

Pathways to Philosophy

PROGRAM C: ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY

The First Philosophers: Unit One

1. WHAT is the nature of the activity we call philosophy? and what use is it? A student undertaking a first course in philosophy would naturally expect to find answers to these questions. A more experienced reader may have already formed some idea of what the answer should be. Speaking as a member of the philosophical ‘profession’ (a comparatively recent, and highly problematic development in the history of the subject), the present writer finds it hard to say anything meaningful by way of a general definition or justification of philosophy. The definite ideas formed with one’s first acquaintance with the subject become increasingly qualified over time. All one can say for certain is that every universal definition will sooner or later be overturned, either by an example of philosophy which doesn’t fit, or by an example of non-philosophy which does fit. Any blanket justification makes assumptions which someone, sooner or later, will find reason to deny. That does not mean, however, that the questions of the definition or justification of philosophy are any less legitimate or pressing. And surely for anyone starting out in philosophy they are not only valid questions to ask, but also appear the most important.

2. Here we have a negative aspect of one of the most well-known techniques or procedures of philosophy: the attempt to define in a real sense, to give the essence of, some notion or concept. Part and parcel of this ‘Socratic method’ is finding counter-examples to definitions already proposed, as Socrates does with consummate skill in the dialogues of Plato, when his discomfited and perplexed interlocutors offer their own definitions of ‘justice’ or ‘knowledge’, or other difficult notions. The validity of such

'Socratic definitions' – or 'philosophical analyses', to use the modern jargon – is, for the philosopher, never a question of mere lexicography, of simply reporting how a word is used, or even rationalising that usage (say, by coining a new term when an existing word is deemed 'ambiguous'). The real nature of justice, or knowledge, or philosophy, Socrates would have said, is no more a question to be answered by looking in a dictionary than the real nature, say, of lead, or thunderstorms, or the sun. Yet nor is it a matter for scientific inquiry, as those latter questions are. The definition of justice or of knowledge, as indeed the definition of philosophy, is a philosophical question. What is demanded is nothing less than philosophical theories of the nature of justice, or knowledge, or philosophy. – And therein lies our problem.

3. Not surprisingly, consulting etymology does not take us very far. The word 'philosopher' means, literally, 'lover of wisdom'. It was first coined by early Greek thinkers who – one may surmise, at any rate – were merely seeking a handy catch-word to aid them in their struggle to defend their new-found vocation from attacks by outsiders. 'Those who are not for us are against everything we stand for,' declared these self-styled lovers of wisdom; knowing that few of their opponents would publicly own up to hating wisdom. It was, in effect, a smart political move. As for what loving wisdom entailed, the activity which made up the life of a philosopher, that was meant to remain a well-guarded secret among the initiates. (In taking philosophy into the market-place, Socrates deliberately cast aside this protection. The consequences of his calculated political naiveté would eventually prove fatal.)

4. At the present time, unfortunately, the word 'philosophy' has an all-too familiar ring. Not only politicians, but policemen, advertising executives and football managers all profess their own 'philosophy'. Alternatively (and inconsistently) any question that appears difficult or obscure is deemed 'philosophical'. Then again, many persons may be aware of a figure like Bertrand Russell, and that he was a philosopher, yet may associate nothing with that description other than his public speeches against the bomb. Philosophers are thought to be experts in 'thinking', but exactly what they spend most of their professional lives thinking about – in Russell's case, the logical foundations of mathematics – remains largely unnoticed. The fact is

that no-one who has not studied the works of philosophers, or self-consciously thought about philosophical problems (those two activities turn out to be virtually inseparable) can be said to know what philosophy is; not simply because one is unable to offer a definition of philosophy, but because one has not so much as encountered the philosophical problem of 'defining philosophy'.

5. Is there then an essential meaning, an underlying reality, to which the name 'philosophy' refers? How does one go about answering that question? What means are available to penetrate beneath the surface appearance of a vague, ambiguous term that can mean practically anything to anybody? It is no use taking 'expert advice' from an academic philosopher. Even if one questioned the most pre-eminent in the field, one should not understand the answer if one had not already gone through the process of becoming a philosopher oneself. Generally, academic philosophers are in any case far too busy plying their trade to worry about the problem of defining their activity! It is only intermittently, for example at times of intellectual crisis, when accepted procedures and theories are seen to be breaking down under the pressure of sceptical criticism, that philosophers are motivated to undertake such a root inquiry; and then not with the intention merely of defining but of radically re-defining their vocation.

6. The underlying reality that is the essential meaning of philosophy is something that one may hope to gain a vision of, even if, ultimately, that essence cannot be explicitly and exhaustively defined. Every serious student of philosophy seeks access to this vision. But if one is going to be involved in the subject anyway, might there not be a route that one can take that will lead us directly to a privileged view? It seems plausible (though at this stage no more than plausible) to suppose that we shall gain such a vantage point if we investigate the historical beginnings of philosophy. Far from merely seeking a short-cut to philosophical insight, however, our aim would be to enter into imaginary dialogue with the first philosophers, those who were active before even Socrates came on the scene. Then, the intellectual atmosphere was clear of all the accumulated detritus of centuries of controversy that has since rendered the question of defining philosophy too complex and many-sided to answer satisfactorily. Surely the very first philosophical ideas must have had

a clarity and brilliance that was capable of inspiring a love that only the initiates could understand, while others looked on in suspicion and envy. – If only we could transport ourselves back in time, to experience the same wonder and sense of urgency that these ‘pre-socratic’ philosophers felt, as pioneers charting unknown territory, then we might be on the way to answering our own urgent question about the nature of philosophy itself.

7. At the risk of paradox, one might make an even bolder claim. The knowledge, or rather the vision of philosophy that is to be imparted by investigating its historical beginnings can only be fully appreciated by those who are beginners themselves. If that is the case, then it may indeed be that the person reading the words that are to follow is in a sense in a better position to grasp their full significance than their author, for whom the sense of wonder at one’s first discovery of philosophy remains only a memory, albeit one that the individual dedicated to philosophy strives to keep alive in every way possible. It is true that, even so, over two thousand years of cultural conditioning separate us from the first philosophers. One cannot stand just where they stood. But the reader who is fortunate to come upon philosophy for the first time, or whose acquaintance with the subject is relatively slight, will be in a position to tackle the questions that the pre-socratics posed in just the same spirit as they did; with a beginner’s mind, ready for any and every development.

8. So let us now travel back to a time when the nature of the world was understood in terms of analogies drawn from everyday experience. Things were imagined to exist in reality just as they appeared to casual observation. The earth was flat, or only slightly curved, the sky a giant bowl, while the sun, much smaller than the earth, traversed the sky during the day and then, by some unknown means, found its way back to its starting point during the night. Into this framework of beliefs which no-one thought to question, the ancients wove their mythological fancies. They made the sun a god, they fantasised about an underworld deep below the earth’s surface, stretching down indefinitely, and a mighty ocean surrounding the earth. The universe was hatched, some said, from an egg. For like all living things, the world must have undergone a process of birth. Its parents were the gods themselves; and all manners of lurid accounts were concocted that left no

details to the imagination.

9. Yet the sheer multiplicity of creation myths and cosmologies eventually had to give rise to the desire to know which of all the competing accounts was *true*. For some, the question was settled by religious orthodoxy. The heretic was banned, or stoned. For others, those who were more ready for compromise, the question became one of systematisation. The best or most attractive ideas were to be taken from the different competing accounts, and combined together in a way which did least violence to accepted tradition. But who was to say which combination of beliefs and ideas was the right one? How could anyone be sure that their own favoured account described the way the world really did come into being, or the way the universe was actually arranged? It may seem strange to say this, but up until a certain point in time, the question simply did not appear that urgent. It is important, if we are not to lose our historical perspective, that we recognize that these people were no less intelligent than ourselves; they were adults, not children. However, it took something extra, a radically new idea, to rise above the mythological conception of the world.

10. We shall not attempt to explain how the idea that was to overcome mythology, the idea of *logic*, arose. Ultimately, it is a mystery. For we are speaking of the human capacity to create new ideas. The historian will point to such prosaic factors as the rise of the mercantile classes, the increasing familiarity of Greek citizens with the processes of reasoning and debate, both in the assembly and in the law courts. Trade had brought increasing contact with other cultures, and consequently a growing awareness of the parochialism of one's own religious and cosmological views. All these were no doubt fertile conditions for the birth of philosophy. At the time when the first philosophers appeared on the scene there must indeed have been an unprecedented sense of freedom in the air, and of the possibility of a radical break with the past. For the first time, it appeared feasible to construct a picture of the world, of its inner workings as well as its beginnings, on the basis not of traditional belief but of reasoned argument.

11. Before we go on to discuss individual philosophers, there is an important general observation to be made that sets the tone of what is to follow. If one

were to sum up the breakthrough made by the first philosophers, it would be in the idea that the basic structure of the universe *conforms to reason*. In this simple phrase is packed together much that explains the impulse to philosophise, the dizzying exhilaration that comes when one realizes that mere mortals such as ourselves have the power to inquire into the hidden nature of the universe. Now in the idea that the universe conforms to reason, there are two quite different thoughts, which at first were not clearly distinguished. The first thought is this. If one attempts to work out the simplest and most economical arrangement of things in the universe, a unified account of the beginning of the world and of the basis of the processes and changes which we observe taking place around us, then that account has the greatest chance of being true. It is irrelevant what people thought in the past, the only question is what *theory* provides the best explanation, the explanation most satisfying to reason, or – what is part and parcel of our capacity to reason – our innate sense of order and simplicity. This is something which is so much taken for granted by scientists today, that one has to make a positive effort to recognize that it is based on a huge philosophical assumption. Why should the arrangement of things in the universe be the most reasonable one? Why should we hold that processes and changes necessarily take place according to fixed laws and principles, and cannot happen in a haphazard and arbitrary manner, even when they give every appearance of doing so?

12. What one can say in answer to this is that we do in fact succeed in predicting the outcomes of processes and changes, something which would be a mere fluke if their underlying mechanisms did not conform to laws. But there is another, deeper explanation embodied in a second thought which comes from the idea that the universe conforms to reason: the thought that certain basic features have to be a certain way and cannot be otherwise, if one considers the matter rationally. This thought goes beyond physics, beyond the attempt to work out the most probable arrangement of things in the world based on reason and experience; it is the germ of what was later to be called *metaphysics*. Given that the basic features of the world are rigidly bound by logic, there is further ground for believing that the world as we find it, in all its myriad detail, has a nature which is reasonable and predictable, rather than unreasonable and arbitrary.

13. One thing which many of the early Greek thinkers had in common was the belief that the universe is made of, or from a basic kind or kinds of *stuff*. Thales, who was active around 585 BC, and who is generally acknowledged to be the very first philosopher, is reported by Aristotle to have held that everything is ultimately made of water. Since, in common with the other early thinkers, Thales' doctrines survive only as they were quoted or paraphrased by others (and in Thales' case, we have the least material to work on), we ultimately have to trust such reports, although keeping an eye on possible alternative interpretations, and adjudicating between all-too frequent conflicting accounts. In this instance, we simply have to take Aristotle's word for it. According to his version of what Thales said, the world did not merely emerge from water, as traditional belief had maintained on the basis of the familiar observation of the ubiquitous role of water in physiology. On the contrary, everything we see and touch is, in some sense, *really* water. If this is what Thales believed, it was a tremendously bold induction from the observed fact that water has the capacity to change into different forms such as ice and steam, and quite unprecedented. At a stroke, all that happens in the universe is given a unified explanation. However complicated and difficult to unravel some particular process might be, we can now think of it as consisting entirely of water changing from one state to another, or of things breaking down their old structural arrangements and forming new ones according to their ultimate watery nature.

14. Yet after the initial shock and wonder at such a bold and exciting hypothesis, one may begin to worry just what Thales could have meant by the claim that all things are 'really' water. The air we breathe, the trees and houses around us are 'really' water. The fire that we light to keep ourselves warm is 'really' water! Well, wouldn't someone who had lived all their life at the equator gaze at a chunk of ice, as a substance they had never seen before, in total disbelief that such material could possibly be water – until it melted! On second thoughts, that would hardly settle the question: it does not follow logically from the fact that where there was ice there is now cold water that the ice and the water are the very same stuff. It is logically possible that when ice 'melts' a process takes place whereby ice-stuff is *replaced* by different water-stuff. That is to say, on some possible world, one might suppose, that is

just what happens when ice melts: the ice goes out of existence and at the very same time and in the very same place water comes into existence. Yet on deeper reflection, just what is the difference between 'same' and 'different', or 'existence' and 'non-existence' here? What is identity? - We have touched on one of the deepest and most perplexing questions of metaphysics.

15. Rather than get bogged down at this early stage, let us come at the question from a slightly different angle. Wood, air, metal, stone, fire, according to Thales, are all really water. What is the difference between saying that and saying - as we shall see one of his close successors Anaximenes claimed - that wood, metal, stone, fire, water are really air? or, as Heraclitus asserted, that wood, air, metal, stone, water are really fire? Aren't these philosophers all saying exactly the same thing: that everything is 'made' (whatever exactly that term means) of the same basic stuff, that undergoes changes into these different forms? Clearly, Thales must have meant something more: when we gaze at the sea or a glass of water we are seeing the one stuff that all things are made of in its truest, or most revealing form. All the other materials we encounter exist in a form which in some manner disguises their true nature. (The corresponding claim applies, of course, to the air of Anaximenes and the fire of Heraclitus.) In that case, more needs to be said by Thales about the unique properties of water, that justifies its being singled out in this way.

16. Meanwhile, no less impressive than his claim about water is a second inductive inference which Thales made: that the magnet moves iron because it has a 'soul'. Thales had noted similar effects on lumps of amber that had been rubbed on certain materials (now known as the process of 'electrostatic attraction'). He conjectured that these were different forms of the same universal process that also includes the power of the mind or soul to move the body. All things, he believed, the things we call 'inanimate' just as much as those we call 'animate', have, or are something over and above the inert stuff of which they are made. In some sense, every object possesses in one form or other its own power to move or change itself, or other things. In the memorable phrase reported by Aristotle, who may or may not have been quoting him directly, 'all things are full of gods' (instead of 'gods' one might equally put 'spirits'). Thales realized that a universe which was nothing other

than different forms of one and the same inert stuff would have nothing to make it *go*. But rather than fall back on the facile explanation of an outside intelligence who takes the watery material and moulds it into various shapes and forms, and whose power is then needed to set the world in motion and make things move or change, Thales put the power of gods into the very things themselves.

17. Even if today we are sceptical about the simple identification of the power of mind to move the body with physical force, we should be wrong to accuse Thales of a primitive animism here. His thought was far more profound. He was not saying that when a magnet moves iron, the iron is somehow consciously 'alive' in the way that we are, but rather that when we think and act we merely exhibit in a more subtle form the forces that govern all natural things. It is in this light that we should view a saying of Thales, reported by Diogenes Laertius, that brings the views about water and souls into beautiful harmony: that 'mind is the quickest of all, for it runs through everything'. In the glass of clear liquid that we drink to quench our thirst we can see in its most perspicuous form the very soul of the universe.

18. Apart from his two conjectures about the stuff of which the world is made and the quasi-spiritual force which makes things go, Thales' only other recorded contribution to the history of thought was his cosmological speculation that the earth floats on water 'like a log'. This was in direct opposition to the traditional, rather vague belief that the world extends indefinitely far downwards. Now if the theory was intended to improve on the answer traditionally given to the question why the earth stays in place, and does not fall downwards as objects which are left unsupported are observed to do, it does not appear very satisfactory. As Aristotle tartly commented, the same question arises about the water supporting the earth: why does it stay where it is and not 'fall down'?

19. Still, Thales must have thought he had a valid reason for saying what he did, other than the desire simply to contradict a previously accepted belief. Perhaps he would have argued as follows. A thing can move only if there is somewhere for it to move to. The traditional belief is therefore quite right in implying that if the earth did extend downwards without end, there would

be no space below the earth into which it might fall. (One might note that the problem of conceiving of infinite extension as such remains unsolved to the present day.) But why, Thales might have asked, should we believe that the earth extends indefinitely far downwards, given that its width and breadth are supposed to be limited? Surely it is more reasonable to think that whatever it is that extends indefinitely far below the earth is the same as whatever it is that extends indefinitely beyond the earth's limits. For Thales, water seemed the obvious choice: the earth floats in a bottomless, limitless ocean. Today, the notion that the earth would fall down if it had nothing to hold it up makes us smile. We are so used to thinking in terms of the more sophisticated notion of a force of gravitational attraction towards the centre of a spherical earth, a picture of the world where there is no absolute 'up' or 'down', that it takes a positive effort to transport ourselves in thought back to a time before the idea of a spherical earth had been conceived. (As it happens, not a long time after, by the Pythagoreans.) But for the moment I would ask the reader to do just that. Imagine a flat earth, and a universe where there is, unlike our own world, an absolute 'up' and an absolute 'down'. How would you account for the fact that the earth stays where it is? (We shall return to that question next time when we examine the doctrines of Thales' immediate successor Anaximander.)

20. On the basis of evidence we have presented, Thales undoubtedly was a very remarkable thinker. Yet are we, on reflection, right in calling him a *philosopher*? Indeed, we have gone further in pointing to his achievement, along with the achievements of the other pre-socratics, as exhibiting the very essence of philosophy. It is no contradiction to our view that the theories he put forward would today be regarded by many as a contribution, not to philosophy but to physics. It is true that Thales gave no philosophical argument for any claim that the universe necessarily had to be made of water, or that all things necessarily contain different forms of the force one finds in magnets. He merely put forward his doctrines as the most reasonable explanation. Perhaps he was so overwhelmed by his discoveries that his insights seemed to him to possess an absolute necessity. As we have briefly seen, however, the thinkers who came after him were happy to substitute their own ultimate stuffs for Thales' water, in a spirit which one might describe as enthusiastic speculation rather than any sense of grasping a

logical necessity. In one sense, then, Thales was a physicist rather than a philosopher, as we now more narrowly understand those terms. (Remember that until comparatively recent times, the term philosophy retained in scholarly and academic usage a second, much wider sense which covered all forms of knowledge; physics, for example, was 'natural philosophy'.)

21. It is no less the case, however, that in order to become a physicist – and indeed the first physicist – Thales had to make a fundamental philosophical breakthrough. In discovering physics, Thales at the same time discovered philosophy. Before Thales, the way of understanding the universe in terms of physics was not a possibility. No-one had conceived of a basic structure to the universe which one could discover by using one's powers of reason in order to interpret one's experience. The idea that things might be completely different from the way they seem on the surface, that the truth lies in an underlying unity rather than in the superficial differences that most impress our senses, was entirely new. Later on, as theories and philosophies multiplied, the idea of a unified truth revealing itself to the human mind would be replaced by scepticism and relativism; and a sense of the impotence of human reason. But for a while at least, Thales' revolutionary idea of a theory which uncovers the hidden structure of things was a beacon that lit the way for the philosophical physicists who followed in his footsteps.