

Snippets of Ancient Wisdom - from the Milesian School to Augustine

Conf. Dr. Sorin SABOU

Director, Research Center for Baptist Historical and Theological Studies

Baptist Theological Institute of Bucharest

Instructor of Biblical Studies, Liberty University

svsabou@liberty.edu

Abstract

These snippets of ancient wisdom are intended to offer an overview of major themes, methods, and contributions to knowledge in the areas of metaphysics, piety, ethics, knowledge and time. The masters like Thales, Anaximenes, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, and Augustine taught about these issues and here is a snapshot of their views.

Keywords: Milesian School, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Augustine, metaphysics, piety, ethics, time

The Milesian School

The positions of the philosophers from the Milesian school can be misinterpreted; here they are as they survived to us: 'the chief substance is water' (Thales), 'the Non-Limited is the original material of existing things' and its 'essential nature is everlasting and ageless' (Anaximander), and 'air is near to the incorporeal; and since we come into being by

an efflux from this air, it is bound to be both non-limited and rich so that it never fails' (Anaximenes).¹

These positions are blunt and unpolished, but they have to be seen as 'hypotheses'² that make you think and look again at the subject matter. The addressed problems are those of origin of all things, of the way they stand together and how they will be. The Milesian school introduced a 'non mythological way of looking at the world'³. The complexity of the surrounding world is to be explained making reference to a simple element/reality.

We can disagree with their conclusions but I would say that their contribution is more in the way they pointed us to do things: observe natural forces and processes and be ready to test your hypotheses.

The Socratic Method

The Socratic method is an inquiry in which, by engaging in a dialogue, a teacher and an interlocutor are pushing the discussion further by question and answer. It is a open ended search for knowledge which is intended to identify any possible confusion and errors. The method presupposes knowledge on the part of the participants and the role of

¹ Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, Kindle `ed.` , (2012). Kindle locations 380-390.

² Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, Kindle `ed.` , (Oxon: Routledge, 2009). 32.

³ Brooke Noel Moore and Kenneth Bruder, *Philosophy, the Power of Ideas*, Eighth `ed.` , (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011). 22.

the teacher is described, according to Socrates, by the metaphor of a 'midwife.' He is there to help when the ideas are born; he evokes knowledge.

The strengths of the method are seen in the facts that the variety of points of view always helps in refining someone's understanding of a topic. The inquiry helps at identifying errors and weak spots in an understanding. The weaknesses of such a method is that if the 'teacher' is caustic he/she can turn learners off, or even become enemies. A method like this can be applied after the research has been done and different understandings/interpretations of it are analyzed together. In this way critical thinking and reasoning help in finding errors, gaps, and confusion about the subject matter.

The Nature of Piety in Euthyphro⁴

Socrates is willing to know about piety because of his court case with Meletus. It appears that Euthyphro has some knowledge on the subject and is willing to talk to Socrates. But soon, it is seen that Euthyphro is not able to offer the answer Socrates is looking for.

Even if Socrates asks specifically, from the beginning of their conversation, about 'the nature of piety and impiety' Euthyphro can answer only in terms of actions ('piety is prosecuting anyone who is guilty of murder, sacrilege, or any similar crime; not to prosecute them is impiety.' Socrates asks for 'a more precise answer,' for 'the nature of this idea'

⁴ Plato, *Euthyphro*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyphro.html>,

and Euthyphro says that 'piety is what is dear to the gods, and impiety is that which is not dear to them.' This will not stand with Socrates because 'what is loved by gods is also hated by them,' and it is not clear if 'the pious or holy is beloved by the gods because it is holy, or holy because is beloved by the gods.'

At this point in the conversation Socrates introduces a new aspect: the relationship of piety with justice. 'Justice is the most extended notion of which piety is only a part.' Which part? 'That part which attends to the gods.' In this way 'piety or holiness is learning how to please the gods in word and deed, by prayers and sacrifices.' In the end this 'is an art.'

This dialogue ends without a final word on the matter discussed. In a sense they are back at the beginning of their discussion ('piety is dear to the gods').

Plato's Theory of the Forms

Plato's theory of forms has several fundamental points of view: the difference between reality and appearance, and between knowledge and opinion. These points of view are related in that knowledge is at the level of reality, and opinion at the level of appearance.

Reality and knowledge are about Ideas or Forms. These are made by God, they are eternal and do not change. And appearance and opinion is about the world of the senses that is temporary and does change.

Plato works with the examples of bed and tables. 'There are beds and tables in the world, but there are only two ideas or forms of them -

one the idea of a bed, the other of a table'⁵. When someone makes a bed or a table he is not the maker of these ideas themselves, because 'the maker of the image knows nothing of true existence; he knows appearances only'⁶. This relationship between the real world and the world of the senses is described in terms of 'imitation.'

The real world, the world of the forms, is apprehended by our intellect. The imitation of the real world is the world of the senses and is apprehended by our senses; the first is about pure ideas and the second is a 'confused vision'⁷.

It seems that this theory is imposed on whatever there is around us; in his overall endeavor to defend his sentenced master he conceived the ideal world, and understood our world in light of it. In this way there is knowledge, and not everything is opinion (see the Sophists). We cannot make that type of distinction between knowledge and opinion, and intellect and senses. The unity of understanding/perception/interaction with everything around us cannot be dissected in this way.

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

The Allegory of the Cave is a figure conceived by Plato to illustrate the way 'how our nature is enlightened or unenlightened'⁸. Hu-

⁵. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, (<http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>), Book X.

⁶. Plato, *Republic*. Book X.

⁷. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 109.

⁸. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

manity is seen to be in an underground den having the legs and the necks chained; they cannot move and only see what is before them. Above and behind them there is a fire blazing at a distance. They see only their shadows, the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave. In a situation like this the truth for humanity is 'nothing but the shadows of the images'⁹.

When one of them is liberated and walk towards the light outside the cave he will feel the 'distress and the pain in the eyes'¹⁰. He realizes that what he saw before was an illusion. Now he is approaching 'nearer to being'¹¹. 'His eye is turned towards more real existence'¹². Finally he will arrive 'into the presence of the sun'¹³.

This epistemological allegory is explained by Plato as follows: the prison house is the world of sight, the light of the fire is the sun, the journey upwards is the ascent of the soul into the intellectual world. This ascent from 'the below into the light'¹⁴ is with the final purpose of returning into the den to help others to come out 'into the light.' This movement 'from the world of becoming into that of being'¹⁵ is the responsibility of the leaders of the State. It is expected that they who 'have seen the beautiful and just and good in their truth' now 'must go down

⁹. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹⁰. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹¹. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹². Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹³. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹⁴. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹⁵. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

to the underground abode'¹⁶ and help others to ascent 'into the world of being.'

Aristotle's Argument for God

The main observation made by Aristotle concerning God is related to the 'final cause'. He says that 'a final cause may exist among unchangeable entities.'¹⁷ This final cause 'produces motion as being loved.' 'There is something which moves while itself unmoved, existing actually,' and this cannot be otherwise than it is. This first mover 'exists of necessity.' It is a first principle because 'its mode of being is good.' Its life is the best, 'thinking in itself' (see also Russell: 'God is pure thought'¹⁸). The act of contemplation is what is most pleasant and best. God is 'a living being, eternal, most good.'

So, this substance is 'eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things;' it is 'without parts and indivisible,' it is 'impassive and unalterable'¹⁹.

This argument regarding God seems to be the product of Aristotle's understanding of perfection. He understands perfection in terms of being unchanged, static, unalterable. Necessity is linked to change and seen as against perfection. If a substance is not like that it cannot be God.

¹⁶. Plato, *Republic*. Book VII.

¹⁷. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>, Book XII.7.

¹⁸. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 143.

¹⁹. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*. Book XII.8.

When perfection is understood in such terms love is not present, and knowledge of the world is missing. We can be 'moved to action by admiration and love of God'²⁰ but we are not loved by him; this can be a reason why Aristotle's religion is not very known.

Aristotle's Golden Mean Theory

The 'Golden Mean' theory is about intermediacy. Someone ought to choose 'not the excess nor the defect'²¹. Choosing what is equally removed from the two opposite is a 'just action'²². Someones' activity has to be marked by this standard found 'between excess and defect'²³. A virtue is 'a mean state,'²⁴ 'a settled disposition of the mind'²⁵ between two vices; it avoids to 'fall short of or exceed what is right'²⁶.

The examples of some particular vices given by Aristotle are as follows (his detailed analysis is given in *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1107.1-14): courage is the mean between fear and confidence, temperance is the mean between pleasures and pains, liberality is the mean between giving and getting money, and the greatness of soul is the mean between

²⁰ Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 144.

²¹ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, (<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>), Book VI.1.

²² Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book V.5.

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Book VI.1.

²⁴ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1106.3.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1106.15.

²⁶ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. 1106.15.

honor and dishonor. Truthfulness is the mean in respect of truth, wittiness is the mean in respect of pleasantness, and friendliness is the mean in respect of general pleasantness in life.

Even if there are areas in which this ethical theory cannot be applied ('intellectual contemplation',²⁷) I commend it for its advantages. The practical virtues are seen, according to Aristotle's theory, as balanced, evaluated, and solid. It is doable when people are self-critical, wise, and interested in the general good of society.

Epicurus' Metaphysics

This is a reconstruct mainly from a poem (*De rerum natura*) by the disciple Lucretius in the last days of Roman republic²⁸.

The reality is seen in terms of 'atoms and the void'²⁹. At this point Epicurus follows Democritus. These atoms are moving in the void³⁰. This movement, because of the weight of atoms, is mainly downward but randomly, also, sideways³¹. These aspects of 'weight' and 'swerve' are modifications of Democritus understanding of atoms. Movement is possible because of the 'void' (the empty space).

²⁷. See Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 148-149.

²⁸. Stephen R. L. Clark, "Ancient Philosophy," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Kenny, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Kindle location 589.

²⁹. Clark, "Ancient Philosophy," Kindle location 596.

³⁰. Tim O'Keefe, *Epicurus*, (www.iep.utm.edu/epicur, 2005).

³¹. O'Keefe, *Epicurus*.

These atoms have always existed, and that is why, the universe has no beginning³². We have an unlimited number of atoms and an unlimited number of voids; that is why, the universe is unlimited in size (against Aristotle³³).

The natural phenomena are not explained in teleological terms (like Aristotle and others), but as the result of a process of natural selection³⁴. That is why, there is no destiny, 'no fear of divine wrath'³⁵; the gods have no concern of us, they are 'rational hedonists'³⁶.

Our bodies are conglomerations of atoms, 'the soul is material'³⁷, and survives death. The mind is identified as an organ which affects the body and is affected by the body³⁸.

Augustine's theory of time

For Augustine the time itself is created by God: 'there was no time before heaven and earth'³⁹; there is no 'then' where there is no time.

³². O'Keefe, *Epicurus*.

³³. O'Keefe, *Epicurus*.

³⁴. O'Keefe, *Epicurus*.

³⁵. cf. Clark, "Ancient Philosophy," Kindle location 603.

³⁶. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 206.

³⁷. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 206.

³⁸. O'Keefe, *Epicurus*.

³⁹. Augustine, *Confessions and Enchiridion*, trans. Albert C. Outler, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955). 11.13.15.

God is understood to exist in an 'ever-present eternity'⁴⁰ beyond time where his 'today' is eternity. To underlay the beginning of time and the distinction from eternity Augustine says that 'there was never a time when there was no time'⁴¹. In other words God is not coeternal with time⁴².

The nature of time is seen from the point of view of sequence: past, present, and future. The future is not yet, the past is no longer, only the present exists⁴³. Accordingly, there are only three times: 'time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future'⁴⁴. All of these are soul related as their existence is concerned: memory (time presence of things past), direct experience (time present of things present), and expectation (time present of things future)⁴⁵ (for the subjectivity of time see Russell⁴⁶ and Moore⁴⁷). This sequence of time is expressed by Augustine in a famous phrase: 'from what is not yet, through what has no length, it passes into what is no longer'⁴⁸.

⁴⁰. Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.13.16.

⁴¹. Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.13.16.

⁴². Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.13.17.

⁴³. Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.18.23.

⁴⁴. Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.20.26.

⁴⁵. Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.20.26.

⁴⁶. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*. 289.

⁴⁷. Moore and Bruder, *Philosophy*. 79.

⁴⁸. Augustine, *Confessions*. 11.21.27; see also Moore and Bruder, *Philosophy*. 79.

Bibliography

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>.

_____. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross. <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>.

Augustine. *Confessions and Enchiridion*. Translated by Albert C. Outler. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955.

Clark, Stephen R. L. "Ancient Philosophy." In *The Oxford Illustrated History of Philosophy*, edited by Anthony Kenny, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Freeman, Kathleen. *Ancilla to Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*. Kindle ed. 2012.

Moore, Brooke Noel, and Kenneth Bruder. *Philosophy, the Power of Ideas*. Eighth ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2011.

O'Keefe, Tim. *Epicurus*. www.iep.utm.edu/epicur, 2005.

Plato. *Euthyphro*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/euthyfro.html>.

_____. *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. <http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html>.

SABOU, Sorin / *Jurnal teologic* Vol 12, Nr 2 (2013): 24-36.

Russell, Bertrand. *History of Western Philosophy*. Kindle ed. Oxon: Routledge, 2009.