

## Review

# First philosophers and the history of philosophical thought: An appraisal of the Milesian Thinkers

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**The question concerning the contributions of the first thinkers [who are believed to be the Milesian thinkers as they were natives of Miletus] to the history of philosophical thought has received different interpretations throughout the history of philosophy. On one hand there are historians of philosophy who argue that the Milesian philosophers did not make any new contribution to the history of philosophy. On the contrary are others who believe that it was only because of the Milesians' efforts that today we have philosophy as a discipline; otherwise philosophy as a discipline could have never come into existence. What remains interesting, however, is that philosophers on either side tend to be extreme, rigid and narrowly focused in their analysis of the contributions by the Milesian thinkers. This paper therefore invites and critically reflects on the arguments brought forth by philosophers on either side. The paper then makes a balance of the two conflicting positions before paying homage to the Milesian thinkers. The paper therefore is a contribution towards the history of philosophy and critical thinking among historians of philosophy.**

**Keywords:** First, Milesian, philosophy, thought, history, appraisal.

## INTRODUCTION

The debate concerning the contributions of the Milesian thinkers: Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, to the history of philosophical thought have been well documented in the literature, and a number of interpretations to the subject have been conjured. When looking at the theoretical arguments on the topic under view in several academic journal articles and philosophy textbooks, it is striking how many of them especially from the Western world, just argue in favor of or against the Milesian thinkers. What is worrying is the fact that arguments from either partisans have been narrowly focused - either too sympathetic or unsympathetic with the Milesian thinkers. There is need, therefore for a more comprehensive research on this important topic wherein most arguments are limited either to pro- or con- Milesian thinkers' contributions to the 'birth' and development of philosophical thought, both in Greece and the world-over.

As has been highlighted above, some historians of philosophy concede that the Milesian thinkers (who flourished toward the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC) have made considerable contributions to the birth and development of philosophy. On the other hand, there are

other historians of philosophy who think otherwise. What is interesting with philosophers of either camp is that they each give reasons (though narrowly focused philosophically) for their positions which at face value appear to be convincing. From this observation, I argue that in such tension between the pro- and con-arguments on the contribution of the Milesian thinkers, panaceas are hard to come by. In this light, it is imperative that historians of philosophy come up with a more balanced position as intervention so that due respect with regard to the Milesian thinkers' contributions to philosophical thought is accorded.

While appreciating some arguments in favor of and against the Milesian thinkers, I seek to challenge their rigidity and narrowness in focus which seem to be deeply anchored in their misinterpretation of the Milesian thinkers' contribution(s) to the history of philosophical thought. The narrowness in focus by scholars of either camp has resulted in dearth of literature that gives a 'balanced view' and 'due respect' of the Milesian thinkers in the history of philosophy. It has also misled, in various ways, the new comers in philosophy. This work thus

contributes to this grey area by demonstrating that though the assertions by the Milesian thinkers can be criticized for various reasons, they were a formidable contribution. As such, the paper seeks to move beyond arguments provided by either partisans to create a more radical, holistic and balanced view that gives the Milesian thinkers the appropriate position and respect they deserve in the 'birth' and development of philosophical thought in Greece and the world-over.

More importantly, the paper critically analyzes arguments forwarded by philosophers on either side with a view to provide a more rounded and objective stance on the place that can be accorded the Milesian thinkers in the history of philosophy. It is only after this that the paper further advances the thesis that though some assertions by the Milesian thinkers were seemingly crude; this does not render them futile. They were stimuli for immediate subsequent philosophers and philosophers today.

That said, the virtue of this paper is to ascertain how striking and influential was the Milesian thinkers' contribution, especially as a starting point for immediate subsequent philosophers. There was need to create a philosophical problem, which the Milesian thinkers did, before moving forward. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the answer to the question on whether the Milesian thinkers deserve merit as the first philosophers is very difficult to stipulate. It is a question that needs philosophical reflection from time to time to evaluate its validity; hence the justification for this research.

### **The first philosophers and their contribution(s) to the history of philosophical thought**

The so-called the Milesian thinkers are considered in the history of philosophy as the first philosophers in Greece and the Western civilization. They were from the Greek city of Miletus, and for this reason and for purposes of this work the trio shall be referred to as the 'Milesian thinkers'. Chronologically, these are Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes. The trio has been considered as the first philosophers for various reasons. This section shall bring to light most of the trio's contributions to philosophical thought that makes them considered the first philosophers though they were not the first men to exist on earth. Before the trio's contributions are presented, an analysis of what is meant by 'philosophical thought' is made.

Technically, 'philosophical thought' can be understood as a result/product of critical thinking. Critical thinking is "skilled, active, interpretation and evaluation of observations, communications, information, and argumentation" (Fisher & Scriven, 1997: 20). Moore & Parker (1999) define it more naturally as the careful, deliberate determination of whether one should accept, reject, or suspend judgment about a claim and the

degree of confidence with which one accepts or rejects it. Following this understanding, critical thinking can be seen to have something to do with purposeful, self-regulatory judgment which results in interpretation, analysis, evaluation, and inference, as well as explanation of the evidential, conceptual, methodological, criteriological or contextual considerations upon which that judgment is based. It (critical thinking) includes almost all types of logical reasoning; hence is essential as a tool of inquiry. However, it employs not only logic but broad intellectual criteria such as clarity, credibility, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, significance and fairness. As such, critical thinking is that 'intellectually disciplined process that yields philosophical thought'. The ideal critical thinker is habitually inquisitive, well-informed, trustful of reason, open-minded, flexible, fair-minded in evaluation, honest in facing personal biases, prudent in making judgments, willing to reconsider, clear about issues, orderly in complex matters, diligent in seeking relevant information, reasonable in the selection of criteria, focused in inquiry, and persistent in seeking results which are as precise as the subject and the circumstances of inquiry permit (Fisher and Scriven, 1997; Paul and Elder, 2002). The Milesian trio: Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes demonstrated most if not all the aforementioned elements of critical thinking, hence their thinking can safely be considered as 'philosophical thought'.

Now coming on to the contributions of the Milesian thinkers, it can be argued that the Milesian thinkers' greatest contribution to the history of philosophy was their departure from mythology and their quest to understand nature on the basis of reason. As Aristotle (*Metaph*, 1.3) claimed, "the greatest contribution of the Milesian thinkers to the history of philosophy was their radical shift in mental activity from mythology that personified every process in nature to objective exploration of nature of things". This is to say the Milesian thinkers distanced themselves from Greek mythology which had to do with the Homeric pantheon's impersonal gods, 'Moirai'. They evaded most if not all Greek myths and dogmas in their quest for knowledge of the universe and seek to justify their views on the basis of rational arguments. Myths were self-justifying, conservative and never argumentative.

The Milesian thinkers' first attempt to demonstrate departure from Greek mythology was their grappling with the first problem of philosophy, that is, the question on ultimate principle of things on the basis of reason. Unlike the ordinary majority that on the basis of mythology said it was the Greek gods, the trio placed it in the form of matter (Aristotle, *Metaph*, 1.3). Thales, for instance, announces that the ultimate 'Arche'- origin of all things is water. As given by Hadane (1955: 175):

*A conjecture forwarded by Aristotle as to how Thales derived everything out of water points to his own mental reflection that it was evident that all nourishment is*

*moist and warmth itself comes out of moisture and thereby life continues.*

Indeed this reasoning that Aristotle attributes to Thales is adequate guarantee the Milesian thinker, Thales a traditional first place in the history of philosophical thought. None had reasoned or demonstrated the same reasoning capacity before.

The Milesians, Anaximander and Anaximenes like Thales concentrated on the first problem of philosophy, that is, the question on the ultimate principle of things. They were determined to unveil through reason the mysteries of ultimate reality of all things. Expounding on this, Sahakian (1966: 3) held that: the philosophical problem created by Anaximander and other Milesians turned out to be two-fold; that of ascending the nature of the basic substance of which the world is composed, and that of deciding whether the universe is one or many (metaphysical monism or metaphysical pluralism respectively). As for the first problem, that of the basic substance or fundamental ultimate cosmic matter, Anaximander announces it to be *Apeiron*, that is, the boundless or the infinite and imperishable. As given by Aristotle, Anaximander thought that if natural processes were finite, they would eventually exhaust their creative potentialities and cease to exist. Thus, the boundless must be infinite unlike the finite forms of matter that proceed from it.

Concerning the same problem of the cosmic matter, Anaximenes unlike Anaximander and Thales taught that the ultimate principle is air including mist and darkness (Ibid). The reason given by Anaximenes is that the universe as we know it has evolved by rarefaction and condensation of the primary fundamental principle-air.

Analyzing the aforementioned assertions by the Milesian thinkers, it can be reasonably argued that the Milesians' contention that the ultimate nature of all things is investigative and explicable. Their assertion that there must be a cause for everything is a clear departure from mythology to logic and reason. In this respect, the Milesian thinkers contributed significantly to the history of philosophical thought.

More importantly, it can be argued that the Milesian thinkers had considerable influence on a number of subsequent philosophers. Sahakian (Ibid: 4) had it that:

*A number of great philosophers followed the Milesians during the pre-Socratic period beginning with Xenophanes of Colophon and Heraclitus of Ephesus as well as Pythagoras. Like the Milesian thinkers, all these subsequent philosophers were pre-occupied with the problem of the ultimate principle of all things.*

This connotes that the Milesian thinkers created a philosophical problem (of identifying the ultimate reality of all things) which they left as a legacy to subsequent philosophers. Pythagoras and Plato, for example,

influenced by this metaphysical problem propounded the number theory and theory of forms respectively.

In the same token, Anaximenes' metaphysical theory of transmigration of soul (the cycle of birth, death and rebirth) seem to have had considerable influence on Plato's metaphysical thinking. It is believed that the latter's theory of form was a directly linked to Anaximenes' theory of transmigration of soul.

Likewise, it has been argued that the strikingly important Darwin revolution theory gained its roots from Anaximander's hypothesis on the creation of the worlds. Hadane (1955: 187) puts it that:

*Anaximander contributed a theory of evolution strikingly close related to the latter theory of Charles Darwin-Darwinism. Darwin following Anaximander posited that the worlds were not created as in Jewish or Christian theology, but evolved through an eternal motion. He (Darwin) like Anaximander further attributed organic life to the action of fluid which formed fish-like creatures which latter developed into animals through evolution and a process of adaptation to life on land. Human species was a result of this process.*

Besides Anaximander's influence on Charles Darwin, his *Peri Phuses* (Concerning Nature) is considered as the first philosophical writing of the Greek and Western civilization. Many subsequent philosophers followed suit—they organized their philosophical thoughts in form of writing. Heraclitus, for example, left a number of fragments recorded by Arius Didymus. So is Pythagoras who according to his secretary, Laetius wrote three books namely: *On Nature*; *On Education*, and *On Statesmanship*. Thus one can argue that the Milesian thinkers contributed significantly to the history of philosophical thought.

Moreso, the remarkable intellectual accomplishments of Thales (the first of the Milesians) like predicting the eclipse of the sun (occurred on 25 May 585 B.C), ability to measure the height of the pyramids using their shadows seem to have influenced subsequent philosophers like Parmenides, Heraclitus and Pythagoras. Heraclitus' inclinations to philosophize on meteorological and natural phenomena as rivers might have been a result of Thales' influence. Heraclitus is well known for pronouncing that: No man can step into the same river twice for the waters will be different. Thales' geometrical works are also believed to have inspired Pythagoras to postulate his own mathematical theorem famously known as 'Pythagoras' theorem'.

### **The Milesian thinkers: Deservers of merit?**

For a long time, historians of philosophy have tussled but with no consensus on the question whether the so-called

Milesian thinkers could be credited for the emergency of philosophy. Scholars like Hamlyn, Thomson, Calvendish, and Russell, among others have generally argued against giving any credit to the Milesian thinkers. They have forwarded quite a number of arguments to substantiate their position. Hamlyn (1992: 7), for example, discredit Thales (the man credited with being the first Greek philosopher) for lacking originality. He remarks:

*Though we are usually told that philosophy begun towards the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C with Thales of Miletus, it is reported that Thales (c. 585), was said to have been of Phoenician ancestry. However, he was living in a Greek city and he traveled extensively to various countries like Babylon, Egypt and Phoenicia consulting a number of wise men.*

Hamlyn (Ibid) further argues:

*Thales' technological skills and mathematical knowledge as his remarkable ability to predict the eclipse of the sun and determine the height of pyramids using their shadows were adopted from Babylonian star-watchers and Egyptian Mathematicians respectively.*

Thomson (1955:159) confirms Thales' lack of originality. He argues:

*Thales' view that the world evolved out of an original state of things in which there was nothing but water and his famous idea that the earth floats on water was in keeping with the traditional conception of 'the waters that are beneath the earth', the Babylon apsu.*

For scholars like Ramose (1999), the Western scholars tended to attribute rationality to Western indigenous societies and denied it among other societies such as that of the Africans. Against such misconstrued thinking by some Western scholars such as Hegel, Kant and Hume, it has been convincingly argued that "reason is singled out as the most essential quality of humanity though it is surprisingly denied to other groups of people" (Winch 1970: 79). Bantu Africans, for example, have always had a philosophy of life name ubuntu with which they strove to live peacefully and in harmony with others (Ramose 1999; Mawere 2010). This idea has been seconded by Churchland (1984:73) who argues that "from the point of view of philosophy of mind, brain activity is a concrete manifestation of rationality among all human beings". Arguing from an African perspective, Ramose (1999: 44) had it that "there is no ontological defect among indigenous African people by virtue of they may be excluded from membership of homo sapiens, and therefore reasoning". From the foregoing, one can argue that it is unfair for other races to argue that philosophy started with the Milesian thinkers when in actual fact all other races have always been reasoning or philosophizing since the time they first existed.

But some critical questions can be ushered at this juncture: 'If trade is to be associated with the origin of philosophy, why did not philosophy start with the Phoenicians, Babylonians, Egyptians or any other African people given that Africa is considered the cradle of many kind? What was different about the Greeks that led to the origin of philosophy with them?' In view of the question(s) above, a clue to what happened in the Greek cities that seems to be a unique characteristic of Greek history is worth explicating: As it happens, there was something conspicuously different about the culture, the society and the livelihood of Greek cities like Miletus and Athens in comparison to the dominant forms in traditional Middle Eastern civilizations, like Egypt and Babylonia as well as in other Greeks cities, like Sparta that were never venues of Greek philosophy. In terms of politics, traditional kings in Greeks cities changed now and then. Put differently, the institution of kingship lost its traction. As Kelly Ross (2008) acknowledges, the office of *árchôn* (ruler or regent) at Athens pushed aside the authority of the king (who eventually became another elected *árchôn*). Initially, the office was filled by hereditary nobles, then by elected nobles with life tenure, then by elected nobles with ten year tenure (starting in 753), then with elected nobles by annual tenure (starting in 683), and then with the office opened (by Solon, c. 593) to qualification by wealth, rather than by noble birth. Ross (Ibid) further elaborates that after some conflict and the rule of tyrants (especially Pisistratus), overthrown in 510, Cleisthenes led Athens into essentially pure democracy. This kind of political situation had never happened before. Thus when ancient kings were overthrown, which happened often enough, they were simply replaced by other kings. This was different with other societies that were never venues of philosophy. The Phoenician cities, for example, all had traditional kings.

It is important to remark that unlike the Phoenician cities which had been engaged in commerce for centuries, and where the kings were merchants themselves, the creation of wealth by trade in the Greeks cities seems to have undermined traditional authority. Whoever entered into politics first had to become, perhaps for the first time in history, a first class personality that chafed at hereditary privilege and had the means, by bribery and hire, to marshal forces against it. Since wealth by trade could be made away from home, it was entirely outside the control of a hometown ruler. This is to say that when one returns home with a new sense of power and independence, s/he could well have lost much of his/her regard for authority by birth or hereditary privilege.

Following such a situation, it can be safely argued that for the first time in history the transformations on kingship could have been accomplished by monetary powers and not hereditary privileges.

<http://www.friesian.com/money.htm#socrates> defines money as coined a precious metal that was invented soon after 640 in the Kingdom of Lydia. This is not to say that the Lydians were Greeks. They were businessmen working closely with the adjacent Greek cities of Ionia. This scenario resulted in money facilitating the rise of Greek cities like Miletus. Given that coinage enhances the manner in which wealth can be concentrated and transferred, it undoubtedly enhanced the process of social mobility and political conflict. From a philosophical view point, such a strange political situation in Greek cities was strong enough to kick start the rapid spreading of philosophical ideas to try to resolve the emerging problems. The correlation between philosophy and the cities of commercial wealth as well as political transformation can hardly be doubted. Thus we find Greek philosophy taking roots in Ionia (today on the west coast of Turkey), in the wealthiest and most active cities of their time in Greece. The Greek philosophy circulated around the Greek colonial periphery, from Ionia (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, Heraclitus, Xenophanes), to Italy (Pythagoras, Parmenides, Zeno), Sicily (Empedocles), and the northern Aegean (Democritus, Protagoras), to Ionia for quite a number of years. As further pointed out by <http://www.friesian.com/money.htm#socrates>, philosophy migrated from every direction to Athens. As such, Athens being at the center became the wealthiest commercial power and the most famous democracy of the time dealing with all sorts of novel peoples, cultures, practices, and ideas which facilitated interpolation of philosophical ideas. The kind of democracy propagated in Athens, thus, cultivated in people a culture of philosophizing.

The kind of democracy elaborated above was unique to Athens. It therefore contrasted the ordinary situation of other societies that interacted with Greece like Phoenicia and Egypt. The contrast of Athens' democracy in Egypt for example is well explicated by the ancient Egyptians. A fine example is a text given by <http://www.friesian.com/money.htm#socrates> for scribal students in Ancient Egypt which recounts how much better the life of a scribe was to all other ways of life. This was generally referred to as the Satire of the Trades. And it goes:

*I have seen many beatings -- Set your heart on books!*

*I watched those seized for labor -- There's nothing better than books!*

Following an interpretation by Ross (2008), the 'beatings', besides the ordinary encouragement of overseers, to which scribes might not always be witness, can easily refer to the business of collecting taxes in Egypt. This was made possible given that every year, when the Nile flooded, the height of the river was read off the wall of a stairway, later called the 'nilometer', cut down into the granite of Elephantine Island at Aswan, at the natural southern boundary of Ancient Egypt. The

height of the river then could be converted into the area of the country covered by the flood that year, and the area could be converted into the estimated yield of virtually every bit of farmland. Thus, at the harvest, the tax collectors showed up to seize, since there was no money, the State's share of the harvest. Peasants, who, for one reason or another, did not have the crop to deliver, would simply be beaten up, tortured or harassed. As this happens the tax collectors' attendant scribes calmly observed and recorded the transaction and other such experiences. The reference of the text to 'those seized for labor' is probably to the ancient system of the *corvée*, by which local peasants could be pressed into labor for public works projects, like the pyramids, especially during the season of the Flood, when work in the fields would have been impossible anyway. The building of new cities and palaces in the Delta initiated by Ramesses II (c. 1290-1224), depended on drafts of the local population, many of whom were not ethnic Egyptians, for labor. This is remembered in the Bible - the Exodus - as slavery, from which the Israelites fled back to Asia.

Making a follow up of the discussion invoked by the questions raised above, one can argue that to say philosophy originated in Greece doesn't mean there was no philosophy in other regions. Only that the political situation prevailed in Greece was conducive enough to facilitate interpolation and rapid spreading of philosophical ideas.

Still on the question of originality of the Milesian thinkers, Calvendish (1964: 3) had it that "the Milesian thinkers exhibited no originality in their choice of questions nor were they original in their method of inquiry". Jonathan Barnes (1992) picks up this argument. He remarks:

*Thales was certainly not the first man to think about cosmogony since pre-philosophical myths about origin generally involve the postulation of the activities of the semianthropomorphic deities. This explains that mythologists and not the Milesian thinkers paved way for philosophical thought* (p. 12).

Tsanoff (1962) is of the same view. He cites Hesoid who in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C undertook a philosophical speculation about the origin of the divine powers. For Tsanoff, this speculation was an attempt of the mind to understand the primary agencies in the structure of nature. He further accuses Anaximander for copying Hesoid in combining mythology and naturalistic ways of thought in his first principle 'apeiron'. The 'apeiron' directly reminds us of Hesoid's chaos in his *Theogony* where the latter undertook to trace the order and succession of gods from first 'chaos', then 'Gaia' or 'earth', then 'Eros' or 'love'. Thus for Tsanoff, Calvendish and Barnes the Milesian thinkers deserve neither merit nor honor for the 'birth' of philosophical thought. On the art of writing, Bertrand Russell (1996) has accused for lying all philosophers of history who consider Anaxi-

mander as the first person to leave behind some philosophical writings. As he puts it: "The art of writing which greatly hastened both the rise of the Greek civilization and philosophy was invented in Egypt about the year 4000 B.C and in Mesopotamia not much later" (p. 25). Russell further argues that the Greeks (Milesian thinkers) borrowed the Phoenician alphabet which probably developed out of the Egyptian script, and the Greeks altered the alphabet to suit their language. Thus for Russell, it is the Egyptian and Phoenician alphabet that made the history of philosophical thought possible in form of writing.

### **An appraisal of the Milesian thinkers**

Following the preceding discussion, it is undeniable that one could say the Milesian thinkers' contributions were crude in so far as they were not absolutely detached from Greek mythology, lacked originality and therefore highly questionable. Given this, would we still give credit to the Milesian thinkers for the 'birth' and development of philosophical thought?

Surely, the above raised question is difficult to answer in a word. However, it is the contention of this paper that though a number of criticisms can be leveled against the Milesian thinkers, the latter still deserve merit in the emergence and development of the history of philosophical thought. Three reasons can be raised to support this line of thinking. First and foremost, the Milesian thinkers' philosophical contributions were not given as ex cathedra pronouncements for the faithful to believe and the godless to ignore, but as conclusions of arguments for 'reasonable men' to contemplate and debate. Their arguments were open ended to allow criticism or development by subsequent philosophers. Thus they provided the impetus for critical thinking.

More importantly, the Milesian thinkers can be accredited for being the first to speak out, criticize and attempt to explain nature on the basis of reason and not myths. This is a thing most of the people of the time, in Greece, Phoenicia, Egypt or Mesopotamia were very much afraid of doing as this was almost the same as criticizing the traditional authorities. In fact, such open pronouncements were revolutionary and so opened the door for subsequent philosophers, both in Greece and other far regions that traded with Greece. I therefore remain convinced that it will be unfair to take the merit accorded to the Milesian thinkers as the first philosophers and give it to 'philosophers' of other regions.

### **CONCLUSION**

This work has unraveled the debate on Milesian thinkers' contribution and place in the history of philosophy exposing the different dimensions that it has assumed as

it was constructed and evolved over the years. I have emphasized that arguments by either partisans on the debate on contributions and place of the Milesian thinkers in the history of philosophy were premised on rigid and narrowly focused views. Instead, I have pointed out that although the Milesian thinkers cannot be considered the sole people endowed with the powers of reasoning the world-over, they played a crucial role of inducting subsequent philosophers into the philosophy community. More importantly, I have argued that it is apparent that the question on place and contribution of the Milesian thinkers to the 'emergence' and development of philosophy is a contested notion. Its answer is too complex to be epitomized in a word as some people still hold on to arguments in favor of the Milesian thinkers' traditional position as the first philosophers ever existed and others still hold on to those of the opposite. It appears that one of the biggest stumbling blocks to solving the question on the contribution of Milesian thinkers is the rigidity and narrowness in focus by some historians of philosophy.

In this light I have argued that if either of the two strands of thought (either pro-Milesian thinkers or con-Milesian thinkers' perspective) is seriously considered and adhered to, it would lead us to a blurred picture of the contribution and place of the Milesian thinkers to the 'emergence' and development of philosophical thought; this might perpetuate a misreading of the contribution and place of the Milesian thinkers in the history of philosophy by students of philosophy and general readers. In view of this observation, I have further argued that either of the views should not be overemphasized and proclaimed to extreme, lest this would perpetuate rigidity and narrowness which are both pointers to 'intellectual or philosophical death', and a fiasco to do justice with the Milesian thinkers to the history of philosophy. Overall, this paper is an attempt to break away from rigidity and narrowness in focus to a more radical, holistic and balanced view that gives the Milesian thinkers their appropriate position and due respect they deserve for the 'birth' and development of philosophical thought the world-over.

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