

The First Philosophers



Everything is Water

A Surprising Advance

- ❖ ‘Everything is water.’ —Thales, fl. 585 BC
 - ❖ This seems blatantly false on its face.
 - ❖ It seems, in fact, so daft as to defy comprehension.
 - ❖ Yet it represents a leap forward in human understanding.
 - ❖ This is because it represents a style of explanation which makes avails itself of two bold hypotheses at once:
 - ❖ An unapologetic appeal to *naturalism*
 - ❖ An unblinking appeal to an *appearance/reality distinction*.

Naturalism

- ❖ Consider an inevitable cosmogonic question:
What is the origin of the universe?
- ❖ Two styles of answer:
 - ❖ Supernatural
 - ❖ Naturalistic

A Supernatural Answer

- ❖ ‘Tell how at the first gods and earth came to be, and rivers, and the boundless sea with its raging swell, and the gleaming stars, and the wide heaven above, and the gods who were born of them, givers of good things, and how they divided their wealth, and how they shared their honors amongst them, and also how at the first they took many-folded Olympus. These things declare to me from the beginning, you Muses who dwell in the house of Olympus, and **tell me which of them first came to be**. In truth **at first Chaos came to be**, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundation of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros [Love], fairest among the deathless gods, who unnerves the limbs and overcomes the mind and wise counsels of all gods and all men within them. From Chaos came forth Erebus and black Night; but of Night were born Aether and Day, whom she conceived and bore from union in love with Erebus. And Earth first bore starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods. And she brought forth long hills, graceful haunts of the goddess Nymphs who dwell amongst the glens of the hills. She bore also the fruitless deep with his raging swell, Pontus, without sweet union of love. But afterwards she lay with Heaven and bore deep-swirling Oceanus, Coeus and Crius and Hyperion and Iapetus, Theia and Rhea, Themis and Mnemosyne and gold-crowned Phoebe and lovely Tethys. After them was born Cronos the wily, youngest and most terrible of her children, and he hated his lusty sire.’ —Hesiod, *Theogony* 109-139

Some Features of this Response

- ❖ The world was born from *chaos*.
- ❖ From chaos order was generated by intentional activity, by strife and sexual activity, some consensual, some violent.
 - ❖ Nature is here remorselessly *anthropomorphized*: nature is explained on the model of human, psychological explanation.
 - ❖ Q: ‘Why are those bricks and that mortar arranged in the shape of a house?’ A: ‘Because they wanted shelter and safety. So, they arranged them accordingly.’
 - ❖ This form of explanation is *intentional*, and so purposeful rather than blind.
 - ❖ It is also, to this extent, capricious and unpredictable.
 - ❖ Q: ‘Why did they decorate their house with elaborate brick work?’ A: ‘They like that sort of pattern, and thought it would look nice on the facade of their house.’
 - ❖ This form of explanation is also *external*: nature is explained by principles external to it, rather than in terms of its own internal principles and laws.



A Naturalistic Account

- ❖ Everything is water. —Thales, fl. 585 BC (5 = Aris. *Met.* 983b18-27 = 11A12)

Everything ?



Some Features of this Response

- ❖ The world had always the same basic building material.
- ❖ It is *naturalistic*, in the sense that it purports to explain the world in terms of its own material features; it explains the world in terms of the world, rather than in terms of the intentional activity of supernatural agents.
- ❖ It is *monistic* form of *materialism*.
 - ❖ Everything which is is made of some material stuff (cf. 5 = Aris. *Met.* 983b6-18 = 11A2)
 - ❖ In fact, everything which is is made of the same *one* material stuff, viz. water.
 - ❖ It is thus highly parsimonious.
 - ❖ Perhaps water seems suitably mutable and thus suitably plastic.
- ❖ It looks to nature to offers its own law-governed principles, viz. the laws of nature.
 - ❖ Nature should then be uniform and regular.
 - ❖ It should thus be predicable.
 - ❖ Here a charming story reports how he was able to use the predictability of nature to his own advantage.

Appearance and Reality

- ❖ We must, as Thales evidently appreciated, distinguish the *manifest image* of the world from the *scientific image* of the world.
 - ❖ The manifest image of the world is the world of common sense and macroscopic perception.
 - ❖ The scientific image of the world is the world as revealed by analysis and investigation.
 - ❖ In general, the scientific image of the world is alien to sense perception and common sense.
 - ❖ Yet, the broad conviction is that the scientific image describes the world as it really is, or as it is fundamentally, or as it is in itself.
 - ❖ Further, the scientific image of the world explains why the manifest image of the world is as it is and not *vice versa*.

Two Polarities of Inquiry

- ❖ A distinction between the manifest and scientific image of the world invites two sorts of questions:
 - ❖ *Metaphysical*: what is real and what is merely appearance?
 - ❖ *Epistemological*: how do we come to know what is real vs. what is merely apparent?

Enter Xenophanes (c. 570-478)

- ❖ On the epistemological side of the street enters Xenophanes, the first *sceptic*.
- ❖ How do we know?
 - ❖ In brief: we don't.
- ❖ He proceeds with an analysis of knowledge, followed by an argument for its unattainability (24 = Sextus, *AM* 7.49.110 = 21B34).

Knowledge

- ❖ Knowledge is not the same as Belief.
 - ❖ Belief can be true or false; knowledge is truth-entailing.
 - ❖ S knows that p only if p is true.
 - ❖ Possibly, S believes that p and p is false.
 - ❖ Belief can be justified or unjustified.
 - ❖ S knows p only if S has a justified belief *that* p .
 - ❖ Possibly, S believes *that* p and p is not justified—even though p is true.
- ❖ So, this suggests an analysis of knowledge, namely:
 - ❖ $K =_{df} JTB$

Xenophanes' Sceptical Argument

1. S knows that p if and only if S has a justified, true belief *that* p .
 2. No-one ever has any justification for any given p .
 3. So, know one has knowledge *that* p .
- ❖ Rather, '*belief is fashioned over all things.*'

No Justification? Never?

1. If S perspectively bound with regard to some object o , then S lacks justified beliefs with respect to o .
2. Humans are necessarily perspectively bound (**6** = Sextus, *AM* 9.193 = 21B11; **8** = Clement, *Misc.* 5.109 = 21B14; **9** = Clement, *Misc.* 5.1110 = 21B15; **10** = Clement, *Misc.* 7.22 = 21B16)
3. So, with respect to any random object o , humans lack justified beliefs with respect to o .

All Objects? All Propositions?

- ❖ One is naturally tempted to reply that Xenophanes at the very least overstates his case.
 - ❖ All objects?
 - ❖ Including the objects of mathematics?
 - ❖ Including the objects of sense perception?
 - ❖ All propositions?
 - ❖ Even propositions relating mathematical truths?
 - ❖ Even analytic propositions?

Three Important Distinctions

- ❖ The *Analytic/Synthetic* Distinction
- ❖ The *Necessary/Contingent* Distinction
- ❖ The *A Priori/A Posteriori* Distinction

Analytic/Synthetic

- ❖ The Character of this Distinction
 - ❖ This is a syntactic-semantic distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
 - ❖ A sentence is analytically true/false *iff* it is true/false purely by virtue of its logical form or by virtue of the meanings of its words and independently of matters of fact.
 - ❖ A sentence is synthetic *iff* it is not analytic.

Necessary/Contingent

- ❖ The Character of this Distinction
 - ❖ This is a metaphysical distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
 - ❖ A proposition is necessarily true/false *iff* it is true/false and could not possibly have been false/true (or as Leibniz suggests, a proposition is necessary *iff* it is true in all possible worlds).
 - ❖ A proposition is contingent *iff* it is true in some possible worlds and false in others.
 - ❖ A sentence is necessarily true/false *iff* given its meaning it could not possibly have been false/true; that is, it is true/false in every possible world where it means what it does in this world.
 - ❖ A sentence is contingent *iff* it is true in some worlds and not others.

The *A Priori/A Posteriori* Distinction

- ❖ The Character of this Distinction
 - ❖ This is an epistemological distinction.
- ❖ The Distinction
 - ❖ One has *a priori* knowledge that p *iff* one knows p by reason or conceptual resources alone (that is, the extra-mental world makes no contribution to the justification of p).
 - ❖ *A posteriori* knowledge is knowledge that is not *a priori*.
 - ❖ N.b. this is a point about justification, not genesis.

A Co-extensivity Hypothesis

- ❖ Although drawn from different domains, these distinctions are co-extensive:
 - ❖ p is known *a priori* iff p is necessary iff p is analytic
 - ❖ p is known *a posteriori* iff p is contingent iff p is synthetic

Our Question Put Differently

- ❖ Does Xenophanes imagine that perspective interferes with:
 - ❖ *a posteriori* knowledge?
 - ❖ *a priori* knowledge?
- ❖ Unclear: ‘about the gods and all the things I speak of.’

The Philosopher of Flux

- ❖ Heraclitus (b. *circa* 540): ‘The knowledge of the most famous persons, which they guard, is but opinion.’ (30 = Clement, *Misc.* 5.9.3 = 22B28)
- ❖ Why?
 - ❖ Humans are not only perspectivally bound, but necessarily perspectivally bound: every judgment is context sensitive.
 - ❖ Human judgment is inescapably *subjective* judgment.

Some Terminological Clarity

- ❖ A property Φ is *subjective* =_{df} Φ is constitutively depends on the psychological attitudes or responses an observer has to some phenomenon.
- ❖ A property Φ is *objective* =_{df} Φ is not subjective.

Illustrations

- ❖ Some subjective properties:

- ❖ being amusing

- ❖ being fashionable

- ❖ being gaudy (in the sense of Dickens, ‘an intricate winding of gaudy colours. . .’)

- ❖ Some objective properties:

- ❖ being square

- ❖ being positively charged

- ❖ being even

A Question from Heraclitus

- ❖ If *every* judgment from a human subject is necessarily from some partial perspective, is not every judgment limited and so subjective and not objective?
 - ❖ If so, how is knowledge of the world as it is in itself possible?
 - ❖ Appearance never takes us beyond appearance.
 - ❖ ‘Listening not to me but to the *logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one.’ (11 = Hyppolytus, *Ref.* 9.9.1 = 22B50)

Context Sensitivity

- ❖ ‘The road up and down are one and the same.’ (**68** = Hyppolytus, *Ref.* 9.10.4 =22B60; cf. **69, 70, 71, 72, 76**)
- ❖ ‘It is not possible to step twice into the same river. . . It scatters and again comes together and recedes.’ (**40** = Plutarch, *Delph.* 392b-22B91a, b; cf. **81, 82, 86**)

Two Flavours of Flux

- ❖ Diachronic

- ❖ At t_1 x is ϕ but at t_2 x is not- ϕ

- ❖ Synchronic

- ❖ At t_1 x is both ϕ and not- ϕ