

The Pre-socratics

E.Hussey

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'Why is there something rather than nothing'. This is the introductory question of 'An introduction to metaphysics' by Heidegger, and a question no doubt formulated by most people as inquisitive children throughout the ages and thus the center of attention of any burgeoning philosophical movement, in spite of the sheer impossibility of a conceivable response. Or maybe rather because of it.

The study of the Classics is a finite study. Most of what was ever produced has vanished with the ruthless passage of time, and what remains are but tantalizing fragments, not unlike those unearthed by paleontologists, and thus subject to the most elaborate speculations. The 'Nachlass' of the so called pre-socratic philosophers is representative of such flotsome that has survived the deluge of obliteration and is in fact collected (supposedly in toto) in the early 20th century volume *Die Fragmente die Vorsokratiker* by Diels later to be edited by Kranz, in which the interested reader thus can sample all extant fragments of their writings along with any known references to their works and biographies supplied by their contemporaries or immediate successors. So standard has that text become that every reference to a presocratic saying is mediated by a recall of the books system of enumeration and classification¹.

A serious study of the presocratic philosophers requires certain indispensable tools, of which first and foremost is an excellent command of Classical Greek. But also a keen historical sense to ward off the ever present danger of anachronism inherent in any historical inquiry should not be omitted. But, however well-equipped technically, without an overriding interest in philosophy itself, the whole enterprise would be meaningless. Only with a sympathetic ear and understanding of what the questions were, can a relevant interpretation be given to what is usually most obscurely presented.

Edward Hussey is a Classical scholar by temperament and training. Although a philosopher, he is foremost a historian of philosophy, and less concerned about the questions per se than their faithful renderings and placing into a historical context and philosophical tradition. This attitudes accounts for the somewhat pedantic manner in which he presents and discusses the various philosophies with a strong textual emphasis. Noteworthy though is the great role Aristotle has played in preserving the historical record by his commentaries, although the author speaks disparagingly about his deficiencies as a historian of ideas, faulting him with his anachronism. Comments that have the slightly comical effect of making Aristotle into an almost contemporary, seemingly as much removed from the early Greek philosophers as we are.

Greek Philosophy did not emerge in a vacuum although any attempt to delineate its various roots can never be anything but speculation. As noted the earliest attempts were focused on something versus nothing. The Milesians, with the key figure of Thales, talked

¹ Not unlike the practice of referring to the K-numbers of the works of Mozart

about the 'Unbounded', an abstract unfathomable entity they tended to equate with God. The notion of the 'Unbounded' suggested the possibility of contemplating a multitude of independent universes. The abstract sense of a deity to be entertained also by subsequent philosophers contrasts strikingly with the naive mythology with which we have come to identify Greek theological thought. The fancy of multiple universes constitute an uncanny parallel to modern cosmological speculation. Clearly the 'Unbounded' is a contemplation of the infinite, a preoccupation which will involve the early philosophers.

Heraclitus is the name along with that of Parmenides which are publicly best known among the pre-socratics. Although the well-known saying to the effect that you can never step into the same river twice attributed to him, turns out to be a later rewording by a successor, the original being far less quotable. Heraclitus is often contrasted against Parmenides as emphasizing change as opposed to stability, although a closer study blurs the easy distinction. Contrary to the case of the latter Parmenides not much survives of Heraclitus making any penetrating study moot, yet the author points out some striking analogies with Wittgenstein, implicitly implying that the latter may have been influenced by the idiosyncratic style of the Greek, at least in his earlier philosophical works. He also takes up the paradox involved in the idea of a God having a plan for the universe, brought up by Heraclitus, and the notion of a perfect map of the universe this implies along with the obvious self-referentiality engendering an infinite regression well-known to everyone and sundry. Supposedly this idea was exploited by the latter Wittgenstein in order to explore the inherent limits of representational language.

With Parmenides there is however enough, although crudely presented in awkward hexameters, to engage in a posthumous dialogue. Parmenides introduced the first explicit split between the world as conceived by reasoning and as perceived by the senses. The latter is multifarious and varied, while the former states that all is one, as nothing can clearly come out nothing, as well as something can never turn into nothing. Thus differences are illusory, all is one, an insight obviously contrary to common sense. The idea of the soul being superior to the body and with concomitant ideas of transmigration were introduced by the Pythagorean school, with a choice of obvious antecedents², and would fit well with Parmenides attitude that the insights of reason are superior to those of mere sensations. In fact he proudly extols his philosophy as divine insight not accessible to common man. Clearly related to this split is the emerging axiomatization of geometry, in which insights should be derived from impeccable reasoning as opposed to the fallacious testimonies of the fallible senses. Yet there is an inherent inconsistency in this exalted mood, because after all abstract thought needs to be anchored, an awareness that can be naturally thought of as the need of verification in any scientific endeavour, and in the last analysis, the despised senses are inevitably brought in as the ultimate judge, something that was already sarcastically pointed out by contemporary commentators. Closely related to the ideas of Parmenides, although to my knowledge not discussed by him, are the feelings that one cause can not have multiple effects (which is the key idea of determinism) and also, although less difficult psychologically to dissent from, that one effect can not have two different causes (history does not forget, and thus the past is injected into the future). A supreme modern example

² Hussey refers to schamanic practices among Central Asian Nomads, while Hindu thought is an even more obvious parallel

of an Parmenedisian entity is the time-space continuum of Einsteins theory of general relativity. In summary, the world is one, the apparent differences to the sensens are merely caused by limited viewpoints and specific perspectives.

Zenon, known for his paradoxes of the arrow continually arrested in flight, or the stultification of the fleet-footed in pursuit of the slow-moving, was a student and explicatory of Parmenedis. The essence of his paradoxes were to exhibit the inevitability of infinity, eagerly seized by mathematicians to whom the ostensible paradoxes have long since been resolved, and who would observe the continued preoccupation by philosophers as puzzling and primitive.

Bertrand Russell has famously announced that philosophy progresses by amputation. In the beginning there is just general philosophy, but as inquiries become more intricate and detailed, sections of it develope into scientific disciplines and separate. While philosophy discussed up to now has been the concern of the fifth and sixth century the emergence of a scientific tradition started in the fourth, the case of geometry being one of the earliest and most successful³. This is illustrated by more elabourate theories of nature, characterized by an ambition to penetrate beyond the surface presented by sense-data. The theory of the four elements of earth, water, air and fire, is of course quite well-known, perhaps less so the even more radical attempt to generate those by the two pairs of opposites, namely those of dry versus wet and hot versus cold⁴. A further elaboration of the theory was made by Empedocles involving the forces of Strife and Love into his rather elabourate cosmology, a sustaining principle being balance and shifts thereof. The most well-known emergent scientific theory, usually attributed to Democritus but according to the author really introduced by the more original Leucippus, is that of the Atomic theory. Namely that matter is made up by discrete indivisible units yet of definite size and form. In many ways this discretization of the universe is in contradistinction to the continous one conceived by Zeno. The similiarities to modern physical theory are too obvious to be pointed out⁵. Suffices it to remark that with the atomistic theory a truly materialistic conception was presented doing away with such idealistic notions as soul and mind, reducing the apparent differences between things to accidental combinations. A further explication of the intricacies of the theory reveal many further similarities with modern thought, like evolutions of combinations. To the mathematically inclined, the speculations about every piece of matter containing parts of all other matters, leads to the impossibility of making neat subdivisions and lead to associations of sets being made up by disjoint yet dense subsets.

The sophist tradition prevalent among philosophers in the 4th century is nowadays due to the contempt of Plato and his followers held in low regard. The word 'sophist' having lost its original positive connotation and become a term of abuse. Yet it can be seen as a tribute to the power of reasoning although animated through rhetorics, an art of speech held in high, if ironically tinted, regard throughout not only antiquity but also mediveal times. It has been argued that the sophists presented an democratic alternative

³ Historians point out to the obvious debt of Greek mathematics to Babylonian; but nevertheless there was a profound difference in attitude as indicated above

⁴ The reader should have no difficulty matching up the indicated Klein-Viergruppe action with the four elements

⁵ A well-known joke asserts that the Greek thought the Atom to be indivisible, but we know better

to the authoritarian and aristocratic approach of Plato, thereby implying the main source of his hostility. On such matters the author remains silent.

February 28, 2005 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se