The Polis Philosophers

To help with the project of gaining an understanding of the relationship and communication that occurs between the humanities and sciences, this paper will look to the natural philosophers of archaic Greece. Considerable advances in both the humanities and sciences occur during this period of Greek history, and we will defend the thesis that this is no coincidence. The Greek example shows one way in which the development of scientific thinking itself rests upon a culture’s foundation of social and political values. Key for the Greeks of this period was the importance of debate. The polis, the basic unit of community life for the Greeks of this time, serves as a forum within which debate can occur, and the Greeks were keenly interested in questions such as what particular form constitutes the ideal polis, what kind of life is happiest, and how best to judge good argumentation. These questions are, of course, the domain of the humanities. What is interesting for our purposes is how these questions lead to a revolution in scientific inquiry. With this perspective, we can move into an investigation of the earliest natural philosophers, and what role they played in the polis.

At the end of an often neglected fragment, Xenophanes laments the recognition he receives from the state, especially when compared to the honours heaped on athletes victorious at the Olympic games: “and even if he were to win with horses he would get all these, not being as worthy of them as I. For our expertise is better than the strength of
men and horses. But this practice makes no sense, nor is it right to prefer strength to this good expertise”.

The conclusion here rests on his observation that athletic victories do not enhance the administration of the polis, while his own wisdom does. The fragment continues, “neither if there were a good boxer among the people, nor if there were a pentathlete or wrestler . . . would for this reason a city [polis] be better governed”.

Xenophanes thus raises the question of how he in particular, and by extension possibly all the early philosophers, have utility to the polis. Diogenes Laertius tells us that Parmenides “served as a legislator” for Elea, and similarly Thales is thought to have had some kind of role in governing his home city. Based on this report of service, one answer to the question relies on the most direct route possible: they use their wisdom to craft good laws. But this can, at best, be only a part of an answer to the riddle posed by the fragment of Xenophanes. The mere fact of early philosophers leaving behind writing is a provocative observation in considering the social implications of their thought; it argues against understanding the importance of the early philosophers being based upon a role of active legislators within a polis.

Diogenes’ narrative is doubtable, as he is notorious for being loose with the truth of biographical details. Any account of the role of the early philosophers in polis culture that need not make use of his reports as to their personal history is thus on safer ground.

Furthermore, this preliminary interpretation cannot help us to explain the relevance of Xenophanes himself or other philosophers that do not take on a legislative function; Xenophanes is the prototypical wandering philosopher, and, not being a citizen in any of
the cities he visited, would be unable to directly participate in the political process. As he himself tells us, “already there are seven and sixty years, tossing about my counsel throughout the land of Greece” (fragment 8), and “I tossed about, bearing myself from city to city” (fragment 45). Of course Xenophanes could have fulfilled the role of advisor, in the vein of say, Protagoras advising Pericles; if Xenophanes was successful in this, one wonders at the import of our opening fragment, which indicates dissatisfaction with the respect accorded him by cities. There is no record of Xenophanes being involved in legislation in any way, and if possible it would be best not to resort to such speculation in assessing fragment 2. In any case, this line of thinking gives us no explanation of early philosophy itself having a substantive role in stabilizing or supporting polis culture, just that some legislators moonlighted as philosophers. To take the skeptic’s case further still, what are we to make of the philosophers that positively avoided public service? Heraclitus deposits his famous “book” in the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, thus making it a public document, or at least more of a public document than if he had kept it to himself (D.L. 9.5-6), but his conduct regarding the book is fascinating in part because it is combined with his unwillingness to directly engage in public life and his opinion of the understanding of others; in all probability he was dismayed by the prospects of common people ever understanding his work. While Heraclitus was unwilling to take up public duties himself, he did think enough of his work to allow it some influence in the public sphere.

In trying to understand how the “wisdom” (sophia) of these philosophers might aid the polis, Jaeger championed the claim that these early thinkers facilitated the transition in
Greek culture to a more analytical and rational perspective. On this account we might speculate that cities are benefited in various ways but specifically by the ability to enact better legislation through a more rational process of problem solving; the philosophers help bring the cities to such a rationalist position. This answer gives the philosophers the Herculean task of changing the mindset of the polis from irrational to rational, but the ability of any small group of people being able to effect such a transition is questionable. Indeed, the rise of rationalism in the polis period has been referred to as the Greek miracle, and this because it was thought that such a change is unexplainable. More recent work has revealed the foundational importance of debate to the polis from the very beginning, signaling an inherent amenability to good argumentation. On the methodological front it is not so much the case that early philosophers effect the transition themselves, but rather that they participate in the unfolding of the inherently discursive nature of the polis. More germane to our point, this methodological response ignores the actual content of the philosophy being put forward, praising how it says things but not what is actually said. What is desired for a fuller understanding of the role of early philosophers is an interpretation that can explain their role by referring to the actual content of the philosophy.

The immediate problem faced by anyone looking to delve into the relevance of these philosophers to the polis lies in their fascination with nature. A predilection for cosmology seems a long way off from being relevant to that most human and artificial of constructs, the polis. However, the polis presents its own unique set of demands in being understood, especially when we turn to its discursive nature. The need for a theoretical
grounding of the system itself exists in any political association constructed upon open
debate in a way not present in authoritarian contexts. One identifying marker of polis
culture is the extent to which it directs itself at the question of which constitution is best,
and the basic options range from full-fledged democracy through various broadly-based
and limited oligarchies down to the tyranny of one. Such a debate is unheard of outside
of the argumentative confines of the polis; in well established authoritarian cultures the
rule of many does not warrant serious contemplation. What makes the debate different
within the polis is the real possibility of a change in political structure, should the results
of the debate warrant it. The history of Athenian tinkering with its own constitutional
structure bears this out, as does the sheer variety of constitutions present within the polis
system. That being said, the reality of the polis as itself constituting a forum within
which meaningful discourse can take place presents real limits to the extent to which the
constitutional debate can be taken. Should the polis decide to embrace monarchical rule,
it would no longer be a polis. There is an inherent tension, then, between the need to be
able to have the argument concerning which constitution is best, and the need to preserve
the debating forum as an arena within which relatively balanced interests can compete
and debate with each other. If the system loses the balance of power, then the political
structure collapses into some form of authoritarianism, and the meaningfulness of the
debate is lost. For the forum itself to persevere, it needs an analysis within the debate that
persuasively grounds the system as an interactive process between competing but
balanced concerns.
It is into this gap that the early philosophers and their cosmological interests can be fitted. The philosophers’ investigation of the cosmos will reveal the “natural” foundations of the polis. The debate that goes on between philosophers concerning the fundamental constitution of the universe reprises the constitutional debate of the polis on a grander scale, and we can find different philosophers to champion either monistic or pluralistic views of nature. At stake is an argument that shows either harmony or dissonance between polis and universe, thus providing powerful theoretical ammunition in the debate over what governmental form the polis should adopt. The Greeks take naturalistic arguments quite seriously; the “is/ought fallacy” is a modern phenomenon virtually unknown to the polis period. If the philosophers in their investigations uniformly conclude that the natural world is a hierarchy with one dominant member or element obviously holding a position of primacy and control, citizens would be forced to recognize the dissonance between the structure of society and the structure of reality. Conversely, the inverse conclusion also holds. Should the philosophers return a verdict of pluralism, the argumentative character of the polis would be vindicated on naturalistic grounds. Armed with a view of nature that shows it to be a context in which various elements compete but never overwhelm each other, Greeks could look to the polis as the natural instantiation of this reality in the realm of human interaction. For a Greek of the period, the polis would have been the most natural of human societies possible (as opposed to the tyrannical regimes in the surrounding Mediterranean), and here we understand ‘natural’ to be taken in its most literal sense. This provides the polis with a strong justification of its own existence, and we see the rise of a natural law-type of argument that works to preserve the polis as a forum of competition and can allow for
fluidity in the balance of power without total collapse. The import of this endeavour
should not be understated: these philosophers help to stabilize the polis by grounding its
ideological axioms in nature.

As mentioned, the cosmological version of this debate reflects that taking place at the
more human level, and, unsurprisingly, we do find some early philosophers endorsing a
hierarchical model of the cosmos. Thus Thales famously posits water as a “first
principle” and Anaximenes air.\textsuperscript{12} It is interesting that both of these models occur at the
very earliest phase of natural philosophy, and that we know the least about them. It is
therefore unclear just how hierarchical either of these natural systems are, and caution is
required is assessing their place in this analysis of the early cosmologies. Regardless, this
position is delivered a crushing blow by the argumentation of Anaximander, whose own
model of a plurality of elements presents an opposing model of fluid structure that will
not collapse into uniformity.\textsuperscript{13} As quoted by Simplicius, providing a gloss on
Anaximander’s thought: “for they [the elements] give penalty (\textit{dike}) and recompense to
one another for their injustice (\textit{adikia}) in accordance with the order of time—speaking of
them in rather poetical terms. It is clear that having seen the change of the four elements
into each other, he did not think it fit to make some one of these underlying things
primary”.\textsuperscript{14} In explaining Anaximander’s reasoning, Aristotle tells us that if one of the
elements were primary, then it would destroy the others, or at least that the others would
have been completely converted into it by now (recognizing, as Anaximander does, that
the elements do change into each other). But of course we now observe all the different
elements, and therefore no one of them is primary.\textsuperscript{15}
With this move the understanding of the universe as a changing array of elements comes to the fore. Xenophanes also engages in natural philosophy, and he is rigorous in his application of a theory of elements to the explication of physical phenomena. He seems to base his system on only two elements, earth and water, and from them and their mixtures is able to generate all other natural phenomena. Thus clouds and wind are formed out of the sea, rain falls from the clouds, rivers form, and flow back into the sea (fragment 30). We have further reports that Xenophanes thought there would come a time “when the land sinks into the sea and becomes mud, at which time generation begins again,” and so the elements are locked in a continuous cycle of growth and diminution, a narrative that is to be found in outline in virtually all of the remaining earliest philosophers. Here we can give but a brief survey of the other philosophers, but it will suffice to provide a view of the general trend. Empedocles gives an account of the four cardinal elements (earth, fire, air, water) plus the forces of love and strife. These elements and forces are continuously at play: “in this respect they come to be and have no constant life; but insofar as they never cease from constantly interchanging, in this respect they are always unchanged in a cycle”. It is true that Heraclitus prioritizes fire, but that is because fire is change par excellence; Heraclitus will not allow for static elements of any kind within his system. He does, however, stress the importance of a balance that is created between opposing forces: “what opposes unites: the finest attunement stems from things bearing in opposite directions, and all things come about by strife,” and “they do not understand how, while being at variance, it is in agreement with itself. There is a back-turning connection, like that of a bow or a lyre”. Aristotle gives us a list of ten opposites that the Pythagoreans believed were somehow constitutive of the
world, beginning with limited/unlimited. Apparently it was the interaction of this pair that creates the reality of the elemental numbers constituting the world. The Atomists provide perhaps the most radically pluralistic universe of them all, going so far as to say that “the eternal existents consist in minute substances, infinite in number”. Most distressing is the apparent loss of concern for the whole in this system: a full account of the atoms is enough to explain the universe, and the void, within which atoms combine and interact, is given the troubling status of “non-existent”. Furthermore, “no plurality, Leucippus said, could arise from what is truly multiple”. It seems that for the Atomists, the problem of the one and the many is solved by disavowing any ontological status to the one. Even Parmenides, the great monist of the early philosophical tradition, finds it fitting to combine his “Way of Truth” with a much longer “Way of Seeming”, in which a cosmology of elements presents itself: “But since all things have been named light and night, and these have been applied according to their powers to these things and to those, all is full of light and obscure night together”. In describing the universe that we live in, Parmenides fits squarely within the polis-validating tradition, and, close to the beginning of the Way of Truth, even has this to say about the Way of Seeming: “But nevertheless you shall learn these things as well, how the things which seem had to have genuine existence, permeating all things completely”. While these thinkers express great variety in their thought, the uniformity of this elemental aspect to their natural philosophies deserves emphasis. Returning to our original fragment, we can broaden the discussion to conclude that the early philosophers and their wisdom are a boon to government because they show just how legitimate traditional polis governance is; by extension, they highlight the need to protect and preserve the fundamentals of the system. Indeed it is for this
reason that they deserve to be called the Polis Philosophers, as their work serves the purpose of helping to stabilize the polis as an established form of social organization. So far we have explained early philosophy as providing the groundwork of the polis, but of course, the process is operating in the other direction as well. In other words, it is no surprise that philosophers who are products of the polis in their thinking should find a reflection of the polis in nature; they are far from providing an unbiased and “scientific” examination of the universe. If, as is being argued here, the project of natural philosophy gets its impetus from an interest in providing the social world with a persuasive justification for its own makeup, then the criteria for acceptable results on the part of the polis philosophers are already well established. But we should not be too hard on this projection of political realities onto nature, for while it does circumscribe how the cosmos is to be understood, it also liberates the Greek mind from the more usual Mediterranean ways of thinking. The polis philosophers tell us that, when dealing with the interaction between arts and sciences, as often as not there is an underlying harmony of perspective that drives both worlds. Hence the advent of natural inquiry goes hand in hand with the rise of a culture of rhetoric and persuasion, and indeed supports that culture by validating its ground rules.

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Xenophanes, frag. 2. All translations and fragment numberings from J. H. Lesher, *Xenophanes of Colophon: fragments: a text and translation with a commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992). For a concordance with other numbering systems of the fragments, see Lesher, 10. Lesher calls fragment 2 a “famous comment” on the glory given to Olympic victors, and this is fair, given the attention it has received in scholarly literature as a remarkable example of a Greek thinker questioning the value of athletic festivals. That being said, the fragment fails to appear in most modern collections of the earliest Greek philosophers. Thus Robin Waterfield ed, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and the Sophists* (New York: Oxford University Press, Oxford World’s Classics Edition, 2000); Patricia Curd Hackett, etc. The choice to leave out fragment 2 (and fragment 1, for that matter) shows the continuing influence of the interpretation of these early philosophers as primarily physicists, and so their social observations are pushed into the background; on this interpretive stance, see below.

2 Diogenes Laertius (hereafter D.L.), 9.23.

3 Specifically, we can question Diogenes’ willingness to give a legislative role to various early philosophers. Since the place and use of the earliest philosophers’ cosmological wonderings is not immediately clear, giving these men in positions of power provides some basis for remembering their work: it is part and parcel of their being as good rulers. But this line misses giving import to the philosophy itself.

4 See also Diogenes Laertius 9.2.

5 Although on this point we again run into the problem of accepting the veracity of Diogenes’ biography. Here though Diogenes mentions nothing about public service, and it is difficult to see what ulterior motive of Diogenes the anecdote serves. Heraclitus’ low opinion of the intelligence of common people is a theme he returns to again and again; see T. M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: fragments* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), fragments 1, 2, 5, 15, 17, 19, 29, 34 (In ordering the fragments, Robinson follows Diels-Kranz); for his reticence over serving in office, see D.L. 9.3. Heraclitus’ obvious elitism complicates the matter of his willingness to be of any use to the polis, instead possibly wanting his work to remain in the private hands of a select few. Regardless, his work and thought enters the public domain and becomes part of the intellectual background to the polis. As such, it is worthwhile questioning if and how the thought of Heraclitus is of use to the polis.
6 As Lesher puts it, “which aspects of Xenophanes’ teachings would have been especially conducive to good government?” (57).


8 For the Greek miracle, see John Burnet, Early Greek Philosophy (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1920).

9 Most importantly, see Jean-Pierre Vernant, The Origins of Greek Thought Trans. J. Lloyd (Ithaca, 1982).

10 For a summary of recent attempts at explaining Xenophanes’ specific intentions with fragment 2, see Lesher, 57.

11 Witness the robustness of virtue ethics in the period, with its reliance on the premise that it is good for a natural capacity to be brought to fruition. Furthermore see the almost traumatic worry over the artificialness of the polis that is expressed in the physis/nomos debate. While Antiphon postdates the early philosophers, he sums up the reasoning of the position most bluntly in On Truth: “For the laws’ demands are externally imposed, but those of nature are essential . . . for what is natural is life and death” (Diels-Kranz 87b44a). Conformity with nature carries its own prescriptive weight then, if survival is to count as a desirable end.

12 Diels-Kranz 11A12 and 13A5 respectively, although witness that Anaximenes cannot restrain himself from adding the forces of “rarefaction and condensation” to the explanation.

13 Vernant, 119-27, gives a fuller analysis of Anaximander along these lines.

14 Simplicius, Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics 24, lines 13ff.=12A9 and B1.

15 Aristotle, Physics 204b13-19, 22.

16 What then are we to make of Anaximander’s prioritizing the boundless (apeiron)? It is important to realize that the boundless is marked off as no element itself, but different in kind. Carrying on with our comparison between the natural and political spheres, the boundless comes to resemble the polis itself, which houses the debate that occurs between its constituents. Here we might argue for a cultural stimulus to the “Problem of the One and the Many” concurrent with an interest in nature that was to become so popular in Greek philosophy as well. Pursuing this question is desirable from a political perspective because understanding in general terms the relationship between the one and the many would give citizens a greater understanding of their own relationship (as the many) to the city (the one).
17 Thus fragments 29, “All things which come into being and grow are earth and water,” and fragment 33, “For we all come into being from earth and water.”

18 Hippolytus Refutation of All Heresies 1.14.


20 Fragments 8 & 51, respectively.


22 From Simplicius, Commentary on Aristotle’s ‘On the Heavens ’, 294.33 (Diels-Kranz 68a37).


25 Fragment 1, lines 31-32.