

Man in the universe without divine assistance and the dawn of Greek philosophical thought

1. Necessity compelled primitive man to concentrate on the external physical world. They devoted their time and energy to acquire food and to ward off the dangers which continually threatened them. He had many problems from the outside world too. To him, this familiar external physical world was very real. The problems of survival surpassed everything else. We find the primitive religions rising out of this mentality and catering to the essential needs of such a society. It was after these problems were brought under control and man became more civilized that he began to ask questions and to seek explanations. Philosophy is essentially the attempt to get beyond symbolic and mystical thinking to get at the naked truth, to grasp what lies behind the symbol, to understand exactly as it is in itself. Symbolism is a hindrance to philosophising which seeks to reach the highest level of truth. Philosophy begins when symbolism had been surpassed.
2. The first attempts of the Greeks at philosophizing were the first steps of a beginner. It began when men for the first time attempted to give a scientific reply to the question “what is the explanation of the world? Before this era, all we have are the mythologies, cosmogonies and theologies of the poets. They contain no attempt at a naturalistic explanation of things. They belonged to the spheres of poetry and religion, not philosophy.
3. Until the 6th century B.C. the poets and the myth-makers had attempted to explain phenomena through mythology and superstition. For them, the anthropomorphic gods had a hand in everything. But Thales, who was regarded as one of the seven wise sages of ancient Greece was not satisfied with these non-rational explanations. In fact, he gained the title, “The father of Greek Philosophy”, because his was the first recorded attempt to explain the universe on naturalistic and scientific principles, without the aid of myths and anthropomorphic gods.
4. Man is naturally a materialist. And philosophy is the movement from sensuous to non-sensuous thought. Greek philosophy began with materialism which was the starting point of the upward path through the sensualism of the Ionics, through the semi-sensuous idealism of the Elastics moving to the highest point of pure, non-sensuous thought in the idealism of Plato and Aristotle.
5. To philosophise is to wonder, to explore, to break free, to ask questions, to seek in oneself the courage to ask painful questions. It means resisting easy answers, being willing to be disturbed with a creative disturbance. And when asking questions meant doubting one’s faith and religion, it was the most

painful and disturbing of all. And Thales was brave enough to ask questions and seek answers in the name of knowledge and truth.

6. (a) Before Thales, (6 century B.C.) physical events were explained by supernatural causes. Since the cosmos was believed to be inhabited by all kinds of gods, goddesses demigods and demons it was reasonable to conclude that all the events of experience occurred because they had been willed. For example, if lightning struck, it was thought that Zeus had hurled another thunderbolt, when the sun moved through the heavens; they imagined that Apollo was driving his fiery chariot. All natural events were attributed to supernatural causes. Thales was not satisfied with these 'explanations'. Perhaps, he realized that if to every question you ask, you get but a single answer – 'The gods willed it so'. Then you know nothing meaningful. Or useful. So he sought a different kind of explanation. When he asked questions about the cause of events, he assumed that the answer, might be found in 'nature' or within matter itself. He deliberately ignored the unpredictable wills of the anthropomorphic Greek deities.

(b) The questions Thales asked were i) from what did the universe originate? ii) What was the nature of the universe? iii) To what does it go back? In this discussion of the philosophy of Thales, W.T. States¹ comments – "The fundamental thought of that period was that under the multiplicity of forms in the world, there must be single ultimate principle. The problem of philosophy was, 'what is the nature of the first principle from which all things have issued? Hegel states that, according to Aristotle, most of the earlier philosophers². Have placed the principles of everything in (1) something in the form of matter. (2) That from which everything existent comes. (3) Out of which it takes its origin as its first source. (4) To which it finally sinks. (5) ever remains the same. (6) But only changes in its particular qualities. (7) Called the element.

(c) It is interesting to note that even the very first philosopher sought to see the universe as a single coordinated system of things. Like many other sciences philosophy indulged to generalizations. But the difference was that philosophy generalized to the utmost degree. This means that it sought to view the entire universe in the light of the fewest possible principles, and if possible, of a single ultimate principle. This we attribute to the natural desire in man kind to see unity in everything. (This was the case in ancient India too.) So the father of philosophy, Thales believed that all things originated from a single ultimate substance. And that substance had to be eternal, dynamic, potent and powerful. Thales said that all things come from water and return to water³. Thus, the first answer to the question what reality is, places the nature of that reality in a sensuous object. It is important to note that Thales did not choose water but accepted it's the principle material. Eg. The mythical belief that 'Okeanos' was father of all.⁴ But what Thales accepted was physical, and so it was different from the base of mythical and religious belief. Further, Thales used the present tense when speaking about the process. He did not say that all things 'come' and 'will' go' back to water. What he spoke was a contemporary simultaneous process – a dynamic world in which all things were changing all the time. And through this theory he debunked the myth of creation, that the world had been created by a supernatural force or some deity. The world process was not stagnant as in the myths. The beginning and destruction of the world were concurrent processes.

7. Thales' statement 'Earth floats on water like a log'⁵ seems to be a deliberate correction of the mythological world picture in which the Greeks believed that the earth extended down to the underworld. The earth did not have its roots in Hades. Thales said 'All things are full of Gods'⁶ He illustrated this with the example of a magnet which attracts iron and amber which attracts silk⁷. Many ancient authors have commented on these thoughts of Thales. For example Aristotle says – Thales seems to have supposed that the soul was something kinetic, when he said that the Magnesian stone possesses a soul because it moves iron,⁸ this was very probably a realization of the ancient belief that rivers, trees etc are somehow animated or inhabited by gods. In another place Aristotle states that some said that it (the soul) is intermingled in the universe. It was perhaps for this reason that, Thales also thought that all things are full of gods⁹. Diogenes Laertius commenting on the above expresses the opinion that, Aristotle and Hippias say that Thales gave a share of soul even to inanimate objects, using Magnesian stone and amber as indication¹⁰.

According to a paraphrase in Aetius – Thales said that the mind of the world is God and that the sum of things is besouled and full of daemons' right through the elemental moisture there penetrates a divine power that moves it.¹¹

8. It is important to note that all these comments are interpretations of the respective authors. The question arises whether all inanimate things really possessed soul to some degree. Kirk and Raven¹² opine that it is more probable that Thales meant that all the things in sum were interpenetrated by some kind of life principle. Thales was giving an explicit and individual statement of a broad presupposition common to all physicists, that the world was some how alive, that it underwent spontaneous change. Thales belief was that the world was interpenetrated by life, that many of it's parts which appear inanimate are in fact animate.
9. There is a common, primitive tendency to regard rivers, trees etc as somehow animated or inhabited by spirits because they seem to possess the ability to move freely and change ; thus they differ from stones. But Thales' thoughts are completely different from these. His philosophy is that everything takes part in the world process and that everything is capable of changing, including stones and other objects which seem to be dead to the naked eye. But Thales had made the mistake of using the magnet stone and amber as examples instead of an ordinary stone. He had thereby confused the issue. Though his thought had been clear, his example and expression had lead to many controversies. The use of 'gods' 'soul' and 'demons' in this theory also tends to confuse modern man. But we must understand that the vocabulary of that early stage was not advanced enough to express Thales' remarkable insight. He was compelled to express across non mythical thoughts using the available mythological language.
10. In the 6th Century B.C. philosophy was still in its infancy. It had to relate itself to its senior and more firmly established rival, poetry. The abstract thinker was sometimes compelled to express his thoughts

in a mythical form. This was partly because it was natural for him to do so, but much more because it brought home the nature and the importance of his work to a people trained in poetry¹³. According to Kirk and Raven¹⁴ even this had been intentional. They say gods are immortal, enjoy perpetual life power, are unlimited and extend over the animate and inanimate world. Thus the world as a whole manifests a power of change and motion which is certainly not even predominantly human and must, both because of its permanence and because of its extent and variation be regarded as divine.

11. The achievement of Thales has been represented by historians from two entirely different perspectives, on the one hand, as a marvelous anticipation of modern scientific thinking and on the other hand as nothing but a transparent rationalization of myth. In fact Thales' philosophy and the fascination it creates in us lie precisely in this – That his ideas form a bridge between the worlds of myth and reason. Philosophy was born because Thales has sought the desired unity in a natural substance and removed the gods from the cosmological scene.

12. (a) **Anaximander** was a younger contemporary of Thales, with his interest triggered off by the questions propounded by Thales, he too reflected on the nature and the origin of the Universe. Though he agreed that the originative substance was one, he postulated a different first principle. The first principle had been referred to by many thinkers in Ancient Greece. Simplicius observes that “Anaximander said that the principle and element of existing things was the **Apeiron**. He says that it is neither water nor any other of the so called elements, but some other **Apeiron** from which came into being all the heavens and the worlds in them¹⁵. Plutarch records the nature of this **Apeiron**. He says ‘Anaximander said that the Apeiron contained the whole cause of the coming to be and destruction of the world¹⁶.

(b) We may now examine the above teachings of Anaximander in brief. *Peras* was boundary in Greek. The negative of *Peras* was *Apeiron*. It meant ‘with no boundary or limit’, ‘limitless¹⁷. The originative substance posited by Anaximander was limitless in quality, quantity and time. It was boundless, indefinite and undifferentiated. Thus, he had removed from it the individuality of elements, such as air or water. As it was limitless in quality, it could not have been one and not the other. It resembles no matter in the developed world. He implied that it could not be positively identified. Thus, for the first time in Greek philosophy, Anaximander breaks away from the natural. *Apeiron* is the immanent substance enveloping the whole universe, it enfolds all things. Though it is everywhere, it is nonsensuous. As it was limitless in quality, it had unlimited potentiality, which meant that all qualities arose from it. In the world of sensors, it is clothed with qualities, though if one took away the qualities, from an object he would be left with the *Apeiron*.

Apeiron had the capacity to move within itself. And Anaximander said that it was divine. He meant that it had life and proves it. It was immortal, potent and the basic substance in the universe.

13. The philosophy of Anaximander seems to be a step taken from the concrete to the abstract. The substance has no material reference and it was reached through sheer logic. Anaximander seems to be groping from the world of experience. He had been working for an unchanging behind phenomena. However, at this stage, he was unable to comprehend completely a non-material substance. This accounts for the fact that he talked about quantity when describing the Apeiron. It does not have a beginning or an end, but it is the beginning of other things. Aristotle's remarks on the Apeiron are interesting. He observes, "of the infinite there is no beginning ... but this seems to be the beginning of the other things, and to surround all things and stir all, as all those say who do not postulate other causes, such as mind or love, above and beyond the infinite. And this is the divine; for it is immortal and indestructible... it steers all things. The original world forming motion was a vortex like motion. It was a natural kind – without a supernatural mover. From the Apeiron which Anaximander called the 'divine', all things come into being, and to it all things returned"¹⁸.
14. In his cosmogony, Anaximander holds that in the Apeiron, due to this vortex, two pairs of opposites, namely hot-cold, and wet-dry, arose. These were the basics of the elements-earth, air, fire and water. The reason that he did not consider one of these as his origination substance was that he regarded all these elements as being equal. The predominance of one would be in justice on the other. therefore even a temporary injustice had to be put right by paying a penalty and receiving retribution.

According to the assessment of time, Day-night, Summer-winter, were good examples for this 'justice'. M.L. West¹⁹ comments that, though Simplicius calls the terms such as 'injustice' 'retribution' and 'Ordinance' employed by Anaximander to describe the cosmic changes 'rather poetic', he feels that they are more theological. For there is a hint of attributing a moral aspect to the world governing activity in the universe²⁰.

15. Anaximander theorises that the earth was drum shaped and the upper and the lower faces were concave. Antipodes inhabited the side opposite to that which we inhabit. There was no Hades beneath the world as in mythology. The earth stayed in one place because it was equidistant from all sides. It was in the middle of the 'fiery rings'. it had no reason to fall to one side rather than the other. There was no supernatural deity holding it in place. There were other worlds in the universe; But Anaximander is careful not to mention an Olympus where divine beings could reside. Heavenly bodies were a result of 'peep holes; in the air encompassing the 'fiery rings' around the world. Eclipses occurring when the holes were blocked.

Winds occurred when the fiery vapors of the air were separated and set in motion; Rain resulted from the exhalation that issue upward from things underneath the sun. Lighting, thunder, thunderbolts and typhoons were all results of the wind. Anaximander seems to be deliberately pinpointing these facts so as to eliminate the supernatural mythological gods from the cosmic scene. For example he proposes a natural cause for the thunderbolt, which was considered as the symbol and weapon of Zeus. Humans

were not created by the gods. Living creatures arose from the moist element as it was evaporated by the sun. The first humans arose inside fish and having been reared like sharks, they became capable of protecting themselves. They were finally cast ashore and took to land; Burnet²¹ says that it is clear that he had an idea of adaptation to the environment and the survival of the fittest. We may raise the question whether Anaximander ever thought that this Apeiron was intelligent enough to choose the best way. He seems to have thought of the Apeiron as a systematic order. It was a source of morality and universal justice. But one cannot say that Anaximander considered Apeiron to be intelligent.

It is very important to note that there is no hint or suggestion of a 'Being' or a world governing intellect. What Anaximander tried to explain was the working of the universe. And the characteristics mentioned above were attributed to it. The reason he called the original substance 'the divine' was because some of its qualities were similar to the concepts of the conventional divinity superior to all things.

16. Anaximenes was a pupil and an associate of Anaximander. The influence is clearly visible, for in his philosophy he is undoubtedly partly using, partly combating or amending the theories presented by his predecessor. Anaximenes postulated Air as the original substance of the universe. Aristotle observes that, 'Anaximenes, makes air, rather than water the material principle above the other bodies'²². Theophrastus on the other hand compares Anaximenes's first principle with that of his predecessor Anaximander. 'Anaximenes, a companion of Anaximander also says that the underlying nature is one and infinite, but it is not undefined as Anaximander said. It is definite, and Anaximenes identifies it as Air'²³.
17. This Air was not the air what we find round us – the air we breathe. It is the substance from which the four elements, namely earth, air, fire and water come from. Air was the air that did not meet our sensors. It is the Air which became air when a fan is put on and set in motion. Although it seems like that Anaximenes had gone back to an element in nature, on closer examination it is evident that it is closer to the Apeiron of Anaximander than to the air that is considered as one of the elements. Being the eternal substance, and the source of change, Anaximander too described his first principle as theos or the divine. Cicero therefore comments 'Anaximenes determined that Air is a god. He had also made a considerable contribution by comparing the cosmic Air with the breath of the soul'²⁴.
18. Aetius provides us with another explanation of the characteristic of this first substance. 'As our soul being air holds us together and controls us, so does wind or breath and air enclose the whole world'²⁵. This macrocosm has influenced the thoughts of subsequent thinkers a great deal. And it is for the first time that Anaximenes takes the bold step of proclaiming a similarity between a part of a human and the world activating cosmic substance. For, if the air was divine, could not the soul in us, be similar to it? Could the soul be divine as well? Anaximenes too seems to consciously deny the supernatural in cosmogony by giving a natural explanation to clouds, rain, snow, the heavenly bodies and the rainbow.

According to him, the earth was a flat disk riding on air. It is clear that Anaximenes was as anxious as his colleagues in the Milesian school of thought to exclude the 'divinity' from his explanations. Their theories at least in themselves, says Guthrie²⁶, 'were purely rationalistic. To them it was the result of reasoned argument and 'not of faith.'

19. Although the Greek thinkers rejected the supernatural, they made ample use of the word *theos*, but had their own notions of what they meant by it. The *theos* which they affirm seems no more than an abstraction of rudimentary physics, a useful scientific hypothesis. And their motive is simple scientific curiosity. The evidence is scarce. It does not suggest that they had any use for the religious consciousness or any interest in satisfying it. Unpromising as their ideas of divinity were, these notions seem to have been clutched at by people who in an age of doubt, were seeking a faith to live by and a god to pray to when science makes itself felt, and demands of reasoning faith gives rise to beliefs which have the sanction of intellect. As a result, some were led to give up all their beliefs in a higher power" others modified their faith in conformity with the discoveries of science. This is caricatured by Aristophanes in his play **The clouds**.

20. Ionian philosophy seems to have influenced the religious aspirations of men in later Greece. Aristophanes, the comic poet of the 5th century B.C. was a parodist. In his powerful play **The Clouds** he chose Socrates to represent all the rationalist tendencies that were influencing society at that period. Most scholars in accordance with Socrates disclaimer in **The Apology** of Plato agree that Socrates did not teach the Ionian philosophy. But Aristophanes depicts Socrates as doing so. It is not an imaginary tendency that is the subject of his caricature. Aristophanes took the rationalist theories that had influenced society and attributed them to Socrates, who was the ideal figure that conforms to the 'ideal' of a philosopher. Anaximander's 'Vortex' and Anaximenes 'Air' being popular among his contemporaries, he would have directed his sarcasm at them. In the opening prayer which Socrates utters in the *The Clouds*²⁷, where he plays the part of a leader of a religious thiasos, Aristophanes the comic poet makes Socrates say,

Keep silence all, and hear my prayer

O lord, O king O boundless Air,

On whom the earth supported floats.

Socrates gives reasons for claiming that there is no Zeus²⁸.

Strepsiades : You men you don't believe in Zeus?

Socrates : There is no Zeus.

Strepsiades : Who sends rain then?

Socrates : Have you ever seen it raining when the Sky was blue?

Surely Zeus, if it was him,

Would be able to send rain even

When clouds were out of town.

It shows that rationality prevented them from ignoring cause and effect.

Strepsiades : From whom comes the thunder through the gloom.....
That Zeus against perjurers dashers?

Socrates : And how.....

If the perjured they strike, and not all men alike, have they never Cleonymus hit?
(Names others)...they escape. But he smites his own shrine with arrows divine?

Strepsiades : Who is it that thunder?

Socrates : 'The clouds do that too – when they are necessarily set in motion and
collide with one another.

Strepsiades : 'Does not Zeus this necessity send?'

Socrates : 'No Zeus have we there, but vortex of Air.'

Strepsiades : 'What ! Vortex?
I knew not before, that Zeus was no more,
But Vortex was placed on his throne !

21. This gives evidence to the fact that the ability to think, to question and not to accept without understanding had led the people to question and suspect religion itself. They have realized that practice does not conform too much. And the gods if they are to be worshipped, had to be moral in nature. They refused to worship or attribute power to gods who struck his own shrine while ignoring the wicked .

Rationalization under the influence of philosophy led people to reject conventional religion.²⁹
Therefore Aristophanes makes his character Strepsiades say.

If I happened to meet other Gods in the street,
I'd show the cold shoulder , I vow,
No libation I'll pour : not one victim more on their
Altar I'll sacrifice now.

22. On the kinship of Air and the soul in human body Aristophanes again refers to the Ionian philosophy³⁰ .

Strepsiades : O then from a basket you condemn the Gods.
And not from the earth, at any rate??

Socrates : Most true
 I could not have searched out celestial matters without suspending
 judgment, and infusing my subtle spirit with the kindred air.

If from the ground I were to seek these things,

I could not find, so surely does the earth,

Draw to herself the evidence of our thought.’

Could Anaximenes have thought of a force drawing the soul upwards away from the physical world, once the mind begins to contemplate the ‘Divine’? The necessity to break away from the force drawing humans to the earth is implied. To understand the working of the universe, you have to turn your attention and concentration away from worldly things, natural affairs and the universal is shown by the above citation.

23. However, Aristophanes is careful to show how, the uneducated man is ‘lost and confused’ by the various philosophies.- Alarmed and confused by the fact that their reason along with their newly acquired ‘wisdom’ refute the conventional religious beliefs. This is said to culminate in a battle of the heart and the mind. Evidence for this could also be obtained from Aristophanes play the **The Clouds**.

Pheidippides : There is no Zeus.
 Young Vortex reigns, and he has turned out Zeus.

Strepsiades : No Vortex reigns; that was my foolish thought,
 How mad I must have been
 To cast away the Gods;³¹

Religious instinct in man is not easily subdued. If one belief is set aside, another definitely takes its place. For religion is a basic necessity of man.

The tragic poet Euripides in the **The Frogs** is made to pray to ‘Aither on whom I pasture³². The same attempt to convert philosophical speculation into religious faith is behind the prayer of Hecuba in Euripides play **Trades**.

‘O thou who at once art prop and stay of the earth and broodest over it, whoso ever thou art, hard to divine or know – Zeus, be thou compelling force of nature of the mind of man to thee I pray. For treading their noiseless way thou leadest aright all the things of mortals³³.

To this utterance Menelaus not unnaturally replies;

What is this? Strange prayers dost thou fashion to the gods.

That which props the earth below is over it as well and at the same time directing force in nature is identical with reason in man. Its path is noiseless; it is 'Air' it is to this 'Air' that Euripides assigned the name and dignity of Zeus. Guthrie quotes Philemon, a poet of the New comedy, contemporary with Menander.

I am he from whom none can hide, in any act which he may do, or be about to do, or have which he may do, or be about to do, or have done in the past, be he god or man. Air is my name, but one might call me Zeus. I as a god should be, am everywhere.....in every home, in every one of you, there is no place where is not Air. And he who, is present everywhere, because he is everywhere, of necessity knows everything³⁴.

Not only does the comic poet find no religious disadvantage in the adapting of scientific theory. He even claims to prove that the gods which it provides possesses more of the attributes proper to divinity than the old Homeric pantheon.

24. Whatever the details it is evident that the Ionian thinkers did not aim at introducing a new 'god' or a new religion. As Hussey³⁵ says, what they did was that they poised a single boundless all powerful and immortal substance encompassing and controlling the universe. This substance they called the 'divine'. The system they envisaged had necessarily to be a universe of order with law like regularity and an interesting satisfying construction, is that, the problems that most concerned the Ionians can be reduced to the question. 'What are the relations between the supreme power in the universe, 'the Divine' and the observable world order, inclusive of human, the inhabitants of this world?

¹ W.T. Stace, **Lectures on Greek Philosophy**, Colombo, 1919, p.21.

² G.W.F. Hegel, **Lectures on the history of philosophy**, London, 1955, p. 171, Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A 3, 9836.

³ Aristotle, **Metaphysics** 983, 20-27

⁴ Homer, **Iliad**, 14, 200.

Plato, **Cratyls**, 402 B.

⁵ Aristotle, **Metaphysics**, 983, 20-27

⁶ Aristotle, **de Anima**, 411, 8

⁷ Aristotle, **de Anima**, 411, 8

⁸ **Ibid**, 405, 19

⁹ **Ibid**, A5, 411, a7

¹⁰ Diogenes Laertius, 1, 24

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- 11 Aetius, 1,7,11
- 12 G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, **The Pre-Socratic Philosophers**, London, 1975, p 74.
- 13 C.M. Bowra, **The Greek Experience**, London, 1957.
- 14 G. S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, **The Pre-Socratic Philosophers**, London,p. 93 ff
- 15 Simplicius phys, 24, 13, DK 12A9
- 16 Plutarch Strom, z, DK 12a 10.
- 17 E. Hussey, **The Pre-Socratics**, London, 1974, p, 17.
- 18 Aristotle, **Physica**, 4, 20367.
- 19 M.L. West, **Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient**, Oxford, 1971, p. 82.
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- 21 J. Burnt, **Greek Philosophy**, London, 1960, p.24.
- 22 Aristotle, **Metphysics**, A3, 9845
- 23 Simplicius **Phys**; 24, 26
- 24 Cicero N.D. 1,10,26
- 25 Aetius, 1,3,4
- 26 W.K.C. Guthrie, **The Greeks and their Gods**, London, 1954, p.133
- 27 Aristophanes, **The Clouds** , line 264
- 28 **Ibid**, line 361-402
- 29 **Ibid**, line 402
- 30 **Ibid**, line 218
- 31 **Ibid**, line 1458
- 32 Aristophanes, **The Frogs**, line 892.
- 33 Euripides, **Trades**, 884
- 34 W.K.C. Guthrie, **The Greeks and their Gods**..., p. 142.
- 35 Hussey, **The Pre – Socratics**..., p. 17