

Epilogue as Preamble

Everyone ought to be interested in the classical origins of our intellectual culture. I have tried to write a book that will show why. There are many students who are more expert than I am in the field. But it is my contention that they do not offer us a properly balanced account of their subject when *they* write the “history of Greek Philosophy.” When it is properly told, this is a story that every thoughtful reader will find truly enthralling.

The reason for the general failure of the experts is that they do not see the *concept* of “philosophy” as something that has a history. They all know what “philosophy” is; and they set out to tell us what the Greek thinkers contributed to it. But that is not the right way to do the “*history* of philosophy” — especially in its beginnings. The concept itself has a history — and we can fairly say that (for our own Western culture) it was the Greek thinkers who discovered it. If we ask when and where the discovery was made, the answer taken for granted by most of the expert students can be given quite simply and categorically: “Philosophy” was discovered by Aristotle in the Lyceum.

I have attempted to write “the story of Greek Philosophy before Plato” because I think that what *Plato* discovered and exemplified was a far better — sounder, more adequate, less biased — concept of Philosophy, than the one that was formulated by his great student. But I myself have not taken any concept for granted. My view of Plato’s achievement has certainly influenced the interpretation of Sokrates given at the end of my story; but I do not think it has affected any earlier chapter. My only initial assumption is *etymologically* guided. “Philosophy” is the “love of wisdom”; so the “history” of the concept must be discovered by observing and recording how it has

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emerged out of the “wisdom” literature that we find in all literate human cultures. This literature has two closely connected but distinguishable foci. To be “wise” is first, to know what is truly “divine” and how we should behave towards God (or the Gods); and secondly, to know what the guiding light(s) and goal(s) of our own finite, mortal lives should be.

The “Aristotelian” prejudice begins by distinguishing sharply between traditional “wisdom” and “philosophy proper.” Greek “wisdom” was largely enshrined in *stories* (about the Gods, or about human *heroes* who were models of both good and bad behaviour). There was quite a lot of wisdom expressed in short poems (and in proverbs). But most of it was in *myths*. The most striking thing about the first Greek philosophers was that they avoided myths. They were clearly not satisfied with the sort of explanation that could be supplied by a *story* about some superhuman agent or agents. So we teach our students that the beginning of proper philosophy was the end of *myths*. These early thinkers, we say, were like Aristotle; they were looking for natural *causes*. Of course (we hasten to add) Aristotle was mistaken in thinking that they were looking for precisely *his* four causes. He distorted their thought by imposing *that* quest on them. But still they were “scientists” (like him).

This project of correcting and improving Aristotle’s account, remains just as fundamentally *unhistorical* as the account that Aristotle gave. Even the simple contrast between “philosophy” and “myths” is biased and misleading. The first “lovers of wisdom,” the thinkers who wanted to unify and organize the “wisdom” that was expressed in the myths and the poets, had quite diverse attitudes towards the traditional treasury of thoughts. If we are going to do *historical* justice to their efforts, we must understand what they said in its actual context. We must ask about each of them in turn: “What was the *problem* that he set before himself, and how did he formulate it? What was the fundamental *question* that he wanted to answer as well as he could?”ⁱ

The traditional wisdom exists for a great majority who do not ask questions about it at all; it is passively accepted even by the tiny minority who want to unify and organize the stories — as the great poet who imposed the “Wrath” theme on the scattered lays about the Trojan War organized

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them when he created our *Iliad*. He had a *problem* perhaps, but it was not a philosophical problem; and we can say the same for the author of the Biblical Proverbs; or for the Hesiod of the *Works and Days*. But when we come to the *Theogony*, we can recognize a problem (or a question) that deserves to be called *philosophical*. The author does not simply accept the Olympian order in the way that Homer does. He wants to tell us “How things began, and how the Olympian order was stably established.” He wants to provide a *philosophical understanding of the myths*; and he shows us that it is quite possible to do “philosophy” in the mythical mode. This is important, because some of the recognized philosophers who came after him consciously sought to carry on his work.

Thales, the first of the recognized “philosophers,” began from the mythical standpoint. He saw the world as two great communities: the immortal gods, and all of us mortals. His “philosophical” question was “Where is the divine life ultimately seated?” This was a considerable transformation of Hesiod’s problem, because the “Olympian” seat of the immortal order in the myths is simply ignored. It is the immortal life of our world-system that interests Thales. But his “answer” — “The divine life is ultimately in the Ocean in which our world floats” — was bound to raise a new question for his successor (and one that demanded a more careful consideration of Hesiod’s problem and its answer). Hesiod asked “What is the seat of divine *justice* and why?” When we ask this, it is *obvious* that we cannot look for God simply in the *water*. Even Homer knows that Zeus is in the sky, and on earth, and under the earth. We must think then of what comprehends *all* of this. How shall we conceive its comprehensiveness? That is the question that Anaximander answers with his “Boundless.”ⁱⁱ

But now a new problem arises. How does the comprehensive divine life actually control and direct all of the forms of mortal life? With the Air of Anaximenes, the problem of Thales receives a decisively satisfactory solution. The two communities are unified, because God is here with us, making us *breathe*. The *mythical* standpoint is completely overcome, because not only are there no other Immortals (that was true as soon as we conceived the Boundless), but we do not need to be concerned about divine *justice* any more. Our world is one great system of natural necessity.

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It is not surprising that Anaximenes remained influential until Plato arrived (indeed, among the disciples of Aristotle, his ideal of the “order of Nature” as one great system of natural necessity is still powerfully attractive). But it was not an adequate account of the human order. The human order was what the myths were really about. The mythical consciousness perfected the Immortals as “divine humans”; and the reaction against the first triumph of philosophy came from a fervent believer in the continuum between us humans and the Gods.

We can say with fair certainty that the philosophical problem of Pythagoras was “How can humans live in harmony with God?” What he asserts — what Anaximenes has overlooked — is the *freedom* of human thought. It is easy to come to the conclusion that Pythagoras was more primitive than Thales. It seems that all we can be *certain* of, in his case, is that he wanted to carry on the work of Hesiod, and to philosophize in the mode of myth. He saw the freedom of thought — which he certainly asserted in his own case — as the privileged possession of a small elite who could understand the myths; and his own freedom was itself embedded in a myth of divine inspiration and communication.

We cannot *prove* that Pythagoras himself made any advance in the philosophical theory of Nature which the Milesians had successfully established. The historical record has been hopelessly corrupted and confused by the reverence that led his followers to ascribe every new doctrine that they adopted, every “truth” that they discovered, to the Master himself. The Pythagorean theory of Nature that we find in the records belongs to a later time. The best we can do is to identify the elements in this later theory that are both directly continuous with Milesian speculation, and referred to by the contemporaries of Pythagoras himself. In particular, the basic opposition between the fiery Limit and the Unlimited (or “Void”) can safely be ascribed to Pythagoras, because Anaximenes said that the divine Air *makes us* breathe, while Xenophanes later said that God thinks, but he *does not breathe*. Someone (who can only be Pythagoras) turned Anaximenes inside out, and claimed that the divine Limit voluntarily breathes the Unlimited.

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The Limit (or One) was fiery; and we can safely infer that, for Pythagoras, the One created the *visible* harmony of the Heavens, because Herakleitos insisted that the divine Fire generated an *invisible* harmony of warring opposites. Thus we can fill in the Pythagorean blank, by considering the problem that Anaximenes posed for him on one side, and the questions that he raised for his successors on the other. This gives us a way of sifting our plentiful, but radically unhistorical, testimony.

Anaximenes — together with the Pythagoras who is *not* historically problematic — posed the problem for which Xenophanes felt that he must find a solution. His One God is the Divine Air of Anaximenes. But Pythagoras had begun to do philosophy at two levels: the divine and the human; and Xenophanes (forced by circumstances to become an exiled wandering bard) was bound to face the problem of the multiplicity of human religious beliefs. The God of the Milesian scientists was not adequate for human needs; and the Pythagorean intellectual harmony of “belief” and “knowledge” could only exist in a small community that was politically quite unstable. So Xenophanes produced an *open* theory of *civil* theology (dominated by *peaceful* ideals and values that were instantly overturned by Herakleitos). He also accepted the democratic view that his scientific theology was just one *opinion* among the others (but until the arrival of the Sophists no one tried to go forward from that position).

Herakleitos drew the correct conclusion that scientific thought must be *rationaly* democratic. The philosopher was “inspired”; but he could not claim the authority of a prophet — as Pythagoras had done. There was a great divide between those who lived by the senses, and those who followed the light of Reason. But the transition could only be made by a voluntary effort. Both Pythagoras and Xenophanes were mistaken in their different ways. (Herakleitos answers several questions, but that of how the philosopher should behave is probably basic for him.)

Xenophanes understood that the God of Anaximenes had transcended our human temporal perspective. His clarification of the concept of *eternal action* had an enormous positive impact on the mind of the “Pythagorean” Parmenides. The separation of intellectual knowledge from sensory

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Belief — which began with Pythagoras and was brought into clear focus by Xenophanes and Herakleitos — now became absolute. God cannot be known by collecting inspired “visions” — the method of Pythagoras. He is the absolutely still object of intellectual intuition. The poetic visions are simply “What is not”; and the intellectual harmony of conflicting opposites proposed by Herakleitos (and implicitly by the Milesians before him) is self-contradictory. Parmenides was a doctor and a political leader. So he recognized that the human world must continue on its opinionative sensory basis. He presented his own “Truth” in the context of a vision of what quite certainly *is not* — it could be experienced only as a *dream*. We must understand — as Herakleitos did — that our world of sensory experience is actually a dream — and we cannot infer the character of reality from it, as Herakleitos tried to do. But Parmenides was no democrat about the world of Opinion — the dream that we all share, in which everything both Is and Is Not. His “Opinions” are mostly lost to us. If we had more of them, we would probably be able to fill the “Pythagorean gap” more adequately. But at least we can see why — like Pythagoras and Xenophanes before him — he had to do philosophy at two levels.

The interaction of two separate traditions (which begins with Pythagoras) transforms the problem - solution - new problem situation. The “question” now is frequently “How can I maintain *my* tradition in view of the problems raised by the other one?” (or “How *much* of it can I maintain?”). But the radical separation of God’s knowledge from our common dream, established by Parmenides, created a focal problem that brought the traditions together.

After Parmenides we can see that the orthodox Pythagoreans — in the person of Philolaos, their best thinker — calmly accepted the gulf between God’s point of view and ours. The mathematical cosmology of Philolaos rests on the *postulate* that the real world is generated and controlled by powers that are somehow *analogous* to our numbers. Aristotle found the analogy quite unacceptable as an explanatory principle; and the “Harmony of the Spheres” is only a long-lived poetic fancy for us. But we are bound to be more impressed than Aristotle was, by the humbler quest of Philolaos for mathematical “harmonies” that can be tested.

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Both the Italian and the Ionian tradition produced a response to Parmenides, which sought to reinstate the intellectual bridge between sensory Opinion and intellectual Being that Herakleitos believed he had crossed. Empedokles clarified the Ionian “opposites,” Hot, Cold, Wet and Dry, into substantial *elements*; and transformed the Pythagorean *Harmonia* and the War of Herakleitos into Love and Strife. But the operation of his Love was as miraculous as that of the divine Numbers of Philolaos; and only a poetic enthusiast could possibly believe in the superb fantasy of the Sphere. The doom of Parmenides against visions confirmed itself: “Never shalt thou say that that which Is Not, Is.” But still, Empedokles taught us some valuable lessons about empirical inquiry in our world of Strife.

Anaxagoras had to deal with the book of Zeno in defence of Parmenides (a work which was either unknown to, or had no impact upon Empedokles). Anaxagoras was as good a mathematical thinker as Zeno (perhaps better); and he saw how to use the concept of infinite divisibility against itself, to overcome the difficulties that Zeno was creating with it. We have to distinguish between the sort of division that we can do with a hatchet, and the sort of division that the divine Mind can do. Anaximenes had argued that the operation of Anaximander’s Boundless was everywhere visible in experience; and Anaxagoras argued that Mind’s activities are equally visible. We see the food we eat transformed into flesh, bone and hair every day. We must learn to think not of *elements*, but of *ratios*. Mind can get anything out of anything in some ratio, and with the appropriately corresponding residue.

But why should Mind itself be pure and divine? Why should it not be just one of the finite ratios that emerges from the cosmic mixture? Of course, if we accept mathematically infinite divisibility, we shall have to accept the divine purity of Mind in order to explain what happens. But if we accept the hypothesis of a cosmic mixture of *elements*, we can dispense with the concept of Mind altogether. Our elements must all be so small as to be *invisible*; and because they are *elements*, they must be indivisible. Also we must deny one of the axioms of Parmenides. We must say that “Not Being Is.” For it is clear that we cannot follow Zeno. We must admit that there is motion. So we must suppose that the elements move in a *Void*. But that is all the furniture that is

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needed in the intellectual world. We do not need God, and his supposed knowledge, at all; human knowledge can be self-sufficient. This was the position reached by the Atomists.

The idea that we *must* manage without the hypothesis of God had already been mooted by Protagoras. He came to maturity in an intellectual world in which the scientific debate about God had been reduced to silence by Parmenides; and the democratic theological tolerance of Xenophanes imposed itself on him, through his decision to earn his living as a political educator. The religious beliefs of the unphilosophical masses were important tools of his profession; and he was clearly very interested in the way that religious belief had functioned in the development of political communities. This makes his willingness to proclaim his own philosophical agnosticism all the more remarkable (and admirable). We do not have any unimpeachable “Truth,” he said (which is a valid way of expressing the “Truth” of Parmenides). We must begin to ask ourselves what is humanly *useful*; and study how the common *good* of a society is established and maintained.

His contemporary Gorgias reacted to the Parmenidean Truth in a much less constructive way. It is legitimate to think that he did not have a *philosophical* question at all (though he wrote an essay that pretended to answer one). But he had a *position* about the persuasive use of language — and about political education — which appeared to Plato to be maximally mistaken and dangerous. He was the first to say that “If God does not exist, all things are permissible.” The common human good is just as illusory as “Truth.”

Antiphon followed the path of Protagoras. He was not a sceptic about “Truth.” But his important thought was concerned with what is “Good” for human societies. Our ideal of individual health ought to be the abolition of tension; and our ideal of social health ought to be the stable establishment of concord. Hence the system of human justice should be restorative, rather than punitive and retributive.

Prodikos also followed in the footsteps of Protagoras. He wanted to achieve a comprehensive account of the cultural evolution of political society — and particularly of religious

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beliefs; and his interest in our ethical vocabulary, and in precise distinctions of usage, can be seen as an attempt to overcome the *magical* powers of language that Gorgias exalted.

The other Sophists can probably be treated together as a “movement of thought,” without serious injustice to any of them. But not to recognize the intellectual stature of Protagoras and of Antiphon is clearly a grave injustice; and in view of Plato’s reaction, the same must be said of Gorgias (though his contribution to philosophy proper was not great). Protagoras played a crucial part in the genesis of Atomism. This alone shows how misguided it is to separate “the Presocratic philosophers” from “the Sophists.” They were all “Presocratic philosophers” together — and the state of the record is not worse for the major Sophists, than it was for some of their predecessors.

Sokrates does indeed bring the whole story to a close. But in his case there seems to be a general determination of the expert scholars, to ignore the record altogether. The crucial fact about Sokrates is that he wrote nothing. Even in the cases where nothing has come down to us (Thales, Pythagoras), it is clear that the earlier thinkers made and left written records. In the case of Sokrates we have copious evidence of his impact on all who knew him well; and they agreed that he was a “philosopher.” So we must try to discover what philosophical problem it was, for which the making of written records was useless. Sokrates began with the dispute between Anaxagoras and Archelaos about Mind; and he sided firmly with Anaxagoras. But he soon agreed with the Sophists that the Ionian inquiry into Nature was a hopeless endeavour. He also agreed with Protagoras against Gorgias. The whole Ionian tradition was at fault, because it had eliminated the assumption of divine Goodness. We cannot say that Sokrates deliberately moved into the Italian camp, because his connection with the Pythagoreans — if there was one — remains completely shadowy. But his mature problem arose from what Protagoras took for granted. He asked: “What is human virtue?” and answered “Virtue is Knowledge.” But by “Knowledge” he did not mean the intellectual quest that both Anaxagoras and Demokritos identified as the ideal life. He meant the kind of self-understanding that cannot be put into books at all. Herakleitos was his nearest — and indeed almost his only — predecessor.

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Plato understood him, and took up the problem of what *could* be done in the Sokratic perspective, by the writing of books. Aristotle did not understand him (or perhaps, more accurately, he understood Sokrates, but regarded him as mistaken and largely irrelevant). The scholars who have carried on what Aristotle began, by writing books about “The Philosophy of Sokrates” — extracted mainly from the writings of Plato — have misunderstood them both. Like Aristotle they do not want their activity to be brought to a halt; and they are bad historians because they will not admit that Sokrates brought written philosophy to a halt. But that is just what makes Sokrates into a perfect stopping place for the present inquiry.

Notes

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- i. This conception of the historian's task comes to me from my reading of R.G. Collingwood. I was hardly conscious of my debt when I began this inquiry, because when one is putting scraps and fragments of an answer together, one is bound to ask (continually) "Why *would* he say this?" "What is the *point* of saying that?" But, as this preamble is designed to show, the *sequence* of new questions generated by existing answers — a cumulative series which became increasingly clear to me as I proceeded — is a striking illustration of the correctness and utility of Collingwood's historical logic.

 - ii. I am not trying to suggest what Anaximander's actual thought processes were. (*Pace* Collingwood, I do not think the historian can do that.) Anaximander's dissatisfaction with the view of Thales could — and doubtless did — take many forms, and provoke many different discussions. But there was a *reason* why the traditional wisdom located Zeus in the sky, and Hesiod formulated clearly why it was that Zeus, the younger brother, was king over all. Anaximander would have seen that the view of Thales did not do justice to that.