

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

The theories of the first philosophers may no longer be plausible, but the way these philosophers questioned traditional and mythological assumptions and the systematic explanations based on reason they put forth provided insight into the nature of philosophical inquiry.

In order to further examine, what the first philosophers revealed about the nature of philosophy, what is meant by the “nature” of a thing needs to be addressed. Secondly, the arguments of the Milesian philosophers, who were active in the fifth and sixth century BCE, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, will be expounded on. Thirdly, the unique nature of their inquiry and the explanations they provided will be examined. What differentiated their inquiry from traditional and mythological explanations? What are the underlying themes and what do they reveal about the nature of philosophy?

Firstly, what is meant by the nature of philosophy? The nature of an entity may be considered what differentiates it (philosophy) from other disciplines. Philosophy may be considered a type of inquiry with a unique set of characteristics, which separates it from other disciplines, something specifically philosophical. The Milesians showed the world these building blocks, the essence of philosophy, in the manner they inquired about the world around them and in the explanations they provided. Yet, philosophy, in a manner similar to its nature is not static, but continually in motion. Thus philosophy at the onset was not understood as it is understood today, but was much broader and encompassed many forms of knowledge.

Unfortunately, only fragments of what the first philosophers accomplished is available to the world as many of their works were destroyed. Therefore, accounts from their successors are all that is available.

The first of these philosophers is Thales. Contrary to traditional beliefs, Thales did not believe that the world emerged from water, but that everything was water. Hence, water has the capacity to change into different forms such as ice and steam. In other words, things consist of water in its complexity or simplicity. Thales also claimed, “that the magnet moves iron because it has a ‘soul’”. In other words, every object possesses its own ‘soul’ (power) to move or change itself or other things. Thales’ cosmological speculation also represented a departure from traditional beliefs as he claimed that the earth floated on an endless ocean like a log, not that it extended indefinitely downward.

Thales deviated from attributing change to gods and searched for answers to the creation of the universe from within. Water, to Thales, was the basic stuff, whose properties persisted in all things. For example, water’s propensity to change provides a possible explanation or cause for motion as opposed to permanence. Furthermore, his three contributions all converge on water being the basic stuff, especially if we consider the ‘soul’ of inanimate objects as possessing water’s property of motion.

To Anaximander, the basic stuff, which sets the universe in motion could not be limited, defined, or one of the ‘opposites’ (such as water), on the contrary, it had to be unlimited, boundless. Anaximander, referred to his basic stuff as the Apeiron – boundless, unlimited. The Apeiron steers all

things. It gives rise to differentiation by separating out familiar opposites of hot and cold, wet and dry, and maintaining an overall balance of things. Hence the universe is governed by laws of physical change.

Anaximander's argument for why the earth stays put may also be considered more sophisticated than Thales'. His theory was based on symmetry. For the earth to move, it has to have a reason to move. Earth is at the center of a symmetrical universe. Thus it would make as much sense for the earth to move west as it does for it to move east. The same would apply for moving north or south. In both instances the earth cannot move in two different directions at the same time and as a result the world would stay still.

To atone for the unsymmetrical positions of the sun, moon, and stars, Anaximander claimed that the heavenly bodies consist of rings of fire enclosed in pipes, encircling the earth. The apparent position of the sun, for example, was a result of a circular breathing hole.

Anaximander's outlook builds on Thales' water and spirits permeating all things by assuming that a universal force provides motive for movement and change.

Anaximenes, the third of the Milesian philosophers, expanded further on the basic stuff. To Anaximenes, the basic material of the universe could not be considered as one of the 'opposites' due to the fact that it would not be a neutral stuff, and secondly it had to be defined. Anaximander's *apeiron*, to Anaximenes, was too ambiguous.

Thus to Anaximenes, the basic stuff of the universe was air – neutral and defined. Air in its basic form could change into different forms while in some sense retaining its own characteristics (through condensation or rarefaction), air-like properties. Water, earth, stones were simply greater degrees of condensation.

He also viewed opposites, such as wet and dry, on a continuum. Wet and dry represent a step along a continuum, hence representing a unification of physical concepts.

Anaximenes also claimed that earth was supported by a cushion of air. According to Theophrastus, Anaximenes stated that earth is indefinite, but defined. He used condensation to explain how a flat earth was formed from air, making reference to felting – earthly particles, formed originally by condensation, being compressed together like fibers in a sheet of felt. The sun, moon, and heavenly bodies were originally exhalations or moisture arising from the earth, which while expanding became very hot.

The above presentation of the thoughts of the Milesian philosophers regarding the origins of the universe, presents a number of common themes. Firstly, each one of them questioned traditional and mythopoeic assumptions. They did not attribute the creation of the universe to mysterious supernatural forces, but looked for answers within the universe. They postulated that the universe was created from 'basic stuff'. They all assumed that there was one basic stuff, inferring an underlying unity, an essence to be investigated. This was not entirely clear at the onset, with reference to Thales, but it becomes more evident through Anaximenes' continuum, which provides the logic for an underlying unity.

The progression of thought that takes place from Thales to Anaximenes is essential to the nature of philosophy as it focuses on critically assessing existing truths and expanding on or refuting them. This includes addressing concepts, breaking them down in a rational and systematic manner and building them up again. Thus systematically reasoned perspectives which adhere to logic are presented, inferring that the universe conforms to reason.

Furthermore, remnants of their thoughts still remain today. Some Marxists see the first philosophers as the first materialists. On a superficial and uncritical level the economic base can be considered water, apeiron, or air. Also on a more tangible level, Anaximander is viewed as initiating the law of causality and 'Principle of Sufficient Reason'. The fact that the limits of reason are being questioned in today's post-modernist world may in itself be considered a form of philosophical inquiry, not a refutation of reason.

In conclusion, the arguments of the first philosophers show that philosophical inquiry focuses on questioning and investigating the essence of things. A critical investigation aimed at finding truths of existence. Such investigations or inquiries are based on critically tackling concepts, with an attempt to clarifying them through systematically reasoned arguments.

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