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Greek Natural Philosophy: The Presocratics and Their Importance for Environmental Philosophy

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Make no mistake, this is first and foremost a book about the Presocratics, who form the subject of seven of its nine chapters. Prima facie then it is a book for students of ancient Greek philosophy rather than environmental philosophy. But appearances can be, and in this case are, deceptive. For underlying the whole discussion is a bold – if programmatic – claim: the claim that environmental philosophy is the true heir of Greek natural philosophy and is indeed where the centre of gravity of philosophy as a whole ought to be located.

Thomas Huxley once wrote that ‘The question of questions for mankind – the problem which underlies all others, and is more deeply interesting than any other – is the ascertainment of the place which Man occupies in nature and of his relations to the universe of things’ (Huxley 1863: p. 71). This sums up, as well as anything can, the spirit of Presocratic philosophy from its first known exponent, Thales, whose views are discussed in Chapter 2, through to the Pythagoreans who are the subjects of Chapter 8. And this is the stance which, our authors claim, ‘after being eclipsed in 20th-century Analytic and Continental Philosophy .. is currently re-manifesting itself in the 21st century’ (p. 299). Key to this claim is the fact that for the Presocratics, the term ‘nature’ embraced everything that there is: to understand ‘nature’ was to understand how the world came into being, how it works, and how humans and their societies fit into the whole structure. Because it seeks to do justice to these concerns, the further claim is made that ‘environmental philosophy is, in fact, the oldest form of philosophy, going back to Greek natural philosophy’ (p. 9).

Before we get to the philosophers themselves we are helpfully reminded of the environmental and cultural contexts from which Presocratic philosophy emerged. In Greek, Babylonian and Jewish myth ‘the articulate and well-ordered world we find ourselves living in was forthcoming from a formless, chaotic, primordial unity’ (p. 92). As the authors proceed to show, this is a pattern we see reflected in the thought of the earliest (Milesian) school, who posited water, ‘the indefinite’ and air respectively as the primordial unity from which the world as we know it emerged by processes of separation and differentiation.

But given the paucity and fragmentary nature of the evidence, how are we to know what the Presocratic philosophers really thought? In essence our authors practise what Gilbert Harman once called ‘the inference to the best explanation’. The nature of the evidence is carefully explained and the contributions of Hermann Diels and Walther Krantz who collected the evidence is, quite properly, acknowledged. Working from this data the authors adopt a principle of interpretation that they call the ‘diachronic dialectic of ideas’, which sees each philosopher as ‘reacting both critically and creatively ... to his predecessors’ (p. 254). The story that follows is driven by this recurring dialectical exchange, and throughout the presentation of this dialectical narrative it is above all the boldness of these original thinkers that shines through. Thus: ‘What problem did Anaximenes discern in Anaximander’s philosophy?’ (p. 96). Answer: a contradiction, for Anaximander’s ‘indefinite’ is one, but it is said to separate out into four contraries. A thing cannot be both one and four. Hence, Anaximenes’s suggestion of one primordial unity – air – that undergoes *transformation* into

fire, earth and water. Problem solved. In the case of Heraclitus, the best explanation for his promotion of ‘logos’ is to see it as a riposte to his predecessors for asking the wrong question, i.e. of what is the world composed? The right question is: what law governs change and transformation? It is to this law that Heraclitus gave the name of ‘logos’ (p. 126). Particularly satisfying is the authors’ elucidation of the claim made by Kirk, Raven and Schofield that ‘Atomism ... fulfilled the ultimate aim of Ionian material monism by cutting the Gordian knot of the Eleatic elenchus’ (p. 220). Thus, because of the impossibility of ‘not-being’, Parmenides and his successors felt compelled by logic, and despite the evidence of the senses, to deny the possibility of change and motion. Everything just is. For the atomists, there is indeed just one underlying reality. But they conceive this to be ‘extension’ which, happily, can manifest itself as either full (atoms), or empty (void). Problem solved, and the possibility of change and motion re-established. (Even so, the problem of ‘not-being’ would not go away. For in the *Theaetetus* and the *Sophist*, we find Plato still wrestling with how to understand false belief, i.e. the belief in what is not!)

Plato and Aristotle, as one might expect, are fully involved in the discussion, not only as major sources but also as participants in the ‘diachronic dialectic’. Particularly rewarding in this respect is the authors’ casting of Plato as a Pythagorean (Chapter 8), which illuminates in equal measure both the Presocratics and the work of Plato himself.

When it comes to making good on the programmatic claim, however (Chapter 9), some readers may want to question in particular whether the philosophy practised towards the latter part of the twentieth century was as inimical to natural philosophy as is suggested. Is the question ‘What is truth?’ really ‘narrowly specialised’? (It may require quite specialised skills to handle it, but that is a different matter.) And would not some attention to the question of how words relate to the world have helped Plato, for example, with the problem of ‘not-being’? Quine is dismissed for expressing a ‘taste for desert landscapes’ (p. 314), but no mention is made of his ‘naturalised epistemology’ or his notion of beliefs as forming a (holistic) web. Nor is any mention made of the work of the later Wittgenstein in undermining the prevailing ‘atomism’ which the authors, no doubt rightly, castigate. One might add that both Quine and Wittgenstein showed a ‘boldness of thought’ not entirely unworthy of their Presocratic forebears. As for work directly relevant to environmental issues, a reader may wish to remind the authors that the only philosopher ever apparently to have advocated an outright ‘war against nature’ was the American pragmatist William James (James 1912), who is nevertheless lauded as a herald of the ‘new beginning’ (p. 327). That reader may also happen to believe that the key to addressing our environmental predicament lies in the creation of a (globally) just society – a society where no one can justifiably lay claim to more than they currently have. To such an endeavour no work bears greater relevance than John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

As an introduction to the Presocratics, this is as good as it gets. The approach is scholarly and the text itself is lively, informal and very accessible: it might indeed be read with profit by anyone interested in the origins of western culture. The programmatic claims of the book, however, are nowhere near conclusive. That said, and in defiance of Stephen Hawking’s claim that ‘philosophy is dead’ (p. 325), the book as a whole is a great reference-point from which to re-ignite a debate about where the beating heart of philosophy is now to be found.

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