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ANCIENT TRADITION CONCERNING THE PRE-SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHY

The traditional picture of the origins of the Greek philosophy is the following¹: philosophy came into existence as a purely theoretical study of nature; as a search for the explanation of unusual, amazing phenomena terrifying ordinary people; as a setting forth hypotheses over the origin and the structure of the cosmos; after all, as a seeking of the *archai* of all things, i. e. their substance or *nature*. The history of the Pre-Socratic philosophy is therefore being set up by the representatives of this type of speculations: the thinkers of the Milesian school, the Pythagoreans, Heraclitus, the Eleatic monists, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Democritus. Their own place here have also the methodological considerations of Parmenides – represented often as the first shape of ontology, the theoretical science of the Being², whereas the ethical problems are nearly completely lacking. The few enigmatic sentences of Heraclitus and the parenthetical output of Democritus, decidedly isolated from his theoretical thought, do play a secondary role in the such interpreted Pre-Socratic philosophy. It is difficult to show the place of the sophistic movement in the history of the Greek philosophy with such an idea of the latter, because it has to appear either as a revolution or a phenomenon from outside the philosophy.

This traditional picture of the Pre-Socratic philosophy has got evidently its advantages, among others the most important one for the majority of the historians of ideas: it enables putting some schema on the living, miscellaneous thought and to represent it by means of theoretical terms. Unfortunately, this schema is arbitrary, counterfeit and inconsequent. Let's explain it.

It is something arbitrary to see the beginning of a philosophy in the natural views of the Milesians; to identify the essence of the Pre-Socratic philosophy with its purely theoretical character; to detach philosophical views from the non-philosophical ones basing on the criterion of the *rationality*; to

¹ This picture was notable formed by an excellent work of E. Zeller, *Die Philosophie der Griechen in ihrer geschichtlichen Entwicklung*, Tübingen 1846. Repeatedly reedited and translated: E. Zeller, R. Mondolfo, *La filosofia dei Greci nel suo sviluppo storico*, t. 1, Florence 1932 it got at least a popular summary.

² Cf. G. Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica*, t. 1, [6 ed.] Milano 1989. Reale doesn't hesitate to use the term *Being* in his translation of fragments DK 28 B 2 and DK 28 B 6; Zeller suggested that Parmenides had had the concept of the *full* in mind.

see the history of the Pre-Socratic thought wholly as a continuation or even a progress.

It is something sham to isolate the Greek poetry from the prose and eventually to restrict the problems of the early philosophy to the *physics*. Then and only then does the sophistic movement appear as a revolution in the Greek philosophy. Instead, if we glance at the latter as a continuator of the Greek educational poetry – which since the time of Archelaus had been occupied with the problems of a man (politics, religion, morality) – we will obtain the more coherent picture of the Greek philosophical thought before Plato. Such an interpretation L. Robin had already suggested¹ and W. Jaeger has outlined in his work on a Greek *paideia*. The reflection on the world of nature is parallel to the reflection on the world of man in such a picture. They differ only in form and in the attitude of the thinkers. Let's notice that this methodological separateness was obvious to Aristotle: he had distinguished practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) from the theoretical one (*sophia*) and yet philosophy was for him a unity.

Finally, it is something inconsequent to incorporate the prophetic dictums of Heraclitus, the poetry of Xenophanes, Parmenides or Empedocles in the frame of the Pre-Socratic philosophy, and in the same time to refuse the name *philosophers* to the poets like Semonides, Solon, Theognis, Pindar, or tragedians like Euripides. Plato, let's notice, was at heart (the number of references in the dialogues gives evidence for this) a heir of the educational poetry rather than a heir of the philosophy of nature.

Undoubtedly, responsible for the traditional vision of the origins of philosophy – the vision in which philosophy is defined as a pure theory and in which one attempts to demarcate the pre-philosophical views from the philosophy *sensu stricto* – is Aristotle. It was he, first in the *Physics* and then in the *Metaphysics*, who described the views of the ancient *physikoi* concerning causes and principles, adding that Thales had been the initiator of such a philosophy (*sophia*) and preceding this by some remarks about the nature of philosophy as a theoretical knowledge². There was no prior text which would treat of the Pre-Socratic thought in the historical frame³ and all of the later ones have been written either under the direct influence of Aristotle's views⁴ or under the influence of the hellenistic canon of presenting the history of philosophy as the history of schools⁵. Thus the authority of Aristotle framed our picture of the history of the Pre-Socratic philosophy. But we must make it clear that it is not Aristotle's fault that used to present the history of the Pre-Socratic philosophy in a very false and inconsistent scheme because he himself never speaks as a historian of philosophy. Our idea of the history of philosophy would be quite unfamiliar to him. Let's explain it.

¹ Cf. L. Robin, *La pensée grecque*, Paris 1923.

² Cf. *Phys.* I, 2–4; *Met.* A, 2–5.

³ Plato in the *Sophist* (244 b sq.) had presented the views of the Eleatics, the philosophers of the nature and the *friends of the Ideas* as an untransitory polemics of opinions.

⁴ It refers to the work of Theophrastus and the works of others Peripatetics.

⁵ Its author was probably Sotion of Alexandria who wrote the *Succesions of philosophers* (ca. 200–170 B. C.).

When Aristotle is speaking about the views of his predecessors he treats it merely as an examination of the ancient opinions (*doxai*) whose aim is to find the truth in some field of philosophy. He is not anxious about rendering loyally else's thought or putting it in a historical context. Aristotle recalls the earlier views as he is guided by the logic of the just delivered lecture. In the *Metaphysics A* and in the first book of the *Physics* the aim of the discourse is to distinguish the ultimate causes of all things and it is this aim which delimits the structure of the discourse. So it is important to Aristotle to show that none of his predecessors has come to the conception of four causes and at the same time none has indicated the cause other than one of these four. This is therefore not the history of philosophy but an introduction to Aristotle's own conception concerning some field of the theoretical knowledge. Aristotle thinks about himself as a seeker of the truth; the historians of philosophy are we, and we ought to put the proper construction on the views of the Pre-Socratic thinkers and to assume a critical attitude towards ancient information about them.

Let's look at the ancient testimonies concerning the Pre-Socratic thinkers. They don't compose a homogenous tradition and it is a result of different functions the testimonies have to perform. Some of them present a picture of the earliest philosophy different to the modern one and at least because of this they are noteworthy.

The ancient picture of the earliest Greek philosophy had been formed during dozens of years on which the lives of the three generations from Plato to the immediate disciples of Aristotle were extended¹. This tradition was developed in two main forms, both being later on united in the hellenistic tradition.

We have in the first place the doxographical literature treating of the views of particular thinkers concerning given questions, i. e. we have collections of some opinions about the ultimate principles, the structure of the cosmos, the causes of the eclipse of the Sun and the Moon and the flows of the Nile, and other phenomena arousing the philosophical curiosity. This tradition was developing in the school of Aristotle, where the materials needed for such a *history of problems* had been collected; and the work most representative for it was Theophrastus' *Opinions of the Physicists* [*Physikôn doxai*] in 16 books. The doxographical literature treats of the history of physics, geometry, astronomy, theology, i. e. of the theoretical sciences in Aristotle's understanding of the term. Yet probably there was no such work treating of the history of the Pre-Socratic ethics, although the material for it had existed as it appears from the contents of Aristotle's ethical works. As a consequence of it there is no place for the moral philosophy before the sophists in our picture of the Greek philosophy. In the doxographical tradition earlier thinkers only as representatives of some opinions from behind which we can't see their faces and lives: *They are not all agreed about the number and the nature of the principles.* – says Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* – *Thales, the originator of such a kind of a*

¹ Cf. W. Jaeger, *On the Origin and Cycle of the Philosophic Ideal of Life in: Aristotle. Fundamental of the History of His Development*, Oxford 1948, t. 2, pp. 426–461.

*philosophy, said that the water was the principle (...). Anaximenes and Diogenes admitted that the air was earlier than the water (...) Hippasus of Metapontion and Heraclitus of Ephes recognized the fire as such an element; finally, Empedocles accepted four elements (...). Whereas Anaxagoras said that the principles were infinite in number (...)*¹.

We can see the authentic passion of the scientist in this, which later in the hellenistic school-books would unfortunately change in an amateurish hobby not animated by any passionate searching for truth but only by an insatiable craving for completing the collection. For Aristotle the doxography was an integral part of his philosophical lectures; for the hellenistic authors of the histories of schools it would be something like a wide commercial offer.

It was this tradition which influenced most of the modern picture of the earliest Greek thought. Our school-books are written after the fashion of the doxographical literature. Their authors just copy Aristotle's scheme and transfer it onto the field of the history of philosophy: they set a sharp ceasure isolating philosophy from mythology², assemble early thinkers in some *schools* or trends minimizing differences between their views, commit flagrant anachronisms presenting their opinions in a subject-manner (i. e. physics, logic, ethics and the like)³. One can find in it also an influence of the hellenistic tradition represented by Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Of course it is not the gossipy-anecdotic character of this work that has had an effect on modern scholars but its method of presenting the history of thought as a history of sucesions⁴. This scheme defined the structure of the *Lives* in an overwhelming manner and has been repeated in modern studies.

The hellenistic schoolbooks combined however two earlier traditions: the just mentioned doxographical one, and the other – biographical. Let's come to the second. It was even elder than the doxographical one as it was born in the Academy. And it was Plato himself who was the originator of it as an author of the Socratic dialogues, in which he had presented the man who was the embodiment of some ideal. In the biographical tradition the stories about the earliest philosophers assumed in it the form of anecdotes and apophthegms. Thales, Pythagoras, Heraclitus or Anaxagoras were represented not as proclaimers of some views – which collected together were producing a topography of given problems – but as representatives of the model of philosophical life. But like in the case of the doxographical one, the biographical tradition can't serve as a base for writing the history of philosophy. The biographies of all of the Pre-Socratics are similar, present a typical characteristic of a philosopher, but we can recognize at first sight the same inconsistency in them all. Regarding Thales (and in the same degree it refers to other earlier

¹ *Met.* 983 b 21 – 984 a 14.

² Even Aristotle wasn't sure about this ceasure; cf. *Met.* 983 b 28 sq.

³ Such a fashion was popularized by the Peripatetics.

⁴ *Didochai philosophon* – such was a Greek title of the book of Sotion of Alexandria which Diogenes' work was based on. On this subject see J. Mejer, *Diogenes Laertius and His Hellenistic Background* in: *Hermes Einzelschriften* 40, Wiesbaden 1978; J. Glucker, *Antiochus and the Late Academy* in: *Hypomnemata* 56, Göttingen 1986.

thinkers) we have testimonies impossible to square¹. Some of them represent him as a sage completely free from worldly matters, contemplating the divine regions of reality and overlooking prosaic obstacles such as holes on the road. Others praise his political wisdom, engineer's talent and a competence for increasing money thanks to his practical knowledge. The testimonies are also inconsistent as regards Thales' private life: his attitude towards marriage and to having children. We read that the adages credited to him were also uttered by other philosophers and the amusing variety of the famous anecdote about a cup which was the price for the wisest man proves that the theme was a favourite subject of paraphrases. We can gather then that the anecdotal tradition joined two different pictures of the sage: the elder, popular one, arising from people's amazement at such an unpractical life, and the younger, philosophical, whose aim was to introduce the ideal of *bios philosophikos* in its pure form.

The originator of this ideal of philosophical life was Plato and it was with him that the biographical tradition came into being. Not, of course, that some of them couldn't really lead such a life; but Plato was the first one to make a biography an instrument of an exhortation to philosophical life and incorporate it in the structure of a philosophical discourse. It was under his influence that all the stories about the earliest thinkers, portraying them as consciously realizing this ideal, came into being. It is from Plato's *Theaetetus* that we know the story about Thales who, fixed on the stars, falls into a hole². A purely dramatic manoeuvre was the introduction of the Thracian servant-girl to this story. It had a didactic aim because it had to emphasise the contrast between earthly minded life and this amazing, inconceivable for ordinary people, *bios theôretikos*³. It was Heraclides of Pontus – Plato's disciple and a member of the Academy – who was the author of the legend basing on the double meaning of the word *theôrein*⁴, according to which Pythagoras as the first had compared the philosophers with the audience of the Olympic games⁵. Anecdotes about Anaxagoras who called heaven his country and who accepted the death of his sons like a scientist accepts the natural laws⁶, or about Democritus who spent the whole fortune on his travels to Egypt and the Chaldees, and who could meditate so intensively that once he didn't see the herds of cattle devour his crops⁷, were in all probability also originated in the Academy or in the Lyceum. Philip of Opus, the likely author of the pseudo-Platonic dia-

¹ Cf. Diog. Laert. I, 22–37.

² *Theaet.* 174 a.

³ Thracian servant-girl was for the Greeks an embodiment of the complete lack of culture. Hence the gossip about Antisthenes' mother.

⁴ *Theorein* originally referred to the participation in the holy spectacles telling about the lives of the Gods. Later its meaning was also the *scientific research*. Cf. K. Albert, *Über Platons Begriff der Philosophie*, Sankt Augustin 1989.

⁵ Diog. Laert. I, 12.

⁶ Diog. Laert. II, 7 and 13.

⁷ Diog. Laert. IX, 36; DK 68 A 15.

logue *Epinomis*, has credited the theoretical way of life even to the Egyptian priests and to the astrologers of the Chaldees, and Aristotle himself seemed to follow his footsteps¹.

It is possible indeed that Anaxagoras or Democritus could lead such a way of life, but there are no indications that it had been announced as a philosophical ideal before Plato. Whereas from Plato on the philosophy has been unalterably presented as a very special way of life. Being a philosopher became an alternative to being a man in a common manner. After Plato it became a standard and has gone so far that one would need no writings to be seen as a philosopher. The hellenistic authors did not hesitate at all to endow the title of a philosopher to such figures as Diogenes the Cynic or Aristippus, having almost no account of the sophists. We know that Diogenes wrote nothing and that Aristippus was probably an author of the work on the base of which the anecdotal tradition represented in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives* has grown – a tradition describing Aristippus' way of life and not his views². Beyond doubt it was Socrates from the *sokratikoi logoi* who had created the precedent for such an understanding of philosophy, and there's no doubt that it was Plato who had been of the most importance in the creation of this model. Plato was the first one to raise the Socratic dialogue on the philosophical level³. And because the ideal of philosophical life was itself changing, the biographical tradition has changed too. That is why the contradictions in the account of the early thinkers appear. The pupils of Plato and Aristotle: Heraclides of Pontus, Aristoxenus or Dicaearchus of Messene were writing the *Lives* of the earlier thinkers in which they fashioned the oral tradition to serve their aims. The latter for example has stressed strongly the political and the legislative activity of the Pre-Socratic thinkers like Anaximander, Parmenides, Zeno, Melissus and, first of all, Pythagoras⁴. The reports on Pythagoras in particular reveal the original inconsistency of the biographical tradition⁵. Pythagoras was represented either as a mathematician and philosopher, whom some pupils of Plato, developing an ontological mathematics, wanted to see as their master, or as a religious prophet preaching an ascetic ideal of life and some rigorous diet, or – like precisely in Dicaearchus – as a statesman and a sage perfectly joining the theoretical *sophia* and the practical *phronêsis*. The later *Lives* of Pythagoras, written by the Neoplatonists, have just mixed these pictures.

According to the biographical tradition philosophy is an attitude and a

¹ Cf. *Epinomis* 986 e; *Metaphysics* 981 b 23.

² Cf. Diog. Laert. II, 83–84. The hellenistic authors didn't even agree that Aristippus had written anything at all.

³ On the special role of Plato's works among the *sokratikoi logoi*, cf. Ch. H. Kahn, *Plato and the Socratic Dialogue*, Cambridge 1996.

⁴ Cf. Diog. Laert. I, 40.

⁵ I speak about the tradition concerning Pythagoras himself; a separate question is the problem of the early Pythagorean philosophy – this tradition W. Burkert has followed, cf. *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, transl. E. L. Minar, Cambridge 1972.

way of life¹. Most typical is the story about a conversion of Polemon, the scholar of the Academy in 314–276 B. C. As Diogenes Laertius said, he was a rake and a reveller in his young days². He kept money hidden in different places in the city to have a pay for prostitutes. Once, provoked by drunk companions, he broke noisily with a wreath on his head into the Academy when Xenocrates was lecturing on the moderation. Xenocrates didn't lose countenance and went on with his lecture, and Polemon began to listen to him intensely and thereafter has devoted himself completely to philosophy, so that after the death of Xenocrates he has taken his place as a headmaster of the Academy. The similarity of the story to the last scene of Plato's *Symposium* make us suspect in it a production of educational literature. Most of such stories concerning the Socratics, Plato, Aristotle or the hellenistic philosophers, originated in order to trope to philosophy.

From the ancient conception of philosophy as a way of life – the life characterized by the unity of the theoretical *sophia* and the practical *phronêsis* – it appears that we can incorporate the moral reflection of the Greek poetry in the frame of the Pre-Socratic philosophy as well as the early study of nature. However, it wasn't yet *philosophy* in the strict sense; neither was the early study of nature. It was only the unity of them both that in the antiquity was called the *philosophia*; and it was a creation of Plato³. From such an understanding of philosophy in the antiquity the variety of philosophical literature got its beginning: protreptics, biographies, anecdotes, diathrybes, apophthegms, memoirs, letters, poems, dialogues, summaries, doxographies, isagogies, dictionaries, treatises, commentaries. The literary form was dependent on the end, each genre had its own function. Hence the form allowing the inference about the aims of the author – the fact that Plato has never abandoned the dialogue form is significant and important for the understanding of his work. Exhortation, popularization, advising or propaedeutics, were elements of ancient philosophy as important as a theoretical exposition. The philosophy was not wholly identified with the latter as it is today.

There's a strict connection between poetry and philosophy with such an understanding of the latter allowing to speak of a continuation. We can see on the occasion that Plato refers more often to the poets than to the philosophers of nature in his dialogues. Whereas Aristotle, whilst being occupied in educational problems, appeals to the ancient sages and poets, and investigates their opinions in the same manner as he carries on his investigations in the field of the theoretical sciences: physics, metaphysic and mathematics. Ancient views are treated by him as primitive, indistinct speculations which have obtained its lucidity and explicitness in the philosophy of Aristotle. He also considers the cognitive value of poetry and tragedy asserting that poetry is

¹ It isn't by accident that the stories about a conversion to Christianity resemble these ancient anecdotes about philosophers – in the first centuries being a Christian was an alternative to being a philosopher.

² Diog. Laert. IV, 16.

³ There's no evidence that the word *philosophy* had had the sense other than the *culture* before Plato. In the latter sense we see it in Herodotus, Thucydides and Isocrates; cf. W. Burkert, *Platon oder Pythagoras? Zum Ursprung des Wortes «Philosophie»* in: *Hermes* 88, 1960, pp. 159–177.

more philosophical than history¹: the poets speak of what is universal, i. e. what is probable or necessary. As opposed to poetry, in case of philosophy we deal with something radically new only in the sense, that it is the first time for an attitude (viz. in the dialogues of Plato) to be presented as the most noble alternative, value of which was founded on the objective and cognitive Beauty. As much the philosophy opposed earlier ideals and on this plane it contended with the traditional poetry (and with the new-fashioned sophistic).

The philosophy of the fourth century B. C. therefore was at heart a successor and a continuator (reformer) of the educational poetry at least as much as it was at heart a successor of the Pre-Socratic physics. It united the formerly separate theoretical inquiries of the physicists and educational efforts of the poets. Besides, some of the ancient authors, directly credited Plato with this contribution asserting that he had united the diffuse and divided philosophy in the whole, joining sciences which had been cultivated separately². Diogenes Laertius said that in Plato philosophy had achieved its excellence and the climax³. Our modern understanding of philosophy – which makes us accept the thesis about the pure theoretical character of philosophy as such – doesn't permit us to accept that there was a moral reflection in the Pre-Socratic times, in which the argumentation had a form of an exhortation to the good life. Whereas this moral reflection of sages and poets was consistent with Aristotle's conception of the *phronêsis* – the philosophical knowledge which allows doing the right thing.

One can write the history of philosophy from different points of view. One can accept the modern criterion of philosophy to distinguish the philosophical opinions from the non-philosophical ones. And only with such an approach can one discover the underestimated thinkers, the precursors of some modern scientific theories, or reveal the substance of the ancient views which can be intelligible for a modern reader. Yet such an approach has always its limitations. The Greco-Latin civilization worked out the meaning of philosophy different from ours – the one in which philosophy was understood as an excellent type of life. I don't suggest that it is the right understanding of philosophy as such, or that scholars who write the history of thought should understand the ancient philosophy in such a manner. But if we take this embrace into account we will understand better the specific form of the ancient philosophy, and then, maybe, the values will reveal to us what we have forgotten or what we haven't had the idea of at all⁴.

¹ Cf. *Poet.* 1451 b.

² Cf. K. Gaiser, *Philodems Academica. Die Berichte über Platon und die Alte Akademie in zwei herkulanensischen Papyri*, Stuttgart 1988, p. 325.

³ *Diog. Laert.* III, 56.

⁴ Maybe we will learn at least to read the dialogues of Plato not as though they were unsuccessful or disguised treatises.