

*Sapere aude.*¹

Classical Thought

The Pre Socratic Philosophers²

Three Milesian Philosophers³ and the Problem of Matter⁴



Thales (**Thay**-leez)

Anaximander (An-ax-i-**man**-duh)

Anaximenes An-ex-**im**-en-eez)

From last week:

The four branches of philosophy are:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Fill in the blanks.

We are going to look at the first of two fundamental ideas in metaphysics (the nature of reality) this week. The two ideas are attempts to explain the nature of change – for example an acorn becomes an oak tree or a flower withers.

Idea 1: **monism** = everything is fundamentally one.

Idea 2: **atomism** = everything is made up of things that are different.

Philosophers have (and still do) discussed these two opposite ideas about the nature of reality ever since the time of the Milesian philosophers. In addition we will encounter the idea of determinism which is also still discussed by modern philosophers. Determinism is the idea that *all* changes or movements that take place are pre ordained by some law and everything that happens is fixed.

We will also look at two different approaches to epistemology (the theory of knowledge):

Approach 1: **empiricism** = we know by experiencing.

Approach 2: **rationalism** = we know by thinking and reflecting.

1 Dare to be wise.

2 Greek philosophers who lived before Socrates (d.399BC).

3 They lived at Miletus.

4 Most of the ideas in these lessons come from *The History of Western Philosophy* Three Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, materially mar the usefulness of these lectures.

Thales (c.624 – c.546 BC)⁵

Thales asked: What is the world made of? He made a **monist** assumption: reality consists of only one kind of substance. He came up with a metaphysic which said everything is water. This gives **unity** to reality and answers the question: What unifies all the diversity we see? In epistemology Thales took an **empirical** approach. He considered that all knowledge depends on observation, experience or sense perception. He was therefore more scientific than speculative. But when we observe nature we notice changes. Clouds change to rain, things move and change. If everything is water why does the water take different forms? Thales solved this problem through what he called Hylozoism. “All is full of gods,” he said and by “gods” he meant something like “life” or “power.”

Non Christian histories of philosophy usually start with Thales because he does not seek to explain things in terms of things beyond the natural world. This makes him something of a hero to atheists. He does not start with a creator or with God. For Thales everything is water and everything is filled with active agents of change which are “gods” or “life.”

Anaximander (c. 610 – c. 546 BC)

Anaximander questioned or cross-examined Thales' idea that all is water. He said: this means that things that *are not* water such as rocks *are* water. This bothered him. Wind or fire or something else if chosen as the unifying factor would give the same problem. If the world is made of an underlying “stuff” it cannot be particular. The “stuff” must be without defining characteristics. It is hard to imagine such “stuff.” Anaximander called it the “boundless” or *apeiron* (ἄπειρον). In an uncanny way he anticipates the idea that everything is convertible to energy.⁶ Like Thales his metaphysic was **monistic**. How did he get this idea? Thales was an **empiricist**. He had looked around him and seen that there was a lot of water. (He lived on a Greek island after all!) Anaximander preferred to reason and reflect. He was not an **empiricist** but a **rationalist**.

Anaximander's metaphysic was also deterministic; that is, to Thales idea that everything is full of “gods” or “life” he added the idea that the change that is going on is not just chaotic. He argued that there is a principle, pattern or a form to it. He thought that all things have to return to the source from which things arise. We see in his idea the seeds of modern secular determinism which says every event is according to some law and that all events are fixed. Anaximander conceived the “boundless” as like a reservoir or mixing bowl in which a circular motion is set up. The circular motion causes bits of the edge of the “boundless” to fly off and disintegrate. The bits that fly off become cosmic matter. Many of the bits of cosmic matter do not survive. Some become things. Once a bit of this matter became a fish and then men developed from fish.⁷ This idea seems to prefigure the theory of evolution.

Anaximander also seems to have had an elementary idea of transmigration of life. Cosmic matter, he thought, creates itself when the boundless spills over but then it disintegrates, goes back to the reservoir and re creates itself. He saw this as a perpetual life process.

Anaximenes (c. 585 – c. 528 BC)

A third Milesian philosopher was Anaximenes. He questioned Anaximander's ideas of the “boundless.” He asked: if there is a particular stuff (the boundless) from which everything arises yet it is not particular – has no distinguishing characteristics – you have have a stuff that is particular

⁵ Find him on your Synchronological Chart of History.

⁶ An idea that is important in modern quantum physics.

⁷ <https://creation.com/evolution-ancient-pagan-idea>

and at the same time not particular. How can this be? If you cannot define the “boundless,” where is the unity that underlies the diversity? To solve this problem he came up with a different solution. Everything is air. He avoided the problem that Anaxamander identified in Thales proposition that everything was water by identifying a quality in air that he thought was not found elsewhere. Air has density. It can be compressed or expanded. Anaximenes thought this quantitative change in air accounted for the qualitative changes we see in the world. Everything is one, he said, but hard things are more compressed than soft ones. He thus reduced a qualitative difference to a quantitative one. Modern science also can use a quantitative description of the world. The periodic chart comes down to quantitative differences in the number of electrons, protons etc. that make up different substances. There is a problem with Anaximenes' idea, of course. If everything is air how does air become water? How can something be its opposite its opposite and yet remain the same thing?

At this point you may feel rather overwhelmed by all these wild ideas which the Greek philosophers came up with to answer the questions, “where did life come from?” and, “where is life going?” The Milesian philosophers had answers to the questions but they are not good answers! They defy the truth revealed by God in his word in every case. They are also often quite close to some anti-Christian ideas which are still around today. Non Christian philosophers can never escape from the **monist/atomist** dilemma to come up with a world view that accounts for the **unity** and **diversity** in the world around us. As Christians we can see that the nature of God himself includes both **unity** and **diversity**. God is One. He is also Trinity. This is why we find aspects of both unity and diversity in his creation.

Exercise:

There are a lot of rather difficult concepts in this lesson. The four terms listed below have been colour coded throughout this lesson to help you grasp the ideas. To start with ensure you understand these terms and write a definition of each:

monism

atomism

empiricism

rationalism

Other terms you need to understand are:

determinism

transmigration

quantitative

qualitative

Look the words up in a good dictionary, if you need to, and write your own definitions.

Now re-read the lesson and make sure you understand where all the terms fit in.