Introduction to the Presocratics

The error of the common mind lies in transforming the apparent into the obvious; while for the inquiring mind nothing is obvious.

Christos Malevitis

“The Greeks knew the proper season to start philosophy”, Nietzsche was to note; “that is, not later, in bitterness – something wrongly supposed by those who derive philosophy from melancholy. Instead, they began in happiness, in mature adolescence, in the burning exuberance of bold, victorious manhood. That the Greeks philosophized in such a period teaches us about what philosophy is and what it means...”\(^1\) In *Ionia* philosophy and science were born. Virtually all of the Presocratic philosophers are from Ionia. “These Ionians”, wrote the widely-traveled Herodotus, “set their cities in places more favored by skies and seasons than any country known to us”\(^2\). These were the thinkers who for the first time posed in rational and critical terms the fundamental questions that henceforth would engage the human mind.

The period of Presocratic philosophy extends from the beginning of the 6th century, B.C., to around the end of the 5th century, B.C., which corresponds -in accordance with its conventional name- with the period Socrates appeared. As we established above, Presocratic philosophy is not the manifestation of a sudden awakening of the Greek spirit. It is the culminating result of a long development and maturation of the Greek mind.

*Intuition* and *reason* tend toward a unique balance, and thought begins to turn away from purely practical ends toward theoretical principles and concepts. Hesiod has already illuminated the pathway that will be blazed by Greek thought. The time is now ripe for the Greek spirit to make the crucial step toward philosophy and its still unalienable partner, science.

This step will be taken by the Presocratics on the basis of four axioms that will henceforth be decisive in the development of the mind. As a point of departure, they may be summarized thus:

- Beneath the apparent disorder and multiplicity of the cosmos, there exists order, unity and stability.

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\(^1\) F. Nietzsche, *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, 263.

\(^2\) Herodotus, *Historiae*, I, 142.
That stability derives from the fundamental primary substance from which the cosmos originated.

This primary substance, and consequently the cosmic reality, is one, and is based not on supernatural, but on physical, causes.

These physical causes are such that man can investigate them rationally.

These statements are neither self-evident nor self-explanatory. Of course, their background is that long maturation of the Greek mind. But the crucial final step was the exclusive achievement of the Presocratic thinkers. Now, for the first time the human mind focuses on the truth, seeking rationally and critically the inherent order and stability in nature.

However, the question as to whether the Presocratics were also the founders of science demands deeper analysis. The history of contemporary science begins with the Renaissance. While Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) was the founder of contemporary experimental science, Francis Bacon (1561–1626), though not himself a scientist, is considered the originator of the new inductive method: “The ancients”, he was to write, “had a particular form of investigation and discovery, and their writings show it. But it was of such a nature, that they immediately flew from a few instances and particulars to the most general conclusions or the principles of the sciences, and then by their intermediate propositions deduced their inferior conclusions, and tried them by the test of the immovable and settled truth of the first”.  

According to Bacon, this method is faulty. Instead of attempting to reveal the truth deductively on the basis of general syllogistic rules, one should begin inductively with particular observations and statements, proceeding gradually to general conclusions. In his great work, Novum Organum -the title consciously chosen as opposed to Aristotle’s Organon- he was to demonstrate the scientific method of induction, maintaining that the true science “constructs . . . axioms from the senses and particulars, by ascending continually and gradually, till it finally arrives at the most general axioms, which is the true but unattempted way”.

Bacon himself, however -who was a profoundly learned in ancient Greek literature- would exclude from his polemics against Platonc, and especially, Aristotelian dogmatism, the work of the Presocratics: “The more ancient Greeks, as Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Leucippus, Democritus, Parmenides, Heraclitus, Xenophanes, Philolaus, and the rest (for I omit Pythagoras as being superstitious), did not (that we are aware) open schools, but betook themselves to the investigation of truth with greater silence and with more severity and simplicity, that is, with less affectation and ostentation. Hence in our opinion they acted more advisedly, (and) however their works may have been eclipsed in course of time . . . (they) exhibit some sprinkling of natural philosophy, the nature of things, and experiment”.

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3 F. Bacon, Novum Organum, 243.
4 F. Bacon, Novum Organum, 244.
5 F. Bacon, Novum Organum, 327, 333, 338.