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An Alphabet of Greek Philosophers: Thinkers from Anaximander to Zeno

Ori Z Soltes

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So much of how we think and what we think about is constructed on foundations shaped by the ancient Greeks. We have all heard of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, who formed an incomparable trinity of askers of questions—often without answers—and theories about humans, the world around us and how we might and should function in it, and about what might be beyond our world. But important thinkers thought and questioned and theorized before Socrates—such as Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes—and important ones followed Aristotle, such as Epicurus and Zeno. In a concise, fast-paced discussion, we will consider how all of these brilliant minds addressed the varied layers of reality, and how so much of what they thought about remains exciting and sometimes painful in its relevance to us, more than two millennia after they strolled around Athens and other cities in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Thales (fl ca 600-550 BCE) starts by asking what physical element, if there are four, (earth, water, air, and *aither*) must underlie the other three. He proposed that it is *water*.

While one of his successors, **Anaximenes** (fl ca 550-25 BCE), argued that the primary element must be *air*, another, **Anaximander** (fl ca 580-50 BCE), suggested that there must be something else, something metaphysical (above/beyond tangible nature, which underlies all four physical elements: a fifth element (in Latin, *quintus* = "five," and thus this would be a *quintessence*) that underlies everything. (The Greek word, *hypokeimonon*—which in Latin would be translated as *substratum*—literally means "that which underlies."

Other thinkers soon added to the array of issues that begin to take shape as Greek philosophy. They proposed in any case that one must use the mind and not rely on the senses to understand the world. Among these, **Pythagoras** (fl ca 535-500) introduced in particular the idea of the purity of *numbers*—abstractions only concretized when we attach them to objects (three loaves of bread vs five loaves is not the same as "threeness" or "fiveness." **Herakleitos** (fl ca 505-480) suggested how grasping ideas is impossible, since "everything flows": everything is in a constant state of *flux*, of *becoming*—nothing simply unchangingly *is*. **Parmenides** (ca 470-20) added a rich discourse on the difficulty of discerning the path of *truth* from that of *illusion/falsehood*. **Zeno of Elea** (flca 450-20) observed how rife with *paradox* reality is: who does an arrow reach its target, since if one dissects its flight in arithmetic terms it never should or can?

Like Thales and Anaximenes, **Leukippos** (510/480/470-420 BCE) and **Demokritos** (ca 460-370 BCE) also focused mainly on the physical nature of reality, asserting that everything is contrived of tiny entities—atoms (so small that they cannot be cut; *a*=un + *tomos* =cuttable)—and space.

Against this array of thinkers (and others), **Sokrates** (469-399) revolutionized Greek philosophy by introducing ethics into the equation: not how *things are*, but how *humans should be*. What is *truth*? What is *justice*? What is *holiness/piety*? What is *the Good and the Beautiful*? Hs also introduced the idea that it is more important to *ask* these questions than to imagine that one has found the *answer*—and that the most effective means of asking is in conversation with fellow askers, who are like to find flaws in one's reasoning that one might fail to notice on one's own. The human process of being in the world ideally consists for him of combining rational thought (*logos*), transrational thought (*mythos*) and action (*ergon*) precipitated by such thinking

Most of what we know of Sokrates' thought come through his disciple, **Plato** (428-348) who, about a decade after his teacher's execution by the Athenian authorities, founded a place where thinking and questioning could take place without fear of offending non-thinkers. The *Academy* was where he began to write down the dialogues that Sokrates had had—or Plato imagined that he had had—with others. One of the interesting questions for readers of Plato through the centuries is to consider where Sokratic thinking leaves off and Platonic thinking begins. Which of them actually articulated the renowned phrase that "the unexamined life is not worth living"? or the idea of the transcendent "Forms/Ideas"?

Plato's star pupil was **Aristotle** (388-22) who, interestingly, did not become head of the Academy after Plato's death—so he founded his own school of inquiry on the Hill of the Wolf (in Greek: *Lykos*): hence, the *Lykeion* (aka: Lyceum). What we have from Aristotle are straight out lectures—or perhaps the carefully written out notes on his lectures by students. Aristotle both organized "philosophy"—the love of wisdom—into a range of different disciplines with titles (eg, physics, politics, metaphysics, ethics, etc.) and argued that everything and anything that we want to understand we can figure out by studying the world around us long, hard, and with proper care. This makes his perspective very different from the Sokratic-Platonic perspective.

Beyond Aristotle—who was the tutor of Alexander the Great (356-23) for about a year when Alexander was an early teen-ager, and thanks to the expansion of the Hellenic world and the Hellenic mind made possible by Alexander's conquests—a range of schools of Hellenistic

philosophy developed. These include **Epicureanism**, named for the atomist, **Epikouros** (341-270 BCE), which argues against the existence of gods, preaching a distinct form of atheism. Another of these, **Stoicism**, associated with **Zeno of Citum** (ca 332-262 BCE), may be said to pave the way for a synthesis of Greek thought with that, focused on a single God, evolving in Israel-Judaea—which synthesis yields Christianity. But that is a story for another day.