SOME THOUGHTS ON TO ΥΔΩΡ OF THALES AND TO ΑΠΕΙΠΟΝ OF ANAXIMANDER

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It is a privilege for me to offer this short article to the gentleman honored by this volume. Over a number of years, Jack and I have happily shared thoughts on points of common interest and even had the good fortune to collaborate with another scholar and friend on an article on a fragment of Late Egyptian sculpture.1 I take particular pleasure in contributing an essay that discusses a possible point of conjunction of Egyptian and Greek thought, a matter of great interest to Jack.

Standing as they do at the beginning of the Greek philosophical tradition, Thales and Anaximander present myriad problems for the historian of philosophy. Their writings, long lost, if ever extant,2 have come down to us in ancient commentaries that are often concerned with the writings and ideas of other philosophers who lived generations after these two early thinkers. It is difficult—in many places impossible—to determine if the words attributed to them are direct quotes or vague paraphrases. In addition, the doxographic tradition3 routinely presents the ideas of these two philosophers in a terminology that was not their making, quite possibly—even probably—distorting their original line of reasoning and rendering undue emphasis on certain given points. Attempting to establish precisely what these two men were trying to say may often seem an exercise in “looking through a glass darkly.”

Looking backwards from Aristotle through Plato and the later Presocratics to their forebears in Thales and Anaximander is not an exercise in abject futility, however, and one can appreciate some sense of where each of these two men stands in that tradition. A more intriguing question arises when we ask not what they were precursors to, but what traditions they themselves were adopting or adapting.4

Let us begin by outlining the basic cosmological theories of each of these thinkers and the routine problems one encounters in such an exercise.

For the cosmology of Thales, two passages in Aristotle form our only sources. They inform us that in Thales’ vision: (1) water is the principle of all things5 and (2) the earth floats on water.6

In his attribution to Thales that τὸ ὕδωρ (water) is the ἀρχή of all things, Aristotle used the word ἀρχή in his sense of “original constituent material” that persists as a substratum into which all will eventually return.7 We are further informed into which it is finally destroyed, the substance persisting but changing in its qualities, this they declare is the element and first principle of existing things—Over the number, however, and the form of this kind of principle they do not all agree; but Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says that it is water.” See Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 88-89.

4 Aristotle, de Caelo 294a 28f.: “Others say that the earth rests on water. For this is the most ancient account we have received, which they say was given by Thales the Milesian, that it stays in place through floating like a log or some other such thing…” See Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 88-89.

6 Aristotle, Met. 983b 20f.: “Most of the first philosophers thought that principles in the form of matter were the only principles of all things; for the original source of all existing things, that from which a thing first comes-into-being and

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3 For the ancient commentators included under this rubric, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 4-6.
4 In the study of Homeric poetry, a similar situation obtains. See G.S. Kirk, The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume I: Books 1-4 (Cambridge 1995, rep.), xvii: “The Homeric epics are in any event a special case, since they stand at the beginning of known Greek literature and the influences on them are hard, if not impossible, to gauge; while literature and culture after them were so manifestly affected by the epic background that tracing influence at every point becomes self-defeating.”
5 Aristotle, Met. 983b 20f.: “Most of the first philosophers thought that principles in the form of matter were the only principles of all things; for the original source of all existing things, that from which a thing first comes-into-being and

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that Thales posited this theory to explain how the earth remains suspended in space. According to Thales, the earth rests on water.

There seem to be no disputes or questions about the nature of τὸ ὕδωρ in the ancient commentators. The word employed by Thales, τὸ ὕδωρ, appears to be a rather generic, non-technical term. 8 In search of an answer to the question of what supports the earth, Thales thought of the waters of the sea. 9 Water was also moisture, a manifestation of the principle of moist things. 10 As a material element, water was, along with air, earth, and fire, a principle in Aristotle’s sense of the term. 11 These four elements lie at much of the heart of the discussion of the nature of things by the Presocratics, 12 and were ultimately to be posited by Empedocles as a quartet of roots that underlies all things. 13 Be that as it may, one can still argue that the word τὸ ὕδωρ seems to have been something of a catchall term for water, at least for Thales. 14

Anaximander, Thales’ successor and possibly his student, 15 posited that the principle of all things was τὸ ἀπειρόν. 16 This word is a substantive formed from the adjective ἀπειρός, one that has a range of meanings from “boundless; infinite” to “endless; circular.” 17 On what Anaximander meant by this word, both ancient and modern commentators have generally disagreed. 18 Furthermore, the statement in Simplicius that “He [Anaximander] says that it is neither water nor any of the other so-called elements but some other ‘apeiron nature’ from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them…” is noteworthy. 19 This alleged denial that the principle is water 20 sounds like a rejection by Anaximander of Thales’ basic premise.

In addition to this ostensible refutation of his predecessor’s view, it has been argued that Anaximander made an apparent shift from a material principle like water to what seems to be an immaterial one 21 when he introduced the term τὸ ἀπειρόν, usually translated “the infinite” or “the indefinite.” 22 It is this point that has received much of the attention in subsequent discussions of his philosophy, both those of the ancient commentators and of modern scholars. The fact that Anaximander’s successors seem to have returned to the material realm in which to locate the principle of all things 23 has led some modern commentators to conclude that these thinkers were explicitly rejecting his views and that Anaximander was either too forward thinking for his time 24 or even simply confused. 25

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8 The word τὸ ὕδωρ occurs as early as Homer and Hesiod. It generally seems to mean “water, of any kind, but in Hom. rarely of seawater without an epith.,” according to the entry in H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement (Oxford, 1996), 1845–1846.
9 See n. 6 above.
10 Aristotle, Met. 983b 20f.: “…taking the supposition both from this and from the seeds of all things having a moist nature, water being the natural principle of moist things.” See Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 89.
11 “The original constituent material of things, which persists as a substratum and into which they will perish.” This statement of Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 90, is based on Aristotle, Met. A3, 983b 6f.
14 The point here is not that the Greeks did not have a range of words for water, which they certainly did, but rather that Thales chose a seemingly generic, non-technical term by which to name his principle. For a somewhat more complex view, see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 91f. See also Hölscher, “Anaximander and the Beginnings of Greek Philosophy,” 306f.
16 According to the doxographical tradition, for which see n. 18 below. See as well Hölscher, “Anaximander and the Beginnings of Greek Philosophy,” 317–322.
17 Liddell and Scott, Greek-English Lexicon, 184.
18 See, for example, Simplicius Physics 24, 13: “…the principle and the element of existing things was the apeiron… He says that it is neither water nor any of the other so-called elements but some other ‘apeiron nature’ from which come into being all the heavens and the worlds in them….” See Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 106–108. Note the editors’ avoidance of a translation of the term ἀπειρόν. So also Diogenes Laertius II, 1: “Anaximander said that the unlimited is principle and element, not distinguishing it as air or water or anything else,” for which see Barnes, Presocratics 1, 32.
19 See n. 18 above.
20 It is worth noting that the only physical element specifically named by Simplicius is “water.”
21 See, for example, Barnes, Presocratics 1, 36: “What can its [the apeiron] character have been?”—“Vague and obscure, but certainly distinct from the stuffs familiar to us.”
22 On the meaning of this term, see the ensuing discussion.
23 See, for example, the claim of Anaximenes, a successor and possibly a student of Anaximander, that the material principle was “air” and “the infinite” (Diogenes Laertius II, 3), for which see Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, The Presocratics, 143. See also the discussion below.
24 See Barnes, Presocratics 1, 26–27: “Anaximander’s successors are often alleged to have betrayed his memory,