

The Divine-Human Aporia in Presocratic Philosophy

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Abstract: The Presocratic philosophers of the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. have traditionally been interpreted simply as the prologue to the beginning of Western science and philosophy. The secondary literature produced by many 20th and 21st century philosophers insists that the primary accomplishment of the Presocratic movement was the decisive rejection of the mythic cosmos of Homer and Hesiod in favor of independent rational inquiry. This paper seeks to contest this interpretation, by drawing attention to the Hesiodic elements in Presocratic philosophy and theology. Far from banishing the divine from the cosmos, the fragments and testimonia of the Milesians, Xenophanes, Heraclitus, the Pythagorean movement, and Empedocles evidence a desire to radicalize the traditional Hesiodic attributes of divinity: eternity, sovereignty, and justice. However in doing so, the Presocratics entangled themselves in the divine-human aporia that continues to structure Western theological discourse: the problem of making the divine conception humanly accessible without making it merely human. In attempting to elevate and dignify the divine realm—criticizing the poetic tradition that seemed to make the gods merely human—the Presocratics made the divine appear inhuman. This eventually produced the violent popular opposition that led to the destruction of the Pythagorean communities of southern Italy and the prosecution of Anaxagoras and Socrates for impiety.

In the penultimate paragraph of the one hundred and fifth page of his revolutionary work in the philosophy of language, *Word and Object*, the American logician Willard Van Orman Quine generously troubles himself to resolve a very ancient philosophical problem.

Though the notion of identity is so simple, confusion over it is not uncommon. One instance is suggested in the fragment from Heraclitus, according to which you cannot step into the same river twice, because of the flowing of the water. This difficulty is resolved by looking to the principle of division of reference belonging to the general term ‘river’. One’s being counted as stepping into the same river both times is typical of precisely what distinguishes rivers both from river stages and from water divided in substance-conserving ways.¹

Were Heraclitus alive and available, perhaps he would welcome this brisk and sharp-edged resolution of his famous paradox with relief and delight. Quine’s principle of division of reference certainly provides an acceptable resolution to the most literal possible understanding of Heraclitus’ famous paradox. And yet one suspects that—as with so many other contemporary philosophers—Dr. Quine has rather missed the point.

The Presocratic philosophers of the sixth and fifth century B.C. are a troublesome group. The context of and precedent for their activities is poorly understood, and the substance of their ideas survives only in a bewildering multitude of quotational fragments and secondary *testimonia* scattered across the length and breadth of the Classical textual corpus. Nevertheless, the Presocratics stand at the wellsprings of the Western scientific and philosophical tradition, and have long been venerated as the first sages in the project of a complete and rational account of the universe. Part of the charm of philosophy as a modern academic discipline is its willingness to regard ancient thinkers as active participants in an ongoing conversation. It is unfortunate that this exciting virtue can easily become a crippling vice.

¹ Willard Van Orman Quine, *Word & Object* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2013), 105.

Alas, the philosophical study of the Presocratics is typically pursued in a tone of genial condescension. Rare is the philosopher who interprets the work of the Presocratics as a positive accomplishment on its own terms. Rather, the Presocratics (as the term by which we still refer to them suggests) are frequently reduced to nothing but a prelude for what is to come. Their cosmogonic and cosmological speculations—nearly always interpreted in proto-physicalist terms—merely set the stage for Western science and philosophy properly so-called. It is the Socratic rejection of the cosmological interests of the Presocratics in favor of *moral* inquiry that opens the door to ethics, and the Aristotelian rejection of their non-empirical methods that opens the door to metaphysics and natural science. According to this narrative, the contribution of the Presocratics consists almost entirely in their rejection of the myths of Hesiod and Homer in favor of independent rational investigation. They are reduced to scraping theological barnacles off the dreadnaught of Western inquiry.

It is the purpose of this paper to reject the traditional narrative of the Presocratics in favor of a different view. Instead of subordinating them to the requirements of a prologue to the Story of the Western Mind, the Presocratics will be taken on their own terms. It will be argued that a well-fleshed understanding of the historical and intellectual context in which the Presocratics operated yields a new story of their motives, their methods, and their ultimate achievement. According to this narrative, the Presocratics rebelled against the Homeric and Hesiodic worldview not in order to purge the cosmos of religious phantoms and make space for rational inquiry in a secular spirit, but in order to *radicalize* the traditional eastern Mediterranean criteria of divinity. The Presocratic tradition emerges as a project that is theological at its very core, aiming to vindicate the eternal, sovereign, and just character of the divine, and ultimately seeking to open new pathways towards a more intimate divine-human communion. The Presocratic moment is a distinctive episode in the history of Western philosophy, but ultimately it is an episode in the history of an intellectual and religious dilemma which extends well beyond the narrowly conceived traditions of Western philosophy and theology: the history of the divine-human aporia.

Just as Cartesian philosophy cannot be properly understood apart from a basic understanding of the Scholastic tradition to which it reacts, so does Presocratic philosophy require an understanding of the Hesiodic tradition of cosmogony and cosmology. As it is established in the twin poems of the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*, Hesiod's vision "comprehends both the divine and the human cosmos and unites the traditions of theogonic poetry with those of 'wisdom' literature".² Hesiod's vision also transmits the ancient eastern Mediterranean criteria of divinity: eternity, sovereignty, and justice. In this lies the root of the Presocratic rebellion against Hesiod's cosmos. For Hesiod's gods appear changeable, immoral, and jealous of their prerogatives. In fact it is divine jealousy that has created the post-Promethean distance between men and gods—a distance continually re-emphasized in heroic poetry and reenacted in communal sacrifice. For the Presocratics, the nature and behavior of the Hesiodic gods was in conflict with the Hesiodic criteria of divinity. Gods who were born in time, were humiliated or dethroned, and succumbed to human lusts, could not be truly eternal, sovereign, or just.

Rather than reject these ancient criteria, the Presocratics sought to radicalize them in a new conception of the divine. Divinity, as the object of petition, hope, or communion, carries with it certain inescapable requirements. It must be in some sense human and immanent, or it would not be accessible to human aspiration. Yet it must also be *more* than human and transcendent, or it would not be worthy of human aspiration. A critique of a previous conception of divinity must always manifest as one of two fundamental accusations: that the divine is *inhuman*, or that the divine is *merely human*. A re-imagination of the divine is

² Jenny Strauss-Clay, *Hesiod's Cosmos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 181.

always an attempt to overcome this divine-human aporia: the dilemma of making divinity humanly accessible and accessibly human without making it merely human. The Presocratics attempted to overcome this aporia by challenging the merely human Hesiodic image of the divine in order to open up new possibilities for divine-human communion. The cosmogony of the Milesians, the cosmology of Xenophanes and Heraclitus, the eschatology of Empedocles and the Pythagoreans—they all aimed to give the *logos* of a divine that is *truly* eternal, *truly* sovereign, *truly* just—and *accessible* as the object of human aspiration.

This central thesis produces two important corollaries. First, “reason” has an oracular pedigree, with origins in the Presocratic desire to authorize their own renovation of divinity. They appealed to the one authority that transcended inherited tradition in religious matters—the Apollonian authority of the Delphic Oracle and the Muses. Second, the divine-human aporia that motivated them was never really resolved. In seeking communion with a divine no longer merely human, the Presocratics created a divine that was inhuman. This produced the popular anxiety that eventually produced the prosecution of Anaxagoras and Socrates for impiety. The truce that was forged during and after the time of Plato and Aristotle—whereby the philosopher would participate in the worship of the traditional pantheon even as he sought communion with a higher divine—could not last forever. The Trinitarian and Christological debates that convulsed the early Christian church represented the resumption of old hostilities. These points are peripheral to the central thesis, but the discussion that follows will require their integration at certain key points, and we will revisit the second point again in the conclusion.

The patriarchs of Greek philosophy, Thales (620-546), Anaximander (610-546), and Anaximenes (d. 528), lived and died in Miletus, a Greek city of Ionia on the western coast of Turkey. Their philosophical project spanned the course of the sixth century BC—the last hundred years before Cyrus of Persia devastated Miletus during the Ionian Revolt. Very little of their work survives, all of it quoted or paraphrased in the works of later—often unreliable—witnesses. Everything that *is* known points to their desire to challenge the Hesiodic tradition of theogony, and tell a new story about the origins of the universe.³

Scholarship on the Milesians has long been characterized by another project of cosmogony. A tradition of scholars particularly associated with the analytic school of contemporary philosophy has sought to paint the Milesians as proto-scientists who broke all ties with the religious worldview of the eastern Mediterranean. In this interpretation the Milesians are the progenitors of the proud tradition of secular rationalism that has replaced the old mythic worldview—just as Zeus and the Olympians succeeded the Titans as rulers of the cosmos. This remains the dominant interpretation of the Presocratics, as evidenced by the 2008 *Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*. R. J. Hankinson’s article in that volume, “Reason, Cause, and Explanation in Presocratic Philosophy,” concludes with a summation of this attitude: “In the world of myth, human beings are alienated interlopers. The Presocratics began to create a world we could all be at home in”.⁴

An analysis of the Presocratics that exploits a sensitive historical reading renders this picture untenable. Far from rejecting the divine or pushing it to the explanatory periphery, the Milesians sought to give an account of the cosmos that radicalized the traditional Hesiodic conception of eternal and sovereign divinity. Hesiod declares his intention early in the *Theogony* to sing the origins of divine things: gods like Zeus or Aphrodite, natural phenomena like sun and moon, and personified abstractions like Strife and Justice. Jenny

³ Keimpe Algra, “The Beginnings of Cosmology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 45-63.

⁴ R. J. Hankinson, “Reason, Cause, and Explanation in Presocratic Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 455.

Strauss-Clay points to the common denominator that creates the divine as a structural category: “What would seem to unite this diverse group into a uniform species in Hesiod’s mind is their immortality”.⁵ Any reading of the Milesian project must remain conscious of the Hesiodic emphasis on immortality and eternity as the index of divinity.

The best summation of the Milesian quest is found in Aristotle’s *Physics*, where he placed them at the beginning of his account of the *physikoi*. By this term Aristotle meant all those who had found the root of the cosmos in a material principle. This is not to imply a physicalist or reductionist thesis in the modern sense of giving “brute matter” an ontological priority. On the contrary—the *physikoi* of Miletus sought the eternal, sovereign, divine *arche* of all things. This is Aristotle’s word, a quasi-technical term that can encompass “beginning, origin, source, axiom, [and] government”.⁶ The most relevant *testimonium* appears in Book III of the *Physics*.

Everything is either a source or derived from a source. But there cannot be a source of the infinite or limitless, for that would be a limit of it. Further, as it is a beginning, it is both uncreatable and indestructible. For there must be a point at which what has come to be reaches completion, and also a termination of all passing away. That is why, as we say, there is no *arche* of this, but it is this which is held to be the *arche* of other things, and to encompass all and to steer all, as those assert who do not recognize, alongside the infinite, other causes, such as Mind or Friendship. Further they identify it with the Divine, for it is 'deathless and imperishable' as Anaximander says, with the majority of the *physikoi*.⁷

Two key attributes of the Milesian *arche* can be derived from this account. First, the *arche* had to be eternal and immortal—“deathless and imperishable”—precisely the Hesiodic index of divinity as found in the *Theogony*. Second, the *arche* had to be universally sovereign, able to “encompass all and to steer all.” This is loaded wording, which Aristotle probably drew directly from his Milesian sources. And as T. M. Robinson has observed: “Of these two verbs, the latter is precisely the terminology used ordinarily of Zeus.”⁸ Hesiod’s desire in the *Theogony* to glorify the young storm god Zeus as the unchallengeable sovereign power of the universe—a desire he shared with the worshippers of Baal and the prophets of Yahweh—has been transposed into an abstract key.⁹ The early Milesians satisfied these twin requirements with a material or quasi-material principle. Thales discovered that life-giving Water is the original substance, Anaximander posited an imperceptible *apeiron* or “boundless,” and Anaximenes derived all things from the rarefaction and condensation of Air. The intended function of all three principles was the same—to radicalize and purify the traditional Hesiodic conception of divinity as eternal and sovereign power.

The Milesian desire to vindicate the absolute eternity and sovereignty of the divine led back to the beginnings of the *Theogony*, where the divine constituents of the cosmos came to be: Earth and Heaven, Night and Day, Air and Water.¹⁰ This was the first generation of divinities, predating the birth and accession of the Titans and the Olympians. The Milesians accomplished the vindication of divine power by selecting one of these primeval divinities and radicalizing its supremacy. The rationale for their selections remains opaque.

⁵ Strauss-Clay, *Hesiod’s Cosmos*, 14.

⁶ Hankinson, “Reason, Cause, and Explanation”, 436.

⁷ Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, ed. Ted Honderich (New York: Routledge, 1987), 31.

⁸ T. M. Robinson, “Presocratic Theology” in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 486.

⁹ Carolina Lopez-Ruiz, *When The Gods Were Born* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 87.

¹⁰ Algra, “The Beginnings of Cosmology”, 45-48.

Aristotle speculated that Thales may have elevated Water to the status of ultimate *arche* “from seeing that the nourishment of all things is moist,” a rational consideration.¹¹ But this rational association was also a traditional association; Robert Parker defines the cultic significance of rivers as follows: “...what rivers embodied for the Greeks in cultic terms was the fructifying power of moisture, the source of life itself”.¹² Regardless of the criteria they chose to utilize in their selection of an *arche*, the *motivation* of the Milesians originated in their desire to vindicate the eternity and sovereignty of the divine.

To accomplish this goal, the Milesians had to challenge Hesiod and the tradition of theogony he represented. The Hesiodic criteria of divinity were correct, but the Hesiodic narrative made the gods “merely human”. The Milesians chose to radicalize the eternity and immortality of their supreme *arche* by exempting it from the most fundamental process of the *Theogony*: birth. The 3rd century AD biographer Diogenes Laertius credited Thales with the following aphorism: “What is the divine? That which has no origin and no end”.¹³ This aphorism is attested in no other source, but there is good reason to think that it reflects an authentic tradition about Thales. The first surviving fragment of the *physikoi* reflects a similar line of thinking.

The things that are perish into the things out of which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time, as he says in rather poetical language.¹⁴

The fragment is a quotation of Anaximander by the Neoplatonist Simplicius, and probably refers to a thesis of the cyclical dominance of opposites. Anaximander is said to have derived hot and cold, the first oppositional pair, in a process of “separating off” from the boundless *apeiron*. The orderly succession of seasons provides an example of the cyclical dominance of opposites Anaximander is probably referring to. This is a process from which the *apeiron* had to be exempted. Unlike hot or cold, the boundless *apeiron* is truly immortal; it cannot “perish” any more than it can be “born”.¹⁵ It is without origin and without end. The Milesian vindication of divine eternity was accomplished by divinity’s exemption from generation. Birth was banished from the divine realm.

What is the significance of this gesture for the divine-human relationship and its attendant aporia? The Milesian picture of divinity seemed to place it—like the first generation of Hesiodic gods—beyond the reach of human cult. Can a divine power that is beyond the scope of the traditional cultic relationship achieve any form of communion with humanity? Eastern Mediterranean religion could only think divine-human communion and divine love *for* the human in terms of partiality. The gods loved favored cities and favored men—always on the basis of consistent libation, dedication, and sacrifice. The only divine love that escaped the *do-ut-des* logic of the cultic relationship was the love of divine parents for their mortal children. This love often led to conflicts within the divine realm—as when Aphrodite intervened to save her son Aeneas in the Trojan War. The destabilizing influence of parental divine love is what motivates the Zeus of the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women* to set the Trojan War in motion. This cataclysmic event devastated the generation of heroes, the

¹¹ Richard D. McKirahan Jr., *Philosophy Before Socrates: An Introduction with Texts and Commentary* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 28.

¹² Robert Parker, *On Greek Religion* (London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 75.

¹³ Dirk L. Couprie, “Anaximander” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/anaximan/>.

¹⁴ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 43.

¹⁵ Couprie, “Anaximander”.

hemithoi of mixed divine and human blood, and brought an end to the promiscuous admixture of mortal and immortal.

...it distances the gods from their mortal offspring as the gods gradually withdraw from their commerce with men. Henceforth, the inequality of status between immortal gods and mortal men cannot be bridged and remains eternally fixed.¹⁶

The Milesians would seem to radicalize this inequality: what kind of relationship could humans have with Water, *apeiron*, or Air, even if they were animate and intelligent in a way the modern conception of materiality is not? Certainly not a relationship of love or partiality—that would be merely human.

Yet the sole surviving fragment of Anaximenes holds out the possibility of a different form of communion: “Just as our soul, being air, holds us together and controls us, so do breath and air surround the whole *kosmos*”.¹⁷ Air—the eternal and sovereign divine power pervading the universe—is in fact identical with the human soul. Or rather, the human soul is a refraction of divine power. The conclusions that Anaximenes may have drawn from this remain mysterious. Equally mysterious is another *testimonium* from Aristotle’s *On the Soul*: “Some declare that it [the soul] is mixed in the whole [universe], and perhaps this is why Thales thought all things are full of gods”.¹⁸ No detailed information exists on what Thales made of this connection. But the ground was laid for a conception of divinity as that which is essential in each soul, and common to every soul. What this might imply for the divine-human relationship is a speculation that the extant work of the *physikoi* leaves for their successors to develop.

Jonathan Barnes is compelled by his conviction that “science and theism are uneasy bedfellows” to downplay the continuity of concern between the Milesian *physikoi* and their more explicitly theological Ionian successors: Xenophanes (570-478) and Heraclitus (535-475).¹⁹

It would not require a very ardent skepticism to conclude that the Milesians had no theology at all. If they were not atheists in the sense of positively denying the existence of any gods, at least they were negative atheists: they left no room in their systems for gods, and were not perturbed by the omission.²⁰

Barnes neglects a historically sound understanding of the Presocratic project in favor of his desire to induct the Milesians into some kind of secular-rationalist communion of saints. Certainly the Milesians were not theists in the traditional sense. But the Judeo-Christian model of theism hardly exhausts the possibilities of a religious worldview. Given that the key requirements for the Milesian *arche* are drawn directly from the Hesiodic criteria of divinity, all attempts to paint them as apostles of an anti-religious Greek Enlightenment must be judged absurd. The theological concerns of Xenophanes and Heraclitus do not represent some sort of regress into a religious worldview. They represent the logical continuation of a Milesian project that is theological in its pith and marrow.

What emerges from the satirical poems of Xenophanes and the oracular enigmas of Heraclitus is an attempt to resolve the divine-human aporia. After the Milesians, this aporia could be expressed in the following question: “how can we engage in more intimate

¹⁶ Strauss-Clay, *Hesiod’s Cosmos*, 171.

¹⁷ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 54.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 99.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

communion with a divine that must become less human?" The Milesian project demanded abstraction and de-anthropomorphization. The same gesture that confirmed the eternity and sovereignty of the divine placed it beyond the reach of human cult. Their Ionian successors sought to address this aporia even as they carried forward the Milesian agenda of de-anthropomorphization.

Xenophanes of Colophon chose not to take the Milesian path towards divine-human communion. The radical immanence Thales attributes to the divine is a minor note in Xenophon's theology, and it was left to Heraclitus to kindle the divine spark that Anaximenes had planted in the human soul. Xenophanes' effort at divine-human communion took the form of another project of *vindication*. To the Milesian radicalization of divine eternity and divine sovereignty, Xenophon added the vindication of divine justice. The Hesiodic precedent for this divine criterion was the reign of Zeus. The *Works and Days* channels a yearning for divine justice that has roots in the wisdom literature created by the court scribes of Egypt and Mesopotamia.²¹ Hesiod urges his wayward brother Perses to cease relying on the courts of "gift-eating" (bribe taking) kings to acquire ill-gotten gains. His behavior constitutes a threat to himself and the entire community:

The immortals are near and observe when men pronounce crooked judgment: the 30,000 invisible guardians of Zeus patrol every corner of the earth; and Zeus's daughter, Dike herself denounces human injustice to her father, so that the entire population must pay for the crimes of their kings. Finally the all-seeing eye of Zeus observes directly what kind of justice the city contains.²²

Yet Zeus and the other Olympians had remarkably little respect for the rules they guaranteed and enforced in the human realm. In Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, when Hephaestus nets—literally—his wife Aphrodite in bed with Ares, he brings them both before the Olympian court. They respond with laughter. A transgression that would bring about the gravest possible consequences in the human realm is a trifling source of amusement in the divine realm.²³ A hundred other episodes like this lie behind the complaint found in Xenophanes' fragments:

Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all deeds
Which among men are a reproach and a disgrace:
Thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another.²⁴

The moral critique emerged from the same vein as the Milesian rejection of divine birth. Xenophanes developed their theses into an explicit rejection of Homeric and Hesiodic anthropomorphism. The most compelling evidence for the Milesian foundations of his attack is found in a *testimonium* of Aristotle:

Xenophanes used to say that those who say that the gods are born are just as impious as those who say that they die, since in both ways it follows that there is a time when the gods do not exist.²⁵

²¹ Walter Burkert, "Prehistory of Presocratic Philosophy in an Orientalizing Context" in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67-68.

²² Strauss-Clay, *Hesiod's Cosmos*, 144.

²³ Jenny Strauss-Clay, *The Wrath of Athena: Gods and Men in the Odyssey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 140-141.

²⁴ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 60.

This was simply the negative corollary of the Milesian definition of the divine: it is impious to attribute gods with an “origin or end.” Xenophanes honed this thesis to a fine point and thrust it into the belly of traditional anthropomorphism:

If oxen and horses and lions had hands
And were able to draw with their hands and do the same things as men, Horses would
draw the shapes of gods to look like horses
And oxen to look like oxen, and each would make the
Gods' bodies have the same shape as they themselves had.²⁶

Xenophanes developed this denial of divine anthropomorphism into an affirmation of divine unity, supremacy, and incorporeality: “God is one, greatest among gods and men, / not at all like mortals in body or thought.”²⁷ This fragment, combined with the claim attributed to him by pseudo-Plutarch: “It is unholy for any of the gods to have a master,” has been used to argue for Xenophanes as the first Greek monotheist.²⁸

Xenophanes’ “monotheism” must remain a supposition. Equally possible is a form of two-tiered henotheism, in which an absolute divine reality is layer-caked atop a subordinate polytheistic pantheon. This was after all the solution later favored by most Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy.²⁹ What is critical for this analysis is the new pathway Xenophanes opens towards the divine. He did not develop an explicit theory of divine-human communion on the basis of his reformulated God. But the exonerating of the divine from morally bankrupt behavior bridged the Hesiodic abyss between divine and human norms of justice. The way was open for divine-human communion through the agency of justice. For Heraclitus, *thinking* in accordance with the just order of the cosmos became a devotional method in itself.

In order to see how Heraclitus accomplished this in his cosmology, an examination of Hesiod’s method of authorizing his account will be necessary. Hesiod begins his *Theogony* by telling of an encounter with the muses in which he was given a scepter made from a laurel branch. The scepter was the symbol of kings and the authoritative speech by which they administered justice. The laurel was the symbol of Apollo, leader of the Muses and patron of the oracle at Delphi. Hesiod thus acquires the judicial authority of Zeus and kingly speech for his account, and combines it with the Apollonian tradition of prophetic and oracular authority.³⁰ The muses also breathe into him a *thespis aude*, a “divine-human voice,” allowing Hesiod to transgress the boundaries between men and gods for the sake of his theogonic account.³¹ Carolina Lopez-Ruiz summarizes the implications of this two-pronged maneuver as follows:

He tells us that his inspiration is divine, superior, and therefore what comes out of his mouth is not new but extracted from a *universal truth* that existed forever and that he can 'see' better than others.³²

²⁵ Ibid., 61.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 62.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 146-147.

³⁰ Strauss-Clay, *Hesiod's Cosmos*, 74.

³¹ Ibid., 65.

³² Lopez-Ruiz, *When the Gods Were Born*, 82.

Heraclitus has long been recognized to model his own enigmatic sayings on the pronouncements of the oracle at Delphi.³³ He used his quasi-oracular authority to combine the Milesian insistence on divine eternity and divine sovereignty with Xenophanes' insistence on divine justice. This formed the basis of a complex *logos*-cosmology that enabled a unique form of divine-human communion. Heraclitus sought to wield the laurel scepter of Hesiod more effectively than Hesiod himself—creating an oracular cosmology that was truly adequate to divine justice. He claimed Hesiod's oracular *thespis aude* by speaking directly on behalf of his divine principle: "Listening not to me but to the *logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one".³⁴ The oracular coloring of the Heraclitean *logos* (a term originally meaning "Word" or "account") represented a fundamental gesture of the Presocratic movement, which sought prophetic authority for its renovation of the divine.³⁵ Reason (with which the Heraclitean *logos* was explicitly identified in later Stoic and Christian writers) has an oracular pedigree.³⁶

Born in Ephesus to an aristocratic family, Heraclitus rejected a hereditary "kingship" that was his by birth, and fled the company of men for the wilderness. His thought survives primarily in fragments drawn from a book he is said to have deposited in the temple of Artemis.³⁷ The opening lines read as follows:

This *logos* holds always but humans always prove unable to understand it, both before hearing it and when they have first heard it. For though all things come to be [or, happen] in accordance with this *logos*, humans are like the inexperienced when they experience such words and deeds as I set out, distinguishing each in accordance with its nature and saying how it is. But other people fail to notice what they do when awake, just as they forget what they do while asleep.³⁸

Heraclitus identified his *logos* variously with "fire, soul, war, justice, God, and perhaps law".³⁹ All of these are expressions for the underlying unity-of-opposites by which the divine *logos* orders the cosmos.

Two threads must be teased from the fragments in order to reveal how this *logos* points to Heraclitus' predecessors and their divine-human aporia. The first leads to Xenophanes and his vindication of divine justice. The *logos* of Heraclitus functions as an immanent principle of divine law:

Those who speak with understanding must rely firmly on what is common to all as a city must rely on law and much more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law; for it has as much power as it wishes and is sufficient for all and is still left over.⁴⁰

The eternal and sovereign *logos*, like Xenophanes' God, orders all things according to an immutable pattern of justice. This is the origin of the unity-of-opposites thesis that is fundamental to the Heraclitean style of thought. Heraclitus chastised Hesiod for making day

³³ Patrick Lee Miller, *Becoming God: Pure Reason in Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 41.

³⁴ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 120.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁶ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?*, 240-241.

³⁷ Daniel Graham "Heraclitus" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta URL <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>.

³⁸ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 116.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

and night two separate divinities: “for they are one,” and asserted that “the road up and the road down are the same one”.⁴¹ All opposites are enfolded from the perspective of the divine *logos*, which arranges all things for the best: “To God all things are beautiful and good and just, but humans have supposed some unjust and others just”.⁴² Critically, *logos* or God does not merely *enforce* this pattern—like the Hesiodic Zeus—He or It is in some sense *identical* with it. To think according to the just and beautiful principle that is “common to all” is to internalize—even incarnate—the divine itself.

This radical immanence of the *logos* brings out another thread of continuity. Like the Milesians before him, Heraclitus argued for the sovereignty, eternity, and ubiquity of his divine *arche* and identified it with a material substance: fire.

The *kosmos*, the same for all, none of the gods nor of humans has made, but it was always and is and shall be: an ever-living fire being kindled in measures and being extinguished in measures.⁴³

This “ever-living fire” is divine and fundamental. Yet it is also capable of “turnings,” transmutations into water, earth, and other fundamental elements: “all things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things”.⁴⁴ Regardless of its state, the divine and animate principle maintains its governing role: “thunderbolt steers all things”.⁴⁵ And like Anaximenes before him, Heraclitus identified his *arche* with the essence of the human soul: “a gleam of light is a dry soul, wisest and best”.⁴⁶ Fire being one with the *logos*, fieriness and dryness are identical with wisdom and intelligence. This accounts for some of Heraclitus’ more peculiar assertions—that “it is death for souls to become wet,” and that a drunken man “[has] his soul moist”.⁴⁷

Bizarre as many aspects of Heraclitean cosmology may seem, they must be interpreted in light of his desire to overcome the divine-human aporia. He sought to open the possibility of intimate communion with an abstracted and de-anthropomorphized divine. Here again he took his cue from the Delphic oracle. In obedience to the famous Delphic inscription, “know thyself,” Heraclitus turned his quest within: “I searched myself.” The Milesians founded their *historia* (inquiry) in travel and stargazing, but Heraclitus gazed into his own soul, and here too he found the infinite *logos*: “you would not discover the limits of the soul although you travelled every road: it has so deep a *logos*”.⁴⁸

The misanthrope proved himself an egalitarian of sorts, for although on the one hand, “human nature has no insight, but divine nature has it,” on the other hand, “it belongs to all people to know themselves and to think rightly”.⁴⁹ Thinking, Fire, Law and *logos* are common to all; divine potential is everywhere waiting to be actualized. Patrick Lee Miller connects the divine style of thought, which comprehends unity in all multiplicity and discerns multiplicity in every unity, with the chiasmic style of expression found in Heraclitean aphorisms: “The wise, by achieving this height of self-knowledge, grasp themselves as cosmic *logos*, divine chiasmus, becoming god”.⁵⁰ Immanent in the harmony that hums beneath the cosmos, God is transcendent in the harmony that waits at the apex of the human

⁴¹ Ibid., 122.

⁴² Ibid., 125.

⁴³ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 126.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 119, 127.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 119.

⁵⁰ Miller, *Becoming God*, 42.

soul. Perhaps this is why Heraclitus claims that “the Wise [that] is One alone” is both “unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus”.⁵¹

More than the Milesian denial of divine birth, more than Xenophanes’ attack on divine immorality, this new potential of the human soul represented the most fundamental challenge to the Hesiodic vision. For in Hesiod’s cosmos, the gulf between man and god had been fixed long ago, at a place called Mecone. Here the Zeus of the *Theogony* and the Titan Prometheus engaged in a battle of wits to determine the fate of man. This battle of wits was the foundation myth for the ritual of animal sacrifice, the central act of divine-human communication in Greek religion. According to Hesiod, Prometheus schemed on behalf of man when preparing the portions for the sacrificial table at Mecone. Thinking to trick Zeus into taking the worse portion, Prometheus wrapped the choicest cuts of the sacrificed cow in the unappealing stomach, and swaddled the white bones in glistening fat. Zeus, despite seeing through the deception, selected the bones wrapped in fat. In doing so Zeus allowed Prometheus to outwit himself, cementing mortality as man’s eternal portion at the sacrificial table. Jeane-Pierre Vernant’s analysis puts it well:

The ritual sets the incorruptible bones aside for the gods and sends them, consumed by the flames, on high in the form of fragrant smoke and gives men the meat of an already lifeless animal, a piece of dead flesh, so that they may satisfy for a moment their constantly awakening hunger.⁵²

The Promethean divide between man and god posed the most significant barrier to the Presocratic yearning for communion with the divine. And it was in its rebellion against this divide that the Presocratic movement produced its most radical challenge to traditional religion: the Pythagorean doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and the consequent rejection of animal sacrifice. Like Heraclitus, the Pythagoreans discovered the human soul’s capacity to assimilate the divine patterns and harmonies that governed the universe. Like Heraclitus, they connected this capacity with the oracle at Delphi. One of the *akousma* (things heard—a supposedly original saying of Pythagoras) of a Roman era sect runs as follows: “What is the oracle at Delphi? The tetractys, which is the harmony in which the Sirens sing”.⁵³

The “tetractys of the decad” was the crown and symbol of a mathematical and musical Pythagorean cosmology. On it the Pythagoreans were said to swear their solemn oaths.⁵⁴ Another Roman era philosopher, Sextus Empiricus, provided the most explicit description of its full significance:

The tetractys is a certain number, which being composed of the four first numbers produces the most perfect number, ten. For one and two and three and four come to be ten. This number is the first tetractys, and is called the source of ever flowing nature since according to them the entire *kosmos* is organized according to *harmonia*, and *harmonia* is a system of three concords—the fourth, the fifth, and the octave—and the proportions of these three concords are found in the aforementioned four numbers.⁵⁵

⁵¹ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 119.

⁵² Jean-Pierre Vernant, “At Man’s Table: Hesiod’s Foundation Myth of Sacrifice” in *The Cuisine of Sacrifice Among the Ancient Greeks*, ed. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 25.

⁵³ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 90.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

This oracular phenomenon was the mathematical, musical, and rational *harmonia* that governed the universe. Can this sophisticated cosmology really be attributed to Pythagoras (570-490) himself? His status as a historical personality of the second half of the sixth century is not in doubt. He was born on the island of Samos, off the Ionian coast, and eventually became prominent in the politics and religious life of Croton in Southern Italy.⁵⁶ But he wrote nothing himself, and his status as shaman, receiver of Babylonian, Egyptian, Iranian, or Indian mysteries, originator of geometry, pioneer of music and mathematical theory, and semi-divine fountainhead of all philosophical wisdom, is lost forever in a quagmire of Neo-Platonist hagiography and modern speculation.⁵⁷ It does seem probable that the original Pythagoras propounded *some* form of mathematical and musical doctrine as a method for assimilating the divine pattern of the cosmos. Philolaus of Croton, a Pythagorean contemporary of Socrates, put this very explicitly: “Mathematical reason, inasmuch as it considers the nature of the universe, has a certain affinity to it (for like is naturally apprehended by like)”.⁵⁸

Thankfully, the single idea that can firmly be attributed to the historical Pythagoras—the transmigration of souls—is the idea with the greatest significance for the divine-human aporia. Probably the single most reliable *testimonium* on Pythagoras and the tradition that he began comes from Aristotle’s pupil Dicaearchus, who gives the transmigration theory pride of place:

What he used to teach his associates, no one can tell with certainty; for they observed no ordinary silence. His most universally celebrated opinions, however, were that the soul is immortal; then that it migrates into other sorts of living creature; and in addition that after certain periods what has happened once happens again, and nothing is absolutely new; and that one should consider all animate things as akin. For Pythagoras seems to have been the first to have brought these doctrines into Greece.⁵⁹

This radical idea smashed the Promethean barriers between animals, mortal men, and immortal gods. It formed the basis of a new way of life, which rejected animal sacrifice as a means of divine-human communion. Little is known of the course of study or the elaborate network of taboos that attended the early Pythagorean lifestyle. The first followers of Pythagoras observed the norms proper to an initiatory religious cult, whose members were sworn to absolute secrecy.⁶⁰ But the goal of these practices was unambiguous:

...this synthesis and the program of purification it enjoined—according to which the soul, and especially its reason, was to eschew the body, and through repeated incarnations decide for... good against evil, light against darkness—would promise union with the divine...⁶¹

What appears clearly both in early Pythagoreanism and in all its later variants is a comprehensive effort to vault the Promethean divide and attain the immortality that Zeus denied to man.

⁵⁶ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 299.

⁵⁷ Carl A. Huffman, “The Pythagorean Tradition”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 67.

⁵⁸ Miller, *Becoming God*, 77.

⁵⁹ Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 102-103.

⁶⁰ Carl A. Huffman, “Pythagoras” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>.

⁶¹ Miller, *Becoming God*, 77.

All the Presocratic maneuvers that have been surveyed—the assertion of divine eternity, sovereignty, and justice, and the transgression of Promethean barriers through the transmigration of the soul—come to a flamboyant crescendo in the person of Empedocles (495-435). Born to an aristocratic family of Acragas, Sicily, the adult Empedocles presided wherever he went, dressed in royal purple, with a laurel and a crown on his head and bronze shoes on his feet. He was a philosopher and a physician, a magician and a miracle worker, a god on earth.⁶² The opening lines of his surviving work of hexameter verse are characteristic of his grandiose style.

Friends who dwell in the great city on the yellow Acragas
On the heights of the citadel, you whose care is good deeds,
Respectful haven for strangers, untouched by evil,
Hail! I go about among you, an immortal god, no longer mortal,
Honored among all, as it seems wreathed with headbands and blooming Gardens.
Wherever I go to their flourishing cities,
I am revered by the men and women. And they follow together in tens of Thousands,
inquiring where lies the path to profit,
Some in need of prophecy, while others,
Pierced for a long time with harsh pains,
Asked to hear the voice of healing for all diseases.⁶³

Empedocles became well known for his unique cosmological doctrine, which posited a universe composed of four eternal elements, Earth, Air, Water and Fire, which periodically collapsed together and was torn apart by the warring forces of Love and Strife.⁶⁴ The opening lines of his poem make it clear, however, that the true object of this cosmology was to exhort people to aspire to the divine status Empedocles believed he had achieved.

The cosmos of Empedocles, like the cosmos of Heraclitus, is pervaded by an immutable divine law: “But what is lawful for all extends far through the wide-ruling *aither* and through the immense glare”.⁶⁵ This cosmos, composed of deathless Milesian elements, governed by Heraclitean divine law, integrates the Pythagorean hope for immortality and horror of animal sacrifice.

There is an oracle of Necessity, an ancient decree of the gods,
Eternal and sealed with broad oaths, that whenever anyone pollutes his Own dear
limbs with the sin of murder,
... commits offense and swears a false oath –
Divinities (*daemones*) who possess immensely long life –
He wanders away from the blessed ones for thrice ten thousand seasons, Growing to
be through time all different kinds of mortals taking the Difficult paths of life one
after another.
... Of them I am now one, a fugitive from the gods and a wanderer, Putting my
reliance on raving Strife.⁶⁶

⁶² McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 255.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶⁴ Richard Parry, “Empedocles” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empedocles/>.

⁶⁵ McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 254.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Mortals were not mortals, but exiled immortals, *daemones* polluted by the sin of bloodshed. This bloodshed was elsewhere identified with the primeval horror of animal sacrifice, by which a son might seize and devour his own parents after they had died and transmigration into an animal body. Once again, a Hesiodic idea was radicalized, but in the most awful way possible. Promethean sacrifice did not just reenact and refigure the abyss between gods and men: it *created* it. Every sacrifice performed by man brought him more firmly under the yoke of Strife, exiling him by divine law from the table of Love. The religious institution of traditional sacrifice was the mechanism by which the sins of the father were visited upon the son.

Only by “fasting from evil” could the soul hope to re-actualize its divine potential.⁶⁷ By avoiding the pollution of sinful acts and corporeal cares, the soul could ascend through the hierarchy of being, becoming first the laurel, noblest of plants, (and symbol of Apollo), then the lion, noblest of animals, and finally ascending through the ranks of human society:

In the end they are prophets and bards and physicians and chiefs among men on earth, and from there they arise as gods mightiest in honors. Sharing the same hearth and table with other immortals relieved of human distress, unwearied.⁶⁸

It was no longer a question of inviting the immortals to briefly dine at man’s sacrificial table. Man could reclaim his divine birthright at the table of the gods.

And yet the divine-human aporia remained unresolved. Perhaps the most striking thing about the Presocratic revolution was its failure to expand beyond a select few. The early Pythagorean communities of Italy, politically dominant for a brief spell, were later attacked and dispersed by angry mobs.⁶⁹ Anaxagoras, an Ionian philosopher who befriended Pericles in Athens, was forced to flee a sentence of death on the charge of impiety. The ground for that accusation was his assertion that the heavenly bodies were not divine but flaming masses of rock. In their place he enshrined a cosmic principle of mind, *nous*: “*nous* is unlimited and self-ruling and has been mixed with no thing, but is alone itself by itself”.⁷⁰ The same charge of impiety claimed the life of the most famous of all the philosophical adherents of Delphi, Socrates, who based his philosophical quest on discovering the meaning of an enigma he had received from the oracle.

During and after the time of Plato and Aristotle, the philosophical rebellion against Hesiod’s cosmos evolved into an uneasy détente with traditional religion. The citizens of Athens had found the god of the philosophers to be inhuman—unable to address itself to mundane and corporeal concerns. So the philosophical schools of the Hellenistic and Roman era did not attempt to induct the masses into their secrets or to abolish sacrificial piety. Philosophy became an elite discourse, largely reserved for wealthy men who could afford to patronize a distant and indifferent divinity.⁷¹ The battle lines of the divine-human aporia would not be drawn again until the dawn of Trinitarian and Christological controversy at the beginning of the fourth century.

This connection can be drawn in good conscience because the Presocratics were proto-theologians as much as they were proto-philosophers or proto-scientists. Perhaps the preceding has attended too much to the theological dimension of Presocratic thought, but only as a means to correcting an outstanding imbalance. What the Presocratics will *not* admit

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 252-253.

⁶⁹ Huffman, “Empedocles”.

⁷⁰ Patricia Curd, “Anaxagoras” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anaxagoras/>.

⁷¹ Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy*, 146-147.

is any attempt to curb the breadth of their interests or to iron out their paradoxes in the interests of claiming them for a privileged and authoritative strand in Western thought.

The Presocratics rebelled against the Hesiodic conception of divinity, using old methods and ancient criteria to renovate their image of the divine. The Milesians returned to the primeval entities of the theogonic account, seeking to radicalize divine eternity and supremacy. Xenophanes sought to liberate the divine from contradictions in its own nature as the guarantor of justice. Heraclitus and Pythagoras drew on oracular authority to transgress the Promethean divide between god and man, claiming that the mortal mind could assimilate the immortal truths which governed the cosmos. Empedocles drew all these paths together in a cosmological and practical program that promised the immortal soul's restoration to the table of the gods. It was a remarkable accomplishment, one that still stand in its own right. But in so doing the Presocratics made the divine inhuman, setting the stage for yet another swing of an eternal pendulum: the divine-human aporia that continues to structure the theological process. The cosmogonic moment of the Presocratics belongs to Athanasius, Luther, and Barth as much as it does to Russell, Ayer, and Quine.

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