

History of Ancient Philosophy Highlights

This course is meant to help us understand the basics of where philosophy came from, with particular emphasis on how understanding this history allows us to appreciate the development of metaphysical and divinely revealed truths as encountered in our Institutional Studies and ongoing Christian formation. That is, the subject matter here is not only historic nor academic in orientation, but rather comprehensive as it contributes to a Christian-realist appreciation of the world and its operations.

The basic breakdown of the course material is the following:

1. Introduction (Why study philosophy and why study history of philosophy)
2. The Pre-socratic Philosophers and Socrates
3. The Post-socratic Philosophers (Plato and Aristotle)
4. The Post-socratic Philosophers (other schools)
5. Conclusions

Introduction

The study of the history of philosophy aids us in understanding how we have gotten to think the way we do, rightly or erroneously. Philosophy, as the study of ultimate causes is the kind of endeavor that affects a person's fundamental life outlooks and attitudes. One cannot help at times to pose and try to satisfy a desire to know the truth about questions like: Where did I come from? What is the world made of? Why is there something rather than nothing? What is happiness? Philosophers throughout history have tried to address and answer these questions. It is precisely in the ancient, Greek influenced, world that these questions are raised in reaction to perceived inadequacy of religious (mythical) explanations given by the great poets Homer and Hesiod. Thus philosophy is born with a kind of clarification purpose, namely to make clear that which is mysterious and unknown.

Looking ahead, Christians now know many of the truths and answers to the questions posed by the earliest philosophers. God has provided them for us through the channels of divine revelation. However, philosophy and the history of its development aids us greatly to appreciate this revelation. Many of the observations of the ancient Greek philosophers were in fact incorporated by Church Fathers, Doctors, and Theologians to discuss and explain and support theological speculation and Christian dogmas (for example, the immortal soul and eternal life; creation; matter and form in the sacraments; and the natural law). In fact, many of these ancient philosophical concepts are still used today.

It is a bit mysterious that these philosophical achievements came from the Greco-Roman world, that is, from the West. While it is undeniable that other cultures addressed philosophical topics (Egypt, Babylonia, and India come to mind), it was the Greco-Roman geographical, spiritual, and religious context that served as a kind of "intellectual cradle" for Christian theology and spirituality. Even the Hebrew Testament and Law would benefit from Greek culture, notably the use of the Septuagint version of the Bible. Jesus Christ was born, lived, died and rose again right at the height of the Greco-Roman

synthesis. These are then some of the points that merit reflection and appreciation of the pagan philosophers that went before Christ and guided the early Christian thinkers through their first steps.

While every kind of temporal breakdown of “philosophical history” is bound to be somewhat arbitrary, some clear moments of this history are identifiable. Consider for our purposes the following scheme as helpful for our purposes:

Major Western Philosophical Eras Within Work of Theological Formation:

800-300 B.C.:	Early Classical Era
300 B.C.-400 A.D.:	Later Classical Era
400 A.D.-1200 A.D.:	Early Medieval Era
1200 A.D.-1500 A.D.:	Later Medieval Era
1500 A.D.-1900 A.D.:	Modern Era
1900 A.D.-now:	Contemporary Era

For the purposes of our course, we are focusing on the Classical eras, roughly 800 B.C. to 400 A.D. With this in mind, the following scheme can aid us in identifying and understanding the different philosophers’ positions and writings:

The Classical Era:

800-700 B.C.:	Philosophical Precursors (Poets and Mythology)
700-400 B.C.:	Pre-Socratic Philosophers (Socrates 469-399 B.C.)
400 B.C.-0:	Post-Socratic Philosophers
0-400 A.D.:	Early Christian Thinkers

The Precursors: Homer and Hesiod (c. 800-725 B.C.)

The ancient poets, Homer and especially Hesiod recorded the actions words of what became known as Greek Mythology, the pantheon of deities who caused the world to be and put order (and lots of disorder) into the world. The stories provided a fantastic and simplistic account of fundamental questions such as the origin of the universe, natural disasters, and moral good and evil. Homer’s accounts appear in *The Iliad* and *Odyssey*, while Hesiod recorded the stories of the Greek deities in *Theogeny* and *Works and Days*.

Pre-Socratics I: The Ionian Speculators

On the western coast of current day Turkey an ancient area of Greek cultural influence developed, especially near the city of Miletus. This area became known as *Ionia*:



In Miletus it is widely considered that Western philosophy had its birth. Though there were no formal academic or religious aggregations in this regard, still the founders of philosophy are often grouped together as “The Ionian School”.

Thales of Miletus (prime about 585 B.C.)...

Thales most likely never wrote a treatise, but he was known as a local hero and wise man for predicting an eclipse of the sun. It is unknown how he predicted this event, but it was possibly from contact he had with Egyptian priests in his youth, who taught him the rudiments of astronomy. Thales is best known for his material explanation for the universe. A forged fragment of his work states the following: “The much-discussed four substances, of which we say the chief is Water, making it as it were the one Element, by combination and solidification and coagulation of the substances in the universe mingle with one another...” Thales’ observations would be based on the common-sense observation that water gives life and growth to living things, as well as his conception that the Earth rested/floated on a great body of water. This is understandable as the people of Ionia were in constant contact with water, the Aegean Sea.

Anaximander of Miletus (prime about 560 B.C.)...

Anaximander is intriguing because he posited that the basis for all reality was a non-concrete material reality, which he called the “Boundless” or “Non-Limited” (*apeiron*). As one of his surviving fragments states: “The Non-Limited is the original material of existing things; further, the source from which existing things derived their existence is also that to which they return at their destruction, according to necessity; for they give justice and make reparation to one another for their injustice, according to the arrangement of Time. [The Non-Limited] is everlasting and ageless...immortal and indestructible...”

Anaximander is on the way to a metaphysics, but his observations still lead to a material view of reality as the “Boundless”, while it kind of looks toward a kind of “prime matter” really seems to indicate a kind of material chaos or disorder that is then put into order.

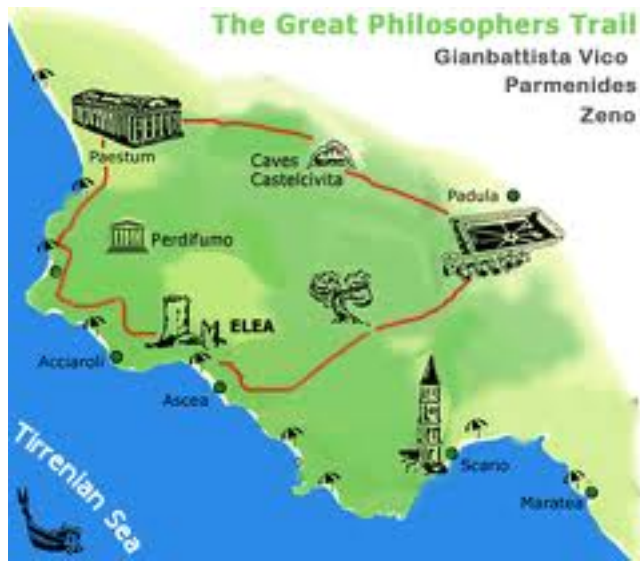
Anaximenes of Miletus (prime about 546 B.C.)...

With Anaximenes we have a return to a basic concrete element as the strata of the universe, namely air. Anaximander wrote only one treatise from which survives only one sentence: “As our soul, being air, holds us together, so do breath and air surround the whole universe”. A spurious quotation from him follows: “Air is near to the incorporeal; and since we come into being by an efflux from this (*air*), it is bound to be both non-limited and rich so that it never fails.” Like Thales, Anaximenes refers to a known material reality (air) to explain everything in the universe. It is the surroundedness and dependency nature has on air that seems to be a strong argument for this Ionian.

Pre-Socratics II: The Eleatics

The region of Italy that was once called Elea is the next scene of philosophical development we will consider. Ancient Elea now is a national park called Cilento Park, and it lies about 50 miles south of

Naples (see map):



Xenophanes (prime about 530 B.C.)...

Xenophanes was a wise man of Greek origin. At about the age of 25 he left Ionia to begin a career of travel and teaching. He frequently taught about the need for virtue and living in accordance with the good. He argued against the gods of Greece, claiming that: "Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that are shameful and a reproach among mankind: theft, adultery, and mutual deception." He also claimed "There is one god, among gods and men the greatest, not at all like mortals in body or in mind." Xenophanes held that the ultimate principles of the world were principles of unity, and that reality was basically unified, bereft of possibilities of understanding individual concrete realities very well. In fact, it seems that Xenophanes' concept of the divine presence in the world was pantheistic. In this, he is a precursor to Parmenides, and often included with the Eleatic School of Philosophy.

Pythagoras of Samos (Non-Eleatic, prime about 530 B.C.)...

Though Pythagoras left no written works, his influence was massive. He began a kind of religious community in modern day Sicily, and his followers attributed all their works to "the Master" signing his name to them. According to Pythagoras, number was the over-arching principle of the world. As a result mathematics achieved a great prestige as it would be possible to give accurate and complete answers to based on evidence to the deepest questions. How this actually is translated into proper understanding of the world is unclear, other than the secrets of the world are written in symbols and the order in the universe reflects the order in numbers and the harmony of music. According to Pythagorians, at the moment of death the soul moves from one body to another in a harmonic and eternal revolution of celestial bodies.

Heraclitus (Non-Eleatic, prime about 500 B.C.)...

Heraclitus of Ephesus was convinced that we are deceived by our senses, and that we really cannot recognize visible things as they are. This is because the most real thing is change itself, and everything is in flux. His most famous saying: "It is not possible to step twice into the same river." He sometimes

talked of this change to be a kind of fire that permeates in a divine way the whole world, including ourselves. Though he was not from Elea, his philosophy is important with regard to the Eleatics in that their views were in direct opposition to his metaphysics.

Parmenides of Elea (prime about 475 B.C.)...

It is rumored that Parmenides was at some point a student of Xenophanes, and was most certainly a Pythagorean as well. He is best known for his metaphysical view that everything is one, and that change is an illusion and existence everlasting. Perhaps his most famous fragment is the following: "Come, I will tell you, and you must accept my word when you have heard it, the ways of inquiry which alone are to be thought: the one that IT IS, and it is not possible for IT NOT TO BE, is the way of credibility, for it follows Truth..." Parmenides influence in the history of philosophy was great, especially his influence on Plato's theory of ideas.

Zeno of Elea (prime about 450 B.C.)...

Zeno sought to defend Parmenides' theories that reality was one, unchanging, and indivisible. He set up "paradoxes" to show that one could not function in the world if there were really many things in it. For example, he would try to show that if reality is many things, then they must be finite in number; however, he argued that things must also be infinite in number because "there will always be other things in between whatever things exist. He also argued one cannot pass through a distance to get to another point, because one has to pass through an infinity of points to get there. Zeno forgot, however, that time is also a factor for change, and that things change within finite time periods. Thus a man can walk from one point to another as he passes through time as well as through distance.

Pre-Socratics III: More immediately before Socrates

Empedocles of Acragas (prime about 450 B.C.)...

Empedocles was a kind of mystic figure. His metaphysics depended on the mixture of the four elements: earth; fire; air; and water. All things were the result of the formation of these elements. The combination of these elements depended on the tensions between two forces: love and hate. "And these (elements) never cease their continuous exchange, sometimes uniting under the influence of Love, so that all become One, and at other times each moving apart through the hostile force of Hate." Empedocles espoused an ethical theory of purification from evils and acquiring of divine thoughts.

Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (prime about 460 B.C.)...

Though Anaxagoras wrote only one book, *On Natural Science*, his thought has a great influence on metaphysics. Aristotle calls him a "sober man among drunkards". This was because Anaxagoras had developed a theory of the *nous* or Mind, which is infinite and self-possessing, and which he identified with God. This Mind supplies the motion for mixtures and separations of things (the mass) that accounts for change in the material world. This notion led to further developments of metaphysical thinkers like

Aristotle to support the notion of a Prime Mover or First Cause.

Democritus of Abdera (prime about 420 B.C.)...

Democritus believed that the universe was composed of invisible particles called atoms. Atoms fall like rain, though at some time there was random movement of some atoms that caused the beginnings of the formation of the material things in the universe. Democritus' views on the world, and especially on ethics had lasting influence, especially during the late classical period when his metaphysical thoughts were popularized by the Roman Epicurean poet/philosopher Lucretius (96-55 B.C.) in the work *De Rerum Natura*.

The Sophists

The Sophists sought to train the youth in Greek city-states practical skills that would allow them to be successful as leaders. While their initial goals seemed noble, actually the Sophists taught primarily for profit, a new practice. As such, they did not seek to discover and pass on truth, and frequently looked at truth in a utilitarian or relativistic way. If you could convince people of your opinions (for example in public speaking, then this is truth enough. Two well known Sophists were Protagoras and Gorgias, both of whom have Platonic dialogues named after them. Though there is a tradition that Socrates actually listened to some Sophists early in life, he spent his mature philosophical years questioning the Sophists to point out their errors of shallowness and utilitarian goals.

Socrates (469-399 B.C.)...