

From the Palace to the Agora: From *Mythos* to *Logos* How the *Polis* Gave Birth to Greek Philosophy

Roughly 2500 years ago on the shores of the Mediterranean, a fundamental shift took place in the way humans conceptualized the world. Partly the consequence of much earlier historical events which saw the eclipse of the great Mycenaean palace cultures by the Dorian tribes, and partly the dovetailing of economic, social and political developments, the change in thinking that emerged was to leave its stamp on virtually every construct by which humans live and think. In the space of a few hundred years, the hierarchical model of political and economic life centered on the king and palace, which mirrored the relations of the pantheon of gods in Greek myth, gave way to a new political and social order based on symmetry, equilibrium and equality. The privacy of the palace and secrecy of religious ritual, which gave power to a few elect, ceded to a new thought which insisted on disclosure and public discourse and which transformed noble and subject alike into citizens, into equals. As both catalyst and consequence of these changes the *polis* emerged and with it the social, political and mental structures which have formed the bedrock of Western civilization for two and a half millennia. As a result, nothing short of the order of the cosmos would undergo a dramatic transformation in the minds of men.

The birth of rational thought, of *Logos*, was not an isolated intellectual achievement; it was a dynamic and reciprocal process which involved economic, social, and political developments and which can be seen in evolutionary terms, from the simple, concrete and hierarchical to the increasingly complex, abstract and interdependent. In a brilliant synthesis of interrelated events and developments, Jean-Pierre Vernant, in *The Origins of Greek Thought*, connects the genesis of *Logos* to the “social and mental structures peculiar to the Greek city” (130) and shows how concepts such as *arche* [command] and *agon* [competition], and significant changes in the function of speech, contributed at once to the rise of the city state and to the emergence of moral thought and human wisdom.

With the “disappearance of the king” during the centuries after the Dorian invasion, the concept of power was redefined and it was the struggle towards balance and accommodation between the two social forces left behind - the village communities, or *demes*, and the aristocratic *gene* – out of which Vernant sees the earliest forms of wisdom, or *sophia*, arise in the early seventh century (40). With the movement of social affairs away from the privacy of the palace to the open spaces of the city which this new arrangement required, the spirit of *agon* [competition] which had animated the old aristocratic families now played itself out in the public space of the *agora* and took form in oratorical contests. Speech thus moved from ritual word or precise formula, as it had been under the palace structure, to the preeminent instrument of power in the emerging system of the *polis* (49). In its transformation from private to public function, from incantation or specialty of scribes to public debate and written laws, speech not only presupposed a public whose choice would determine the validity of the arguments posed, but also laid open to debate the critical social issues facing the population. It was not only matters of practical concern that were thus disclosed, however, but, as Vernant points out, “Knowledge, values, and mental techniques, in becoming elements of a common culture, were themselves brought to view and submitted to criticism and controversy” (50-51).

Knowledge thus disclosed, increasingly through writing, would take on a new consistency and objectivity; indeed, would become wisdom rather than religious secrets to whom only a select few were privy (54).

Out of such a milieu and promoted by the persistence of religious sects on the fringes of the city, which were themselves driving a democratization of religious privilege, the earliest sages emerged. In their desire to transmit a higher truth that would transform the individual from within, these early lovers of wisdom prefigured the earliest philosophers. Their teachings also provided refined interpretations of traditional concepts such as *arête* [excellence, virtue] and *sophrosyne* [self-mastery or control] which resonated with the increasing social pressures towards moderation and balance.

Parallel advances were playing themselves out in the political and spiritual universe of the *polis* where concepts such as *philia* [spirit of community] and *isonomia* [equality] gained primacy as the result not only of the increasingly public conduct of affairs but also the tendency of citizens to consider themselves *homoioi* [alike or equal]. Mirroring similar developments in the military which, moving away from the Homeric ideal of the noble mounted warrior in search of *aristeia*, set up as a model the disciplined hoplite who eschewed personal glory and submitted himself to the overarching goals of the phalanx, the city bred citizens who “conceived of themselves as interchangeable units within a system whose law was the balance of power and whose norm was equality” (61). By the beginning of the seventh century B.C., the profound psychological shift signaled by these social and political changes prepared the city for the upheavals that lay ahead and laid the ground for the unparalleled intellectual flowering just on the horizon.

Between the seventh and sixth centuries, a number of key events led to the elaboration of the concept of *dike* [justice] and the development of law from simply a system by which to decide among the competing claims of the aristocracy to an overarching principle and practice under which the city would cement its unity. The resumption of ties with the East and the resulting renewal of interest in wealth and opulence, inspired by the ideal of *habrosyne* [refinement], let loose a renewed spirit of *eris* [conflict] among the *gene* and resulted in a revival of class warfare marked by violence, despotism, and injustice (74). Singular figures emerged at this time as exemplars of those who would hold the city to a higher standard under which the discordant elements could be reconciled. Men such as the “purifying sage,” Epimenedes, and the lawgiver, Solon, are illustrative of those who recognized the need to “harness the new group sensibility arising from the threat of violence” and, in the case of Solon, reform the judicial and legislative institutions in such a way that the elements of judicial activity – evidence, testimony, and judgment – could arrive at an objective truth (76-81). It was the development of this notion that indeed there was an objective truth to be discovered that further laid the ground for the emergence of rational thought.

With the rise in sixth century Greece of abstract concepts such as equality, justice, law, and community, and the continuing evolution of virtues such as *arête* and *sophrosyne*, both of which increasingly lent themselves to defining standards of civic behavior and which emphasized, on the one hand self control and discipline and on the other moderation and proportion, a new class of people took shape – the *hoi mesoi* – literally, the middle class (82-84). The emergence of a distinct social group which served to provide equilibrium between the opposing factions coincided with the evolution of the role of the lawgiver, Solon, who stood at the center of the social order as mediator, arbiter

and reconciler, promulgating a law that was the expression of the middle (85, 93). This concept of the middle, which embodied the ideas of reciprocity and balance, equilibrium and equality, not only attained a political and social significance but came to define not only the sphere of human affairs but that of the cosmos as well. While the mythical pantheon of the gods still served an official function, the hierarchical model for political order which the ancient theogonies and cosmogonies provided had exhausted itself. Inevitably its usefulness as a model for the nature and structure of the universe would follow suit.

This is not to say that myth did not inform the development of philosophy. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, in the classic text, *The PreSocratic Philosophers*, point out the debt owed by the first philosophers to “the old cosmogonical approach, according to which the most important object was to name a single kind of material from which the whole differentiated world could have grown” (162). Thales, the first Greek philosopher, drew from this older tradition not only when he identified water as the basic stuff of the universe but when, in a throwback to Egyptian cosmology, he posited that the earth floats on water (Kirk and Raven 90). Thales’s great insights were not, as Forrest Baird and Walter Kaufmann, in *Ancient Philosophy*, suggest: that the fundamental explanation of the universe must be one in number; that this one reality must be a thing, and that this one thing must have in it the ability to move and change (8). The earlier cosmogonical explanation, in positing a single concrete material such as the cosmic egg as the originative stuff of the world, had covered the first two of these criteria and implied the third. What Thales did do was to seek systematic, naturalistic, and rational explanations for the origin and order of the universe and to completely separate his theory from the supernatural. In so doing, Thales was extending the process of desacralization of the old Olympian gods that had already begun with their integration “into the framework of the *polis* as representatives of a politicized civic religion” (Vegetti 268). If the *polis* had begun the secularizing process of transforming the gods into metaphor and symbol, philosophy would complete it.

In conceptualizing a concrete substance as the primary material, Thales did not achieve the leap to abstraction that would shortly follow but his thought influenced Anaximenes who took Thales’s insight one step further and, though still looking to a single element, air, as the basic world principle, explained the process by which the underlying one becomes the observable many (Baird and Kaufmann 12). Like Thales, Anaximenes attempted to identify the originative stuff of the universe but whereas Thales’s theory did not explain (as far as we know) how water could become the other components of the world, Anaximenes argued that air, as “the originative substance and basic form of matter,” could alter its appearance according to its condensation or rarefaction (Kirk and Raven 144). In identifying air as the principle material, Anaximenes owes a debt to both Thales and Thales’s younger contemporary, Anaximander whose thinking most clearly stands out as the product of the *polis* and who, in moving towards a more abstract interpretation of the nature of the cosmos, marks yet a clearer division between *Mythos* and *Logos*.

Anaximander, whom Vernant considers the best example of the magnitude of the intellectual revolution taking place (119), was the first to attribute to the basic stuff of the universe properties different from any in the observable world (Baird and Kaufmann 10). Although his idea of the *apeiron* [the unlimited, boundless infinite] still posits a “one” out

of which all has differentiated, and echoes the earlier theogonical concepts of Chaos, Nyx, and Tartaros, his conceptualization of the basic stuff of the universe as “the source of coming-to-be for existing things” and “that into which destruction too happens, according to necessity” (Simplicius qtd in Kirk and Raven 117) incorporated the more abstract concepts of justice, *dike* and *isonomia* which were being worked out in the social and political sphere of the *polis*. More significantly, a direct analogy can be drawn between the structural framework of the *polis* whose order was maintained by the rule of a *dike* which held *arche* precisely because it precluded the primacy of any one faction or element, and Anaximander’s conceptualization of the universe which placed a motionless earth at the center of a cosmos ruled by the law of equilibrium and continuous reciprocity. In the *polis* as in the cosmos, order was no longer hierarchical but lay in “the application of all its parts to a single order of *isonomia* consisting of equilibrium, reciprocity and symmetry” (Vernant 118).

Where Thales’s thought was still tied to the cosmogonical construct, Anaximander’s broke the bond. All hints of myth – of *arche* residing in one single agent or element, of allusions to near eastern cosmogonies- were replaced by a systematic thought built on contemporary developments in geometry and astronomy and fed by the social and political evolution of the *polis*. The first to fully apply a geometrical model to the conception of the universe, and the first to attempt to give a rational explanation for the origin of man as well (Kirk and Raven 142), Anaximander exemplifies the full flowering of rational thought among the pre-Socratics.

Once unleashed, this radical shift in thinking from *Mythos* to *Logos*, which made of nature a detached and impersonal object of investigation, fueled a century of unprecedented intellectual advances. Not only would ideas about the basic stuff of the universe be posited but explanations would be advanced for the form of all things, the processes by which they change, and the patterns by which they operate. Pythagoras, who found an explanation for the physical world in abstract mathematical formulas and ratios; and Heraclitus who, using such concrete metaphors as fire, war, and flowing water, forwarded the abstract idea of process and change as the underlying one truth or *Logos*, and proposed the unity of opposites as a fundamental pattern of the universe, would pave the way for arguments on the nature of time and being itself. Those in the camp of Parmenides who asserted a monism that saw being as one seamless and unchanging whole were challenged by pluralists such as Empedocles, whom Baird and Kaufmann see as the first great synthesizer and who explained change in terms of the mixture and separation of the elements (31). From Empedocles, who posited that changes in the world are only the reorganization of what already exists operating in a cyclical and eternal process, and who contributed the concept of forces or “efficient causes” as drivers of change, it was a natural progression to the proto-atomism of Anaxagoras who also added the concept of a single “efficient cause” or force, *nous* [Mind] (Baird and Kaufman 36). In the space of 150 years, in a reflection of the *polis* out of which it sprang, rational thought asserted itself. That it has flourished for two and a half millennia despite the onslaughts of superstition and stasis which still threaten it is testament to the lasting power of the political and social institutions as well as the mental structures bequeathed to us by the *polis*.

Works Cited

- Baird, Forrest E. and Walter Kaufmann. Ancient Philosophy. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2008. Vol. 1 of Philosophic Classics.
- Kirk, G. S. and J. E. Raven. The PreSocratic Philosophers: A Critical History With a Selection of Texts. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1966.
- Vegetti, Mario. "The Greeks and Their Gods." The Greeks. Ed. Jean-Pierre Vernant. Chicago: U of Chicago P., 1995. 254-284.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. The Origins of Greek Thought. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1982