Materialism of the Ancient World

The birthplace of ancient philosophy was a Greek colony in Asia Minor, and this was not accidental. We know that philosophy became distinguished from the religious worldview due to conditions created by the power of exchange relations and the acceleration of technical progress. We saw how, due to both these means, people attained knowledge through trade and other avenues that did not have a traditional or, what is the same thing, sacred character. The western part of Asia Minor with its contiguous islands was a place where, very early on, trade ties developed with a number of other countries. This trade undermined the conservatism of the means of production.

Ancient trade routes ran through Asia Minor on their way from the cultured countries of the East – India, Iran, Phoenicia, and Syria – to southern Europe. This region was also connected with Egypt by land routes through Syria and Palestine and by sea routes through Crete and the small islands. In the pre-historic era, powerful colonising waves of the Greek nation poured into Asia Minor, as reflected poetically in Homer's *Iliad*. In this region, the most varied tribes of Europe, southwest Asia, and northern Africa came into contact. Their most enterprising representatives – travellers and traders – exchanged their various products, and, along with those products, their labour experience as well. It was here that the earliest Greek trading centres arose. The Ionic city of Miletus was for a long time the wealthiest of these centres; it was also the cradle of Greek philosophy. The Milesian, ‘naturalistic’ school (sixth century BCE) – whose main representatives were Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes – was the point of origin of the development of ancient philosophical thought.

We note that in the beginning, before a clear distinction appeared between separate *special* sciences, the idea of ‘philosophy’ embraced the whole sum of extra-religious knowledge. Philosophy included the germs of all sciences, which were insufficiently formed for independent existence. Naïvely bold generalisations tied this material into a more or less coherent system. But it contained only *extra-religious* knowledge. It did not contain other important knowledge that is also scientific and practical to our way of thinking, but that was still kept in the preserve of religious tradition. This was especially true of medicine, which had built up experience over millennia but which was still kept in the priestly colleges as a sacred secret.

In light of our earlier conclusions, there is nothing strange in this. Those fields of experience that advance most quickly cannot escape people’s notice.
and cannot remain within the framework of the sacred precepts of distant forefathers, and they entered the sphere of scientific-philosophical thought. Medicine, having to do with such a complicated object as the human body, proceeded by trial and error for a long time and was unable to work out any kind of exact and definite methods. Therefore its progress was slow, and it did not break out of the framework of tradition. Later on, when Hippocrates, the great physician, brought new methods and a spirit of inquiry to it, medicine naturally began to move forward from age-old conservatism and to cross over to the sphere of scientific-philosophical thought – though this process still took centuries to be completed.

Thus, the foundation of the new system of thought had to be provided by those fields of knowledge which developed the most quickly. Which in particular? Since the exchange of goods produced the first ‘secular’ knowledge, naturally that knowledge was connected with trade. This knowledge summed up the experience that had accumulated in, and served as the organising forms for, the practice of trade. Geography and astronomy were used in guiding people on trading journeys. Geometry, as a means to determine distance and direction, was a necessary method for both fields. Arithmetic and methods of accounting were also continually applied in buying and selling. Elementary physics relating to the weight of bodies, due to the role of weighing in trade, obviously developed. A certain amount of experience was subsequently gained in the realm of atmospheric phenomena, due to its importance for the fate of seafarers. To this were added fragments of experience from all branches of production, since trade, to a greater or lesser extent, brings such experience into close contact in the market, either directly through producers who bring their goods to the market or indirectly through merchants who go and buy from producers where they live.

It was on just this material that the Milesian school’s ‘investigation of nature’ was based. Very little has been preserved from them, and that which has is in the form of chance excerpts, citations by later writers, and brief indications of the general ideas of the leaders of the school. But even this little allows us to determine both the character of the knowledge this school gathered together and also its philosophical method – the means by which it attempted to bring together its experience into a unified worldview.

Regarding the origin of this school in ‘exchange’, it is characteristic that its earliest leader, Thales, came from an old merchant family. There is reason to believe that he visited Egypt in his trading journeys. There he could have attained by the way certain astronomical knowledge that was unknown to the Greeks – knowledge that was a part of the religious tradition of Egyptian priests. Legend has it that Thales predicted the solar eclipse