

Founders of Western Philosophy: Thales to Hume
a 12-lecture course
by

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Lecture 2
**THE FIRST ANSWERS AND THEIR CLIMAX:
THE TRIUMPH OF THE
METAPHYSICS OF TWO WORLDS**



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CONTENTS

Preface	vi
1. Three Overall Approaches to Philosophy	1
2. The Birth of Determinism: the Materialism of Democritus	3
3. The Birth of “It Seems to Me . . .”: the Skepticism of the Sophists	14
4. “Might Makes Right”	21
5. Socrates’ Discovery of Universals	26
6. Plato’s Metaphysics: the Sensible World and the World of Ideal Forms	32
Study Questions	49

Lecture 2

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1. Three Overall Approaches to Philosophy

The philosophers we looked at last time, the early pre-Socratics, did not offer complete systems of philosophy. They had individual ideas and arguments that greatly influenced later philosophers, but these were only leads. Tonight we are going to see the first attempts—three of them—at developed, all-embracing approaches to philosophy. And these first three overall approaches, formulated in Greece, endure right to the present, with legions of supporters among the people around you—although presumably not in this room.

The three philosophies are materialism, skepticism, and idealism. Let me define each of these at the outset. *Materialism* is a technical term in metaphysics; it does not mean a preoccupation with money or sex. It is the view that reality is basically matter in motion, and that all so-called nonmaterial or mental phenomena are to be explained entirely in physical, material terms.

Skepticism is the view that no objective or certain knowledge of anything is possible to anyone. In other words, what we call knowledge is really only a guess, a subjective feeling, a probability, or something of that sort, but not true knowledge.

Idealism, also, is a technical term in metaphysics; it does not mean here a devotion to the good. It is the view that reality is basically nonmaterial, and that the material world is not an

irreducible primary, but simply a byproduct or expression of something more fundamental, something that is nonmaterial in character.

I note for the record that these three are not the only possible approaches to philosophy—Aristotle is not subsumed under any of them, and neither is Objectivism—but of that we will say more later.

All three approaches are derivatives, in different ways, of the early philosophers that we looked at last week. In a sense, materialism is implied by Thales' view that everything is water, because water is a form of matter—although Thales lived too early to have grasped the materialist implications of his statement, and it is highly doubtful that he would have accepted materialism if he had. Materialism's major Greek spokesmen are the Atomists, the first school we will look at tonight.

Skepticism is primarily a derivative of Heraclitus—you remember his disciple, Cratylus, who stopped speaking altogether on the grounds that there was nothing to refer to. Its major exponent is the Sophist school, and they are the last pre-Platonic school. (I don't call them pre-Socratic, because they are contemporary with Socrates in the fifth century B.C.)

Idealism in Greece is a derivative essentially of the Pythagorean viewpoint, with a large assist from Parmenides and Heraclitus. Its major exponent, of course, is Plato, helped along by certain suggestions of Socrates.

I should note at the start that the idealism of Plato has been incomparably more influential—in the ancient world, the medieval world, and the modern world, including the twentieth century—than either materialism or skepticism alone or in combination ever were. In fact, one of the great attractions that Plato offered to his followers, and still does to this day, was that his approach to philosophy enabled them to escape the materialist or the skeptic approaches. So we are going to start by looking comparatively briefly at materialism and skepticism, as back-

ground; and then we will begin on Plato, covering tonight just the base of his metaphysics.

2. The Birth of Determinism: the Materialism of Democritus

Let us turn first to the materialists, the Atomists. Last week we saw the problem that arises from the opposition between Heraclitus and Parmenides: Everything is change and that is all that exists; versus there is no change, only the motionless One. And we saw how Pythagoreanism attempted to reconcile these two views, by postulating two worlds: this world, which is flux, to satisfy Heraclitus; and another, immutable world, to satisfy Parmenides. The Atomists, also, were the outcome of an attempt to reconcile Parmenides and Heraclitus, but a very different kind of attempt from that of the Pythagoreans.

The Atomists belonged to a group of philosophers called pluralists, who agreed with some elements of Parmenides and some of Heraclitus. They agreed with Parmenides that the stuff that makes up reality has to be uncreated, indestructible, eternal, and unchanging. Because there is no “what is not,” “what is” can never become “what is not,” nor vice versa. In other words, they agreed that nothing really new can ever come into or go out of existence. But they agreed with Heraclitus that there is such a thing as change; they regarded this as simply too obvious a fact to deny. So the question was, how will we reconcile these two views? Their answer was, let us abandon monism. Monism, remember, was the view that there is only one world-stuff, that everything is water, or air, or whatever it happens to be. Suppose we abandon that view, they thought, and say instead that there are many different stuffs which make up the world (and, of course, the name pluralism comes from the idea of *many* stuffs).

Let us, they said, endow each of these stuffs with all of the Parmenidean characteristics, so that in itself each stuff is unchanging, eternal, and indestructible—in itself like a little Parmenidean universe. But, they said, the one thing we will

allow these stuffs is to move around in space. That is all: only locomotion. We will not, therefore, allow any internal alteration in the stuffs, any change in their individual qualities. Locomotion, they argued, does not violate Parmenides' principle, because it does not require anything new to come into or go out of existence. It involves simply a rearrangement of the stuffs that always exist—a constant “mixing and unmixing,” as they put it, of the stuffs in new combinations. So we will never have a case of “what is” becoming “what is not,” or vice versa. Then, we can explain every other kind of change as being simply a process of changing position of these unchanging stuffs. You can think of it this way: Take Parmenides' One and smash it into a bunch of separate little stuffs. Then explain all change, growth, and development as merely a process in which these eternal stuffs constantly shift around and rearrange themselves. So we will not need any reference to nonexistence as the beginning or the end of the process of change. The key point is, nothing new ever comes into existence.

The obvious question was: What are these many stuffs? The early pluralists are primarily of historical interest. The first one was Empedocles (c. 490–435 B.C.). He was not very original in his concept of what the stuffs were. He just combined the various stuffs of his predecessors, saying that there were four basic kinds of stuff, four “roots,” as he called it: earth, air, water, and fire. Everything else was merely a combination and rearrangement of these four. So much for Empedocles: he had a clever idea, but it is not worth spending time on here.

His successor, Anaxagoras (born around 500 B.C.), disagreed with him. He was also a pluralist, but he said to Empedocles, in effect: You say, there is supposed to be nothing new coming into existence. You say that on your philosophy you never have “what is not” becoming “what is.” But, as I see it, your viewpoint is violating Parmenides' basic principle all the time. Consider, for instance, tomatoes, bananas, tobacco, chalk, flesh, hair,

and so on. You say that these things are formed when earth, air, etc. get into different combinations. But all these things I mentioned are different from earth, air, water, and fire. They have different qualities—different tastes, colors, sounds, odors—so something new is actually coming into existence when various changes take place. Banana-taste comes into existence; and then, when the banana disintegrates, banana-taste goes out of existence. And so on. Anaxagoras said, we have to be consistent here. If there are truly to be no new qualities in reality, which is the basic Parmenidean principle, there must be a lot more than four stuffs. There have to be as many different stuffs as there are different types of things: tomato-stuff, banana-stuff, flesh-stuff, etc., etc., each with its distinctive qualities. And each stuff will have to be regarded as irreducible, a basic ingredient of reality.

Then, he said, suppose little tiny bits (little “seeds,” as he put it) of all these stuffs are actually in everything. You might say, but I don’t see banana-stuff and tomato-stuff when I look at somebody’s hair. Of course, his answer would be that the seeds are too little for your gross senses to detect them; you only see the dominant stuff. But if these little seeds of everything were in everything, then, he says, change would really only be a rearrangement and nothing new would ever come into existence. If we burned wood, for instance, and converted it to ash, new qualities would not be coming into existence because the ash-stuff was in the wood to begin with. All that happened is that a certain rearrangement made us able to perceive the ash-stuff and temporarily obscured the wood-stuff, which is still there—and so on for all changes. This, he said, is the only thing to conclude if we are to obey Parmenides’ principle.

However, this was a complete dead end from the road started on by Thales. Thales set out to find unity in the midst of diversity, the one in the many, and here we end up just with diversity, with the many as absolutely irreducible and inexplicable. Thus, this theory would mean the end of science: All you can say about

tomatoes is that they are made of tomato-stuff, and so on for everything else. And yet it seemed to follow from Empedocles' view, based on the earlier views of Parmenides.

At this point, the Atomists enter the scene. The two famous ones are Leucippus (who flourished around 440 B.C.), of whom almost nothing is known, and Democritus (c. 460–360 B.C.), the much more famous one. These two, the leaders of the Atomist school, were also pluralists. They agreed that the world was composed of many elements, each of them by itself too tiny to see, and that all change was merely the mixing and unmixing, the rearranging, of these elements. But, they said, Anaxagoras's theory is hopeless. What can we do to get out of it? Well, they came up with a theory destined to be fantastically influential.

They said, we have to distinguish two basically different kinds of characteristics possessed by physical things: the qualities and the quantities—the qualitative characteristics vs. the quantitative or mathematical or numerical characteristics. The qualities included colors (red, orange, yellow, etc.), sounds (loud, soft, etc.), odors, tastes, temperatures (warm, cold, etc.), and textures (rough, smooth, etc.). All these are qualities. The quantities, on the other hand, are the attributes which are mathematically measurable—and here you see an obvious influence of the Pythagoreans. They include size (the exact amount of extension of a given particle), shape (triangular, rectangular, etc.), motion or rest (standing still or moving, and if so at what rate), and number (is a thing, such as a peach, made up of one particle, or ten particles, etc.). Those are the big four of the quantities: size, shape, state of motion, and number.

Having made this distinction, the Atomists said that there is only one way out of Anaxagoras's dilemma. The way out is to strip off from the things in the world all their qualities, and say that in reality they have only quantitative characteristics. The things in the physical world have only size, shape, motion, and number. Why? Well, they say, if qualities such as color, odor,