

C1 What does the examination of the arguments and theories of the first philosophers show us about the nature of philosophy?

It is with the theorizing of the pre-Socratic philosophers that we find the emergence of thinking about the world, and the world of thinking, that gives us a basis for understanding philosophic processes. Philosophy is constructed from the human desire to know the answer to questions, and to do that we need to create the models and frameworks enabling us to explore being in a world.

Taking Thales (585 BCE) as the first philosopher (as regarded by Aristotle) we can examine his view that water was the basic stuff of all matter as a starting point in looking 'beyond' the everyday appearance of material things in the world to explain their nature. This represents a significant break from a dependence on mythology. Thales posits the explanation for the material world in its own character. By taking the ubiquitous nature of water and its ability to change forms as being the key constituent and driver of all things seems a logical thesis from Thales' point of view. Thales can then ascribe a 'mysterious' nature to water, which can then provide a fluid soul to everything. Significantly here, Thales is giving us the great philosophical insight that things disguise their true nature; things are not what they appear to be. What exists? What are forms? What is identity? What is 'same'? 'Different'? What causes? What changes?

By describing a unifying theory Thales is suggesting a structure to the universe; that there are laws and principles conforming to reason. In speculating that the Earth must be held up by floating on water he has to accept that the body of water must extend infinitely – infinity a challenging notion for physicists and philosophers today. Indeed, his reasonable thinking; his logical requirements that things have to be a certain way rather than arbitrary are what kick-starts the Western framework of natural philosophy and science over the next two and a half thousand years.

Succeeding Thales in the Milesian school was Anaximander (610-546 BCE) who reasons that the Earth is held in balance by its central place in the universe. The Earth is balanced in a symmetrical universe – seeking a geometric equilibrium. Building on the desire for a unifying theory, he suggests this balance is held together by the intangible 'substance' of Apeiron – the infinite source of creation and seeker of balance; and through seeking balance we are provided with a natural explanation for change. The Apeiron may be a mystery beyond our understanding but it is not unreasonable to suggest it is how the world must be.

Anaximander is not speculating about causality by ascribing the infinite with a material cause but he is using an argument from 'sufficient reason' leaving randomness as the illogical and thus flawed position.

Then we come to Anaximenes of Miletus (586-526 BC) whose contribution that the primary, underlying substance of the world was not water or the Apeiron but air seems at first another arbitrary speculation, until we look at his justification which is based on the processes of condensation and rarefaction. The observable ability of air to condense and evaporate naturally gives it some precedence as the 'magic' substance driving the world. This idea of a changing form suggests that things transmute rather than begin and end, giving us the 'principle' that things remain eternally, in one form or another. This quantitative evaluation based on density begins to form the basis of examining different substances atomically.

Indeed, Democritus (460-370 BCE), building on the work of his teacher Leucippus, who suggested that objects filling space are made of atoms (*atomos* – uncuttable), is able to explain why hard objects can be lighter than soft ones since the properties of atoms may be different for different substances. Democritus extends his thinking by using his atomic model with reference to human behaviour by suggesting that sound, cheerful people are atomically well composed while destructive passions in people are due to violent atomic motions. Education may then be useful in controlling and containing these atomically driven emotions. This has been suggested as a starting point for a materialist view of the world.

Then there are the Sophists such as Protagoras of Abdera (490 – 420 BCE) and Georgias of Leontini (5th century BCE) who reacted to the notion of unperceived worlds by describing such speculations as pointless pursuits. It is the world that people perceive that matters, as Protagoras tells us, "man is the measure of all things, of those which are that they are and of those which are not they are not." By observing that different nations had different rules of conduct then it can be assumed that rules are conventions rather than absolute universal behaviours, which we might now view as a moral relativistic viewpoint. The Sophists were interested in getting on with leading a successful life by gaining influence over others.

Though Democritus starts to examine human behaviours, and the scepticism of the Sophists takes us into further philosophical areas around ethics, we might clearly see the greatest influence of the pre-Socratic philosophers being as forerunners of a science based view of the world. Indeed, it might be argued that they invented physics or at least the philosophy of science. Is there such a strong case for as big an influence on philosophy?

Certainly, the use of reason and logic in examining how the world appears rather than mythological storytelling would be a cornerstone of philosophy. But more than this, appearance itself is questioned, by asking if there is a framework 'behind' what appears to us? Then we can start asking about appearance itself and epistemological questions of how we know what there is and how it works. Arguing for a unified theory based on reason inevitably leads to questioning the theory and thus the emergence of scepticism and relativism. Meanwhile, we can see the school of Miletus builds 'a dialectical process' as each

of the pre-Socratic's critiques builds on the other or develops its own reasoning based on the critique of the former – the quest for truth being central to all of their investigations. The truth being more than what appears to us, so we might conjecture prior to having that conjecture scrutinized. These pre-Socratics would not have seen a difference between science and philosophy, though it seems to me that their quest for knowledge had a mainly scientific basis as seen from today and it might be overstretching it to say they 'invented' philosophy as a discipline. It appears to me that they engaged in general philosophical processes in seeking knowledge about the world but it would be Socrates and Plato who start really examining reality, metaphysics and ethics.

Nevertheless, asking questions about reality and wanting to know the answer is a quest for 'truth' which must be the ultimate nature of philosophy even though 'truth' might be unattainable. As I think harder myself about philosophical questions, I realise that answers may well be beyond me, as it was for the pre-Socratics, but there is something inside me that wants to know and has done from being a child when I realised I was in a fascinating world. There is something built-in to human existence that questions and experiments, which must certainly have happened before the pre-Socratics. But let us take the pre-Socratics as a defined group for the sake of argument and allow them their place.

Though looking back we can see the pre-Socratics were ultimately empirically mistaken, it was the process of their thinking that was 'true'. Theories that seem laughable in their naiveté to us now might be regarded as brave attempts to seek the truth about reality. It is often having the courage to be viewed as ridiculous by others in the world that marks out the philosopher of significance – natural or otherwise.