THALES: The Beginning of Philosophy

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τοὺς ἀνθρώπους . . . διὰ τοῦτο ἀπόλλυσθαι, ὅτι οὐ δύνανται τὴν ἀρχὴν τῷ τέλει πρόσαψαι. Alcmæon *fr.* 2 (Diels).

THE PROBLEM OF THE ORIGIN OF philosophy is implicit in each endeavor to understand what philosophy *is*. We cannot distinguish philosophy from non-philosophy without *defining* or thinking philosophy through its form, without following the boundary whereby philosophy is differentiated from other intellectual activities; and therefore, in reflecting seriously upon the origin of philosophy, we have begun to philosophize. A philosophical beginning, considered as a specific kind of human activity, rather than as the acceptance of a position or doctrine, necessarily reproduces or repeats the origin of philosophy at least in the sense that each such beginning, however unique as a historical phenomenon, is a species of a given genus. Thus the (philosophical) consideration of philosophical beginnings would seem to be the proper mode for investigating, not just the nature of philosophy, but its historical origin as well: that is, in what sense philosophy may be said to have a 'historical' origin (for it may be that 'history' originates within philosophy). This procedure seems more reasonable than an effort to determine by historical methods the identity of the actually first philosopher, whether Thales or some other man. For if each new philosophical beginning is literally *new*, if, say, the philosophical beginning of Hegel is radically separate from the philosophical beginning of Thales, then there is no such thing as philosophy, no such thing as the self-identical form of man's expression of his love of wisdom, existing within and independently of historical accumulation and transformation.[1] Since no one could maintain such a thesis without presenting a philosophical theory of the origin(s) of philosophy, a thesis as to what philosophy *is* (and is not), it seems reasonable to suggest that the questions of the origin and nature of philosophy are at bottom one.

Furthermore, the problem of the origin and nature of philosophy seems to be inseparable from the problem of the nature (and perhaps the origin as well) of history. We cannot discuss intelligently what we mean by the *origin* of philosophy unless we possess some clarity about the origin of psychic (human) activity as such. If the origin of philosophy occurs *within* history,

[1] For Hegel himself, the beginning of philosophy is as it was for Aristotle: that is, the same at all times, and for all philosophers, whoever they may be. See *Wissenschaft der Logik* (Ed. Lasson, Verlag Felix Meiner), pp. 12–13.

as in some sense seems necessary, we are forced to consider whether that origin is radically historical (or temporal), or distinguishable from history and, in some sense, perhaps from time as well. For even if we believe that philosophy is nothing more than the generalized expression of a historical attitude or *Weltanschauung*, we must explain in some detail our historicist interpretation of philosophy (or, our philosophical interpretation of history). We cannot 'do' philosophy (as historicists now put it) unless we know what we are doing; otherwise, we could never be sure that we were not in fact doing something *else*, and we would not be in a position to condemn with such conviction other ways of 'doing' philosophy. Philosophy, especially if it is the clarification of language (to refer again to contemporary historicism), must surely be required to be clear about its *own* language, and, most fundamentally, about the word with which it is itself designated. Consequently, it must be able to explain in some detail how it is possible for philosophical language, and so, for philosophical activity or 'analysis', to be at once a generalized version of local historical usage, and so, to one degree or another, transient,[2] and at the same time the instrument whereby history, in the form of linguistic usages, is sorted into the proper categories. Finally, it must explain in what sense there can *be proper* categories of that which is throughout historical, and which is considered from the viewpoint of the thoroughly historical.

For these reasons, the problem of the origin of philosophy is not at bottom a 'scholarly' one. Or rather, the scholarly approach to the problem is itself already philosophical. To give one important example: F. M. Cornford claimed that philosophy originated in a gradual evolution of religious mythology, whereas Karl Reinhardt denies such an interpretation altogether, and considers philosophy proper to begin in logical or metaphysical speculation.[3] By what criteria are we to choose between these rival accounts? Even were we to duplicate the professional attainments of these men, we should have performed only an external act. At the critical moment, we should have to say, 'I have studied the evidence as fully and as fairly as possible; I have tried to see what Thales said as it was meant, and I take it to demonstrate the following . . .' At this moment, we act not as scholars, but as philosophers. In other words: the origin of philosophy cannot be 'scientifically' documented, because what counts as evidence depends upon the philosophical assumptions governing our conception of scientific scholarship. But let us assume that the evidence *had* been scientifically gathered, and agreed to be evidence. We should still have to understand it, and there is no

[2] Even if it claims derivation from the local version of logic, or the current theories of mathematical language.

[3] See F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*; and Karl Reinhardt, *Parmenides* (Klostermann, 1959).

neutral point, external to philosophy, upon which the 'objective' investigator may build the foundations of philosophy itself.

We cannot, for example, say: Thales was the first philosopher, and he speaks a modified version of religious language; therefore, Cornford is right, and Reinhardt is wrong. We should first be required to answer at least two questions: (1) how do we know that Thales *is* a philosopher? (2) how can we demonstrate that the religious language used by Thales was intended by him to be understood in a religious sense? The answer to the first question manifestly depends upon our philosophical understanding, upon what we understand philosophy to be. It cannot be answered by scholarly evidence because it is not a question of scholarship. Consequently, 'orthodox' opinions about the philosophical significance of scholarly evidence are no more compelling than the philosophical arguments upon which these opinions are based.[4] It is sad but true that we can never know whether Thales was a philosopher unless we ourselves are philosophers. If we place our trust in the traditional agreement upon his status, we are behaving in a manner just the opposite of philosophers as the traditional account prescribes them, men who examined tradition or put it to the torture. If on the other hand it is self-evident that Thales was a philosopher, one may say that philosophy is itself unnecessary because that which is self-evident is not in need of rational investigation. But the character of Thales' remarks could hardly be said to be self-evident, unless we mean by 'self-evident' the findings of common-sense, or of modern science, in either of which cases, his words (if they are his words) are self-evidently untrue. If by this criterion it is self-evident that Thales is *not* a philosopher, one requires a demonstration or defense of the viewpoint from which he is so condemned, and this brings us back into philosophy.

As for the second question: the orthodox or conventional method of deciding whether a man is religious consists in asking him, if he is accessible to direct questioning, or in reading his books if he is not, or in studying reports of the man's views if he wrote no books or they have been lost in time. It should be easy to see that this conventional procedure possesses no philosophical status whatsoever. To begin with, men may lie, and have often done so. They may lie for compelling social and political reasons, or from pride, or even from mere playfulness. This possibility has been stated publicly throughout antiquity, and even before the time of Thales; it suffices to mention the wily Odysseus. Plato and

[4] It is possible to deny that there is any such thing as an orthodox or generally accepted interpretation of *any* great thinker. One need consider only the history of Aristotelian scholarship, for example, to say that no such agreement exists in his case, and in the same sense, the soundness of Aristotle's remarks about Thales can hardly be self-evident.

Cicero among the ancients discussed the ambiguous status of religious professions by the wise men of the past, and the theme has been much discussed throughout the history of European thought.[5] But apart from the possibility of lying, which may strike some as frivolous, let us consider the point raised by Reinhardt in his work on Parmenides. Reinhardt reasonably reminds us that, at the beginning of philosophy, there could not have existed a previously developed set of technical philosophical terms.[6] Therefore the first philosophers were forced to make use of available language to express their meaning. Since religious language was normally employed to speak of exalted matters, they understandably used religious words, albeit in a new sense, for their own purposes. Reinhardt continues by showing how the context in which these terms are employed rules out the possibility that they possess an orthodox, or even a religious sense. He is primarily concerned with Parmenides, but why can we not adopt his suggestion in the case of Thales (or anyone else)?

If we reject this suggestion, and argue that the speech of Thales and the other pre-Socratics is just like that of modern savages, or of primitive people who are just emerging from a condition of totally mythical belief, then we are asserting a *philosophical* rather than a scholarly or scientific view. We mean to assert that, regardless of the identity of the first philosopher, he *must* have spoken like Thales, and Thales' speech is like that of the cited primitives, a development from religion to philosophy. It should at least be mentioned that this hypothesis can *never* be empirically confirmed, and is therefore scientifically worthless. In the first place, the superstitions of modern primitives do not 'congeal' into philosophy by themselves; if any 'primitives' go on to become philosophers, it is by leaving their tribes and studying at universities staffed by men who have already been formed by the prior emergence of philosophy. Nevertheless, philosophy must have begun prior to the existence of universities, so let us assume that a savage in some primitive tribe now accessible to us, suddenly became a philosopher, entirely unassisted by outsiders. How could we prove that what he had done was merely to develop, step by step, the superstitions of his tribe? Exactly the same problems would arise as have already been mentioned. We might ask him (perhaps in the form of a questionnaire submitted

[5] For extensive documentation, see Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (1952). As examples of discussion by philosophers on this topic, compare Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning* (Spedding, Ellis, and Heath, Vol. 6, pp. 217, 290), with J. J. Rousseau, *Les Rêveries d'un Promeneur Solitaire*, Quatrième Promenade. Montesquieu's views on the political origin and function of religion among the ancients are too well known to require references.

[6] *Op. cit.*, pp. 23–24. For the priority of logic and metaphysics to physics and religion, see pp. 74 ff, pp. 250 ff.

by a team of sociologists), but he in turn might be as scornful of our ignorance as Francis Bacon, among others, tells us that the ancient philosophers were. Or he might share Socrates' views on the utility of noble lies, or the belief of Odysseus that one's speech should be relative to the kind of man one is addressing, or Spinoza's conviction on the advisability of speaking *ad captum vulgi*. We should once more be thrown back onto our philosophical understanding of philosophy.

It is in this vein that I ask the reader to consider the following reflections upon Thales. Thales, whoever he may actually have been, is for us philosophy, making its appearance in human history. The question of the historical accuracy of the opinions and sayings attributed to him is in one sense unanswerable. What I should rather wish to do is to justify this attribution by discussing the philosophical content of the fragments attributed to Thales. I believe that this content is accessible to us, despite the ambiguities, the encrustations of history, and the reason for this belief is my understanding of the nature of philosophy. Thus, a complete interpretation of Thales' alleged sayings would be identical with a complete philosophical speech, even if they were in themselves incomplete, provided only that they were indeed philosophical. Philosophy, if it is an activity distinguishable from others, with a form and so an essential nature, must originate essentially (as distinguished from accidentally or historically) for each of us as it did for Thales. I shall therefore restrict my interpretation to the problem of the necessary conditions which make possible the origin of philosophy. That is, I shall try to suggest how the sayings of Thales explain themselves by explaining the possibility of philosophical speech. This is to say that, in one sense, the sayings are self-explanatory; that is, they are, as reproducible by us in our own thinking, essentially intelligible apart from their original historical context. If this is so, the question at once arises why we should read Thales at all, and not rather simply ourselves. For this reason, my interpretation must begin with a defense of the study of history.

The Desedimentation of Philosophy[7]

It is sometimes the case, and especially since Descartes, that men turn away from history and 'l'étude des lettres . . . me résolvant de ne chercher plus d'autre science, que celle qui se pourrait trouver en moi-même, ou bien dans le grand livre du monde,' to discover philosophy within themselves.[8] It might seem to some that they are thereby following the example of Thales by

[7] It will be apparent to the reader that, in the few remarks of this section, I am making use of the notion of desedimentation developed by Husserl in *Die Krisis der Europäischen Wissenschaften* (Martinus Nijhof, 1900), e.g. pp. 372 ff.

[8] Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode* (ed. Gilson, J. Vrin, 1947) p. 8.

turning directly toward ideas, questions, and answers in their eternal purity, rather than in their historically encumbered form. And so, in addition to the excitement aroused by the notion that one may himself originate philosophy, it seems that the first philosophers live again in the return of the modern thinkers to the self. Of course, the self in question must be something more than the sum of one's personal history. But even if the self is transformed into the transcendental ego or absolute *Geist*, the danger arises that such a transcendental or absolute structure may be historically modified, perhaps be even a historical construction. For our view of the structure of the self is extracted from self-introspection, and do not selves present themselves to themselves as historical crystallizations, as *results* of the forces of time? We must ask how it is possible to grasp a self whose structure permits the presentation within it of eternal ideas, of a structure which underlies, but is sedimented over by, history. And so we must decide whether 'the origin of philosophy within the self' means the discovery by each self of the *same* philosophical origin, or rather the 'original' creation by each self (as a new moment of history) of a fundamentally new philosophy. How, for example, can one recognize the origin of philosophy within one's *own* experience? Is not the experience of the individual a microcosm of human history, with the same ambiguities and contradictions that serve as obstacles to precise identifications? Entirely apart from the difficulty of locating the self, who of us could dare to say, after an honest assessment of his own experience: 'for me, philosophy began with event X or condition Y at age Z.' And is such an 'honest' assessment of our experience even possible? Do we not carry it through in the distorted light of our already past, and so determined, experience? Is not our view of our own past therefore *obscured* by its progressive accumulation or sedimentation? The moment we begin to wonder about the origin of philosophy, have we not already become alienated from this origin by the relativism of historical experience?

In view of these objections, it has often been suggested that a theory about the 'origin' of philosophy is nothing more than a conjecture about history, with the added inconvenience that the theory is about one's *own* history, about the history of which we have the least possible perspective or 'objectivity,' about which we are most certain to be biased. If we nevertheless insist that philosophy originates in a specific way, which is elaborated by us as individual philosophers, we find that there is a wide variety of such theories, and that the variety is characterized, not simply by disagreement, but by contradiction as well. If we say that all these theories are correct (or irrefutable), we say in effect that philosophy has *no* origin because it originates everywhere and in every way: this is to say that its origin is *ex nihilo*, since 'everything' is obviously 'nothing.' Contemporary 'sophisticated'

relativism, which takes for granted the impossibility of establishing the relative satisfactoriness of philosophical positions, or, more radically, of conceptions of philosophy, terminates in the conclusion that Being, which is defined by our philosophical language, is Nothing.

In order, on the other hand, to substantiate our *own* theory, we should have to refute those who contradict us. Each contradictor represents a historical generation, and each generation mirrors the confusion of history as a whole. We face the same problem: we should have to know what philosophy *is*, which is to say that we should have to know our *own* history. Is not our own history, despite the illusions of propinquity, considerably more *obscure* than human history? What else did Thales mean when, in reply to the question, 'what is hardest of all?' he answered, 'to know thyself.' And when the Platonic Socrates, in obedience to this maxim, advises us to study the psyche by way of its more easily visible paradigm, the *polis*, have we understood anything if we dismiss his words as a 'fallacy of composition?'[9]

Perhaps the most usual counter-objection to the difficulties just sketched would be something like this: I agree that knowledge with respect to the origin of philosophy is included within knowledge of what philosophy is. I further agree that I am circumscribed by my own experience, and that this raises difficulties of perspective. But philosophy is in fact nothing more nor less than the thoroughgoing attempt by the individual to understand his own experience, and whatever that experience touches upon or implies. On the basis of this attempt, each philosopher arrives at a decision concerning the origin of philosophy which he must defend against opposing decisions as best he may, i.e. on the basis of how he understands his experience, of himself and of others, and so, of how he understands, not merely his own decision, but the reasons or experiences of others, whereby they are led to reject *his* decision. What more could any man do?

On the face of it, this objection seems eminently sane. The

[9] The analogy between the *polis* and the psyche is based upon a structural isomorphism which is not itself a stage of historical development, but the condition for the possibility of historical development. Thus Socrates' concern for political phenomena is in a sense analogous to the Kantian concern for sensible phenomena: for Kant, the categories of pure reason, although not themselves sensible, are 'visible' in and through their presence in (the structure of) sense-objects; one must move 'upwards' from the empirical or phenomenal world to the conditions for the possibility of this world; and in this sense one cannot see these conditions directly or in themselves. For Socrates, the structure of the psyche cannot be seen directly or in itself, but only through or in political experience (that is, in the fundamentally political structure of experience). The latter constitutes a Whole or Totality of possible human experience: politics is the architectonic art, and the *archê* of politics is the psyche.

problem lies in understanding more precisely what it means. Has it not merely accepted our earlier diagnosis of the issue of origin? We have now been told that the decision with respect to the origin of philosophy not only faces the difficulties which were previously raised, but is intrinsically impossible to make, because it depends upon a never-ending attempt to certify the soundness of our understanding of experience. We are like hoops rolling through history, with each hoop itself a micro-history, obsessed with questions of origins which cannot be found because of the circularity of our obsession. To ask: how does philosophy originate? is to ask: what is philosophy? If we do not know what philosophy is, we cannot specify its origin. If knowledge of what philosophy is, depends upon a sound understanding of our experience, then we are perpetually immobilized by problems of historical interpretation. If philosophy *is* just this perpetual immobilization, then again, *it has no origin,* except perhaps in so far as consciousness deteriorates into self-consciousness. Then philosophy is just the decay of non-Being into the Becoming of Being. It is the bracketing of the 'non' by a progressively more paranoid historicism. That is to say, there is no such thing as philosophy except in the sense of helplessly self-critical *opinion.* But why is one opinion better than another? Again, a matter of opinion. *De confirmatione non disputandum est.*

If man is radically historical, then self-understanding is historically conditioned understanding of history. In this perspective, the original objection against the relevance of the historical investigation of the first philosopher is a historical error. The definition of the self can only be accomplished by establishing the perimeter of the self's history, that is, by the invocation and articulation of the historical continuum within which the self emerges, and through which its experience is illuminated and obscured. In this case, the statements of the first philosopher, say Thales, are of particular relevance to our own statements about philosophy. Indeed, they are even *more* relevant to the question of the origin of philosophy than are our own statements about that question, in as much as it is precisely the statements of Thales which originate the philosophical mode of historical existence. We exist philosophically as relative to Thales. We see the world from the perspective illuminated by Thales' vision: Thales' vision is the origin, not just of philosophy, but of the world which we see, and so of us as philosophical selves.

Suppose, however, that man is *not* radically historical. If the roots of the self are embedded in an eternal order, in an ahistorical ground of history, then self-discovery depends upon a perception or grasping of, which is also a standing upon, this ground. Such a discovery requires a movement away from history, a moving through history to its conditions. But if the self is the theater of philosophy, then the movement is also toward the origin of

philosophy. As independent of historical modifications, the origin of philosophy is *ex nihilo;* its source is timeless, without location, always accessible to man just because it is nowhere, *outopios,* utopian, ideal. Thales, therefore, makes manifest this origin *ex nihilo* better than any subsequent philosopher, because in him the origin is less obscured by historical sedimentation. That is, the obscurity of Thales is not historical, but entirely philosophical. In order, however, to rid ourselves of the detritus of history, we must master it; we cannot return to the pure obscurity of Thales without recovering him from impure obscurity. And, since we are ourselves determined by history, such a recovery cannot be accomplished merely from our individual resources. We must think our way to the conditions of the self by thinking our way back to Thales. The accuracy of self-knowledge must be confirmed by an understanding of Thales.

The Discovery of Nouns

Diogenes Laertius records the views attributed to Thales by tradition; they may be summarized as follows:[10]

1. According to some, he was the first to call the soul deathless.
2. Some say that he was the first to speak of *physis.*
3. He established water as the beginning of everything, and made the cosmos ensouled (*empsychon*) and full of daimons.
4. *Nous* is quickest of all things, for it runs through everything.
5. He said that there is no difference between life and death.
6. When asked, 'what is the most difficult of all things?' he replied, 'to know thyself.'

If we interpret Thales either as a primitive mythologist or as a primitive physicist, it is immediately apparent that the notions attributed to him possess little if any *philosophical* significance, unless we assume (as most modern men, following Descartes, would do) that philosophy begins with the discovery of physics, although this discovery is initially couched in mythical terms.[11]

Even then, of course, Thales would have only minimal substantive importance for philosophy. However this may be, philosophy

[10] I. 22–44. Once again let me emphasize that I am not concerned with the question of the historical accuracy of these attributions, but with their philosophical significance.

[11] The pre-Socratics were by no means exclusively interested in cosmology, as is sometimes maintained; we know from such sources as Herodotus and Plato of their concern with politics (See Plato, *Protagoras,* 343a ff). Diogenes Laertius says of Thales: *meta de ta politika tēs phusikēs egeneto theōrias.*

is, under this assumption, if not physics itself, what we may call 'meta-physics' (to be distinguished by the hyphen from what is traditionally known as metaphysics) or speech *about* physics. But speech about physics must have a foundation which is not merely physical, for the simple reason that matter is itself *mute*: electrical charges, for instance, *qua* electrical charges, are unable to measure themselves and speak of the results. Meta-physics is based upon a monist materialism which cannot account for its own speech. The relationship between physics and meta-physics depends upon a *metaphysical* structure within which matter and speech find their place: their possibility and their intelligibility. The speech about metaphysical structure is not the same as meta-physical speech, and the difference between these two kinds of speech is recognized (if not understood) by those who themselves speak of the 'mythical' character of what Thales said. But the conception of 'myth' here employed is itself determined by the acceptance of scientific or meta-physical speech; in referring to the 'mythic' elements in Thales' speech, such an interpretation refers to the imperfectly or partially *scientific* character of his speech.[12] That is, the 'mythic' element represents the incursion of ignorance into a recognition of the road to knowledge, if not of knowledge itself. Therefore, in so far as Thales speaks 'mythically,' he is speaking *nonsense* (since attempts to interpret this nonsense make use of concepts themselves derived from the scientific conception of significant thought). Mythical speech is therefore speech about nothing, and the transition from mythical to scientific-philosophical speech is a transition to a speech about something.

On this view, to talk about the mythical component in Thales' speech is just a polite way of referring to his ignorance. To the

[12] Contemporary thinkers, under the influence of science (in the modern sense of the term) even when they fancy themselves most sympathetic to the pre-scientific myth-makers, mean by myth not rational speech of a specific kind, but rather primitive or *pre-rational* speech: 'Myths are original revelations of the pre-conscious psyche, involuntary statements about unconscious psychic happenings .... Not merely do they represent, they *are* the mental life of the primitive tribe ...' C. G. Jung, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology* (Routledge, 1951) pp. 101–2. For another influential contemporary account of myth from a scientific viewpoint, see Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. II: *Mythical Thought*. As to why contemporary men have become so obsessed with myth, a word which is now applied to science, religion and art, consider M. Heidegger, *Die Zeit des Weltbildes* (*Holzwege*, Klostermann, 1952) p. 70. For a philosophical discussion of the meaning of myth in Plato, see Gerhard Krüger, *Einsicht und Leidenschaft* (Klostermann, 1948). Krüger's argument is perhaps too 'religious,' but, when corrected from a balancing, secular viewpoint, it becomes most suggestive, and may be applied by extension to the pre-Socratics.

extent that he is *not* ignorant, he is assumed to be speaking meta-physically or scientifically. But meta-physical mythology cannot explain the *difference* between knowledge and ignorance which it purports to discover. Assuming that Thales is really a physicist[13] (or a meta-physicist), the difference between his (physical) knowledge and (mythical) ignorance cannot be explained in terms of the physical structure which his meta-physical speech attempts to describe. The correspondence between meta-physical speech and physical structure can only be measured from a third point, or rather from a third structure which encompasses the two, and is therefore a *superstructure*. Knowledge is not explained by ignorance, nor ignorance by knowledge. But the two are explained by an understanding of their difference, and the understanding of their difference lies in the recognition that the *condition* for the possibility and intelligibility of each *is* the superstructure encompassing the two. In other terms, the difference between knowledge and ignorance is that between a positive and negative quality. If there were nothing else, the positive and the negative would cancel each other out, or in effect the negative would negate the positive. The presence of different qualities is proof of the reality of their difference, and so of the 'difference' between them and it. The recognition of the reality of the difference is the origin of philosophy as the recognition of the accessibility of the superstructure within which knowledge and ignorance themselves become evident.[14]

If the 'mythological' interpretation of Thales is correct, then, he is certainly not a philosopher. For we may certainly say that philosophy, as the love of wisdom, *cannot* be present where there is no recognition of that which makes such a love possible (namely, the recognition of the difference between knowledge and ignorance). Such a recognition is *ex nihilo* in an ordinary, even common-sensical understanding of instantaneous illumination. One does not see that one is beginning to see: when we begin to see, at any moment of this 'beginning,' we *are* seeing. So we cannot recognize the reality of the difference between seeing and not-seeing, between knowledge and ignorance, by stages

[13] That is, a physicist in the modern sense of the term. When considering Aristotle's interpretation of Thales as a physicist, it is essential to consider also Aristotle's concept of *physis*. See *Met.* 1014 b16 ff. *Physis* is not just growth or formed motion, but it is also the *arché* of growth. It is true that Aristotle's account of Thales is limited to a consideration of water as the material cause. But it does not follow that an *Aristotelian* consideration of Thales must be so restricted. (I do not imply, of course, that my interpretation is Aristotelian.)

[14] In the formulation of this point, as in many other ways, I am indebted to Alexandre Kojève for conversations concerning the Hegelian notion of the difference between Being and non-Being. I do not, however, believe that this notion is *restricted* to Hegel, and have tried to state it in terms of the origin of philosophy simply.

or degrees; in order to recognize this difference, one must *already* know it. In order to see its 'origin,' one must be able to see, *one must be seeing*. The mythological interpretation is in any case at bottom identical with the interpretation of Thales as a physicist or a meta-physicist. The 'mythologist' assumes the emergence of philosophy from superstition or religion to be a partial repudiation of mythical in favor of physical speech, because he is at bottom convinced of the identity between philosophy and meta-physics. Whether or not the ostensibly 'mythical' elements in Thales' speech are really mythical elements, depends, in effect, upon whether he is speaking, or attempting to speak, as a meta-physician rather than as a metaphysician. Thales is considered to be by intention a meta-physicist because of Aristotle's somewhat professorial remarks (which seem to reveal his lack of interest in Thales) on Thales' image of water. But if Thales understands water in the 'physical' sense as the term is used by modern scientists (although not by Aristotle), what are we to make of his speech about souls? If the speech about souls is just myth, then Thales is not a philosopher. The question is whether Thales is using mythical terms in a new, philosophical sense (analogous to the procedure which Reinhardt attributes to Parmenides), and so, in consequence, whether he is performing the same liberating or originating function with respect to the vocabulary of the physical universe (as must be the case, if he is a philosopher, and if Reinhardt is correct about the 'origin' of philosophy). The philosophical dimension of physical terms used to discuss the cosmos need not conflict with what we may call their 'scientific' dimension; indeed, we may say that, at any epoch, no term can be *scientific* if it does not also have a philosophical dimension not simply identical with its function in describing the extended universe. And it is an error to assume that all speech about the physical universe is speech about physics in the modern sense, or metaphysics; we fall into this error by assuming that the use of mythical terms is in every case an adherence to myth, only partly mastered by the recognition of science. In other words, we interpret Thales in a circular fashion, a circle which has as its center our own acceptance of the identity between science and philosophy.[15] This is inadequate, not because it is circular, but because it makes philosophy impossible by transforming it into an undergrounded metaphysics. Thales' cosmology may well be what tradition tells us it is, but it hardly follows from this that his

[15] On the hypothesis, frequently made in our time, even by philosophers of science, that science is itself a form of myth, or that key scientific terms are mythical, there must obviously be a difference, *within* rational discourse, between scientific myth and non-mythical science, or between scientific and non-scientific myth. Further, if science and philosophy are identical, then it is meaningless to speak of a philosophy *of* science.

cosmology is identical with his philosophy, or that we have adequately understood the traditional account of his cosmology.

We must therefore see whether the notions attributed to Thales can be so interpreted as to make possible the recognition of the reality of the difference between knowledge and ignorance, and so, of the origin of philosophy. It goes without saying that our words will be different from those of Thales: but their difference must be contingent, or due to the difference in the time, and not to the difference in the nature of philosophy itself. Our interpretation is perfectly justified in translating the speech of Thales into another idiom, in order to make more explicit his thought; it is not justified in distorting the thought itself. We may begin by observing that there is a connection between the discovery of *physics* and the attribution of deathlessness to the psyche, and that this connection indicates the recognition for which we are searching. When Thales says that there is no difference between life and death, he means that the superstructure of the difference between knowledge and ignorance is independent of, or unchanged by, the phenomenal or historical appearance of the psyche. The becoming of the psyche, its physical manifestation as an incarnate soul, is the temporal reflection of the being of the psyche, its form or intelligibility, and so its actuality. The identity of life and death is the difference between Being and Becoming, and this difference is the superstructure within which Being *and* non-Being (represented by knowledge and ignorance) find their place and are revealed as intelligible.[16] Being and non-Being, when mixed, produce Becoming (opinion): the three are separate from each other, or different, and the articulation of their differences is the superstructure of the Whole.[17] The superstructure of

[16] Being and non-Being are compatible and co-actual; neither is derived from or subordinate to the other. We need not look merely to Hegel for such a notion. It is implied in the parricide committed by the Eleatic stranger in Plato's *Sophist* at 240 e ff: the stranger points out that, for falsehood to be possible, we must think that non-Being somehow is, and that Being somehow is not. If non-Being is actual, then it 'is' in a sense, and, since it 'is' not Being, Being is less than itself, and so in a sense is 'not.' Not only do Being and non-Being make each other intelligible; we must ask *how* it is that both are intelligible.

[17] The trinity of Being, non-Being, and Becoming (analogous to the trinity of One, Unlimited, and Many in the *Philebus*) does not alter the fact that, between any pair of opposites, the superstructure is manifest as the reality of their difference. (Aristotle at least touches upon this notion when he observes that knowledge is knowledge of contraries. Being and non-Being are contraries in the sense that Becoming is neither the one nor the other.) This superstructure is none of the three, and presents a *different* problem from that of the relationship between Being and non-Being as manifested in Becoming. Or, put differently, the difference between Being and Becoming *is* non-Being, and the

the Whole is reflected in the psyche of man, the structure of which mirrors the articulations of the superstructure. Not only does the psyche imitate or 'become' the superstructure (and, through this becoming, achieve immortality in the form of wisdom), but the superstructure itself, as the paradigm of the human psyche, is a kind of psyche.

Thus the identity of life and death means not merely that Becoming differs from Being, but also that life is death and death is life: Being, in opposition to Becoming, is dead; but this death constitutes true life, for it is the total actualization of all possible forms.[18] This total actualization is expressible in an *archē* or principle: water is the *archē* of all things. Thales comments upon this principle by adding that the world is *empsychon* and full of daimons. There is a connection between water as the *archē* or *physis* of all things, and the psyche. World or cosmos is an order; it cannot be characterized by the fluidity of water. The sense in which water is the structure of the world-order stems from the structural analogy between water and psyche or *nous*.[19] Order in the world stems from the immanent presence of psyche and daimons: daimons are everywhere because the ordering principle in the cosmos is *psychic*: e.g. it is the metaphysical superstructure (describable only by analogy with the human psyche) which is the condition for the possibility of meta-physical speech about physics. Water becomes the structure of the world-order by submitting to the immanent *nous*-psyche which is the form of order. And water is, not matter in the ordinary physical sense, but the content of intelligible form, the principle of the differentiability of intelligibility.[20]

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difference, *qua* superstructure, is indeed *nothing*, neither Being nor Becoming.

[18] Greek philosophy begins with the concept of an intelligible cosmos, and therefore of an isomorphism between psyche and cosmos. It is interesting to compare with this initial version of Greek thought its final form in the words of Hegel: '. . . die Idee ist selbst die Dialektik, welche ewig das mit sich Identische von dem Differenten, das Subjektive von dem Objektiven, das Endliche von dem Unendlichen, die Seele von dem Leibe, ab- und unterscheidet, und nur insofern ewige Schöpfung, ewige Lebendigkeit und ewiger Geist ist.' (*Encyclopädie*, par. 214) For Hegel, the isomorphism is developed into a concrete actuality: Greek philosophy is mediated by Christianity, and man becomes God.

[19] On the other hand, the difference between water and psyche-*nous* is the actuality of the Whole, within which each element exists and is intelligible, and which may be itself expressed only through concrete or partial analogies.

[20] Compare perhaps Aristotle's conception of *pneuma* as the divine matter, akin to the element of the stars, within the sperm, and the carrier of psyche: e.g. *Generation of Animals*, 736b30.

If we wish to understand Thales by means of an Aristotelian interpretation, then, we cannot simply think of water as prime matter and psyche as form. Water is more like psyche than like matter; it is not a prime but a *formal* matter, or another way of expressing form-psyche itself (though both are analogies or metaphors with reference to the actual superstructure of the Whole): there is a fluidity in psyche itself, *an ability to assume all forms*. As Thales says, *nous* runs through all things; it is quickest of all. This means that everything is (in principle) intelligible, because of the fluent character of psyche. Water is the middle-term between *nous*-psyche and *anthrōpo*-psyche, and, regarded in this sense, it is the expression of the *difference* between them: that is, a metaphorical expression of the superstructure of the Whole, within which cosmic order is structurally analogous to the articulations within the order of man's psyche. Water is both psyche and non-psyche; it is the *same* and the *other*, the representation of the differentiability (and so of the intelligibility) of the structure of the Whole. The compatibility between *nous* and man's psyche, the ability of the latter to assume all forms generated by *nous*, makes philosophy possible. Thus, the cosmos is daimonic because it is in principle intelligible. The principle of this intelligibility is expressed in the deathlessness of psyche, and so in the identity of life and death. Just as the daimonic is deathless, so too is the order within the cosmos of *nous* a 'fluent' or fluid order, in that it assumes all forms (and so there is movement within the eternal); so, too, is the psyche of the knower "deathless" in so far as it also assumes the forms of the cosmos by virtue of its quickness or fluency. The deathlessness of the psyche is philosophy, made possible by the accessibility of the cosmos to the psyche, because of the common aqueous content of the cosmic *nous* and the human psyche.

'Becoming' (Being differentiated by non-Being, or the difference of one intelligible structure from another) is the serial appearance of cosmic psyche assuming its infinity of forms, as perceived by the man whose own *nous* runs through these forms simultaneously with the cosmos.[21] To understand the cosmos or order, i.e. to philosophize, one must go beneath this Becoming (into the difference), one must ignore the apparent difference between life and death; and so, one must ignore oneself as a

[21] For a development of Thales' position, one must turn to his student, Anaximander: 'He said that the principle and element is the Indefinite, not distinguishing air or water or anything else. He held that the parts change, but that the whole is unchangeable.' Diog. Laert. II. 1–2. The Whole is an eternal order of changing parts; the boundless—the Indefinite—is the infinity of forms through which *nous* runs. See also Ps.-Plut. *Strom.* 2: 'He declared that destruction, and much earlier coming-to-be, happen from infinite ages, since they are all occurring in cycles.'

historical, mortal self. Philosophical concentration upon the self (i.e. the psyche) results in a laying-bare of the structure of the self as the visible reflection of the structure of the cosmos (and of the difference between the two, which is the superstructure of Totality). The hardest of all things is to know oneself, because one's historical self is the most insistent obstacle to the perception by human *nous* of the cosmic order, in terms of which the self is alone intelligible. The *archē* of this order, fluid psyche, is indifferent to the historical peculiarities of our individual lives. It is *deathless*: in order to be perceived, it makes us die as individuals, because it requires us to run through *all* of its forms. It requires us to imitate its fluidity, and so to cease to be *ourselves*. Thus, philosophy *originates* in death; or, as Socrates put it, philosophy is the preparation for, i.e. the beginning or origin of, death. And so the relevance of history to philosophy is contained in the need to desedimentize the psyche of its temporal accretions, in order to begin to die philosophically. Thus, philosophical death, although dependent upon history, is essentially different from it, and from the history of philosophy (and the reality of the difference between the two is the superstructure of the Whole).

Deathlessness (the equivalent for Thales of Socratic death) is the eternal swiftness of *nous*. And it is an *immediate* swiftness; it has no 'beginning' but is immediately present: it is *we* as historical selves who are *absent*, i.e. not present before the eternal presence of *nous*. The cause of our absence is the difference between us and eternal *nous*, and we become present to philosophy as we enter into the difference. Philosophy is the selfless expression of the swiftness of *nous* within the aperture of the historical self, opening into the difference between the self and *nous*, running forever, in *some* historical self or other, throughout the cosmos.[22] Philosophy is *ex nihilo* because it is *ab initio*: philosophy has no origin, but is rather itself the origin or *archē* of every finite activity.[23] In the same sense that there is no origin for philosophy, we may say that there is no *need* for philosophy. Philosophy is the origin of need, because, as the love of wisdom, it is the expression of the eros whereby the psyche imprisoned in each of us strives for completion by escaping from the 'life' of history into the 'death' of the eternal running of *nous*. Within the perspective of history, philosophy is the *archē* in the same sense as water: it flows most swiftly, it assumes all forms, it permeates everywhere. In the words of Pindar, 'water is best.'

Aristotle, after interpreting the doctrine of Thales in a physical-materialist sense, makes the following observation: 'there are some who believe that the ancients who lived long before the present generation, and who first theologized, supposed some-

[22] See Heracleitus, fr. 50 (Diels): *οὐκ ἐμοῦ ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφόν ἐστιν ἓν πάντα εἶναι.*

[23] Cp. Heracleitus, fr. 60, 103 (Diels).

thing similar about *physics*; for they made Ocean and Tethys the fathers of genesis, and water what the gods swore by, which the poets called *Styx*: for the most honorable is the oldest, and what one swears by is the most honorable."[24] The eternity of water is traditionally associated with the divine: water is the *arché* because it is *empsychon* and full of gods. From the very beginning, the excellence or divinity of the origin or principle made manifest the relationship between philosophy and religion. How we understand this relationship depends upon the way in which we interpret the statements of the first philosopher. It depends upon our understanding of the psyche, and so, on how we interpret *religio*: scrupulousness, exactness, respect for the sacred. In conclusion, let us recall the view of Socrates, who, in the *Theaetetus*, repudiates the explicitly theological interpretation of water because it leads to the dissolution of all things.[25] The theological interpretation, in other words, is the mytho-physical interpretation which we have already noticed. For Socrates, the problem of philosophy is to cultivate the divine madness, which comes *ex nihilo* like a spark that sets fire to the psyche. The problem is to mix the fire of philosophy with the fluidity, the fluency, the water, of the psyche. To 'cultivate' (*colo, cultus*) is both to 'adorn' and to 'worship.' The cultivation of divine madness is then the adornment and worship of the highest part of the psyche, the part which is *afire*, so that the fire is not extinguished by the very fluency and quickness of the psyche. The proper mixture of fire and water depends upon the proper adornment of worship. The 'religion of the philosophers' resists that disgust for the sacred which is a consequence of anti-theological ire, but it replaces the *creatio ex nihilo* of the world in the theological sense with the *ex nihilo* appearance of philosophy as the eternal accessibility of the world.[26] Philosophy replaces the chaos of religion with the water of Thales. It is not God, but Thales, who hovers over the waters. Thales is the purification of history by philosophy, the transformation of the waters of chaos into the waters of *nous*.

[24] *Met.* 983b6 ff.

[25] 180 c 7 ff. According to Socrates, the ancients concealed their actual meaning from the mob by speaking in theological terms. This actual meaning is the metaphysical conception of the universe as fluid or moving. If, however, my interpretation of Thales is correct, then the theological doctrine (or its public metaphysical counterpart) cannot be attributed to him; his own thought comes considerably closer to that of Socrates than is indicated by Socrates himself in his own "poetic" statements.

[26] See Heracleitus, fr. 18 (Diels) for a beautiful expression of the classical conception of the 'religious' aspect of philosophy: ἐὰν μὴ ἔλπηται ἀνέλπιστον οὐκ ἐξευρήσει, ἀνεξερεύνητον ἐὸν καὶ ἄπορον. For a modern statement of the same issue by a famous atheist, see Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, par. 58.