Presocratic philosophy

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1. The Greek origin of philosophy

That philosophy has a Greek origin is something most American-trained professional philosophers learn early and then take for granted. This puts us on the "uniqueness" side of treating Greek culture; others prefer a "contextualized" approach, stressing Greek culture's relations to its older, bigger neighbors: roughly speaking, Egypt and Persia. (These are of course linked to the rest of Africa [Egypt], and to India and China [Persia].) Of course there needn't be a conflict between the uniqueness and contextual approaches, as the most cautious way is, as usual, to split the difference: the Greeks may have been unique, but it's only because they lived in a cultural soup, with traders and travellers carrying new ideas into the Greek cultural zone at ever-faster rates. So it's precisely the turbulence of the Greek/barbarian mix that makes Greek unique. In musical terms, Greeks play a unique riff on common tune, or in sculpture terms, carve a unique figure in common material.

Now because it's usually seen as connected to the world history of the last 5 centuries, the relation of Greek philosophy to the intellectual activities of its neighbors is a complicated and controversial political issue, not just an academic squabble . Roughly speaking, there are 2 sides to this story: one side says that European capitalism and eventually democracy spread throughout the world because the rational and scientific nature of European society gave it an irresistible advantage, and that this reason and science begin in Greece, after a long dormant period (the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages) is reborn in "modernity" (Galileo, Descartes). This European expansion, had an unfortunately high cost (war, slavery, colonialism), but now that free market economies and democracies are well-established (almost everywhere) around the world in a New World Order, the best hope for progress is the continued spread of reason and science, so studying the Greeks, in whose philosophy reason and science began, is an essential part of the progress that will resolve the remaining areas of poverty around the world.

Another side would say that no one could deny the technological advantages of European production, but that the New World Order is not one that allows eventual progress to developing countries, but is rather one of structural dependence, of hidden colonialism. Thus European science and reason are instruments of domination, taught to local elites to let them do the dirty work of maintaining their people in subordinate positions, teaching them that they are poor because they are non-Western and superstitious, when in fact their current misery is the result of being colonized, and that their traditional (eco-friendly) ways of life, even if they can't be retrieved, can be sources of inspiration for a new eco-sustainable, non-dominated life. For this second point of view, late 18th and early 19th century European historians pulled "Greece" out of its Eastern Mediterranean context and put it at the origin of the continuous progressive history of a cultural unity called "Europe" just then assuming its rightful role of world dominance.

So you can see how controversial this whole question can be. What's so unique then about Greek philosophy, as opposed to the intellectual activities of Egypt and Persia, its immediate neighbors? The story goes that the Egyptians and Persians miss the philosophical mark on either side, by being either too theological, or too mechanical: too abstract or too applied. In other words, their astronomy, cosmology and logic were in the service of the gods, and their math and physics in the service of the kings: they were either priests or engineers, talking about the **properties of** (mystical) gods or (mundane) things, either for worship of the mysterious or manipulation of the everyday, not about **principles**, rationally discussable **explanations for** gods and things

aimed not at worship or manipulation, but at understanding for its own sake, because of (as Aristotle puts it) an innate human desire to know.

The notoriously inflated self-image of philosophers springs from this claim to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Since to know is the essence of humanity, philosophers (according to their own not immodest testimony!) realize that essence best (the *déformation professionelle* of philosophers). Philosophers also strive to distinguish themselves from priest/poets in terms of their effect on humans. To be blunt, philosophers think of priests as the Wizard of Oz, hiding behind curtains and coming out with mumbo-jumbo designed to frighten people into some worshipful attitude (and to not forget the collection plate or sacrificial altar or old priest's retirement home or the new temple building fund, or what have you!). You might even say philosophers think of priests as engineers of human emotions: they manipulate the flock the way engineers manipulate wood and metal. (By the way, philosophers also think of poets as drunken lunatics, sort of like Harry on *3rd Rock from the Sun*: always channeling messages from some Big Giant Head in the sky or from the Muses or whomever it is that takes them over.) (NB: the preceding were extreme Platonistic caricatures, but still somewhat representative of philosophers as "Enlightenment" skeptics.)

Now is this a good story? Were the Egyptian and Persians really just priests and engineers and not philosophers? Besides the nagging suspicion that "who is the first X" is the wrong question ("who is the first modern scientist?" is a very difficult question), we really can't get into this debate on the first philosopher, primarily because there's not enough connection among Greek study, i.e., philosophy & classics on the one side, and history, anthropology, archaeology, Egyptology & "Persology" departments on the other. Then of course there's the matter of what is called "orientalism": what kind of Egyptologists and Persologists are there? Are they just "intellectual colonialists"? And why would classics and philosophy want to study Egypt and Persia anyway, when we know already that they're not philosophers, only priests and engineers?

So you see the problem. Maybe someday they'll be institutional backing for good, deep cross-disciplinary studies that would place Greece in its historical-geographical-political-economic context and that would result in textbooks we could use in this kind of class.

2. The material conditions of 6th Century Greek philosophy

One thing to examine about Greek philosophy is their political system and their writing habits, that is, the **material conditions for philosophy**.

a. As result of economic upswing coming out of Dark Ages, Ionian Greek society produced middle-class leisure (not just that of priests and warriors--that is, leisure that didn't have to be dedicated to service of gods or kings). *Schole* is Greek for leisure, where we get our "scholar." Freedom for Greeks is always leisure: **freedom from** working to supply bio-necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and **freedom to** self-develop: gymnastics and discussion (war and politics).

b. Not only did the Ionian Greeks live in an economic upswing, bringing lots of trade, and with it new ideas, but they were also in a not very important edge of the Persian empire, so control of their opinions wasn't that important. Yet they could nonetheless benefit from the multi-cultural mixing of the E Mediterranean. Having foreign ideas around you loosens your ethnocentrism, producing a cultural relativism (as a heuristic check on ethnocentrism, not as a positive thesis of the equal validity of all cultures) the Greeks expressed in the distinction btw *phusis* and *nomos*, that is, nature and convention.

c. The Greek *poleis* had rough democratic principles, at least among the elite free adult males (even if in fact they had tyrants). I mean by this that Greek democracy had its roots in military egalitarianism. You remember the councils and assemblies of the warriors in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. In such meetings the nobles could

speak freely and they had to persuade their equals, rather than command them. Persuasion depends on giving reasons, so Greek speakers learned to link chains of ideas into "arguments," *logoi*.

d. Finally, the Greeks wrote things down. The trick to having a "scientific" culture comes when they start to write down their reasons for saying things, thus preserving a record of arguments that later generations can consult. This network of partial results, of guesses and speculations and argument, forms a cultural memory that liberates Greek thought both from the dogma of religion and from the charisma of the rhetorician.

3. Pre-Socratic philosophy

According to Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, one of our primary source in these matters, shortly after 600 BCE Thales was one of the first of a group of intellectuals in Greek colonies in Ionia, or Asia Minor (now Turkey). Since these colonies were now part of the Persian empire, these cities enjoyed access to new images, new religions, and new thought patterns, all of which found their way into Greek philosophy (ML West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*). For Aristotle, these were the first Greeks who had sufficient leisure to try to produce a *logos* about *physis*: to produce a rational account of how the world worked, rather than a) simply manipulate things for survival purposes; or b) tell stories about heroes and gods, as the 8th century poets (Homer and Hesiod) had done. Aristotle says the "naturalists" tried to identify an underlying subject, a thing to which change happens, the basic matter of the universe. Thus these thinkers aimed not at **manipulating** things, nor at describing the **transcendent** doings of the gods, mysterious in essence to humans, accessible somehow only to the Muse-inspired poets, but at **immanent principles**, rationally discussable by all, that would explain things.

"Principle" in Greek is arche: both command and origin, or both: the commanding origin. Principles do two things: they simplify and unify. They simplify by providing more simple explanations of complex phenomena (an explanation must be simpler than its explanandum, or else it's useless), and they unify by reducing many cases to a single explanation.

We'll briefly mention three of these thinkers of the "Ionian Enlightenment": Thales, Anaximander, Heraclitus.

Sticking with Aristotle's account, Thales proposed "water" as his candidate for the basic matter of the world. Now this is a not unlikely choice, given the way land and water intermingle in the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the importance of all sorts of bodily fluids. (Thales, by the way, was also the subject of lots of affectionate anecdotes kidding him about both his keen business sense [cornering the market in olive oil due to his knowledge of eclipses] and about his absent-mindedness [falling down a well while looking at the stars]. Contemporary philosophers, sadly, live up only to the latter trait.) While he most likely got the image of earth floating on water from Eastern or Egyptian mythology, by putting it in the form (as Aristotle would have it) "the principle of all things is water" Thales went beyond **describing the properties of things** to articulate a **principle explaining things**.

Anaximander (@550 BCE) proposed the "unlimited" as his candidate for basic principle. This is a step up in abstraction from Thales. Thales had moved from ordinary things back to a basic material, water. Anaximander moved back even from basic materials (earth, air, water, fire) to what was behind even them. The unlimited as original principle lay behind limited things, which arose and fell back into it "according to necessity, paying the peanalty for their injustice." This was all "rather poetical," as the early commentators put it, but nonetheless crucially different from poetry in that it was rationally discussable, not divinely inspired. This structure, the limitation of the unlimited that produces a stable being for a time before falling back into the unlimited, is a key to all subsequent Greek thought. As a physical image, think about how a harbor or cove limits the sea, and in producing some calm water, increases the predictability that allows for human action.

The process of limitation of the unlimited is unclear in Anaximander. This is the key point which separates the "formalists," Plato and Aristotle, for whom a transcendent or immanent form organized chaotic matter, from the

"atomic materialists," Leucippus and Democritus [and later Epicurus and Lucretius], for whom a "swerve"-formed "vortex" enabled self-organization of matter. There might be political implications here, insofar as democracy is a sort of self-organization. Can this be trusted, or is "democracy" just a pretentious name for "anarchy" or "chaos"? Are the people better off being led from above, whether they realize this or not? Is it really the case, as Louis XVI said, "*après nous, le déluge*"? (Here we see the desire to match politics to nature, a longstanding W philosophical desire.)

Finally, let's mention Heraclitus (@500 BCE) who according to Aristotle proposed "fire" as the basic material principle. It seems better however, to mention Heraclitus as one of the first to focus on *logos* (= "measure" or "proportion"). *Logos* = measured speech fitting the order of the cosmos. For Heraclitus, the process of the world was orderly, even if individual things were in flux. What to do about this flux of everyday life is another key to Greek thought.

Other early Greek naturalists have become famous: Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and Democritus (one of the indirect influences on Lucretius). We can't get into their works, except to say that we'll have a look at how Aristotle arranges them in a conceptual scheme that sets the stage for his own doctrines.