

‘The possibility of a physical explanation of the nature of the world and how it came to be was a philosophical discovery.’ –how come?

Examinations Of Nature As Philosophical Discovery

Is there any knowledge in the world which is so certain that no reasonable man could doubt it? – Bertrand Russell

In chapter one of his book “Problems of Philosophy”, Bertrand Russell states that philosophy is a means of answering “ultimate questions” without being dogmatic, and in such a way that one is aware of all the intricacies of these questions and the “vagueness and confusion that underlie our ordinary ideas.” Philosophy is a means of answering questions of great significance without giving in to careless doctrine. One should realize the import of questions such as, “What is the nature of the universe?” and tackle them fully knowing the intricacies of further inquiry, that there are sometimes no straightforward answers, or that there are multiple answers none of which may fully satisfy. In short, there are often no easy answers.

Before philosophy, people attempted to understand life, the universe and everything through mythic story or religious dogma. Myth rationalized the apparent chaos. The natural world was one mystery stacked upon another, and though many tried to define nature by casual observation there still remained some obvious inconsistencies. There were doubts, competing theories and ostracisms (all of which continued even after philosophical inquiry came about), but with philosophy humankind had a means of discourse that it did not have before. With philosophy there was debate, logic and reason. And the chaos faded just a bit.

At some time in the past, individuals found time for a deeper contemplation of reality without having to resort to traditional stories. These individuals exercised logic. How they first came to logic and reason remains a mystery. Regardless, these first philosophers sought explanations for the natural world that was predictable; one that perhaps included laws, which answered questions about reality, drawn from observation including deductions from those observations. They perceived that the universe “conforms to reason.” That’s not to say that Thales, one of the earliest philosophers, discovered a pure methodology—even if he did we moderns wouldn’t know of it as most of his writings haven’t survived, and what remains is distorted by others—but that there were now systematic attempts to wrestle with the complexity of nature. These early philosophers did not attempt to differentiate between “fields of study” (cosmology, biology, etc.) as we do today, but lumped them together as philosophy.

One of two thoughts that the universe conforms to reason is that there should be a unifying principle, as well as a series of processes, whereby one can make predictions about the natural world, that the universe does not function arbitrarily (contrary to some observations) but according to fixed rules. And if we identify and understand these rules we can better appreciate the world we live in. The second thought or premise is that the world works as it does, in a certain way, but could not possibly function in any other rational way. Our knowledge of the world should therefore be expanded by use of reason to better predict circumstances and understand the natural world.

The Greek Thales was one of the first thinkers that we know of to propose a substance of which all things in nature are made. He proposed that everything was ultimately made of water. Later “matter” philosophers used fire and air, but the point here is that these philosophers were trying to get at the nature, the base element of the universe using reason derived through observation. These philosophers proposed through philosophical means doctrines that they thought most reasonably explained their observations. Further, they postulated theories that nature might be completely different from observation, that there were truths beneath the surface, which could be got at by supposition and logic. What holds the world in its place? What is the stuff of the universe? Are there guides, balances or laws to the universe? The way to these discoveries ran directly through philosophy.

Thales also proposed a “universal force”, a “stuff from which all things are made” which provided for “change and movement.” Thales’ Milesian pupil Anaximander proposed that there was an indefinite something that he called “Apeiron,” that “steers all things” and balanced opposites. Anaximander supposed equilibrium for the natural world, which eliminated randomness in favor of order and causality. However, the method by which this Apeiron works was never fully explained, and by not knowing how it works we are left to infer that there are limits to human reason. The pre-Socratic philosophers were, Anaximander in particular, breaking from traditional beliefs about nature.

It is safe to say that the pre-Socratic philosophers were well aware of all the vague and confusing notions about the natural world, and that they made attempts to understand the world through the lens of reason, instead of giving in

to tradition. This speaks volumes on the value of these early philosophers. Without philosophical inquiry humankind would have continued to resort to myth to explain an otherwise chaotic world. Philosophy put within reach a tool by which humanity could find coherence that satisfied our inclination for order, and eliminated a greater part of the fear that ignorance induces.

There may never be a knowledge of the world in which no reasonable man could doubt, but philosophical doubt and inquiry have driven us from the caves and into something more akin to enlightenment.

References