

Session 5: Philosophy for revolution: The Ancients lay foundations

Session 5: Materialism and dialectics – roots in Greece, India and China

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Hello again! Welcome back.

In this session, we'll look at how some early thinkers of ancient Greece, China and India began to view the world.

That world was fundamentally different from ours, but we can still relate to it in powerful ways. We can think of it as the childhood of humanity and like childhood it has a unique brilliance, and so it is not of purely academic or historic interest. Seeing things through a child's eyes can give us new insights and challenge our assumptions.

As Picasso once said, he spent a lifetime trying to paint like a child. Just as important, ancient philosophy shaped the building blocks, the foundation for much of modern philosophy, just as Einstein wouldn't have been possible without Newtonian physics. Here's Adam Lecznar's take on why the ancients still speak to us.

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Early sages, poets, artists and writers grasped the world, in which the natural and social were closely intertwined and science and philosophy were inseparable.

The period between 800-200 BCE, some 3,000 years ago, was termed the "Axial or Axis Age" by the German philosopher Karl Jaspers in 1948. He identified this as the time when human beings first became conscious of themselves and asked about the meaning of life.

Recent research shows that virtually all the great belief systems emerged around then, in many different parts of the world. These traditions continue to exercise a powerful influence.

We can gain insights, as well as strength and inspiration, by getting a handle on this dramatic sweep of historical thought.

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An overview of the history of philosophy reveals a picture of a wonderful diversity of ideas and tensions. Theories and concepts arose and developed in discussion *and* conflict with others.

Out of this tightly woven web of thought we will tease out some fundamental shared trends however diverse their origins.

Many thinkers came into conflict with religious and state authorities. On the other hand, others developed ideologies and belief systems that served to strengthen and consolidate the existing hierarchies and ruling classes.

Quite a few struggled within THEIR OWN philosophical systems. In other words, some aspects of their thinking could be revolutionary while other aspects were the opposite.

Back to the fundamental, "eternal" question:
the relationship between the world of thought and the world of being or nature.

From the earliest times, when humans began to consider their relationship to the world of nature, to each other and to thought itself, various tendencies emerged.

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Schools of philosophy divided into those which assert the primacy of spirit, or mind, over nature, and those who proposed the opposite, whereby nature in the broadest sense is viewed as primary, and thought arises out of it

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We defined materialism in the last session. Now we'll look at how the concept arose in ancient Greece. There was contact with Africa and Asia, so it was not purely a "European" phenomenon.

The Ionian school of Cosmologists was based in the Greek city of Miletus, on the east coast of the Aegean Sea, an area which is in today's Turkey, as you can see on this map.

They became known as *physici* or *physiologi* – people who wrote about **nature**. Their names were Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. Another thinker, called Heraclitus, lived in Ephesus, just 30 kilometres north, along the coast. This east side of the Mediterranean was at the junction of the emergent Greek civilisation and the ancient empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt.

Best-selling author, the theoretical physicist Carlo Rovelli, describes how the advances of these ancient thinkers took place against a background of war and destruction. But this moment in time also saw the rise of early forms of democracy, including citizens assemblies, the precursors of today's developing forms of participative democracy.

Those thinkers, Rovelli says were

"immersed in the liberty and political fluidity which is typically Greek, in a social space without imperial palaces or powerful priestly castes, where individual citizens decide their own destinies in open agoras, which means civic spaces

... where men decide their own laws, where the first parliament in the history of the world gathers ... and where for the first time men doubt that only the gods can account for the mysteries of the world."

The first organised forms of democracy were an integral part of the political and economic transformations around the Mediterranean which saw the creation of city states as well as the rise of distinct class societies. There was a constant ebb and flow, between forms of tyranny and democracy as tyrants came to power, only to be overthrown by movements from below. You can read about this in *Democracy Unchained*, downloadable from the Real Democracy Movement website.

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A famous name from those distant times is Heraclitus, who lived from 540 BCE to 480 BCE.

Heraclitus was an aristocrat who lived during a time of democratic revolution when a rising merchant class took state power from the landed aristocracy. The development of slave labour facilitated this transition.

Heraclitus was known as "the Obscure", partly because his work has come down to us in fragments, but also because his style of writing was mysterious and paradoxical. His most famous saying is: "We step and do not step into the same river; we are and we are not".

He fused together opposing ideas in which one thing appears to cancel out the other. "He treated every phenomenon as a unity of contradictions and treated it in terms of self-negation".

Heraclitus saw the world as permanently in existence, not as created by gods or men. Instead "it was, is and will be eternally living fire, regularly becoming ignited and regularly extinguished", and in

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flux through the movement of opposing forces. The only permanent thing is the law of perpetual change – otherwise known as the Logos.

He said: “The world, which is the same for all, has not been made by any god or man; it has ever been, is now and ever shall be ever-living fire”.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica explains it in this way:

Heraclitus’ *“understanding of the relation of opposites to each other enabled him to overcome the chaotic and divergent nature of the world. He asserted that the world exists as a coherent system in which a change in one direction is ultimately balanced by a corresponding change in another. Between all things there is a hidden connection, so that those that are apparently “tending apart” are actually “being brought together.”*

Heraclitus stands out not only due to his mysterious sayings, but because in his picture of the world, movement comes from **within things themselves due to the opposing forces within them** – which in this course we shall term “self-movement”. This principle was lost for millennia but we shall see how much later it was to inspire another revolution in thought.

Slide 7: As philosophy developed from this ancient view of things, in which spirit and matter were originally seen as unified, two distinct tendencies can be identified.

Slide 8: Renaissance artist Raphael painted a host of personalities in his grand fresco called The School of Athens. In this detail, you can see Plato on the left, pointing upwards towards his spiritual world of ideal forms, and Aristotle on the right, with the palm of his hand emphasising materiality, earth and matter.

Slide 9: Here is a visualisation of the difference between Plato and Aristotle. Plato explained “being” through the existence of immaterial types of objects, which he called “forms” or “ideas”. What we might consider as “actual being” – matter and space – he said, was “non-being”. Ideas were eternal, whereas things we perceive through our senses are transient and relative. He is famous for his allegory of the cave. In this story, humans are prisoners chained to a wall who only perceive the shadows of ideal forms reflected on the walls of the cave.

Many still consider Aristotle the greatest thinker of antiquity, and indeed of all time. He attended Plato’s school in Athens but critiqued Plato’s idea of disembodied forms. He studied innumerable fields of what we now call science, establishing his own school and library. He regarded all nature as transitioning between matter and form. Aristotle examined concepts of substance and essence - “what it is to be” - in his *Metaphysics*. He concluded that any particular substance is a combination of both matter and form. He considered that the soul – *psyche* -, as the *form*, or the *essence* of any living thing; it is not a distinct substance from the body that it is in. Medieval theologians tended to dogmatise Aristotle, so his legacy remains complex and disputed.

[Slide 10: What is materialism. Audio](#)

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Here is the philosophical meaning of the word Idealism. The notion that there is only a subject, or a thinking mind is the essence of the idealist approach. Philosophical idealism is sometimes connected with religious belief systems, in the sense of an all-seeing supreme being. Idealism can be better understood as one aspect of knowledge – the exploration of the mind or psyche – but which may play down its connection with the human body or nature.

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Epicurus, who lived 341-270 BCE, created his own school, known as the Garden at which women and slaves were welcome. He sought to free people from fear and anxiety, especially about death which he said was the end of both body and mind. He proposed the idea of atomic swerve, which was allied to free will in humans.

Some two centuries later, the Roman poet Lucretius (c.99 BC- c. 55 BCE) declared in verse that the universe was made of an infinite number of atoms in his long poem *On the Nature of Things* (*De rerum natura*), where he describes the movement of dust particles in a ray of sunshine.

In conclusion, it's clear that philosophy has diverse global origins and that the eastern Mediterranean was a melting pot. The basic concepts were neither Western nor Eastern, but shared universally.

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So far we've only been looking at male thinkers. But here is a Greek woman called Aspasia who also came from Miletus, but then moved to Athens. Oxford scholar Armand d'Angour has rescued Aspasia from the misogynistic slanders of history. He notes that she may well have been Socrates' partner. D'Angour describes her as an intellectual midwife who helped give birth to European philosophy.

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Materialist philosophies also arose in India. Author Ramkrishna Bhattacharya has compared the Charvaka school to the Presocratic philosophers in Greece. He notes that they not only admitted the materiality of the world, but also tried "to pinpoint the elements that constitute this materiality. There is a Cārvāka saying echoing this:

"Earth, water, fire and air are the principles, nothing else."

Bhattacharya concludes that "In spite of widely different concepts of matter in both western and Indian traditions, materialism as a doctrine holds its distinct position in the history of philosophy."

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In China, the 8th to 3rd centuries BCE saw the rise of a period described as the

"Contention of the Hundred Schools of Thought".

It saw the greatest advances in philosophy, Chinese literature, arts, music, and culture overall.

It was a time of great instability and warfare as powerful feudal states swallowed up smaller ones: the period of the Warring States: 403-221 BCE

Thinkers, cut loose from their states, started their own schools or preached their own vision and attracted followers.

As ancient rites and customs were replaced by administrative bureaucracies, the break-down of old ways made the period of the Warring States a brilliant and creative period in the history of Chinese thought.

Alongside the Confucianist and the Legalist Schools, was Taoism or Dao. It looked back to an ideal age of prehistory. The Taoists advocated a policy of inaction and quietism, helpful for ordinary men and women in troubling times. It's a deeply mystical approach. The name "Tao" literally means the

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“way” or “path”, but its wider meaning is a metaphysical first principle: a vast oneness that precedes and generates the diverse forms of the world.

The written text called the Tao Te Ching shares with Heraclitus a love of contradictory truths:

To collect, first scatter

To weaken, first strengthen

To abolish, first strengthen

To conclude, first initiate.

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In identifying basic trends, we need to distinguish between what a thinker considered to be the basic issues and his/her approach. In other words, to distinguish between the “content” of a philosophy and its “form”.

Any approach, Idealist or Materialist, may be turned into fixed notions, lifeless abstractions, which take it away from the living movement of reality.

We can reflect on how theories of knowledge, religions and belief systems, may help, or hold back creative, revolutionary approaches to the world and relate to today’s political attitudes and practices.