The Greek Philosophers: from Thales to Aristotle

by W. K. C. Guthrie

Page 1

CHAPTER I

GREEK WAYS OF THINKING

TO indicate the scope and aim of the following pages it will be best to say at once that they are based on a short course of lectures designed for an audience of undergraduates who were reading any subject other than Classics. It was assumed that those who were listening knew no Greek, but that an interest in some other subject, such as English, History or Mathematics (for there was at least one mathematician among them), or perhaps nothing more than general reading, had given them the impression that Greek ideas were at the bottom of much in later European thought and consequently a desire to know more exactly what these Greek ideas had been in the first place. They had, one might suppose, encountered them already, but in a series of distorting mirrors, according as this or that writer in England, Germany or elsewhere had used them for his own purposes and tinged them with the quality of his own mind and age, or, it may be, was unconsciously influenced by them in the formulation of his views. Some had read works of Plato and Aristotle in translation, and must have found parts of them puzzling because they arose out of the intellectual climate of the fourth century B.C. in Greece, whereas their readers had been led back to them from the climate of a later age and a different country.

Acting on these assumptions I tried, and shall now for any readers who may be in a similar position,

Page 2

to give some account of Greek philosophy from its beginnings, to explain Plato and Aristotle in the light of their predecessors rather than their successors, and to convey some idea of the characteristic features of the Greek way of thinking and outlook on the world. (It should be said at once that this has been done, as well as it is ever likely to be, by F. M. Cornford in *Before and After Socrates* (Cambridge University Press, 1932). The fact that this book is out of print, and under present conditions likely to remain so for some time, is the best justification for the present work. Readers who are lucky enough to obtain it, however, will find that Cornford's approach is different, and also that this book, being slightly longer, contains rather more in actual material.) I shall make little or no reference to their influence on thinkers of later Europe or of our own country. This is not due only to the limitations imposed by my own ignorance, but also to a belief that it will be more enjoyable and profitable for a reader to detect such influence and draw comparisons for himself, out of his own reading and sphere of interests. My object will be, by talking about the Greeks for themselves and for their own sake, to give the material for such comparison and a solid basis on which it may rest. A certain work on Existentialism shows, so I have read, a 'genealogical tree' of the existentialist philosophy. At its root is placed Socrates, apparently on the ground that he was the author of the saying 'Know thyself'. Apart from the question whether Socrates meant by these words anything like what the twentieth-century Existentialist means, this ignores the fact that the saying was not the invention of Socrates but a proverbial piece of Greek wisdom whose author, if one must attribute it to someone, can only be said to have been the god Apollo. At any rate it was known

to Socrates, and every other Greek, as one of the age-old precepts which were inscribed on the walls of Apollo's temple at Delphi. That it belonged to the teaching of Apolline religion is not unimportant, and the example, though small, will serve to illustrate the sort of distortion which even a brief outline of ancient thought may help to prevent.

The approach which I have suggested should have the advantage of showing up certain important differences between the Greek ways of thought and our own, which tend to be obscured when (for example) Greek atomic science or Plato's theory of the State are uprooted from their natural soil in the earlier and contemporary Greek world and regarded in isolation as the forerunners of modern atomic physics or political theory. For all the immense debt which Europe, and with Europe England, owe to Greek culture, the Greeks remain in many respects a remarkably foreign people, and to get inside their minds requires a real effort, for it means unthinking much that has become part and parcel of our mental equipment so that we carry it about with us unquestioningly and for the most part unconsciously. In the great days of Victorian scholarship, when the Classics were regarded as furnishing models, not only intellectual but moral, for the English gentleman to follow, there was perhaps a tendency to overemphasize similarities and lose sight of differences. The scholarship of our own day, in many respects inferior, has this advantage, that it is based both on a more intensive study of Greek habits of thought and linguistic usage and on a more extensive acquaintance with the mental equipment of earlier peoples both in Greece and elsewhere. Thanks in

part to the progress of anthropology, and to the work of classical scholars acute enough to see the relevance to their studies of some of the anthropologists' results, we can claim without arrogance to be in a better position to appreciate the hidden foundations of Greek thought, the presuppositions which they accepted tacitly as we to-day accept the established rules of logic or the fact of the earth's rotation.

And here it must be said frankly, though with no wish to dwell on a difficulty at the outset, that to understand Greek ways of thinking without some knowledge of the Greek language is not easy. Language and thought are inextricably interwoven, and interact on one another. Words have a history and associations, which for those who use them contribute an important part of the meaning, not least because their effect is unconsciously felt rather than intellectually apprehended. Even in contemporary languages, beyond a few words for material objects, it is practically impossible to translate a word so as to give exactly the same impression to a foreigner as is given by the original to those who hear it in their own country. With the Greeks, these difficulties are greatly increased by the lapse of time and difference of cultural environment, which when two modern European nations are in question is so largely shared between them. When we have to rely on single-word English equivalents like 'justice' or 'virtue' without an acquaintance with the various usages of their Greek counterparts in different contexts, we not only lose a great deal of the content of the Greek words but import our own English associations which are often quite foreign to the intention of the Greek. It will therefore be necessary

sometimes to introduce Greek terms, and explain as clearly as possible how they were used. If this should have the effect of enticing some to learn Greek, or refurbish any Greek which may have been learned at school and dropped in favour of other things, that will be all to the good. But the present account will continue on the assumption that any Greek word used needs to be explained.

Before going further, a few examples would perhaps be helpful to bring out my meaning when I say that if we want to understand an ancient Greek thinker like Plato it is important to know something of the history, affinities and usage of at any rate the most important of the terms which he employs, rather than resting content with loose English equivalents like ‘justice’, ‘virtue’, and ‘god’, which are all that we find in most translations. I cannot begin better than by a quotation from Cornford’s preface to his own translation of the Republic:

Many key-words, such as ‘music’, ‘gymnastic’, ‘virtue’, ‘philosophy’, have shifted their meaning or acquired false associations for English ears. One who opened Jowett’s version at random and lighted on the statement (at 549 b) that the best guardian for a man’s ‘virtue’ is ‘philosophy tempered with music’, might run away with the idea that, in order to avoid irregular relations with women, he had better play the violin in the intervals of studying metaphysics. There may be some truth in this; but only after reading widely in other parts of the book would he discover that it was not quite what Plato meant by describing *logos*, combined with *musike*, as the only sure safeguard of *arete*.

Let us take three terms which will be generally agreed to stand for concepts fundamental in the

writings of any moral or metaphysical philosopher in which they occur—the words which we translate respectively as ‘justice’, ‘virtue’, and ‘god’.

The word translated ‘justice’ is *dike*, from which comes an adjective *dikaios*, ‘just’, and from that again a longer form of the noun, *dikaiosyne*, ‘the state of being *dikaios’*. The last word is the one generally used by Plato in the famous discussion of the nature of ‘justice’ in the Republic.

Now the original meaning of *dike* may have been literally a way or path. Whether or not that is its etymological origin, its earliest significance in Greek literature is certainly no more than the way in which a certain class of people usually behaves, or the normal course of nature. There is no implication that it is the right way, nor does the word contain any suggestion of obligation. In the Odyssey, when Penelope is reminding the servants what a good master Odysseus was, she says that he never did or said anything that was cruel or overweening, nor did he have favourites, ‘as is the *dike* of lords’—i.e. it is the way they are wont to behave. When Eumaeus the swineherd entertains his master unawares, he apologizes for the simplicity of his fare by saying: ‘What I offer is little, though willingly given, for that is the *dike* of serfs like myself, who go ever in fear.’ It is, he means, the normal thing, what is to be expected. Describing a disease, the medical writer Hippocrates says, ‘Death does not follow these symptoms in the course of *dike’*, meaning simply, ‘does not normally follow’.

It was easy for such a word to slip from this purely

non-moral sense of what was to be expected in the normal course of events, and to take on something of the flavour which we imply when we speak of ‘what is expected of a man’, i.e. that he will act decently, pay his debts and so forth. This transition came about early, and in the poetry of Aeschylus, a century before Plato, *Dike* is already personified as the majestic spirit of righteousness seated on a throne by the side of Zeus. Yet it is impossible that the earlier meaning of the word should have ceased to colour the minds of the men who used it, and who as children had learned to read from the pages of Homer. Indeed a kind of petrified relic remained throughout in the use of the accusative, *diken*, as a preposition to mean ‘like’ or ‘after the manner of’.

At the conclusion of the attempts to define ‘justice’ in the Republic, after several definitions have been rejected which more or less correspond to our notions of what we mean by the word, the one which is finally accepted is this: justice, *dikaiosyne*, the state of the man who follows *dike*, is no more than ‘minding your own business’, doing the thing, or following the way, which is properly your own, and not mixing yourself up in the ways of other people and trying to do their jobs for them. Does it sometimes seem to us rather a mouselike result to be born of such mountains of discussion? If so, it may make it a little more interesting to reflect that what Plato has done is to reject the meanings of the word which were current in his own day, and with a possibly unconscious historical sense to go back to the original meaning of the word. It was rooted in the class-distinctions of the old Homeric aristocracy, where right action was summed up in a man’s

knowing his proper place and sticking to it, and to Plato, who was founding a new aristocracy, class-distinctions—based this time on a clearly thought-out division of functions determined by psychological considerations, but class-distinctions nevertheless— were the mainstay of the state.

Our second example is the word generally rendered ‘virtue’. This is *arete*. It is used in the plural as well as the singular, and the first thing to grasp about it is that, as Aristotle said, it is a relative term, not one used absolutely as the English ‘virtue’ is. *Arete* meant being good at something, and it was natural for a Greek on hearing the word to ask: ‘The *arete* of what or whom?’ It is commonly followed by a dependent genitive or a limiting adjective. (I make no apology for introducing these grammatical terms, for the point I want to bring home is that grammar and thought, language and philosophy, are inextricably intertwined, and that, while it is only too easy to dismiss something as ‘a purely linguistic matter’, there can in fact be no such thing as a divorce between the expression of a thought and its content.) *Arete* then is a word which by itself is incomplete. There is the *arete* of wrestlers, riders, generals, shoemakers, slaves. There is political *arete*, domestic *arete*, military *arete*. It meant in fact ‘efficiency’. In the fifth century B.C. a class of itinerant teachers arose, the Sophists, who claimed to impart *arete*, especially that of the politician and the public speaker. This did not mean that their teaching was primarily ethical, though the more conservative of them certainly included morality in their conception political virtue. What they wished to emphasize was its practical and immediately useful nature.

Arete was vocational, and the correspondence course in business efficiency, had it existed in ancient Greece, would undoubtedly have had the word *Arete* prominently displayed in its advertisements.

It could of course be used by itself when there was no doubt of the meaning. So used it would be understood to stand for the kind of excellence most prized by a particular community. Thus among Homer's warrior-chiefs it stood for valour. Its use by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle had an element of novelty. They qualified it by the adjective *anthropine*, 'human', thus giving it a general sense—the excellence of a man as such, efficiency in living—and surprised people by suggesting that they did not know what this was, but that it was something which must be searched for. The search meant — note the legacy of *arete* as a word of practical import — the discovery of the function — *ergon*, the work or job — of man. Just as a soldier, a politician and a shoemaker have a certain function, so, they argued, there must be a general function which we all have to perform in virtue of our common humanity. Find that out, and you will know in what human excellence or *arete* consists. This generalization, which alone brings the meaning of the word anywhere near to that of 'virtue', was to some extent an innovation of the philosophers, and even with them the influence of its essentially practical import never disappeared.

Arete then meant first of all skill or efficiency at a particular job, and it will be agreed that such efficiency depends on a proper understanding or knowledge of the job in hand. It is not therefore surprising that when the philosophers generalized the notion to include the proper performance of his

function by any human being as such, its connexion with knowledge should have persisted. Everyone has heard of the 'Socratic paradox', his statement that 'virtue is knowledge'. Perhaps it begins to look a little less paradoxical when we see that what it would naturally mean to a contemporary was more like: 'You can't be efficient unless you take the trouble to learn the job.'

The third example is the Greek word for god — *theos*. When we are trying to understand Plato's religious views, we as students of religion or philosophy attach importance to the question of whether he was a polytheist or a monotheist — two words invented, from Greek roots indeed, but in modern times, to cover a modern, non-Greek classification. We compare the words of Plato (often in translation) with those of Christian, Indian or other theologians. But perhaps it is even more important to take account of his native language, bearing in mind a good point made by the German scholar Wilamowitz that *theos*, the Greek word which we have in mind when we speak of Plato's god, has primarily a predicative force. That is to say, the Greeks did not, as Christians or Jews do, first assert the existence of God and then proceed to enumerate his attributes, saying 'God is good', 'God is love' and so forth. Rather they were so impressed or awed by the things in life or nature remarkable either for joy or fear that they said 'this is a god' or 'that is a god'. The Christian says 'God is love', the Greek 'Love is *theos'*, or 'a god'. As another writer has explained it: 'By saying that love, or victory, is god, or, to be more accurate, a god, was meant first and foremost that it is more than human , not subject to death,

everlasting ... Any power, any force we see at work in the world, which is not born with us and will continue after we are gone could thus be called a god, and most of them were.' (G. M. A. Grube, *Plato's Thought* (Methuen, 1935), p. 150.)

In this state of mind, and with this sensitiveness to the superhuman character of many things which happen to us, and which give us, it may be, sudden stabs of joy or pain which we do not understand, a Greek poet could write lines like: 'Recognition between friends is *theos'*. It is a state of mind which obviously has no small bearing on the much-discussed question of monotheism or polytheism in Plato, if indeed it does not rob the question of meaning altogether. Cornford in his inaugural lecture at Cambridge remarked that philosophical discussion in any given epoch is governed to a surprising extent by set of assumptions which are seldom or never mentioned. These assumptions are 'that groundwork of current conceptions shared by all men of any given culture and never mentioned because it is taken for granted as obvious'. He quotes Whitehead as writing: 'When you are criticizing the philosophy of an epoch, do not chiefly direct your attention to those intellectual positions which its exponents feel it necessary explicitly to defend. There will be some fundamental assumptions which adherents of all the variant systems within the epoch unconsciously presuppose.'

That is where a knowledge of the language comes in. By studying the ways in which the Greeks used their words — not only the philosophers, but poets and orators and historians in a variety of contexts and situations — we are able to get a certain insight

into the unconscious presuppositions of the epoch in which they lived.

As another example of the unconscious presuppositions of the epoch, we may remind ourselves how close were the Greeks in early times, and many of the common people throughout the classical period, to the magical stage of thought. Magic is a primitive form of applied science. Whether or not spirits or gods are thought to enter at some stage into the process, their actions are compelled by the man in possession of the proper magical technique no less than if they were inanimate objects. The sorcerer sets in train a certain sequence of events, and cause and effect then follow with the same certainty as if one took good aim with a rifle and pulled the trigger. Applied science is based on laws of nature. So was magic, though its laws were such as we have ceased to believe in. Fundamental was the law of sympathy, which posited a natural connexion between certain things which to us seem to have no such connexion at all. Its effect was that where two things are thus connected, then whatever one of them does or suffers the other will inevitably do or suffer too. This sort of connexion exists between a man and his image or portrait. It exists also between the man and anything which once was part of him like hair-trimmings or nail-parings, or even clothes which through close contact have become charged with his personality. Hence the well-known practices of ill-treating a doll which has been given the name of an enemy, or burning (with the proper incantations) his hair or a thread of his coat. Sympathy exists moreover between things or people and their names. Even to write the name of an enemy on a lead plate, transfix

it and bury it (thus consigning it to the powers of the underworld), could injure or kill him. This is a practice which, though primitive in the extreme, was rife in the neighbourhood of Athens itself in the fourth century B.C., that is, in the lifetimes of Plato and Aristotle.

To people who think like this, the name is clearly as real as the thing, and belongs very closely to it. ‘A name’, as somebody has said, ‘is as much a part of a person as a limb.’ Now Plato’s dialogue Cratylus deals with the origin of language, and is largely concerned with the question whether the names of things belong to them ‘by nature’ or ‘by convention’, whether they are attached as a natural part of the thing or only arbitrarily imposed by man. The question sounds nonsensical, and there seems to be a thick screen between us and people who could spend hours discussing it. But it becomes more interesting in the light of what I have been saying, and of the works of anthropologists like those of the French school represented by Lévy-Bruhl, who argues for what he calls the pre-logical mentality of primitive man, a stage of human development when the actual processes of thought are different from ours and what we call logic has no place. He has been criticized for this, and I think rightly. It is not that the human mind ever worked on entirely different lines, but simply that in the then state of knowledge the premises from which men reasoned were so different that they inevitably came to what are in our eyes very odd conclusions. The results are same in either case. Certain things are connected or even identified in their minds in what we regard as an unreasonable way. The point of view of

Cratylus in Plato’s dialogue betrays just the state of mind in which magical association is possible when he says: ‘It seems to me quite simple. The man who knows the names knows the things.’ Socrates asks him if he is to understand him as meaning that the man who has discovered a name has discovered the thing of which it is the name, and he agrees that that is exactly what he wants to convey. It is interesting how, when he is driven back by the argument, he finally resorts to a supernatural explanation of the origin of words: ‘I think the truest account of these matters is this, Socrates, that some power greater than human laid down the first names for things, so that they must inevitably be the right ones.’

Similar conceptions may help when we come later to consider the conception of *logos* in Heraclitus, which seems so puzzlingly to be at the same time the word he utters, the truth which it contains, and the external reality which he conceives himself to be describing, and to which he gave the name of fire. The Pythagoreans, being a religious brotherhood as well as a philosophical school, show many traces of it. The earlier of them maintained that ‘things were numbers’. To demonstrate it they said: ‘Look! 1 is a point, 2 a line, 3 a surface and 4 a solid. Thus you have solid bodies generated from numbers.’ We may call this an unwarrantable and indeed incomprehensible leap from the abstract intellectual conceptions of mathematics to the solid realities of nature. The pyramid which they have made of the number 4 is not a pyramid of stone or wood, but non-material, a mere concept of the mind. Aristotle was already too far removed from their mentality to understand it, and complained that

they ‘made weightless entities the elements of entities which had weight’. But the anthropologist tells us again: ‘Pre-logical mentality, which has no abstract concepts at command . . . does not distinctly separate the number from the objects numbered.’ Numbers in fact, like everything else — whether objects or what we should distinguish from objects as mere conventional symbols, words or names — are endowed magical properties and affinities of their own. Some knowledge of these facts should help us to approach these early Pythagoreans a little more sympathetically.

Before leaving this subject a warning must be uttered (strange as it may seem) against giving too much weight to what I have been saying. Pythagoras was not a primitive. The analogy with the primitive mind takes us a certain way and no further. He was a mathematical genius. He discovered among other things that the concordant notes in the musical octave correspond to fixed mathematical ratios, and what the ratios were. His mathematical bent had a profound influence on all his thought. Yet his unconscious assumptions were moulding it too, and the sort of considerations here put forward, if cautiously and critically applied to what we know of his doctrines, may help to let us into the secret of some of them. They must, however, be kept strictly in their place. The anthropological approach to the Greeks is so fascinating that it has led many a good scholar astray. It may be that magic and witchcraft were, as I have said, rife in Plato’s time. It is equally important that he condemned them roundly. If what I have been saying leaves the impression that the Greek thinkers were

a kind of superior medicine-men with a dash of rational thought thrown in, it will have been worse than useless. What it should do is to give some idea of the difficulties with which they had to contend, and so if anything heighten our appreciation of their achievements when we come to them. Moreover the history of Greek thought is in one of its aspects the process of emancipation from such popular preconceptions, many of which can be studied to-day among the peasants of modern Greece, and this in itself made some reference to them advisable as an introduction.

In making an historical study of the philosophy of a certain epoch, we must of course adopt a definition of the word which will apply to the thought of that time. Let us describe it therefore in a way which might not be agreed upon by all who call themselves philosophers to-day, but which is suitable in considering the philosophers of Greece. I myself should claim nevertheless, even though prepared for disagreement, that the divisions of its subject-matter which I shall adopt for our present purposes are as relevant to the intellectual problems of to-day as they were to those of the ancients.

It has two main sides, and as it reaches maturity, develops a third.

1. Speculative or scientific. This is man’s attempt to explain the universe in which he lives, the macrocosm. Nowadays the special sciences of nature have developed so far that they are distinguished from philosophy, and the latter term is reserved, in this aspect of it, for metaphysics. But we shall be speaking of a time when science and philosophy were both in their infancy and no line was drawn between them.

2. Practical (including ethical and political). The study of man himself, the microcosm, his nature and place in the world, his relations with his fellows. The motive for this is not usually, as with speculation about the nature of the universe, pure curiosity, but the practical one of finding out how human life and conduct can be improved.

Chronologically we shall find that in Greece the first appeared before the second, though here we must distinguish between casual reflections on human life and conduct, on the one hand, and moral philosophy on the other. 'Moral reflection, in consequence of the demands of life lived in common, preceded reflection about nature, whereas critical reflection on the principles of conduct, on account of these same demands, only begins late.' That remark of Henri Berr, in his preface to Robin's Greek Thought, was made with a general application. Apply it to Greece, and we see that the gnomic and didactic poetry of a Hesiod, Solon or Theognis — full of saws and aphorisms — precedes the beginnings of natural philosophy in Ionia in the sixth century. On the other hand, for anything that can be called a philosophy of human conduct — an attempt to base our actions on a systematic co-ordination of knowledge and theory — we must wait until the close of the fifth century. It comes with the Sophists and Socrates, when the first wave of enthusiasm over natural philosophy had spent itself, and the confidence of its adherents was being shaken by scepticism.

3. I said that as philosophy grows up it develops a third side. This is critical philosophy, including logic and epistemology or theory of knowledge. It is only

at a comparatively advanced stage of thought that people begin to ask themselves about the efficiency of the instruments with which they have been provided by nature for getting into touch with the world outside. What is our knowledge ultimately based on? Is it the evidence of the senses? We know that the senses may sometimes delude. Have we any proof that they ever bring us into contact with reality? Are our mental processes sound? We had better get to work on these processes themselves, analyse and test them, before we allow ourselves to think any more about the world outside. These are the questions that belong to critical philosophy. It takes thought itself for its subject-matter. It is philosophy become self-conscious. The way is paved for it as soon as a philosopher begins to doubt the evidence of the senses, as Heraclitus and Parmenides did in their different ways in Greece of the early fifth century. It did not make much progress until the later years of Plato, but it will be interesting as we go on to see the need for such a science gradually making itself felt.

Returning to the first two branches of philosophy — the metaphysical and the ethical — some philosophers will be equally interested in both and succeed in combining them in one single, integrated system. That was the aim of Plato, whose philosophic purpose was to combat two complementary tendencies of his age: (i) intellectual scepticism, which denied the possibility of knowledge on the ground that there were no lasting realities to be known: (ii) moral anarchy, the view that there were no permanent and universal standards of conduct, no higher criteria of action than what happened to seem best to a

particular man at a particular moment. As a comprehensive solution to the double problem he offered his doctrine of Forms, to which we shall come in its due place.

More commonly, different thinkers are attracted to one or other of the two sides, as Socrates to the sphere of conduct or Anaxagoras to cosmic speculations. Usually also the whole thought of a particular age will incline more to one than to the other, for it depends in part at least on the state of society. Philosophers do not think in a void, and their results may be described as a product of temperament x experience x previous philosophies.

In other words they are the reaction of a certain temperament to the external world as it presents itself to that particular man, influenced, in the case of most philosophers, by reflection on the remains of previous thinkers. And we may be sure that, just as no two men's temperaments are exactly alike, so no two men's external worlds — i.e. experience — are exactly alike.

That is why the answers to the ultimate questions of philosophy have been so widely different. Two men of contrasting temperament are bound to give different answers to philosophical questions. Indeed it is probable that the answers will not even be contradictory; they will simply be impossible to correlate at all. They will not only differ in content, they will be different kinds of answer. An example may make this clearer. Suppose two men are arguing about what the world is made of. One says it is all water, the other that it is all air. Then they are both answering the same question in the same way, and

simply giving contradictory answers. They have a basis for argument, each may adduce facts of their, common observation in support of his view, and there is a chance that one may end by convincing the other. But suppose the question — What after all is the world? — is being debated on a less crudely material, more philosophic level, and one man asserts that it is positive and negative charges of electricity, the other that it is a thought in the mind of God. It is unlikely that the two could spend a profitable hour of argument or make much progress together. They are different sorts of men. The second is probably quite ready to admit what the first says about electricity, but will not allow it to affect his answer. Similarly the first, though more likely to deny the truth of what the other says, will probably reply that it may or may not be true, but in any case is irrelevant.

The two answers belong to the two everlastingly opposed philosophical types, which betray themselves by their replies to what Aristotle called the eternal question: 'What is reality?' This is not such an impossible question as it sounds. It simply means: in considering anything, whether it be the whole Universe or a particular object in it, what do you regard as essential to it, which you would mention at once if asked the question 'What is it?' and what do you regard as secondary and unimportant? Anyone can easily find out to which of the two types he belongs. Suppose the question to be 'What is this desk?' and consider which of the two following answers appeals to you as the most immediately relevant: (a) wood, (b) something to put books and papers on. The two answers, it will be

seen are not contradictory. They are of different kinds. And the immediate and instinctive choice of one rather than the other shows one to be by temperament inclined to materialism or to teleology.

The two types may be clearly discerned among the Ancient Greeks. Some defined things with reference to their matter, or as the Greeks also called it, ‘the out-of-which’. Others saw the essential in purpose or function, with which they included form, for (as is pointed out e.g. by Plato in the Cratylus) structure subserves function and is dependent on it. The desk has the shape it has because of the purpose it has to serve. A shuttle is so shaped because it has to perform a certain function for the weaver. And so the primary opposition which presented itself to the Greek mind was that between matter and form, always with the notion of function included in that of form. And in answering the eternal question, the Ionian thinkers and later the atomists gave their reply in terms of matter, the Pythagoreans, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in terms of form.

This division of philosophers into materialists and teleologists — matter-philosophers and form-philosophers — is perhaps the most fundamental that can be made in any age, our own included. Since, moreover, both sides are clearly and vigorously represented in the Greek tradition from the start, we shall do well to keep the distinction in the forefront of our minds.