

WHY THE WATER? THE VISION OF THE WORLD BY THALES OF MILETUS

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ABSTRACT

This article is intended to show the presence of the element water in the pre-philosophical wisdom of the ancient Greeks. This provides an argument for an immaterial treatment of the element. In order to provide an insight into the philosophy of Thales, I shall gather together all preserved accounts concerning his views.

Key Words: Thales, Aristotle, the element water.

Niçin Su? Miletli Tales'in Evren Anlayışı

Bu makalenin yazılış amacı antik Greklerin felsefe öncesi hikmetlerinde su unsuru nun var olduğunu göstermektir. Bu çalışma söz konusu unsuru gayr-i maddi olarak ele alınması gerektiğini öne sürmektedir. Thales'in felsefesini daha iyi anlaşılmasını sağlamak için onun görüşleriyle ilgili bütün mevcut bilgileri bir araya getireceğiz.

Anahtar terimler: Tales, Aristo, su unsuru.

There are many inaccurate interpretations of Thales' views. They mostly come from the false assumptions regarding the element water. Others are results of the common failure of bringing together hardly or very rarely all preserved accounts concerning the views of this philosopher. Yet another error in interpreting Thales' views stems from misinterpretations of Aristotle, who grasped almost none of the first philosophers.

Thales, reputedly the first Greek philosopher, lived in Miletus at the turn of the 7th and 6th century B.C.¹ His father was Examyas² of Caria, and his mother, Cleobuline, was Greek and was famous for her riddles. Somewhat puzzling are both the Greeks' pride of the wisdom of Thales and the extraordinary scantiness of his preserved philosophical statements. The reason for this is the fact that the sage did not write.³ In the accounts about Thales we find the water as a mysterious abyss and a sage who had investigated it with his typically Greek mind. The ancient hero produces the mythical story about the water as a fruit of his efforts. Thales brought the notion of water for the first time. That was tangible proof of the power of the human mind. This notion raised the human mind above the extra-human secret, managing not to destroy it in the process, since the water – even as a notion – contains in itself enough indefiniteness not to allow sophistic intellectualization.

Thales' philosophical thoughts are preserved thanks to Aristotle and his references to the tradition, part of which was Thales. The longest mention can be found in the *Metaphysics*:

“Most of the first philosophers believed that the only principles of all things are in material form. That substance, remaining or changing only in terms of its properties, from which all existing things stem, from which they appear at the very beginning and to which they dissolve at the end, exactly that substance was considered to be an element and a principle of things. That is why they believe that there is no [absolute] emergence nor disappearance, if exactly that nature always remains...for there has to be some

¹ Diogenes Laertius writes (I, 37–39), that according to Apollodorus, Thales was born in the first year of the 35th Olympiad (640 B.C.), and died in the 58th Olympiad (548–545 B.C.) at the age of 78.

² The fact that he drew the attention of the Greeks to the usefulness of the Ursa Minor for navigational purposes supports the thesis about his Phoenician origin. Herodotus believes that the Phoenicians used this constellation for navigation before Thales, while the Greek navigators of the age used only the Ursa Major. On the other hand his engineering abilities and political influence suggest that he was a descendent of a great Miletian family. Herodotus writes that his family was of a Phoenician origin, but does not say anything further.

³ According to Simplicius, Thales wrote only the *Sailing Astronomy*. See Simplicius, *In Phys.* 23, 29. According to Diogenes Laertius he wrote not the *Sailing Astronomy*, but *On the Solistice* and *On the Equinox*. See Diogenes Laertius I, 23. Aristotle does not mention any work by Thales. Kirk and Raven, analyzing the topic of Thales's writings, do not reach any conclusion. It is very probably that there had existed some sailing manuals by Thales in written form; however, we do not know if he had written them himself or someone else had. It is hard to suppose that someone might have set down his metaphysical views in a work of that sort. See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge 1983 Polish ed. by Jacek Lang, *Filozofia presokratejska*, Warsaw 1999.

natural substance, either one or more than one, from which other things emerge, while that one remains. However not all of them say the same thing about the number and the form of that principle. Thales, initiating that philosophy, claimed that it was the water, therefore he proclaims that the earth rests upon it. He had probably taken that assumption from the observation that the nourishment of all creatures is watery, and that the warmth itself emerges from it [the water] and exists thanks to it (and that, from which all matters emerge is the principle of everything). So, on that basis he was making his assumptions, as well as on the basis of the humid nature of all seeds, with the water being the natural principle of the humid things.”⁴

Aristotle ascribes to Thales a simple inductive reasoning similar to those which he carried out himself. He was completely convinced that the first philosophers reasoned the same way as he did only a bit more primitive. “According to Aristotle, for the first philosophers, the only or the most important of the four causes was the first one – the material cause. Such an accurate analysis of the predecessors, although rightly and usefully reveals certain similarities between the philosophers of the nature, is also a source of confusion.”⁵ claim Kirk and Raven. Aristotle knew about the achievements of Thales in the field of geometry, which requires an accurate deduction, so he ascribed to him the inductive reasoning in the domain of the natural research. His other mentions of Thales are as follows:

“...others, on the other hand, [claim] that the earth rests upon water. This is the oldest view that has been transmitted to us, and allegedly had been said by Thales of Miletus. The earth remains to rest because it floats on the water like a log or something similar to it. It does not happen, however, that some of these bodies would be resting on air, it is always on water. [He says so] as if all this reasoning does not apply also to the water holding up the earth. As it seems from what they were saying, also Thales assumed that the soul is something putting things into motion, since he claimed that the stone [of magnet] has got a soul, because it moves the iron.”⁶

⁴ See Aristotle, *Metaphysica* (A) 3, 983 b 6.

⁵ See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, M. Schofield, *The presocratic philosophers*, op. cit., p. 101.

⁶ See Aristotle, *De caelo* B 13, 294 a 28.

“According to some, [the soul] is mixed in the universe; most probably because of this Thales believed that everything is full of gods.”⁷

Plutarch noted: “God is the intelligence of the world”⁸ Aristotle recognized Thales as the creator of the idea about the intelligible world, but that was the farthest he was able to go. He quotes a sentence traditionally ascribed to Thales, “the earth rests upon water” and admits that he does not understand it well, wondering that the creator of the philosophy did not perceive that the same reasoning should then be applied to the water. He reads the words of Thales in such a way that as if they were a result of a primitive induction. Aristotle is intrigued by the words, “the earth floats on the water”. He tries to accustom himself to them by adding an empirical character to their meaning. Then the words of Thales about the gods permeating the world and about the similarity of the soul to the magnet would be a remnant of the mythological image of the world. Many historians of philosophy ascribe this kind of spiritual dichotomy to the father of the philosophy. One could also treat Thales’ sentence as a confession of pantheism, which emphasizes the importance of the water as a main principle and evades Aristotle’s reproach about the lack of any basis for it. Krokiewicz writes that “the water possessed the initiative for its temporary ‘changes’ similarly to mythical Thetis.”⁹

Therefore Thales recognized it as the most important element. G. Reale ascribes pantheism to Thales, but denies that he might have acknowledged personal immortality of the soul.¹⁰ With such an interpretation, Thales’ moral sentences, assuming immortality of the human soul, lose their sense. Without this faith, the philosopher could not dare to undergo a self-reliant exploration of the world requiring some distance from the religion. The sentences ascribed to Thales by Diogenes Laertius seem to confirm this.¹¹ Thales’ words about God should not necessarily be read as a metaphor of pantheism. They could possess a meaning similar to the words of Budda Sakyamuni “the world is full of buddhas”, or those of Jesus “you are

⁷ See Aristotle, *De anima* A 5, 411 a 7.

⁸ Plutarch, *Placita philosophorum* I, 17

Cicero, *De natura deorum* I, 10, 25.

⁹ See Cicero, *De natura deorum* I, 10.

¹⁰ See G. Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica, Dalle Origini a Socrate*, Milano 1989,

Polish ed. *Historia filozofii starożytnej*, by Edward Iwo Zieliński, Lublin 1994, p. 80.

¹¹ See Diogenes Laertius, *Vioi kai gnomai ton en filosofia evdokimisanton*, I, 1; Compare J. Legowicz, *Filozofia starożytna Grecji i Rzymu*, Warsaw 1991, p. 47–48.

gods". In addition, there are no reasons to attribute lack of faith in the traditional gods to Thales. Diogenes Laertius states that, when someone asked Thales if a man who had done bad things could hide himself from gods, he allegedly answered that even one who had mere intention to do wrong would not be able to hide. These words could only be uttered by a man believing in an omni present God, and not only in the divinity of an impersonal principle, as Reale would want it.¹² Both Thales' sentence about God as the universal mind of the world and the sentence about the gods permeating the world should rather be equally acknowledged. In the sentence "the world is a work of God" we feel a great distance between the God understood in monotheistic terms, and the sensual world which could be destroyed only by traditional Gods. Here the soul became recognized as active against the passive reality of the senses. This is an echo of the orphic conviction about the superiority of the soul over the body.

Thales' accomplishment was the confidence he had in his own reason liberated from the ties of any given religion and elevating it to the rank of a partner of the cosmic *logos*. The sentence by Plutarch about God as intelligence of the world and the sentence by Cicero "Thales of Miletus...said that the water was the beginning of all things, whereas God is the mind who has given shape to everything from the water"¹³ gives expression to this leap accomplished by the human mind. We have got here one of the proofs that the notion of the spiritual being has been created on the model of the human mind. It is true that Hegel persists on the claim that the notion of *νοῦς* was not invented until Anaxagoras.¹⁴ Thales' lack of system consists in the absence of the notion of the spirit in a literal sense. This is not strange considering such an early stage of the philosophical thought. Hegel as an adherent of the development of the philosophical notions ignores the opinion of Plutarch and Cicero about God as the mind of the world. However, there are no reasons to doubt that these opinions rely upon a credible tradition. If with such an attitude we accept the sentence about the soul as a source of a force comparable to the invisible force of the magnet and the sentence about God as a mind which has shaped the world from water, it becomes

¹² See G. Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica*, op. cit., p. 75–80.

¹³ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Polish ed. by Światosław Florian Nowicki *Wykłady z historii filozofii*, Warsaw 1994-96, t I, p. 249.

¹⁴ Dembińska-Siury accepts Thales's sentence about God as intelligence and the mind of the world as authentic. See D. Dembińska-Siury, *Człowiek odkrywa człowieka*, Warsaw 1991, p. 73.

clear that we are dealing with active spiritual principle and a passive rule as a medium.

Thales chose the water as a passive medium for the intelligence of the world. His reasoning, as quoted by Aristotle in his treatise *On the Soul*¹⁵, means to claim that, if everything living is damp, then water equals life. This is however a purely biological reasoning without having anything to do with the science about God as intelligence of the world. Also the comparison of the soul to the magnet proves that the source of life and movement need not have anything in common neither with water nor with the biological life in general. Cornford, Kirk and Raven, and other researchers talk of the similarity of the water as *arche* to the Babylonian conception of underground waters. Thales learned geometry from the Egyptian priests. He is most likely acquainted with their cosmology, in which the world emerged from the primal ocean.¹⁶ The sentence that the water rests upon water possesses a structure close to the mythical visions. The way from a simple observation up to such a total vision, even with application of induction, is still a very long one. The naivety of this induction would be equally overwhelming as would be for an eminent geometrician and engineer to restrain himself on the level of a mythological vision. The only reasonable solution to this riddle is the statement that it should be understood similarly to the sentence about God also describing an all-encompassing and objective condition of the world. Consequently, Thales reached this statement not through the induction as Aristotle believes, but thanks to the power which showed him God as a world-creating force and the soul as a source of movement. Then, the sentence “the earth rests upon water” becomes a description of all sensual reality. Only in such understanding the water is a cosmic medium for a world-creating intelligence. At the same time it can be recognized by the human *logos*. The division into the active and the passive principles God and the soul on one hand¹⁷, and the water as an element on the other is more comprehensive than Guthrie’s division into

¹⁵ See Aristotle, *De anima* II, 405 b. Kirk and Raven write that Aristotle’s arguments might come from Hippon of Samos, who in the 5th century B.C. brought back to life, with certain intentions, Thales’ cosmology. See G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, op. cit., p. 102.

¹⁶ U. Holscher, *Hermes* 81 (1953), p. 385–391 and H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, 1948, p. 114. About Thales’ study of geometry in Egypt we know from Aetius, Proclus and Herodotus. See Aetios I, 3, 1. See W. Bator, *Mysł starożytnego Egiptu*, Kraków 1993, p. 13–17, see also Proclus, *In Euclidem*, p. 65. See also Herodotus II, 20.

¹⁷ See Aristotle, *De anima* A2, 405 a 19.

the formal and the material principles.¹⁸ This is simply a development of the colloquial experience of the exertion of one's own body. So we have God as a cosmic mind, and the water as a passive principle which can acquire any given sensual shape. We also have Gods whom we can regard as powers shaping the world. This is in accordance with the image of Thales as a scientist and a sage, but not an iconoclast. Nevertheless, why did he distinguish the water? Since he studied in Egypt, it is beyond doubt that he had to know the conception of the four elements, applied by Anaximenes. The water is very important for the spiritual life due to some unknown reasons. Yet the Qu'ran also says: "We have made every living thing out of water".¹⁹

The waters of Styx are the border between the world of the living and of the dead. Oaths would be taken to Styx in especially important matters, just like to Zeus or Hera. Almost every Greek hero defeated some sea monster or encountered benevolent deities living in the sea. The *Odyssey*, which shows the spiritual development of man, takes place mostly at the sea. The relation between Poseidon, the master of the seas, and Demeter symbolizing the fertility of the soil, had a great importance in the mysteries according to Pausanias. The defeated monsters of the seas invest the hero with force, and the benevolent deities like Proteus, Nereus or Geron pass him their wisdom. An analysis of the importance of the element of water in the myths and the legends shows its vitality, beneficence, rightfulness and wisdom, despite the fear and the unpredictability.²⁰ The water is always a passage from the normal world of the people to the life of the gods. Any attempt to turn into a hero connected with water and with the deities living in it always require more bravery, stamina, persistence and a penetrating mind. It is an active attitude, unlike the passive acceptance of the direct revelation of the Olympian gods. Thanks to that attitude, the hero confirms his individuality once and for all. It is not surprising that Thales, who accomplished an active connection of the human mind with the cosmic intelligence, invokes the water as a medium of passage between the human and the divine. All the analysis of the myths executed by Dobrowolski in his

¹⁸ See W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge 1962, t I, p. 233; also W.K.C. Guthrie, *Greek philosophers from Thales to Aristotle*, Paris 1950, Polish ed. by Andrzej Pawelec, *Filozofowie greccy od Talesa do Arystotelesa*, Kraków 1996, p. 21-36. Compare B. Farrington, *Greek Science*, 1953, Polish ed. by Zygmunt Glinka, *Nauka grecka*, Warsaw 1954, p. 48-9

¹⁹ The Surah Anbiya, 21:30.

²⁰ See W. Dobrowolski, *Mity morskie antyku*, Warsaw 1987, p. 61-66.

work *Mity morskie antyku*²¹ confirms the theory of Cornford about the relation of the Ionian philosophers of the nature to the preceding mythology. The image and status of the soul in Thales' conception are entirely new. In Homer the human soul is always connected with gods. It is never actually just a soul, but the whole person with its material and social situation. In Hades' underworld the souls, devoid of all that, are mere shadows of themselves. It is in Thales that, for the first time, the soul is linked to the utmost factor of the cosmic order and faces the world as an active agent. God is also another active agent. The human soul becomes active not only in the face of the world, but also in face of herself, there from: "Know yourself" and "The master controls himself". The soul becomes both a mystery and a task for herself. Thales avoids the ancient stories about the history of the world and turns towards the present.²² Only in the present can the human soul be an active agent in moral and rational sense.

The foregoing arguments sufficiently prove that the water as an element is important for spiritual life and should be conceived in immaterial terms.

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²¹ Ibidem, p. 64.

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