# UNIT 1 PRE-SOCRATIC PHILOSOPHERS

## Contents



## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall familiarize ourselves with the Pre-Socrates philosophers. You are expected to know the pre-Socratic schools and their philosophical ideas and differences among them. At times you might think that their philosophical ideas are simple to our complex mind but then, you must not forget that they were pioneers, venturing into a new territory. They did not possess the centuries of experience that we have today. You might also be struck by the very freshness and simplicity of their vision and it might teach us a lesson or two: to us who are so accustomed to intricate systems of thought and culture that we tend to lose that fresh, youthful, sense of wonderment when viewing the world which is the foundation of all true philosophy.

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

The thinkers who are called 'pre-Socrates' is not just for reasons of convenient chronology. On the whole, their views ran in another direction than that of Socrates. They were mainly concerned with outer, external world and the problems and issues raised from such an interest except the sophists who focused their attention to the internal world. Aristotle called the pre-socratics the "physicists" because they reflected so very much on nature. The major issues that drew their attention was: (a) the search for the *archç* –the primordial substance out of which the universe was fashioned; (b) The ever fascinating controversy: being versus becoming or, to use a more precise philosophical vocabulary, the question of the One and the Many. Since they viewed the universe as an organic whole, and as a living whole, they are also called hylozoists. We begin our study with the Ionian School who offered 'sensual' response to the universe. The Eleatic School attempted to give a rational response to the existence of the universe. The Atomic School is an effort to synthesize both the Ionians and Eleatics, though it might not be a perfect synthesis. We shall also briefly note the philosophical ideas of Pythagorean brotherhood and Sophists

who, generally speaking, turn our attention to the 'internal world.' This study unveils different philosophical ideas of different pre-socratic schools and their attempt to understand themselves and the world.

## 1.2 THE SENSUALIST SCHOOL: THE IONIANS

Ionia is a district on the west coast of present-day Turkey. It was colonized by Greek in the 11th century BCE and it was one of the important commercial and literal centres of Ephesus and Miletus. All the eminent Ionian thinkers came from Miletus, except of course Heraclitus who is more celebrated among them. The School is called 'sensualist' because in its attempt to response the being versus becoming question as well as in its effort to discover the primary substance of the universe, they relied rather on the sense knowledge and sense observation and not the reason. Generally speaking, the Ionians tend to hold that becoming alone is real and that being is an illusion. We shall briefly note the ideas of four Ionians: Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes and Heraclitus.

### Thales of Miletus

Thales was born in Miletus. The exact date of his birth is unknown. Probably, he must have flourished in the early part of sixth century BCE. He is said of have predicted the eclipse of the sun mentioned by Herodotus. Since, that eclipse occurred on May 28th, 585 BCE, it is one of the reasons to believe that he must have begun his philosophical career in the early part of 6th Century BCE. He is traditionally regarded as the first philosopher. He is said to have played an important role in public and academic life and excelled in politics, mathematics and astronomy. Some other scientific activities are ascribed to Thales such as, the construction of an almanac and the introduction of the Phoenician practice of steering a ship's course by the Little Bear. However, there is little information about his philosophical doctrine since he did not commit his thoughts to writing. Thanks to Aristotle, whatever little we know comes mainly from him. According to Aristotle, Thales taught two fundamental philosophical ideas. They are, one, the water is the first absolute principle and, second, the soul is the principal motor. How did Thales arrive at the conclusion that the water is first absolute principle? Besides the mere fact that he lived in a place virtually surrounded by water, Aristotle supplies the following reason: "Thales got this notion perhaps from seeing that the nutriment of all things is moist, and that heat itself is generated from the moist and kept alive by it (and that from which they come to be is a principle of all things). He got his notion from this fact, and from the fact that the seeds of all things have a moist nature, and that water is the origin of the nature moist things." Though the explanation might look simple to our intellectual minds, his attempt was to give a rational account of the principle of things. Thus, be broke away from myths and poet-theologians. The second philosophical idea of Thales according to Aristotle is the soul as the principle of movement. According to Aristotle, "Thales, too, to judge from what is recorded about him, seems to have held the soul to be a motive force, since he said that the magnet has a soul in it because it moves the iron…. Certain thinkers say that the soul is intermingled in the whole universe, and it is perhaps for this reason that Thales came to the opinion that all things are full of gods." Perhaps, the best way to understand "all things are full of gods" is to say that everything is fundamentally alive. Not only magnetic stones are

endowed with souls but everything else, the whole universe is impregnated with life. How does Thales earn his place as the first Greek philosopher? It is from the fact that he conceives the notion of unity in difference. While holding firm the idea of unity, he philosophically accounted for diversity.

**Anaximander**

Anaximander was born in Miletus around the year 611 BCE and was a disciple of Thales. He was concerned about the scientific pursuits and he is credited with having constructed a map –most probably for the Milesian sailors on the Black Sea. He wrote a book entitled *On Nature*. Like Thales, he showed keen interest in cosmology. However, he differed with his master in his choice of the first principle. For Anaximander, the *archç* is *ápeiron* –'the infinite' or 'the unlimited.' What does Anaximander refer to by the *ápeiron*? *Ápeiron* means that which is devoid of limit. In other words, it refers to infinite. Probably it would be herculean task to figure out what exactly Anaximander meant by infinite, Aristotle understood it to mean unlimited extension in space and qualitative indetermination. For Anaximander, *ápeiron* is not only a material cause of infinite extension but also it is a principle characterized by the absence of any formal determination. It has no positive identity. It is neither water, nor air, nor any one of the known elements. *Ápeiron* can function in two ways: as a material cause and as a divine principle. *Ápeiron* as a material cause is an important discovery of Anaximander, which Aristotle would fully develop later. Unlike the principle of Thales, the *ápeiron* is not one of the elements (in Aristotelian terms, it is not a substance). It is of an indeterminate nature, and therefore, is different from and prior to all other existing substances. *Ápeiron* as divine causes encompasses and governs all things. It is an immortal and indestructible principle. These qualities must be inherent in it as it is unlimited and unaffected by the limiting factors of earthly realities such as birth and death, growth and decay. Besides this, Anaximander also explains the genesis of all things. For the questions how does the *ápeiron* encompass and govern all things and how it is related to finite things, Anaximander would reply saying that all things proceed necessarily from the *ápeiron* by means of separation of contraries, and return to it in a necessary manner as well. All the same, Anaximander does not explain the process of separation of contraries but one might say that it is caused by the eternal movement of the *ápeiron.* All things are subject to this law of generation and corruption as a punishment. It is the retribution they pay for the commission of an injustice. The injustice is the contraries committed by the *ápeiron* which separate from and oppose one another, each one trying to prevail over the rest. This punishment restores the equality of the different parts with the passing of time. This is achieved by virtue of the imposition of a limit to each contrary that brings to an end the dominion of one over the other. This is the way Anaximander explains the continuity and stability of material changes, the formation of the world and the governing role of the *ápeiron.* To conclude, Anaximander's *archç* is not confined to one thing but to indeterminate infinite out of which all things come. He also attempts in some way to answer the question how the world developed out of this ultimate element.

**Anaximenes**

Anaximenes was born at the beginning of the 6th century and was an "associate" of Anaximander. He authored a book, of which a small fragment has survived. At first sight, the doctrine of Anaximenes appears one step back from the stage

reached by Anaximander. He summarily abandons the theory of *ápeiron* and assigns a determinate element as the ultimate principle. And that principle, according to Anaximenes, is air. Anaximenes was probably led this conclusion because all living being need air for breathing. And since he thought that the entire universe was composed of living beings, it appears logical to choose air as the ultimate principle. Besides this, he observes, "Air undergoes substantial changes through rarefaction and condensation. By rarefaction, it is transformed into fire and wind. On the other hand, if it thickens, if forms the clouds; and through further condensation, it becomes water, then earth, then the stones. All other things come these substances." In other words, "All things originate through a certain condensation and rarefaction of air." When analyzed closely, Anaximenes actually takes a step forward in clarifying the problem of the first principle of all things. The importance of Anaximenes' contribution is confirmed by Aristotle himself, who says that all later thinkers who thought of some material cause as the *archç*, are indebted somehow to Anaximenes.

**Heraclitus**

Heraclitus was born in the middle of 6th Century BCE and died around 480 BCE. He came from Ephesus and belonged to an aristocratic family. He was known as a conceited, proud person who looked down upon the rest of humanity because of its blindness to the truth of his teachings. His philosophy is found in a book entitled *On Nature*, quite a few fragments of which have been preserved. Since it was not easy to determine the exact nature of his thought on account of the cryptic and occult nature of his writings, he was also known as "the obscure one" even during his lifetime. This may be reason perhaps why Plato and Aristotle made no special efforts to penetrate his thought but just described it as an exaggerated relativism. Following are a few important philosophical ideas of Heraclitus. First, Heraclitus affirmed that everything is in constant flux, or, "everything changes." He explains this with an analogy of the river saying, "It is certainly not possible to enter twice into the same river." This has been also attested by Plato: "Heraclitus says somewhere that all things change and that nothing is at rest." This is the original contribution of Heraclitus to the history of pre-Socratic thought. For Heraclitus, movement is the central theme and point of departure of his philosophy. All the Miletian philosophers attempted to account for the multiplicity of things and explained that multiplicity by affirming different solutions to the question of the *archç*. Whereas, Heraclitus singled out change as the very essence of what is real. "Everything changes, only becoming remains constant throughout." This is the widely known thought of Heraclitus. Second, Heraclitus explains the universal process of becoming as a never-ending alternation of contraries. The opposites not only account for the transformation of one substance to another but they constitute the very essence of all things. The permanent opposition of contraries lies at the root of reality and its stability. In other words, for Heraclitus, the only real world is the world of opposites, opposites which are in mutual need of one another. Third, Heraclitus considered fire as the *archç*: "This world, as well as all other worlds, was not made by the gods or by men. It always was, is, and will be, an ever living fire, which is enkindled according to a certain measure and extinguished according to a certain measure." According to Heraclitus, fire, more than any other *archç*, reflects the constant change and harmony that lies at the root of reality. "The transformations undergone by fire are as follows: first it becomes the sea; then half of the sea becomes land, while the other half becomes

burning wind." Most interpreters of Heraclitus understand fire in the metaphorical sense rather as a material cause. Taking fire metaphorically might cause many difficulties as Heraclitus himself uses the term *logos* to refer to the first principle. Understood as such, it means the principle that governs every transformation; it is the law that is inherent in everything. And for Heraclitus, to know the *logos* means to know the truth. Fourth, Heraclitus identifies the nature of the soul with that of the first principle and the soul is infinite part of human being: "No matter how much you journey, though you travel every road, you will never be able to discern the soul's limits, so deep as its *logos*." He also believed in the immortality of the soul. "After death, there are things which await man which he neither hopes for, nor imagines."

It is indeed interesting to note the gradual maturing and refinement of philosophical speculation and concepts from Thales to Heraclitus. Heraclitus probably is the most accomplished thinker of this school. He has a defining influence on Stoics, especially as regards his doctrine of the logos. Hegel saw in him a predecessor. Hegel says, "If we wish to consider fate so just as always to preserve to posterity what is best, we must at least say of what we have of Heraclitus, that it is worthy of this preservation."

## 1.3 THE RATIONALIST SCHOOL: THE ELEATICS

Elea, a town in Southern Italy, had been founded by Ionian refugees, running away from the Persian invaders in the middle of 6th Century BCE. The philosophers of this school preferred to make use of their reason to respond to the intriguing questions of their time rather than merely rely on the data of their sense. In this sense, they can be called rationalists. They tend to assert that Being alone is real and becoming is illusory. Xenophanes (530 BCE) is said to be the founder of this school. He was known for his attacks on the anthropomorphic Greek deities. He called for a purification and deepening of religious language. We shall briefly note the philosophical ideas of three Eleatics, namely Parmenides, Zeno and Melissus.

**Parmenides**

Parmenides was born in Elea, probably in the second half of the 6th century BCE. He devoted himself not only to philosophy but also to politics. He wrote a poem in hexameter verse entitled *On Nature*, extensive fragments of which have been still preserved. Parmenides seems to have been a Pythagorean, but later he abandoned that philosophy in favour of his own. We shall briefly note the important philosophical ideas of Parmenides. First, the Being, the One, *is* and that Becoming or change is illusion. Two questions need to be answered to understand the mind of Parmenides: What does he mean by being? Why did he see being as the unifying principle of everything else? Parmenides' concept of being is univocal. It does not refer to any concrete perceptible reality but only to being as such, to the being which everything possesses since all of them exist. This is the being which encompasses everything –the whole reality. Being is apprehended by the intellect alone. The senses grasp the multiplicity of the sensible; but the intelligence sees beyond appearances, and knows what lies behind them, only one reality: being. "Thought and that by which thought is made possible are the same thing; for thought is expressed in being, and hence,

without being, there would be no thought." In other words, for Parmenides, being and thought are correlative terms since being only reveals itself to thought and it is this revelation that constitutes the truth. He also describes the characteristics of being in his poem: unbegotten and incorruptible; it cannot come from non-being, because non-being is nothing, and from nothing nothing comes; it cannot come from being because being exists, and what already exists need not be brought into existence. This means that the being has no beginning and no end; it is immutable, perfect, complete, with no need for anything. Things may come to pass but being itself remains one and the same. One can easily notice an obvious difference between Parmenides and other preceding philosophers. The being of Parmenides cannot be the ultimate principle as nothing can proceed from it. For all Ionian philosophers, the *archç* is the origin of all things through the many changes it undergoes. Then how does Parmenides account for the multiplicity of things? To answer this question we must know what Parmenides says about the way of opinion. Second, one can notice in Parmenides' desire in his poem to uphold the reality of movement which his notion of being seemed to deny. He makes a radical distinction between the way of truth and the way of opinion. To explain the reality of movement he brings in the concept or the way of opinion. "With this I bring to a close the explanation about truth which is worthy of all credence. Now learn for yourself the opinions of mortal men by listening to the deceptive account of my words." In other words, Parmenides places the opinions of human beings, who allow themselves to be guided by their sense and not by their intelligence. While the intelligence (or reason) apprehends the reality as unified reality, the senses perceive them as fleeting and changeable. To be fair to Parmenides, what he says that one reality actually exists, but it can be viewed from different perspectives; of these only one lead to true knowledge and others, give opinion. Therefore, for Parmenides, the perceptible reality is not a product of fantasy; it is something real. What happens is that human being only grasp the external side of reality and take that to be true. This is not absolutely false but can be misleading. This interpretation really does not solve the problem of one and many but it brings the problem to the centre of philosophical inquiry. From now on, the big challenge to philosophy is to vindicate the reality of the many and the reality of change which the 'being' of Parmenides undermined.

**Zeno**

Zeno of Elea was probably born at the beginning of 5th century BCE. He was an ardent disciple of Parmenides and wrote a book in defense of his master's teachings but surprisingly in a new manner. Zeno adopted a method, which Aristotle would later call it a dialectical method, which consisted in demonstrating a thesis by showing the absurdity of the contradictory propositions. He used many ingenious arguments to prove the impossibility of motion such as the riddle of Achilles and the tortoise, which Aristotle would offer a critique of these arguments in his book *Physics*. Zeno also sought to defend the unicity of being by demonstrating (albeit wrongly) that multiplicity ended up in as many absurdities as the contradicting thesis. Moreover, the philosophical ideas of Zeno transferred the centre of Eleatic speculation from the problem of being and non-being to the problem of one and the many. This approach deflected the ontological character that philosophy had taken with Parmenides. To prove his master right, Zeno had to push Parmenides' thought to its last consequences: he had to summarily deny the reality of the phenomena which Parmenides had tried to explain it through the way of opinion. With Parmenides and Zeno, the Eleatic

philosophy was brought to its ultimate conclusion: only being existed, and multiplicity was an illusion.

**Check Your Progress I**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Give the account of Ancient Greek thinkers' understanding of '*arche'*.

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2) Briefly explain the understanding of Parmendes on Being.

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## 1.4 AN ATTEMPT AT SYNTHESIS: THE ATOMISTS

Human being, rather than admit defeat, rather than let him/herself remain confounded and despairing over the apparent contradiction, tries to find a way to reconcile conflicting opinions and harmonize with the all the possible data. Such was the case with Atomists. They noted the clash of view between the first two great schools of Greek philosophy, concerning even so elementary a datum of experience as movement and change. In their response, they seem to have saved the Being so beloved of the Eleatics as well as becoming rigorously championed by Ionians. Reality, according to Atomists, is composed of atoms moving in a void. The individualistic atom, itself unchanging, is the element of permanence whereas its incessant motion provides the element of change. We shall briefly note the important philosophical ideas of a few atomists such as Leucippus, Democritus, Empedocles and Anaxagoras.

**Leucippus and Democritus**

Little is known about Leucippus of Miletus except that he founded the atomist school of philosophy. Probably, he was born around the year 480 BCE and established his school in Abdero, the same place where Democritus was born. He had been a member of the school of Parmenides and was a disciple of Zeno. The absence of information about Leucippus' life and works is due in large measure to the great renown enjoyed by Democritus who compiled all the works of the school, including those of his master, into one single *corpus*. Therefore, it is rather difficult to distinguish between what is due to Leucippus and what is due to Democritus. Therefore, we shall briefly delineate the ideas of both Leucippus and Democritus.

According to Leucippus and Democritus, there are an infinite number of indivisible units called atoms. These are imperceptible; they differ in size and shape and have no quality except that of solidity or impenetrability. They are infinite in number and move in a void, and thereby give rise to the movement

and multiplicity of the world of senses. "For some of the older philosophers (the Eleatics) thought that 'what is' must of necessity be 'one' and immovable. The void, they argue, 'is not': but unless there is a void with a separate being of its own, 'what is' cannot be moved –nor again can it be 'many,' since there is nothing to keep things apart…..Leucippus, however, thought he had a theory which harmonized with sense-perception and would not abolish either coming-to-be and passing-away or motion and the multiplicity of things." In other words, the diversity of things is caused by the movements of atoms in a void. This void is a reality which exists. When the atoms come together, they bring about generation; when they separate from one another, they bring about corruption. For Leucippus and Democritus, atoms constitute the positive element of reality. This movement, as we have already noted, requires the existence of an empty space or vacuum. The empty space is just real as the atoms are. Every corporeal thing is composed of several atoms separated from one another by an empty space. Moreover, the cause of the movement of atoms is nothing but the very instability of their nature: they are, by nature, in constant motion. Atoms have always been and will forever remain in motion. Aristotle called Leucippus and Democritus as the philosophers of chance since their philosophy implies that the world has come to its present state only by accident. They were called so not because they denied causality because they ignored the final cause: atoms move necessarily but without any finality. But to be fair to Leucippus and Democritus, it must be noted that more than denying the final cause, they were simply ignorant of it, for no one had as yet discovered it. This defect provided a useful clue to the subsequent philosophers, who realized that a mechanical explanation of the world was insufficient.

**Empedocles**

Empedocles was born in Agrigento, Sicily, in the beginning of the 5th century BCE. He was the first philosopher to harmonize the being of Parmenides with the testimony of the senses. His ideas are found in two of his works: *On Nature* and *The Purifications*. *On Nature* explains Empedocles' cosmology while the other work contains his ethico-religious teachings. His religious teachings are heavily influenced by the Pythagorean belief in the transmigration of souls. But as a philosopher, he subscribes to the Eleatic principle of the immutability of the real without denying the existence of sensible reality. We shall briefly study his basic ideas. First, Empedocles says that a certain number of substances, ungenerated, incorruptible and always remaining the same, constitute the origin of all things. These for elements are fire, water, air and earth. "From these elements all other beings have proceeded –those that existed in the past, those that exist at present, and those that will exist in the future –trees, men and women, animals, birds, the fish that live in water, an also the gods who live long lives and who enjoy special prerogatives. For only these elements exist; and by combining themselves in different ways, they take on a variety of forms, each particular combination giving rise to a particular kind of change." As we have already noted, the Ionians explained the origin of all things through the qualitative changes undergone by the first principle. But for Empedocles, the four elements never change; they remain always the same, and it is through their different combinations that other beings are brought into existence. We can say that Empedocles is the origin of the notion of an unchangeable material cause, irreducible to no other thing, and capable of uniting and separating itself from other elements. Second, it is love and hate principle which makes four elements unite with or separate themselves from one another. Love brings things

together, and therefore, it is at the origin of the generation of things. Hate is divisive and brings about corruption. Love and hate are two principal forces constantly at odds with each other. There is an alternation of the predominace of one force with the predominance of the other, and this gives rise to the cycles of generation and corruption present in the world. Third, the principle of knowledge lies in a material likeness between the sensible object and our senses. Sensible knowledge is the result of the contract between the elements of things and the elements of the senses. According to Empedocles when there is a continuous effusion of elements from things, and when this comes in contact with the sense, sensible knowledge is produced. The intellectual knowledge too, is brought about in a similar way. Leaving aside Empedocles' materialistic understanding of knowledge, his theory contains an important intuition which is later picked up by Aristotle: that the knowing process should be understood as an assimilation.

**Anaxagoras**

Anaxagoras was born in Clazomenae, near Miletus, around the year 500 BCE. Probably, he was the first one to transfer the center of philosophy to Athens. He remained in Athens teaching for about thirty years, until a charge of impiety forced him to transfer to Lampsacus, where he died around the year 428 BCE. He wrote a book tiltled *On Nature* and his philosophy closely resembles the philosophy of Empedocles. One might say that Anaxagoras too makes an attempt to reconcile the Eleatic principle with the evidence of multiplicity. The following are the basic philosophical ideas of Anaxagoras. First, beings are immutable, indestructible and indivisible. They bring about multiplicity of things according to the way they mix and combine with one another. Hence, the first principle of Anaxagoras, according to Aristotle, is a great mixture: an indeterminate mixture composed of an infinite number of substances, each one of them infinitely small in size. Second, to explain the multiplicity of substances, Anaxagoras concludes that the first principle must, in a way, embody all things in itself. He believed that everything must come from something that already exists. Therefore, he affirmed that the first principle was a confused mixture of infinitesimally small elements which are inert, unchangeable, eternal and qualitatively different from one another. They are seeds of all things. Aristotle called them "*homeomeries*," which means things which remain qualitatively the same even if they are divided into smaller parts. All things are composed of a mixture of *homeomeries*; different mixtures bring about different beings. Since all things come from the first principle, whatever nature things may have, "everything is found in everything:" the qualitative differences of all things are found in everything though some elements may be minimally represented in nature. Third, alongside the *homeomeries*, Anaxagoras adds another principle: the *Nous* or intelligence. He describes it in the following way: "While all other things are composed of a mixture of all things, the intelligence in infinite and independent, not mixed with other things, but is by itself alone." The *Nous* is the most subtle and pure of beings. It knows everything completely and has maximum power. "The intelligence ordains everything that is brought into being –those things that existed in the past and exist no longer, those that exist at present and those that will exist in the future." In other words, for Anaxagoras, the *Nous* functions only as the origin of movement. Since the seeds of all things are eternal, the *Nous* merely starts the cosmic movement whereby thing begin to differentiate themselves from one another, and take on their particular characteristics. This

observation is criticized by Aristotle, who says that Anaxagoras "uses reason as a *dues ex machina* for making of the world, and when he is at a loss to them from what cause something necessarily is, then he drags reason in, but in all other cases ascribes events to anything rather than to reason." However, Anaxagoras first introduces a spiritual and intellectual principle, though he might have failed to grasp the full import of that difference between that principle and the matter which it forms or sets in motion. Nevertheless, Anaxagoras must be credited with the introduction in the Greek philosophy such a principle that would have defining influence in the future.

## 1.5 THE PYTHAGOREAN BROTHERHOOD

One must note that Pythagoras did not found a philosophical school, but a kind of religious community. This was nothing unusual in the later half the 6th century BCE. There was a general "two way drift" then, in the Ionian civilization towards skepticism or towards the "mystery religions." This does happen when a civilization is felt to be on the decline. It happened with the Romans, it was happening with the Greeks and it does happen in our own times. Little is certain about Pythagoras, the founder of the Pythagorean brotherhood. He was born in Samos, in Apollodorus and reached the high point of career in the years 532-531 BCE. The obscurity which envelops the life of Pythagoras is not due to paradoxically to a dearth of information about him, but to the abundance of testimonies that altogether have succeeded in blurring the historical and have converted his life and person into a legend. One must also note that it is rather difficult to separate the views taught by Pythagoras himself from those of others of the brotherhood. They were a community and it is to this community as a whole that one should ascribe the teachings. We shall briefly focus on the philosophical ideas of the Pythagorean brotherhood and mention just in passing that Pythagoreans taught transmigrations of souls and they were the first one hold, long before Copernicus, the theory of heliocentrism.

The following are the fundamental philosophical ideas of Pythagoreans. First, the *archç* is number, and that things, ultimately, are numbers. Probably, it was their interest in mathematics and music which led them to this conclusion. It was their study of mathematics that made them to reduce all of reality to a series of numerical numbers. They observed different characteristics of phenomena and they saw that these characteristics followed clear mathematical patterns. Musical harmony, for instance, could be reduced to a set of numerical relations. Natural phenomena observed an order which could be measured numerically –the duration of the year, the seasons, the length of the day etc. Hence they were of the opinion that numbers and its elements constituted the principle of all things. In other words, number constituted the essence and substance of all that was real. Moreover, they also observed that the number itself is further divisible into a number of categories: "the elements of number are the even and the odd and of these the latter is limited, and the former unlimited." This meant that every number can always be divided into even and odd elements. It also does mean that even and odd elements constitute the universal elements of number, and hence, of all things as well. Since the even is identified with the unlimited and the odd with the limited, everything must be composed of this pair of contrasts. The Pythagoreans concluded that the unlimited and the limited constitute the first principles of all numbers, and, therefore, of all things. Prior to Pythagoreans, none had observed that the core of reality is composed

of two contrary principles –the unlimited and the limited. This is the original contribution of Pythagoreans. Second, although the *archç* is composed of contrary elements, they do not show externally –either individually or taken as whole. On the contrary, what they show is inner harmony. The Pythagoreans claimed that each thing has its own harmony, and that the universe as a whole is governed by a law that unified all its elements. One can observe the interest of Pythagoreans' desire to subject all phenomena to the categories of reason (mathematical laws). The world is not ruled by dark or unknown forces: it comprises an order, a harmonious order, which, like the musical scale, can be reduced to numerical relations and rational laws. Probably the greatest tribute we can pay to Pythagoreans, as Fredrick Copleston remarks, is to point out that they were one of the determining influences in the formation of the thought of Plato.

## 1.6 THE SOPHISTS

The beginning of 5th century saw a change of focus in Greek philosophy. The Greek philosophical speculation began to shift from the world to the human beings; from the macrocosm to the microcosm, or, in the precise philosophical language, from the object to the subject. Probably, the conflicts and contradictions inherent in the philosophical thoughts of Ionians and Eleatics on ultimate nature of reality, might have discouraged further work on that theme. Besides, democracy was introduced into Athens, which was also at the time (492-429 BCE) the commercial, cultural and political centre of Greece. With democracy, the 'common man' began to realize that s/he could play an important role in the affairs of the city-state, s/he wanted to equip her/himself with knowledge in practical affairs, especially in rhetoric and the art of persuading. In this, h/she was ably (?) aided by a band of self-appointed itinerant teachers who were willing to offer him/her the fruit of their expertise, of course for a fee! This practice of dispensing knowledge for a rate was something wholly out of keeping with the Greek wisdom and earned the "Sophists," as they were called the epithet, "shopkeepers with spiritual wares" from Socrates. As the demand increased for the services of Sophists, not a few charlatans saw in the profession an opportunity to make "a fast buck." To out-smart other rival teachers, they did not hesitate to clad their speeches with all manner of obscurisms to appear more profound. Moreover, in order to appear more original, they worked out various fine-sounding and specious arguments to attack established norms, which draw enthusiastic support of younger generation and the irk of the elders. Sooner than later, whatever their initial motives and ideals were, sophistry had acquired that connotation of quackery and fraud that it has today. It was the opposition and attacks of Socrates and Plato that gained them this reputation. And the terms still has this implication today. However, one must not forget that no less than Socrates himself could be, historically speaking, classed in this "school," but with a difference, of course. For in Socrates we can see the nobility and grandeur of what must have been the pristine sophist ideal. Both Socrates and Sophists gave importance to virtue. But the Sophists came to mean gradually the art of acquiring the practical know-how, -worse, are art of convincing and forging ahead at all costs. For Socrates, it concerned the formation and development of the whole person. Be that it may, properly speaking, sophism was more of a philosophical movement than a school of philosophy. There were difference of opinion among sophists themselves and later, between the first

sophists and their disciples. The first sophists were respected personages and were esteemed or the new forms of culture they ushered in, the latter were known to have cared little for content and were more for external form. With them, sophism became barren form of debate and empty rhetoric. The unscrupulous men used it to further their political ambitions and undermine duly established laws. We shall briefly note the philosophical ideas of earlier sophists: Protagoras and Gorgias.

**Protagoras**

Protagoras was born in Abdera around 484 BCE. He taught in several cities, including Athens and he was well received by the people. His most famous books were *On the Truth*, *On the Gods* and *Anthilogies* (or *Contradictions*). Philosophically speaking, Protagoras continued the tradition of the pluralists. He rejected the univocity of Parmenides' being; subscribed to Heraclitean doctrine of continual change. But his doctrine is more than just a new description of the principles of multiplicity like the philosophies of Anaximander and the atomists; it was a philosophy of knowledge, truth and error. If contrary things are present simultaneously in things, it is impossible to have certain scientific knowledge about things as nothing can be known with certainty. Therefore, he argued, that the only alternative left is relativism: human being determines the truth of the object, and s/he determines it according to his/her own knowledge. Knowledge for Protagoras is based squarely on senses which are constantly subject to change like everything else. The famous quote of Protagoras summarized his position well: "Man is the measure of all things –things which exist insofar as they exist, and things which do not exist insofar as they do not exist." Because of relativism, he taught his students the art of antilogy –to single out the different contradictory sides of a particular argument, gauge which among them was the weakest and present it in such a way that it appears more convincing than the opposite view. Obviously, Protagoras' philosophy was bereft of truth. Because of this, one might conclude, and rightly, that Protagoras did not believe in wisdom of any kind, and that to speak of wise people was absolutely out of the question in such a context. Wisdom for him meant skillful rhetoric and identified it with utility and convenience. The relativism and skepticism of Protagoras did undermine objective moral standards and led to agnosticism: "As for the gods, it is impossible for me to affirm whether they exist or not."

**Gorgias**

Gorgias, a disciple of Empedocles, was born in Sicily around the year 483 BCE. He too taught in many cities, especially in Athens until his death in 375 BCE. His main philosophical work entitled, *On Nature and Non-Being*. Briefly, the philosophy of Gorgian was the exact opposite of Eleaticism which can be summarized in the following way: "First, nothing exists. Second, if anything existed, it cannot be known by man. Third, if it can be known, it cannot be transmitted and explained to others." Gorgias proved these three propositions employing the "dialectical" method of Zeno. He rejects both the reality of being and that of non-being on account of contradictory affirmations among the philosophers. In this sense, Gorgias appears more radical than Protagoras. Protagoras at least accepted the notion of a truth relative of each human being. Gorgias does not subscribe to this: truth and falsehood mean nothing to him. Because, we cannot speak of being, neither can we speak of any correspondence between being and thought, or being and truth. In other words, Gorgias not

only divorces thought from being, he also severs the link between words and the realities our words are meant to express. For Gorgias, words are independent and autonomous, without any reference to what is real. It is logical, then, for Gorgias to give exclusive importance to rhetoric. Although the words have no meaning or truth content, it can be used to control minds and manipulate people: it is "a great tool for domination; being so small and invisible, it is yet capable of accomplishing feats only the gods can do." While undermining ethical values, rhetoric was exclusively used to further their political ambitions more by the disciples of Gorgias than he himself.

Though Sophists brought into philosophy certain regrettable attitudes and practices, we must admit that they initiated some other praiseworthy trends in the discipline. First, there was welcome shift of attention from the object to the subject. Second, as regards to method, there was a shift from the deductive to the empirico-deductive approach. Third, the "virtue" they were interested in was of the cheapest pragmatic variety, it was a beginning, all the same. Socrates would do full justice to this and thus would save and immortalize the best and noblest that there ever could have been in the early sophist spirit.

**Check Your Progress II**

**Note:** Use the space provided for your answers.

1) Analyse the concerns of Atomists.

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2) What are the philosophical insights of Pythagoras?

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## 1.7 LET US SUM UP

The pre-socratic philosophers looked in amazement the world around them and attempted to describe it in their own way. Through their observations they brought to light the perennial problems of philosophy such as, the fundamental principle of all things and its nature and the problem of the One and the many. Their answers may appear unsatisfactory or, at times unintelligent to our complex mind but they laid foundation for a true philosophy. After studying pre-socratic philosophy, one might wonder and echo the words of Blaise Pascal: "These whom we call ancient were really new in all things." Or, the words of Francis Bacon: "The antiquity of history is the youth of the world. It is we who are the ancients." If we look at the world, as did the pre-socratic philosophers, with a sense of wonderment and awe, we too might begin to contribute something to enrich true philosophy.

## 1.8 KEY WORDS

***Ápeiron*** : That which is devoid of limit; in other words, the infinite. For Anaximander, this is the fundamental principle of all things. It is not only a material principle of infinite extension; it is also a principle characterized by the absence of any formal determination. It has no positive identity; it has no known elements.

***Dialectical* Method** : A method of argument or exposition that systematically weighs contradictory facts or ideas with a view to the resolution of their real or apparent contradictions. Zeno employed this method to defend the philosophical ideas of Parmenides, *his master.*

***Homeomeries*** : It is the "seeds" of all things. *Homeomeries* remains qualitatively the same even if they are divided into smaller and smaller parts. This term was used by Anaxagors (christened by Aristotle) to explain the reality of change.

***Sophism/sophistry*** : A deliberate and conscious invalid argument demonstrating ingenuity in reasoning, usually to mislead someone. It is also tendency "to deny the absolute and objective character of truth easily leads to the consequences that, instead of trying to *convince* anyone, the sophist/[sophistry] will try to *persuade* him or talk him over."

***Rhetoric*** : An art of persuading others by undermining logical arguments and emphasizing mere words in the arguments. It is a presentation of a subject than to the subject itself. The later sophists used this method of communication to advance their political ambitions.

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