

# **Patterns in the Sand**

## **Early Philosophy and the Discovery of Reality**

**By**

**Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof**

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When contemplating the rise of Greek philosophy and its significance to human thought and progress, I often summarize with the words of Bertrand Russell who said, “The rise of Greek civilization which produced this outburst of intellectual activity is one of the most spectacular events in history. Nothing like it has ever occurred before or since.”<sup>1</sup> Considering that this “outburst” began in a couple of ancient cities along the Ionian coast during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE—2,600 years ago—Russell’s statement, from his 1959 book, *The Wisdom of the West*, seems astonishing if not exaggeration. In our modern age, with all we have since accomplished and are still accomplishing today, how can we possibly consider the “intellectual activity” of a few ancient islanders the most spectacular event ever? Yet I believe Russell’s claim remains true today, even in the age of computer technology, satellites and rocket ships, and the advent of artificial intelligence (which didn’t exist in 1959), because all of our greatest intellectual accomplishments today and throughout history remain rooted in the thinking established by the earliest of Greek philosophers.

This is true not because of what they thought but because of *how* they thought. The early philosophers sought to understand the world on its own terms, as it presents itself, rather than upon superstitious, mythical, and religious explanations. And this is the only kind of thinking that has ever allowed us to accomplish the scientific, medical, and technological advances we have today. No voodoo ceremonies or faith healings have ever led us to a vaccine or antibiotic. Worshippers of the moon may have danced beneath its soft light, but none ever took one small step upon its surface, let alone made a giant leap for all mankind. Religion may help some individuals better cope with the world we live in, while leading others into denial and delusional thinking, but no religion or church has ever given us anything beneficial to the whole of humanity, although their adherents often believe their particular religion might do so if only they could make converts of everyone else on the planet.

The early Greek philosophers, often referred to, improperly I think, as the “presocratic philosophers,” were the first thinkers we know of who attempted to explain the world in natural rather than supernatural terms. An ancient Babylonian myth, for example, says the world was created from the remains of the sea monster Tiamat by the god Marduk after he defeated her. The Norse creation myth says, similarly, that the world was made by Odin, the Allfather, from the remains of an ice giant he’d slain in battle. The Hebrew myth that we’re most familiar with today claims it was fashioned in just six days by the voice commands of the Elohim. These are superstitious and mythical explanations of reality. But the early philosophers were what we call “First Principle” thinkers. They wanted to know what the world and reality are at the most elemental level, “the ultimate ‘stuff’ from which everything else proceeds.”<sup>2</sup>

Today we would call the stuff they were seeking “quanta” or, perhaps, “qubits.” But these early thinkers did not have the advantage of nearly three millennia of such thinking to build upon. They were starting from nothing and, remarkably, within less than two centuries they

arrived at the answer scientists continue to agree with today—that reality is comprised of atoms. This is the great benefit and power of not what but *how* these ancient thinkers thought. Their way of thinking has allowed and continues to allow human civilization to advance, and is the only thing that ever has, unlike the stagnation that lasts far longer when humanity is mired in superstition and mass delusions.

In seeking to explain the nature of reality, the very first of these first philosophers, referred to as the Ionians, from the cities of Miletus, Colophon, and Ephesus, began by trying to determine what the underlying element of all things might be. But before we get into what they thought, why them, and why then? In her book, *The Greek Way*, the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century renowned educator and author, Edith Hamilton suggests that ancient Greeks' love of play was a major factor in the rise of philosophy. Because their natural environment gave them a lot of security, freeing them from being in defensive mode, Hamilton says, "The joy of life found expression ... The Greeks were the very first people in the world to play, and they played on a great scale ... if we had no other knowledge of what the Greeks were like, if nothing were left of Greek art and literature, the fact that they were in love with play and played magnificently would be proof enough of how they lived and how they looked at life."<sup>3</sup>

In their book, *The Worlds of the Early Greek Philosophers*, J.B. Willbur and H.J. Allen say, "the playing of games is an affair of the imagination and the mind, as well as the competitive spirit; it is an ordered activity, and the Greek genius may be looked upon as the fusing of order and action on one of the highest levels of excellence ever attained by man[kind]."<sup>4</sup> In other words, their thinking wasn't wildly imaginative, hoping to stumble upon some great idea, but became disciplined. Like mastering a game, these thinkers wanted to understand how best to go about thinking in a way that leads to their goal of better understanding the world. In this way, the first philosophers learned how to reason and even developed early forms of scientific experimentation. Again, as Willbur and Allen explain, "Reliance on rational rather than mythological explanation is a marked characteristic of the early Greek philosophers. It is perhaps this trait more than any other that distinguishes them as philosophers..."<sup>5</sup>

Willbur and Allen outline other factors that may have also contributed to *how* these early Greeks came to think, like the particular lighting of region's unique landscape and cloudless skies that gave them an eye for, depth, details, and differences. "If the Greeks were the world's first true philosophers in that they formed a consistent and straightforward vocabulary for abstract ideas," they say, "it was largely because their minds, like their eyes, sought naturally what is lucid and well defined."<sup>6</sup>

The unusual economy of the region is another factor thought to have influenced their thinking. Because the area was largely unsuited for agriculture, its inhabitants depended on commerce, which led to the arrival of merchants, artisans, traders, and industry from many places, adding to a diversity culture and ideas, along with the necessary tolerance and curiosity that goes with it. As Heraclitus said, "[Those] who love wisdom must be inquirers into very many things indeed."<sup>7</sup> This, of course, is what the word *philosophy* means, "love of wisdom."

Additionally, the early Greeks had no priestly class to dictate what their beliefs ought to be, which also gave them a unique degree of intellectual freedom in the ancient world, “a fact making it possible for poet and philosopher to assume their important roles,”<sup>8</sup> Wilber and Allen say.

There are other contributing factors that may also help explain why the Ionians and some of the philosophers who came later, gave rise to the most spectacular outburst of intellectual activity in human history, but we already have enough to consider a few of the qualities that define *how* they thought.

- Be playful and imaginative with your ideas
- Become skilled in the use of reason
- Notice the things that contrast and contradict what we think we see and know
- Welcome a free exchange of ideas from different people and places
- Maintain a society that encourages the freedom to think for oneself

These are same qualities that make us spectacular thinkers today, and, in my opinion, are the only qualities that can. When they are absent, at best, nothing good is accomplished. At worst, terrible things do happen. I’ll come back to this, but first lets consider some of what these early philosophers themselves accomplished.

Thales of Miletus, born around 625 BCE, is the very first thinker we know of who attempted to explain the world by engaging in experimentation, mathematics, and reason. His new way of thinking was so unusual that some wondered what good it was and poked fun of Thales. One legend has him falling into a well while looking up at the stars. A child scoffed, "Thales is so eager to know what was happening in the sky that he can't see what's right in front of his feet." But Thales, who discovered key principles of geometry, astronomy, and meteorology, once used his knowledge to predict a better than usual olive season. So he rented all the olive presses in town in advance. As the olives ripened all the growers had to then rent them from Thales, at a hefty price. It is said that Thales did so just to prove to them that philosophy can be useful.

These earliest philosophers were elementalists, meaning they tried to figure out the fundamental element in all things. They didn’t have anything like our periodic table and, initially, had no idea of atomic theory. To them the elements were what they could see and touch. Thales believed this primal stuff is Water, for reasons it’s not necessary to go into here. His student, Anaximander, also of Miletus, was a bit more abstract in his thinking, and referred to the fundamental substance as “Apeiron,” translated as “the Boundless.” Anaximander didn’t think the first principle could be anything finite, so he gave whatever it is a name reflective of its *infinite* nature. If this seems a bit “out there,” keep in mind Anaximander was down to Earth enough to have been the inventor of the sundial, maker of the first map, the first to have constructed a globe, the builder of a clock, and was the first to claim life began as mud and slime and that humans evolved from fish.

Anaximenes, another Milesian, 25 years younger than Anaximander, was more aligned with Thales, but, instead of water, he considered Air the primary element. “As our soul, being air, holds us together,” he said, “so do breath and air surround the whole universe.”<sup>9</sup> He observed that air thickens into clouds, condenses into rain, and freezes into ice and snow,

hence, showing that it can become other things. He further speculated when fine it can become fire, probably because wind and breath can stoke flames; and when thickened it becomes not only becomes water, but then earth, and then stone. Rain makes mud. The mud dries. Then it hardens in the sun. Although they did engage in some experimentation that we might call science, most of what they conjectured was based upon mere observation and rational inferences.

Perhaps the most familiar early philosopher, Heraclitus, is well known for having considered Fire to be the primal element, mostly because he observed that all things change, and nothing changes itself and other things more than fire does. So we have what were once considered the only elements, water, air, fire, along with earth. Empedocles, born 15 years after Heraclitus's death, was the first to argue for a complex universe comprised of all four of these elements, which he called the "four roots," transformed into other things through the forces of Love and Strife, not unlike what we might call attraction and entropy today.

Other early philosophers came along and wondered how, if the universe is infinite, anything could be finite, and *vice versa*. Parmenides argued that change and motion must be illusions because true reality is unchanging and eternal. His student, Zeno, famously came up with a variety of paradoxes to prove his mentor's point. Because an arrow seen to be moving, for instance, always occupies two points in space, it is, by definition, always at rest. Such thinking may seem absurd and impractical to some, but it demonstrates philosophy's general ability to continue questioning what seems obvious to us, so that we are not fooled by mere appearances. Were it not for such thinking the early philosophers would never have evolved past thinking that the primal stuff of the universe must be something we can observe, like one or all of the four elements. (Today there are 118 known elements.)

Yet this way of thinking is so powerful that within less than 150 years after the first philosopher Thales was born, Leucippus and his student Democritus developed atomic theory, suggesting small, indivisible particles are eternally moving in the void and combine in various ways to form the visible world. Their science wasn't nearly as advanced as today's, but, within a relatively short period of time, they had essentially figured it out, the "stuff" of the universe. As free and independent thinkers, through their own observations and building upon each other's logical arguments, they came to understand the underlying nature of reality nearly 2,500 years before modern scientists would rediscover and prove the idea.

Because they turned to nature itself to figure things out, they are sometimes referred to as the natural philosophers. Aristotle, who greatly admired them, called them the *phusikoi*, translated as "physicists." But the root of this word, *physis*, simply means "nature." So both are appropriate labels. Whether we call them physicists, natural philosophers, or presocratic, the early philosophers remain the exemplars of *how* we ought to think if we want humanity to progress.

Alas, their time was brief, compared to the tenure of the Holy Roman Empire that condemned all Greek philosophy as paganism, destroyed as much as ninety percent of their writings, and ushered humanity into a near millennium of intellectual stagnation and misery. This is so, I'd suggest, because the kind of thinking that dominated this dark age was the antithesis of the kind of thinking that made the first philosophers spectacular.

Instead of being playful and imaginative, it was dogmatic and constraining. It was based upon superstition rather than reason. It refused to allow the mere utterance of any conflicting or contradictory views. It forced everyone to hold and profess the same beliefs and was hostile towards those with different ideas. It was not an ideologically free society, but one bound by the dogmas and dictums handed down from those in authority.

During their era by contrast, the early philosophers, using reason to grapple with the world on its own terms—natural and physical terms—developed heliocentric models of the universe, along with elemental, evolutionary, and atomic theories of life and reality. They discovered musical octaves, irrational numbers, meteorology, paleontology, and other practical applications of understanding the natural world. And they engaged in early scientific experimentation, medicine, and even surgery. All of this occurred in an astonishingly brief period of time compared to the near thousand years of relative stagnation that was to follow.

But the early philosophers weren't entirely without opposition during their lives, although such opposition also presented itself mostly in the form of philosophy and honest inquiry. Pythagoras, for example, also counted as an early philosopher, disagreed with the Ionian philosophers' emphasis on physics and the natural world. Pythagoras, rather, believed everything in the entire universe came down to mathematics, which he often explained in moving and poetic terms. The phrase, "music of the spheres," originates from him. Indeed, he was both a philosopher and a priest, the founder of the religion named after him, Pythagoreanism, which took on some of the dogmatism and authoritarianism religion is too often known for. Pythagoras believed in the eternal soul, and that all is number and all things exist in number. Strange as this seems, Pythagoras and his school were the discoverers of musical octaves, the Pythagorean theorem, and other mathematical truths that are useful in real physics.

But his thinking also contradicts the Ionian philosophers' attempts to understand reality by physically grappling with the reality before us. As Greek Historian Benjamin Ferrington explains, "Herein lay a danger ... Mathematics not only seemed to provide a better explanation of things than the Ionian view. It kept the souls of the brethren pure from contact with the earthly, the material, and suited the changing temper of a world in which contempt for manual labor kept pace with the growth of slavery. In a society in which contact with the technical processes of production became ever more shameful, as being fit only for slaves, it was found extraordinarily fortunate that the secret constitution of things should be revealed, not to those who manipulated them, not to those who worked with fire, but to those who drew patterns on the sand."<sup>10</sup>

Pen and parchment being scarce resources, the Pythagoreans did their math in the sand, and, for them, that was the extent of their meaningful interactions with the physical world. Like many, if not most religions, in trying to understand reality, they came to despise the physical world and to escape its reality by retreating into their ideas about it, leaving the real world, (considered sinful, fallen, illusionary, the cause of suffering, and so on) a far worse and more unjust place in the process.

This is why, to me, the very first of the first philosophers, regardless of whatever first principle they believed in, demonstrate for us the principles necessary for the kind of thinking that will make human civilization more just, while enabling us to progress

together, not matter our differences. These principles were rediscovered during the Renaissance, a word that refers to the renewed interest in their ideas and, more importantly, in *how* they thought. The Renaissance was the emergence from the Dark Age, which led to the Enlightenment, during which this way of thinking flourished, as did human civilization, for about another two centuries, until around 1950, when a new age of endarkenment, marked by intolerance and stagnation, began descending upon humanity.

Today, we are in desperate need of a new Renaissance, another rediscovery of the only way of thinking that has ever allowed us to emerge from darkness and move together toward the promise of human progress. It doesn't matter what we think, so long as we pay attention to *how* we think.

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- Welcome a free exchange of ideas from different people and places
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This is our intellectual heritage as religious liberals, in which lies humanity's best hope and its greatest potential.

<sup>1</sup> Russell, Bertrand, *The Wisdom of the West*, Crescent Books, Inc., Rathbone Books Limited, London, 1959, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Wilbur J.B., and Allen, H.J., *The World of the Early Greek Philosophers*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1979, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Hamilton, Edith, *The Greek Way*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, NY, 1942, p. 30ff.

<sup>4</sup> Wilbur and Allen, *ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94f.