

***How and Why did Philosophy
start When and Where it did?***

Part One Early Greek Philosophy

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This essay will attempt to address the four issues central to the question above. Firstly, Greece will be examined in terms of the chronological development of its culture, and the history of its myths. In dealing with how, when and where, it will be suggested that several core requirements must exist before philosophy can become widespread in a society. Secondly, there will be an examination of the unique historical context of Greece that made this metamorphosis possible. Lastly there will be a discussion of the evolution of Greek thought from myth into logic, focusing on the philosophy of the early presocratics.

In order to determine how philosophy emerged in Greece, one must first consider where Greece was, both socioculturally and geographically. Firstly, the physical position of Greece was such that it was ideally placed for easy trade between Egypt and the near East with artefacts from Mycenae showing amber from the Baltic and rock crystal from Africa¹. This geographical advantage also had an incalculable impact on the culture of Greece, not only was Greece influenced by foreign ideas, but it also held significant influence; it is thought that Pythagoras knew Buddha, and Guthrie asserts "(Thales had) ample opportunities for contact with the Orientals"². This meant that Greece was exposed to a massive range of thought and knowledge throughout its history.

This exposure to a wide range of differing cultures and myths surely caused contemplation on the nature and validity of the evolving Greek myth. Evidence for the influence of Babylonian and Hittite myths on Greek traditions is found in Kirk and Raven; "conceptions not native ... to the Aegean area ... had embedded themselves in Greek thought even before the time of Hesiod"³. This shows a complex origin of Greek myth, with such diversity in its origins and such a loosely structured Olympian hierarchy one can see the potential for the growth of philosophy. This diversity comes about as a direct result of the geographic position and topography of Greece; being at least partly an island based community. The political structure reflected this geographical disparity, and contributed to the development of distinct and wide ranging schools of thought, which developed to a large extent independently of one another.

The geography, however, is but one aspect that helped start Greece's philosophical nature. Greece had a unique system of government. Unlike Egypt, Greece was governed not by a central hereditary monarch, nor was it ruled by oppressive theocratic dogma. Instead, Greece was structured less as a unified country and more as a collection of city states and *polises*. These *polises* had unique cultures of their own, while at the same time subscribing to a central Pan-Hellenic religious identity, as Murry & Price note; "common cult was the established mode for expressing community in the Greek world"⁴. The fact that Greece was not as rigidly constructed, politically and culturally as contemporary civilisations, led to a larger degree of freedom for its citizens than was possible elsewhere.

This freedom is one of several broad areas that can be identified as being required for philosophy to flourish. In addition to freedom, lack of a dogmatic system of government can be seen as one of the foremost of these areas. These areas are complemented by freedom of expression, which in turn requires wealth and power. These key qualities help foster an environment welcoming to philosophy. However it can be argued that the most important of all prerequisites is the initial, individual passion for knowledge and sense of wonder, as Plato asserts, "a Philosopher's passion is for wisdom of every kind"⁵. More important even than this for a widespread social acceptance of philosophy, is leisure; Guthrie notes the accuracy of Hobbes' statement that "Leisure is the mother of philosophy"⁶. This is indeed true, as without

1 For discussion of this, see Hood, chapter 6

2 Guthrie: 47

3 Kirk and Raven:13

4 Murry & Price: 301

5 Plato: 197

6 Hobbes in Guthrie: 31

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leisure, there would simply be no time to encourage philosophy, science or free thought. It is no co-incidence that with the birth of philosophy also came the birth, or at least greater development, of science in all its forms, from the mathematics of Aristotle to the astronomy of Thales and the natural sciences.

Science, however, existed in Babylon and Egypt before Greece; why then was philosophy not born there? It has been noted that the Greeks were concerned with absolutes, with primary causes and abstract notions of 'form' that previous thinkers had simply not considered. As Guthrie states, "The Egyptian and Mesopotamian peoples ... felt no interest in knowledge for its own sake, but only in so far as it served a practical purpose"⁷. It was the Greeks' fundamentally different way of looking at the world that was to be the gateway to philosophy.

Philosophy did not however, come into being of its own accord. It could be argued that the underlying philosophy of a 'first cause' was existent and moreover intentional in the early myths of Orpheus. Athenagoras claims that "Orpheus was the first theologian"⁸, but it is worthy of note that even then, Orpheus is attributed with making claims about the first elements, Water and Earth, and there is a strong suggestion of the elemental nature of the divinities. Damascius makes reference to the theology of Orpheus, and from this we see that it was centred on Time, Necessity, Chaos, Aether and a host of other deified elements. The overriding factor in this, however, is the fact that deity had a definite presence. If theological myth evolved as a way of transmitting philosophical thought, it seems at worst pointlessly cryptographic, and at best inefficiently executed.

There is however a discernible evolution of Greek thought, whose roots in Orphic theogony continue with Homer's myths, in which the gods have ultimate power over humans, though rarely directly exercised. It is debatable whether Homer's view is typical of early Mycenaean Greece, or whether it was a reflection of the 'Dark Age' of Greek history. In the case of Homer, Kirk & Raven clearly believe there to be at best limited philosophical merit, as they state "almost nothing in Homer ... can reasonably be construed as specifically cosmogonical or cosmological"⁹. In either case, both Orpheus and Homer clearly highlight the importance of the gods in Greek culture from an early date. The significance of this, if one does not assume an intentional philosophical meaning, only becomes clear when considering that "the religious explanation would seem by far the most natural and probable"¹⁰, in comparison to the later philosophical view of the world.

In Hesiod, we start to see the hold of the gods on myth slip, it has been suggested that Hesiod was simply using the gods as a "transparent disguise for physical phenomena"¹¹, however this conclusion is not well supported, as Guthrie states, "In the cosmogony of Hesiod the all-powerful cosmic force is still Eros"¹², and indeed, Hesiod talks of the creation of the universe in terms of unions between the gods, further reinforcing the symbolic importance of the gods in Greek culture. However, as Buxton notes, "his (Hesiod's) text is richer and deeper than is sometimes acknowledged"¹³, with such concepts as eternity, immortality and even a potential for a cyclical view of time, there is much in Hesiod that cannot but be taken as philosophical in nature, if not directly so.

The intermixing of the divine and the elemental is a recurrent theme in the early pre-socratics, continued in Pherecydes and Acusilaus, as we see in the following fragments; "Zas (Zeus) and

7 Guthrie: 34

8 Athenagoras; Orpheus fragment 13 in Freeman: 3

9 Kirk & Raven: 16

10 Guthrie: 28

11 Guthrie: 28

12 Guthrie: 28

13 Buxton: 9

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Time always existed"¹⁴, and, "Chaos was the first principle, and after it the pair, Erubus the male and Night the female; from their union sprang Aether, Eros and Mêtis; and the other gods are derived from these"¹⁵. While Buxton is correct in noting that "By no stretch of the imagination could the views of Pherecÿdes ... be termed philosophical"¹⁶, the idea of 'what came first?' seems to be the primary concern for many of the pre-socratics, and this is expressed in the very early pre-socratics through myth. We can see why the first cause was naturally the first place that reason would take them; if the gods weren't the first cause... what was?

Beginning with Thales, it seems there is a general awakening of overt philosophy, undisguised by myth, and no longer debatable. The basis of philosophy lies in the realisation that "the visible world conceals a rational and intelligible order ... that autonomous human reason is the sole and sufficient instrument for the search"¹⁷. Thales has been credited with introducing the idea of water as the first element, and this, if substantiated, is important as it is the first time that something other than a deity has been given this honour. From Thales, we see numerous variations on the elemental theme, most notable of which is Empedocles, who was less specific than Thales, simply suggesting that "from these (Elements) come all things that are and will be"¹⁸. Interestingly, the steady evolution seen so far seems to splinter here into several factions, starting with elemental, as also seen in Xenophanes; "we all have our origin from Earth and Water"¹⁹, though this could be referring less to existence as a whole and more to human beings specifically. The immediate successor to Thales, Anaximander, then cites an entirely new idea of the "non-limited"²⁰ as the first cause, and it is this metaphysical class of primary cause that seems to have been more popular among later philosophers, a concept again seen in Hêracleitus' "ordered universe"²¹ of Fire.

It is at this point, where the history of philosophy both begins and simultaneously diverges into multiple and distinct areas of study, that we can say that philosophy has truly begun. In the space of a few centuries, most notably during the mid sixth, philosophy developed from a concept barely discernible from myth, as seen in Homer and to a lesser extent Hesiod, to such diverse areas as the beginnings of metaphysics, natural philosophy, Pythagorean concepts of transmigration of souls and so on, with an equal explosion in popularity.

In conclusion, we have seen how Greece was ideally placed for the birth of philosophy, having wealth, power, luxury, a predisposition in its people towards curiosity and a mix of culture, all leading not only to a mass of disparate ideas, but the intellectual potential and opportunity to study "knowledge for its own sake"²². We have seen how the traditional myths were lenient enough to allow a degree of free thought, later expounded by the dilution of myth itself with Hesiod, and finally, how once the gods had been put in second place to an elemental cause, they were quickly and continually relegated in importance. Finally, we saw that once started, philosophy seems to grow exponentially and without limit.

14 Pherecÿdes fragment 1 in Freeman: 14

15 Acusilâus fragment 1 in Freeman: 15

16 Kirk & Raven: 72

17 Guthrie: 29

18 Empedocles fragment 21 in Freeman: 54

19 Xenophanes fragment 33 in Freeman: 24

20 Anaximander fragment 1 in Freeman: 19

21 Hêracleitus fragment 30 in Freeman: 26

22 Guthrie: 34

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