

Thales and the Origins of Rational Theology

Peter A. Kwasniewski

Thales is said to have been the originator of speculative philosophy because he was the only one of the seven wise men, who came after the theological poets, to make an investigation into the causes of things, the other sages being concerned with moral matters.

—Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Metaphysics*

WONDER AND THE SEARCH FOR CAUSES

We are accustomed to reading the earliest Greek philosophers as “physicists” concerned with giving a “scientific” account of the visible world. But it is worthy of careful reflection that one of the most prominent features of their speculations is not so easily reducible to physics: the progressive search for some form of natural or rational theology. “When one reads the Presocratics with open mind and sensitive ear,” Gregory Vlastos observes, “one cannot help being struck by the religious note in much of what they say. Few words occur more frequently in their fragments than the term ‘god’. The style itself in certain contexts is charged with religious associations; the rhythm and sentence

structure of certain utterances is unmistakably hymnodic."¹ The question of the divine nature (with all the ambiguity suggested by this phrase) recurs again and again in the extant fragments. The reflections of the Presocratic thinkers are suffused with the assumption that all causal explanations must be grounded in some kind of first cause, just as Homer portrays Zeus holding up the rest of the gods on the end of a long chain stretching from heaven to earth. In spite of their differences in natural philosophy and the varying importance they attribute to ethical and political matters, the Presocratics come together on the kind of explanatory principle that is minimally necessary to account for an orderly world, a *kosmos* intelligible to mind. By all reports, Thales of Miletus appears to have been the first to use a rational method to investigate the interrelationship of outer phenomena and their inner causes, and for that reason alone, his account, insofar as we can cautiously reconstruct it from incomplete and scattered evidence, is eminently worthy of attention. In this paper I will defend an interpretation of the extant fragments that differs from the usual Aristotelian line and, in light of this interpretation, offer suggestions regarding the ways in which Thales can be seen to have influenced the destiny of later Greek metaphysics, especially the Pythagorean and Platonic schools.²

One of the first stories recorded of Thales introduces a famous image of the philosopher as a man so caught up in contemplation that he takes no notice of the path ahead and falls

¹"Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought," *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. D. J. Furley and R. E. Allen, 2 vols. (New York: Humanities Press, 1970, 1975), vol. 1, p. 92.

²The purpose of this paper is to analyze what Thales says about divine principles. In the course of doing so, later Presocratics whose doctrines are comparable in fundamental respects to his will be quoted as interpretive aids.

into a well, making himself the laughing-stock of a bystander.³ “A witty and attractive Thracian servant-girl is said to have mocked Thales for falling into a well while he was observing the stars and gazing upwards; declaring that he was eager to know the things in the sky, but that what was behind him and just by his feet escaped his notice.”⁴ Yet perhaps witty and attractive girls and other genial pragmatists would do well to ponder why Thales could be so forgetful of his earthly way. He was contemplating the heavens, marveling at the order and beauty of the world in which he found himself. Is it not likely that he was turning over in his mind the most eternal and elusive matters of all—whence do all these things come and for what purpose? In short, Thales began to ask the indispensable (but so often dispensed with) questions that bring philosophy, the craving for wisdom, into being.

Philosophy begins with the combination of awareness, ignorance, and hope that the Greeks styled “wonder.”

Plato and Aristotle both traced the origin of philosophy (theory) to wonder, and both developed theories of the world in light of the distinction between opinion (*doxa*) and knowledge (*epistēmē*). This distinction becomes thematic when, first having noticed and compared the variety of world-representations found in the different religious-mythical traditions of different cultures, as Thales arguably did, our curiosity in the world itself

³Of course, numerous anecdotes about Thales show him to have been eminently practical. We need only think of Thales’ legendary repute as astronomer, navigator, and businessman.

⁴Plato, *Theaetetus* 174A, in G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 80. Hereafter KRS.

makes it possible to wonder (i) whether and in what sense they might all be representations of a single world, (ii) whether we can know that world “beyond” representations, and (iii) which *one*, if any, among the *many* world-representations *held* as true *is* true. In other words, Thales [moves] beyond representation to the underlying, intelligible reality disclosed in each.⁵

Mythology satisfies a desire to feel at home in the universe, but it does not satisfy the desire to know the causes of things in a way more secure and penetrating than the metaphorical figures of traditional tales. To experience the wonder out of which philosophy arises, a person must first realize that he does not know the real answers, all the while implicitly believing that the world is accessible to him in spite of his ignorance. However shrouded in mystery the universe may be, man cannot think it to be mere chaos; the thought itself is impossible, even if one tries to assert it in speech. As Aristotle observes, “what a man says he does not necessarily believe.”⁶ For speech is only significant in proportion to the meaning of the thought it conveys, just as a question makes sense only to the degree that it is seen to be answerable. To have a mind, to be mindful, is to seek order and principles in the way things are and to live according to the best that one has found. Chaos having the negative meaning of absence of order, could we speak of this absence where there is no presence, no fullness, no content? The one who denies

⁵John J. Drummond, “Edmund Husserl’s Reformation of Philosophy: Premodern, Modern, Postmodern?” *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66, no. 2 (1992): 138.

⁶*Metaphysics* G3, 1005b25–26; revised Oxford translation.

intelligibility to the world erases himself as a thinker and even as a speaker.⁷

THE MAGNET'S SOUL AND THE WORLD'S DIVINITY

Let us take as our point of departure one of Thales' doctrines recorded in Aristotle's *De Anima*. "Thales, too, to judge from what is recorded about him seems to have held soul to be motive [*kinētikon*] force, since he said that the magnet has a soul in it because it moves iron."⁸ Diogenes Laertius repeats the testimony: "Aristotle and Hippias say that he gave a share of soul even to soulless objects, using Magnesian stone and amber as indications."⁹ Thales fixes upon "soul" [*psuchē*] because our experience of living things leads us to trace life and its activities back to an interior principle of motion capable of holding together and directing a plurality of parts to a common end.

⁷"If our opponent says nothing, it is absurd to attempt to reason with one who will not reason about anything, in so far as he refuses to reason. For such a man, as such, is seen already to be no better than a mere plant" (*Metaphysics* G4, 1006a12–15). Any act of signifying with words or gestures already implies an existential commitment to the way things are and an epistemological commitment to their knowability.

⁸*De Anima* A2, 405a19–20, revised Oxford translation; see KRS, p. 95: ἔοικε δὲ καὶ Θαλῆς, ἐξ ὧν ἀπομνημονεύουσι, κινητικόν τι τὴν ψυχὴν ὑπολαβεῖν, εἶπερ τὴν λίθον ἔφη ψυχὴν ἔχειν ὅτι τὸν σίδηρον κινεῖ.

⁹*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. R. D. Hicks (London: William Heineman, 1959), vol. I, §24, p. 25, hereafter LEP; KRS, p. 95: Ἀριστοτέλης δὲ καὶ Ἱππίας φασὶν αὐτὸν καὶ τοῖς ἀψύχοις μεταδιδόναι ψυχῆς, τεκμαιρόμενον ἐκ τῆς λίθου τῆς μαγνήτιδος καὶ τοῦ ἠλέκτρου.

Extending his observations of life to a more abstract plane, Thales recognizes that interior *kinēsis* likewise calls for an account, whether it be found in obviously living things or in stones that fall to the earth and magnets that attract iron. The motions of these, too, seem actuated by design rather than by chance; they manifest a *nature* to do one sort of thing rather than any odd thing, and this natural inclination suggests the presence of a principle akin to what is at work in determinate life-forms. Hence, it is reasonable for Thales to extend the notion of *psuchē* to the magnet or the amber. The general mode of argument found among the earliest thinkers can be summarized as a path of inference from the entangled *soros* of sense-data to the unity of a suprasensible definition. By this route, they hope to explain, rather than dumbly receive, the variety of phenomena encountered in the world.

Thales does not stop with the magnet. Reflecting, no doubt, that the *kosmos* has properties and a directedness similar to, though on a far greater scale than, those of the magnet, he seeks knowledge of the unknown by means of likeness with the known. The world itself, with its interweaving of things and purposes, appears to be a living organism in need of a soul or soul-like principle. “And some say that it [soul] is intermingled in the universe, for which reason, perhaps, Thales also thought that all things are full of gods.”¹⁰ Confronted by a drama of dynamic natures caught up in the confines of one reality, Thales tries to strip away the stage and see the playwright. By discerning in the world a principle that permeates all things but is not collapsible into a simple material substratum, he is targeting something active and intangible operating through or within the visible universe—a plenitude of *theoi* behind the cosmic *prosōpa*. Reality is theophanous; the presence of gods or ultimate principles shines through the order and beauty of the

¹⁰*De Anima* A5, 411a7; KRS, p. 95: καὶ ἐν τῷ ὄλῳ δέ τινες αὐτῆν [sc. τὴν ψυχῆν] μεμείχθαι φασιν, ὅθεν ἴσως καὶ Θαλῆς φήθη πάντα πλήρη θεῶν εἶναι.

kosmos. As Thales purportedly said, “the world is the most beautiful, for it is God’s making.”¹¹ Even if a Presocratic thinker breaking away from the world-view of Homer and Hesiod may not have meant more by ‘soul’ and ‘god’ than a simple guarantor of constancy in view of which everything else can be accounted for, to speak of such things is already to have ventured into the sphere of the immortal, the ungenerated, the unconstricted. And surely, it must be recalled that for the earliest philosophers the word *theos* would have retained some of its deep religious force, the sense of the numinous, that it had in the mythic worldview which Mircea Eliade describes as hierophany or revelation of the sacred.

Yet Thales inaugurates a noteworthy shift. The divine principles he apprehends are not encrusted with Hesiodic genealogies or Homeric theomachies. They are nakedly acknowledged as *other* than the world we know, they are at once without and within, above and beneath everything else, operative always and everywhere throughout the universe to constitute or maintain things in their distinctive forms. Such a first principle, different from the ordinary stuff out of which things are put together, is nonetheless implicated in their being as that by which they are intelligible and specified in the system of nature. As *archē* or *aition*, it attains a status of immutability, non-confinement, and atemporality which elevate it to the truly divine, that is, the primal, fecunditive, vitalizing font of being. W. K. C. Guthrie remarks:

Ask any Greek what, if anything, in his experience is ever-living (in his own word *athanaton*), and he would have only one answer: *theos*, or *to theion*. Everlasting life is the mark of the divine, and of nothing else. Hence Thales, though rejecting the anthropomorphic deities of

¹¹Statement attributed to Thales. LEP §35: *κάλλιστον κόσμος· ποίημα γὰρ θεοῦ*.

popular religion, could retain its language to the extent of saying that, in a special sense, the whole world was filled with gods.¹²

On this same fragment, “all things are full of gods,” Kirk and Raven comment:

[T]he chief distinguishing marks of the gods are that they are immortal, they enjoy perpetual life, and that their power (their life-force, as it were) is unlimited, it extends both over the animate and over the inanimate world. Thus [Thales’] assertion may well imply (since even apparently dead things like stone may possess soul of a kind) that the world as a whole manifests a power of change and motion which is certainly not even predominantly human, and must, both because of its permanence and because of its extent and variation, be regarded as divine, as due to the inherence of some form of immortal *psuchē*.¹³

With Thales we are encountering, possibly for the first time in Western thought, a theology divested of provincial beliefs and poetic fabrications. Thales does not speak of the cultic god of the Milesians among whom he lived, the pantheon of the Egyptians whom he visited, or the splendid fictions of Hesiod which he had very likely heard at celebrations. In his utterances,

¹²A *History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1, *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 68.

¹³KRS, pp. 96–97. The striking resemblance of this early idea to Plotinus’ greatly-developed doctrine of the world soul should not be overlooked.

he wishes to speak according to reason, the *logos* common to world, speech, and thought, committing himself to no more than he can gather by contemplating the structure and unity of the *kosmos* around him, using reason rather than imagination to theorize about the realm of invisible and divine principles. In contrast to Hesiod who generates the gods out of void or chasm (*chaos*), Thales sees that the divine must be ungenerable and incorruptible. When asked “What is the divine?” Thales is said to have replied: “That which has neither beginning nor end.” “Of all things that are,” another fragment states, “the most ancient is God, for he is ungenerated.”¹⁴ As Guthrie puts it, “at the conscious level, he had made a deliberate break with mythology and was seeking a rational account”¹⁵—an account, moreover, not exclusively empirical but framed in terms of a supreme engendering cosmic cause. This inherently theological *skopos* of his thought will become more apparent as we progress.

WATER AS ORIGINATIVE PRINCIPLE AND ARISTOTLE’S INTERPRETATION

Not satisfied to speak only of kinetic and animating principles, Thales unexpectedly introduces the notion of Water as the fundamental origin of beings, illustrated first by the organic generation that takes place through the moisture of rain and seed, and second by the resting of the earth upon a great ocean. The following well-known passage, taken from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, offers a glimpse of Thales’ hydrostoichaic doctrine.

¹⁴Statements attributed to Thales. LEP §36: *τί τὸ θεῖον, τὸ μήτε ἀρχὴν ἔχον μήτε τελευτήν*. LEP §35: *πρεσβύτατον τῶν ὄντων θεός· ἀγένητον γὰρ*.

¹⁵Guthrie, p. 62.

Most of the first philosophers thought that principles in the form of matter were the only principles of all things; for the original source of all existing things, that from which a thing first comes-into-being, and into which it is finally destroyed, the substance persisting but changing in its qualities, this they declare is the element and first principle of existing things, and for this reason they consider that there is no absolute coming-to-be or passing away, on the ground that such a nature is always preserved . . . for there must be some natural substance, either one or more than one, from which the other things come-into-being, while it is preserved.

Over the number, however, and the form of this kind of principle they do not all agree; but Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says that it is water (and therefore declared that the earth is on water), perhaps taking this supposition from seeing the nurture of all things to be moist, and the warm itself coming-to-be from this and living by this (that from which they come-to-be being the principle of all things)—taking the supposition both from this and from the seeds of all things having a moist nature, water being the natural principle of moist things.¹⁶

¹⁶*Metaphysics* A3, 983b6 et seq.; see KRS, p. 89. The latter paragraph: τὸ μέντοι πλῆθος καὶ τὸ εἶδος τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρχῆς οὐ τὸ αὐτὸ πάντες λέγουσιν, ἀλλὰ Θαλῆς μὲν ὁ τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρχηγὸς φιλοσοφίας ὕδωρ εἶναί φησιν (διὸ καὶ τὴν γῆν ἐφ' ὕδατος ἀπεφαίνετο εἶναι), λαβῶν ἴσως τὴν ὑπόληψιν ταύτην ἐκ τοῦ πάντων ὀρεῶν τὴν τροφὴν ὑγρὰν οὔσαν καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ θερμὸν ἐκ τούτου γιγνόμενον καὶ τούτο ζῶν (τὸ δ' ἐξ οὗ γίγνεται, τοῦτ' ἐστὶν ἀρχὴ πάντων), διὰ τε δὴ τοῦτο τὴν ὑπόληψιν λαβῶν

While the Peripatetic interpretation is not indefensible, one would have to sympathize with Harold Cherniss, R. K. Hack, and others, who have pointed out that we must take pains to distinguish the true thought of the Presocratics from the elenctic service to which Aristotle puts their sayings when articulating his own doctrine of causality and substance. Aristotle's trustworthiness as a reporter of the opinions of his predecessors—who, in his mind, were groping towards the discovery of what he, and he alone, had perceived in full—has from time to time been called into question.¹⁷ To quote the provocative (if slightly overcritical) view of Hack:

When Aristotle was treating of physical doctrines, he referred politely to Leucippus and to Democritus; his attitude was no longer

ταύτην καὶ διὰ τὸ πάντων τὰ σπέρματα τὴν φύσιν ὑγρὰν ἔχειν·
τὸ δ' ὕδωρ ἀρχὴ τῆς φύσεως ἐστὶ τοῖς ὑγροῖς.

¹⁷For discussions about Aristotle's accounts of his predecessors, see Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1935); J. B. McDiarmid, "Theophrastus on the Presocratic Causes," *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, esp. p. 180; and W. K. C. Guthrie, "Aristotle as Historian," *ibid.*, pp. 239–54. It is understandable that Aristotle chose to interpret his predecessors in a literalistic manner, especially when we consider that authentic written sources for the earliest thought were almost as scarce at the time of Aristotle as they are today. If, however, the language of the earliest thinkers straddled the realms of poetry and philosophy, and if, as a result, it was still indebted to prior modes of thought, we shall have to read the extant statements with an eye towards the use of analogy and imagery. Although some of Aristotle's criticisms of the Presocratics isolate real weaknesses of early naturalistic thought, they fail on the whole to do full justice to its subtleties.

hostile, because he was willing to allow that other philosophers had made some genuine contributions to the explanation of phenomena and of nature, as distinguished from the supreme god. To be sure, he owed an incalculable debt to the Greek theologians who had preceded him; but he was not aware of that fact, and found it easy to represent them all, with the exception of Anaxagoras, as men “who spoke at random” on the topic of the supreme god, and who were incapable of making the correct use of the causes that they had discovered. Since he believed in his own version of the supreme god, he did not believe in theirs; and the divine substances, which had been the supreme gods of most of the earlier thinkers, promptly sank to the low status of mere “material causes,” and the long effort to endow each of those gods with every imaginable perfection, on which some of the greatest Greek minds had liberally expended their genius, appeared to Aristotle to be random talk.¹⁸

To keep a balanced view, we must remind ourselves that Aristotle never makes himself out to be an historian or a well-informed doxographer answerable to the canons of scholarly precision. That would be quite irrelevant to his purpose. Thoughtless of later textual critics who will heap accusations upon his selective and temperamental use of sources, Aristotle in the flights of dialectical inquiry prefaced to the major treatises candidly states his goal of illuminating certain positions (namely, his own) by means of comparing them to, and educing them from, earlier philosophical formulations, much as Aquinas or Hegel will do later on. Moreover, as Guthrie reminds us, there

¹⁸*God in Greek Philosophy to the Time of Socrates* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1931), pp. 150–51.

is a measure of diffidence and precision in Aristotle's approach to the Presocratics.

Aristotle had no means of knowing the reasons which led Thales to make his statement [regarding water as the first principle], and when he ascribes a possible line of thought to him makes no secret of the fact that he is guessing. The frankness and caution with which Aristotle introduces any statement about Thales are highly reassuring, and we may feel confident of the distinction between what he has found and what is his own inference.¹⁹

Nevertheless, granting him all this, we cannot quite let Aristotle off the hook—not, at any rate, if we think the progenitor of a long-standing error deserves some of the blame accruing to his latter-day followers. For it remains true that Aristotle's questionable materialist or reductionist interpretation of many of the Presocratics has strongly colored the reception of their ideas into the Western metaphysical tradition, to such an extent that a famous contemporary “expert” on Aristotle can write: “There was enough . . . for the Stagirite to see in Thales

¹⁹Guthrie, pp. 54–55. In a similar vein, Kirk and Raven note: “Even more uncertainty attaches to a problem that has already been foreshadowed: are we justified in inferring from the Peripatetic identification of Thales' water as ‘material principle’ that he believed the visible, developed world to *be* water in some way? This is the normal interpretation of Thales; but it is important to realize that it rests ultimately on the Aristotelian formulation, and that Aristotle, knowing little about Thales, and that indirectly, would surely have found the mere information that the world originated from water sufficient justification for saying that water was Thales' material principle or *archē*, with the implication that water is a persistent substrate” (pp. 93–94).

the beginning of the type of thinking that starts from observation of the natural phenomena and seeks to trace them back to their ultimate material source. It was in his eyes the beginning of natural philosophy. On that point, and on that point alone, can Thales be given a position in the history of philosophical thought."²⁰ The summary found in textbooks or histories often follows the same lines. As Hack rightly observes,

Aristotle's interpretation is only approximately correct, because he failed to include [in his explanation of the choice of Water] the attribute of divinity along with the Psyche that is diffused through all things: he thus left the way open to those modern historians who have eliminated god from early Greek philosophy, and have reduced this and similar doctrines to "hylozoism" or "panpsychism." It is not merely Life that is diffused; it is divine Life, a genuine creative force.²¹

Hack recognizes the crucial importance of interpreting the Thalean fragments in light of each other, rather than as isolated and unrelated assertions. Indeed, the only way to understand the Presocratics in general is to look upon their available statements not as random bits of clay but as shards from a broken vase that we must carefully try to reassemble. By focusing on the intrinsic connection between *psuchē*, *theos*, and *hudros*, Hack defends the coherency of Thales' cosmological doctrine, rather than leaving it in pieces that only redouble our impression of primitive obscurity. The advantage to Hack's approach is that it seeks for unity amidst multiplicity instead of

²⁰Joseph Owens, *A History of Ancient Western Philosophy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1959), p. 10.

²¹Hack, note on p. 42.

settling for a mere philological or historical analysis of textual fragments. If we are seeking for the *unity* of Thales' ideas, it behooves us to re-examine the evidence and arrive at a tentative synthesis of the whole.

THE THALEAN REVOLUTION AND THE UNITY OF
PRESOCRATIC PHILOSOPHIZING

To hold that the pre-Anaxagorean thinkers were "materialists" plain and simple, as do Aristotle and most of his commentators, arguably misses the whole point, the cardinal theme, of Presocratic philosophizing.²² Although he may not have grasped the full significance of his own statements, Thales seems to be reaching out for some sort of immaterial principle (named according to what is more known, e.g., Water, Soul) that constitutes, inhabits, activates, or otherwise enatures physical things. In fact, we may hazard to say that as with Heracleitus's Fire, so too with the Water of Thales and the Air of Anaximenes: in each instance, a common ground or nature is posited as a causal explanation of variety and distinctness, a "first" before all things not in the manner of Aristotelian prime matter, but as a permeating identity that unites the disparate members of a class (what Plato and his school would later call 'form' or 'idea'). Whether it be Water, Fire, Air, the Infinite, Mind, or any other candidate, the proposed primal causes share in common a distinctness or supremacy over the realm of particular things or types of things they are intended to account for. That the Presocratics differ considerably among themselves when it comes to the number, separateness, and functioning of

²²"Nothing is more easy," writes Hack, "than to fall into the habit of surveying both the language used by others, and the thought that they intend to convey by that language, from the outside, and of estimating the merits and the demerits of their thought entirely by its external appearance" (p. 152).

such *archai* does not alter the crucial fact that they are tracking the same quarry. “This [Greek] impulse to generalize, to discard the individual and accident and bring out the universal and permanent,”²³ gains its first audible voice in Thales.

What is it about Water that inclines Thales to posit it as an explanatory *archē*? Although he undoubtedly received his initial impetus from reflecting upon the manifold roles this substance answers to in the world of experience, to think that its character as a particular kind of fluid or as the distillation of warmth and the bearer of seminal moisture was uppermost in Thales’ mind is probably an oversimplification. Consider some of water’s remarkable properties: an easy fluidity and versatility of condition, an ability to seep into and soften small pores and channels, a tendency to be absorbed and to transmit or nourish life. Guthrie goes further, noting the subtle range of meanings enjoyed by the word *hugros* (moist) which Aristotle regards as a clue to Thales’ choice of *hudros*:

The most likely thoughts to have been in Thales’ mind are those which link water with the idea of life. Hence he observes that food and semen always contain moisture, and that the very warmth of life is a damp warmth. . . . *Hugros*, indeed, owing to these associations in the Greek mind, is a word rich in meaning which cannot be imparted by any single English equivalent. ‘Moist,’ yes, but that will hardly do when Theocritus applies it to a bow as being flexible, when Plato describes Eros, god of love and generation, by the same word, or applies it to the supple limbs of youth in contrast to the ‘hardness’ of old age. Pindar uses it of the back

²³Guthrie, p. 54.

of an eagle, Bacchylides of the feet of dancers,
Xenophon of the legs of a swift horse.²⁴

Abstracted from the ordinary element we wash with and drink, the many suggestive qualities of water and moisture can be used as noetic symbols of the *archai prōtai* at work in the *kosmos*. Considered together with what Thales says about a plenitude of gods and the presence of soul even in apparently soulless things, the doctrine of Water as a first principle assumes its function in the outlines of a holistic cosmology. Thales' positing of Water, far from being the guesswork of a scientific simpleton or the reductionism of a materialist, is a conscious attempt to trace back the daunting array of visible things to an omnipresent and ever-active origin, a way of organizing multiplicity under the aegis of unity. In this regard, the hydrostoichaic thesis of Thales foreshadows the more nuanced metaphysical position of Anaximander, whose *apeiron* functions as an elementally-neutral womb in the capacity of which all things preexist and from which their diversity and contrariety can be born. "The supreme god and the cosmogenetic god," Hack proposes, "were one divine power, Water; and Thales supported his choice of Water by strictly appropriate arguments."²⁵ If one were to push this line of interpretation too far, of course, one would risk incongruously assimilating Thales to the much later Stoics with their peculiarly evolved Heraclitian doctrine of *puros* or *pneuma* as the divine substance of the universe. But as a reader of his book would discover, Hack's desire to rehabilitate Thales as a *bona fide* metaphysician springs less from a supposition of doctrinal continuity between authors of early and late antiquity than from a keen recognition of the heuristic power latent in Thales' simple utterances.

²⁴Guthrie, pp. 61–62.

²⁵Hack, p. 42.

Take another Thalean image. What is it about the lodestone that invites speculation into the ultimate natures of things? The wondrous property of the lodestone, its invisible attractive power drawing iron to itself the way an appetible object draws a hungry animal, calls attention to the ability of certain agents to act at or over a distance without an apparent connecting medium—in short, to influence immaterially. This in turn suggests a distinct causative power rooted in the very being of natural things and irreducible to their components. Even the magnet has a soul, Thales says—as though pointing first to the cause of motion latent in all things, and then to the *principium motus* of a cosmic order which is also an ensouled totality whose divine perpetuity of life cannot be derived from the sum of its parts. By hypothesizing the existence of one or more everlasting *archai* which must be considered both transcendent to particular things over which they stand as originative and immanent in them as sustaining causes, the philosopher advances beyond the boundaries of both mythology and physical science, commencing what Aristotle would call “first philosophy” or “theology,” the science of first or highest entity.

If we bear in mind that the so-called physical doctrines of the Ionian philosophers were really to a great extent metaphysical—that is to say, these Greek philosophers believed that they were investigating, and had discovered, the nature of ultimate divine reality, and not of mere outer appearances—we shall be able to understand why the Ionians named one substance after another as the divine source of the universe.²⁶

Unfortunately, present-day interpreters of Presocratic thought are often led astray by an anachronistic imposition of

²⁶Hack, p. 40.

ideas originating with modern empirical science and its battery of assumptions. Hack observes:

Modern scholars, who imagined that Thales was talking not about a living divine substance but about a 'material' cause, and who therefore fail to see the relevance of nutriment, heat, and seeds to the source of Life, have invented meteorological reasons for the choice of Water, such as evaporation, and the rivers with their alluvial deposits. These reasons are interesting enough in themselves; but they have nothing to do with Thales and his inquiry into the source of Life.²⁷

The modern (and to judge from the later history of ancient philosophy, timeless) tendency towards an all-effacing material reductionism fails philosophically because of its inability to give answers to those highest and perennial questions that first gave rise to philosophizing among the Greeks in the period prior to the flourishing of Socrates. Reductionism undershoots the mark by choosing rather to explain away than to explain.

In connection with the problem of reductionism, one is reminded of three famous retorts. When one asks the question "What is time?" and a physicist in reply says "You mean, how do we measure time?" the two are not talking about the same thing. The physicist does not understand that knowing *how* to measure time does not tell us what time is, but only what time it is. The Epicureans, of whom Lucretius is a glowing example, wish to explain purposeful life in terms of chance encounters of lifeless atoms. To them it may be replied: "Have you succeeded in explaining *living forms* by positing *lifeless matter*, and have you succeeded in explaining *purpose* by positing *chance*? It does seem that your theory side-steps, and thus fails to address, the

²⁷Hack, p. 42.

very thing in need of explanation.” Finally, to those who try to reduce everything to matter it may be said: “You talk about the stuff things are *made of*; but have you told me *what* makes them, and for what reason? To say that things are made of matter arranged in a particular way because . . . they are made of matter arranged in a particular way is, indeed, a monstrous tautology.” As Guthrie notes,

It [is] not enough to name the material *archē*, the stuff from which the world is made. Why should this material substratum (if, as they claimed, it is one only) appear in so many different forms? What is the cause of its change into the multiplicity of phenomena? Why not a dead, static world? Besides the one material substance, one must also discover the force which is at work producing movement and change within it.²⁸

The point of all three dialectical refutations is this: when presented with a phenomenon that people really see and talk about meaningfully, no one is justified in ignoring it or wishing it to go away, thrusting forward alternatives that are, at bottom, empty or circular. The philosopher asks questions that no one else can answer, not the chemist or the poet, not the sociologist or the mathematician.

If we hope to surmise what the earliest thinkers intended to convey, especially when their sayings are often weighted with the remnants of poetic metaphor and unspoken premises about the living nature of the universe, we shall have to strip off the blinders of the “scientific” world-view and take a fresher look. It is extremely important to take into account the tendency of the earliest thinkers to borrow necessarily inadequate images from nature in order to explain the *ground* or *source* of nature itself.

²⁸Guthrie, p. 63.

A close reading of their fragments indicates that they are not merely describing the world of experience but—what is immeasurably more significant—are attempting to *explain* it. When the Presocratics venture to propose a material thing as explanatory agent, one would be hard-pressed to argue they meant it with empirical literalness. Regarding the Milesians in particular, Guthrie appositely remarks:

The term which it is above all things important to avoid [applying to them] is the term “materialists,” since that is a word currently applied to those who deliberately deny any place to the spiritual among first principles. It denotes those who, well aware that a distinction has been drawn between material and non-material, are prepared to maintain in argument that nothing in fact exists which has not its origin in material phenomena.²⁹

Even if, for instance, a physical interpretation of Anaximenes could be sustained on the alleged reason that “soul” in primitive terms seems to be the life-breath and “the world” (heaven and earth) appears to be enveloped in an atmosphere, a literalist reader would have to admit nonetheless that any broader extension of the claim—a declaration, for instance, that Infinite Air, understood as ordinary atmospheric air, is the first principle of everything—violates the testimony of the senses and raises a score of common-sense objections. Considering the statements of Anaximenes more thoughtfully, we see that a theoretical leap has been made from the apparent or phenomenal dimension to the indwelling and causative; and it is precisely such a leap that indicates a broadening of the signification of “air” to a kind of ontological fountain, of which human breath and the earth’s

²⁹Guthrie, p. 64.

atmosphere are two easily recognizable analogues.³⁰ One fragment of Anaximenes reads: "As our soul, he says, being air holds us together and controls us, so does breath and air enclose the whole world. (Air and breath are synonymous here.)"³¹ When Anaximenes identifies "air," "breath," and "soul," already he seems to have amplified the realm of *pneuma*, broadening out its meaning to include the vital activities of man, even his thinking about breath. Furthermore, if "air" and "breath" are really synonymous, then Anaximenes has begun to describe the setting of the world itself in pneumatological terms, as though the *kosmos* were an immense breath, the breath of a living organism, with its own vitality and purposiveness—as the Stoics were to teach in their natural theology. Another fragment tells us: "Air is close to the incorporeal; and because we come into being by an outflowing of air, it is necessary for it to be both infinite and rich because it never gives out."³² The elusive, invisibly surrounding, hardly substantial nature of air is a defensible analogue for that principle which is to account for the diversity and mutability of natural things as well as the sublimity and swiftness of the heavens.

To the air Anaximenes attributes an eternal motion, which, by cycles of condensation and rarefaction, dissolution and concentration, gives rise to the great diversity of things. Here we notice the entrance of *opposites* as subsidiary principles to

³⁰The same process of linguistic adaptation and extension may be seen at a more advanced stage in Anaximander's hypothesis of the indefinite divine substance, the indefinable first above all contrariety; although his words make use of physical metaphors like enfolding, controlling, separating, there can be no question about the strictly metaphysical insight behind his thesis.

³¹As reported by Aetius; see KRS, p. 158.

³²As reported by Olympiodorus; see *Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (New York: Penguin, 1987), p. 79.

account for the distribution of things out of or by the working of an initial unity, suggesting that Anaximenes, along with many early thinkers, sought a reconciliation of the one and the many in a system of exterior opposition following upon an originative or primal wholeness. Indeed, the attempt to situate diversity in the context of a basic unity underlying oppositions (be it expressed under the name of an element, an abstract concept like *apeiron*, or some consolidation of the two) must be considered one of the most elegant and influential contributions of the *physiologoi*. Aristotle recognizes this contribution in many places. In the *Physics* he praises earlier thinkers for hitting upon the idea of using contraries as starting-points for the science of nature—a procedure he himself will adopt—and in the *Metaphysics* he resumes the ancient search for an unconditional unifying ground of reality, which, in continuity with Parmenides and Anaxagoras, he will name *noēsis noēseōs*.

PYTHAGOREANISM AND LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The drive to unification surfacing first in Thales and the Milesian school later acquires, in the hands of the Pythagoreans, the intricate conceptual contours of number, proportion, and harmony. The Pythagoreans are said to have turned the world inside-out by seeking the ultimate *logos* of material forms not in an infinite potency or an analogically predicated natural element, but in the very finitude of mathematical forms. In light of what we have seen about the general Presocratic partiality for physical language, it may be asked why the Pythagoreans took what seems to be a strikingly different route by positing mathematical as *archai*. The genus of number and shape, quantity, suggests an answer. To number or diagram something implies a certain mastery of it as a whole composed of parts: we must recognize it as a *one* whose unity is not that of an aggregation or coincidence but rather a proper intelligibility in itself, yet at the same time as a *many* whose components are involved in manifold

relations. Such a recognition of reality as a one-many is reminiscent of the Milesians' quest for unity (be it Water, Soul, Air, or the Infinite) beneath or behind multiplicity.³³ When we break a thing down into symmetries or numbers, the mind seems to surround it and discover a formal structure underlying its outward appearance. To number arithmetically is to bring about or manifest a given order, and number itself can be common to otherwise unrelated objects or collections. To diagram and demonstrate in geometry is to exhibit the causes, uninhibited by the accidents of time and change; elementary figures suggest themselves as archetypes or *paradeigmata* of shaped matter.

Mathematical analysis, therefore, reveals an infrastructure or matrix of intelligibility, by which reason can claim to grasp, in some measure, the intrinsic boundaries and characteristics of a thing, its formal whatness. (Whence Plotinus and Augustine, taking the Pythagorean insight to its logical end, eventually equate form and number.) Such an analysis testifies to an abiding design or *paradeigma* which transcends individual objects while 'animating' them as more immanent than the very matter out of which they are composed. The Pythagorean numbers or figures are more than simply bones beneath flesh or beams beneath panels; they are the *species* of things, the interior whatness which makes distinct knowledge of them possible. Alexander of Aphrodisias remarks: "Both Plato and the Pythagoreans assumed numbers to be the first principles of

³³Every philosophical account, to be a *account of the whole*, must be based on a principle essentially different from all particulars, different from granite, flowers, mammals; a first principle, upon which the subsidiary principles, causes, and elements depend. The phrase "philosophy of being" and others like it, if they are to have any meaning, must mean an explanation of not just one kind of being, but all kinds as well as their origins and purposes. If any part be lacking, we may call the explanation adequate up to a point, but we cannot justly speak of an answer to the first questions *what* and *what for*.

existing things, because they thought that that which is primary and incomposite is a first principle.”³⁴ It is not fanciful, then, to regard the disciples of Pythagoras as bringing to completion the program adumbrated in Thales and developed by the *physiologoi* after him.

If we wish to understand the originality and revolutionary importance of the Thalean insights discussed above, we must mention some of the later theological developments whose roots are found in the Milesian school. If God or the gods, and *ipso facto* whatever comes to symbolize divine or originative principles, ought to be understood as the ultimate cause of the beauty, order, and intelligibility in the universe, it becomes quite clear that the traditional poetic accounts of gods and goddesses, dominated by a lush anthropomorphism and an indistinguishing animism, must be purged of error by the philosophical thinker.

When Thales proclaimed that Water was the living and divine substance of the universe, the real novelty lay in the fact that there were now, in the sixth century B.C., a number of Greeks who were ready to devote their best energies to the task of discovering a correct solution to this one problem, and in the fact that the supreme divine power was now expressly identified with the cosmogenetic divine substance. They did not eliminate the idea of god from their solutions, but they were primarily interested in a non-anthropomorphic divinity.³⁵

³⁴Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Commentarius in Metaphysica*, 55.20 ff., in *Collected Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 2397.

³⁵Hack, pp. 39–40.

It would be foolish, of course, to undervalue the real wisdom found in the traditional mythological accounts. By portraying personalities at the root of cosmic events, Hesiodic parables teach that the ultimate explanation of reality is Intelligence. Anthropomorphic gods, moreover, express man's intuition of intelligibility in the world and symbolize man's intrinsic affinity with the ground of reality. Primitive animism indicates a strong awareness of an immanent vital or natural principle active in all phenomena, traceable to the divine or transcendent Life. The world of the poets is, in its own way, a theophany. But it is also a fact that certain Presocratic thinkers, motivated by what might be called philosophical piety, went out of their way to criticize and condemn the religious practices and beliefs of their contemporaries. The surprisingly contemptuous utterances of Xenophanes, Empedocles, and Heraclitus make sense only if we take them to be signs of a devout search for wisdom beyond poetic daydreams and popular superstitions. The philosopher's scorn for poets and the "unknowing many" indicates a sharp awareness of the inability of mythic accounts to compass reality without introducing magnificent but fatal distortions. Insight into the true nature of the gods reveals the need for a genuine worship whose ritual and doctrine is rooted in a proper understanding of the divine order and harmony of the universe. On the religious aspect of early natural theology, Gregory Vlastos comments:

[I]n Xenophanes we find something quite different. When he calls nature 'God' he is asserting no 'mere' personification, but a doctrine which has urgent religious relevance, since it prompts him to attack the traditional beliefs as both irrational and irreverent. It is impious, he says in effect, to speak about the gods as Homer and Hesiod do, implying that *his* doctrine sets general standards for pious utterance. Heraclitus goes much further when he blasts away not only

at what people say about the gods, but at what they do in their most sacred rites. Such modes of worship offend not only his reason, but his religious sense; they are not only 'madness' (B5, B16), but sacrilegious madness, 'unholy mysteries' (B14).

There is a strong implication here that there can and ought to be a different form of worship which would qualify as 'holy'; and this is confirmed by a passage in Iamblichus: 'I distinguish two kinds of sacrifice: first, those of the completely purified, such as would happen rarely with a single individual, as Heraclitus says, or with a handful of men; secondly, the material. . . .' We need not take this as a willful preference for solitary worship. It is more likely an expression of Heraclitus' despair of the capacity of the 'many' to understand what he was talking about and to act accordingly. In any case, it is clear that the 'divinity' of his world-order (B67, B102, B114) is seriously meant as a genuine religious object which *could* be worshipped by the enlightened.³⁶

The earliest thinkers unquestionably divorced philosophy from mythology, argumentation from lyricism, genealogy, theomachy. They most certainly did not divorce philosophy from theology. Thales curtailed his inquiry, we might say in hindsight, at a proximate and semi-divine *logos* rather than the absolute and separate origin of all other things (including souls and elements) to which subsequent thinkers gradually attained. Due to the singular impetus provided by the Ionian school, later thinkers were able to contribute to the articulation and refinement of

³⁶Vlastos, pp. 94–95.

natural theology.³⁷ As a survey of its major thinkers reveals, Greek philosophy steadily matured in its awareness of the divine principle operative in the *kosmos*. Over the course of many centuries, this maturation bore in its wake social, ethical, and religious changes of profoundest consequence for Western cultural and spiritual history. Later in his essay, Vlastos draws a bold, and, if our own discussion has hit the mark, accurate inference from the inchoate religious doctrines of the Presocratics:

They took a word ['divine'] which in common speech was the hallmark of the irrational, unnatural, and unaccountable, and made it the

³⁷Hack suggests that a twofold motivation shaped and propelled early theology: "There is from the first a kind of dualism expressed or implied, a cleavage between higher and lower forms of the supreme god, or else a cleavage between the perfect substance of the supreme god and the imperfect substance upon which it worked, in every one of these philosophies. This cleavage, this partial dualism, is produced by the conviction, which the philosophers shared with all other Greeks, that the ultimate divine reality is perfect. The belief in the perfection of the supreme god is one of the two great driving forces that stimulated philosophers to differ from their predecessors, to invent new doctrines of the supreme god, and to demolish the theological systems that had hitherto been accepted" (p. 145); "the other driving force which operates in Greek philosophical and theological thought is the conviction that the ultimate divine reality must somehow or other account for and explain the universe which is immediately present to the senses. In other words, the causal function is held to be an essential part of the perfection of the supreme god; and from one point of view this force may be regarded as merely an element of the conviction already mentioned, and as one of the aspects of god's perfection" (p. 147).

name of a power which manifests itself in the operation, not the disturbance, of intelligible law. The transposition opened new religious possibilities. Had these been realized, Greek religion would have been freed of those evils which Lucretius in retrospect so justly imputes to it.³⁸

Although the reformation that might have been fostered in pagan religious practice failed to occur before the waning of Greek culture and the rise of Christianity, the insights of the earliest theologians in their search for true wisdom were not destined to barren obscurity. With the Presocratics, pagan religious thought had struck out on a course that would, over time, culminate in Platonic and Peripatetic theology, and in this dual capacity it played a definitive role in the majestic edifice of Patristic Christianity.

From our vantage 2500 years later, we cannot be certain what the earliest known Western philosopher intended to teach. Yet it is hard to deny that Thales, admired in his own times and honored afterwards as a pioneer, awakened the mind of his contemporaries to reflection on the nature of reality and charted out paths for his successors to tread. Without the Milesian initiation of inquiry into first principles, Plato might not have developed a doctrine of super-eminent forms, nor Aristotle an account of diverse modes and causes of being. Although Plato held many of the Presocratics in disdain because they failed to ground their explanation in the good (especially the human good), and although Aristotle looked down upon thinkers benightedly groping after the four causes, nevertheless each in his own way gathered up the rough ore of his predecessors and thrust it into the fires of dialectic, whence came forth those arguments and conclusions about the nature of reality that have stood the test of all later controversies and have never been

³⁸Vlastos, p. 120.

surpassed in their intellectual power. The influence of Thales and the Presocratic theologians did not subside with the advent of Socratic and Peripatetic philosophy; on the contrary, it held a steady course down the centuries, acting as a stimulant for minds engaged upon the same basic problems. When after a synoptic ascent from conclusion to conclusion Proclus declares in the *Elements of Theology* that “all things are overflowing with gods,”³⁹ surely the end of Greek philosophy is making a conscious return to its beginnings. In the words of Proclus, speaking of the circle of divine processions: “This reversion of the end upon the beginning makes the whole order one and determinate, convergent upon itself and by its convergence revealing unity in multiplicity.”⁴⁰ By looking closely at the contribution of Thales, we have begun to see how ancient Greek metaphysics converges upon itself and is, indeed, a unity in multiplicity.

Catholic University of America

³⁹*The Elements of Theology*, trans. E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963), Prop. 145, p. 129.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, Prop. 146, p. 129.