

# INTO THE DEEP WATERS OF PHILOSOPHY

On a few examples of aquatic metaphors that invoke some of the most important philosophical concepts.

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Every culture has a certain set of fundamental metaphors which are rarely the subject of observation or study yet allow other things to reveal themselves in their light. Although these metaphors appear to be “merely” vivid comparisons, ordinary devices that serve to make utterances more understandable, attractive, beautiful, universal, and lively (in other words, although the task that they perform is seemingly not determined until a thought has already crystallized and is ready to be conveyed in the process of communication), they in fact do play an important role when thoughts are still starting to take shape. In its initial phase, human thinking is closely linked to rudimentary sensory experiences that are reflected in the simplest colloquial vocabulary. In the language of every discipline of science, we can easily find many terms that – when understood literally – bring to mind situations that are very sensual.

In the history of European philosophy (which is the focus of this article), we can find many such metaphors along with their countless uses. Some of them are aquatic metaphors, or ones that refer to different forms and properties of water.

## The principle of all things

It just so happens that one of the earliest preserved philosophical statements concerns water. In the conjecture made by Thales of Miletus, “water” is the metaphorical answer to the question about the origin (*arché*) of all being, which could be interpreted – again metaphorically – as a question about the source from which it springs. Water starts flowing from the place described as its source, creating the environment for life and shaping the surrounding landscape, where it carves out room for itself. It is

merely one of the elements comprising the universe, alongside earth, fire, air, and aether, but it is the most creative and life-giving element. It is the fundamental component – or a building block – of all other things. Obviously, we may question its ubiquity and elementary nature, especially if we look at it from the perspective of today’s natural sciences, but we must bear in mind that such historically distant thinking (from the sixth century BC) about the element of water as the source of all being pertained not so much to the empirically and statistically proven fact of the presence of water in the universe as to trying to describe what manifested itself in the emerging philosophical experience. And this experience was concerned not with identifying the quantity in which something is found in nature or the frequency at which it is found there but with seeking insight into the general essence of things. While trying to understand why Thales had chosen water as the originating principle of all things (*arché*), Aristotle, who lived more than two centuries later, pointed to its universal role in the process of preserving life (nutrition) and giving life (reproduction). He saw moisture as the property of water that is decisive for its original nature. Naive as this statement may sound, its purpose was to attempt to describe what was perceived in the emerging philosophical experience as something that transcends every single thing and all things put together, while simultaneously constituting their basis and essence, without which all being would collapse into nothingness. In other words, this is something thanks to which all being can exist, as opposed to inexistence.

There is no better way to understand why Thales chose water to express his philosophical experience than by “getting a feel” for how we can experience water in different ways. By so doing, we can sense that the substance of water is delicate, that it is viscous yet not sticky, that it flows smoothly, in addition to being liquid, shapeless, simple, transparent, tasteless, and elusive, and therefore in a sense impossible to capture with the senses, that it is paradoxically non-sensual, despite the fact that it does seem so very sensual, not only in the sense that it is accessible to the senses but also in the “erotic” sense. It is tempting and soothing,



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it strips objects of their weight, and so on. It links and binds things together, just like the power of love...

## The river of the world

Here, it is worth pointing out that the explanations provided by Aristotle stress the active role that water plays in preserving and giving life. This experience of the beneficial activity of water would subsequently become commonplace in the European culture and philosophy. I will say a few words about this later. For now, I would like to mention Heraclitus and his river, into which no man could ever step twice or – according to an interpretation later proposed by one of his students – even once. The river is used here as a metaphor that highlights the dynamic yet also negative character of the aquatic principle of things. After all, things not only come into existence but also perish, thus making room for other things, which also have a thirst to perform on the stage formed by the world. Without losing its active nature, water – chosen to play the role of the principle of all things – assumes the form of a river as something that destroys the identity of things and prevents them from being fully what they are. The river is a symbol of transience and elapsing.

## The power of cleansing

First noticed by Thales, this active property of water, which would prove to have great significance not only in philosophy but also in all culture, manifested itself in yet another effect, namely one that combined both the destructive and the creative aspect of its essence. What I mean here is water's cleansing power. This aspect of water is a very broad subject and may be the one that carries the greatest significance for man. The fact that water not only quenches our thirst but also purifies us has become a basic fact allowing us to take care of our health and to adhere to the rules of hygiene as well as to perform complex acts of a ritualistic nature.

The motif of purity has played a remarkable role in almost all aspects of culture, especially in religion (vows of chastity) and ethics (a clean conscience, the virtue of chastity) as well as in the theory of knowledge (*a priori* knowledge) and esthetics (*katharsis*). Purity is a state that shows only what belongs to a given thing and determines the fact that it is what it is. Removing impurities from a thing means separating what is alien and comes from the outside from what belongs only to that thing. Purification means returning to one's self, regaining one's identity, lost as a result of being surrounded by others. In this sense, purification is always an attempt to recreate the mythical and lost state of being oneself, which was given even before a specific thing was born and was destroyed as a result of its existence in the world and the passing of time (aging). Coming into the world, which as a rule

involves a lot of impurities, is the beginning of the constant process of regaining and losing one's own identity. This process is called life. Here, it reveals itself in its truth as fragile and weak. Just as it did for the first time, when its original environment, the place of its creation, which occurred even before birth, was the water-filled environment in the mother's body, which ensured the state of perfect purity (children are temporally close to this state and therefore regarded as utterly pure). And just as it will do one last time, at the moment of its death...

But people did not always believe in the cleansing power of water. Paradoxically, it was in the times of the emergence of scientific thinking that the cathartic properties of water were called into question. In the 17th century, for example, purity was achieved not through washing but through changing undergarments and scrubbing bodies and objects with dry towels. In that case, the experience of purity had its source not in the purity of the body but in the pure whiteness of undergarments exposed to public view. Then, purity became synonymous with order, including also social order. In the following centuries, when water was back in favor, experiencing purity in public faded into the background, replaced by purity that was private and intimate and pertained not only to visible impurities but also and above all to what was invisible and more dangerous than dust or sweat (the discovery of microorganisms). Purity pertained to the body, and it was achieved through bathing.

All these things are related on the one hand to the understanding of the elements that surround humans (water, earth, fire, and air) and on the other hand to the human body. In the 17th century, the human body was perceived as passive, frail, weak, soft, open, constantly exposed to the danger of the violation of its boundaries, and unable to counter the influence of water and air (hence the avoidance of baths and the tendency to wear multiple layers of clothing). In the 18th century, however, the human body gained strength – it had its own immunity and resistance. It had power that came from nature and allowed it to counter the external – as long as we let it do so by cleaning its external surface and providing it with healthy food. The human body was seen as hard, active, autonomous, closed, independent, and capable of defending itself against whatever transgressed its boundaries. It resembled metal more than a sponge. It could be made stronger and molded into shape. Cold showers tempered the resistance of the body and therefore its strength. Water not only washed the body but also made it stronger.

## Being yourself

In this way, water is involved in the drama of birth and death, which fight a battle over both the recreation of one's own identity and its preservation. Keeping the



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body clean is only one of the elements of taking care of being whole. If we leave out the strictly theological connotations (which are in plentiful supply in Christian tradition, symbolically related to the motif of fish and theologically woven around the sacrament of baptism) and stay within the boundaries of philosophy, which nonetheless remains close to religious thinking in these aspects, we should cite Plato and his aquatic conception of the drama of human life. Here, the battle over being oneself is fought on a field of efforts to get at the truth, which requires us to go beyond what our senses tell us and to use conceptual analysis to reach out to true being, which Plato referred to as ideals. The purpose is to purify contact with ideals from the sensual and the superficial. Purification is a practice that applies not only to the body – in Plato’s opinion, the body itself belongs to what is external to man and therefore must be removed. Purification of knowledge from sensual elements is achieved through philosophic pursuits, and since the separation of the body and the soul and the removal of the body is tantamount to death, philosophy was for Plato “the practice of death.” In order to describe the soul’s journey into the world of truth in an act of cognition, Plato uses various metaphors – in one of them, he compares man to a flying fish that jumps out of the sea in an attempt to see what is above the surface. Another comparison draws on a marine metaphor. Knowing the world of ideals is referred to as “the second voyage.” As Eustathios explains, “‘the second voyage’ is the way of those who try oars when the wind fails.” Consequently, sensual knowledge means sailing with the wind, and using reason to get to know ideals is an effort that must be made in order to get to know the intelligible truth by purifying reason of what is sensual. By comparing the knowledge of ideals, which determines the fulfillment of our existence, to a sea voyage, Plato obviously drew

on what was already a rich tradition of describing human fate as a journey across the turbulent sea of life. The dubious certainty that man gains and holds on to when looking into the dark waters of existence is like ancient Europe surrounded by the “sea of darkness” (*Mare Tenebrarum*).

## Liquid modernity

At the end of this short essay, I would like to stress that the motif of water was used to describe the most important experiences in human life not only in the distant times of ignorance. Aquatic metaphors are still recognized in today’s philosophy and culture. One only needs to invoke “the stream of consciousness” as the aspect of our existence that distinguishes us, humans, from other beings. Just as water’s capacity to capture the universal principle of being was noticed and appreciated in the early days of the history of philosophy, so is water becoming an appealing motif also at what could be described as the end of this history, this time allowing us to put an end to the understanding of being as permanent presence, which has already been identified as erroneous and dangerous. The metaphor of water, understood through the prism of its liquidity (as Heraclitus understood it), again provides a point of departure for this criticism, which took on broad dimensions in the second half of the 20th century.

In the “liquid modernity” in which we currently live, all continents, lands, and safe havens have been flooded over, and we, “the last people” – unlike our ancestors, who were safe in their ark and had faith that the flood would subside – are drifting, without navigation, into the unknown and the uncertain on “the ship of fools” known from Renaissance novels. When we look at the horizon, we can see no reason to get off this ship.