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Books by Dagobert D. Runes

THALES

Thales of Miletus (*ca.* 600 B.C.) is generally considered the first philosopher of Western civilization. He was reputed by the ancients to have been widely traveled and highly learned, and was counted among "the seven wise men" of Greece. He does, in fact, seem to have been acquainted with both Egyptian and Babylonian astronomy. But what we have of his limited knowledge hardly supports the claim that he once predicted an eclipse.

We know little of Thales' philosophy, for none of his writings have survived—if, indeed, he ever made a written record of his thoughts. According to Aristotle,[1] Thales believed that it was water "which existed before all existing things came to be, out of which all things came and into which all things return." He pictured the earth as a flat disc swimming on the surface of a boundless expanse of water. He believed that the world was filled with animate beings, and his awareness of electric attraction led him to attribute souls even to magnets.

ANAXIMANDER

Anaximander (611-547 B.C.), a compatriot and contemporary of Thales, is called "the Father of Metaphysics." Only a few lines, and not one complete sentence, remain of his treatise, *On Nature,* a title which has since become a classic for philosophic works. His truly philosophic or chemico-physical theories are therefore very uncertain. The beginning and cause of all the worlds he names "*apeiron,*" which can be translated as "the uncertain" or "the unbounded." [2] Along with this obscure definition, Anaximander states that this universal substratum is in constant motion, so that the opposing qualities within it divide and are separated out. His views in brief: Our world was generated by such a process of separating the opposites from the unbounded. At first the "cold" and the "hot" separated. These in turn created humidity, the primal substance, of which the highest form is the sea. Out of this original humidity, in turn, were separated the earth, the air and a sort of pillar of flame, the latter two circling the first.[3] Then the pillar of flame broke apart, and the sun, moon and stars were formed. The flaming pillar was forced into a great number of holes in the spheres, made of compressed air and driven horizontally around the earth by the wind. Earth itself has a cylindrical form. Its original substance was liquid, and in the process of evaporation by the sun, it gave birth to animals and men.

ANAXIMENES

The following fragment is all that remains of the theories of natural law held by the third Miletian philosopher, Anaximenes (*ca.* 550 B.C.) : "Just as the air which is our soul surrounds us, so do the wind and air encompass the world." [4] Evidently the indeterminateness of Anaximander's world substance did not satisfy Anaximenes, while he seems to have preferred air to the water of Thales because of its greater fluidity and capacity for expansion.

Anaximenes explains the creation of fire out of air as a process of thinning out, or rarefication; on the other hand, a process of thickening, or condensation, produced water, the earth, the sun, etc. Thus, according to Anaximenes, the density of a body bears a direct relation to its temperature. Of the earth he said that it hung like a disc in the air. He said the same of the sun, which in appearance reminded him of a flat leaf. In contrast, he described the moon and stars as nails driven into the firmament.

The creation of the stars he explained as a process in which the moisture of the earth was evaporated, or rarefied, back into fire. The sun was drawn earthward, attaining its white heat through the rapidity of its motion. He described the sun's path as circular over the earth, rather than around it. It is invisible at times because it is concealed from sight by high mountains in the north.

This is virtually the sum of our knowledge of the philosophy of Anaximenes.

DIOGENES OF APOLLONIA

About 425 B.C., a champion of Anaximenes' theory of air as the primary substance appeared in the person of Diogenes of Apollonia. Diogenes followed his master's view that all matter was a transmutation of air, the change consisting of a relative rarefication or condensation of this primal substance.

Because the denser substance sank, two masses took form which, whirling under the influence of fire, formed the stars and the earth. Furthermore, it is the air which gives both men and animals the power of motion.[5] [6] Diogenes classified the air under various categories. Soul air, for instance, is finer and warmer than body air, while sun air is warmer than soul air.

HIPPON

Hippon (*ca.* 550 B. C.) agreed with Thales that humidity was the primary substance, pointing to the humidity of the sperm in support of his contention. According to his view, fire was made from water, and the world was created by the subsequent action of the fire upon the water. Like the other Ionic philosophers, Hippon assumed a periodic creation of the universe.

HERACLITUS

Heraclitus of Ephesus (*ca.* 500 B.C.) is the most stimulating of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Through lack of aggressiveness on his part and the ingratitude of his countrymen, he relinquished his inherited position of honor as high priest and went into seclusion, contemptuous of the masses that "did not understand even if it perceived. . . . They are like the deaf." All his personal utterances reflect disillusion and bitterness, and what we know of his behavior confirms this pessimism and skepticism. In contrast to Democritus, "the Laughing Philosopher," Heraclitus was known as "the Weeping Philosopher." His contemporaries also called him "Skoteinos" ("the Dark One") because his style was too involved for them to follow, and his relations with his fellow philosophers were mainly unfriendly. He said of Homer that he deserved to be whipped.

Heraclitus' comments on the flux of life and the struggle in nature have been greatly overestimated by modern historians of philosophy. Such an observation as, "Who rises in the same stream will always struggle with fresh waters," makes too little precise sense for us to attach great importance to it. The habit of imbuing such naive reflections with profound meanings is uncritical and certainly unjust to the philosopher. Like all thinkers of his time, Heraclitus faced reality with a profound awareness of his own helplessness.

He taught that the world is composed of three substances: fire, water and earth. These pass from one into another in a regular order of mutation: on the one hand, fire changes to water and water to earth; on the other, earth changes to water and water back into fire. Thus water divides, one half to form earth, the other half, fire. The source of Heraclitus' theory of an upward- and

downward-streaming substance remains unknown to us.

In another context Heraclitus said that fire was the primary cause of the world as well as "the principle of world logic." For this reason, the fiery, dry soul is more nearly perfect than the humid one, while "it is death for the soul to turn into water." Whence arises his judgment that the drunkard is seriously imperfect because "his soul is wet."

Heraclitus visualized the sun as being the size of a plate (or, in another simile, as broad as a man's foot), and evidently believed that it was extinguished and relit daily. He conceived of the heavens as mighty vaults rotating around the earth, with openings in which vapor rising from the ocean had gathered and formed the sun and solar system.

Heraclitus strove to give a scientific explanation to natural phenomena, but as with all early Greek philosophers, his efforts were handicapped by the inadequate cosmogony and physics of his time. The Stoics later based their beliefs on Heraclitean physics, and among modern philosophers, Hegel acknowledges a debt to the philosophy of Heraclitus.

The chain of Hylozoists ends with Heraclitus. From the representatives included here it is clear that they conceived their first obligation to be the explanation of nature in terms of a primary substance. Their lack of exact knowledge and sound scientific method made it impossible for them to go beyond vague speculations, grounded in superstition, which were to exercise a persistent and often destructive influence on the minds of succeeding generations.

Their philosophic "systems" were built, not on scientific investigation and logical study, but on fragmentary observations of nature and inaccurate conclusions. In attempting to develop a physics, the Hylozoists gave birth to a metaphysics. For that which would have required demonstrable proof in physics, they could state boldly and without inhibition in metaphysics.

XENOPHANES

About 540 B.C. an evil-mocker appeared among the Greeks in the person of Xenophanes of Colophon. With devastating sarcasm he scourged the ignorance, egotism and pride of the people, and the blind adoration they lavished on everything that was primitive but powerful. He composed a series of lyric, epic and didactic poems, without (so Aristotle complained) committing himself to any definite position or point of view.

His work contains many evidences of protest against popular religious beliefs—not, as has often been maintained, against the polytheism of the Greek cults, but rather against the distorted anthropomorphism to which they were addicted. "Homer and Hesiod," he accused, "have attributed to the gods everything which is blameworthy in the eyes of men, stealing, adultery and mutual deception." He noted, aptly: "If oxen, horses or lions were able to draw pictures as men do, oxen would draw gods that were oxlike, horses gods that were horselike, and lions lionlike gods. . . . The Ethiopians say the gods are black and flat-nosed, while the Thracians declare they are blue-eyed and redheaded."

But while Xenophanes opposed anthropomorphism, other of his statements, of unquestioned authenticity—such as his imitation of Euripides, where he accounts for the relation of the lower gods to the higher ones on the basis of ancient lore—indicate his belief in polytheism. Over and above all the gods, he says, "reigns one who is supreme among men and gods. . . . This godhead is all eyes, all mind, all ears. . . . Without effort he controls everything by the power of his mind."

Through such writings as these, compounded partly of faith, partly of superstition, Xenophanes laid the foundation for a religious philosophy which had become so powerful a growth,

pride of the first metaphysicians and their disdain for scientific method laid down the path for all later Greek spiritual development.

logic (*deductio* or *inductio*), Descartes, in true Platonic fashion, favored the intuitive method (*intuitio*).[216] In defining intuition, he resorts to some very vague terms. As to its source, he knew as much or as little as the recent champion of this mystic system of thought, Henri Bergson. One belief does emerge clearly from the philosophy of Descartes: It is not the mind but the will that accomplishes the act of judgment.

The psychology of Descartes is a storehouse of human error. At the time when Harvey was discovering the circulation of the blood and laying the foundations of modern medicine, Descartes was philosophizing about "dust-like living spirits" which come in contact with the nerves and so "mediate between the perceptions and motion." The soul has its seat in the *glans pinealis,* which is in the center of the brain, and from which it sends out its commands to all parts of the body. Man is a "machine inspired by life spirits."[217]

Metaphysicians of the last century wrestled long and vainly with the problem of how the Cartesian soul affected the body and was in turn affected by it.

According to Descartes, animals are without consciences or feelings; they are mere eating and drinking machines.[218]

What Descartes accomplished philosophically was to express the Scholastic ideas of substance in mathematical formulas. Relying on Cardinal Cusanus, he distinguished between a thinking substance and a body substance in addition to the substance of God. The substance of God needs nothing outside itself for its existence, but the substance of thought and body require the substance of God for their existence.[219] This idea became a major theme in modern philosophy and is one of the reasons Descartes is known as "the founder of modern metaphysics."

BARUCH SPINOZA

Among the hundreds of men of greater or less importance in the history of philosophy, Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) holds a unique position. Abhorred and reviled for more than a hundred years by the intellectual elite of Europe, this so-called wicked little atheist had, by the end of the eighteenth century, become a symbol of sanctity. Great men like Herder, Goethe and Lessing revered this strange man and his original ideas, and as the decades went by, the light of Baruch Spinoza's brilliant thought shone brighter and brighter.

No man can be fully understood without an adequate knowledge of his background; and if Spinoza seems to be an enigmatic figure, so were his epoch and his environment.

Spinoza was the descendant of a Jewish family which had been driven from Spain by the Inquisition, first to Portugal, then to Holland. The latter country offered only a partial refuge, for in the seventeenth century Holland had its own brands of religious and political persecution. Young Spinoza found little happiness in his step-mother's house in Amsterdam, and we hear of him as an adolescent frequently wandering away from the Spanish-speaking "ghetto," to mingle with his Christian neighbors. Amsterdam was at that time seething with Socinians, Quakers and other reformist sects, a situation which helped the young student of the Torah and the Talmud to approach Scripture with an amazingly analytical and objective eye.

By his detached viewpoint, the young Spinoza brought to light indisputable discrepancies between various sections of the Canon, and confronted scholars with disturbing evidence that some of the traditionally ancient writings had been composed only a few hundred years B.C., and by entirely different hands than the

orthodoxy alleged. This was the beginning of modern theological exegetics or Biblical criticism. The Jewish community of Amsterdam, most of whose members had suffered harrowing tortures at the hands of the Catholic Church, made desperate efforts to stop Spinoza from proselytizing among their people. What they especially feared was Spinoza's thesis that the laws of the Torah were state laws designed for the tribes of Israel, and therefore had no validity for Jews living in other states. If this interpretation were accepted, it would mean the dissolution of those religious ties by which the Torah had for thousands of years held together Jews scattered to the four corners of the earth. When pleas and threats proved to be of no avail, the twenty-four-year-old Spinoza was officially expelled from the Jewish community of Amsterdam. He spent the remainder of his life in other Dutch towns, mostly in and around The Hague.

Immediately after his excommunication, Spinoza had published in Spanish a pamphlet entitled *Apologia,* which explained his position. Until this day not one copy of the pamphlet has been discovered, though many years later, in the only book published during his lifetime, *The Theological Political Treatise,* he expounded his point of view in great detail. His main thesis is an appeal to reason, with the recommendation that the secular powers of the Church be curbed, so that every man may be granted full liberty of thought and speech.

In his philosophic mind, Spinoza is a student of Descartes, but in his findings he ranges far afield from the French mathematician. In his *Ethics,* which is designed after Euclid's Geometry, he begins with a number of what he considers irrefutable premises, on which he builds a system analyzing the nature of God and man in a purely scientific manner. He identifies God with creative nature, and with substance. Mortal man knows only two attributes, the world of the body and the world of the mind; but God (or substance) lives through infinite attributes, each of which in turn necessarily expresses eternal and infinite essentiality.

131
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132
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133
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134
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135
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136
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137
Ibid., Suras 33, 49.
138
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139
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140
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141
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142
"Introduction," I.
143
Cf. Ibn Khalikan, 189.
144
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145
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146
Elixir of Happiness.
147