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# Font of All Matter

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The origins of Western philosophy remain shrouded in mystery: what actually happened in Greece back at the turn of the 7th to 6th century B.C. which brought about a new way of thinking, and encouraged scholars to start pondering the origins of their existence and that of the universe? Our perseverance in studying the period is impeded by the relentless passage of time, which destroys evidence, shifts attitudes, and takes us ever further from the source. Our separation from that time is made all the more dramatic by the fact that many people believe it was when the greatest advancements were made, yet we are cut off from them now. And not because there was simply more to discover back in the early days, but because of an extraordinary insight and ability to pose the right questions. And perhaps, as Aristotle believed, thanks to a sense of astonishment, whose innocence is free of presumptions, context and relativism.

Every course on the history of philosophy begins with water, because Thales of Miletus – the first philosopher in the Greek tradition – believed water to be the first principle of nature. For the ancient Greeks, the question of *arche*, or the underlying fabric of everything, was as important as that of *telos*, or the full potential or inherent purpose of the world. They did not

Leon Wyczółkowski, Landscape with a River, 19(...)4

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accept the explanation, introduced much later by Christianity, that something can be created from nothing. In the ontology of the ancient Greeks this was obviously impossible. Something either exists or does not – or, following the Aristotelean principle of the excluded middle, either a proposition is true or its negation is true. According to Parmenides, "We can speak and think only of what exists," which a few centuries later was translated into Lucretius' maxim *Ex nihilo, nihil fit* ("Nothing comes from nothing").

And so Thales of Miletus believed water to be the progenitor of all matter. It's unclear why: perhaps because we are so easily able to change its physical state under normal conditions? Or perhaps because he spent a lot of time sailing the seas between Greek islands or travelling to Asia? In a letter to Pherecydes announcing his upcoming visit (preserved for us thanks to Diogenes Laërtius), Thales wrote: "For as you are fond of your present habitation you are not likely to come to Ionia, nor are you desirous of seeing strangers; but you rather, as I hope, devote yourself wholly to the occupation of writing. We, on the other hand, who write nothing, travel all over Greece and Asia."[1] This excerpt touches on two fascinating themes. As well as mentioning travel – we know that Thales visited scholars in Asia – it is notable that neither Thales nor his companion Solon occupied themselves with writing. Moreover, they clearly stated that they had no interest in it – something which would seem unimaginable to contemporary scholars. Giorgio Colli believes that this attitude was characteristic of the first Greek thinkers; they considered discussion to be a higher form of communication than the written word, and they likely believed that they saw their knowledge as esoteric, only accessible to a select few. Meanwhile it is impossible to prevent our written words from falling into the wrong hands. This is why Thales left behind no treatises or notes – just two short letters. Luckily we have the testimonies of Herodotus and Diogenes Laërtius and mentions of him in Plato and Aristoteles. They allow us to determine when he lived and what he did with some degree of certainty; we even know that he predicted an eclipse of the sun in 585. Aetius also reports that Thales was the first scholar to argue that the moon reflects the light of the sun.

So, when he said that everything originated from water, was Thales really claiming that the world around him was made of the substance? Striving to make sense of this, historians often state that viewing water as the first principle had a broader meaning, reaching beyond its material sense. Water, rather, was meant to be a model for all other substances and for the laws governing our world. Still, Bertrand Russell notes: "The statement that everything is made of water is to be regarded as a scientific hypothesis, and by no means a foolish one. Twenty years ago, the received view was that everything is made of hydrogen, which is two thirds of water."[22] Contrary to appearances, the problem is important because understanding the significance water had for Thales can be extrapolated onto our entire approach to philosophy, which can be regarded either as an assemblage of unproven nonsense, or as continuing attempts to explain the world and our significance in it, or as a revealed truth, prophetically coming ahead of its time.

I admit that I tend towards the latter view, especially the assumption that philosophy should reflect life as closely as possible. Based on what Diogenes wrote about Thales, we can conclude that he considered it important that his reflections should be precisely like this – stepping beyond the obvious, yet still possible to apply in our daily lives. Even if Thales occasionally stumbled along a rocky path because he was busy gazing at the stars, he was able to translate his observations into specifics accessible to less educated people. In any case, all those who mock the impracticalities of philosophy or are mocked as impractical philosophers would do well to remember the tale of Thales and olive presses: the scholar's careful observations of nature led him to conclude that the olive harvest would be particularly abundant one particular year, so he bought up all the presses he could and rented them out, turning a tidy profit.

Water, the first principle of reality according to Thales, is at once real and metaphorical. One can interpret it in many ways, posing the most fantastical exegeses or – as the philosopher would undoubtedly agree – one can finally grasp that without it there is no life. And it seems to me that we should all conduct this exercise for ourselves, because, as Thales had said, giving advice to others is the simplest thing in the world, whereas getting to know ourselves is the hardest.

[1] D. Laërtius, Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers, trans C. D. Yonge 1853
[2] B. Russell, A History of Western Philosophy, 1945

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