

C. Ancient Philosophy; 1st student Essay

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What does the examination of the arguments and theories of the first philosophers show us about the nature of philosophy?

Before we can go about answering the subject matter before us, we must first answer an all too glaring and important question. What do we mean when we ask what is the “nature” of a thing or a concept. What is the nature of a ball, of a man, of a tree? Is it just the properties or characteristics of these things we wish to inquire about or is it that which separates these things from everything else? Is it what makes these things uniquely different from everything else? That which if it loses it ceases to be what it is and becomes something else? I think the nature of a thing is what makes a thing what it is. For instance, the nature of a ball would be its “bounciness”, for if it could not bounce then it would not be a ball. Hence the nature of philosophy would be those essential properties or characteristics that if philosophy were to lose or if we could remove from the philosophical activity would cause it to be something else (probably mythology or empirical science, etc.) So what are these essential properties that we might consider uniquely “philosophical”? Let us now turn to the theories of the first three pre-Socratics generally considered to be philosophers to see if we can gain some insight.

Thales was active around 585BC and is credited by Aristotle with the saying that “it [the nature of things] is water’. That is Thales proposed that the basic essence of all things is water. What we can understand from this is that no matter how things appear to us, that at their basic “core” they are composed of water. Or all that we see is just water in different states. The question now is how did Thales arrive at this conclusion? Aristotle thinks ‘[Thales’s] supposition may have arisen from observation.’ This does have a lot of merit. One can easily observe that water can exist in three states of solid (ice), liquid and gas (vapour). Also when certain solids are superheated they become liquid like gold, so one can infer that these solids have a ‘watery’ nature.

But how did Thales know to arrive at a conclusion based on observation, or rather was it proper to arrive at a conclusion based on observation? Why did he not like the Greek poets before him ascribe all of reality to the gods? But before we proceed let us consider some back ground assumptions Thales had to make in order for his theory to get off the ground. First, Thales would have to believe that his senses and their perception of reality were accurate. Now is this general belief in the reliability of sense perception one of the foundations of philosophizing? I don’t think so, because most humans generally trust their sense unless a situation arises in which it is shown they cannot be trusted. Hence there is nothing really philosophically peculiar about this. What about the principle of drawing out inferences based on observations? This activity predates the first philosophers and is largely one of the ways we learn things as

humans. Then what about the belief that behind all of reality there has to be one basic stuff? Why only one, why not two or more? It is here that Thales breaks with the past, for we cannot find this in the myths during his time or in the time before him.

We see this theme recurring in the next two philosophers after Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. For the former, the basic principle that constituted all of reality was the “boundless” or the “apeiron” while the latter it was “air”. For these three men the basic stuff of reality was one thing, but why? I think that despite the myriad of objects and phenomena surrounding them they were able to notice an underlying unity. For instance we know many men, but there is only a particular class or species known as “man”. Likewise we are acquainted with plenty trees but they all can be subsumed under the set known as “tree”. All things can be subsumed under a particular set that differentiates it from every other set. Now this set has to be one and cannot be two or more. From this we can see why our basic underlying principle has to be one. Hence from this we can propose that the nature of philosophy lies in the investigation of and speculation about the ultimate essence of things.

Now we come to the next obvious question, how is this investigation to be carried out? Anaximander theory of a free floating earth serves as a wonderful example. Anaximander proposed that the earth hangs freely and was unsupported in space. This bold theory naturally gives rise to the question if that be indeed the state of affairs, then why does the earth not fall down? Anaximander answered that earth was in a perfectly “symmetrical” universe, hence there would be no “reason” for it to move up or down or left or right. Something analogous to this would be balancing a meter rule on pen. If the pen is placed at the center of the ruler, you notice that the ruler does not tilt to either side because both sides have corresponding proportions. As such in Anaximander’s perfectly symmetrical universe with the earth as its center, there would be as much reason for it to move in one direction as in an opposing direction, so the earth remains fixed.

From the forgoing we see that Anaximander provided justification for his theory by providing “reasons”. Hence in philosophical investigations reasons must be provided to prevent the enterprise from collapsing into dogmatism or mere mythology. Also such reasons must not violate the laws of logic, which is that they are at least logically possible.

In conclusion, the nature of philosophy lies in the investigation into the true nature of things by asking relevant questions, clarifying concepts and providing justification by appealing to reasons supported by broadly accepted logical principles. All this is done in the laboratory of the human mind.