

1.6 HISTORICAL SHOWCASE

The First Philosophers

Western philosophy began with a question the Greek thinker Thales asked around 585 BCE: What is the ultimate reality of which everything is made? Thales' answer will strike you as a bit funny and prosaic. He answered, "Everything ultimately is made of water!"

But the factual correctness of Thales' answer isn't really important. What is significant is that he was the first to take a radically new "philosophical" approach to reality. Thinkers before Thales were content to explain reality as the whimsical work of mythical gods. For example, the Greek poet Hesiod (circa 776 BCE) explains how the sky came to rain on the earth by describing the sky as a male god who was castrated by his son while sleeping with goddess Earth:

Great Heaven came at night longing for love.
He lay on Earth spreading himself full on her.
Then from an ambush, his own son stretched out
his left hand.
And wielding a long sharp sickle in his right, He
swiftly sliced and cut his father's genitals.
Earth received the bloody drops that all gushed
forth.
And she gave birth to the great Furies and mighty
giants.
Now when chaste Heaven desires to penetrate
the Earth,
And Earth is filled with longing for this union,
Rain falling from her lover, Heaven, impregnates
her,
And she brings forth wheat for men and pastures
for their flocks.¹

Thales departed in three ways from this mythological and poetic approach to reality. First, he had the idea that although reality is complex, it should be explainable in terms of one or a few basic elements. Second, he decided that reality should be explained in terms of natural, observable things (such as water) and not by poetic appeals to unobservable gods. Third, he rejected the idea that reality should be explained through the authority of religious myths from the past, which could neither be proved nor disproved. Instead, he tried to provide a literal and factual explanation that others

could evaluate for themselves through reasoning and observation.

Thus, although Thales' theory—that water is the basic stuff out of which everything is made—seems naive, he was the first to break away from religious myth and strike out on a path that uses human reason and observation to explore the universe. His having taken this momentous and daring step marks him as a genius. In fact, today we continue to travel the road Thales showed us. Much of our basic scientific research is still devoted to finding the simplest elemental forces out of which everything in the universe is made, and we still proceed by proposing theories or *hypotheses* that can be proved or disproved through reason and observation. It took the genius of Thales to set Western civilization on this amazingly fruitful path of discovery.

But two other early Greek philosophers, Heraclitus (circa 554–484 BCE) and Parmenides (circa 480–430 BCE), proposed the most interesting and radical of the early philosophical views of reality. Both philosophers left the question of what things are made of and turned their attention to the problem of *change*—whether change is a basic reality or a mere illusion, real or merely appearance.

Heraclitus, in a remarkable series of sayings, proposed that change is the fundamental reality. He asserted that like a fire's flame, "All reality is changing." Like a flowing river, everything in the universe changes from moment to moment, so we can never touch or perceive the same thing in two different moments. The only enduring realities are the recurring patterns (like the seasons) of change itself:

In the same rivers we step and yet we do not step; we ourselves are the same and yet we are not. You cannot step in the same river twice, for other waters are ever flowing on. The sun is new every day. The living and the dead, the waking and sleeping, the young and the old, these are changing into each other; the former are moved about and become the latter, the latter in turn become the former. Neither god nor man shaped this universe, but it ever was and ever shall be a living Fire that flames up and dies in measured patterns. There is a continual exchange: all things are exchanged for Fire and

1 Hesiod, *The Theogony*, pt. 11, lines 177–185. This translation copyright © 1987 by Manuel Velasquez.

Fire for all things. Fire steers the universe. God changes like Fire.²

Parmenides, convinced that Heraclitus was completely mistaken, proposed a theory that was the exact opposite. Parmenides held that change is an illusion and that the universe in reality is a frozen, unchanging object: “We can speak and think only of what exists. And what exists is uncreated and imperishable, for it is whole and unchanging and complete. It was not nor shall be different since it is now, all at once, one and continuous.”³ How was Parmenides led to this view? He argued that nothingness or “nonbeing” cannot be real because we cannot even think of nothingness. Yet change requires nonbeing or nothingness. For if something changes, it must change into something that did not exist before: something must come into being out of nonbeing. But nonbeing does not exist. So nothing can come from nonbeing. Therefore, change cannot exist; the universe has no beginning, and nothing in it changes:

For what beginning of the universe could you search for? From what could it come? I will not let you say or think “From what was not” because you cannot even conceive of “what is not.” Nor will true thinking allow that, besides what exists, new things could also arise from something that does not exist. How could what exists pass into what does not exist? And how can what does not exist come into existence? For if it came into existence, then it earlier was nothingness. And nothingness is unthinkable and unreal.⁴

Parmenides’ strange view received support from one of his students, Zeno. Zeno argued that “a runner cannot move from one point to another. For to do so, he must first get to a point half-way across, and to do this, he must get half-way to the half-way point, and to do this he must get half-way to that point, and so on for an infinite number of spaces.”⁵ Because an infinite number of spaces cannot be crossed (at least not in a finite length of time), Zeno concluded that no object moves: motion is an illusion of our senses!

In spite of—or perhaps because of—their unusual views, the pre-Socratic philosophers made several crucial contributions to our thinking. They got us to rely on our reason and to search for new ways of looking at reality instead of relying on the authority of the past. They introduced us to the problem of the one and the many: Can the many things of our experience be explained in terms of one or a few fundamental constituents? They introduced the problem of appearance and reality: Does a more basic reality underlie the changing world that appears before us? Moreover, the views they proposed continue even today to have followers. Modern “process philosophers,” for example, hold that change or “process” is the fundamental reality, and some modern British philosophers have held that change is an illusion.

But even before Thales, Parmenides, and Heraclitus had developed their fresh, nonmythical approach to reality, the great visionaries of India had put Eastern philosophy (those systems of thought, belief, and action espoused by many peoples in the Near and Far East) on a similar road to reality. However, this road would take Eastern philosophy in a very different direction.

Between 1500 BCE and 700 BCE, the first of a long line of Indian thinkers composed the Vedas, poetic hymns that contain the beginnings of Indian wisdom and that were meant to be chanted in religious ceremonies. The authors of many of these hymns are unknown, and many of the hymns describe “visions” of “seers.” These writings, steeped in myth and symbolism, nevertheless also contain early attempts to find a new, nonmythical understanding of the universe. Here is how one of the greatest of these hymns, the Rig Veda, describes the origin of the universe in the mythical terms of the seers, while at the same time wondering whether the seers’ myths are adequate:

In the beginning there was neither existence nor
nonexistence;
Neither the world nor the sky beyond.
What was covered over? Where? Who gave it
protection?
Was there water, deep and unfathomable?

Then was neither death nor immortality, Nor any
sign of night or day.
THAT ONE breathed, without breath, by its own
impulse;
Other than that was nothing at all.

2 Diels-Kranz, *Fragments of the Presocratics*, Heraclitus, fragments 49, 12, 6, 88, 30, 90, 64, 67, trans. Manuel Velasquez.

3 Ibid., Parmenides, 7.

4 Ibid., 8.

5 Aristotle, *Physics*, 239b11, trans. Manuel Velasquez.

There was darkness, concealed in darkness,
 And all this was undifferentiated energy.
 THAT ONE, which had been concealed by the
 void,
 Through the power of heat-energy was manifested.

In the beginning was love,
 Which was the primal germ of the mind.
 The seers, searching in their hearts with wisdom,
 Discovered the connection between existence and
 nonexistence.

They were divided by a crosswise line.
 What was below and what was above?
 There were bearers of seed and mighty forces,
 Impulse from below and forward movement from
 above.

Who really knows? Who here can say?
 When it was born and from where it came—this
 creation?
 The Gods are later than this world's creation—
 Therefore who knows from where it came?
 That out of which creation came,
 Whether it held it together or did not,
 He who sees it in the highest heaven,
 Only He knows—or perhaps even He does not
 know!⁶

Although the author of this hymn is still groping for a nonmythical way of understanding the universe, he nevertheless succeeds in expressing a great insight: There is a fundamental reality beyond all the distinctions and concepts we make in our language, and this reality is the ultimate source of the universe. This reality, which can only be pointed to as “That One,” is neither “existence nor nonexistence,” it is “neither the world nor the sky beyond,” it is “undifferentiated,” and it was there before even God or the gods existed. This great idea of the Vedas posed a basic question for Eastern philosophy: What is the nature of this ultimate reality?

In the Upanishads, writings later added to the Vedas, we find the first attempts of Indian thinkers to understand this ultimate reality in philosophical terms. The Upanishads refer to the ultimate reality as Brahman and describe it in negative terms:

Invisible, incomprehensible, without genealogy,
 colorless, without eye or ear, without hands or

feet, unending, pervading all and omnipresent,
 that is the unchangeable one whom the wise
 regard as the source of beings.⁷

Thus, Brahman cannot be seen, smelled, felt, or heard. It cannot be imagined, and words cannot describe it. But it is the ultimate reality that must be present behind everything in the universe, causing everything to be, while itself being unlimited and greater than any specific knowable thing.

At this point the philosophers of the Upanishads took a momentous step that was destined to forever change the course of Eastern philosophy. Seeking to understand Brahman, the deepest reality that underlies the universe, they thought to ask, “What am I?” The self, after all, is part of reality. By understanding the self, one could perhaps also understand ultimate reality. The Upanishad philosophers thus turned to understand Atman, or the deepest self.

The Upanishad philosophers argued that Atman is the *me* that lies behind all my living, sensing, and thinking activities; it is the *me* that lies behind my waking experiences, my dreaming experiences, and my deep-sleeping experiences; it is the *me* that directs everything I do but that is not seen or heard or imagined. This deepest self, which can be known only by enlightened inner self-consciousness, the philosophers of the Upanishad concluded, is identical with Brahman, ultimate reality. This profound idea is the foundation of Indian philosophy.

These ideas—that one ultimate reality underlies everything in the universe and that the self is identical with this reality—are beautifully expressed in an Upanishad parable. The parable is about a proud young man, Svetaketu, who returns from the Hindu equivalent of college only to find that his father is wiser than all his teachers:

Now, there was Svetaketu Aruneya. To him his father said: “Live the life of a student of sacred knowledge. Truly, my dear, from our family there is no one unlearned....”

He then, having become a pupil at the age of twelve, having studied all the Vedas, returned at the age of twenty-four, conceited, thinking himself learned, proud.

Then his father said to him: “Svetaketu, my dear, since now you are conceited, think yourself learned, and are proud, did you also ask for that teaching whereby what has not been heard

6 Rig Veda, 10.129, in *Oriental Philosophies*, 2d ed., ed. and trans. John M. Koller (New York: Scribner's, 1985), 23–24. © 1970, 1985 Charles Scribner's Sons. Reprinted with permission of Prentice-Hall, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ.

7 Mundaka Upanishad, 1.1.6, in *Oriental Philosophies*, 28.

of becomes heard of, what has not been thought of becomes thought of, what has not been understood becomes understood?”

“What, pray, sir, is that teaching?”

“Just as, my dear, by one piece of clay everything made of clay may be known—the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just ‘clay’—

“Just as, my dear, by one copper ornament everything made of copper may be known—the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just ‘copper’—

“Just as, my dear, by one nail-scissors everything made of iron may be known—the modification is merely a verbal distinction, a name; the reality is just ‘iron’—so, my dear, is that teaching.”

“Truly, those honored men did not know this; for if they had known it, why would they not have told me? But do you, sir, tell me it.”

“So be it, my dear,” said he....

“Understand that this [body] is a sprout which has sprung up. It cannot be without a root.

“Where else could its root be than in water?

With water, my dear, as a sprout, look for heat as the root. With heat, my dear, as a sprout, look for Being as the root. All creatures here, my dear, have Being as their root, have Being as their abode, have Being as their support....

“When a person here is deceasing, my dear, his voice goes into his mind; his mind, into his breath; his breath into heat; the heat into the highest divinity. That which is the finest essence—this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is Atman. That art thou, Svetaketu.”⁸

Svetaketu’s father is here explaining that everything in the universe arises out of the same ultimate reality. We say there are many different things in the universe, but the differences we see are of our own making: they are mere “verbal distinctions.” Underlying the variety of objects is a single unified reality, Brahman. And Brahman is identical with Atman—

8 Chandogya Upanishad, in Daniel Bonevac, William Boon, and Stephen Phillips, *Beyond the Western Tradition* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1992), 151.

your deepest self. In short, you are the ultimate reality behind the universe!

The Upanishad philosophers did for the East what the pre-Socratics did for the West. Like the pre-Socratics, the Upanishad philosophers taught the need to inquire carefully into the nature of reality instead of merely accepting the authority of the past. And like the pre-Socratics, the Upanishad philosophers showed the need to look behind appearances to the one ultimate reality.

But the Upanishad philosophers took a further step that would forever distinguish the thought of the East from that of the West. The pre-Socratics taught the West that to find the ultimate constituents of reality, one must analyze the outer, physical world. The Upanishad philosophers, on the other hand, taught us that the way to discover the ultimate reality of the universe is to look within ourselves.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain why Thales is so important to Western philosophy.
2. How would Heraclitus have responded to the following statement? “Heraclitus is wrong because the objects we see around us continually endure through time; although a person, animal, or a plant may change its superficial qualities, it still remains essentially the same person, animal, or plant throughout time and changes. In fact, we recognize change only by contrasting it to the underlying permanent things. So permanence, not change, is essential reality.”
3. How would you answer Zeno’s proof that an object moves?
4. Are there any similarities between the view of Parmenides and those of the Upanishads? If not, what are their essential differences? Explain.
5. In the Upanishads, Svetaketu’s father says, “That art thou, Svetaketu.” What does “that” refer to? What does “thou” refer to? Do you have any problem with saying that these two (what “that” refers to and what “thou” refers to) are identical—in other words, that they are exactly one and the same thing? Explain.