

I. The Birth of Philosophy in Greece

1. Philosophy as a creation of the Greek genius

“Philosophy,” both in its semantic sense (that is, as a lexical term) as well as in its conceptual content, is a creation peculiar to the Greeks. In fact, in every other respect practically all the other components of Greek civilization are to be found in other peoples of the East, who achieved a certain level of progress prior to the Greeks. Whereas with respect to philosophy, there is no corresponding achievement or even something resembling it to be found. From the Greeks, the whole of the West called and still calls this unique creation philosophy.

A variety of beliefs and religious cults, artistic manifestations, knowledges and technical abilities, political institutions, and military organizations existed both in nearby Eastern peoples, who make an appearance in civilization prior to the Greeks, and also in the Greeks. It is, consequently, possible to make a comparison (if only or at least within certain limits) and to establish whether and in what measure the Greeks in these areas can be or actually have been debtors with respect to the peoples of the East. It can also be ascertained in what measure the Greeks surpassed in their various enterprises the peoples of the East. Oppositely, in the matter of philosophy, we find that it is a new phenomenon that has neither any identical counterpart in the Eastern peoples, nor anything which could be compared with the philosophy of the Greeks or which prefigures philosophy in an unequivocal way.

To emphasize this means to recognize neither more nor less that in this area the Greeks were creators, that is, that they gave to civilization something that it did not possess, and that, as we will see, will be revealed to be of such a revolutionary character as to change the course of civilization itself. Therefore, if the superiority of the Greeks with respect to the Eastern peoples in other areas is acknowledged as being of a mere *quantitative* nature, then in what concerns philosophy their superiority is instead naturally *qualitative*. He who does not consider this will end in not understanding why the civilization of the entire West has taken, under the impetus of the Greeks, a direction completely different from that of the East, further he will not understand why science originated only in the West and not in the East. In addition, he will not understand why an Easterner, when he wishes to benefit from Western science and its results, must also appropriate in a goodly measure the categories, or at the least some categories necessary to Western logic. In fact, it is precisely philosophy that created these categories and this logic, a wholly new mode of thinking; and it is philosophy that generated, in function of these categories, science itself and, indirectly, some of the principal consequences of science. To recognize this means to recognize that philosophy had the merit of making

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a truly exceptional contribution to the history of civilization. Therefore we must justify in a critical manner what we have said and must adduce some very detailed proofs.

2. The inconsistency of the thesis of a presumed derivation of philosophy from the East

Actually, there has been no lack of attempts on the part of some of the ancients or on the part of modern historians of philosophy, especially of the romantic age, as well as by well known orientalists to maintain the thesis of a derivation of Greek philosophy from the Orient on the bases of observations of various kinds and of different characters. But none of them has succeeded in their intention. The most rigorous critics, even beginning from the second half of the nineteenth century, have assembled a series of counter-arguments that at this time can be considered as incontrovertible objections to this thesis.¹

Let us examine, especially, how the idea of a presumed Eastern origin of Greek philosophy arose in ancient times. The first supporters of the Eastern origin of Greek philosophy were precisely certain Easterners, undoubtedly under the influence of a nationalistic motivation. They wanted to deny to the Greeks, and to vindicate, for their own people, that most unique title to glory resulting from the discovery of the highest form of knowledge. On the one hand, there were Egyptian priests, who during the time of the Ptolemies became acquainted with Greek thought and tried to maintain that it was derived from the preceding wisdom of the Egyptians. On the other hand, there were Jews of Alexandria who had absorbed Hellenistic culture and tried to maintain the origin of Greek philosophy from the teachings of Moses and the Prophets contained in the Bible. Next there were Greeks themselves, who gave credence to this thesis. The Neopythagorean Numenius will write that Plato is nothing other than a "Greekified Moses."² Many others would maintain an analogous thesis, especially the last of the Neoplatonists, that the teachings of the Greek philosophers were merely elaborations of doctrines of Eastern origin and originally received by Eastern priests through divine inspiration from the Gods.

But these affirmations have no historical basis for the following reasons.

a) In the ancient-classical period of the Greeks, neither historians nor philosophers give even the slightest hint of a so-called origin of philosophy from the East. Herodotus (with the exception of his derivation of Orphism from the Egyptians, which is contrary to all the evidence) says absolutely nothing. Plato, who admired the Egyptians, emphasized their practical and anti-speculative spirit, which was so contrary to the theoretical spirit of the Greeks,³ whereas Aristotle attributed to the Egyptians only the discovery of mathematics.⁴

b) The thesis of the Eastern origin of philosophy is given credence in Greece only at the time when philosophy had lost its speculative strength

and self-confidence and no longer trusted in reason, but rather in a higher revelation for its own foundation and justification.

c) Greek philosophy, on the other hand, became in its final stage a mystical and ascetic doctrine that could easily find analogies with certain prior Eastern doctrines and hence be believed to have a dependence on them.

d) In their turn the Egyptians and the Jews were able to discover coincidences between their "wisdom" and Greek philosophy only by quite arbitrary allegorical interpretations, some from Egyptian myths and some from the biblical narrative.

But why do modern scholars continue to defend the thesis of the Eastern origin of philosophy? In a certain sense it is because they accept as valid the statements of the ancients, whom we mentioned above, without taking into account their lack of credibility, that is, they do not consider what we have argued above. But, in general, it is because they give credence to the uncovering of some analogies of content and possible contacts between the Eastern peoples and particular doctrines of the Greek philosophers. Following this path scholars arbitrarily and whimsically infer imaginary conclusions that reached outlandish proportions with Gladisch.⁵ This German scholar (whom we mention because of the torturous lengths to which he forces the thesis that we are arguing against, and because he represents to a large extent the absence of a critical view that would arise from following such criteria) claims even to conclude, from the consideration of internal concordances, that the five principal Presocratic systems were derived, with few exceptions, from the five principal Eastern peoples, precisely: 1) the Pythagorean from Chinese wisdom; 2) the Eleatic from Indian wisdom; 3) the Heraclitean from Persian wisdom; 4) the Empedoclean from Egyptian wisdom; and 5) the philosophy of Anaxagoras from Judaic wisdom.

We agree that, carried to such extremes, these theses become nothing other than works of fiction; but the fact always remains that even if they become attenuated, particularized, and toned down, thus losing their fictional character, they still remain simply conjectures and, what is more, without historical foundation. In fact, they would still have to contend with the following detailed data that factually frustrates their claims to credibility.

a) It has been historically demonstrated that the Eastern peoples with whom the Greek have come in contact possessed, it is true, religious convictions, as well as theological and cosmological myths, but they did *not* possess a *scientific philosophy* in the true sense of the word. They did not possess what the Greeks themselves were the first to create, namely, philosophy. The archeological evidence that has come to light at present does not authorize us in any way to go further than this conclusion.

b) In the second place, granted also (but not conceded) that the Eastern peoples with whom the Greeks came in contact had philosophical doctrines, the possibility of communicating them to Greece would be anything but

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easy to explain. Zeller has written quite accurately: "When strictly philosophical concepts are considered, especially in the infancy of philosophy, in comparison to their connections to linguistic expression; when we remember how rarely the knowledge of foreign tongues is encountered among the Greeks, and how little on the other hand the interpreters, as a rule well versed only in commercial transactions and for the explanations of curiosities, would consequently be capable of being guides to the understanding of philosophical teachings; and when we add to all of that the fact of the utilization of Eastern writings on the part of Greek philosophers and the translation of such writings, nothing further is said that in the least merits belief; when we ask in addition through what means the doctrines of the Indians and the other peoples of the Far East could have come to Greece before Alexander, then these difficulties will be found sufficiently weighty."⁶

Note that it would be beside the point to object that the Greeks, notwithstanding this, were able to draw from the Eastern peoples certain beliefs and religious cults as well as certain arts, at least on the experiential level. In fact, such things are easier to communicate in contrast to philosophy, as Burnet has stressed, because they neither require abstract language nor the vehicle of knowledgeable men, but simply imitation: "We," writes Burnet "do not know, in the period with which we are concerned, any Greek who knows the Eastern language well enough to read an Egyptian book or even to understand the words of Egyptian priests, and only at a much later date do we hear mention of Eastern teachers who write and speak Greek."⁷

c) In the third place (and this has until now not been sufficiently attended to), many scholars who claim to uncover similarities between Eastern wisdom and Greek philosophy are victims without being fully aware of optical illusions insofar as, on the one hand, they understand the Eastern doctrines in function of Western categories and, on the other, they color the Greek doctrines in Eastern tints so that these correspondences have, in the final analysis, little or no credibility.

d) Finally, even if it could be demonstrated that certain ideas of the Greek philosophers actually had antecedents in Eastern wisdom and it could be historically proven that they attained them, such similarities would nevertheless not change the core of the problem. Philosophy, from the moment of its birth in Greece, represented *a new form of spiritual expression such that, in the moment itself in which it acquired content as a fruit of other forms of the spiritual life, it structurally transformed it*. This final remark puts us in a position, as a consequence, to also understand another very interesting fact, that is, how and why those same arts, and in particular the knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, which the Greeks received (the fact seems to be historically undeniable), from the Egyptians and from the Babylonians, respectively, were essentially transformed by them.

3. The unique theoretical transformation of the Egyptian and Chaldaic knowledges produced by the Greek spirit

It is quite beyond doubt that the Greeks derived their first knowledge of mathematics and geometry from the Egyptians. But, as has been correctly emphasized by Burnet,⁸ they were radically transformed by the Greeks.

As we can note from a papyrus of the Rhind collection, Egyptian mathematics chiefly consisted of the determination of arithmetic calculations for essentially practical purposes, e.g., the weighing of cereals and fruits, the calculation of the ways of dividing given quantities of things between a number of persons, etc. Whatever has been said to the contrary, it corresponds quite well to what Plato notes in the *Laws* about the arithmetical operations taught to children in the Egyptian schools.

Analogously, geometry had an essentially practical character (as can be inferred from the aforementioned papyrus of the Rhind collection and from Herodotus⁹), both in determining the dimensions of fields after the flooding of the Nile, and in the construction of the Pyramids or similar projects. But mathematics as the general theory of numbers and the theoretic science of geometry were created and developed by the Pythagoreans. Some scholars object to Burnet's arbitrarily positing a distinction between the theoretical and practical and, hence, between the practical interest (of the Egyptians) and the theoretical interest (of the Greeks). Thus Burnet develops a separation of the two interests that is in itself incorrect, because in the measure in which the Egyptians were able to determine their practical rules they were precisely involved in a theoretical activity. Moreover, insofar as the above is undeniable, it is still true that the prominence given to the properly theoretical aspect and the speculative clarification of mathematico-geometrical questions was the work of the Greeks. This rational procedure itself, on which philosophy was grounded, permits it to purify mathematics and geometry and to elevate them to the speculative level.

An analogous argument is true as well for the astronomy of the Babylonians, which has at times been noted. It was concerned with celestial phenomena, with the astrological purpose of foreseeing events and making predictions. Hence it had a purely utilitarian aim that was not properly scientific and speculative. Even if it has been emphasized that the conceptions of the Chaldaic astrologers implicitly contained rather important speculative concepts, as for example the notion that number is the instrument for the knowledge of all things, the notion that all things are linked by an intimate connection, and hence the idea of the unity of all things, and perhaps even the notion of the cyclical character of the cosmos and others like it, nevertheless the points made above are still true: namely, that it is the Greeks who are to be credited with having explained these concepts, and that they accomplished it in terms of their speculative spirit, that is, in virtue of the spirit that created philosophy.

4. Conclusions

At this stage of current research, it is impossible to speak of a derivation of philosophy or speculative science from the East. Certainly the Greeks took from the peoples of the East with whom they came into contact notions of various kinds and on this point the current research may bring to light new facts and new perspectives. One point is nevertheless secure, namely, that the Greeks *qualitatively* transformed whatever they received. Therefore we want to conclude with R. Mondolfo (who, it should be noted, was very insistent on the importance and positive character of Eastern influence on the Greeks and on the spiritual fecundity of that influence) as follows: "... these assimilations of elements and cultural stimuli [coming from the East] cannot at all weaken the boast of the originality of Greek thought. It has negotiated the decisive passage from technical utility and from myth to pure and disinterested science; it has first affirmed systematically the logical requirements and the speculative needs of reason. It is the true creator of science as a logical system and of philosophy as the rational awareness and solution of questions of the whole of reality and life."¹⁰

But what we have established brings to light further problems. What reasons will explain in whole or in part how and why only the Greeks, and not other civilized peoples before them, created philosophy and science? We shall now reply to this question.