

THE BEGINNING OF
GREEK PHILOSOPHY

PART ONE

BY
MANLY P. HALL

COMPLIMENTARY WITH MONTHLY
LETTER



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Greek philosophy had its beginning with the Seven Sophists. Of these Thales was the foremost, being deeply versed in all natural wisdom, whereas the other six were honored principally for their eminence in jurisprudence, morality and ethics. The Greek word for wisdom was *sophia* and one who had raised his soul to an eminent degree of knowledge came to be called a Sophist or a wise man. It was the Seven Sophists who formulated the laws that resulted in the establishment of the Greek civilization. Upon the foundation which they laid the Hellenic states rose to superlative heights of culture, giving to the world the greatest aggregation of thinkers ever produced by a single people.

Philostratus thus defines the sophistry of the original Greeks: "We must regard the ancient sophistic art as philosophic rhetoric.

For it discusses the themes that philosophers treat of, but whereas they, by their method of questioning, set snares for knowledge, and advance step by step as they confirm the minor points of their investigations, but assert that they have still no sure knowledge, the sophist of the old school assumes a knowledge of that whereof he speaks. At any rate, he introduces his speeches with such phrases as 'I know,' or 'I am aware,' or 'I have long observed,' or 'For mankind there is nothing fixed and sure.' This kind of introduction gives a tone of nobility and self-confidence to a speech and implies a clear grasp of the truth."

The opinions of the Sophists were so varied that their thought is not susceptible of organization into any general body of doctrines. In fact, the term as originally applied, was an honorary title signifying intellectual excellence, but in no way limiting or identifying the nature of the thought.

It is generally acknowledged that many philosophers of eminent attainments were termed Sophists, but the word later fell into disrepute until it came to signify professional teachers or those who taught philosophy

for prescribed fees. Most references to the Sophists which have descended to this day originated among their adversaries, one of the chief of whom was Socrates who accused the Sophists of his time of prostituting knowledge for gain.

THALES of Miletus (5th century B. C.), of Phoenician extraction, has the distinction of being the first upon whom the title Sophos or The Wise was conferred. Thales spent the greater part of his life in travel. He was initiated into the mysteries of the Cretans, penetrated into Asia and Phoenicia, and his last and most extensive journey was to Egypt where he was instructed in the arts and sciences by the priests of the temple of Jupiter at Memphis. Being the first of the Greeks to engage in speculative learning he was regarded with special veneration, and in his fifty-ninth year was honored with the title of The Wise. Though deeply versed in occult lore, his philosophy was evolved within his own mind. Having received no aid in the interpretation of the elaborate metaphysics of the Eastern nations, he was dignified with the additional title of the Self-learned. Cicero acknowledges Thales

to be the first author of philosophy; Strabo, that he was the first of the Greeks to enquire into natural causes and mathematics; Plutarch calls him the inventor of philosophy; Justin Martyr the most ancient of philosophers; Tertullian, the first of natural philosophers.

The basic principles of the philosophy of Thales are as follows:

1—*Water is the first principle of all natural bodies, from which they come, of which they are composed, upon which they subsist, and to which they will ultimately be resolved.*

2—*Humidity, because it is present in the seed of all living creatures, is the basis of generation.*

3—*God is that which hath neither beginning nor end.*

4—*The world is full of gods and heroes which exist invisibly in the air and in their invisible states these entities are called souls.*

5—*Soul is a self-moving nature having within itself the power of moving other things.*

6—*The world is alive and God is the Soul thereof diffused through every part through the medium of water.*

BIOS had the title of The Wise conferred upon him because he purchased from slavery some captive Messinian girls and reared them as his own daughters, later giving them portions of his estate and returning them to their own parents. Bios was much given to pleading the cause of the oppressed and was famed throughout Greece for his knowledge of jurisprudence. Those who came to him seeking advice on the problems of right living invariably received this answer:

“Before you perform any act behold your own face in a mirror. If your face seems handsome, do some handsome thing that is worthy of it. If it seems ill-formed, do some beautiful deed that will supply the defect of nature.”

The death of Bios was a dramatic event. After pleading the cause of a fellow-citizen in the courts, Bios, who was very old, seated himself to await the decision of the judges. The court rendered judgment in favor of

Bios and disbanded, only to discover the aged jurist dead in his seat.

Bios was not the founder of any important philosophical system, but is honored principally because of his deep practical insight into the issues of daily life.

The following are representative of his precepts:

1—*He is indeed unfortunate who cannot bear misfortune.*

2—*It is a disease of the mind to desire after such things as cannot be reasonably obtained.*

3—*The most difficult thing to bear courageously is a change for the worse.*

4—*It is better to decide a difference between our enemies than between our friends, for in the first place one of our enemies will become a friend, but in the second place one of our friends will certainly become an enemy.*

5—*We should so live that it becomes of no moment whether life be long or short.*

6—*That leader of the state gains most glory*

who first himself obeys the laws of his state.

7—*Those who busy themselves in vain knowledge resemble owls who see only in the night (opinions), but are blind in the light (facts).*

PITTACUS combined both military and judicial power. The people of Mitelene chose him as general of their armies and later, by popular vote, elevated him to the Tyranny, the state of absolute rulership. He governed the Mitelenaeans for ten years, greatly improving the laws of the state, and at the end of that time, feeling his age unequal to the burden, resigned the government in spite of the protestations of his people. He died at the age of a hundred, according to Lucian.

Pittacus is remembered chiefly for what is called his great sentence—two simple but all powerful words: "Know opportunity." His political precepts may be summed up in his own statement, taken from Plutarch: "That ruler is indeed happy who has made his subjects afraid not of him but for him."

Being a man in high position, sorrow

weighed heavily upon the soul of Pittacus. On one occasion he was moved to say: "Reproach not the unhappy, for the hand of God is upon them."

Like Socrates, Pittacus was unhappily married, his wife being of birth and station above him. On one occasion his wife overthrew the table where he and some guests were dining. Seeing that his friends were troubled, Pittacus remarked: "Each of you has some misfortune; he is happiest who has none more serious than a nagging wife."

The following are representative of his precepts:

1—*The greatest good is to do the present thing well.*

2—*It is the duty of a wise man to foresee evil and to prevent it.*

3—*It is the duty of a valiant man to overcome evil when it is at hand.*

4—*The past is certain; that which is to come is obscure.*

5—*He who envies another is mad.*

This philosopher pardoned the murderer

of his own son, and released him to liberty, saying: "Pardon is better than penitence."

CHILON of Lacedaemonian, was a philosopher of such superior wisdom that his words ranked among the Oracles. Three of his precepts were, on the authority of Pliny, placed in the temple at Delphi, inlaid in letters of gold upon marble. These precepts were: first, that every man should know himself; second that moderation is the secret of happiness; and third that money is the cause of misery. He further declared that love and hate were the most fierce of the affections of the soul. He therefore fashioned the following precept: Love all things as though some time you might hate them, and hate all things as though some time you might love them.

Chilon once asked Aesop what Jupiter was doing. The famous writer of fables replied, "Jupiter is continually pulling down the high and raising up the low."

Chilon died embracing his son, when the youth was declared victor in the Olympian Games. The aged man's joy was so excessive that his heart was unable to stand the strain.

Among the moral sentences of Chilon are the following:

1—*The learned differ from the unlearned in that the wise have a good hope.*

2—*Three things are difficult: to conceal secrets; to make good use of leisure; and to bear the injuries of the unjust.*

3—*A ruler of the state must not think upon any transitory mortal things but only upon those things which are eternal and immortal.*

4—*If you are strong, behave mildly that you may be respected rather than feared.*

5—*Fear that man who is inquisitive into the business of others.*

6—*Let not your tongue run more swiftly than your mind.*

7—*Prefer honest loss to unjust gain.*

8—*Go slowly to the feast of your friends, but go swiftly to their misfortunes.*