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The Dialectic of Pre-Socratic Philosophy and its Basis in the Civilization of Antiquity

Tony McKenna

Pre-Socratic philosophy is really quite remarkable. It furnished us with the first theory of a heliocentric universe, the first theory of evolution and the first form of atomic theory. All this in a time before microscopes or telescopes! It was during this epoch too that the mode and form of philosophy attained a clear and definite character. From within the miasma of religious feeling and thought, certain coherent and explicitly rational notions begin to emerge. Being, nothingness, becoming, quantity, quality: in pre-Socratic philosophy the most fundamental categories of existence, those which underwrite all things, were brought into a conscious and sober interrelation. It was a single precious flashpoint in time where myth mutated into science, where naturalism superseded religion and philosophy experienced its first glorious dawn. A comprehension of pre-Socratic philosophy is essential to the dialectician. Over two thousand years later, Hegel was to comment on the pre-Socratic Heraclitus—'there is not a proposition of [his] I have not adopted in my Logic'. Marx's doctoral dissertation was written on the difference between the Democritean and Epicurean philosophies of nature. More importantly still, the dialectic which runs through pre-Socratic philosophy in many ways anticipates the course of classical German philosophy over two thousand years later. The author seeks to trace this dialectic, and to show how it was grounded in the forms and structures of social existence of the Greek city state more broadly.

Keywords: Pre-Socratics; Hegel; Marx; Dialectics; Parmenides; Heraclitus

There is a delicious mystery that lies at the heart of the Ancient Greek world, its own personal Bermuda triangle if you like, although it is something little recollected or referenced nowadays. The first great civilization based on mainland Greece, the Mycenaean civilization, having endured for more than five hundred years, seemed to perish in a remarkably short space of time, almost as though it had slipped into the sea.

Numerous theories abound as to why there was such an abrupt end to so grand a civilization. Some historians and archaeologists cite the influence of barbarian

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invaders or sea peoples, others speculate that the regime was torn apart by its internal class strife and a few perceive the work of some cataclysmic natural event. The archaeological record shows that, from about 1200BC on, the civilization was showing certain signs of wear and tear, but nevertheless there was some specific and localized event that signalled its death knell around 1100BC. Despite the wealth of speculation, nobody is sure what that event might have been.

In any case we do know that the mysterious occurrence left the two greatest cities of the civilization, Mycenae and Tiryns, ruined. City populations fled to former colonies while many of the greatest temples crumbled and turned to dust. Tiryns was abandoned entirely, becoming little more than a ghost town, a lost city wreathed in shadow and loneliness, perched atop a far away hill. In the centuries following, those travellers who stumbled across it, experiencing the eerie isolation of its labyrinthine passageways and tunnels, were often inclined to believe that the city was not a creation of human beings at all, but was instead the work of a set of supernatural beings known as Cyclopes.

The end of a civilization implies not only the receding of its population but also a receding of culture. Just as the great cities were reduced and abandoned, so much of the art, and even the ability to write, was forgone. The end of Mycenaean period implied the start of what some scholars refer to as 'The Greek dark ages': a veiled and mysterious clutch of time in its own right, it formed the shadowy juncture between the Mycenaean civilization and classical Greek Antiquity. The epics of Homer and Hesiod take shape in this period because it is here when the oral tradition asserts itself. The very moment at which the culture of an old civilization began to perish was the point at which the great oral poets started to weave their lyrical spells, endeavouring to render vivid in the imagination that which had in reality already grown faint.

The epic poems that formed the material for Homer are lithe and melodic and joyful and sad. Their tragic-beautiful element lies in the connection with the past as they supply the final, haunting echo from a bygone age. Many of the themes in the Iliad were drawn from Mycenaean civilization; indeed, according to myth, the city of Mycenae itself, having been founded by Perseus, was to become the stronghold of Agamemnon. However, those oral poems, some of which would eventually come together in the Iliad, were more than mere fragments of a delicately crafted nostalgia. They served an eminently practical purpose too. They were told at a specific time and place, a point at which history found itself in retreat from civilization. The infrastructures of the large cities had been smashed and consequently many of the organizational principles which were once brought to bear confidently on everyday life now appeared spectral and uncertain. There was no longer the visible externality of city life, manifested in a series of laws and routines and enacted in the public forums and market squares. Modes of etiquette ceased to be generated by the hub of urban life. The epic poems evolved from the latent desire to redress this; the poets were helping export some of the key principles of civilization to a context that now lacked the presence of civilization itself. Few people could read and write; education

was hampered as any laws, regulations and itineraries could no longer be committed to tablets and referenced at a later date. Populations were far more disparate and subject to movement and migration.

Something like the Iliad provides the means by which the cultural rules and social hierarchies that once pertained to a civilization can survive in a quasi-mythical form to be handed down across subsequent generations. The Iliad provides an incredibly rich evocation of an early civilization run along tribal lines, detailing the interplay of the various social factions from the slaves to the kings. The rules that govern the behaviour between groups and their members are rendered beautifully explicit and it is their violation that provokes conflict and disequilibrium. Indeed the cause efficient of the Homeric epic rests with the infamous discourtesy of a young prince who, upon falling in love with a foreign princess, promptly whisks her away to his own kingdom, thereby setting in motion the events of the Trojan War.

It is necessary, therefore, to understand that the epic poems that were conceived and performed in the 'Greek dark ages' implied far more than simple, unadulterated entertainment. The Iliad is much like the Bible in this respect; true, there is no single list of prescriptives by which a person is expected to live, but the impact of the book, and others like it, must have been experienced in a way similar to the early Christians as they attempted to arrange and galvanize their moral imperatives around biblical verse. The Homeric epics were intensely practical as they provided a coherent moral and political continuum that could be drawn upon to explain the world, divulging a guide for the political and ethical behaviour of individuals and whole groups.

Subsequently the works of Homer and Hesiod cannot fail to be rich in philosophical speculation too. Through these authors are developed some of the most delicate, fantastical and innocent replies that man offers up to the perplexing riddle of his own existence. He casts his eye across the panorama of his own reality, noticing a level of order in human relations and surmising that this can only issue forth from the disorder and vagaries of nature. He raises the natural moment in mythology, allowing it to become the first principle of the world; a mysterious, shapeless chaos, an infinitely in-substantive substance that subsists prior to all else and that consequently yields the earth. However, things become so complicated, so quickly. For as soon as he has answered this question, he is then troubled by another. How might things develop hence? Once more he casts his gaze across his own world, discovering there other human beings joined by some delicious, gentle compulsion, a joining that allows them to create, to bring forth, to produce life. And so his question is once again answered; the moving principle of creation set against the darkness and primacy of that first unconditioned substance, can be nothing other than love! The spirit of love or Eros appears here in what might be described as its Hollywood debut!

> First of all, the Void (Chaos) came into being, next broad-bosomed Earth, the solid and eternal home of all, and Eros [Desire], the most beautiful of the immortal gods, in every man and every god softens the sinews and overpowers the prudent purpose

> of the mind. Out of Void came Darkness and black Night, and out of Night came Light and Day, her children conceived after union in love with Darkness.[1]

There is a rhythm, a dialectic, which pulses across the history of the ancient world. The Mycenaean civilization was all but lost, at which point the people who inhabited that region were thrust into a dark age that nevertheless yielded a luminous mythology. By the time Homer and Hesiod were able to encapsulate that mythology in a written corpus of work, the dialectic of civilization had already begun to exert its pull once more. Writing developed again in the 8th century BC, by way of the earliest form of the Greek alphabet, but this was possible only in and through the construction of another civilization. Civilization began once again but not as it was, for now the first city states came into being and these displayed a social structure very different in character from the Mycenaean world that was.

Mycenaean Greece had advanced its ends through the activities of a warrior aristocracy; later to be immortalized in the pages of the Iliad, it was a civilization that very much reproduced itself through conquest. That was probably because there were a loosely knit series of kingships which themselves were subdivided into lesser provinces, sometimes with their own individual rulers. Expeditions leading to conquest and glory for the various kings jostling for position were the natural expression of the somewhat loose and erratic structures that formed the network of the civilization itself.

The later city states were themselves often embroiled in a variety of wars, but these states tended to rely more heavily on trade to attain their revenues and, consequently, the wars that did occur were often fought in an attempt to gain control of specific trading routes and hot-spots on both land and sea. In addition, an economy that was more trade-orientated necessitated a higher degree of organization, in terms of facilitating the trade itself, keeping records, as well as the increasing number of branches and specializations that were opened up in production and distribution. Such differences were enmeshed in a higher economic unity, pulling them together, regulating them in a more organized and concentrated whole.

The Greek city states implied a greater degree of rationalization in economic life that would inevitably find its expression in the consciousness and philosophy of the age. Whereas the embers of the Mycenaean civilization smoldered throughout the dark ages eventually to be re-ignited by Homer and Hesiod, their principles were always mythological in character, their attempts at explanation remaining rooted in the supernatural. However, with the rise of the city states came a new breed of philosopher; like the old oral poets before him, he sought answers to the great and fundamental questions, but now he was compelled to perceive a rationality at work within the framework of existence, within the natural order, for the same rationality had arisen in social life, pervading the fabric of the polis and consecrating relations between people.

[1] Hesiod, Theogony, lines 116–122.

Therefore, the 'absolute' or 'infinite', which in Hesiod had occurred as a supernatural void from which the divinities emerged, was for the first time in classical antiquity wrenched from its heavenly basis. For the first time philosophy might consciously seek its initial unconditioned substance, not in the realm of some supernatural 'other', but in the life processes of the world that such a principle was to underpin. This marks a single precious flashpoint in time, whereby philosophical myth mutates into philosophical science, where naturalism supersedes religion and the philosophy of antiquity experiences its first, glorious dawn.

The Milesian Cosmologists who heralded this advance did not have much to go on. They strove to discover a natural principle, but they had no technology conducive to the task beside the physical senses they were born with. Biblical verse was later to note, beautifully, mordantly, how 'from the dust we came, and to the dust we shall return'. The early Greek naturalists were aware of this pressing fact and they made use of it, concluding that, despite all the diversity and multiplicity of its forms, life itself must be bound to some underlying, unchangeable substratum, the 'dust', if you will, from which everything arises, and to which everything must return.

Thales, having examined his own reality, concluded that the substratum, the underlying source and first principle of all things, was water. His reasoning was astute and his conclusions somewhat inevitable; water would have been familiar to the Ancient Greek in its various guises as a solid, liquid and gas. It would have been regarded as perhaps the most malleable and most changeable of all the substances, capable of exerting a ferociously destructive power by way of a flood and thereby threatening human life, but also manifesting as its very pre-condition, in the form of a fresh-water river or lake.

However, here a contradiction opens up. If water truly is the unconditioned substance from which everything else derives form and shape, then its universality must be pure and in someway content-less, for it is neither sensuous nor particular but merely the substratum from which particularity issues forth. Yet in the world we find water existing as a particular that stands in relation to a whole host of other natural objects. Hegel says that it is with Thales that we find 'the strife between sensuous universality and the universality of the notion'.[2]

We are today accustomed to thinking in a more notional and conceptual manner. We use everyday expressions like 'the devil is in the details', which means of course that those who do not attend to the little chores and tasks run the risk of suffering later. Yet such a seemingly simple idiomatic device also displays a highly developed power of abstraction; we are able to feel that, through the myriad of empirical detail, there are fundamental conceptual patterns that develop almost independently as though possessed of their own life, that 'devil' that is perceived in 'the details'.

Such an ability, which to us seems little more than a mental reflex, is in fact the product of some millennia of collective thought. Our idiomatic 'devil' who lives in

[2] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, Vol. I (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), p. 178.

those details would have remained forever invisible to a man or woman who had not encountered civilization and been constituted by it. What Thales was attempting to do at this early stage was to abstract from all particular matter the unchanging concept of matter itself, of matter in general. However, his attempt to do so occurred at an early moment in the history of thought and necessarily remained somewhat incoherent; in the endeavor to raise the absolute, Thales became entangled with particularity once more. Yet as Hegel rightly points out, the greatness of Thales lies not in the fact that his absolute principle emerged fully formed, but rather that he was the first to register the need for such a principle in the first place. Hegel says:

> What there is besides, like the conceptions of Homer, is something in which thought could not find satisfaction; it produces mere images of the imagination, endlessly endowed with imagination and form, but destitute of simple unity ... This wild, endlessly varied imagination of Homer is set at rest by the proposition that existence is water; this conflict of an endless quantity of principles ... taken away, and it is shown likewise that there is only one universal, the universal self existent.[3]

Anaximander, who was a disciple of Thales, took a step further in broaching the contradiction that the thought of his teacher had opened up. Rather than denote the Absolute as a specifically occurring natural phenomenon like water, Anaximander denuded it of all particularity, rendering it entirely conceptual; he refers to the 'apeiron', which translates as 'undetermined', and this is fitting because it has no particular material correspondent, no resonance in the natural world. That this was a powerful and radical idea is demonstrated by the incomprehension of the Greco-Roman historian Plutarch who, although he lived several centuries later, was unable to comprehend a purely conceptual notion, delivering a severe and pragmatic reproach to Anaximander 'for not saying what his infinite is, whether air, water or earth'.[4]

Anaximander asserted that the 'apeiron', the initial state, went on to generate 'hot and cold', which in turn, as the consequence of an 'eternal motion', 'separated off', into 'flame and air', and from this interrelation was created the earth and the heavenly bodies. Such vivid and colourful speculation provides one of the first early attempts to furnish natural processes with a scientific sheen; Anaximander had noted the interactions of those elements in the world that he could experience with his senses, before raising their interplay in imagination, and attempting to unfold the cosmological character of the universe thereby.

It is worth noting that the logic of development is explained by Anaximander in terms of manufacturing processes like 'separating off', whereas in Greek mythology the processes of the universe assume a biological character, usually one in which anthropomorphic actors come together and procreate, bringing into being the sky or the sea or some other natural entity. That Anaximander was beginning to conceive of natural processes from the purview of social labour rather than the immediacies

[3] Ibid., pp. 178–179.
[4] Ibid., p. 187.

of biology was itself a symptom of civilization. Phoenician merchants, fleeing the Assyrian empire in the east, had settled in Greece, bringing much in the way of culture and technique. The Phoenician contribution to Greek Antiquity cannot be over-stated; among many other things they imported to the Greeks an alphabetized language that the Greeks would adapt and make their own. The name Phoenician was bestowed on these merchants retrospectively for it has etymological origins in the ancient Greek word 'phoînix' meaning 'blood red' or 'purple'. The Phoenicians were named thus because their biggest single industry consisted in the refining or 'separating off' of a purple dye that they would extract from sea snails. 'Separating off' and other such manufacturing techniques helped give rise to classical Greek civilization; it is therefore quite fitting to say that the philosophy of Anaximander was first fertilized with the secretions of snails.

In replacing Thales' absolute principle of water, with the 'apeiron', Anaximander had effected a revolutionary moment in thought; the concept as a pure, unconditioned abstraction, matter removed from all individuation—or what Hegel was later to describe as 'the abstract universal'. Yet the success of Anaximander was blighted by a new contradiction that opened up in the moment that the 'apeiron' had been postulated. As Hegel says 'matter determined as infinitude means the motion of positing definite forms . . . abolishing the separation'.[5] In other words, Anaximander had created a gulf between the infinite (the apeiron) and its various finite manifestations such as hot and cold, flame and air. For the first time, clearly and vividly, we encounter the fundamental problem of all philosophy, which appears in various guises across the ages, here as the contradiction between the world of forms and the world of sensuous things, there as the opposition between noumenal and phenomenal. The most sublime task of philosophy consists in the consistent and ongoing mediation of this.

On this count Anaximander necessarily fails. He boldly theorizes a conceptual absolute but it is one that 'negates the finite',[6] for Anaximander is unable to demonstrate how specific, material individuations emanate from his conceptual infinite. Both the infinite and the finite, or to say the same thing, the unconditioned and conditioned, have been rendered visible by philosophy at this point, but they stand in a fixed and irreconcilable contradiction; the gap between them presents as an impenetrable void across which thought cannot pass. Anaximenes, a younger contemporary of Anaximander, takes up this problem in urgency. Because Anaximander was unable to bridge the infinite and finite with a purely conceptual absolute, Anaximenes returns to the position of Thales, who felt that the Absolute must as well have purchase in a real world substance. But Anaximenes makes his first principle air, instead of water, and this represents a logical attempt to synthesize the contradiction that opens up in both Thales and Anaximander. In the case of Thales, by making water the absolute, his notion is swallowed by the sheer particularity of

[5] Ibid., p. 187.
[6] Ibid.

real world water; its infinity is dissolved within its finitude. With Anaximander we are able to observe the opposite; that is, the power of the universal as 'apeiron' manages to annul all particularity by virtue of its unconditioned conceptuality. However, by rendering 'air' the absolute substance, Anaximenes is endeavouring to mediate both these positions; to sight and touch, air seems transparent and empty, that is, it seems devoid of corporeal form, so it can be made to satisfy the criteria of a pure, content-less universality, but at the same time air clearly is present in the physical world, for we breathe it and we move through it. It seems for the briefest of moments that the path between the infinite and the finite has been successfully traversed.

Of course we now understand that air is a combination of nitrogen and oxygen and carbon dioxide; it is therefore just as much a particular material substance as water or anything else, but Anaximenes' contribution should not be measured in terms of his unsound scientific conclusions. After all there were no microscopes to compel material reality to yield its intricacies and its secrets. Because of this, the pre-Socratics necessarily developed a more speculative and imaginative philosophy that was sometimes way off the mark but also furnished us with the first theory of evolution and the first vestiges of atomic theory. In the case of Anaximenes, we find thought itself striving to break the opposition of the infinite and the finite in an intuitive, imaginative and innocent way.

Anaximenes was ultimately unsuccessful in the attempt, of course, precisely because 'air' as an absolute principle only *seems* to satisfy the dualism between matter and thought, a dualism that was a specific expression of the infinite/finite contradiction more generally. What was needed was an absolute principle whose action might be perceived (unlike the apeiron) in and through specific material things, but was at the same time not reducible to any particular material substance. It is worth noting that thought itself had created the desire for and was the striving for such a need, as it moved through its various manifestations from Thales to Anaximander and then to Anaximenes. Yet where might such a principle be found? How can a non-corporeal absolute substance at the same time act upon and determine real world objects?

The Pythagoreans developed an ingenious response to this problem. It was again a response that issued forth from the strictures of classical Greek civilization. An increasingly sophisticated economy with a highly differentiated division of labour and a greater degree of interaction meant each individual exchange was more and more understood and equalized against all the other actions taking place. Economic activity was ever more measured and quantified and a moneyed economy was the inevitable expression of this. In a certain way what Marx described as 'the universal commodity' in *Das Capital* was, in the economic terrain, an excellent exemplar of the resolution between the universal concept and its manifestation in the material particular; for money, as a universal commodity (when it ceases to subsist in the form of an equivalent like gold or cows) no longer exists as any specific thing but at the same time is the value that lives in every commodity as a substance-less universal. It cannot be said that money had reached this level of 'practical abstraction' in

ancient Greek society, but nonetheless, the tension between the universal as value and the particular market commodity was mediated by the introduction of money in the form of silver coins that have been discovered in Athens dating from 575BC onwards.

In the philosophical sphere, therefore, 'quantity' or 'number' was raised as the absolute principle, and in doing this the Pythagoreans seemed to have alighted on an absolute that was a conceptual universal, freed from all immediate materiality, while at the same time a principle that was imminent and active in the world of things. It was active in the world of things not only in terms of political economy, which the Pythagorean society (though shaped by it) would not have been able to formulate its rules consciously to any real extent; but in terms of certain other discoveries that they were able to lay their hands upon, for example, the fact that musical sounds could be expressed in a mathematical form; that graduations in pitch disclosed their numerical equivalents. Here we do find the activity of a conceptual universal, which attains a degree of subtlety and sublimation successfully permeating material reality without at the same time exhibiting as material substance itself.

However the Pythagoreans took things further. Having realized that the principle of quantity was active within the manifold of material things, they rather unfortunately proceeded to make the principle identical with materiality itself. Geometry had already yielded the knowledge that objects could be described according to the numerical interplay of points, lines and surfaces; the Pythagoreans concluded therefore that material things themselves were numbers which thought was required to disclose. Aristotle said of the Pythagorean philosophy 'that number is the reality of things, and the constitution of the whole universe in its determinations is an harmonious system of numbers and their relations'.[7]

Numbers were the basic elements that constituted everything, according to the Pythagoreans, and by formulating things thus they were able to subsume material things under a single totality in which all delineation and difference was reduced to a principle of bare quantity. The Pythagoreans had a prescient intuition that led them to seek out a mediated universal, one in which the numerical principle was realized as the absolute but could also function in and through finitude, without being swallowed up by either determination. This instinctively led them towards 'number', but once they seized upon 'number' they violated any dialectical interplay between the infinite and the finite, for they reduced everything, in thought and the world, to the principle of quantity, whereupon the dialectical tension between the conditioned and unconditioned was dispersed like sand through the fingers. The Pythagoreans were thus left with a rather difficult task which, to their credit, they approached imaginatively and with a great deal of ingenuity; they were required to demonstrate how the determinations of thought and of the world were in reality essentially numbers for a thing's numerical designation was as well its immanent and determining principle.

[7] Ibid., p. 208.

The Pythagoreans tried to demonstrate how social phenomena like justice have as their source, numbers. They even tried to reduce the antinomy of the infinite and the finite, to which they themselves had fallen victim, to a numerical affixation; they argued that the 'odd' was the finite and the 'even' the infinite. Pythagoras himself asserted that unity was the principle of all things only because any given thing is a 'this one' or 'that one' and subsequently the number 'one' underpins all that is. The 'one' is the first determination after which comes 'two', which is duality, but all the following numbers are only ever extensions or additions of that first 'one'. So for the Pythagoreans 'the one' became the designation of the Absolute, the unconditioned principle of number which they themselves had superimposed across reality entire.

Hegel reflects that the Pythagorean doctrine of number has in it 'the absolute essence' because it has returned from 'sensuous existence into thought'.[8] However 'number' in isolation remains a partial and one-sided concept; by raising it to the level of totality the Pythagoreans once more privileged abstract thought at the expense of the manifold of material things. Subsequently, when the principle of 'the one' entered into 'the region of the concrete in nature and in mind', it was rendered at once 'purely formal and empty'.[9]

The principle of 'the one' did not simply wither away, for it appeared again in the philosophy of the Eleatics. The Eleatics advanced on the Pythagorean absolute by maintaining that absolute existence comprised of all things is ultimately a single, unified whole or 'one'. In this way a counter balance to the Pythagorean philosophy is achieved, for it is no longer that case that an arithmetical 'one' attains an almost Platonic existence from which a complex of material things derives its form. Instead quantity and quality here intermesh; all material particularity blends in a natural unity underwritten by the ultimate uniformity of being. In other words in Eleatic philosophy 'the one' is not, as with the Pythagoreans, superimposed on reality but rather arises as a property that inheres in its objective structure.

This allows the Eleatics certain advantages over the Pythagoreans. The Pythagoreans were limited, logically speaking; by doling out certain number designations and perceiving in these the substances that are the root sources of objects, the difference between those objects became formalized; that is to say, a difference between mere mathematical aggregates. The Pythagorean philosophy became inflicted with a certain reticence; hence, its logical basis meant that it could not very far probe the interrelations that mediate things, for such interrelations presented as empty determinations. It was unable to account for the reasons by which corporeal forms come into being and pass away. Whenever Pythagoreans did try to confront these problems, they necessarily had to step out of the environs of their philosophy, which in turn meant they were approaching phenomena unarmed, denuded of their own philosophical method; they were therefore much more susceptible in thought to the

[8] Ibid., p. 219.
[9] Ibid., p. 224.

delirious and the random. The conflict between the Pythagorean 'one' and the interstices of material reality engenders in thought the propensity for the most volatile suppositions, and indeed this set the basis for the 'cultish' aspect of the Pythagorean school, in which the true inter-links between things are eventually explicable in and through what is today described as 'sacred geometry'.

However, the Eleatics were able to preserve the principle of the one, and try to discover the fundamental principles of the reality that generates 'the one'. As is well known, the Eleatics came to the conclusion that reality is immutable and eternal, that our experience of change is mere illusion, and that substances no more come into being than pass away. In the poetic revelation gifted him by a goddess, Parmenides opined that 'what is for being and for thinking must be: for it can be, and nothing cannot'.[10] The philosophy of the Eleatics was also profound, for though the Milesian cosmologists had already sought being in 'the one', in a single unconditioned substance—be it 'water' or 'air' or 'the apeiron'—the unconditioned always stood in irreconcilable contradiction to the manifold corporeal objects. Admittedly the Milesian cosmologists tried to annul this separation; in describing the absolute as 'water', for example, it became intimately bound up with corporeality, but such a connection remained intuitive as opposed to logical. (Although logical necessity did underpin the need for such an intuitive formulation in the first instance.)

Because the unconditioned and the corporeal were here only united intuitively and therefore superficially, the Milesian cosmologists were unable to say anything about their interaction which was not entirely speculative. For example, having derived 'the apeiron', Anaximander describes its activities in the material world by fusing an account of some of the manufacturing processes that antiquity had developed with some of the most immediate and pervasive factors of existence itself. Things 'separate off' from 'the apeiron' in and through the interplay of 'flame' and 'air', and their consequents—the hot and dry, and cold and wet.

The Eleatics affected a profound step forward in the history of philosophy; they derived a substratum of 'pure being' that was the underlying nature of all things; in contra-distinction to the Pythagoreans, 'the one' became an expression of 'being' rather than 'being' formulated as the expression of 'the one'. However, opposed to the Milesian cosmologists, such 'being' was sublimated with 'corporeality' in a logical fashion; that is to say that, having argued that 'being' is immutable and eternal, Parmenides concluded quite logically that particularity—the experiential change-ability of all material things which we encounter—must be an illusion, a phenomenal manifestation that obfuscates the true nature of reality. In a bravura set of proofs Zeno went on to demonstrate the logical impossibility of motion and plurality, thereby confirming the Eleatic view.

The Eleatic philosophy therefore united elements of the Pythagoreans and the Milesian cosmologists, drawing them together in a more concrete synthesis. For the first time there is derived a clear logical delineation between the infinite and the

[10] Parmenides, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 132.

finite as essence and appearance. This contradiction would re-appear across the following centuries, here in the guise of the Platonic division between form and object, there in the Kantian conflict of noumenal and phenomenal. Indeed the Kantian antinomies perform a similar function to Zeno's paradoxes in seeming to confirm the correctness of his philosophical system; in the Kantian case, however, the antinomies demonstrate that it is only a knowledge of the phenomenal word that philosophy might attain, a knowledge of appearances, while with Zeno it is quite the reverse; we are made to understand that appearances are inherently treacherous and unstable, that the true content of knowledge lies in the substantive 'one'.

However, this philosophy also engenders a new strain of opposition expressed in the thought of Heraclitus. The thought of Heraclitus laid stress on 'becoming' as opposed to 'being', but here we must proceed tentatively. Heraclitus is well known for his proviso that it remains 'impossible to step twice into the same river',[11] but there is a danger of opposing an abstract 'becoming' to an equally abstract 'being'—the 'being' of Parmenides contra the 'becoming' of Heraclitus. Such an opposition is retrograde because it does not represent a genuine progression; in fact, the contradiction is implicit in the Eleactic premise in the first place, for here an underlying being—'the one'—is reflectively contrasted with a perpetual 'becoming' experienced as the illusory world of appearances. In Copleston's fine history of philosophy, the author imputes such an error to Hegel; he argues that 'Hegel's assignment of Heraclitus' philosophy to the category of Becoming is therefore based on a misconception—and also errs by putting Parmenides earlier than Heraclitus, for Parmenides was a critic as well as a contemporary of Heraclitus and must be the later writer'.[12]

However it is the usually reliable Copleston who has erred in this case. Hegel does not merely and reflexively counterpoise 'being' with 'becoming', but rather draws attention to the way in which Heraclitus unearths 'becoming' from the contradiction which the Eleatic position entails. In the Eleatic philosophy the region of 'being' as the true reality is opposed to the phenomenal terrain of 'becoming' and the phenomenal here consists of nothing more than an illusion. And so 'becoming' is as well 'non-being', for it is not real, it does not really exist.[13] In other words, by asserting that everything is 'being', the Eleatic philosophy divulges a contradiction in which 'being' is opposed to 'non-being'. It is this that sets the stage for the Heraclitean philosophy in which the notion of 'flux' is merely an (important) component.

Heraclitus unearths the contradiction that is built into the Eleatic position. Or at least he recognizes it as a contradiction that inheres in reality itself. According to Aristotle, he said that 'Being and non-being are the same; everything is and yet is not'.[14] Hegel reformulates this in his own idiom when he says 'the Absolute is the

[11] Plutarch, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 117.

[12] Fr. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1/part1 (New York: Image Books, 1962), p. 56.

[13] It would be more accurate, and more faithful to the spirit of Greek idealism, to say that it does in fact have existence but is nevertheless not real.

[14] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 282.

unity of being and non being'.[15] We are now in a position to examine once more Heraclitus' famous statement about the river. According to Plutarch he said: 'it is not possible to step twice into the same river'.

To us this formulation now seems inadequate; it is the expression of an abstract 'becoming' that is speculative, derived from the immediacy of empirical processes, and superimposed on the totality in a knee-jerk response to the Parmenidean concept of 'pure being'. We have already seen that Heraclitus is more profound for it is the simultaneous existence of both 'being' and 'non-being'—a unity of opposites—which he is able to derive, and from which his notion of 'becoming' is generated. It seems to us that the 'Homeric Questions' provide a more feasible account of what Heraclitus actually said, when he is cited as uttering the following: 'We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not'.[16]

Heraclitus did not traduce a naive and speculative notion of 'becoming'. Nor does Hegel impute to him one. In a way, it is the subtlety of the Heraclitean position that militates against Copleston's other charge. Copleston argues that Hegel 'errs by putting Parmenides earlier than Heraclitus, for Parmenides was a critic as well as a contemporary of Heraclitus and must be the later writer'. However the Hegelian analysis is primarily logical; in his account Heraclitus occurs later than Parmenides because the latter only attains the notion of pure being. Hegel did not seem to have been aware that the contradiction of being and non-being is implicit in the Eleatic position however. Heraclitus, whether he is aware of the contradiction of being and non-being concealed within Parmenidean thought, nevertheless raises that contradiction to the level of historical reality, and it is this that Hegel particularly appreciates. In the Hegelian triad as evinced in the first section of the Logic, one does not derive 'becoming' from the moment of 'pure being'. Instead 'being' first divulges 'nothing' and it is only the 'sublation' of this contradiction that results in 'becoming'. The same too is true in the movement we consider here. One cannot derive a genuine 'becoming' merely from the 'pure being' of the Eleatics; the moment of negation, of 'nothing' or in this case—'non-being'—remains a necessary one through which 'becoming' is derived.

This difference might seem petty but it is in fact most important for Pre-Socratic philosophy. Without it Aristotelian thought could not have developed along the lines it did. In reference to the paradoxes Aristotle remarks:

> Zeno's reasoning, however, is fallacious, when he says that if everything when it occupies an equal space is at rest, and if that which is in locomotion is always in a now, the flying arrow is therefore motionless. This is false; for time is not composed of indivisible nows any more than any other magnitude is composed of indivisibles.[17]

[15] Ibid.

[16] *Early Greek Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 117.

[17] Aristotle, *The Collected Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 405.

For Aristotle time involves a fluid, variable element rather than a lifeless aggregate of static and disconnected moments. Yet just as with Heraclitus, this is no abstract 'becoming' merely imposed on events. Aristotle's insight regarding time flows from his conception of change more generally. Here he invokes the categories of 'potency' and 'act'. For a given 'form' to be replaced by another, for example, a green leaf turning brown in autumn, the material substratum or 'matter' must have at its core the ability to change. This is not the place to analyse in detail the Aristotelian notions of matter, form and substance, but what is vitally important here is that the notions of 'potentiality' and 'actuality' are ultimately reminiscent of the contradiction which Heraclitus elucidates; that is, the contradiction between 'being' and 'non-being'. One can describe the Aristotelian philosophy in the same terms that Heraclitus used to describe his own—'everything is and is not'. In Aristotle things are in their (present) actuality, but they also are not, for they are not as they will eventually be.

Despite how, in explicating the syllogism, Aristotle very explicitly denied the principle of logical contradiction, we are nevertheless aware that at a more fundamental level his system also requires it. In Heraclitus the real-world contradiction between 'being' and 'non-being' generates 'becoming' and in Aristotle the same contradiction is furnished in a more concrete expression as 'act' and 'potency'. Aristotle is so armed that he is able to deal with Zeno's paradoxes more successfully than any of his contemporaries, for the Aristotelian basis consists in the fact that 'everything is and is not'. That is why he, Aristotle, is able to pierce the heart of the methodological dogma that articulates the paradoxes, when he argues that the third paradox 'arises from the fact that it is taken for granted that time consists of the Now; for if this is not conceded, the conclusions will not follow'. For Aristotle time consists of the 'now' but it also consists of the 'not now', which is the true corollary of the 'being' and 'non-being' of corporeal things.

To recapitulate, the contradictions that inhere in the fabric of reality appear in Zeno as the ossified and static determinations of the Parmenidean concept of 'pure being', but such a concept also contains its own negation in the form of purely phenomenal 'becoming' or 'non-being' and Heraclitus' genius consists in uniting both the concept and its negation, thereby generating a true 'becoming'. Aristotle too derives 'becoming' from the contradiction between 'being' and 'non-being', which here appears as 'act' and 'potency'. In both Heraclitus and Aristotle change is fundamental for it is produced by a contradiction that is fundamental to reality itself; thus when Aristotle approaches Zeno's paradoxes, he cannot but approach them historically. The arc of development through which thought moves here is prescient; it provides a phantom outline for what would later be enacted among the German idealists—are not the paradoxes of Zeno the auguries of the Kantian antinomies? And were not the antinomies of Kant bi-products of those who endeavoured to tarry with the metaphysical notion of God—a Cartesian God

characterized precisely by the fact that He is above all 'pure being'?[18] Finally, is it not clear that Hegel too was compelled to approach the antinomies historically?

Heraclitus' great achievement is raising the principle of 'identity in difference' or 'unity in opposition' reflectively, self-consciously as a principle that is derived from the fundamental contradictions that inhere in reality itself. The dialectical nature of the insight is quite remarkable and allows Heraclitus to provide an early and extremely lucid account of another notion integral to his philosophy, that is, the idea of 'the logos'. In Homer 'logos' signified 'word' or 'speech', but could also stand for 'breath'. In a certain way 'word' and 'breath' were for the ancients two sides of the same coin, expressing a duel aspect in the conditioning of human beings; a breath is the affirmation of the physical life while the uttered word is the affirmation of the spiritual one. On the theological plane it was speculated that poets were able to 'breathe in' words and therefore knowledge from a divine source.

Heraclitus was to merge much of this into his own definition of 'the logos'. He took from the theologians the conviction that knowledge has a basis in the divine but God for Heraclitus attains a distinctly irreligious flavour. Some theologians believed that man was ultimately passive, that the logos was the 'breath' of God that would animate human beings in much the same way the motion of the puppet master causes his creation to dance. In other words the external object (God) resolves human thought and activity into itself, in abstract identity: a pure being refracted through a religious lens. However the moment of abstract identity instantaneously yields difference, for when the divine dissolves the human essence into itself, we inevitably come to experience God as a mortifying and alien existence set against our own.

Heraclitus is unable to rest in the realm of an unmediated religious absolute and is compelled to pass across to the moment of difference. Thus he emphasizes that, as individual people, we have our own set of particular features and aims that often stand in contradiction to 'the divine' or 'logos'. The mediation or moment of 'unity in difference' is realized when Heraclitus asserts that each person possesses their individual 'logos' that allows them to filter 'the divine' in and through the details of their particularity.

Such a unity in difference means that the religious spectre now becomes radically re-orientated, for it can no longer be a supernatural enigma that stamps us with the imprint of its own mysterious teleology. At the same time it cannot present as a set of Gods perched atop a mountain, reflecting absolutely all the capriciousness and subjectivity of their counterparts in the world of men. Both these images of God are unmediated abstractions. The dialectical synthesis Heraclitus achieves necessarily transforms the guise of God; no longer can it appear in the form of a 'being' or 'beings' that exist in some transcendental realm to which the earthly life is related merely as a melancholy afterthought. The 'unity in difference' principle *as mediation*

[18] God in Descartes is pure being in as much as God is the pre-condition and ultimate unity of both the thinking and extended substances.

means that God is bound up with man's most intimate nature; the principle of God is as well the principle of concrete living man.

Consequently 'the logos' or 'the divine' sheds its supernatural character, resolving itself in a principle inhering in the world and active in people. In Heraclitus 'the logos' or the 'divine' becomes dialectically restructured as the 'reason' or 'logic' which pervades reality—the purpose 'which steers all things through all things';[19] a 'purpose' whose aspect is the universal, but not in the abstract, for it is a 'universal' which comes to be—a becoming— realized in and through the individual. The task of philosophy then becomes the endeavour to facilitate this.

Again it becomes clear how remarkable Heraclitus actually was; how he managed to adumbrate much of the very best in modern philosophy. His 'logos' is an anticipation of key themes in Spinoza, Shelling and, of course, Hegel. For this reason the maestro was to comment 'there is not a proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my logic'.[20]

Although Heraclitus is probably the most sublime of the pre-Socratics, there are many further fascinating derivations on the 'being'/'non-being' theme. Empedocles tries to annul the difference between the 'pure being' and its appearance as a phenomenal 'becoming' in Parmenidean philosophy. He concurs with the Eleatic notion that nothing new can come into being and that matter is unchangeable, but at the same time he posits several different instances of 'eternal' matter (earth, air, fire and water) and argues that their various intermixing is what gives shape to the concrete objects of the world. In other words, the interplay of fundamental objects acts as the mediation or transition point by which we are able to comprehend the process of 'becoming' in the phenomenal world. Empedocles asserts that the relation of the fundamental substances is governed by the principles of 'love' and 'strife'. Because there is a multiplicity of substances, the point at which some come together is simultaneously the point at which others draw apart; thus the principle of contradiction is attained through the 'multiplicity' as mediation, and embodied in the concepts of 'love' and 'strife'. It is worth noting that Empedocles' concept of change as the consequence of an intermixing of various particles of 'eternal' matter adumbrates the more comprehensive 'atomism' developed by Leucippus and Democritus.

Anaxagoras both extends the notion of a multiplicity of substances we discover in Empedocles and contravenes it. He extends it by way of saying that each individual thing is qualitatively unique and self generating—'How can hair come from what is not hair, or flesh from what is not flesh?' (Particles however can intermingle and in this case the dominant particle is the key to the appearance of the object—is this not marvellously reminiscent of Leibniz and his beloved monads?) Thus reality is fragmented into an infinite number of individual substances. However, at the same time Anaxagoras denies that these things are substances at all, for they are secondary

[19] Heraclitus, *The Fragments* (www.heraclitusfragments.com), Fragment 54.
[20] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 279.

creations that issue forth from an original and undifferentiated substance, the primeval and chaotic mass that pervades all determination. In a certain way Anaxagoras falls back into the unmediated Eleatic position of pure being while at the same time superimposing a multiplicity of individual and irreducible things. What is different is that Anaxagoras believes that the mediation of these two separations, the means by which the original undifferentiated mass yield multiplicity, is accomplished by what Hegel describes as the 'Universal, Thought itself, in and for itself, without opposition, all embracing, which is the substance or the principle'.[21]

For Hegel, Anaxagoras' principle of the 'nous' allows that 'Thought as pure, free process in itself, is the self determining universal and is not distinguished from conscious thought. In Anaxagoras quite new ground is thus opened up'. However Hegel is slightly off key here: in describing the 'nous' as 'the self determining universal ... not distinguished from conscious thought', Hegel is as well describing 'the logos' of Heraclitus. The 'quite new ground' that Hegel describes has in fact already been trodden by the original philosopher of 'becoming'. Why is Hegel not aware of this? As much as Hegel admires the philosophy of Heraclitus, he does not seem to have realized that 'the logos' was derived dialectically. That is, Hegel appreciates very well that Heraclitus derived 'becoming' from the contradiction of 'being' and 'non-being' that inheres in reality, but he does not perceive that Heraclitus' 'identity in difference' principle is as well the point of departure for the formulation of 'the logos'. In Heraclitus 'unity in difference' becomes the mediating principle between 'the logos' and the old one-sided, abstract formulations of 'the divine'. Hegel does not approach the Heraclitean 'logos' historically; he does not locate its development in relation to previous one-sided religious abstractions; therefore to Hegel, the scraps and fragments in which Heraclitus describes 'the logos' seem speculative[22] and lonely, extirpated from the profound methodological insight, the 'becoming', which is the genuine cornerstone of Heraclitean philosophy. Thus Hegel incorrectly believes that Anaxagoras is the first to postulate the 'self determining universal'. By this Hegel means a self-contained principle, something that regulates the world without being external to it. We understand that the 'logos' satisfies this condition only in as much as it is understood as an imminent principle developed out of the contradiction of 'being' and 'non-being'.

That is not to say that Anaxagoras makes no real steps forward of his own. Certainly he gives an account of 'nous' that is fuller and less partial than that of Heraclitus. Anaxagoras brings the principle of identity in difference to bear on his own system; the unconditioned, initial substance is opposed to the 'nous' or 'thought' in its universal aspect. Although both moments form a contradiction, they also realize an ultimate identity, for it is the activity of 'nous' that makes determinate the initial 'unconditioned substance', which acts upon it, thereby yielding the

[21] Ibid., p. 321.

[22] Here i refer to the normal negative meaning of 'speculative' as opposed to its positive hegelian connotation.

manifold of corporeal things. This is profoundly important for, although Heraclitus had understood that the contradiction between being and non-being was something which was imminent in reality itself, he did not ground that knowledge in a thoroughly dialectical cosmology. In his cosmological account Heraclitus maintains that everything is created from fire and that consequently everything is fire. Here we are presented with another form of the 'it is not possible to step into the same river twice' motif—that is, an un-dialectical and therefore purely phenomenal expression of 'becoming'. The concept of 'fire' is not wrought in the furnace of contradiction; instead it has been and always will be; that is to say it is immutable, eternal. It is in a state of perpetual flux, that is true, but behind the flames of change we find concealed a hidden essence—the Parmenidean notion of 'pure being'—which so easily and casually yields such phenomenal 'becoming'.

In the cosmology of Anaxagoras we are able to feel once again the activity of 'identity in difference'. Anaxagoras begins with 'pure being', which is the unconditioned substance, but he also allows for its negation, which appears as 'nous'. At the same time reality is the ultimate identity of the two for it derives its essence from their inter-penetration and is realized therein as a concrete 'becoming'. The importance of this cannot be overstated, for it is here that the contradiction between 'being' and 'non-being' begins to attain a real world character. Heraclitus' conception of fire cannot change with time because it contains at its core the unmediated notion of 'pure being'. Yet Anaxagoras' cosmology develops through the contradiction of 'being' and 'non-being' that occurs as 'unconditioned substance' and 'nous'—both of which are component parts of a reality that now begins to appear in historical terms as well as logical ones.

The dialectic between the 'unconditioned' and 'the nous' is logical in as much as these things do not exist as corporeal realities couched in a geographical opposition, but it is historical in as much as the corporeal world and the process of change can be understood as a true 'becoming'. Heraclitus' 'fire' cannot change historically but only phenomenally, whereas the cosmological account of Anaxagoras as an expression of 'unity in difference' sets the basis for change both logically and temporally. What distinguishes 'being' from 'non-being' in Anaxagoras is not merely the fact that the 'unconditioned' is pure matter while the 'nous' is pure thought, but that the mediation between them, their identity in difference, requires temporal expression; the unconditioned substance 'becomes' in as much as the 'nous' works upon it: it acquires the status of a historical thing, that is, its essential nature changes in time or, to say the same thing, time is the organic expression of its changeability. In terms which are more familiar to the student of philosophy, the unconditioned substance of Anaxagoras is at first a pure potentiality whose actualization hinges, in the last analysis, on the 'unity and difference' principle. *Here lies the true worth of Anaxagoras; his philosophy provides the link between the purely logical 'identity of difference' of 'being' and 'non-being' conceived of by Heraclitus and its eventual transition into the philosophy of Aristotle as 'potency' and 'act'.* Unfortunately the further determinations of the 'nous' in Anaxagoras are arbitrary and unsystematic, but one must remember

that he creates the conditions for a logical–historical conception of reality based on the fundamental contradiction of 'being' and 'non-being', which was to reach profound expression in Aristotle.

The 'nous' of Anaxagoras is powerful partly because it is so comprehensive; its purview is totality itself. Hegel draws attention to this in a remarkably interesting discussion about 'ends'. He notes that, in the case of a wooden table, its purpose is not something inherent to it, bound up with its properties but is rather external; its 'thought', its 'universality', is derived from the carpenter as a source outside itself. However, the 'nous' is not only the universal principle of the reality (purpose), but is also the historical unfolding; its 'end' is at the same time its essence—'the nous is thus not a thinking existence from without which regulates the word . . . the end is posited for itself in a wise, figuratively conceiving Being'.[23] It constitutes itself through its activity; both 'the logos' of Heraclitus and 'the nous' of Anaxagoras are points at which thought achieves a 'concrete universal', that is, a universal mediated in and through particularity, a synthesis that leads inexorably to the appreciation of the totality as a 'self determined' content.

The 'concrete universal' here paradoxically features as well a high level of abstraction. It is certainly more determinate that the abstract universal and its negation, abstract particularity, or their appearance in pre-Socratic philosophy as 'pure being' and 'non-being'. It is indeed their synthesis. Therefore the necessary positing of the 'concrete universal' is a significant step forward in the history of philosophy, but at the same time the 'concrete universal' is devoid of any further determination at the level of particular things, other than the fact that they must be particular things whose presence reflects outwardly the universal.

At this point another contradiction is opened up from within the abstraction of the 'concrete universal'. Its universality and its particularity, formerly bound, now rescind in opposition once more. For the universal that has attained the status as a self determined content is unlike the particular through which it seeks self-expression. To recall what Hegel said about the table, particularity at this point, it is determined by a content outside itself (the universal). The universal is self-determinate; there is no external content to which it owes its life. To be truly embodied in particularity, particularity itself must attain the aspect of the universal; that is to say it must on some level be self-determined rather than other-determined. In other words the universal and particular must realize a new identity in difference.

At this point it is clear that the totality is self-determined, for there is nothing external to it. Yet how could any particular thing attain the element of self-determination when, by definition, any particular thing exists in the context of an external world and the infinite multiplicity of other particular things?

The solution to this problem is to be found in another Hegelian concept. Hegel notes that there is one particular thing, one single substance, that is quite unlike any other. The great German philosopher observes: 'consciousness is, on the one hand,

[23] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures in the History of Philosophy*, op. cit., pp. 321/322.

consciousness of the object, on the other, consciousness of itself . . . both are the same for consciousness, it is itself their comparison'.[24] And here from the *Philosophy of Right*—'I as free will am an object to myself'.[25]

The insight is the same in both cases. When we think about any particular object in the world it exists as something external to us, something other, but when we think about ourselves, we do not consider something foreign but rather the very thing which thinks. Self-consciousness and its realization in will is, therefore, fundamentally self-determined. Self-consciousness is both subject and object; its moments of objectification/alienation are ultimately the productions of its own nature.

Therefore, consciousness as a specific object has the unique quality of being able to reflect the self-determined universal; in consciousness the self-determined universal or 'nous' or 'logos' is able to recognize itself, thus realizing a more concrete identity in difference.

Therefore, 'the nous' as a concrete universal yearns for further determination, the satisfaction of which can be found only in the particularity of the conscious mind. It is at this point that a huge transition is affected; the point at which the universal must of necessity seek its content in the particularity of individual consciousness. This is what sets the stage for Socrates, for Socrates marks the point at which Greek thought begins to approach 'thought' in accordance with the individual mental life and 'conscience'.

[24] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind* (London: Goerge Allen & Unwin, 1966), p. 141.
[25] G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 42.