

## THE ANCIENT GREEKS: A TRANSITION FROM DIVINE JUSTICE TO COSMIC JUSTICE

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### **Abstract**

*The Greek antiquity as portrayed in its mythical and religious tradition exhibits a kind of natural order and harmony preordained by divine authority as a part of its heritage. All of us know that Goddesses were the very earliest dispensers of justice in ancient Greece. Their main duty was to regulate the course of nature and the behavior of human beings according to the Divine Principles. However some of the early Greek philosophers made a transition and discovered new ways to explain things and course of the world. Instead of relying on the ancient scriptures, they started to use reason, contemplation and observations to make sense of reality. By using human reason, they attempted to understand the things of the world. Initially the natural philosophers of the pre-socratic period gave importance to rational explanation without any scriptural and divine intervention. This has led to the evolution of natural philosophy and a perceptible transition from a mythological and religious worldview to a scientific one.*

### **Keywords**

*Greek antiquity, Milesians, arche, Apeiron, primary stuff, cosmic justice, divine justice.*

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Before the advent of Milesian philosophers the Greek society was fully dominated by the mythological , religious and magical traditions. To explain the creation of the universe, the life of human beings in the world, the relationship between man and the universe and social activities, the early Greeks used myths exclusively . In pre-philosophical literature of ancient Greece it is held that God is supremely good, merciful and just, and divine justice is the highest law. Initially the Greek myths were propagated in an oral poetic tradition . Gradually the myth of the heroes of the Trojan War became part of the oral tradition of Homer’s epic poems, the Illiad and the Odyssey and the Theogony of Hesiod. The ancient Greeks believed in a variety of Greek mythological characters. The traditional story of Olympian gods beginning with chaos is told by Hesiod , a vague divine primordial entity in his Theogony. He connected each divine figure with a particular part of the physical universe . So his theogony we can say is a cosmogony in which it is said about the generation of the world. Deities are definitely human beings with superhuman powers ; and they have nothing worthy of praise in morality.(Russell , 1963 : 33 ) In Hesiod’s world the major divine entities like Gaia, Uranus, Cronos , and Zeus behave like superhuman beings. They would worship specific Gods for specific reasons.

For Greeks immortality and power are the basic properties of divinity .They believed that Gods were involved in all aspects of human life - work, theater, justice, marriage, and battle. In mythological explanation we rely on gods and goddesses. They believe that anything that happens in nature (natural events ) or whatever happens in the life of human beings is only due to divinely predestined . Homer richly endows the gods in his epic poems with human characteristics and foibles. As Richmond Lattimore points out: “The gods of Homer are mainly immortal men and women, incomparably more powerful than mortals, but like mortals susceptible to all human emotions and appetites, therefore capable of being flattered, enraged, seduced, chastized “(Lattimore , 1951 : 54) .

It may also be noted that in prehistoric Egypt and Mesopotamia the main interest was focused on the question as to how the world came into being ? Here to answer this question they have fused religion, myth, magic and gross observation together. Egyptians and Mesopotamians held that for the survival of the world, magic was essential. To explain all the natural phenomena virtually magic was used. The diagnosis and treatment of internal ailments relied heavily on magic. The Egyptians believed that the internal ailments were caused by the presence of demons in the body . The body can be cured by driving the demon from the body or the poison which have been injected into the body. To do this they used amulets and other efficacious objects to protect the patient.Similarly in the Greek antiquity it was

believed that the will of the deities was irresistible. The heroes obey that the will of the deities was their destiny. Under this situation the Homeric Epics and the Theogony by Hesiod gave the authority to deities in the beginning of the world. This worldview did not require knowledge but only faith, belief and obedience.

The Milesians endeavored to understand the world on purely rational grounds and gave a naturalistic and rational explanation of the existing natural world. Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes are the three chief representatives of the Milesian school. The main problem before them was that, what the nature is and the genesis of the things of the world. They assumed that there must be some ultimate source out of which everything in the world has come out. That source may be one substance or one process which is the ultimate cause of this world. So the fundamental question is what is the underlying nature and structure of this ultimate source? In the process, we would like to point out that in this inquiry they have used some techniques and analytical tools which constitute an integral part of modern explanatory system.

After the settlement of social life, rational reflections evolved to search for the arche i.e. the first principle of the world, The main aim of Milesian philosophers was to explain nature on rational principles. We cannot deny that the questions raised by Milesians had been already posed by poets and the common man. But the Milesians occupy special place due to their methodological approach and their belief in the liberation of reason from myths and divine intervention. In Milesian philosophy we find a perceptible transition from myths to reason or logos.

The urge to explore the mysteries of nature in Greek antiquity, is evident from the worship of deities and their religious practices. With the emergence of Milesian's progress of thought, the natural philosophers started to think about the beginning of the world by breaking off from the religious worldview, which was the starting point of scientific and rational thinking of the Greeks. Greek thought first blossomed in the city of Miletus which produced some of the most famous early thinkers and they were Thales, Anaximenes, and Anaximander who are collectively known as Milesians. With the advent of Milesians there is an urge to understand the world by adopting an explanatory way without any divine intervention. For the first time the Milesians reject this notion of mythical world and look at it as Kosmos which is an ordered natural arrangement and free from supernatural intervention. Their thought is independent of any religious and mythical influences. This kind of natural enlightenment would lead to find out the first cause.

The three Milesian philosophers attempted to answer the question, "What is the common stuff from which everything is composed?" Aristotle said that each

one of the Milesian philosophers tried to explain the world by only one single element which is a material principle and each of them chose a different element like for Thales water, for Anaximander Apeiron, for Anaximenes air. They thought that the first element out of which everything is produced and at last they resolved into that. The basic stuffs of the physical world are water, earth, air and fire. In mythological explanation these four elements are under the control of Gods. But the Milesians, in place of Gods considered these four elements to constitute the whole of nature.

Thales is regarded as a figure of illustrious knowledge in a variety of fields, including engineering, politics, applied economics, and science. He is known as the creator of Greek astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy. Thales, the beginner of philosophical thought claims that some form of matter was the origin of all things and that made him different from all others. For him nature is a complete and self-ordering system and there is no divine intervention from outside the world. Thales, the father of ancient Greek philosophy believed that water was the basis of all things and the principle of the universe. Thales believed that in the beginning there was only water. The world and everything was composed of water. He attempted to give a naturalistic explanation of the world without reference to the supernatural. His most famous belief was his first cosmological doctrine, which held that the world is originated from water.

Water is essential for the creation and preservation of both living creatures and some ostensibly nonliving things, and it is prominent in the physical structure of the Earth as it occurs not only on the ground but also above it in the form of rain and below it as the water on which the earth floats. Thales of Miletus states that the first principle is water, because warmth lives in moisture, dead things wither up and all germs are moist. The life force of water permeates the entire world because everything is made of or ultimately derived from water. However, some things exhibit this life force more prominently than others (just as some things are wetter than others). Water is divine because it is a living thing that has no apparent beginning or finish in time. As a result, everything is made of or arising from water is full of the divine. (McKirahan, 2010)

The statements of Aristotle may be reduced to three assumptions :

(1) The earth floats on the water. (2) Water is the material cause of all things. (3) All things are full of gods. The magnet is alive; for it has the power of moving iron. (Burnet, 1920, P:34). According to Thales, 'water is the primary element' but before him water is also considered as primary in some cosmological mythologies. Thales leaves the gods out of any explanation about the creation of the world. This is where his originality lies. So it seems to be a very sophisticated move

to abandon mythological exposition of the natural world in favor of rational explanations and this is what Thales did.

Anaximander rejects the view of Thales. He believed in the existence of a natural law, a kind of cosmic justice that kept the four primary elements in balance. These elements were perpetually in strife due to their different texture and consistency. According to Anaximander the underlying cause of everything in this world was called the boundless. Like Thales, Anaximander believed that there was a single source of all things. But he argued that neither water nor earth nor fire nor air could be the primary stuff because, if any one of the four elements was the primary substance and spread unlimitedly throughout the cosmos then all other things would be destroyed. So the ultimate cause must be invisible and unlimited which is called the apeiron. The important argument in this theory is the philosophical idea of an eternal and unchangeable cosmological essence from which everything is derived and finally returned. This is identical to the infinite (apeiron). Anaximander believed that the apeiron was in reality changing into the four elements which in turn interacting with one another gave all things. He is the first philosopher who grounded ultimate reality in something non-perceptible. The notion of Apeiron as the material source of things accepts the world is not coming out of nothingness rather there is something out of which it is produced. There is no other cause of Apeiron rather it is the first cause of everything, It is the uncaused cause of everything.

The properties of the elements are opposites, like fire is hot and water is wet, earth is cold and air is dry, so they try to destroy each other. "Anaximander believes that the opposites hot and cold are equally important in the structure and operation of the world and gives them a prominent position in his cosmogony" (McKirahan, 2010, P:36). Water destroys fire. Both cannot co-exist. Anaximander considered apeiron as a body in between these opposite elements. As it is boundless, it will overpower the other elements. So, for him the elements come from the apeiron. From this we know that how one thing can transform itself into the many. Here there is a reference to a cosmic moral order.

In the origin of the cosmos there are three steps.

1. Generation or birth
2. Acts of justice and injustice when one element penetrates the area of another element.
3. Destruction as punishment.

According to the assessment of time all the four elements change into one another and according to necessity they pay penalty and retribution to each other for

the injustice they have done to one another. Despite a conflict between the opposites, proper balance is maintained in due time. The opposite elements dominate each other and produce a regulated structure. For Anaximander this structured arrangement is called justice. Over time the cyclic changes are regulated and therefore form a system. This system which is ruled by justice of the ordering of time is different from the chaotic world of the Greek Gods who interfere in the worldly activities.

There is a difference between the cosmology of Anaximander and the cosmology of Homer or of Hesiod. Because Anaximander has removed the supernatural with a boldness and completeness. He has experienced all those things like supernatural or mythical characters which are detected by him. During his time the things or objects on which the religious consciousness was focused, were eliminated by him. The primary order remains a moral order in which justice prevails ; but the will of the personal deity has disappeared and the natural cause has partly taken its place. So we have left the supernatural behind and have passed at one step into reason. (Cornford, 1912 )

A new world view is being offered by Anaximenes. According to him the basic stuffs and qualities are not opposed but rather different stages of a continuum.

Fire - Air - Wind - Cloud - Water - Earth - Stone

Each one of the stuff in the continuum is capable of condensing or rarefying into either of its neighbors. For example water can condense into Earth or rarefy into the cloud . Each kind can so either condense or rarefy into air. He thought that air was the primary element out of which the others produced by the process of rarefaction or condensation. He asserted that air was the basic material of all things. Gods and goddesses are created from air since it is the stuff from which all other things are ultimately created . The gods are corporeal beings with a beginning and are subject to the same laws of existence as other entities. (McKirahan , 2010)

Anaximenes declares: “As our soul, being air, holds us together, so do breath and air surround the whole universe.” (Freeman , 1948 , P: 19).” Anaximenes believes the gods and goddesses of myth have nothing to do with the origin or maintenance of the universe. Air does that. “(McKirahan, 2010 , P: 54)

G. E. R. Lloyd sees two basic innovations in Milesian’s thought: “First, there is what may be described as the discovery of nature, and second the practice of rational criticism and debate.” (Lloyd , 1970 , P: 8). By “discovery of nature,” Lloyd means “the appreciation of the distinction between the ‘natural and the ‘supernatural’, that is the recognition that natural phenomena are not the products

of random or arbitrary influences, but regular and governed by determinable sequences of cause and effect.” (Lloyd, 1970, P: 8).

The pre-socratics never explained the natural phenomena like earthquakes and lightning, storms or eclipses as the actions of happy or angry gods rather these are the actions, natural forces that produced such effects. With the Milesians there emerged a trend of studying the physical universe, its structure, dynamics, origin, evolution and fate. The Milesians are material monists. They called their first principles ‘divine’ but the question is what do they mean by divine? They replaced the Immortal gods and accepted an Immortal form of matter as divine. They were interested in natural phenomena keeping interest in nature of things. They try to explain what is universal rather than the particular events. The Milesians found that behind all changes and transitions, there must be something permanent. The main concern of the Milesian philosophers is to purify human notions of God from mythological elements, to purify religion by rational analysis. “We find in Presocratic philosophy the roots of future philosophic tendencies. They represent the first attempt to attain a rational understanding of the world. They believed that reason is a powerful tool to get to know the truth of the world and eventually the truth about human beings and also the Supreme Being” (Acharya, Arellano, Iturbe, Pathak, Sakrikar, 2015, P:108).

### **Conclusion**

Here, one can clearly see the transition from a purely religious environment to a cosmic one. Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and other Milesian philosophers set out on a course to understand the cosmos and its underlying nature and structure, demonstrating a remarkable detachment from traditional religious and spiritual pursuits. Instead of focusing on mythological explanations for how man and world came into being, they preferred to offer natural and logical explanations. Our understanding of the world did not fundamentally change as a result of Milesian philosophers’ discovery of nature; rather, it came about as a result of their attempt to explain nature by rationalizing Greek mythology. This transition from myth to rational explanation led to the emergence of scientific knowledge which is instrumental in making modern science what it is today.

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