

- 'Examining the theories of the Milesian philosophers concerning the nature of the primary substance, we find a progressive clarification of the questions asked, and an improvement in the answers given to those questions.' - Discuss.

The first philosopher is Thales. He believes that water is the 'arche' or root of everything. He is not the first person to raise this issue, but he is the first one who asks questions and tries to find the answer using reason. Hesiod and Homer may have addressed this question before, but both use other ways to explain it other than reason. In the modern day, we know that water is not the root of everything. As Aristotle said, Thales possibly made the observation of water as a liquid that is able to transform into steam. The water in the pot when we heat it for long enough, will disappear from the pot. Eventually, we will have only an empty pot. In addition, we can see the steam rising up into the air. Thales uses an empirical method to find the answer to his question. The big change is that he uses a completely different way of asking and answering questions for anything that he does not understand yet from his previous generation. Instead of only using belief or imagination, he uses reason. However, he still only does this on the physical level. Only information learned through the channel of perception is used as an input for him.

Infinity is the root of everything for Anaximander. For me, his idea is the most abstract for all the Milesian thinkers, maybe because of his rational way of thought. Infinity or the infinite is the root of all finite things? How can infinite things be the root of finite things such as humans like us? He starts to look at everything and question in a more rational abstract way. He does not follow his teacher Thales who philosophizes in an empirical way. He questions and doubts in the myth of Hesiod's myth, and finds the logos such as Arche or final substance like Thales. Maybe he tries to think about it in a different way by asking himself 'Can Arche only be in tangible form?' Maybe he has been influenced by Hesiod's myth that tells the story about in the beginning when only chaos existed. But he looks at it in a rational way. Anaximander looks back to earlier thinkers and comes up with a more innovative abstract way of answering. His attempt to explain it in a logical way really impresses me. It may seem unconvincing at first, but when I try to examine his reason, I then notice the similarity between his thinking and Copernicus's cosmic idea. The chaos happens first then everything starts to organize itself as a system (Copernicus, everything moves around the sun). Perhaps he sees the pattern of an event in his society when everything is so chaotic in wartime, and then peace and unity return after the strongest power wins and leads society. Anyway, I still like his attempt to think about it abstractly.

Anaximenes disagrees with his previous thinkers, both Thales and Anaximander. Anaximander's indefinite idea cannot be the root of everything since it is not intelligible. We cannot think about 'nothing'. When we think about water, we think about something. So something indeterminate cannot be thought of on its own similar to Hesiod's Chaos idea. Where he does agree with Thales and Anaximander is that Arche is the root of everything. He agrees with Anaximander that Thales's idea of water cannot be the Arche.

When we break a rock and look inside the rock, we cannot find the water in it. Actually, this is the best example of the Dialectic method in early history. We conceive an idea. We critique or negate it and then we move on to a better idea. The air is Arche for Anaximenes. It is as intelligible as Thales's water but it has many more advantages compared with water. Air can transform from one shape to another. Perhaps he mixes both the idea of Thales's water and Anaximander's indefiniteness together. Water can transform into many forms and seems able to continue this process forever. We can heat water and it becomes moisture rising up into the sky as water vapour. When it rains, the water vapour in the atmosphere changes its form and falls down as water again.

The Milesian thinkers believe in the human ability of reason. They both use their senses and reason to find the answer to the important questions that they meet in their time. They also develop their ideas from the previous thinkers by critique, agreeing or disagreeing with them. Finally, they can come up with more rational and advanced ideas than their teacher or the thinkers before them.