

On Being and Being “Pre”

I. Introduction

- A. The “Presocratics”: The History of a Concept
- B. The Importance of Being Thales

II. A Presocratic Apory: The Eleatics, the Atomists, and Heraclitus

III. The Aporetics of Intellectual History

apory: “a group of individually plausible but collectively incompatible theses” (Rescher, *Aporetics*, 1)

contact zone: “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 6)

material monism: the claim that the cosmos is made of one underlying material (Thales, Anaximenes)

numerical monism: the claim that “there is only one thing or item in the universe” (traditionally, Parmenides and Melissus) (Curd, *The Legacy of Parmenides*, 66)

I. There must be either [A] one principle [*arché*] or [B] many; and if [A] one, it must be either [i] unchanging [as Parmenides and Melissus say] or [ii] changeable, as the natural scientists say, some declaring [a] air, and others [b] water, to be the first principle. But if [B] there are many, they must be either [i] finite or [ii] infinite in number; and if [i] finite but more than one, then either [a] two or [b] three or [c] four or [d] some other number; and if [ii] they are infinite, they must either [a] be, as Democritus says, different in form although the same in generic substance, or [b] the opposite. (Aristotle, *Physics* 1.2)

II. An Outline of Aristotle’s Taxonomy with Relevant Presocratic Thinkers

A. One Principle

- i. Unchanging/Unchangeable (Parmenides, Zeno, Melissus)
- ii. Changing/Changeable
 - a. Air (Anaximenes)
 - b. Water (Thales)

B. Many Principles

- i. Finite
 - a. Two (Xenophanes)
 - b. Three
 - c. Four (Empedocles)
 - d. Some other number
- ii. Infinite
 - a. Differ in only form (Democritus)
 - b. Differ in substance (Anaxagoras)

III. A Presocratic Apory

1. Absolute becoming occurs: there are some things that exist (now or sometime) that did not do so at an earlier time
2. Absolute becoming involves a transition from non-being to being
3. Becoming presupposes being: only something that already is can undergo any sort of alteration or transition

--Nicholas Rescher, “Being and Becoming” in *A Companion to Metaphysics*, 46

IV. Very early in the history of western philosophy...Parmenides was driven to the outrageous metaphysical conclusion that there is no such thing as becoming or passing away, and hence, no change anywhere. What

appears to us as motion and change must be simply illusion. Behind this incredible proposition lay a perfect example of polarization; namely, his supposition that, if something were to change, then something that *is* would cease to be, or in other words, would become what is *not*, and that what is *not* would perforce come to *be*. His conclusion seemed to him inevitable, just because he allowed himself no choice of answers besides those offered within this “either/or” framework. His disciple Zeno, of Elea, arrived at similar conclusions...for example, Zeno argued that anything that exists, in case it consists of parts, must be infinitely large, because (and here is polarization) each such part either has some size, or it does not. But if each part has size, then so also does each part of *it*—for example, each of its two halves; and each part of these, in turn, has size too, and so on, *ad infinitum*. You can never conceive of a part so small as to be without size, and hence without parts. Therefore, anything composed of parts is composed of infinitely many of them, each having some size, so the thing in question will be infinitely large. The only alternative to this (so Zeno thought) would be for it to have no size at all, and hence to be utterly nonexistent, this result following from the supposition that its “parts” have no size. Everything is therefore either infinitely large or infinitely small, filling the whole of space or none of it, or in other words, being identical with everything, or with nothing. Strange as this conclusion is, it can be quite rigorously deduced from the premises Zeno began with, together with his restriction of answers to just two possibilities. (Taylor 124)

V. Conventional Views on the Rise of Greek Philosophy

1. Leisure: Aristotle supposed that the availability of leisure made possible by the wealth of economic surplus is a sufficient condition for the development of speculative thinking.
2. Intermingling of Beliefs: The sharing of different ideologies in the interactions with different people leads to a toleration for differing points of view and an openness in thought for one’s own traditional beliefs.
3. Literacy: Written records provide a sufficient condition to account for this distinct kind of critical evaluation.
4. Technology: Technological mastery is a sufficient condition for the development of critical inquiry.
5. Polis: The radical revision of the “framework of political relations” and of “beliefs about natural phenomena and the world” emerged co-relatively; developments in the legal and political domain provided images and analogies by which the spheres of law and justice could provide important models for thinking about cosmic order

--Robert Hahn, *Anaximander and the Architects*, 24-25

VI. “The trick is to define change in such a way that it does not involve coming to be from nothing at all, or for no reason, but still makes sense of the idea that if something comes to be F it does so from not-F” (R. J. Hankinson, OHPP 447).

VII. What is seldom fully acknowledged is that this new intellectual enterprise [Presocratic philosophy] came to the fore with the establishment of the Achaemenid [Persian] empire. The fame of Thales is linked to a solar eclipse—probably in 586 B.C.—in the midst of conflict between Lydians, Iranian Medes, and Babylonians, after the annihilation of the Assyrian Nineveh. Anaximander is said to have published his book in 547 B.C., the very year in which Cyrus conquered Sardis, took over the Lydian kingdom, and thus founded the Persian Empire, an empire that included the Greeks of Asia Minor from the start. (Burkert 49)

Selected Bibliography and Recommended Reading

- Burkert, Walter. *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2004.
- The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*. Ed. A. A. Long. New York: Cambridge U P, 1999.
- “Origins and Movements of Greek Intellectuals.” Mapping History Website. U of Oregon. Link from <http://academic.reed.edu/Humanities/Hum110/maps.html>
- The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy* (OHPP). Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham, eds. 2008.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.
- Rescher, Nicholas. *Aporetics: Rational Deliberation in the Face of Inconsistency*. Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2009.
- . “Being and Becoming.” In *A Companion to Metaphysics*. Jaegwon Kim and Ernest Sosa eds. 1995.
- Taylor, Richard. *Metaphysics*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.