Handouts- Philosophy Lecture #11

History of Greek Philosophy

1. Historical Timeline of Greek Philosophy

Greek philosophy is traditionally categorized into several eras based on intellectual and sociopolitical shifts:

- **Dark Era (1100–800 BCE):** This was an age dominated by mythology. People used myths to explain natural phenomena and human existence. Rational thinking had not yet emerged.
- **Archaic Era (800–480 BCE):** Marked the transition from mythology to naturalphilosophy. Thinkers began replacing myth with rational inquiry, focusing on natural elements and principles.
- **Classical Era (510–333 BCE):** The golden age of philosophy, with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle leading profound developments in ethics, politics, and metaphysics.
- **Hellenistic Era (323–146 BCE):** After the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek ideas spread widely. Philosophical schools became more diverse, emphasizing ethics, stoicism, and practical living.

Anaximenes (546–c.528/5 BCE)

Anaximenes was the last philosopher of the Milesian School and a student of Anaximander. He lived during a time when parts of Greece were under Persian rule and may have experienced the Ionian rebellion firsthand. Letters suggest he corresponded with Pythagoras. Like other Milesian philosophers, his central philosophical concern was to identify a single source for all things. Anaximenes proposed **air** as the fundamental element, believing it to be the origin of all existence.

Philosophically, Anaximenes shared Anaximander's view that something boundless underlies all things. However, he differed in specifying that boundless entity as air. He conceptualized the Earth as a flat disk floating in the surrounding air. According to Anaximenes, the sun and stars were created through processes of condensation and rarefaction of air.

In explaining natural phenomena:

- **Thunder and lightning** were attributed to wind escaping from clouds.
- **Rainbows** were seen as the sun's rays falling on clouds.
- **Earthquakes** resulted from the earth cracking after drying post-rain.

- **Hail** was frozen rainwater.

He believed that human beings are microcosms of the universe, with both body and soul composed of air. He accepted Anaximander's law of the unity of opposites but added that change occurs through a continuum caused by the war of opposites. His theory centered on cyclical change, governed by the movement of air. Notably, Anaximenes was the first philosopher to propose a scientific explanation for rainbows, a view not elaborated further until Aristotle.

Pythagoras (580–572 BCE)

Born on the island of Samos, Pythagoras was a legendary figure with several myths surrounding him. Some believed he was the son of Apollo and had the power to travel through time. He reportedly studied under Thales and Anaximander. Pythagoras is known for being the first person to refer to himself as a philosopher, and he established one of the earliest philosophical academies, which was later shut down due to political unrest.

Pythagoras held revolutionary cosmological ideas:

- The Earth is round.
- Planets rotate on axes around a central point.
- The Moon was termed a "counter-Earth".
- He believed in the musica universalis or harmony of the spheres, where celestial bodies move in accordance with mathematical equations that create a form of cosmic music.

He viewed religious beliefs and scientific views as deeply interconnected. Pythagoras believed in the transmigration and reincarnation of the soul, where it moves through human, animal, or plant forms until it becomes moral. He also proposed that the brain, not the heart, was the center of thought and the soul.

His number philosophy stated that the universe is based on the numbers 1 to 4, which total 10-a perfect number. He characterized odd numbers as masculine and even numbers as feminine.

Heraclitus (504–501 BCE)

Heraclitus belonged to the Eleatic school of philosophy. He came from an aristocratic family, and his philosophical insights were largely self-taught. Known as **"the Obscure"** or **"the Riddler"**, Heraclitus wrote in a deliberately complex and enigmatic style. His melancholic nature earned him the title **"the Weeping Philosopher."**

Natural Philosophy of Heraclitus

Heraclitus wrote only one known book, **"On Nature,"** which discussed the universe, politics, and theology. Like earlier philosophers, he believed in a single substance that underpins reality—

fire. He emphasized a law-like interchange of elements, governed by the principle of perpetual change, symbolized by fire and guided by Logos.

Concept of Logos

Heraclitus viewed Logos as both the natural law and the divine order of knowledge. He often used the terms God and Logos interchangeably. Though it governs everything, humans fail to fully comprehend it. For Heraclitus, Logos was the ultimate, unchangeable truth behind the world's constant transformations.

Dialectics and Change

As the father of dialectics, Heraclitus famously stated, “Everything flows.” He highlighted constant motion and change, asserting that no one can step into the same river twice. He believed that opposites coexist and interact — “We are and we are not.” According to him, fire transforms into water and earth, and vice versa, but despite the transformations, the whole remains intact.

He introduced human values into philosophy and viewed the soul as fiery in nature—limitless yet affected by our actions. A virtuous life kept the soul dry and intelligent, while drunkenness and other vices moistened and degraded it.

The Challengers of Traditional Thought

Xenophanes

A poet and religious thinker, Xenophanes critiqued traditional Greek religion, especially the immoral portrayals of gods by Homer and Hesiod. He proposed a single, unified deity that embodied the entire physical universe — often referred to as “the whole.” Considered the founder of skepticism, he distinguished opinion from knowledge, asserting that people may believe they know something when it may just be an opinion.

Xenophanes laid the groundwork for Eleatic philosophy and anticipated Aristotle’s views, questioning long-standing mythological explanations with rational, critical thought.

Parmenides (515–450 BCE)

Founder and chief figure of the Eleatic School, Parmenides is sometimes regarded as the father of metaphysics. He argued that all reality is one — unchanging, eternal, and indivisible. Movement and change are mere illusions, and truth can only be grasped through pure reason (Logos), not through unreliable senses.

He maintained that “What-is-not” cannot exist;therefore, nothing truly comes into being or perishes. Change and motion, he argued, are impossible because they imply a transition into non-being.

Empedocles (490 BCE)

Empedocles, from Sicily, were influenced by the Pythagoreans and the Eleatic School, particularly Parmenides. He, too, believed in the transmigration of the soul, stating that wise individuals who grasp life's secrets attain divine-like status and eternal peace.

He introduced the cosmogenic theory of four classical elements - earth, air, fire, and water — as the fundamental building blocks of the universe. This concept shaped Western science for centuries. He added two opposing forces that affect these elements:

- **Love** (which unites)
- **Strife** (which separates)

These forces account for all change and existence in the world. His philosophical contributions also included early insights into physics that would later be validated by scientific progress.

Founders and Challengers in Early Greek Philosophy

Founders:

- **Thales** (Water as fundamental element)
- **Anaximander**
- **Anaximenes** (Air)
- **Pythagoras** (Mathematical harmony)
- **Heraclitus** (Fire, Logos, perpetual change)

Challengers:

- **Xenophanes** (Skepticism, one God)
- **Parmenides** (Being as unchanging)

These thinkers laid the foundation for the scientific method by:

- Asking what the universe is made of
- Proposing natural explanations for phenomena
- Seeking underlying unity through monistic philosophy
- Developing theories of change, causality, and knowledge