

The PreSocratics

Western Philosophy begins in Greece around the 6th c. BCE. While there are “wisdom traditions” preceding this movement in Greece and elsewhere in the world, a quite different trend begins with a group of thinkers called “The PreSocratics” (if only because they precede Socrates).

Below is a series of quotes taken from the main PreSocratic philosophers along with brief descriptions of each philosopher. You will see that the quotes are fragmentary and often somewhat cryptic. No lengthy works remain from any of these philosophers. Much of what we know comes from quotes contained in works by others. So, what remains really is fragmentary and cryptic. See what you can make out of the claims made by each. What concerns would motivate someone to say such things?

The Milesians:

Miletus is a Greek colony in Ionia. That is, apparently, where things get started. The first three philosophers are from this city and so are grouped together as the Milesians.

Thales of Miletus (625-547 BCE) is generally taken to be the first philosopher in the Western tradition. This is because he was an advocate of what might be called a “naturalistic” outlook. He attempts to explain natural phenomena by appealing to basic forces and basic elements rather than appealing to the gods. It is clear that he believed in the gods; he just does not include them in his explanations for the way things are. For the early Greek philosophers, a big part of explaining the universe was identifying what it was made of. Many often tried to reduce the basic substance of the universe to one element. For Thales, it is water. **Anaximander of Miletus** (610-645 BCE) suggests a different basic substance and **Anaximenes of Miletus** (d.528 BCE), still another.

Thales:

Thales says the principle is water (for which reason he declared that the earth rests on water), getting the notion perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it..., and from the fact that the seeds of all things have a moist nature, and that water is the origin of the nature of moist things.

Anaximander:

Anaximander said that the principle and element of existing things was the *apeiron* [indefinite, or infinite] nature, from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them. And the source of coming-to-be from existing things is that into which destruction too happens, "according to necessity; for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of Time."

But if in fact there is some natural motion, neither motion nor rest would be by force only; if, then, it is by force that the earth now remains in its place, it, too, came together at the center because of the vortex. For this is the cause that everyone states, on the basis of what happens in water and in air; for in these the larger and heavier things are always carried to the center of the vortex. This is why all who generate the heavens say that the earth came together at the center.

Anaximenes:

Underlying nature is... air. It differentiates in its substantial forms by rarity and density. Becoming more rarified, it becomes fire; being condensed, it becomes wind, then cloud, and when condensed yet further, water, then earth, then stones, and the rest come from these.

The members of the next group do not come from any one colony but are related in their concerns with epistemological issues. What is knowledge? How do we gain knowledge? What can be known? These include **Xenophanes of Colophon** (570-480 BCE), **Heraclitus of Ephesus** (535-470 BCE), and **Pythagoras of Croton** (571-497 BCE).

Xenophanes:

Homer and Hesiod ascribed to the gods whatever is infamy and reproach among men: theft and adultery and deceiving each other. But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have clothes and speech and bodies like their own.

The Ethiopians say that their gods are snub-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have light blue eyes and red hair.

But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would draw the forms of gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.

No man knows or will ever know about the gods and the other things of which I speak. For even if one happened to speak the whole truth, he himself would not know it. All things are wrought with appearance.

Heraclitus:

Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one.

The path up and down is one and the same.

The sun is new each day.

In the same river we both step and do not step, we are and are not.

Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow.

They scatter and gather, come together and flow away, approach and depart.

Sea is the most pure and polluted water: for fishes it is drinkable and salutary, but for men undrinkable and deleterious.

It is necessary to know that war is common and right is strife, and that all things happen by strife and necessity.

Fire lives the death of earth, and air the death of fire; water lives the death of air, earth that of water.

If one does not expect the unexpected one will not find it, for it is not reached by search or trial.

The lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks out nor conceals, but gives a sign.

It is not good for men to obtain all they want.

Character is man's fate.

Pythagoras:

[The Pythagoreans] regarded the principles of mathematical objects as the principles of all things.

The elements of numbers are the elements of all things and the whole of heaven is a harmony and a number.

The square of the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equal to the sum of the squares on the sides enclosing the right angle. (Pythagoras is said to have sacrificed an ox in honor of his discovery).

The soul is immortal and it changes into other kinds of living things. What happens recurs at certain intervals and nothing is absolutely new. All things that come to have souls should be recognized as beings of the same kind.

Once they say that he was passing by when a puppy was being whipped, and he took pity and said "Stop, do not beat it; for it is the soul of a friend that I recognized when I heard it giving tongue."

Life, he said, is like a festival; just as some come to the festival to compete, some to ply their trade, but the best people come as spectators, so in life the slavish men go hunting for fame or gain, the philosophers for the truth.

The Eleatics are so called because they are from Elea, a Greek colony in Italy. These include **Parmenides of Elea** (515-450 BCE), and **Zeno of Elea** (490-430 BCE). Both focus on the idea of "Being." When philosophers speak of "Being" they are generally talking about what "is" in some foundational sense. Being is often contrasted with appearance. There is what "is" and what "appears to be." The philosopher is taken to be able to distinguish what is from what appears to be. Being, then, is reality. What appears to be is illusion. Zeno goes so far as to reject motion as mere appearance.

Parmenides:

To think is the same as the thought that it is; for you will not find thinking without Being to which it refers. For nothing else either is or shall be except Being, since fate has tied it down to be a whole and motionless; therefore all things that mortals have established, believing in their truth, are just a name: becoming and perishing, being and not-being, and change of position.

What Is is ungenerated and imperishable, whole, uniform, unmoving, and without end. And judgment concerning these things is in this: It is, or it is not; and it has been judged, as is necessary.

Zeno:

The second of Zeno's arguments against motion... "The Achilles," which purports to show that the slowest will never be overtaken in its course by the swiftest, inasmuch as, reckoning from any given instant, the pursuer, before he can catch the pursued, must reach the point from which the pursued started at that instant, and so the slower will always be some distance in advance of the swifter.

The Pluralists and the Atomists returned to focusing on the nature of matter. The Pluralists believed that there was more than one type of substance. Matter is a combination of a plurality of basic materials. The Atomists believed that matter is made up of (mostly indescribable) tiny particles. **Empedocles of Acragas** (490-445 BCE) and **Anaxagoras of Clazomenae** (500-428 BCE) were pluralists. **Democritus of Abdera** (460-370 BCE) was an Atomist. Atom is from the Greek "a-tomein" meaning "uncuttable."

Empedocles:

At one time there grew to be one from many. And at another time they grow apart to be many, from one: Fire and water and earth and enormously high air, And accursed Strife apart from them, alike everywhere and Love among them, equal in length and width.

Many heads sprang up without necks, and arms were wandering, unattached, without shoulders, and eyes were roaming alone, needing foreheads.

Anaxagoras:

And since there are equal parts of Great and Small, so, too, similarly in everything there must be everything. It is not possible to exist apart, but all things contain a portion of everything.

For how could hair come from what is not hair and flesh from not flesh?

Other things have a portion of everything, but Mind is limitless and self-ruled, and is mixed with nothing, but is alone by itself. For it is the finest of all things and the purest, and has complete knowledge about everything and the greatest power.

Democritus:

Everything happens according to necessity; for the cause of the coming-into-being of all things is the whirl, which he calls necessity. As the atoms move, they collide and become entangled in such a way as to cling in close contact to one another. Due to the congruity between their shapes and sizes and positions and arrangements, they stay together, and this is how things that are compounds are generated.

Other movements closely related to philosophy include history and medicine.

Hippocrates of Cos (460-377) is responsible for the statement about practicing medicine that is today known as the "Hippocratic Oath." Here is the full original version:

I swear by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius, and Hygieia and Panacea and all the gods and goddesses as my witnesses, that, according to my ability and judgment, I will keep this Oath and this contract:

To hold him who taught me this art equally dear to me as my parents, to be a partner in life with him, and to fulfill his needs when required; to look upon his offspring as equals to my own siblings, and to teach them this art, if they shall wish to learn it, without fee or contract; and that by the set rules, lectures, and every other mode of instruction, I will impart a knowledge of the art to my own sons, and those of my teachers, and to students bound by this contract and having sworn this Oath to the law of medicine, but to no others.

I will use those dietary regimens which will benefit my patients according to my greatest ability and judgment, and I will do no harm or injustice to them.

I will not give a lethal drug to anyone if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan; and similarly I will not give a woman a pessary to cause an abortion.

In purity and according to divine law will I carry out my life and my art.

I will not use the knife, even upon those suffering from stones, but I will leave this to those who are trained in this craft.

Into whatever homes I go, I will enter them for the benefit of the sick, avoiding any voluntary act of impropriety or corruption, including the seduction of women or men, whether they are free men or slaves.

Whatever I see or hear in the lives of my patients, whether in connection with my professional practice or not, which ought not to be spoken of outside, I will keep secret, as considering all such things to be private.

So long as I maintain this Oath faithfully and without corruption, may it be granted to me to partake of life fully and the practice of my art, gaining the respect of all men for all time. However, should I transgress this Oath and violate it, may the opposite be my fate.