

WESTERN PHILOSOPHY AND THE LIFE-GROUND

G. Baruchello

University of Akureyri, Iceland

Keywords: abstraction, agrarianism, capitalism, cruelty, elitism, embodiment, ensoulment, existentialism, language, liberalism, life-ground, materialism, mysticism, otherworldliness, pantheism, skepticism, socialism, spirit

Contents

1. The Life-Ground in Western Philosophy Via Negativa
 - 1.1. Rarefying the Life-Ground: the Ideal Turn of Ancient Philosophy
 - 1.2. The Otherworldly Horizon: the Long-Lasting Legacy of Socrates and Plato
 - 1.3. The Modern Separation from the Life-Ground: Kant's Copernican Revolution
 - 1.4. Rarefying Western Philosophy: the Linguistic Turn of the Twentieth Century
2. The Life-ground in Western Philosophy Via Positiva
 - 2.1. Western Philosophy as the Mother of All Sciences
 - 2.2. Western Philosophy Reclaiming the Life-Ground in Human Conduct
 - 2.3. Western Philosophy and the Life-Revealing Given of Existence
3. Conclusion : Seeing the Light

Glossary

Bibliography

Biographical Sketch

Summary

For Western philosophy, “life support systems” (LSS) may be assumed to mean merely emergency medical devices, because there is no category for life’s ecological and social infrastructures in its canon. Western philosophy’s second-order realm of concepts, principles and arguments are in this way essentially decoupled from the encompassing social and environmental systems that lie presupposed beneath its reflective inquiries. While every moment of human existence silently depends on and expresses these very LSS—the life-ground standpoint adopted in this chapter—philosophy’s discourses make them disappear before our eyes as, to employ an often-used term, the mere “furniture of the world.” Accordingly, a “life-value turn” to connect the regulating agency of human thought to its systemic effects, or alternatives, of world construction is an emergent turn for Western philosophy, which we may derive from its very abdication of it, a mind-world dualism underpins most of its 2500-year development after the Pre-Socratics. From Plato on, there is a realm of pure concepts and reasoned visions dwelling above the world of corporeal interests, prejudices and certain death, which seeks to transcend its confused self-desires, illusions and fleeting changes, but does so in peerlessly diverse ways that illuminate our earthly lot—as explained ahead.

The standpoint advanced here is that philosophy must take account of humanity’s natural and social LSS to comprehend how they may be understood to enable broader and deeper ranges of life in a sustainable manner. Yet, this home truth requires a

profound meta-shift in philosophy's received perspective. The task of the following account of Western philosophy over 2600 years is, thus, to move beyond the established categories of interpretation to new lenses of philosophical accountability and disclosure. To provide the foundational category of judgment required for this philosophical journey, the onto-axiological conceptions of "the life-ground" and the "life-value turn" by contemporary Canadian philosopher John McMurtry (b.1939) are utilized, from which Western Philosophy is mapped in the light of the EOLSS mission.

1. The Life-Ground in Western Philosophy *Via Negativa*

One of the earliest recorded thinkers from the Mediterranean area, Thales of Miletus (624—547 B.C.E.), stresses the importance of water as the ultimate "brick" with which the universe's edifice is built, as well as the indispensable "paste" that holds the edifice together, and the skilful "hand" that varies the shape of the edifice in time. Thales' search for the primary principle represents possibly the first recorded attempt to individuate a unifying notion behind the apparent plurality of natural phenomena. All following philosophical, theological, and scientific explanations share Thales' intent, though they generally disagree on his conclusion. Thales says water is the primary principle [*arché*], i.e. the fundamental constituent of reality, from which all things originate, to which all things return, and through which all change occurs. The hydrologic cycle is, for him, the entire cycle of being, which he also characterizes as living being. Thus, the primary principle—water—is the principle of life.

As Thales' philosophy is reported in the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle (384—322 B.C.E.), repeated empirical observations led Thales to reach the conclusion that 'the nurture of all creatures is moist, and that warmth itself is generated from moisture and lives by it; and that from which all things come to be is their first principle... Besides this, another reason for the supposition would be that the semina of all things have a moist nature.' Thales noticed that all living beings are generated in environments characterized by humidity (e.g. gills, eggs and uteri). Throughout their existence, all living beings need water in order to survive, so that all activities of theirs are, in relevant measure, determined by such a need, the meeting of which draws the ultimate line between their being and their being not.

Water has an analogous role to play in that world, which we would regard today as "inanimate," namely the world of geological, physical, and astronomical phenomena. Aëtius attributes to Thales the notion that 'even the very fire of the sun and the stars, and indeed the cosmos itself is nourished by evaporation of the waters.' Thales conceived of all natural phenomena as forms of life. The primary principle is said to pervade entirely, and manifest itself throughout, the universe, cutting across—and perhaps blurring—physical, geological, and biological distinctions, which we now take for granted. As Aristotle reports in his *De Anima*: 'Some think that the soul pervades the whole universe, whence perhaps came Thales' view that everything is full of gods.' Thales reveres the omnipresent living being that is made possible by water as divine.

1.1. Rarefying the Life-Ground: the Ideal Turn of Ancient Philosophy

1.1.1. The Ionians and Empedocles

Thales' search for the primary principle, its life-centeredness and its manifestations in a revered, soul-permeated, divine universe of living matter (i.e. Thales' pantheistical *hylozoism*), travels diverging paths with his Ionian disciples. Anaximander (610—546 B.C.E.) claims the primary principle to be 'the qualitatively indefinite', or 'the spatio-temporal boundless', or 'the unperceived', depending on the translation of the Greek word *apeiron*. Anaximenes (d. 528 B.C.E.), one of Anaximander's pupils, maintains the primary principle to be air [*pneuma*], which determines all natural phenomena by rarefaction and condensation. Diogenes of Apollonia (sixth century B.C.E.), probably a pupil of Anaximenes', speaks of an intelligent primary principle, which shapes throughout, orders, and vivifies the universe. Anaxagoras (500—428 B.C.E.) argues that a rational primary principle—the 'Mind' [*Nous*—flows throughout the universe regulating its existence in an orderly fashion.

One feature uniting all these thinkers and Thales is their privileged position in society. Although very little is known about their biographies, it appears that all these pre-Socratic thinkers were active in politics, which implies that they belonged to the landed or mercantile class ruling the Greek-speaking city-states spread around the Aegean and the Ionian seas. Anaximander, for instance, appears to have been the leader of the Greek colony of Apollonia.

Another feature typical of these pre-Socratic thinkers is that Thales' search for the primary principle gradually sub-divides in a number of sophisticated investigations of *physis* [nature]. Each of them approaches separately the "brick," the "paste" and the "hand" that contribute to the constitution of the edifice of the universe as well as of its many details. In this manner develop the many sub-branches of the Western intellectual endeavor and, more importantly, a shift in the intellectual attitude towards the world of nature starts to take place.

A third feature worthy of note is that Thales' more immediate followers begin to wonder increasingly about the "mind" that has conceived and/or conceives of the universe's edifice. Their focus moves away from the more tangible material aspects of the existing universe and its ability to reproduce itself in ever-changing forms (i.e. by analogy to a living organism). Instead, the focus is redirected onto the ideal features that allow for the consistent organization of the universe, our grasp of it in spite of its inherent diversity, and the immutable structure granting its continuity through time (i.e. by analogy to a geometrical theorem).

With respect to this redirection, however, Empedocles (492 — 432 B.C.E.) represents a notable exception. Like most known pre-Socratic thinkers he too was a member of the elite, as he led the democratic faction of Agrigentum. Yet, he did not pursue any shift of focus from the material to the ideal aspects of the universe. On the contrary, Empedocles spoke of four fundamental material elements—fire, earth, air and water—that unite and divide by mutual love and hatred. These four elements are said to be the 'seeds' or 'roots' of all things, hence by analogy to botanical observations. Absorbed amidst the received wisdom of ancient Western philosophy, Empedocles' theory of the four elements is to become later a standard conception of the sub-lunar world, at least until the eighteenth century, although it still informs much of today's New Age theories.

As a general trend, however, the ideal turn—away from the more tangible material aspects of reality—will prove too strong a drive to resist. As Gaston Bachelard (1884—1962) and Ivan Illich (1929—2002) have observed, generations of successive philosophers will eventually redirect Thales’ water from actual streams and seas to the Christian metaphor of baptismal redemption and to ‘H₂O’ i.e. the abstract formulation of modern chemistry. In this sense, Thales’ original philosophical enterprise could not but lose its life-centeredness, as his followers’ emphasis shifts from the embodied and dynamic features of natural life (i.e. from *poiesis* [making, generation]) to its logical and static principles of organization (i.e. to *mathesis* [learning, demonstration]). They all may keep seeing the universe as the ordered system of living nature—the Greeks’ standard conception of *kosmos*—but the focus is no longer on the living nature, but on the ordered system in abstraction. Thales’ reverence of divinity shifts away from the living, embodied realities of the observable world, preferring their intimate, “thinner” constituents that reason alone can grasp.

In McMurtry’s conceptualization for this chapter: ‘The diremption of thought from the principles regulating the life-ground to the abstracted principles in themselves as immutable directives from a higher ideal realm forms the essential dualism of Western philosophy ever after. It never fully reaches the idea of a comprehensive embodied unity of flesh and idea as an integrated open human possibility that overcomes all dualities in a oneness of life becoming the life-ground conscious of itself in human understanding’. (See *Philosophy and World Problems*).

1.1.2. Pythagoras

Pythagoras (569—475 B.C.E.), who was also a pupil of Anaximander’s, illustrates the initiation of this *mathesis*-driven trend most formidably. He understands the fundamental structure of reality to be numerical in nature, hence transforming the universe into a mathematically ordered organization of the indefinite. Individual frogs, stones and stars are turned into sets of universally valid arithmetical and geometrical properties, which only the trained mind of the philosopher can fully grasp. The study of arithmetic and geometry can give us access to something that is much more stable, certain and imperishable than what may be ascertained by any empirical observation, i.e. the compelling truths of deductive reason.

Pythagoras’ celebrated motto ‘a figure and a platform, not a figure and a sixpence’ is particularly telling, for it suggests that the study of arithmetic and geometry is a platform to reach the divine abstractions of the mind and not a tool to resolve life’s problems. The turn away of the more tangible material aspects of reality is also a value turn, not just a matter of intellectual focus. Even Pythagoras’ celebrated pacifism and vegetarianism can be ascribed to his *mathesis*-driven attitude, insofar as the murder of that which lives is a source of disharmony in the cosmos. In other words, the philosopher’s trained mind can realize that the universe, being a perfectly structured geometrical figure, ought to be kept in its proper form. Thus, the embodied life-ground becomes instrumental to the contemplation [*theoria*] of a sound universe and loses any value in itself.

With the Pythagorean school of Croton, the search for the primary principle grows not

only more abstract, but also more elitist. The sets of mathematical uniformities, into which natural reality is translated, require a very special education to be seen and appreciated. Only select groups of leisure-granted individuals, who can afford to devote themselves to a life of theoretical contemplation, are capable of this. In addition to the intellectual and axiological preferences, an aesthetic preference emerges in conjunction with his *mathesis*-driven attitude, as the removed perfection of ideal beings is opposed to the ordinarily perceived imperfection of embodied beings.

1.1.3. Heraclitus

Born in Ephesus, Heraclitus (540—480 B.C.E.) exemplifies further the growing theory-driven and elitist attitude of ancient Western philosophy.

On the one hand, Heraclitus conceives of the abstract logic of opposites of the ever-changing material universe (viz. life and death, hot and cold, day and night) as the fundamental, unifying “backbone” of reality. The world may ignite, flicker, die out and revamp ceaselessly, as though it were made of fire; yet there is logic behind its mutability. The existence and behavior of fire follow precise rules. According to Heraclitus, there is an underlying ‘Reason’ or ‘Word’ [*logos*] that gives unity to the plurality of unrepeatable phenomena of which nature seems to consist: ‘Listening not to me but to the Word it is wise to agree that all things are one.’ Heraclitus claims this abstract logic of opposites to be accessible solely to the enlightened minds of the few: ‘Of this Word’s being forever do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear and once they have heard it... Other men are unaware of what they do when they are awake just as they are forgetful of what they do when they are asleep.’

On the other hand, Heraclitus was nicknamed ‘the obscure’ because of his style. He wrote in an oracular, aphorismic style, which was meant to be accessible only to superior minds like his own. Heraclitus’ social division between the unenlightened and the enlightened, and the mounting division between the sense-experienced world of nature and its underlying reason-grasped world of principles, reflect each other. Elitism may not be evil or life-blind as such. However, by focusing on the interests and concerns of a minority, it makes life-blindness more likely, especially as regards the ways in which the few may profit from the reduction or elimination of life amongst the many (e.g. Greek slave society, Athens’ pirate economy). Besides, by placing more emphasis on the abstractions of the mind than on the basic material needs of the living, elitism may easily lead to neglect or even justify the ways in which the select few enjoy their refined life of contemplation at the expenses of the many who toil for them.

1.1.4. The Eleatics

Emblematic is the case of Parmenides (b. 510 B.C.E.), leading politician and philosopher of the city of Elea. Parmenides argues that only the one, unchangeable world discovered by reason alone *is*: ‘For it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be.’ The fleeting world of natural phenomena, of which we have sensuous experience, *is not*: it is mere appearance and it is cognitively unreliable. With Parmenides, the primacy of rational intellectual abstraction becomes paramount axiologically, socially, epistemologically, and ontologically. The world that matters is not the world of matter: it is the ideal world; it is the world to which Parmenides has

privileged access by reason. In truth, according to Parmenides' *Proemium*, there is no actual world of matter.

With Parmenides, Thales' hylozoism is vanquished completely, as life cannot pertain to the world of matter, for the world of matter is illusory. Life comes to be understood as, and reduced to, the mind's [*nous*] life of theoretical contemplation. Nothing of any relevance can be dug out of the lower material world of the senses, to which the ignorant person is enslaved. Revealingly, Thales' far too many and far too trivial gods of the biosphere disappear as well, as Parmenides' *Proemium* portrays philosophical wisdom as the gift of a goddess from the celestial sphere.

A pupil of Parmenides', Zeno of Elea (c. 490—435 B.C.E.), is famous for his logical paradoxes, which make the seemingly obvious phenomenon of motion utterly unintelligible. For instance, Aristotle's *Physics* reports one of Zeno's many puzzles, whereby 'the slower when running will never be overtaken by the quicker; for that which is pursuing must first reach the point from which that which is fleeing started, so that the slower must necessarily always be some distance ahead.' Achilles will never be able to reach the plodding tortoise, for the space between them can be divided *ad infinitum*.

With Zeno, the deductive principles of mathematical thinking wage war onto the inductive principles of empirical observation. As a result, the unity of our understanding is fractured and, more profoundly, the unity of the universe is fractured. Zeno makes us doubt the life-world and its experience itself by entangling us within the net of human abstractions as the ultimate reality, whence the world is devalued and estranged, even at the basic level of physical motion. The ideal is set into conflict with the bodily and priority is given to the former, hence with all that life-world that is not abstract thought. This prioritization is carried to a level not yet seen with any other pre-Socratic thinker but, possibly, only Zeno's mentor, Parmenides. Probably, a neologism should be coined for the Eleatics' understanding of life—*nous-zoism*—for all that is relevant, knowable with certainty, and actually existing, descends from the "higher" divine world of reason, to which the philosopher alone may attain entrance.

1.1.5. The Sophists

Zeno's contemporary, Protagoras of Abdera (c. 490—421 B.C.E.), is known as the father of relativism: 'Of all things the measure is man, of the things that are, that they are, and of things that are not, that they are not.' Relativism annihilates the universal validity of human knowledge by making it relative to the particular understanding of each particular individual or, in an alternative version, of each particular human community. For Protagoras, each 'man', or his community, is the yardstick by which all phenomena are evaluated. This is, at least, the standard interpretation of Protagoras' well-known statement quoted above, for another would be possible, which does not identify 'man' with the particular individual, but with humanity as a whole.

Gorgias of Leontini (c. 480—376 B.C.E.) similarly denies the possibility of valid universal human knowledge by highlighting how human thought is ontologically impalpable, utterly different from the physical reality that it wants to represent, and

bound to be unreliable because of the volatile interpretations of the particular individuals who entertain it.

Protagoras and Gorgias are the two most famous sophists of the golden age of Greek philosophy. Often regarded as the expression of the growing power of the urban middle class of their day, the sophists were itinerant masters of rhetoric, who were willing to train people from all social classes, as long as they could afford to pay for their costly services. In exchange for money, the sophists would help their clients to become skilled orators, in order to achieve success as, say, salespersons, politicians and lawyers. The sophists were individuals profiting from helping other individuals to achieve individual success: Pythagoras would have been disgusted. The world of human affairs was the only context they deemed relevant to explore and study. Anthropocentrism was their basic and defining assumption, probably to the point of understanding *anthropos* [human] as the particular individual.

Because of the “prostitution” of aristocratic knowledge to the layperson’s self-interest, Socrates (470—399 B.C.E.), Plato (427—347 B.C.E.) and Aristotle will criticize more or less ferociously Protagoras, Gorgias and their itinerating colleagues. The sophists’ denomination as ‘sophists’ is itself a derogatory “gift” received from these three great minds, who wanted the ‘sophists’ to be expelled from the exclusive circle of properly-called ‘philosophers.’ Indeed, the bad press received by the sophists has caused their art (i.e. rhetoric) to be regarded as a rather dubious activity, deceitful and indifferent to the pursuit of the actual truth. Western philosophers, not only in the days of classical Athens, have often desired not to be confused with the likes of Gorgias, who sold apparent truths. For centuries, Western philosophers have desired to be seen as the heralds of the actual truth, whether this be: metaphysical truth (e.g. classical and medieval philosophy), scientific truth [i.e. the role of modern philosophers as judges of properly conducted research (e.g. logical neo-positivism)], or critical truth [i.e. pertaining to the identification of the conditions for the possibility of knowledge (e.g. Kant’s transcendental idealism)].

1.1.6. The Skeptics

Not all Western philosophers have had faith in “deeper” or “higher” truths. The skeptical school of Pyrrho of Elea (c. 365—275 B.C.E.) and Timon of Phlius (c. 320—230 B.C.E.) represents the most adamant case in this direction. The name of the school reveals it: ‘skepticism’ derives from the Greek word *skepsis*, i.e. ‘doubt.’ And *epoché* or ‘suspension of judgment’ was the fundamental tenet of skepticism, which combines the distrust of the senses with the distrust of reason itself.

To put it simply, our senses are, according to skepticism, unreliable. For instance, something is hot for me, which is cold for another. In addition to this, reason itself is regarded as unreliable. For instance, the sophists’ ability to help lawyers to win cases in court by means of weak but strong-sounding arguments is just one of the many cases that display the prevailing irrationality of the human being. In brief, since we cannot know with certainty, whether inductively (i.e. by relying primarily upon the senses) or deductively (i.e. by relying primarily upon reason), we should be honest about our condition and pass no judgment at all. Furthermore, since human action is based on

belief, and belief cannot be supported by any reliable knowledge, action should be dismissed altogether. If you doubt of what you know, you will better do as little as possible.

Put in these terms, skepticism sounds extreme and, as a matter of fact, it was extreme. Pyrrho and Timon embraced an ethics of estrangement that goes under the technical term ‘apathy’ i.e. non-*pathos*. ‘Apathy’ is commonly translated as ‘indifference’, but its etymology reveals something extreme: non-feeling, numbness, absence of relationship between oneself and the surrounding environment. Significantly, Pyrrho is said to have been most consistent with this ideal of apathy: his friends accompanied him wherever he went, in order to prevent him from falling down cliffs or being trampled by carriages. As exaggerated as these stories on his account may be, they reveal the extreme consequences of ancient skepticism and, in particular, the extreme degree of indifference to life that the ethical ideal of apathy involved.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE **80 PAGES** OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: <http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx>

Bibliography

There are many resources relevant to each section of the text above. Rather than listing primary and secondary volumes concerning specific philosophers, which would be too many, what follows is a small, select group of reference materials focusing either on the history of philosophy or on the history of green thought that was particularly helpful during the completion of this text. More specific references are provided in the article-contributions of the topic area.

A. Printed resources

Anthony Kenny (ed.) (1994), *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford [Concise overview of the main figures in the history of Western philosophy]

Clarence Glacken (1967), *Traces on the Rhodian Shore: Nature and Culture in Western Thought from Ancient Times to the End of the Eighteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley. [20th-century classic in geography dealing with three fundamental philosophical issues in historical perspective: the idea of a designed earth, the idea of environmental influences on culture and the idea of humans as geographic agents]

David Boucher and Paul Kelly (eds.) (2003), *Political thinkers: from Socrates to the Present*, Oxford University Press, New York. [A comprehensive introduction to the great political theorists of the Western canon, organized by historical period and carefully referenced].

Ernan McMullin (ed.) (1965), *The Concept of Matter in Greek and Medieval Philosophy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame [Collection of essays discussing the wide array of metaphysical and ontological interpretations of material reality from ancient Greek thought to late medieval philosophy]

Ernan McMullin (ed.) (1978), *The Concept of Matter in Modern Philosophy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame. [Collection of essays discussing the wide array of metaphysical and ontological

interpretations of material reality in the modern age]

Etienne Gilson (1952), *La philosophie au moyen-âge*, Payot, Paris. [20th-century classic on the history of Western philosophy, thus including Jewish and Islamic medieval thought, from 2nd-century Christian theology to 15th-century humanism; translated in several languages]

Giovanni Reale (1991), *Storia della filosofia antica*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano [20th-century classic in five volumes on the history of ancient philosophy, both Greek and Latin, making ample use of original sources; translated in several languages]

Greg Garrard (2004), *Ecocriticism*, Routledge, London. [Original account of the emergence of self-aware green trends in recent literature and literary criticism; identifies topical areas such as “wilderness”, “apocalypse” and “dwelling”]

James Montmarquet (1989), *The Idea of Agrarianism: From Hunter-gatherer to Agrarian Radical in Western Culture*, University of Idaho Press, Moscow, Idaho [Comprehensive account of agrarian social, political and intellectual movements in the history of Western civilization]

John Deely (2001), *Four Ages of Understanding: the First postmodern Survey of Philosophy from Ancient Times to the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto. [Learned and comprehensive account of the history of Western philosophy in the light of the study of signs, identifies the birth of modern semiotics with the fracture between modernism and postmodernism]

John McMurtry (1999), *The Cancer Stage of Capitalism*, Pluto, London. [Carefully referenced analysis of contemporary globalization through the lenses of the medical paradigm of carcinogenic pathology; defines groundbreaking notions of life-ground, life-value and civil commons]

Mark Skousen (2001), *The Making of Modern Economics: the Lives and Ideas of the Great Thinkers*, Armonk, New York. [Original account of the most influential figures in modern economic thought]

Randall Collins (1998), *The Sociology of Philosophies. A Global Theory of Intellectual Change*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) [Learned and comprehensive theory of the historical dynamics of European, Chinese and Indian intellectual networks producing philosophical wisdom, characterized typically by abstraction and reflexivity]

B. Electronic resources

Enciclopedia Treccani, Istituto italiano dell'enciclopedia, Rome, (2006), <<http://www.treccani.it>> [Renown Italian encyclopedia]

Liber Liber, Biblioteca digitale progetto Manuzio, Rome, (2006), <<http://www.liberliber.it>> [Large Italian electronic library]

The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, The University of Tennessee at Martin, Martin, 2006 <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>> [Rich electronic encyclopedia devoted to philosophy]

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Stanford University, Stanford, (2006), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/>> [Rich electronic encyclopedia devoted to philosophy]

Biographical Sketch

Giorgio Baruchello is Associate Professor at the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences of the University of Akureyri. He holds a doctorate in philosophy from the University of Guelph (2002) and an Italian *laurea* degree in philosophy from the University of Genoa (1998). His research interests focus on the understanding of cruelty in the history of the Western civilization. He has published in several international journals, including *Symposium*, *Appraisal* and *Philosophy and Social Criticism*. He currently edits the Icelandic electronic journal in Nordic and Mediterranean studies *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* <<http://www.nome.unak.is>>.