

## The Emergence of Philosophical Thought Among the Greeks

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**Abstract.** *This article deals with the first beginnings of Greek philosophy and its relation with the Eastern civilizations that preceded it. If Eastern philosophy is characterized as being a religious and ethical practice, it did not liberate itself from the unseen and mythological framework, whereas Greek philosophy was able to transcend that, thus it became an analytical and methodological mentality seeking explanation through proof and rational dialectic not through myth. But this does not negate considering the Eastern civilizations as the first foundation upon which the sciences and the various Greek arts were built, a matter which indicates the factor of civilizational interpenetration in the emergence of the ancient Western civilization.*

**Keywords:** *Greek thought, Eastern thought, mythology, mystery religions*

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## Yunanlar arasında fəlsəfi düşüncənin yaranması

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**Xülasə.** *Bu məqalə yunan fəlsəfəsinin ilk başlanğıclarını və onun özündən əvvəlki Şərq sivilizasiyaları ilə əlaqəsini araşdırır. Şərq fəlsəfəsi dini və əxlaqi bir təcrübə kimi xarakterizə olunur və özünü görünməyən və mifoloji çərçivədən azad edə bilməmişdirsə də, yunan fəlsəfəsi bunu aşmış, beləliklə izahı mif vasitəsilə deyil, sübut və rəsonal dialektika vasitəsilə axtaran analitik və metodoloji bir təfəkkürə çevrilmişdir. Lakin bu, Şərq sivilizasiyalarının elmlərin və müxtəlif yunan incəsənətinin inşa edildiyi ilk təməl kimi qəbul edilməsini inkar etmir – bu məsələ qədim Qərbi sivilizasiyasının yaranmasında sivilizasiyalararası qarşılıqlı nüfuz amilini göstərir.*

**Açar sözlər:** *yunan təfəkkürü, Şərq təfəkkürü, mifologiya, gizli dinlər*

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## **Introduction**

The questioning about the original origin of philosophy is considered among the questions that were posed and are still being posed until today. Despite the continuation of this preoccupation, there remains a great ambiguity that still accompanies it and prevents the removal of the obscurity from it. Add to that the large disagreement among researchers in agreeing upon one single answer to these questions. There is no doubt that speaking about this problematic leads us to dive into the beginning of philosophical thinking in the ancient civilizations and to examine those traces and documents which they left behind.

With regard to the history of philosophy, most researchers trace the first beginnings to Thales “624 B.C.” on the basis that he was the first philosopher, and there are those who return it to before Thales, that is to the ancient Eastern civilizations. So does the emergence of philosophy go back to Greece, or to the ancient Eastern civilizations?

Speaking about philosophy and its origin leads us to speak about two opposing positions. A first position affirms that the real beginning of philosophy was with the ancient Greeks. This position is represented by Nietzsche, Zeller, and Burnet. Philosophy, according to them, is a product of the Greek mind and the essence of what characterizes this mind in terms of knowledges and particular rational skills that did not exist among others. Accordingly, it is the offspring of the Greek genius itself and that it is original, not copied from another people other than the Greeks. Bertrand Russell says: “The Greeks created mathematics, science, and philosophy, and they were the first who wrote history not as mere annals, but reflected with freedom of thought upon the nature of the world and the end of life without being bound by inherited authority. What happened was astonishing, and even in the modern age there are still those who speak about the Greek genius as if it were a miracle” (Jundi, 1989–1999, pp. 7–8).

Indeed, many of the experimental sciences which have reached a great development in the present age, the merit in founding them goes back to the ancient Greek civilization. And if there were ancient Eastern philosophical views, they were merely mythological ideas in which the religious and ethical aspect predominates. This Burnet sees in his book “The Dawn of Greek Philosophy” that we cannot speak about a philosophy among the Egyptians or the Babylonians, while the Indians their influence was secondary and does not rise to the level of being a source for Greek philosophy. In this manner many Arab researchers and thinkers supported this understanding and returned philosophy to the Greeks, and some of them refused that it should have roots extending even to the distant time of the ancient Eastern civilizations, whether it was the ancient Egyptian civilization, or the Phoenician, or the Assyrian, or the Babylonian.

As for the second position, it looked at the Greek civilization with objectivity and returned many of its origins to those who deserve merit among the nations and civilizations of the ancient East, and returned many of its origins to those who deserve merit among the nations and civilizations of the ancient East (Jundi, 1989-1999, p. 9).

Among the representatives of this position are “Diogenes Laertius” in ancient times and “Marson Osel” and “George Sarton” in modern times. According to them, the first beginnings of philosophical thinking are rooted in the ancient Eastern civilizations which presented many ideas and opinions, and answered, according to them, many of the concerns that occupied the human being of that age. George Sarton affirms that it is childish naivety to suppose that science began in the land of Greece, for it was preceded by thousands of scientific efforts in Egypt and Mesopotamia and other regions before Greece, and Greek science was more a revival than an invention. Sarton goes further when he affirms that the heritage of the Egyptian civilization and the heritage of the Mesopotamian civilization were

able to build scientific facts which we do not find in the ancient Greek heritage. The books of history mentioned the existence of many visits carried out by major Greek thinkers to the centers of civilizational radiance in the East, and among them Pythagoras, Thales, Plato, Democritus, and Herodotus, etc.

When Thales traveled to Egypt, he became acquainted there with the researches of its scholars in astronomical and mathematical questions, among them the studies of the successive cycle of eclipses and the researches of geometry which he later used in formulating the totality of his views in the field of geometry. In addition to all this, it is most probable that his theory concerning the origin of existence and his considering water as the origin of this existence was extracted by him from the ancient Egyptians (Jundi, 1989–1999, p. 9).

As for Plato, he also visited Egypt and became acquainted with the researches of its thinkers in mathematics, geometry, and astronomy. In his Dialogues there appeared the name of Egypt and what he used to hold for it of appreciation and respect. In his dialogues we find him glorifying Egyptian art and music and he acknowledges that the Greeks had adopted these arts. Whoever reads the Republic will find that Plato picked up and adopted Eastern ideas which helped him in formulating many of his ideas and theories. This is what we understand through what Karl Marx affirmed, that Plato's Republic, with regard to the division of labor as a basic pillar of the state, is only an Athenian model of the Egyptian system.

Among those who also visited Egypt and the East is Herodotus, who devoted to it a book from his works on the Persian wars, in which he analyzes the ways of transmission of Egyptian sciences and theories to Greece. He mentioned the innovations of Egypt and Babylon in the field of geometry, astronomy, and the various religions. As a result of what was known among the ancient Egyptians of the division of lands on the two banks of the Nile River and the emergence of geometry among them, we find "Herodotus" saying: "From here I see that the Greeks learned the art of measuring the area of the land, but the sundial and the gnomon and the division of the day into twelve parts came to Greece from Babylon not from Egypt" (Jundi, 1989-1999, p. 14).

## **Research**

There are other narrations which affirm the visit of great thinkers to Egypt and to the East in general, and that they took from the sciences of its people, among them Aristotle, Pherecydes, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras, and Anaximander. As the books of heritage mention, Aristotle was impressed by Egypt, by its sciences and by its civilization, as he mentioned on many occasions that Egypt was "the cradle of mathematics and that the priests invented the arts of mathematics and the sciences of surveying, calculation, and astronomy which the Greeks had begun to know" (Jundi, 1989–1999, p. 17).

If the merit of the Greeks over the civilizations that came after them is a matter that needs no proof, then there is no doubt that the Greeks are also indebted to the Eastern civilizations that preceded them with theories, views, and concepts which were a basic foundation in the formation of their sciences and their philosophy. Thus it is more appropriate to say that the sources of Greek philosophical thought go back to the peoples who preceded them, and that they afterwards worked on organizing, developing, and enriching them until they became intellectual and scientific knowledges rising to the level they intended for them. After that, the nations that followed the Greek civilization benefited from them and they were for them as a starting point for any creative work of theirs. If we return to the Greek philosophers and examine their sayings, we find that they acknowledge the merit of the Easterners over them. In this regard Herodotus mentioned his admiration for the civilization of the ancient Egyptians and its superiority in many philosophical matters such as the immortality of the soul and transmigration. In addition, the art of surveying which the ancient Egyptians used after the

flooding of the Nile to redistribute the lands is the one that developed into the science of geometry among the Greeks.

In the end we reach that these statements indicate that the emergence of philosophy among the Greeks would not have existed were it not for those preliminary foundations laid down by the ancient Eastern philosophies. The current of thought is connected in successive rings moving forward, and just as the Greeks received the torch of thought from the ancient Egyptians, they handed it to those who came after them so that the heritage in the end becomes the property of all humanity. Every nation and every civilization adds from its genius and its originality tributaries which are gathered finally by the eternal human current of thought, pulsating with life” (Matar, 1998, p. 31).

### **From Myth to Natural Thought:**

Man passed through multiple and varied stages before reaching the stage of philosophizing. It is known that his view of himself and of the external world was formed at the beginning in primitive and initial knowledges which were a mixture of myths, superstitions, epics, stories, popular religions, and natural evolutions and embodiments of the gods. Whether “myth – **mythology** – was an obscure philosophy and a vague and necessary knowledge of existence, or it was something other than philosophy, it constitutes the historical nucleus for the birth of philosophy” (Al-Khatib, 1999, p. 78). And since Greek thought, as is known, did not begin mature nor complete, but rather began surrounded by myth which swims in imagination, then what are the initial preliminaries of Greek thinking and how did it move from mythical thinking to rational thinking?

**Greek Mythology:** Before beginning to review the contents of Greek mythology, we should indicate that Greek thought passed through two essential stages: the stage of mythical thinking and the stage of rational thinking.

- **The etymological origin of the word:**

The word Mythology is composed of two parts. The first is taken from the Greek word *mutho* which means a traditional tale about gods and heroes. As for the second, *Logy*, it means science. The word “Mythology” is used to express the product of a certain people’s imagination in the form of tales and narrations. The Greeks used to call these narrations and tales *Mythoi*, meaning utterances and words (Mabrouk, 2011, p. 18).

Some also trace it back to the Arabic language and derive it from the verb “*satara*” meaning to compose and record a wondrous report. “He narrated to us” in the sense that he brought us myths, and “so-and-so embellished for so-and-so” that is he decorated for him sayings. The verb “*satara*” also means “to compose myths or stories which have no origin, wondrous accounts, extraordinary beyond what is natural and customary among humans” (Khalil, 1980, p. 8).

As for the terminological definition of the word, it is very difficult to determine the meaning of mythology with precision. In this regard Saint Augustine says in his book – *Confessions* – that “I know very well what it is, provided that no one asks me about it, but if I am asked and I wish to answer, hesitation will overcome me,” relying on deception in the notion of time and predicting the involvement of everyone who tempts himself to present a comprehensive and concise definition of myth (Mabrouk, 2011, p. 19).

What explains this difficulty is that myth is in a state of continuous change and renewal, resembling in this a living being that does not remain in a fixed condition, but itself changes, renews, and transforms. From here it was difficult to reach a definition of myth, as “*Mircea Eliade*” 1907–1986

says, that would be accepted by all scholars and be – at the same time – accessible to non-specialists: one comprehensive definition that applies to all patterns and forms of myths among all societies deeply rooted in antiquity and traditional societies (Mabrouk, 2011, p. 20).

But in general mythology refers to a new branch of knowledge concerned with the study and interpretation of myths, that is, it is a tale about beings that go beyond the conceptions of objective reason. What distinguishes it from fable is belief in it; myth is an object of belief (Khalil, 1980, p. 8).

The word “myth” in its true meaning is the expressive formula through which the Greek civilization itself spoke, beginning in poetry, chanting, and narration, then in usage and employment within the discourse of philosophy itself (Vernant, 2012, p. 15). For example, writing poetry and its crafting among the Greeks corresponds to, and even merges with, the crafting of myth, and the poet is essentially a maker of myth (Othman, 2008, p. 13).

It applies to every tale that is narrated regardless of whether it is the subject of tragedy or the plot of comedy or a fable story, and it attracts every share of the irrational in human thought. Thus we find that the word myth stands in opposition to the Greek word “logos,” just as the word imagination stands in opposition to the word logic, or as the word that narrates stands in opposition to the word that demonstrates. From here, the two words “logos,” reason, and “mythos,” that which contradicts reason, are the two halves of language, and they are two essential functions of the life of thought (Zoghaib, 1982, p. 7).

Greek mythology is represented to a large extent in narratives, poetry, art, and painting, all of which aim at knowing the origin of the world and its emergence and then attempting to explain natural phenomena, and it also works to trace the life of the gods, heroes, and mythical beings. The epics of Homer, “The Iliad and the Odyssey,” are considered among the oldest known in Greek poetry. The Iliad describes events that occurred in the last years of the Trojan War, while the Odyssey, which is shorter than the former, describes what Odysseus encountered of hardships on his way back from that war. The differences between the two epics are manifested in that “the Iliad is a story of war whereas the Odyssey revolves around peace. The concept of heroism in the Iliad is based on physical strength and military ability, while heroism in the Odyssey is founded mostly upon intelligence, mental capability, and good conduct” (Al-Khatib, 1999, p. 254).

The myths trace the causes of the Trojan War to a divine quarrel among the twelve Olympian gods and a dispute between the three goddesses “Hera,” “Aphrodite,” and “Athena” over which of them was the most beautiful, and to the act of Paris, the second son of the king of Troy, in abducting Helen of Troy, queen of Sparta, which led to the outbreak of war between Troy and Greece.

The two epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey, draw a faithful image of Greek society in the age of heroes and feudalism when “Greece was ruled by kings who claimed that they were descendants of the gods, exercising rule on the basis that it was a sacred right. They surpassed the rest of the people by their strength, bravery, wealth, and wisdom. Their subjects had to obey them blindly not only because they were descendants of the gods, but because they were the strongest of people and the most fit to rule, and could be relied upon in times of hardship” (Atiyto, 1999, p. 52).

### **Mystery Religions:**

The Greeks viewed their gods in the image of human beings, and they drew and represented them in human form and appearance, even if they were characterized by supreme and extraordinary power and exceptional beauty. This means that the gods in Homer’s poems are “mere human figures who do not differ from the rest of human beings except in the existence of that fluid which runs in their

veins and grants them immortality. The gods also possess the temperaments and morals of humans” (Al-Nashar, 1999, p. 32).

Despite the great loyalty of the Greeks to the gods, they did not find in them their desired aim in getting rid of the life of misery and poverty which they were living every day. Thus some of them turned to the ancient Eastern religions which promised individuals a life full of bliss and happiness and union with the gods. As a result secret sects arose in which the Greeks found the spiritual nourishment which they had lacked in the Olympian gods.

It is clear that the mystery religions are religions whose adherents perform obscure and ambiguous rituals restricted only to them, in order to guarantee an eternal happy life after death. There are those who define the mystery religion as “a secret celebration in which sacred symbols are revealed, and in which symbolic rites are performed that are practiced only by those who are acquainted with their secrets. These rites usually represented the suffering of one of the gods, his death and what comes after, or they commemorated this suffering, resurrection, and death in a quasi-theatrical manner, and they promise those initiates an eternal immortal life” (Al-Shenawy, 2002, pp. 172–173).

**1- The Orphic sect:** It spread during the sixth century B.C., and it is attributed to the divine poet Orpheus who was in Thrace. He was known as a musician and a religious preacher, and he visited the East and was influenced by the Eastern religions and by what he encountered there of mysticism and secrets which were not known among the ancient Greeks. The Orphic poems were not discovered until the sixth century B.C., when eight golden tablets were found, six of them in southern Italy, one in Rome, and another in Crete. Tombs bearing commandments and rituals were also discovered.

The basis of this religion is “salvation, that is the salvation of the soul from its bodily prison. It regarded the body as a defiled prison for the spirit or soul which is a divine breath. Therefore the soul, in order to return pure, must rid itself of the sins and evils of the body” (Al-Shenawy, 2002, p. 186). Orphism is connected to the god Dionysus, the god of wine, from Thrace, and the narrators consider that the reason for its remaining secret in Greece was its Asian roots which were far removed from their conditions, circumstances, and known religions at that time.

The most important Orphic ideas can be summarized in a number of views which had a profound effect on Greek philosophical thinking in its earliest beginnings:

- **The myth of creation according to the Orphics:** With regard to the origin of the world, the creation of the universe, and the reality of man in this religion, Orpheus posits water as the first principle of all. From it came mud, and from both came the serpent Heracles or Time. With Time arose Necessity, which is the law of fate and destiny that controls the whole universe. Then Time begot ether, chaos, and darkness. Then Time formed an egg in the ether, and when the egg split open there emerged from it Phanes, or Light. It is said that the egg split into two halves, one becoming the sky and the other the earth. As for Light, it is the first that the gods produced, and it is the creator of this universe and all that is in it of beings. Among its names are Zeus, Dionysus – wine – Eros – love – Pan – procreation – and Metis – intellect. Light begot a daughter who is Night. He united with her, and from them were formed the earth and the sky. The earth and the sky married and they begot three daughters and six sons” (Al-Nashar, 1999, p. 29).
- **The soul:** If we return to the question of the soul, we find that Orphism made life in the other world associated with mercy, and made life on earth associated with pain, and considered the incarnation of the soul in the body a fall for it from the other world. The Orphics say that human beings possess a good nature embodied in the human soul, whose source is Dionysus himself, and a “more evil harsh nature” represented in the human body, whose source is a group of gods called

the Titans. The soul remains imprisoned in the body as a punishment for a fault it committed during its existence beside the gods (Al-Muta'al, p. 126).

- **Purification:** The Orphics almost unanimously hold that the human being has a part in him from the earth and a part in him from the heaven, and that the pure life strengthens the heavenly part and weakens the earthly part. In order for the soul to purify itself from the sins it committed, it was in need of a spiritual guide, and Orpheus undertook this mission, directing followers and disciples in his time. However, purification from evil is not an easy matter, because one earthly life is not sufficient for that. The matter requires a series of births so that the period of purification and expiation for sins may extend to thousands of years. On this belief they organized "rituals which they used to perform at night, among them purification by bathing in milk or in water to which a substance is added that colors it like milk, offering non-bloody sacrifices, reenacting the story of Dionysus including the cutting up of a bull and eating its flesh raw, and reciting prayers similar to those found in the Book of the Dead known among the Egyptians" (Allah, *The Orphic Sect: Its Origins and Effects in the Greek World*, p. 17).
- **Transmigration and immortality among the Orphics:** According to Orphism, the human being is composed of two elements: a divine element and an earthly element. The practice of purification rites leads to the salvation of the soul from what they call the "Wheel of Birth," which means the return of the soul to the body of a human or an animal, and this is the idea of transmigration which Pythagoras also upheld. The Orphics set for the soul in its journey in the underworld certain rules inscribed on golden tablets which the dead would carry. The "soul passes by two springs at the entrances of Zeus, one on the left which it must avoid and which is the River of Forgetfulness, and the other on the right which is the River of Memory. The dead person should drink from it, and beside it are guardians. The soul must address them saying: I am the daughter of Earth and starry Heaven, I am thirsty, give me water, give me cold water from the pool of Memory. The guardians give her the water, and thus she becomes in the rank of the other heroes" (Al-Muta'al, p. 17). Finally, after a long journey, the soul meets Persephone, queen of the underworld, and the other gods, to ask to return to its first place because it has become pure and completed its liberation from the chain of births and transmigrations. If everything is in order, the soul becomes immortal and divine.
- **Ethics:** Orphism does not separate ethics from religion, and its foundation in the moral aspect is asceticism in life. Among their most important ethical principles also is respect for the sanctity of life wherever it may be found, whether concerning human beings, animals, or plants, and also the prohibition of suicide for the human being because it is considered disbelief and at the same time a withdrawal from the trial and therefore from the reward.

**2- The Eleusinian sect:** The name of this religion is derived from the city of Eleusis. This worship is represented in the myth that Pluto or Hades, god of the underworld, abducted the goddess Kore, daughter of Demeter. Demeter disguised herself in the form of an old woman and searched for her until she reached the city of Eleusis. The daughter of the king of the city, called Celeus, offered her to work as a nurse for the king's only son, Triptolemus. She accepted this and tried to repay the favor to the king's family. She healed the sick daughter and then performed strange rites in order to grant him immortality. But the child's mother was terrified when she saw the strange rituals performed by the old woman, so Demeter revealed her true divine identity, mounted her divine chariot, and disappeared from sight. However, she returned and taught the king's son the various kinds of work and traveled with him throughout the world. He grew strong and learned, and when he returned to Eleusis, Triptolemus built for the goddess Demeter a magnificent temple in which the Eleusinian worship and its rituals were practiced (Al-Shenawy, 2002, pp. 178–179).

These rituals were specific to men only and were performed in an elevated place, while women practiced these rituals separately in a special place called the Nymphaeum. It is worth noting that the Eleusinian celebratory rites can be divided into two parts: minor rites practiced in the spring and

major rites practiced in the autumn. Thus the essence of the Eleusinian sect lies in invoking the “benevolent forces in the depths of the earth represented by the goddess Demeter and her daughter Kore and uniting with them in order to guarantee for the worshippers salvation in the other life and immortality by their resurrection with her” (Al-Shenawy, 2002, p. 181). This explains the conviction among the worshippers of the possibility that a human being may undergo a symbolic death if he is initiated into those Eleusinian rites and secrets, so that he may be born again as an immortal human being.

### **The Seven Sages:**

They were a group who were reformers and lawgivers, and it was not known of them that they were philosophers. They had rational debates in guiding people and explaining the stages of the occurrence of the universe and its destiny. Each one of them had his own particular theory concerning the reality of beings. What is noticeable in their efforts is that they followed two paths: a first path which explains the reality of beings through the material substance, and a second path which explains it through the spiritual substance opposed to the material.

Their sayings became famous in all the Greek cities, and they were a symbol of cultural harmony among the Greeks, despite the disagreement of scholars regarding their number and their names. The narrations mention some agreed-upon names such as Thales, Pittacus, Bias, and Solon. Among the maxims which some historians attribute to the Seven Sages are: “Know yourself – Avoid the pleasure that gives birth to sorrow – Preserve trustworthiness in your conduct more strictly than even a promise – Do not lie and speak the truth – Do not advise your fellow citizens with what is more pleasant but with what is better – Let reason be your guide – Be gentle with your relatives” (Qarni, 1993, pp. 18–19).

### **Conclusion**

Although Greek thought began in a mythical manner influenced by the ancient Eastern myths, as this appeared clearly in the poetry of Homer and Hesiod and in the Orphic religion which drew most of its doctrinal foundations from the ancient Eastern religions in Egypt, India, and Persia, this thought was able to free itself from those myths and to move toward the study of phenomena in a material manner devoid of metaphysical explanations. As for the emergence of Greek thought, it is valid for us to say that it was born in multiple places and in varied forms, and what is called philosophizing is not exclusive to one people or one age. Rather, it is a shared act and a shared adventure. This does not mean at all diminishing the value of the Greek contribution in its creative dimension.

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