail for how the many kinds of things that now exist evolved from one undifferentiated sort of “stuff”.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to think that Anaximander’s apparently incomprehensible concept of the “Unlimited” actually rings true to our contemporary ear if we simply define it as “energy”.

The second major idea of Anaximander that is of importance for us, is his belief that the earth does not rest on a vast ocean of water, as Thales held, and as many believed to be true at that time. Instead, he believed that it hangs suspended at the center of the universe. Anaximander had no theory of gravity to explain what holds the earth at the center, but he argued that the force of opposites held it there.<sup>3</sup>

A third Miletian philosopher, Anaximenes, dismissed the theory of Anaximander, and identified the one underlying substance of the cosmos with *air*. He wrote:

As our souls, being air, hold us together, so breath and air embrace the entire universe.<sup>4</sup>

So Anaximenes, though disagreeing with Thales that water formed the basis of reality, at least agreed with his mentor on one point. The source of all being should not be identified with some vague, poetic entity such as the

Unlimited, which surpasses all understanding. Instead, reality should be identified with something that may be understood, with something familiar. Air is all around us. It is necessary for life to breathe it. It fills the sky, and upon it floats the earth.

If air was the candidate of Anaximenes to be the basic stuff of reality, then he was still left with the problem of explaining how all things come from and return to air, and how all things are forms of air. In fact, it was his attempt to provide such an explanation, and not so much his selection of air, that was responsible for his place in the history of philosophy. He seems to have been the first philosopher to show in some detail how the three elements of Greek “science”—earth, fire and water—arose from the fourth, air. The basic concepts he employed for such an explanation were condensation and rarefaction. Pure air is the most rarefied substance, but it can condense into heavier and heavier forms. These may be graded, according to their degree of condensation—as fire, and then wind, and then clouds, and then water, and then earth.

Some of the properties of these early attempts to explain reality are strikingly similar to those of contemporary science. Contemporary science shares the general scientific approach to nature introduced by Thales some 2600 years ago, the search for the underlying principles of reality. It also shares the related idea that the many different things of the universe are all different forms of the same substance. In addition, with Anaximander we now have introduced another idea shared by contemporary science, namely that nature follows a *pattern* of change, a pattern that may be discovered by us, at least in its broad outlines. We can see from just a preliminary discussion of the views of Anaximander and Anaximenes, that it is important not to dismiss views that may seem silly at first glance, without further examination. Sometimes, with a little twist here and there, we may find in their blossoms the seeds of great wisdom.

Though the Milesians were the first Presocratic philosophers, they were not considered the greatest. This honor fell to such men as Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Parmenides and Democritus. We will merely hint at the views held by each of these men and their followers here, and we will do so for two reasons. First, so that you may have some idea and appreciation for the many and varied creative attempts to solve the mystery of reality that flowered during this period, and second, so that you may view the ideas of the great classical Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, within their historical contexts. Some of the central ideas of Plato and Aristotle are presented below.

### Pythagoras and Harmony

Pythagoras (572-497 BCE) and his followers were a religious sect that practiced a stern ascetic life and believed in a form of reincarnation. They believed that the soul existed before this life and will be reborn again after the death of the human body. It will be reborn, moreover, in a form befitting its achievements in this life. The soul was not considered to be a separate thing, but

was thought of as a sort of harmony of the body. As Pythagoras puts it: “The soul is established in the body through number; which is to say, through immortal and incorporeal harmony.”<sup>5</sup> If the soul is a type of harmony of the body, then the study of the harmonies of music and mathematics were seen as a way to nourish the soul, to rid it of its impurities, of its “disharmonies”. In addition to being thought of as part of a religious practice, mathematics and music were also considered to be the keys to unlocking the secrets of reality. This is because, for the Pythagorians, reality is number. Pythagoras states that: “Number is the ruling and self-creating bond which maintains the everlasting stability of the things that compose the universe.”<sup>6</sup>

Once again we have a view of reality that seems exceedingly strange at first glance but, upon closer inspection, is exceedingly insightful. One thing that numbers can be is expressions of relationships. The relationships between musical notes, harmony, may be expressed numerically. Pythagoras thought of the universe as having an order to it that, like the human soul, was a type of harmony, a harmony that could be expressed mathematically. In addition, numbers can name groups of objects, and arithmetic equations can express quantitative relationships between these groups. Pythagoras also had knowledge of geometry (remember the Pythagorean theorem you studied in high school?), and knew that numbers can stand for things insofar as they express their shape, their size, their volume and some of their other dimensions, such a mass and location.

Mathematical systems, then, reflected a deeper pattern of nature to Pythagoras, its order and structure—its harmony. This view is not so strange after all, once we consider that today the world of nature, as studied by physics at least, is described primarily in mathematical terms. We know today that the world is a mathematical place from its smallest particles to its largest quantities. Plato knew that too, but only because he learned much from Pythagoras, the man who knew it first.

Two more points should be noted about Pythagoras. First, to say that everything is number represents thinking at a very high level of abstraction, higher than any of his Milesian predecessors—with the possible exception of Anaximander. Though Thales and Anaximenes thought in general terms about the nature of reality, the role of the basic principle or stuff of reality, the One, was played by a concrete substance—water or air. Pythagoras, however, did not identify reality with any particular kind of thing, but rather with properties and relationships—the mathematical properties that were possessed by all things, and the mathematical relationships that held among them. This was an advance in thinking because the more abstract a theory is the more likely it is that it applies to all things in the universe.

The second point concerns the contributions made by Pythagoras to method in mathematics and philosophy. It appears that he was the first to

develop the idea of a mathematical proof, a method that allows new theorems to be derived from previously accepted axioms. Mathematics builds its systems by accepting some statements as true (axioms) and deriving the truth of other statements from them (theorems) according to the rules of valid proofs. These rules are essentially those of deductive logic. As we have seen on many occasions in this text, philosophy also employs deductive arguments as essential to its march from one truth to another. Pythagoras was the first philosopher and mathematician consciously to employ such rules, though it was left to others to develop them more fully.

### Heraclitus and Becoming

Heraclitus and Parmenides, perhaps the most famous of all the Presocratic philosophers, are often seen as contrasting figures. Heraclitus (540-480 BCE) said everything was constantly changing; nothing was permanent. Parmenides, on the other hand, said nothing changed; everything was permanent. Since much was made by Plato and Aristotle about the degree to which reality was fixed and unchanging, on the one hand, and continually changing, on the other, this dispute between two central Presocratics about what is called the problem of “Being and Becoming”, has interest not only in itself, but also for its influence on later Greek thinkers, and thus on Western thought for the next two thousand years.

In the fragments of his writings that survive Heraclitus says: “Everything flows and nothing abides; everything gives new way and nothing stays fixed.”<sup>7</sup> It appears that Heraclitus believes that there is nothing permanent. This is bolstered by his now famous and oft quoted remark that: “You cannot step into the same river, for other waters and yet others go ever flowing on.” In another curious passage he appears to identify reality with one of the four elements, fire. “There is exchange of all things for fire and of fire for all things, as there is of wares for gold and gold for wares.” So does he believe that what underlies all appearances is fire, as others have claimed it to be water and air?

Once again, a closer look shows that under an apparent absurdity lay the seeds of wisdom. We simply have to identify fire, an ever-changing process, with change itself, as Heraclitus did, to reveal a new insight about the nature of reality. For him, there is no abiding substance of which all else is a variation. Instead all is becoming and nothing is fixed and permanent. If this is true, then the belief of Heraclitus that all is becoming seems to be a denial of the philosopher’s mission. It seems to be a denial that the search for the permanent One, the search for the abiding stuff that underlies everything else will yield any fruit. This seems to be the way that Aristotle interprets him, and the way Heraclitus is usually interpreted. But a deeper look finds him saying, though in a terribly obscure manner, something that belies this standard interpretation. What in nature, if anything, plays the role of a permanent reality for Heraclitus?

The first thing to say is that constant change is a property of appearances, for Heraclitus, not reality. Underlying this changing world of appearances is an order at work. Heraclitus writes:

“This universe, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man, but it always has been, is, and will be—an ever-living fire, kindling itself by regular measures and going out by regular measures.”

Besides the interesting point that Heraclitus sees the universe as eternal, the two phrases especially to pay attention to are the “is the same for all” phrase and the “regular measures” phrase. The first indicates that becoming is a property of appearances, the world as it is for all of us. The second phrase, however, refers to the underlying order of this continual change. As with Anaximenes, Heraclitus has a notion of the order with which things pass from one form to another. He says elsewhere that: “Fire lives in the death of earth, air in the death of fire, water in the death of air, and earth in the death of water.” This is hardly a detailed account of the laws governing change, but it does convey the general idea that there is an underlying order to change.

Moreover, as Anaximander had spoken of conflict at the root of change, so does Heraclitus. Conflict is the engine that drives change. For Heraclitus, however, conflict is not to be seen as a struggle from which one of the conflicting parties is generated and the other decays. Instead, from conflicting elements arise new entities, so that conflict may be seen as the creative process, the force behind change. Underlying the changes that occur in the world of appearances, then, are two crucial elements that Heraclitus identifies with reality. At the deepest core of reality is a creative process, a synthesis of opposing elements, where “cool things become warm, the warm grows cool; the moist dries, the parched becomes moist.” This process gives rise to a serial order of change, a pattern of allowable changes—fire from earth, air from fire, water from air and earth from water. Heraclitus calls this pattern the *Logos*, where *logos* mean, roughly, the rational order of the cosmos. This is the One for Heraclitus, the rational order of the universe according to which patterned change occurs.

The *Logos* is not readily apparent to the senses but must be discovered by the mind, by the wise man whose knowledge of appearances leads him to the deeper mysteries of reality. As Heraclitus expresses it:

“Although this *Logos* is eternally valid, yet men are unable to understand it—not only before hearing it, but even after they have heard it for the first time. That is to say, although all things come to pass in accordance with this *Logos*, men seem to be quite without any experience of it...”

## Parmenides and Being

If Heraclitus said that all was becoming or change, though change according to regular patterns, Parmenides (515-445 BCE) said nothing changes, that everything is permanent, that everything is what he called Being. How could he hold such a view in the face of so much apparent change, change that is so evident to our senses? There are all sorts of changes constantly occurring in the world around us. For example, things change their location (motion), or change from one sort of thing to another (wood becomes heat and ashes when burned), or change a property (a banana changes color from green to yellow). To see what Parmenides means when he says that nothing changes, and why he holds such an apparently false view, we must consult his writings.

The only surviving work of Parmenides is his poem, On Nature,<sup>8</sup> which sets out his ideas in a symbolic manner. As with many of the Presocratics, his writings were deliberately obscure in order to keep wisdom from what they thought of as the “vulgar masses”. The first part of the poem, called “The Journey”, talks about Parmenides being guided to the Goddess, who informs him that to be wise he must learn the “Way of Truth”. She spells out for him what this means in the second part of the poem. In addition, he must also learn about false philosophical doctrines, what is called “The Way of Opinion”, described in the last section, because to be wise he must learn “how to judge of mere seeming.”

Many important distinctions introduced by earlier Presocratic philosophers, sometimes more implicitly than explicitly, will find themselves much more clearly and explicitly drawn by Parmenides. For example, Parmenides drew the distinction between appearances (“mere seeming”) and reality more sharply than any of the Presocratics who preceded him. In addition, he also was completely committed to the distinction between the two ways of knowing that others before him had acknowledged, but often minimized. On the one hand, there are the senses that deliver to us our perceptions of the world, perceptions that produce mere opinion. Opinion is belief based merely on appearances. On the other hand, we have our minds, or reason, that delivers reality to us. It is through reason and reason alone, that the Way of Truth is to be traveled by Parmenides. The senses allow us to travel only the Way of Opinion, the road of illusion and falsehood. Finally is his tenacious insistence upon identifying reality with unity. For Parmenides, Being is One, to be sure. There are no “many” different sorts of things, no multiplicity. All is One and One is all.

If reason is to be the only trustworthy guide to truth, then it is important to understand what Parmenides means by ‘reason’. Reason means two things for him, and for most philosophers who choose reason over observation as the way to truth. It means intuition or insight; on the one hand, a special power of the mind by means of which something about the world is understood to be

undeniably true. In intuition, the mind has the power to clearly grasp a truth independently of experience, or observation. It sees that the truth is self-evident, that it requires no factual evidence. Earlier we saw how Descartes grasped the truth of his own existence in this manner. 'Reason' also means 'reasoning', that is, arriving by valid deductive arguments at the truths that follow from self-evident truths.

What is the starting point for Parmenides, what are his undeniable truths from which he will deduce further truths? After admonishing Parmenides to "Let reason be your judge" the Goddess tells him:

"I will tell you of the two roads of inquiry which offer themselves to the mind. The one way, that It Is and cannot not-be, is the way of credibility based on truth. The other way, that It Is Not and that not-being must be, cannot be grasped by the mind; for you cannot know not-being and cannot express it."

My, my. What is one to make of this? I want to run away when I see a passage like this. It so defies intelligibility at first glance, and even at second and third glance. But the most worthy truths are often the most difficult to grasp, and also the most rewarding to disclose. So the passage merits our confident and courageous efforts. Let's begin with the last sentence and try to figure out what the way to truth might be that the Goddess refers to as "It is Not". She says "that not-being must be, cannot be grasped by the mind." It cannot be known or expressed. 'Known' means 'thought', so the first point is that not-being cannot be thought or said. In a later passage of the poem, the Goddess confirms this by saying . . . "it is impossible to say or think that not-being is."

The second major point of the above quote is that "It Is", or Being, "cannot not-be". Why is this? It seems, after all, that things that do exist could cease to exist. For example, every season plants that grow and bear fruit seem to pass away, to become not-being. So we have to dig further to get at the deeper meaning of these great insights that are supposed to allow us to begin our journey to truth.

Underlying what Parmenides has said so far is his radical assumption that Being is anything that can be thought and spoken of. He believes that anything that can be thought exists. In a later passage the Goddess says, "Thinking and the object of thought are the same," In another place she says, "Thought and being are the same." This is not an assumption that we ordinarily make. We believe that we can think of things that do not exist, like the future, the pay raise I might get, or the new car that I could buy with an increase in my salary. There are lots of questions and objections to his belief, to be sure, but instead of raising them at this point let us instead examine its significance for Parmenides,

especially when coupled with the two insights about Being and not-being mentioned above.

If what is real, Being, is what can be thought or said, and if not-being cannot be thought or said, then reality is only Being. There is no not-being. It is nothing. At this point, many philosophers and most of us would argue for another category besides Being and Nothing, a type of being that is-not but could be—*possible* being. For example, a married couple may consider having a child, who currently is not. If they have the child then it is, it exists. This child's birth is an example of *becoming*, a category of existence that requires us to think of beings that both are and are not, that have not-being (because they do not yet exist) but also some sort of being (because they could exist). But this category is ruled out by Parmenides, because he believes that if you can think of something, then it exists—at least as the object of your thought. And remember, “thought and being are the same.” Anything that *could be* can be thought, so it is. Something that does not yet exist but could exist is still something, and therefore belongs to the category of Being. If it cannot be thought of, on the other hand, it does not exist. Things either are (Being) or are not (Nothing). There is no category for becoming.

So, there are only two categories, Being and not-being; things that exist and things that do not. Of these two there is only one category of reality—Being, which is anything that can be thought about. Not-being, which cannot be thought about, simply is not and should not be mentioned, since it is merely an illusion of the senses. The Goddess says, “. . . men have established the habit of naming two thought-forms; therein they have erred, because one of the forms ought not to be named.”

From these two intuitions: (1) Being is, and (2) not-being is not, Parmenides then proceeds to deduce some rather startling conclusions. It should be noted that he is the first philosopher so far examined whose writings contain arguments for his views, arguments of the sort that we have put forth in preceding Parts of this text and which many think of today as the very heart of the philosophical enterprise.

The *first* conclusion he draws is that Being is eternal. It was not created nor can it be destroyed. It simply is. The Goddess says: “What Is has no beginning and never will be destroyed: it is whole, still and without end. It neither was nor will be, it simply is—now, altogether, one, continuous.” It has no beginning, he argues, because, if it did, Being would have had to come from not-being. But not-being is unthinkable and therefore nothing, and thus can produce nothing. So Being had no origin. Everything that Is did not “become” what it is, for then it would have had to not-be before it was. There is no becoming, since becoming would require passing from not-being, or nothing, to Being, which is not possible. So Being just Is, eternally.

The *second* conclusion is that Being is indestructible. It cannot cease to be because, by reasoning similar to that found in the previous paragraph, it would have to pass from Being to not-being. Since not-being is nothing, and since something cannot become nothing then, passing away is just as impossible as coming to be. “Strong conviction will not let us think that anything springs from Being except itself,” is the way the Goddess puts it.

But coming to be and passing away are what happens when things change. An apple is eaten and changes to human flesh; a river flows by with new water filling its currents; a man dies and returns to the earth. None of this really happens, says Parmenides, though it appears to the senses that it does. Nothing happens. Nothing changes. Nothing comes into Being or ceases to be. Change is a mere illusion. It is what the senses tell us about the world, but the wise man knows to reject evidence based on observation and to rely on reason alone.

In the “Way of Opinion” the Goddess says: “. . . according to common opinion things come into being, thus they are now, and thus at length after they have reached maturity they will perish.” This common opinion, however, is false and misleading since it is based on how things appear, not on what they really are, a reality known only to reason, not the senses. And reason tells us that not-being, which is required for change, is nothing. The Goddess says that “all the usual notions that mortals accept and rely on as if true—coming to be and perishing, being and not-being, change of place and variegated shades of color—these are nothing more than names.” They are not real. Change, the basic reality for Heraclitus, is simply an illusion.

*Thirdly*, Parmenides claims that Being is indivisible. It cannot be divided into parts that can be named. There are no separate kinds of things. “To each kind of thing men have assigned a distinct name.” However, this is merely how things appear, but Being has no parts. If it had parts it would have divisions, and divisions are not-being, or nothing. Divisions are the “holes” between beings and thus, as not-being, do not exist.

*Finally*, since it is indivisible, Being is One. It has no parts. It is “one, continuous” it remains “always the same” and “stays fixed where it is”. Moreover, it is “perfectly complete” and “stands in need of nothing.” It is a fixed and frozen unity, always has been, and always will be that way. It is a reality that is identical with what can be thought, a world of the thinkable which is more real than the illusory world of the observable things that ordinary mortals believe to be real.

The last point to make about Parmenides is that he appears to be an idealist. In metaphysics, an idealist is someone who believes that reality is composed of ideas, not material objects. His is a reality that is an eternal, indestructible, permanent, seamless, solid block of Being. It is a world in which there is no motion, no growth or decay, no change of any sort, no becoming. What is this Being like that has all these strange properties? It seems to be the

world of all possible thoughts or ideas. Though he is often interpreted as an idealist, there is some reason to believe that he really was not, that he identified reality instead with the material world.<sup>9</sup>

If you read about Plato on this website you will notice the positive influence of Parmenides upon Plato, especially when you examine Plato's famous theory of Forms. The Forms for Plato possess many of the properties that Parmenides attributes to Being. You will also find his influence behind the many distinctions that Plato makes, such as the distinctions between appearances and reality, sense knowledge and reason, and the One and the many—distinctions that are so important to Parmenides. In addition, the contrast between the ever-changing world of Heraclitus and the never-changing world of Parmenides provided for both Plato and Aristotle one of their major philosophical problems, the problem of change. The philosophical legacy of Parmenides was also quite significant on the last of the Presocratic philosophers that we will consider, Democritus.

### Democritus and Atomism

Democritus (460-360 BCE) is usually classified as a Presocratic philosopher, but he was actually a contemporary of Socrates. Following his teacher, Leucippus, he agreed with Parmenides that there is an ultimate reality that is not visible to the senses, and also agreed that it possessed the properties of being eternal, indestructible, and indivisible. This ultimate reality he called atoms, and his very modern sounding view is called atomism. Here is how Aristotle, who had much to say about Democritus, described his theory.

“According to the theory of Democritus it is the nature of the eternal objects to be tiny substances infinite in number. Accordingly, he postulates also a place for them that is infinite in magnitude, which he designates by these names—*the void, the nothing* and *the infinite*; whereas he speaks of each individual atom as the *yes-thing, the dense, and being*. He conceives them as so small as to elude our senses, but as having all sorts of forms, shapes, and different sizes. Treating these as elements, he conceives of them as combining to produce visible and otherwise perceptible objects.”<sup>10</sup>

For Democritus, the material objects evident to our senses were all composed of atoms, each of which possessed the Parmenidean properties of Being. They were eternal, uncreated entities. They could never be destroyed, only recombined in a different manner. The material objects that they formed could be destroyed; they could be broken up into parts. But atoms could not be destroyed. Finally, and contrary to what we know about atoms today, his atoms

were indivisible, they could not be split. He thought of these atoms as material objects that were so small as to be imperceptible, and as having different sizes and shapes. The differences in their shapes and sizes allowed them to join with similar atoms, in order to form the bulkier objects that are visible to our senses.

Besides agreeing with Parmenides that reality is eternal, indivisible, and indestructible, he also agreed with Parmenides that reality is one. At least it is one insofar as everything that we observe, the material objects that seem so different from each other, are really just different forms or collections of atoms. In another way he disagreed with Parmenides that Being was One, because there were many different kinds of atoms.

Parmenides had been willing to discount dramatically the testimony of his senses, even to the point of denying all forms of change, especially motion. Along with his denial of change came a denial of time—since change happens over time, and a denial of space—since space was considered to be a form of not-being. It was a place where being is not and therefore it is considered a nothing. This point about space is important. Space was called the “void” by some of the Greek philosophers and was considered to be a nothingness in which things moved. Because he denied Being to any form of not-being, or nothingness, Parmenides had to deny space.

Democritus, on the other hand, unwilling to deny the reality of change, would have none of this denial of space. For him, the void was not just nothingness, but had its own kind of being, what might be called “emptiness”. So reality consisted of two fundamental types of being, atoms and the void. These were the basic entities of the real world, at least as conceived of by Democritus.

With the acceptance of the reality of space, atoms now had room to move, and thus change could be accepted as occurring in the real world. It was no longer to be thought of as an illusion of the senses. What made things change was the movement of atoms, as balls on a pool table make other balls move when they are struck. Think of the universe as a collection of an infinite number of atoms moving about, eternally crashing into each other. When they do, they sometimes join together to form visible material objects, objects whose atoms eventually break apart again and recombine into other objects. This process of combining and dissolving and recombining atoms is the engine that makes motion and change. It is a process that has been going on eternally and one that will last forever.

But what started this motion to begin with? This is a question that Democritus leaves unanswered. What directs or regulates this motion? Is there any purpose to it, or a rational plan that it follows? He does answer this question. For Democritus, there is no plan in the universe that the motion of atoms follows. There is no plan created by divine intelligence, nor is there a plan of nature itself, such as the Logos of Heraclitus. The previous motion of atoms determines how

things move or change. Just as the eight-ball moves when struck by the cue-ball, so the movement of atoms is to be thought of in the same rigid, mechanical way. This sort of view is sometimes called mechanism. It holds that the universe is like a machine, one part moving as it does because of the motion of previous parts.

In such a mechanistic world, where everything happens in machine-like fashion, there is no room for the exercise of free will. This view is called determinism. Determinism is the belief that every event has a cause. Free choices are thought of as choices that are not rigidly caused, as choices that could have been different. In a mechanistic world, however, everything that happens is determined by previous causes to happen in precisely the way that it does, and in no other way. My choices are not free because, like everything else, they are brought about by the prior movements of atoms, movements which were themselves determined by the prior movement of atoms, and so on, infinitely back in time.

Besides being a mechanist and a determinist, Democritus is also a materialist. He has often been called the first materialist. Materialism is the view that all reality, including the human mind, is composed solely of physical entities. In truth, most of the Presocratic philosophers were materialists. In fact, the concept of nonphysical being seems not to have been clearly articulated by this point in history. Even the soul, when referred to at all, had usually been thought of as a sort of “thin” matter—like air or fire, and not as a different type of being altogether. So the materialism of the Presocratics was present more as an unarticulated assumption than a deliberately held theory of reality.

Democritus, however, adopted materialism in a much more conscious manner than had his predecessors. This can be seen especially by his insistence that the workings of the soul be explained in the same manner as the rest of nature—in a rigidly mechanistic way. Even human knowledge is to be explained as a causal process of atoms crashing into each other. In his attempt to explain how knowledge of the world is acquired by appealing to nothing but the movement of atoms, Democritus strikes a chord with contemporary accounts of knowledge. Focusing on perception, his explanation of how we come to know the world by forming inner representations of it will strike a sympathetic chord with the modern accounts of perception to be examined in Parts Four and Five.

At the time of Democritus not much was known about how human sense organs worked. Democritus considered them to be merely pathways to the soul. He thought of the soul itself as a pattern of atoms that functioned as an inner receptacle of information. Material objects, for Democritus, constantly give off atoms, and these atoms, upon striking the sense organs, work their way into the soul and somehow form an internal image of the external object. Unfortunately, our senses give us no accurate information about the deeper structure of reality. The inner representations that we form correspond to no real qualities of atoms or collections of atoms. Our sensory experiences are merely the way that the real

world of atoms appears to us. In particular, all the colors, sounds, odors, tastes, and smells that we experience exist only in our minds. They are subjective reactions of ours to a world of atoms that have none of these properties. As Democritus puts it:

“The truth is that what we meet with perceptually is nothing reliable, for it shifts its character according to the body’s dispositions, influences, and confrontations.”<sup>11</sup>

So it is only in reason, only in knowledge through the intellect, not the senses, that the true account of reality is to be found. But what of reason as a mode of knowledge? It cannot be a different kind of thing from sense knowledge since, for Democritus, everything is reducible to the movement of atoms. But it must be different in some sense, since he believes that reason alone delivers knowledge of reality, while the senses inform us merely of appearances. Unfortunately, he never adequately explains how such mechanical motion produces the sublime theories of reality that Democritus and other Presocratics present for our consideration. Because of this, some commentators interpret him as being skeptical of discovering the true nature of reality. Democritus himself hints at this difficulty when he says, in an imaginary dialogue between the senses and the intellect:

“INTELLECT: It is by convention that color exists, by convention sweet, by convention bitter.  
SENSES: Ah, wretched intellect, you get your evidence only as we give it to you, and yet you try to overthrow us. That overthrow will be your downfall.”<sup>12</sup>

In addition to these unanswered questions, Democritus also needs to explain better than he does how moral choices are possible in a world where all behavior, including human behavior, is determined by the prior movements of atoms. If we cannot choose our actions freely, if they just “happen” to us, then there seems to be little sense to ethics, to pretending that there are choices about living one way rather than another. Advising us, as Democritus does, to choose the pleasures of the soul over those of the body, seems to be inconsistent with his materialistic determinism. The inconsistency seems not to have been lost on Democritus, but he appeared to ignore it and wrote a great deal about ethical concerns.

Instead of admonishing Democritus for these omissions and inconsistencies, however, we ought to praise him for his grand attempt at explaining human knowledge and moral conduct in natural terms. Gratitude was not the reaction of Socrates, however. As we will see in a moment, this legendary figure insisted that human nature is quite distinct from the rest of nature. Before

turning to Socrates it will be helpful to summarize briefly the major contributions of the Presocratic philosophers.

### THE LEGACY OF THE PRESOCRATICS

The Presocratics have all offered solutions to our problem, *What is the nature of reality?* Let us summarize what we have learned from their attempts to question the ordinary concept of reality, to go beyond the common sense knowledge of their day, and to unlock the secrets of reality. We will focus not so much on their conclusions but upon the new way of thinking which they invented. This is a way of thinking which we continue to employ today in both philosophy and science, as we continue the journey they began some twenty-six hundred years ago to understand what really exist. Several points are worthy of mention, especially as they contribute to the solution of our problem.

*First*, their explanations of the world were free from reference to gods and spirits and other personal forces. The Presocratics *demythologized* nature. They explained what existed and how it worked by appealing only to natural forces. They invented the concept of nature as an impersonal place, a concept that we all take for granted today.

*Second*, because it was seen as impersonal, nature could be studied in an objective manner. The behavior of persons, whether they are gods or humans, is not orderly and predictable. We act on whim, on emotion and the passion of the moment. In the same circumstances our behavior may vary considerably. Now, with nature no longer thought of as filled with personal forces, it became possible to conceive of a natural *structure and order* to its workings, and to attempt to discover what this order might be.

*Third*, since such an order was not readily apparent to the senses, the idea was introduced that there was a deeper *reality* to existence, one that was different from the way that the world *appeared* to us in our daily lives. The common sense world was not the real world after all; there was something deeper to reality than there appeared to be. All the Presocratics had some notion that the reality they were after was not simply the world as it appeared. Some of them started with appearances, as did Thales, for example, and Anaximenes and Democritus. Others, especially Parmenides, seemed to ignore the way things seemed to be altogether. All of them went some distance beyond appearances in their speculations about the nature of what was real.

*Fourth*, if reality could be known it was not known in the same manner as appearances. *Sense knowledge*—perception, gives us knowledge of appearances, our good old familiar common sense world. But perception gives us no knowledge of the deeper reality beneath these appearances. Instead, this was to be arrived at through *intellectual knowledge*, through reason. The way

that reason operates is by intuition and deduction. Someone following reason begins with some truth about which there is much confidence, and then attempts to figure out what else follows from its being true. Some of the Presocratics followed reason rather rigorously, like Parmenides, Pythagoras, and Democritus. The reasoning of others appeared to bow less to the demands of logic. In all cases, however, the speculations of the Presocratics went well beyond what the senses told them was true.

There was a confidence in reason shared by the Presocratics that is absent today. We may use reason to form scientific hypotheses and to deduce some of their implications, but we have confidence that our hypotheses are true only if they are confirmed by observation. For the Presocratics, however, knowledge through the senses alone distorts reality. They believed that the deeper reality that metaphysics is after lies beyond the observable. They also believed that the human mind (reason) is powerful enough to grasp this reality. They were confident that reason could reflect within itself the true nature of reality, because the mind was made for truth.

*Fifth*, reality was always conceived of as *One*, while appearances were made up of many different sorts of things. Sometimes the One was a common substance that was thought of as the basis of all else, as that out of which all else was formed. Water, fire, and air are examples of these. At other times the One was less concrete, less tangible. It was the Logos, or Number, or the Unlimited or Being. Sometimes the One was not one at all, as was the case with the account of reality presented by Democritus. But even the “many” atoms were one, insofar as they were all atoms with the same sorts of properties.

*Sixth*, in addition to the general framework of thinking and its basic concepts and assumptions, the early philosopher-scientists that we call the Presocratics also introduced particular notions that were influential within both philosophy and later science. Particular theories, for example, were precursors to their later scientific cousins. Theories, albeit primitive theories, of *evolution* and *atomism* were developed. The very idea of a *natural law* also arose from their speculations, as did the very useful notion that qualitative changes may be brought about by quantitative ones, as when air gets compressed to a significant enough degree to form earth.

The Presocratic philosophers helped to build the common sense concept of reality that we accept today in many significant ways. They invented the notion of a material object, for example, and the idea of causality. But they also challenged common sense ideas of reality as well, especially with their identification of the everyday with appearances, and with the outright denial (Parmenides) of space, time, and causality. They ignored, for the most part, the concept of persons as an important part of their theory building, especially the subjective side of persons—their thoughts and feelings and values.

Ultimately, they were unable to solve satisfactorily the central problem generated by their metaphysical systems—the problem of the One and the many. First, they were unable to come to any agreement about what this One basic reality is. Second, they could not account for how their individual conceptions of the One related to the many sorts of things that we observe around us in our daily lives. There was so much disagreement among the Presocratics that it eventually bred skepticism, a belief that the One was unknowable, that reason was not an avenue to reality, that truth was ever to elude even the brightest minds. So Greek philosophy, for a time at least, turned from the question of the ultimate nature of the world, and instead began to focus on the person. Onto the stage of philosophical history now walks one of the truly great Ancient philosophers, someone who helped to build the concept of a person that has become so much a part of our common understanding of the world.

## SOCRATES

Socrates himself wrote nothing. The teachings of Socrates (470-399 BCE) are well recorded, however, and are to be found in the first third of the many philosophical dialogues written by his most famous student, Plato. Socrates is always the lead character in these dialogues, which are usually discussions between himself, a lifelong resident of Athens, and one of his fellow Athenians. The subject matter of these discussions is usually a particular moral concept, such as justice. Sometimes the person questioned is an aristocrat, and what he says represents the wisdom of the past. More often it is one of the Sophists. The Sophists were teachers of the sons of Athenian aristocrats, who were paid to show these young men how to be successful in life. They instructed their students in the art of rhetoric, especially in the skills of argumentation and public speaking. These were essential skills for success in Athens, where politics was often the chosen path to fame and fortune for wealthy young men.

Also included in the training offered by the Sophists was moral instruction, primarily based on the assumption of moral relativism. Moral relativism is the view that what is right is decided by, or is *relative* to, the conventions of a particular time and place. What is right may vary from time to time, from place to place, and from culture to culture, depending upon what people believe is right. The message of the Sophists was “this is how you should live to be happy: adopt the pathways to success that are the conventional ones in your society”. Socrates was an enemy of this view and did whatever he could to show it to be false. For him, the right thing to do, and the correct goals to strive for in life, was not determined by the current beliefs of a particular society. Instead, they were something *absolute*, something that was the same for everyone, regardless of time, place, and cultural background.

### The Teachings of Socrates

Some basic beliefs that Socrates appeared to hold are the following. *First*, philosophers, as “lovers” of wisdom, are interested in pursuing their questions not simply for theoretical reasons, but for very personal ones as well. They are devoted to discovering what life is all about and what the best way to live it is. They passionately wish to discover what it is that will make a person happy. They are not content with simply living, but want to examine life and improve it. The famous phrase attributed to Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living,” makes this point clearly.

*Second*, for Socrates and Plato, the true self is the soul, not the body. It was Socrates who first clearly developed the notion of the soul as a non-physical entity, and who identified it as the seat of our individuality. The soul, not the body, is the true self, the real self. Another famous quote attributed to Socrates makes this point in a rather cryptic fashion: “Know thyself.”

*Third*, since I am my soul, happiness comes from satisfying the deepest desires of the soul, not those of the body, especially desires for wisdom and virtue. The life of wisdom and virtue, the life of the philosopher, is the happy life. The life of power and fame may be used only to secure only the satisfaction of bodily desires.

*Fourth*, to be wise means to acquire wisdom, a general understanding of all things. Once acquired, we may then use this understanding to guide our behavior, and especially to resolve the conflicting elements of the soul into a harmonious state. In such a harmonious state, our passions and emotions are ruled by reason. The influence of Pythagoras is clearly present in this concept of the “harmony” of the soul.

*Fifth*, Socrates was less concerned with metaphysics, with wisdom about the true nature of reality, and more concerned with moral wisdom, with identifying what counts as a life of virtue. He was especially concerned with discovering what such a life was like, and less concerned with training people to be virtuous. He did not think that people needed to be motivated to do the right thing, or to pursue the correct goals, once they knew what these were. He believed that if a person truly *knew* what was right, then he would *do* it.

Most of us think that it is possible to know what is right and still not do what is right. But Socrates argued that since being virtuous, as well as being wise, was essential for individual happiness, no one would knowingly lead a life that was not virtuous. Such a life would go against their own self-interest, their own happiness. It is out of ignorance, not weak wills, that we are immoral. It is either from ignorance of our true natures as essentially our souls—souls that desire wisdom and virtue, or from ignorance of what is truly a virtue, that we live lives of vice. So it was essential for Socrates to discover what virtue is, so that this knowledge might then transform us, might turn us onto the road to happiness.

There are many interesting things to discuss about the personal life of Socrates, including some of his rather eccentric behavior, how he became a philosopher, and especially his trial and death. His death was brought about by drinking the poison, hemlock, after being condemned by those in power in Athens. These were men who were afraid that Socrates was attempting to undermine the moral foundations of society. In truth, Socrates was trying to clarify them and set them upon firm foundations. Socrates could have escaped to a life outside of his beloved Athens, but he chose not to and voluntarily drank the poison. The account given by Plato in his earliest dialogues of the trial and death of Socrates has inspired many generations of philosophers to think more seriously about what beliefs they espouse, and whether or not they would be willing to die for them as Socrates did for his.

We might also review here our earlier discussion of the method of doing philosophy that Socrates seems to have introduced, a method which bears his name—the Socratic method. As used by Socrates, this method of questioning was used to arrive at clear definitions of some moral virtue. These definitions clarify what the virtue is; they express the true nature of a particular virtue. Once found, the definition expresses knowledge of the virtue in question that is everywhere true, and could be used to guide the behavior of all towards happiness.

In his search for definitions, Socrates usually questions a person who claims to know what the virtue is all about. Socrates invites him to define “courage”, or “justice”, or “piety”, or whatever virtue is under discussion, and then proceeds to show how the definition fails. It usually is found to be inadequate because it fails to fit particular situations, or because it leads to contradictions, or because it implies other beliefs which are obviously false. Often the questioning ends with little resolved, except that ignorance is exposed and the search for the truth is encouraged. There are many other ways to use Socratic questioning as well, but we will not concern ourselves with them here, or with his personal life, or with his death. Instead, it is enough for now to summarize the two major contributions made by Socrates to the solution of our problem about the nature of reality.

*First*, Socrates dug deeper into the concept of what it means to be a person than anyone had done before. As the Presocratics had done for the physical world, he tried to find the deeper reality of the self that was hidden beneath the appearances of the body. After Socrates, to be a person came to mean to have a soul, to be that soul. This nonphysical soul has its own desires, desires that are superior to those of the body. The soul especially desires wisdom and virtue, and these desires must be satisfied if happiness is to be found in life. Philosophers were men whose lives were devoted to the satisfaction of these, our deepest desires. They were “lovers of wisdom”.

*Second*, happiness requires knowledge of the virtues. For Socrates, these virtues have their own type of being, their own type of nonphysical reality. As absolute virtues, ones that remain the same regardless of time or place, they are concepts that exist independently of such times and places, and even independently of the minds that may think them. Plato especially developed this idea that ideas could exist on their own. As you will see below, Plato attempted to revise our common sense concept of reality by adding to the list of what counts as real such nonphysical items as souls and ideas.

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1. This fragment from Anaximander, as well as many of the surviving writings of the other Presocratic philosophers, along with commentaries by Aristotle and others, may be found in The Presocratics, ed. by Philip Wheelwright. NY: Odyssey Press, 1966.
2. Frederick Copleston, S.J., The History of Philosophy, vol. 1, pp 24 f. NY: Doubleday, 1994.
3. Wheelwright, *op. cit.*, p. 57.
4. *ibid.*, p. 60.
5. *ibid.*, p. 234.
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*, pp. 69-71.
8. *ibid.*, pp. 95-100.
9. Copleston, *op. cit.*, p.49.
10. Wheelwright, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
11. *ibid.* p. 182.
12. *ibid.*, p. 183.