

Greek Philosophy: The Syrian Connection

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Philosophy – philosophia is the Greek word for 'love of wisdom'. It is the rational and critical inquiry into basic principles.

Philosophy is often divided into four main branches:

- (1) metaphysics: the investigation of ultimate reality;
- (2) epistemology: the study of the origins, validity, and limits of knowledge;
- (3) ethics: the study of the nature of morality and judgment ;
- (4) aesthetics: the study of the nature of beauty in the fine arts.

The two distinctively philosophical types of inquiry are: analytic philosophy: the logical study of concepts synthetic philosophy: the constructive arrangement of concepts into a unified system.

According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, philosophy concerns itself with:

- a search for the wisdom of life
- an attempt to understand the universe as a whole
- an examination of man's moral responsibilities and social obligations
- an effort to fathom the divine intentions and man's place with reference to them
- an effort to ground the enterprise of natural science
- a rigorous examination of the origin, extent, and validity of men's ideas
- an exploration of the place of will or consciousness in the universe
- an examination of the values of truth, goodness, and beauty
- an effort to codify the rules of human thought in order to promote rationality and the extension of clear thinking

In short, philosophy consists of all areas of speculative thought including nature, the arts, sciences, law, ethics, and religion.

Origin of Greek Philosophy: The Syrian connection

Western philosophy is considered generally to have begun in ancient Greece as speculation about the underlying nature of the physical world. From this origin sprung a number of schools:

(1) **The Ionian School** (Also known as the Milesian School).

Among other things, the Ionian school made the initial radical step from mythological to scientific explanation of natural phenomena. It discovered the

important scientific principles of the permanence of substance, the natural evolution of the world, and the reduction of quality to quantity.

(2) The Pythagorean School:

Pythagoras (c. 580-500 BC) founded at Crotona, in southern Italy, a school of philosophy that was more religious and mystical than the Ionian school.

(3) The Eleatic School:

Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 560-478 BC), from the Phoenician colony of Elea in southern Italy, was the father of pantheism and doctrine of the One.

(4) The Pluralists:

The Pluralists developed a philosophy which replaced the Ionian assumption of a single primary substance with a plurality of such substances: pluralism.

(5) The Atomists:

Atomism—a theory which proposed that all matter is composed of tiny, indivisible particles differing only in simple physical properties.

(6) The Sophists:

Sophists, a group of travelling teachers famous throughout Greece toward the end of the 5th century BC, played an important role in developing the Greek city-states from agrarian monarchies into commercial democracies.

(7) Socratic Philosophy:

Socrates (c. 470-399 BC) left no writings as records of his thought, but his teachings were preserved for later generations in the dialogues of Plato.

(8) Platonic Philosophy:

Plato (c. 428-348 BC) was a more systematic and positive thinker than Socrates, but his writings, particularly the earlier dialogues, can be regarded as a continuation and elaboration of Socratic insights.

(9) Aristotelian Philosophy:

Aristotle (384-322 BC) was the most illustrious pupil of Plato and ranks with his teacher among the most profound and influential thinkers of the Western world.

An explanation that is actually going to explain something about the origin of Greek philosophy must identify something that was different about what was happening to, or what was being done by, the particular Greeks who were responsible for that origin. Ross Kelly, in a study of Greek philosophy, suggests an interesting theory about the origin of philosophy. Taking as a starting point the Greek cities, Miletus and Athens, he attempts to delineate the origin of Greek philosophy by comparing between these two cities and the dominant forms in traditional Middle Eastern civilizations, like Egypt and Syria: "If Greek philosophy was different from what came before ... the next question would be, "Why the Greeks?" What was different about the Greeks that led to the origin of philosophy with them? Years ago, the simple answer might have been that the Greeks were 'different', they just had some kind of special 'genius' that enabled them to think about things in new and different ways. That kind of answer is unsatisfactory, not only because it doesn't really explain anything, not only because it sounds disturbingly like some kind of racism (the Greeks just must

have been genetically different), but because it cannot then in turn explain why philosophy only occurred among some Greeks (e.g. Milesians, Athenians, etc.) and not among others (e.g. Spartans)."

Kelly argues that Miletus and Athens became venues of Greek philosophy on account of their wealth in comparison with other Greek cities, like Sparta. This wealth came primarily from trade, which exposed the two cities to the cultures of other civilizations. "Cities like Miletus and Athens were thus wealthy off of ... Trade. We might think that trade as a way of life already could explain much. It would involve and foster considerable independence, being far away from all authority at home, and it would involve dealing with all sorts of novel peoples, cultures, practices, and ideas. If we look for a way of life to get people thinking, that might be it." Trade gave Miletus and Athens a life of travel, business, discovery, and independence. However, the two cities "were neither alone nor the first in their commercial profession." They had learned the basics, and much else (including their alphabet), from some of the most ancient traders: the Syro-Lebanese Phoenicians. In the course of their trade "both the Greeks and the Phoenicians ... founded colonies all over the Mediterranean ... Greek colonies came to ring the Aegean and Black Seas, the southern coast of Italy, eastern Sicily, Cyrenaica in Libya, and in places on the coast of Gaul (modern France) and northeastern Spain. The largest modern cities derived from Greek colonies are probably Marseille in France (Massilia), Naples in Italy (Neapolis, the "New City" - remembered in the name of "Neapolitan" ice cream), and Istanbul (originally Byzantine, later Constantinopolis -- Constantinople). Phoenician colonies coexisted with Greek cities in Cyprus and Sicily, but excluded Greeks on Sardinia and Corsica, in the south of Spain, and especially along North Africa. Phoenician colonial power was particularly concentrated at Carthage (Kart Hadasht, the "New City"), eventually seen by Rome as her greatest rival, and in the south of Spain, where Cadiz (Gades) was a Phoenician city. The, by then, Carthaginian domain in Spain was much expanded by Hamilcar Barca, the father of the great Hannibal (247-183 BC), in the time between the First (264-241) and Second (218-201) Punic Wars with Rome. In the course of that expansion, the city later known in Latin as Carthago Nova, "New Carthage" (Cartagena), was founded."

Kelly then poses an interesting question: "But after all this, we may then ask, that if trade is to be associated with the origin of philosophy, why did not philosophy start with the Phoenicians? After a fashion, perhaps it did. The man credited with being the first Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus (c. 585), was said to have been of Phoenician ancestry. However, he was living in a Greek city; and even later philosophers who were certainly ethnic Phoenicians, like Zeno of Citium, moved to Greek cities to learn and practice philosophy."

If we examine more closely the philosophers in Greek civilization, we find that a significant number of them were of Syrian origin. Scholars treat them as Greek philosophers because Greece was the centre of their activity. Suffice to quote

from a recent study of Greek philosophy: Thales, though a Syrian, "was considered the first Greek philosopher because he was the first to give a purely natural explanation of the origin of the world, free from all mythological ingredients."

Syrian philosophers who have been mistakenly labeled as "Greek" including such well-known names as:

(1) **Posidonius of Rhodes** who is also known as Posidonius of Apameia. The first of these names refers to where he taught while the second refers to the town of his birth, Apameia on the Orontes in Syria. Some time not long after 100 BC Posidonius became the head of the Stoic School in Rhodes. While in this position he also held political office in Rhodes. It was in a political position, as ambassador of Rhodes, that he travelled to Rome in 87-86 BC. There he met a number of men who he had known and taught earlier including Cicero.

None of the writing of Posidonius has survived but much has been written about his achievements and much work has been undertaken trying to reconstruct his views from the fragments of his writings which are preserved in quotations by later authors.

(2) **Porphyrus**: (234-305 CE, Tyre (Sur)) was a major contributor to the spread of Neoplatonism, particularly within the Roman Empire. In 263, he moved to Rome and became a close friend and follower of Plotinus. He is best known for organizing and editing the lectures and writings of Plotinus, producing the collection of texts we know as *The Enneads* [DOC], and for writing *The Life of Plotinus*, a work that provides many clues to interpreting Plotinus' thought. In addition, Porphyry also made his own philosophical contributions: 1) he developed the idea that the One exists prior to and independently of Being or Intellect and 2) established the identity of Intellect and Thought with its objects. Porphyry argued that everything that did not seem to be the One was in fact an appearance of the One resulting from our inability to think the One as it truly is. Porphyry wrote many philosophical works, including *Against The Christians*, a critical work attacking Christianity, *Introduction to the Categories*, a valued commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, and *Aids to the Study of the Ineligibles*, a basic summary of Neoplatonism.

(3) **Iamblichus** (c. 250-c. 330), the neoplatonic philosopher, was born in Chalcis, Coele-Syria. Iamblichus was a pupil of one of the first disciples of the philosopher Porphyry, Anatolius, the peripatetic, before being a disciple of Porphyry. While a student of Porphyry in Rome, he came under the influence of the Greek Neoplatonist philosopher Plotinus. When Porphyry died, Iamblichus succeeded him as the head of the Neoplatonic School. In Syria he established his own school, which attempted to fuse the ideas of Plato, those of the Greek mathematician and philosopher Pythagoras, and Hermetism and the magical literature into a single coherent system. Iamblichus succeeded in transforming the purely intellectual Neoplatonism of Plotinus into an even more spiritual form

of Greco-Roman religious philosophy that include myths, rites, and magical formulas.

(4) **Pythagoras of Samos** is often described as the first pure mathematician. He is an extremely important figure in the development of mathematics yet we know relatively little about his mathematical achievements. Unlike many later Greek mathematicians, where at least we have some of the books which they wrote, we have nothing of Pythagoras's writings. The society which he led, half religious and half scientific, followed a code of secrecy which certainly means that today Pythagoras is a mysterious figure. Pythagoras's father was Mnesarchus, while his mother was Pythais and she was a native of Samos. Mnesarchus was a merchant who came from Tyre, and there is a story that he brought corn to Samos at a time of famine and was granted citizenship of Samos as a mark of gratitude. As a child Pythagoras spent his early years in Samos but travelled widely with his father. There are accounts of Mnesarchus returning to Tyre with Pythagoras and that he was taught there by the Chaldaeans and the learned men of Syria. It seems that he also visited Italy with his father.

(5) **Dionysius** "the Areopagite" was thought for many centuries to be one of those converted to Christianity on the Areopagos hill in Athens after the apostle Paul's speech there (see Book of Acts 17.34). With the rise of modern scholarship it was realised that he was actually a 5th/6th century Syrian monk. His profound mystical books contained large sections lifted without crediting from the works of Proclus, the last of the great Neoplatonists. Dionysius can be considered the founder of Christian mysticism. Indeed, the term "mysticism" itself in its present usage derives from him. His treatise "On the Divine Names", was just as important (or sometimes even more important) in the history of religious thought than the "De Celestia Hierarchia". It was fundamental in the current of "apophantic" theology, that is, the doctrine that we can say more about what God is NOT than about what He is.

(6) **Zeno**: Zeno came from the Cypriot city of Citium, which had a large Phoenician population. From the various recorded anecdotes, mainly made at his expense, it seems that he must have been of Phoenician ancestry. Apparently Zeno was a merchant by trade and only took up philosophical studies in Athens at the age of thirty in the aftermath of being shipwrecked. He initially became a pupil to the Cynic Crates, to whom he maintained in high regard. Crates, himself, was a former student of the famous Cynic Diogenes. Zeno then went on to attend the lessons of Stilpon, a renowned dialectician of his time from the Megarian school of philosophy. It is from the radical moral teachings of the Cynics and dialectical logic of the Megarians that Stoicism has its roots.

(7) **Chrysippus**: (280 BC - 206 BC), Chrysippus was the greatest of the Stoic philosophers and is considered to be an equal to Aristotle, particularly concerning logic. Born in Assos, Troade, of Phoenician roots, he was a former pupil of Zeno. He eventually took over the Athenian Stoa academy. Together with Zeno, he is considered the cofounder of Stoicism. Chrysippus was a prolific

but apparently disorganized writer, often writing continuously on the same subject and jotting down everything that came to mind. He made innumerable corrections and made prolific use of citations. It is said that at one stage he even quoted a long work of Euripides in its entirety! In all, he is credited with over 750 writings, none of which are extant. It was said that, "Without Chrysippus, there wouldn't have been any Stoicism."

(8) **Lucian of Samosata:** Born in Samosata, Syria, Lucian was a Rhetorician. He practised as an advocate in Antioch, travelling widely in Asia Minor, Greece, Italy, and Gaul. He then settled in Athens, where he devoted himself to philosophy, and produced a new form of literature - humorous dialogue. His satires include Dialogues of the Gods and Dialogues of the Dead. His ironic True History describes a journey to the Moon, and inspired a number of imaginary voyages. In his later years, he spent some time attached to the court in Alexandria.

Conclusion

Any inquiry into the origin of Greek philosophy should be made in the context of Mediterranean civilization. As an extension of this civilization, Greek philosophy gained a great deal from Syria, Egypt, Rome, Carthage, and other Mediterranean cultures, and *vice-a-versa*. The role of Syrian philosophy in this age and civilization cannot be denied, but it has not been thoroughly researched (1) because of lack of historical material on Phoenicia, which was highly secretive about its activities; and (2) because Syrian hinterland literature is scant and highly disorganized. Valuable sources and material from Syria have gone astray, lost or wrongly attributed to other nationalities, because of poor book-keeping in Syria in those days and because of the constant subjugation of the country by lesser cultured nations.

References

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(2) Kelly Ross, *The Origin of Philosophy: The Attributes of Mythic/Mythopoeic Thought*. <http://www.friesian.com/history.htm#west>.

(3) Kelly Ross, *The Origin of Philosophy: Why the Greeks?* *ibid*.

