

## Chapter 1 Questions of Philosophy

### Section 2 Theories on Philosophical Origins

#### 5 The Riddle of Philosophy

\* We've seen that the ancient teachings or doctrines of philosophy ended up in oppositions to one another as they developed their accounts of the world. There are two main ways of asserting the validity or authenticity of those doctrines: one, the way of developing and extending the grand hierarchical, multi-item scheme of doctrine as seen above, and the other, the argument by *reductio ad absurdum* or *argumentum ad absurdum*.

The latter form of argument typically presents two propositions, one of which is assumed to be true. The argument then attempts to prove the validity of the first proposition simply by disproving the second as logically absurd or impossible. In some cases, the impossibility of knowledge itself is asserted by revealing the logical contradictions contained in the two statements. The fact is that different philosophical theories inevitably lead to disputes with one another. Why do they persist so stubbornly? Why haven't we been able to reach the slightest agreement about how we know something and what we know? This was and is one of the most essential questions of philosophy. Where there is no serious attempt to ask and answer this question, philosophers have no choice but to resort to two methods mentioned above, namely, (1) to turn their theories into the grandest of narratives, and (2) to refute their opponents in the style of *reductio ad absurdum*.

\* Tetsuro Watsuji, a Japanese philosopher and cultural historian, conducted a profound study of the different characteristics of philosophical thought according to climatic environments. According to him, India's climate is characterized by continuous heat and humidity; such monsoon climate discourages people from challenging nature and deprives them of considerable mental energy, leading to a more or less passive and patient mentality. Although Indian philosophers also speculated about 'Being' and 'Nothing' or 'I' and 'Whole', there is no practical opposition between them because the "I" is assumed to be one with the Brahman, the highest universal principle. "If we are the basis of the world, this does away with any confrontation between ourselves and the world; the appreciation of this fact is the departure point of Indian philosophy. Indian philosophers merely describe this appreciation; they use neither argumentation nor universal concept in explaining it." (Watsuji 1961 p. 33)

\* Hegel identifies a philosophical shortcoming in Indian philosophy: the absence of universal concepts and logical abstraction. What is important for Indian philosophy is the soul's self-concentration and elevation to a state of freedom. Here is no unity between spirit and nature. The spirit merely considers nature as an instrument to attain nirvana, or spiritual awakening. Thinking is not strong enough to ensure the independence of the subjective mind; therefore, all speculation ends in the emptiness of

subject and object. "... is yet only quite abstractly objective; and hence the essential form of objectivity is wanting to it." (Hegel, 1982 p.145)

Nevertheless, religious and philosophical worldviews differ in their fundamental motives. As M. Eliade pointed out, religious worldviews never break with the consciousness of the "sacred." "In short, the 'sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness and not a stage in the history of consciousness." (Eliade 1978 Preface xiii) While the philosophical discourses developed in India and Greece have much in common in that they offer the typical sets of dualistic views such as monism vs. pluralism, materialism vs. idealism, sensationalism vs. substantialism and universalism vs. relativism, they fundamentally differ in terms of their philosophical motives.

\* Greek philosophy is characterized by the emergence of intrinsic and essential "riddles" of philosophy, namely the riddles of being, knowledge and language.

\* The uniqueness of philosophical thinking is that it identifies contradictions or inconsistencies in the concepts created by itself and, in order to solve these problems, incessantly objectifies the act of thinking itself, elevating the concepts to a higher dimension. In order for this movement of concepts to allow for further universal evolution, contemporary times and society are required to ensure the conditions for people's free thought and free language games. Throughout history, it has been difficult to find a time when such social conditions have prevailed. Examples of such times include the various masters of the Hundred Schools of Thought in China, the major religious sects in India during the time of Buddha, the Polis society in ancient Greece during the time of Socrates, and finally modern Europe.

\* In India, around the time of the Buddha, a number of theories emerged, including outright materialism which distanced itself from religious worldviews, epistemological skepticism, relativism and some views refuting morality. Here we see the prototype of philosophical thought, where freewheeling arguments provoke epistemological disputes in every possible way, which in turn lead to breaking new ground in philosophical insight. But in Indian philosophy, which was mostly concerned with religious worldviews, its central themes were never free from the magnetic pull of ideas such as salvation, nirvana and enlightenment, and accordingly none of the competing thinkers succeeded in addressing the question of the universality of knowledge itself. Indian philosophy began with the traditional figurative narrative of Brahman and Atman and developed many opposing theories such as monism vs. pluralism and idealism vs. materialism by using the power of rational inference. Ultimately, however, Indian philosophy remained firmly rooted in its core religious theme of how to attain salvation and nirvana. Nagarjuna, with his exceptional dialectic and ontology, introduced the argument of *reductio ad absurdum* as a doctrinal method, apart from his initial motive, but unlike Greek philosophers, he did not direct himself towards investigating the riddles of knowledge and language.

## **6 Theories of Origin in Greek philosophy**

\* Greek philosophy began with discussions about the original principles of the universe. Initially, the Ionian philosophers identified water, the infinite and pneuma (Greek for “breath of life”) as the original elements of the world, and were followed by Pythagoras of modern-day Italy, who taught that everything is originally made of numbers. In this context, the worldviews of the philosophers are essentially far removed from the religious or mystical worldviews mentioned in the previous section. — Xenophanes and Pythagoras seem to have offered convincing criticisms of such narrative accounts as those of Homer and Hesiod — It is to the essential advantage of philosophical thought that Greek philosophy did not start from genesis or creation narratives or similar fundamental accounts of origin, but from conceptual theories of ontological primordality. The *original or primordial principles* in this context were assumed to be, on the one hand, something of concrete physicality and, on the other hand, abstract beings, and this led to rudimentary controversies between theories. In Greek philosophy, these disputes moved away from religious or mythical worldviews and their motivations, moving toward the further development of conflicting claims about primordality through free thought.

\* Due to the scarcity of surviving written texts, the theories of the *archee* (the principle of beginning, origin, source, etc.) proposed by the philosophers who are considered the founders of Greek philosophy have been interpreted in different ways. For example, Aristotle interpreted Thales’s “water” as the basic element in physical or natural science. “Of the first philosophers, then, most thought the principles which were of the nature of matter were the only principles of all things.” (Aristotle *Metaphysics* Book 1 Part 3) According to another source, Thales said that all things float in water, and that all living things contain moisture, leading to the interpretation that Thales’s water is not just a physical principle but also a principle of life or living things. In any case, it should be noted that Thales associated the origin of the world with a concretely existing substance.

\* Thales was followed by Anaximander, who is said to have coined the word *Archee*. He is a proponent of the principle called *Apeiron* (the indefinite), but what its meaning has varied among later interpreters. We have the following fragment of his writing that has survived to the present day.

... the things from which is the coming into being for the things that exist are also those into which their destruction comes about, in accordance with what must be. For they give justice and reparation to one another for their offence in accordance with the ordinance of time (Barns 1979 p.29)

Hegel appreciates the Anaximander's concept of the “infinite” because he considers it to be conceptually superior to the idea of a single basic element mentioned by Thales. Hegel finds here the idea that movement, opposition and fusion *precede* material elements, the former being more original and fundamental than the latter. Albert Schweigler shared this view. It is also possible to derive from these words of Anaximander the interpretation that the “infinite” is a kind of universal chaos that precedes the appearance and development of all things in the world. According to Bertrand Russell, Anaximander meant that the elements of fire, earth and water that exist in the world constantly try to expand their sphere of influence to ensure the necessity of restoring a certain balance. This should be

what the Greek notion of “justice” mentioned by Anaximander implies. “But there is a kind of necessity or natural law which perpetually redresses the balance; where there has been fire, for example, there are ashes, which are earth. This conception of justice —of not overstepping eternally fixed bounds —was one of the most profound of Greek beliefs. (Russell 1945 p.46)

## 7 Ontological Thought

\* Heidegger, in his own way, interprets the same text of Anaximander as the beginning of ontological reflection in Greek philosophy. This fragment is usually understood as an account of how the appearance and disappearance of things took place, and Anaximander's idea of the “infinite” is understood as the primordial principle of nature. According to Heidegger, however, Anaximander's passage quoted above manifests his fundamental reflection on the *whole of beings* that exist in this world and on the *meaning* of its appearance, so that it must be understood as the most original reflection on the Being of beings.

\* It is widely acknowledged that Heidegger sought to identify the origin or root of his own ontological philosophy in the line of pre-Socratic philosophers including Anaximander, Heraclitus and Parmenides.

The (energeia) which Aristotle thinks as the fundamental character of presencing, (eion), the (idea) which Plato thinks as the fundamental character of presencing, the (Adyoc) which Heraclitus thinks as the fundamental character of presencing, the (Moipa) which Parmenides thinks is essential in presencing, the (Xpewv) which Anaximander thinks is essential in presencing---all these name the Same. In the concealed richness of the Same the unity of the unifying One, the (Ev), is thought by each thinker in his own way." (Heidegger 1975, p.56)

Heidegger contends: Being begins to restrain itself, and the Greek way is undermined and gives way to the Roman thinking up to the present day. The concept of actuality is identified as reality, and reality in turn is considered as objectivity. In this history of philosophy, the notion that Being has an essence of temporality was forgotten and beings turned into what merely exists, i.e., objective things. The history of the oblivion of Being begins here ....

\* When philosophy is spoken in poetic, allegorical language, it allows for any kind of interpretation. This is evident in the multitudes of “orthodox” doctrines derived from the exegetics of sacred texts. It seems almost pointless to argue convincingly for or against the interpretations of such texts.

My own view in this context is as follows: A host of ancient philosophers already offered the idea of a primordial and ultimate Being that makes all beings possible, as well as the process of thinking in which the Being of all that exists is to be considered first in its original principle and in the totality of Being. These ideas and thoughts were adopted by later philosophers for their own development. It should be noted, however, that the thought of positing the ultimate ground of all existing entities, not in some divine or transcendent existence, but in the idea of Being itself —that is, the approach to radically questioning Being itself— is mediated only by the intensity of the existential sense of life of the

individual. (Consider the motive: Why does the question “What is Being?” arise in our mind at all?) Plato and Aristotle certainly questioned the possibility of universal knowledge as their central subject. However, regarding the ancient thinkers who preceded them, it would require a highly sophisticated rhetoric to convince people that they shared such ontological ideas with their successors.

## 8 Free Movement of Thought

\* The *general* account of Greek philosophy is, as stated by Bertrand Russell and Albert Schweigler, is that it began with Thales’s hypothesis of the primordial principle of nature, followed by Anaximander who already mentioned the elements of motion, oppositions and decline. This seems quite convincing in the context of the following quote from Hegel.

Philosophy begins where the universal is comprehended as the all-embracing existence, or where the existent is laid hold of in a universal form, and where thinking about thought first commences. [...] Thought must be for itself, must come into existence in its freedom, liberate itself from nature and come out of its immersion in mere sense-perception; it must as free, enter within itself and thus arrive at the consciousness of freedom. (Hegel 1892 p.94)

Free thought is described as a necessary movement in which thought progresses along the line of the movement of infinity as the nature of the Absolute Spirit in order to approach its universality. Needless to say, the notion of universality here is rooted in the concept of the Absolute in Hegel's philosophical system. Despite its metaphysical implications, Hegel's discussion of freedom undoubtedly establishes the necessary process of free thought, which starts from a given primordial argument and progresses toward more universal thought through the experiences of all possible logical contradictions and oppositions. In this sense, the essential nature of philosophy must be the *thinking about thinking*, rather than a mere theoretical or ontological consideration of Being or beings.

\* Hegel's account of the history of philosophy, based on his understanding of general history, is often seen as a harbinger of Europe's *progressive views of history*. However, from our original point of view developed by observing the development of Greek philosophy and of modern philosophy which bears a significant resemblance to its ancient predecessor, we cannot but recognize the essential importance of his theory of dialectics, in which he asserts that contradictions and oppositions are the fundamental motive force for advancing the free movements of concepts, which in turn develop thought towards the more universal. We should conclude, then, that, provided that complete freedom is allowed to develop rational conclusions, philosophical thought proceeds to gradually rid itself of conventional or implicit presuppositions about worldviews, to advance the movements with possible oppositions in terms of the beings and the manners of the world, and to *deprive the concept of the world of all the “transcendent.”*

Despite Hegel's assertion, the movement of philosophical thought could never reach the ultimate “absolute idea”, but it may reach the highest level of rational observation for its time, the level of the insights that could never be surpassed by any of the contemporaries and that deserve to be honored as universal principles. It is impossible for the movement of philosophical thought to reach the *dimension*

*of omniscience or infinite knowledge.* Nevertheless, as Hegel observed, the free movement of concepts approaches the highest level of universality that reason can ever attain, by carrying out the radical process of philosophical inquiry while avoiding generalizations and assumptions.

Greek philosophy had an obvious advantage in this free movement of thought over Indian philosophy, which unfolded in the realm of religious and salvation-oriented motives.

\* In order to trace this free development of the movement of the concept in Greek philosophy, we should make sure of the core principle of those that Greek philosophers were able to offer, before coloring it with particular interpretations.

\* We would specify them as follows: Greek philosophy, sustained by the freedom of philosophical thought that prevailed at the time, pushed the steps of reasoning far enough to raise three important riddles of philosophy: the riddle of being, the riddle of knowledge and the riddle of language.

Greek philosophy began with the riddle of Being, but the focus was not on the genesis of the world, but on how the world is originally constituted. First, the question was about physical substances, and then about the abstract and formal pursuit of them, then it was about the sphere of appearance and disappearance and finally about the subject of motion (becoming and change), namely causal motives. These questions give rise to typical philosophical oppositions, such as monism versus pluralism, materialism versus idealism, sensationalism versus substantialism. In the course of these disputes the riddle of knowledge arises, which is followed by the riddle of language as its derivative. And here we see a clear distinction between the development of philosophical thought in Greek and Indian philosophy. While Greek philosophy succeeded in raising and pursuing the question of universal knowledge in the form of a “riddle,” Indian philosophy ended up with narrative, figurative doctrines in various forms in pursuit of ultimate causes, ultimate ends, dharma (religious awakening), salvation and spiritual supremacy.

\* When we try, through the act of thinking, to freely and infinitely objectify the relationship between ourselves and the world, motivated by the desire to indicate and account for our experience of life more fully and comprehensively, a point is reached where the movement of philosophical thinking unfolds to give some fundamental explanations about the world and our life. As far as circumstances allow the freedom of this “thought of thought”, philosophical theories about the knowledge of Being are supposed to cover all possible kinds of accounts and pass their agenda, having been subjected to the limitations of time, on to the next generation for more open discussion. Our immediate task, however, is not to investigate why conditions were better for the “thought of thought” in Greek society. For now, we must content ourselves with the effort of examining, in what form free thinking developed in Greek philosophy and raised questions about knowledge and language. The development will take the following steps:

(1) Fundamental reasoning about primordial principles, instead of parable-like accounts of the origin of the world.

- (2) The twofold aspects of the primordial principle, concreteness and abstraction
- (3) The temporal appearance of Being. The opposing ideas of Being (oneness) of the world versus its Becoming.
- (4) The opposition between the sensational and the super-sensational as the basis of knowledge.
- (5) The multiplicity of materials and the idea of motives in generation and alteration. Two principles of the material and the spiritual.
- (6) The cause of all causes (motives).