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(Athen)

## **The Aegean and the Birth of Philosophy**

The Aegean emerged early as an area where significant concentrations of peoples occurred, in order to settle down permanently or else temporarily, better to look for a new home later on. Before the Greeks settled the shores of Asia Minor, the north Aegean littoral had been the scene of forms of worship that the entirety of the Greek races could take to with ease. Thraco-Phrygian Dionysus emerged as surrogate for the oriental Attis (or Adonis, depending on where the cult was): Attis, simultaneously the son and the lover of the Great Goddess. The cult has been seen as one of fertility and agriculture, yet it is also conspicuous for an element of drama, in the person of the god himself. Traces of this can still be seen in Euripides' two tragedies *Ion* and *Bacchae*. Frequently unofficial though it might be, the cult of Dionysus was, for the awareness of Greek societies, very much one to be reckoned with. What distinguished the Olympian gods from Anatolian gods was that the latter were not thought of as 'blest': they suffered as those who believed in them suffered. If the Apollonain attitude focusses its religious interest on the here and now, the Dionysiac attitude addresses itself to an opportunized tomorrow.

Initially the Greeks' spirit of religion has no obvious philosophical colour. Only later does this spirit assume this colour, or something like it, with the moulding of the Orphic tradition. Rhythm and music give rise to an ecstasy that takes on the meaning of a surrogate for death; an ecstasy which does away with the straitjacket of the senses, which brings about a withdrawal from life, and which at the same time offers entry to a world where life beyond the grave is the reality. (Euripides breaks down the orgiastic process into three distinct stages in his character Hercules the Madman). Both Orphism and the Pythagorean tradition, each in its own way, made use of certain elements of this psychosocial and religious disposition. They placed particular reliance on them as criteria, and were thus able – from their somewhat partial viewpoint – to explain the cosmos and humankind with greater ease. It is telling that, at the Aegean crossroads, a thematic mode of mysticism could be shaped in a non-Greek matrix but internalized and indeed improved by societies that were manifestly Greek. This holds true not only for the Greek communities on the shores of Asia Minor, whose civilization was found on a bedrock of Anatolian culture preserved as a dim memory: it is true, to exactly the same degree, of those mainland Greek communities untouched by barbarian infiltration yet with flourishing orgiastic cults. This state of things was assisted by conditions somewhat similar to those in force in another temporal era. I refer to the period some five hundred thousand

years B.P. [before the present], when the first appeared in outline a process from which would emerge an event with broader ramifications: Transition to the biological status of *Homo erectus*, ancestor of *Homo faber* und the later *Homo sapiens*. The upright position helped the human organism to liberate itself, and it unchained the power of the human brain. Likewise, the rise of philosophica discourse – and the birth of philosophy was precisely *here*, in the Aegean, thirty centuries ago –permitted awareness not only to free itself from the grip of the old exigencies, but to show its ability to look into the causes of cosmic reality. Indeed, one function of this awareness is to make it easier to place human existence within the cosmic reality, unencumbered by mumbo-jumbo of any kind. Nobody has looked hard enough at the analogy between these two crucial events – standing up straight, and thinking straight. The link between them is, first and foremost, that there is in each case a complete rejection of inessentials. This reflects greater economy of means necessary to execute a known function, with the intention of making the same means available to deal with other as yet unknown functions. Thus the further development of humankind, not only in the biological sense, but in the intellectual, is promoted.

The distinction I have just made became still profounder and more substantial once awareness distanced itself from the principle of exigency as such, so closely bound up with action. Let us look at the first true history of philosophical thought – the opening book of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Here Aristotle is setting out his two most basic results, which were in their turn to become the root causes of his development. These results followed hard on the heels of the liberation of awareness, completed under special circumstances, which I shall briefly be dealing with in a moment. The first of results mentioned by Aristotle has to do with making the most of awareness and of its ability (firstly) to detach itself from the world of necessity, a world that its creative instinct had responded to, by mythmaking, and (secondly) to relate, thereafter, to other objects independent of all endurance – objects that awake its wonder and puzzlement, “*dia to thaumezein*”, as Aristotle says – and also independent of any kind of exigency. The second of these results consists in developing the power of awareness to detach itself from the immediate and specific environment of the existence that it is the awareness of, and giving itself over to abstract elucidation of the problems arising from the fact of its detachment. This is tantamount to contemplating particular objects in themselves – “*theories heineken*” – that is to say, as legitimate objects of dialectic not involving a practical goal, conveying in its elucidation the very essence of the value of an end in itself. The step thus taken was to prove decisive for the further progress of humankind *per se*, now perceived as a value in itself.

There is still a paradox, though. Why did the process of liberating awareness which I have just described, assert itself simply and solely in the Aegean region,

in a *kairos*-ful, a crucial way, axiologically unique and historically unrepeatable? It was not, after all, unthinkable that, given similar conditions, the process might have taken heart in some other geographical region or regions out of our planet – at this or at some other time. For the answer, we must look at the conditions in favour of the fact of “standing intellectually upright”. (That this was a world-shaking fact, there can be no shadow of doubt. The effects of physically standing upright gave new momentum to the human creative impulse – so much so that they will for ever be definitively felt.) It was the first and perhaps the last time in human history that there was a so powerfully favourable turn of events. Over and above those conditions for qualitative symbiosis that were of a purely cultural order, we should point to symbiosis conditions of a social order. Only thus will we grasp the individuality of the particular societies that realized the possibility of this giant leap. The main, if not the only, decisive factor propelling the Aegean and the pre-Aegean peoples towards intellectual liberation was, it seems, their turning away from the herd instinct. To put it in another way, what counted, was the human person’s individualization and his self-promotion as a value *per se*.

By working out distinctive economic conditions, people were better able to fashion the political structures that would help them in promotion of this sort. As early as Homer, we find emphasis on the personality of each participant in the epic saga. These are not just persons Homer is talking about, they are personalities – each is a substantively different entity as regards both characterization and manners. The concept of the crowd is absent from the thinking of the *Illiad* and *Odyssey*. The concept of the *laos*, the commons, is found in the poems, but only to denote the sum of citizens with awareness of their own political completeness. Even the concept of the army, the 'host', is not referred to a straightforward collective presence but to a totality of individualized warriors each with his own particular personality. Moreover, the superficially aristocratic structure of historically long-gone societies in the Homeric epic clearly carries within it the seeds of its later, democratically moved restructuring. The latter was put in place at a time when genuine philosophical speculation as we know it today had passed from birth to maturity as the centre of gravity for perhaps the most axiologically brilliant and historically significant, not to say dynamic, civilization humankind has ever invented.

Homer’s two epic poems, with all the richness of their poetic content, also display aspects of thinking 'thinking in myth'. They do this whenever they present human existence as in restricted control of its destiny, with the result that it is obliged to carry out sacrifices to propitiate the gods. And these gods, when we come down to it, are not the rulers of their own destiny either. The principle of *methexis*, 'empathy', that is *also* a manifest law, is still at this level omnipotent. So much so, that even the process of abolishing the distinction between subject and object fails to affect the relationship of the two. For the epic cosmology, the

principle of contradiction in terms has entirely been done away with. In Homer's *Weltanschauung*, the inhabited world is surrounded by the stream of the river Ocean, into which all other waterways of the world flow. This is a way of setting bounds to the cosmos. However, the sea, *thalassa* or *pontos*, is *apeiritos* – boundless, illimitable. This contradiction in terms seems not to have troubled the poet's conscience overly. In general, contradictions are acceptable in epic. One instance is the conflict of the two ways of picturing the vault of heaven: firstly as a hemisphere, or secondly as supported on a pair of pillars. While in Homer's biology, all living beings come out of Ocean, his psychology reflects very ancient beliefs about the souls of the dead: they are rarefied bodies, shadows that are attracted by blood and that completely retain their sensory functions. The principle of contradiction breaks down when Homer accepts the idea of the soul as butterfly, able because of its wings to leave the body once the latter goes to sleep. Lastly, the Homeric ethic is a liberal ethic. There are only two violations of ethical measure that it will not tolerate: *hybris* (overweening behaviour that renders a human being liable to punishment by the gods) and bad faith (trampling on honourable conduct, which brings down punishment by humans).

In Hesiod, too, we find an ontology that is in principle contradictory. It presents 'unborn Chaos', the source of all things, as a cypher, an empty place, indefinite and (while not limitless) uncircumscribed. Yet this place is an ontological reality. Out of it there spring forth Gaia, Erebus, Night, and the children of Night – those terrifying deities of death, sleep and dreams. As for Hesiod's ethic, this is based on the demand for labour, a sure guardian of peace in a universe governed by a natural cyclic time. The cyclic perception of time was to dominate the Greek attitude to history – in contrast to Hesiod's own historical model of successive fall of humankind (from an Age of Gold to an Age of Silver, and so on downwards), the prototype for the descending model of hypostases in Plotinus.

Economically and politically, many areas of the Aegean were short of space. This was a contributory factor in individual colonizing expeditions by one part – the strongest part biologically and operatively – of the local population. The consequences for the rest of the population would have been fatal, had an intense economic and cultural link between mother city and colony not naturally been created and maintained; and the colony, in its turn, founded new colonies, so that there were now two generations of mother cities. That is how the Aegean expanded into the whole of the Mediterranean, while advances in shipbuilding technology made it possible for their populations to come in touch with remarkably successful civilizations such as that of Egypt. By virtue of the hierarchic priestly structure of the societies that had built them, however, these other civilizations were developing comparatively at a snail's pace. As has already been stated in science, technology, art, and culture in the wider sense, the

Greeks do not seem to have exhibited (to start with, at least) any very particular ingenuity. The elements of their own civilization, they drew from either the aboriginal or the neighbouring populations. The proof of their genius and creative spirit was, rather, in the specific synthesis of whatever elements they took over, and in the creation of unified forms able to stand on their own, axiologically speaking. This view may be open to criticism on the grounds that it is elitist, or that it oversimplifies the historical facts. But it does contain a kernel of truth, insofar as it highlights the synthetic creativity of the Hellenic spirit. The problem then shifts from the field of quantitative axiological analysis to that of qualitative diagnosis of the Hellenic contribution, with the search criterion becoming a specific, tangible one.

There can be no doubt about the fact of Greek mobility, at any rate. From the eighth century B.C. onwards, the great centres of Greek civilization in the Aegean world, in its broadest sense, exhibit a mobility that accelerates to a peak with the supervening second wave of colonization in the sixth century. This mobility would have been less conspicuous had it not been for the political bond of the colony with its mother city. The second time round, the wave of colonial activity ejected entire populations to great distances from their city-states of origin, more often than not, because power had been seized by some oligarchic political group. Those at the head of such groups were, for the most part, strong personalities – lawgivers and politicians, thinkers and humanists rolled into one. It was to this category of 'thinking politician and personality' that the majority of the Seven Sages (as they were called) belonged. Other thinkers, such as Pythagoras, were traditionally classed among the migrants to new and wealthier countries, the recent rulers of which had at their disposal an indigenous population so much larger in numbers that it provided at low cost a workforce able benevolently to aid the economy of the societies they had, relatively speaking, come under the control of.

For Hesiod, as for Phocus and later for Cleostratus, the practice of astronomy held great interest. Astronomical research became steadily more imperative as navigation rapidly developed in the wake of Greek colonization and communication between colony and mother city. There were obviously voyages out of the Mediterranean, as we know from the most celebrated ethnographer after Homer, Aristeas of Proconnesus. Aristeas wrote a book which can be dated to the start of the sixth century B.C. and which was cited both by Hecataeus and by Herodotus. In it, he mentions the 'Hyperborean' peoples. Are they authentic or imaginary? It is hard to tell. For some scholars, the geography of the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey* is itself 'imaginary'.

Be that as it may, a beginning had been made. Along with the sea voyages, the presence of Hellenism had expanded from the Aegean Sea into the Mediterranean. And at the same time the technique of communication serving to link the awareness of differing civilizations had freed human thinking from myth. It had

consolidated the conditions necessary for philosophical discourse to develop – the discourse that looked for the causes of all existing things.