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Pre-Platonic Science

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Abstract

Friedrich Nietzsche is one of the most influential nineteenth-century figures in Western philosophy. Adjectives such as scientific or objective do not usually come to mind when describing Nietzsche, as he frequently targets Platonic or purely logical philosophy as self-contradictory. However, Nietzsche's initial academic work as a classical philologist was centered on the pre-Socratic philosophers (which he refers to as pre-Platonic), a group who primarily studied metaphysics and natural science. This summer, we focused on three of these philosophers, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Anaxagoras, and charted how their surviving fragments connect to Nietzsche's own studies. Our goal was to shed light on the importance of science to the so-called unscientific philosopher and to provide a basis for how some of his ideas came to fruition.

Introduction

While known as one of the most important philosophers of the last few centuries, Friedrich Nietzsche actually started out as a philologist, and was hired as a professor at the University of Basel at a young age before even completing his dissertation. It was here that he first started giving a lecture on earlier Greek philosophers. A rising star, he was banished from the academic world when, instead of coming out with his first book on the pre-Platonics *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, he published his first book *The Birth of Tragedy*. Bucking the trend of the serious, scientific culture of his academic world, his professional life was ruined, but his philosophical legacy was only getting started. That said, it is certainly not the case that Nietzsche ignored his previous studies. He makes specific references to the pre-Platonics throughout his work, from using Heraclitus to explain the intersection of tragedy and music in *The Birth of Tragedy* to contrasting the ideas of both Heraclitus and Parmenides in relation to the senses in one of his later works *Twilight of the Idols*. Furthermore, many of Nietzsche's core ideas: from will to power, the eternal return of the same, and gay science can all be traced to his ideas about the pre-Platonics. Finally, his own interpretation of them gives a student of his a hint in how one should analyze Nietzsche's conception of the world and how it should relate to ethics.

The Pre-Platonics

Generally, the ancient Greek philosophers are known as the pre-Socratics; that is, as the group of philosophers that came before Socrates. However, Nietzsche refers to them instead as the pre-Platonics, as he wants to separate Socrates and Plato and include the former in the group. He separates them this way by identifying the pre-Platonics as philosophers of a 'single type, the three main being Pythagoras the religious reformer, Heraclitus the searcher for truth, and Socrates the investigator of all things.

The idea of a 'single type' also points to the metaphysical conception of the whole. The pre-Platonics are generally known as natural scientists as they are concerned with describing how the world works. Specifically, they want to identify the essential oneness of the world: whether that is Thales' water, Heraclitus' fire and becoming, or the Anaxagorean chaos.

The large unifying idea we found over the summer was that, while the above is certainly true, each pre-Platonic metaphysical conception leads to ethical implications as well. Not only is this interesting in its own right, but it also points to how one should analyze Nietzsche's own philosophy.

Parmenides

Metaphysics: 'And it is all one to me. Where I am to begin; for I shall return there again' (Fragment 5).
'For never shall this prevail, the things that are not *are*' (Fragment 7).

Nietzsche's Analysis: The cardinal idea was that only Being is: Not-Being cannot *be*. It is the greatest error to speak of a Being of Not-Being...Becoming belongs in the realm of *deceptions*. (PPP 84-86)

Relation to his Thought: [Parmenides] rejected the testimony of the senses because they showed multiplicity and change...(but) the 'apparent' world is the only one: the 'true' world is merely added by a lie. (TI, 'Reason' in Philosophy, 2)

The question in each and every thing, 'Do you desire this once more and innumerable times more?' would lie upon your actions as the greatest weight. Or how well disposed would you have to become to yourself and to life *to crave nothing more fervently* than this ultimate eternal confirmation and seal? (GS, 341)

Anaxagoras

Metaphysics: 'At the beginning, all things were together, unlimited both in amount and in smallness' (B1).

'Since these things are so, it is right to think that there are many different things present in everything that is being combined' (B4a).

'And *Nous* knew them all: the things that are being mixed together, the things that are being separated off, and the things that are being dissociated' (B12).

Nietzsche's Analysis: 'Having once started with its motion, and thus having set itself a goal, (*nous*) would be...To complete this sentence is difficult. Heraclitus did; he said, "...a game"' (PTAG 19).

'The meaning of Anaxagoras' renunciation which had been the outcome of his truly pure scientific method, the method which in all cases and above all else asks not to what end something arises...but how something arises' (PTAG 19).

'What he especially esteemed in it was its quality of randomness, hence its ability to activate unconditionally, undeterminedly, guided by neither causes nor ends' (PTAG 19).

Relation to his Thought: 'People have believed at all times that they knew what a cause is; but whence did we take our knowledge-or, more precisely, our faith that we had such knowledge?' (TI, Four Errors, 3)
'Suppose nothing else were 'given' as real except our world of desires and passions...in the end not only is it permitted to make this experiment; the conscience of *method* demands it' (BGaE, 36).



Figure 1: Nietzsche Statue in Naumburg



Figure 2: Nietzsche-Haus in Naumburg

Heraclitus

Metaphysics: 'What opposes unites... and that all things come about by strife' (Fragment 8).

'Lifetime is a child playing, moving pieces in a backgammon game; kingly power is in the hands of a child' (Fragment 52).

Ethics: (The ordered) world, the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an everliving fire, being kindled in measures and being put out in measures. (Fragment 30)

'Fire, having come suddenly upon all things, will judge and convict them' (Fragment 66).

Nietzsche's Analysis: 'Do guilt, injustice, contradiction, and suffering exist in the world? They do, proclaims Heraclitus, but only for the limited human mind which sees things apart but not connected...as children and artists play, so plays the ever-living fire. It constructs and destroys, all in innocence.'" (PTAG, 61-62)

Relation to His Thought: Men were considered 'free' so that they might be judged and punished so that they might become *guilty*...we deny the responsibility in God: only thereby do we redeem the world. (TI, The Four Great Errors, 7-8)

From now on, man is *included* among the most unexpected and exciting lucky throws in the dice game of Heraclitus' 'great child...' as if man were not a goal but only a way, an episode, a bridge, a great promise. (GoM, II.16)

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