



An Inquiry on Ancient Natural Theology: The Milesians

► Araştırma makalesi / Research article

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Abstract

Natural theology is a branch of philosophy that employs empirical and logical methods to gain insight into the nature of God and His attributes. The fundamental structure of natural theology is derived from the tenets of religion and the essential concerns of metaphysics, a branch of philosophy. The arguments for the existence of God represent a central aspect of religious discourse. Consequently, natural theology is situated at the nexus of religion and philosophy. The investigation of the nature of God is a pursuit that has been undertaken since the earliest periods of human history. Nevertheless, within the context of Western philosophy, its roots can be traced back to the ancient Greek tradition. In the last century, there has been a tendency to approach the Pre-Socratics with a certain degree of bias. These philosophers have been viewed in two distinct ways: either as evangelists of the prophetic path or as scientists whose focus was solely on nature and who made no theological claims. This paper examines the possibility of offering an alternative interpretation of their philosophical contributions from the perspective of natural theology. It is proposed that exploring the historical context could provide new insights into studying philosophy and religion. Scholars engaged in the field of the philosophy of religion and those specializing in the history of philosophy may gain new perspectives by tracing the footprints of natural theology within the surviving fragments of the Milesian school.

Keywords: Philosophy of Religion, The Milesians, Nature, Natural Theology, Divine, God.

Antik Doğal Teoloji Üzerine Bir İnceleme: Miletliler

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Öz

Doğal teoloji; Tanrı ve sıfatlarını deneye dayalı ve mantık düşüncesi aracılığıyla anlamaya çabalayan bir felsefe dalıdır. Doğal teoloji ana çerçevesini dinden alır ve bir felsefe branşı olan metafiziğin en temel kaygısı Tanrı'nın varlığı lehine serdedilen deliller ise dinin en temel boyutunu oluşturur. Bu bakımdan doğal teoloji dinin ve felsefenin kesiştiği alanda yapılmaktadır. Tanrı'nın doğası üzerine çalışmak en az insanlık tarihi kadar eskidir, ancak Batı felsefesi söz konusu olduğunda bunun kökenlerini Antik Yunan düşüncesinde aramak gerekir. Geçtiğimiz yüzyılda Pre-sokratiklerle ilgili olarak yanlış bir okuma yapılmaktaydı. Bu filozoflar ya nebevi yolunun müjdecileri ya da yalnızca doğaya odaklanan, herhangi bir teolojik iddiada bulunmayan bilim insanları olarak kabul ediliyordu. Bu çalışmanın amacı onların felsefi çabalarının doğal teoloji perspektifinden alternatif bir okumasının imkânını tartışmaktır. Böylesi tarih okumasının hem felsefe hem de din çalışmalarına yeni bakış açıları temin edeceği düşünülmektedir. Milet okulundan arda kalan fragmanların müsaade ettiği ölçüde onlarda bir doğal teoloji düşüncesinin izlegini takip etmek hem din felsefecilerine hem de felsefe tarihçilerine yeni bakış açıları kazandırabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Din Felsefesi, Miletliler, Doğa, Doğal teoloji, Tanrısalık, Tanrı.

Introduction

The Milesians were a group of early Greek philosophers who lived in the ancient city-state of Miletus around the 6th century BC and their primary aim was to examine nature. The first Greek philosophers, Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, hailing from Miletus, established the Greek school of philosophy in antiquity and were known as the Milesians. They were known for their attempts to explain the world around them through observation and reasoning, without resorting to supernatural or divine explanations. Natural theology is one lens through which we can view the Milesians. This is a philosophical exploration of God's nature and the relationship between God and the natural world. Since they did not explicitly address natural theology as a separate discipline, we cannot refer to their investigation as natural theology. However, we can view their philosophical investigations of the world and its workings as a precursor to the natural theological traditions that subsequently emerged in Western philosophy. We can see their emphasis on observation and reason to understand the world, along with the divine implications of their findings, as an early form of natural theology.

Natural theology is concerned with using the natural world to gain insight into the nature of God. Within Christian philosophical theology, the emergence of natural theology as a distinct discipline is generally traced back to St. Augustine in the fourth century CE. He distinguished between “mythical theology” and “political theology” on the one hand, and natural theology on the other. According to Werner Jaeger, the concept of “natural theology” first appeared in St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei* and was later received by Thomas Aquinas, who transformed it into the opposing idea of “revealed religion”.¹ Since the golden age of ancient philosophy and throughout the Middle Ages until today, natural theology has been employed as a means of lending credibility to the theology of revelation and as a way to find common ground among believers of different creeds and unbelievers. Generally, the Pre-Socratics' approach, in our case the Milesians' approach, to understanding the world through observation and reason aligns with natural theology's emphasis on using the natural world as a source of understanding the divine and can therefore be read in light of natural theology.

There was, however, a reading of the history of thought at the beginning of the last century that claimed that the pre-Socratic philosophers were scientists or natural philosophers who had problems with the concept of God and the divine. It could be said that these philosophers were engaged in thinking critically about the idea of God as it was commonly held in the time they lived. This view would only be partially correct. Nevertheless, even the thinking of such thoughts could be considered a means of showing man's connection to God and the Divine. These names indeed serve as a foundation for a logos-centered approach and critically engage or address mythological thought. While some scholars have seen these philosophers as naturalistic, secular heroes, others have seen them as forerunners of the prophetic path.

However, making an honest assessment between these two-sided readings has become quite challenging. Our basic argument in this article is that these thinkers are neither naturalists nor theologians in the traditional sense. Rather, they are *truth-seeking natural theologians* who use nature as a means of reflecting on God and the divine. To put it

¹ Werner Jaeger, *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi*, çev. Güneş Ayas (İthaki Yayınları, 2020).

differently, they can be thought of as natural philosophers who are trying to create a concept of God inspired through the examination of nature.

The pursuit of empirical, logical thought regarding the presence and essence of God, outside of any revealed source, can also be broadly defined philosophically as natural theology.² In other terms, natural theology refers to the study or method of an attempt to determine God's existence and nature without the aid of any sacred text or revelation. A branch of philosophy known as philosophy of religion takes its framework from religion. The evidence for God's existence, which is a central concern of metaphysics, a branch of philosophy, is also a fundamental aspect of religion. In this sense, natural theology can be analyzed as a philosophical approach rather than a branch of theology. Philosophical theology or natural theology are other names for the body of work that resulted from the endeavor to debate God and philosophy or religion and philosophy together. For instance, when we look at the names C. Taliaferro mentions while discussing the role played by natural theology in modern philosophy, we see that the eminent names of the history of philosophy are among them. This is in line with his claim that natural theology has been dealt with since the first periods in the history of philosophy. Taliaferro adds that these names reflected a little different view of God and philosophy from their religious contemporaries because of their natural theology approach.³

This article aims to demonstrate that the concepts of God and the divine, as well as the attributes ascribed to the divine, can be understood through the lens of natural theology in antiquity. To this end, we have investigated the philosophical understanding of the Milesians, intending to identify a modern method of philosophy. The explanations advanced by these philosophers, particularly in Ancient Greek thought about God, divine, order, cosmos, harmony displayed by the universe, the explanations they advanced regarding the origin of the universe (cosmogony), as well as the application of the causality principle, evoke the notions and reasoning that proponents of natural theology frequently refer to. This article will assess the ideas advanced by Milesian natural philosophers from the standpoint of natural theology and investigate whether they practiced natural theology. The natural theology approach that I believe they advanced need not be presented from a theistic standpoint.⁴ Because we will consider the observation of nature and applying a method based on experimentation as a sufficient requirement for developing natural theology, rather than relying on any religious or theological writings when we talk about God and the Divine. The key characteristic that defines them as "natural philosophers" in this methodology is what sets them apart from the poets who told and used the myths before them.

Ancient philosophers tried to understand the universe by staying within the limits of the natural. For them the boundaries of the natural were extended to include the supernatural; there was no distinction between the natural and the supernatural in terms of the regularities

² Charles Taliaferro, "The Project of Natural Theology", *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2009), 1

³ Taliaferro, "The Project of Natural Theology", 1. Taliaferro; He says that works such as Descartes' *Meditations*, Locke's *Essays on Human Understanding*, Berkeley's *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, Leibniz's *Theodicy*, Hume's *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* can be considered within natural theology.

⁴ See for a further reading on non-theistic natural theology; Taliaferro, "the Project of Natural Theology", 18-20.

of existence.⁵ The natural philosophers' search for an archetype was essentially a search for the reason behind the changes in this universe, which functioned regularly and harmoniously according to certain laws. Since this search was both an attempt to reach from the visible to the invisible and because the universe was conceived as an order that operated according to laws, the relationship between the idea of order and the designer can be traced back to antiquity. Moreover, the conceptualizations such as order, perfection, purposiveness, and *nous* or *logos*, which the natural philosophers used to explain the *chaos-cosmos*, changed and unchanged oppositions in the cosmogonies they attempted to establish, indicate the existence of order and a purposiveness based on this order in their thought systems.⁶

The Reason for an Alternative Reading

Theology, the study of the nature of God, is as old as human history. In a sense, the search for natural theology, that is, the search for God through the appearances in the universe without referring to a revealed text, must have its origins in Greek philosophy, if we think in terms of Western philosophy. However, although some would say that the design argument or natural theology cannot take shape without scripture, it is clear that ideas about the relationship between the idea of order or design and God existed in pre-Christian thought. We are particularly concerned that in ancient Greek philosophy, we will not find a structure similar to the present form of the concept of argument. However, although one cannot see a strong metaphysical thought, it is also true that ancient natural philosophers were making efforts to find the *arche* (ἀρχή), which has a metaphysical character, starting from physics.⁷

Ancient Greek philosophy, as is undoubtedly customary, begins with the Milesian natural philosophers. It is analyzed in two distinct periods: pre-Socratic and post-Socratic. Unfortunately, the writings of both natural philosophers and philosophers belonging to other philosophical schools before Plato are not available to us today. The gap created by the absence of the writings of these philosophers cannot be overlooked. However, many historians of philosophy in the West have tried to fill the gaps in the ideas put forward by these philosophers by quoting from the books of Plato, Aristotle, and those who emerged after them and became interested in philosophy. In a sense, these fragments became the cornerstones for the reconstruction of Pre-Socratics' thought, and in the hands of "creative interpreters," they became reconstructive material.⁸ The ideas of these interpreters are partly determined by the position they occupy. It is impossible to know which of these interpretations accurately reflects the thoughts of the philosophers in question. For example, when it comes to the evidence for the existence of God and the divine, we should note that a naturalistic reading of ancient Greek thought is given by positivist thinkers. They think that the early Greek philosophers were physicists from Miletus who were not satisfied with the explanations in myths and went in search of an empirical quest and that they, like them, made sense of the universe with a physicalist and naturalist approach.⁹

⁵ F. M. Cornfrond, *Sokrates Öncesi ve Sonrası*, çev. A.M. Celal Şengör - Senem Onam (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2015), 11.

⁶ Otfried Höffe, *Felsefenin Kısa Tarihi*, çev. Okşan Nemlioğlu Aytolu (İnkılap Kitabevi, 2008), 20.

⁷ Ahmet Arslan, *İlkçağ Felsefe Tarihi 2 / Sofistlerden Platon'a* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi, 2014), 34.

⁸ Otfried Höffe, *Felsefenin Kısa Tarihi*, çev. Okşan Nemlioğlu Aytolu (İnkılap Kitabevi, 2008), 20.

⁹ Cemil Sena Ongun, *Allah Fikrinin Tekâmülü: Taassup Düşmanları ve Laiklik Kabrâmanları* (İstanbul: Semih Lütfi Sühulet Kütüphanesi, 1934), 3-7.

For example, Cemil Sena Ongun, who can be considered one of the early philosophers of religion in Modern Türkiye, in his book titled *Allah Fikrinin Tekâmülü: Taassup Düşmanları ve Laiklik Kahramanları* (*The Evolution of the Idea of God: Enemies of Fundamentalism and Heroes of Secularism*), has attempted to present a history of philosophy by centering on God. According to him, the principles put forward by these early Greek philosophers were materialistic. To him, they were not teleological in any way, nor did their philosophies have any features related to God and the divine. In this book, even though he sometimes says that the philosophers reached the idea of a God since he thinks that this can be used as a support for rationalist-idealist-teleological explanations, he will continue to stay away from this and read these philosophers as the first materialists, as Aristotle did.¹⁰

Another example of this kind of reading was done by Carlo Rovelli, a physicist and an expert on the history of philosophy. In his work, *Anaximandre de Milet ou la naissance de la pensée scientifique*¹¹, Rovelli sees Anaximander as a materialist philosopher whose philosophy cannot be read with a theological perspective. For him, it's impossible to find a thought regarding God or gods in his philosophy. Anaximander and other Milesians are the philosophers who made a restricted distinction between nature and the thoughts which refer to God.¹²

The other way of reading these early accounts is from a particular religious perspective. Those who have this perspective argue that these philosophers were trying to philosophize under the influence of an Orpheusian worldview that they inherited from the heroic period.¹³ An example of this is Yusuf Ziya İnan. He reads this period from a religious perspective and refers to the philosophers of antiquity as evangelists of Islam's understanding of monotheism.¹⁴ There is another example of these kinds of reading styles in E. Gilson. He evaluates these modes of reading through the question of how a possible synthesis can be established between Thales' statements that water is the source of everything and his statement that "all is full of gods". For him, the first way of reconciliation between Aristotle's mention of water as the *arche* of the natural philosophers, especially Thales' mention of water as the *arche*, and his statement "Everything is full of gods" is to regard God and water as identical. Gilson argues that neither Aristotle nor Thales had such an inference and that this is an obstacle to understanding it as such.

According to Gilson, J. Burnet who states that the second possible way is to transform water into God. This idea implies that the notion of "god" in Thales' epigram does not have a religious use, i.e. it is loaded with the implication that the philosopher's and other natural philosophers' archetypes are material. There are historians of philosophy like Burnet who

¹⁰ Ongun, *Allah Fikrinin Tekâmülü: Taassup Düşmanları ve Laiklik Kahramanları*. Although Ongun states in the preface of the book that he avoids conducting a theology or theodicy and that his concern is only to comprehend and show the truth, unfortunately, a few lines later he is not faithful to this promise and confesses that his concern is actually to help establish the personality that the revolutions in Türkiye were trying to build. As reflected in the subtitle of the book, the reader who looks at the book with academic honesty will, of course, realize that he also had the average opinion of the time about religion and that he could not remain objective.

¹¹ It was translated as *Miletli Anaksimandros ya da Bilimsel Düşüncenin Doğuşu* in Turkish.

¹² Carlo Rovelli, *Miletli Anaksimandros ya da Bilimsel Düşüncenin Doğuşu*, çev. Atakan Altınörs (İstanbul: Bilge Kültür Sanat, 2014).

¹³ Clifford Herschel Moore, *The Religious Thought of the Greeks: From Homer to the Triumph of Christianity, Second Edition* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1925); Jaeger, *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi*.

¹⁴ Yusuf Ziya İnan, *Antikçağ Düşüncesinde Tanrı ve Varlık Sorunu* (İstanbul: Okat Yayınları, 1984).

claim that the concept of “god” is neither a philosophical concept nor that the word “god” was used in a religious context by the early natural philosophers.¹⁵ Gilson does not accept this and criticizes Burnet. On the contrary, he states that gods were always there when philosophers started their research and that this word points to a religious concept. He proposes a third way against Burnet’s approach; he states that these philosophers should be understood as they were, or as they described their thoughts, and that there is no need to teach Greek to the Greeks.¹⁶

The starting point of this article is to put forward the possibility of these philosophers using natural theology as an alternative reading method. Unlike these examples, the thoughts of these philosophers could be read within natural theology. The work of W. Jaeger (1888-1961), a philologist at Oxford University, based on his Gifford Lectures on natural theology, translated into Turkish as *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi* (*The Idea of God in the Early Greek Philosophers*), can be considered as an example of this kind of reading. In this book, the author tries to construct natural theology through the fragments and doxographies that have survived from the works of natural philosophers. Jaeger explores the possibility of constructing a natural theology based on the thought of pre-Socratic philosophers, starting from the heroic period onwards, whose common characteristic was the study of nature, and most of whom wrote books entitled *On Nature*.¹⁷

Moreover, L.P. Gerson’s *God and Greek Philosophy* states that there are natural theological traces in the way these ancient philosophers carried out their philosophy.¹⁸ A. Arslan, on the other hand, states that these philosophers were not godless and that although they attributed divine attributes to their archetypes, they did not build temples and sacrifice for them; they maintained their relations with other gods or deities like the average religious person of that era.¹⁹ K. L. Flannery, another opponent of Brunet’s above assertion, states that pre-Socratic philosophers believed in the existence of God and gods, and at the same time, the divine element they put forward offered a relative explanation of the order in the universe. Therefore, he says, we can call them rationalizers of the divine.²⁰ In addition, it is also possible to say that the traditional understanding of religion, myths, and rituals was subjected to criticism in Greek philosophy and the classical conception was replaced by a new natural theology. M.R. Wright, author of *Introducing Greek Philosophy*, interestingly uses the term “pagan monotheism” for the ancient Greek conception of God. According to him, the work done in the period in question is the reconstruction of the belief in God, which has always existed in Greece, through nature in the first natural philosophers.²¹ That is the reason I think these natural philosophers can be seen as natural theologians. After Socrates, however, an idea of God was emerging that manifested itself in the practical side of

¹⁵ Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2002), 6; Etienne Gilson, *Tanrı ve Felsefe*, çev. Mehmet Aydın (İstanbul: Birleşik Yayıncılık, 1999), 26.

¹⁶ Etienne Gilson, “Tanrı ve Yunan Felsefesi”, çev. Mehmet Aydın, *Ankara Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 29 (1987), 107-110.

¹⁷ Jaeger, *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi*.

¹⁸ Lloyd P. Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy: Studies in the Early History of Natural Theology* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994).

¹⁹ Ahmet Arslan, *İlkçağ Felsefe Tarihi 1 / Sokrates-Öncesi Yunan Felsefesi* (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2022), 106.

²⁰ Kevin L. Flannery, “Ancient Philosophical Theology”, *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Charles Taliaferro vd. (West Sussex: Wiley - Blackwell Publishing, 2010).

²¹ M. R. Wright, *Introducing Greek Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 85-106.

philosophy. This god became the “God of morality” in Socrates, “a God of order” in Plato, and an “Unmoved mover” in Aristotle.

Another point that these aforementioned names, except Arslan, have attempted to show is that both a positivist reading, and a religious perspective of ancient Greek philosophy is a one-sided perspective. Contrary to what those who try to one-sidedly construct the history of philosophy claim, God or the divine has always existed in Greek thought. It is even stated that Epicure, whom anti-theistic thinkers consider to be a pioneer and who says that it is not possible to reach the idea of God from the idea of order/cosmos, accepts the existence of God as the source of the images in dreams.²² As mentioned above, the most fundamental characteristic of the pre-Socratic natural philosophers is that each of them wrote a book entitled *On Nature* and that their inquiry into *physis* turned into an inquiry into *genesis*.²³ In other words, the *arche*, which they set out to search for, was accepted as both the first being and the first principle from which existence derives its origin, and the *arche* functioned as the first cause in the causal explanation of the universe.

An Inquiry on Natural Theology in the Milesians

Aristotle states that Thales was the first to search for the *arche*. It is thought that *theologians* such as Homer, Hesiodos, and Orpheus, who lived before him, were influential in his inquiry. He pointed to water as an answer to this problem, inherited from them, by reflecting on the transformation and change in nature as a result of his observation and discussions of essence.²⁴ As F. M. Confrond mentioned from the time of Aristotle, metaphysics has been called “theology” and shows us ancient philosophy shaped in a religious or mythical environment.²⁵ I would say that the inquiry of the Pre-Socratics can be read as natural theology because of this reason. They have talked about nature which has a divine characteristic.

One of the best-known fragments in the hands of researchers when discussing Thales’ thoughts on God is his sentence “Everything is full of Gods,” known through Plato, which he uttered as a result of his observation of the magnet stone. Considering this sentence together with the fact that the *arche* is water, it can be said that his first principle, which is presented as a material element, has a metaphysical character.²⁶ With these two ideas in mind, Jaeger makes the following assessment:

This statement cannot refer to those gods with which the imaginative faith of the Greeks peopled mountain and stream, tree and spring, any more than to the inhabitants of Heaven or Olympus of whom we read in Homer. Thales’ gods do not dwell apart in some sequestered and inaccessible region, but everything—that is, the whole familiar world about us, which our reason takes so soberly—is full of gods and the effects of their power.²⁷

²² Wright, *Introducing Greek Philosophy*, 102.

²³ Werner Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers: The Gifford Lectures, 1936*, çev. Edward S. Robinson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1948).

²⁴ Aristoteles (Aristo), *Metafizik*, çev. Ahmet Arslan (İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınları, 2012).

²⁵ Francis Macdonald Cornford, *Dinden Felsefeye Batı Nazariyatının Kökenleri Üzerine*, çev. Özgüç Orhan (Albaraka Yayınları, 2022), 208.

²⁶ Francis Macdonald Cornford, *Dinden Felsefeye Batı Nazariyatının Kökenleri Üzerine*, 200

²⁷ Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, 21-22.

Thales thought of “nature,” which is under the power and influence of the gods, as a living organism. In a literal sense, these statements imply that the universe was created by “God.” In addition to this, *physis* (nature) has a divine character.²⁸ He believed that behind every movement in the world is undoubtedly the spirit it carries.²⁹ It is God who is behind this vitality of the universe, which is the most beautiful thing. God is the eternal, beginningless being who precedes this world and is older than everything in this world for Thales.³⁰ Everything that exists in the world is dependent on this being that precedes it in terms of its existence. In this respect, God, or the divine, is paramount. To the question “What is God?” Thales’ answer was, “God is that which has no beginning and no end.”³¹

R. G. Collingwood contends that Thales’ conception of God is a magician God rather than the master architect God of Renaissance thought and that God creates the universe through magic, just as Aaron transforms his rod into a serpent. The universe is viewed as *Pima Teos* (a divine poem), and an analogy is drawn between human and divine creation.³² In other words, creation is a divine act that resembles human work but is extraordinary in ways that human work cannot be. We do not know much about Thales’ experience because we do not have detailed information about how creation and God’s power work, either from the fragments or from other witnesses. However, he considers water to be a metaphysical element, and the universe to be the work of an efficient God, created according to certain laws, such as the measure and harmony contained in a poem, and created in an orderly and beautiful manner as a living organism in flux. Because it is God’s work, the universe is beautiful and orderly. We understand this from the aphorism attributed to him: “There is nothing better than the universe because it is the work of God.”³³

The second Milesian natural philosopher is Thales’ friend, pupil, and relative: Anaximander. There is nothing left of him except some fragments from his *Peri Physeos*. Confrond believes that he is the most important person of the Milesian School and is seen as the founder of the scientific tradition.³⁴ From the natural theology perspective, he is the first natural philosopher who used the term “cosmos” for the World, the term *arche* as a philosophical term, and the very first person who drew the map for it because he thought that the World has an order and demonstrates regularities. In his opinion, the Earth has a cylindrical structure with an equilibrium in space.³⁵

In a bold move, Anaximander challenged his teacher’s views on nature and theology, offering original criticisms that reshaped the very foundations of philosophical thought. He confidently states that the earth does not float in water like a raft, as Thales suggests, but is situated in the void as a globe or cylindrical shape. The boundaries of the void are equal in all

²⁸ Cornford, *Dinden Felsefeye Batı Nazariyatının Kökenleri Üzerine*, 198-201.

²⁹ Aristoteles (Aristo), *Rub Üzerine*, çev. Zeki Özcan (Bursa: Sentez Yayınları, 2018): 405a19

³⁰ Via R. G. Collingwood, *Doğa Tasarımı*, çev. Kurtuluş Dinçer (İstanbul: İmge Kitabevi Yayınları, 1999), 42.

³¹ Diogenes Laertios, *Ünlü Filozofların Yaşamları ve Öğretileri*, çev. Candan Şentuna (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2013), 36a, 28.

³² Collingwood, *Doğa Tasarımı*, 42-43

³³ Laertios, *Ünlü Filozofların Yaşamları ve Öğretileri*. 35h, 27

³⁴ Rovelli, *Miletli Anaksimandros ya da Bilimsel Düşüncenin Doğuşu*, 167-171.

³⁵ Wilhelm Capelle, *Sokrates'ten Önce Felsefe*, çev. Oğuz Özügül (İstanbul: Pencere Yayınları, 2011), 56; For further discussion see; Jaeger, 45-47; Walter Kranz *Antik Felsefe*, çev. Suat Y. Baydur, (İstanbul, Sosyal Yayınları), 1994, 31.

directions. He also challenges his teacher's concept of the archetype of existence. He asserts that a single substance like water could not have given rise to the entire universe. Given that water lacks the defining characteristics of all existence, this criticism extends to any substance that could be considered the source of life. The principle must therefore possess a quality that is not identical to these substances, allowing for the existence of an unlimited number of substances.³⁶

The philosopher will call this principle *aperion* (ἄπειρον). *Aperion* means limitless and unlimited—the opposite of the Greek word *peras*, which means boundary. It has a metaphysical character, as can be seen from its properties. In *Physics* III, Aristotle, referring to Anaximander, states that the infinite is immortal and eternal:

It is clear then from these considerations that the inquiry concerns the physicist. Nor is it without reason that they all make it a principle or source. We cannot say that the infinite has no effect, and the only effectiveness which we can ascribe to it is that of a principle. Everything is either a source or derived from a source. But there cannot be a source of the infinite or limitless, for that would be a limit of it. Further, as it is a beginning, it is both uncreatable and indestructible. For there must be a point at which what has come to be reaches completion, and also a termination of all passing away. That is why, as we say, there is no principle of this, but it is this which is held to be the principle of other things, and to encompass all and to steer all, as those assert who do not recognize, alongside the infinite, other causes, such as Mind or Friendship. Further, they identify it with the Divine, for it is 'deathless and imperishable' as Anaximander says, with the majority of the physicists.³⁷

From this beginningless *aperion*, which governs everything in the universe and is infinite in space and time, the universe was formed as a result of universal justice. Simplicius included it in a commentary he wrote on Aristotle's *Physics*, the earliest fragment we have of Anaximander is this:

The things that perish into the things out of which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time.³⁸

The term that is difficult to translate here is the word *diké*, which the Greeks used in the sense of right, justice, and price. Anaximander, the first philosopher to use this word in a philosophical sense, believed that the elements, being opposing forces, should pay a price to each other to maintain balance and order in the process of creation and decay.³⁹ The violation of the order that belongs to the cosmos is evident in this instance. In this statement, as cited by Simplicius, he asserts that the processes of creation and destruction are based on a rationale and that this will be per the judgment of time, which is to be regarded as just. When the question of justice arises in the context of nature, it will maintain its existence in a state of order and balance. The concepts of law and justice that are the subject of this discussion are, in Arslan's terms, necessities that can be addressed through a cause-and-effect relationship and are transferred from a social meaning to a natural one.⁴⁰ In other words, the

³⁶ Simplicius, *Aristoteles'in Fizik* 13, 12 A 9, Via Capelle, 61.

³⁷ Aristotle, *Physics*, III, part 4. <https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/physics.3.iii.html> (Accessed, 19.08.2024).

³⁸ Simplicius, *Aristoteles'in Fizik* 13, 12 A 9, Via Capelle, 61.

³⁹ Francis E. Peters, *Antik Yunan Felsefesi Terimleri Sözlüğü*, Çev. Hakkı Hünler, "Diké", Paradigma Yayınları, İstanbul, 2004, 71-72.

⁴⁰ Arslan, *İlkçağ Felsefe Tarihi 1 / Sokrates-Öncesi Yunan Felsefesi*, 109.

notions of justice and legality, which are indispensable principles for the functioning of any given society, must be considered equally valid for the functioning of the universe. By analyzing celestial movements, Anaximander elucidates the harmonious and balanced repetitions and transformations in the movements of celestial bodies in a manner that is consistent with the concept of justice.⁴¹ In Greek political discourse, the term “cosmos” was utilized to denote the reign of justice, and concurrently, the concept of an orderly and equitable natural order was similarly designated as “cosmos.” Consequently, one might postulate that the philosopher in question established the inaugural philosophical theodicy.⁴²

The philosopher, who is reluctant to accept any of the four elements as a basis for the universe, posits that the existence of heat would be unjust to cold and that the existence of moisture would be unfair to dryness. This is because, according to the philosopher, each of the four elements is a fundamental and essential quality of the universe. Consequently, the existence of any one of them would be unjust to the others. This philosopher postulates that universal justice can only emerge when these two opposing forces are in equilibrium. As an efficient cause, *aperion* is also responsible for maintaining equilibrium between these contrasting forces within the universe.

Opposing G. Naddaf and A. Arslan’s claims, following Aristotle’s account considering him among the physicists, Anaximander did not present a naturalistic interpretation of the universe in the modern sense. Instead, his emphasis on the universe’s orderliness, as evidenced by the surviving fragment from Simplicus, and the adjectives he ascribed to the *aperion* indicate that he offered a theological account of the universe’s genesis and its organization.⁴³ Moreover, Collingwood states that ‘deathless and imperishable’ in his system is identified with God and he has an immanent conception of God, unlike Thales.⁴⁴ In addition to this, Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin claimed that Anaximander had an impact on Xenophanes’ understanding of God. For her, Xenophanes believed in one, unchanging, eternal, unbegotten, and nonmaterial God as Anaximander. He reached this from the attribution of *aperion*, which was the *arche* in Anaximander’s system of thought.⁴⁵

Anaximander advanced beyond his teacher, Thales, through the application of empirical reasoning in his philosophical pursuits. He commenced this journey with the aid of reason and nature, elucidating the regularity and coherence within the universe, which he conceived as one of an infinite number of worlds. Anaximander defined the abstract concept of *aperion* as immortal, devoid of origin or termination. By identifying the highest principle with the divine, he initiated the philosophical theologies that would subsequently emerge. His endeavors and influence on the comprehension of nature in subsequent philosophical thought evoke the notion that early Greek philosophy was an endeavor in natural theology.⁴⁶

The third notable figure to emerge from the Miletus school was Anaximander’s student and eventual successor, Anaximenes. Although Anaximenes aligned with the concept of

⁴¹ Russ, Jacqueline, Baudart A., Chenet, F.,vd, *Kurucu Düşünceler / Felsefe Tarihi Cilt 1* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011), 26.

⁴² Jaeger, *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi*, 54.

⁴³ Jaeger, *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi*, 54 Arslan, *İlkçağ Felsefe Tarihi 1 / Sokrates-Öncesi Yunan Felsefesi*, 111.

⁴⁴ Collingwood, *Doğa Tasarımı*, 44-45.

⁴⁵ Marie-Frédérique Pellegrin (ed.), *Tanrı*, çev. Adnan Akan (Ankara: Fol, 2022), 50-51.

⁴⁶ Jaeger, *İlk Yunan Filozoflarında Tanrı Düşüncesi*, 55.

aperion as espoused by his mentor Anaximander, he espoused a relatively conservative stance concerning the fundamental principle of the universe. He proposed that the archetypal structure is constituted solely by the element of air. He offered an *arche* partly resembling Thales' *arche* and his teacher Anaximander's. The fundamental principle should have been a certain but unlimited character.⁴⁷ Air is the fundamental principle that gave a chance to him to make a synthesis among them. He considers the first principle, air, as divine. For him, the air has both immanent and transcendent character.⁴⁸ In a fragment from Anaximenes, he asserts that the air is God, the force that holds the entire cosmos together and encompasses the world.⁴⁹ From this fragment, we could say that the air and God are identical, and air has a divine character. How the soul of the human gathers man together, the air or in this case, God gathers all the universe together.

In Anaximenes' system of thought, the fundamental element of the universe, air, is subject to a process of transformation. As the air becomes more diluted, it assumes the form of fire; conversely, as it becomes denser, it takes on the qualities of the earth. Air is regarded as the vital force that unites the diverse elements of the universe, giving rise to a cosmic order. Accordingly, it is regarded as a divine entity, imbued with the qualities of vitality and immortality. This concept is also applicable to the sacred realm, where it is believed that the gods themselves are born from the same air from which they were conceived.⁵⁰

In conclusion, the idea that metaphysical concepts must exist in opposition to the phenomena of the physical world, such as change and limits, dominated the pre-Socratic philosophers of antiquity. Although the School of Miletus refers to material elements such as water and air in naming the first principle, their objective is not to search for a material first principle but to identify a single abstract principle that can affect *things*. This can be elucidated by examining the predicates utilized for this principle and the allusions to deities and the divine in their cosmogonies. For instance, upon initial examination, the predicates of the *aperion* evoke the attributes commonly associated with a theistic God.

Conclusion

After considering the Milesian philosophers' dissatisfaction with mythological explanations of the universe, the metaphysical nature of the principle of the universe's origin, the attributes of the first principle, and their emphasis on the divinity of nature/the universe, it is evident that these names have a significant role in the development of natural theology. By focusing on the nature of the universe and natural phenomena, the Milesians reached a deeper understanding of the universe and its genesis. The influence of their skepticism of myth on subsequent philosophical and scientific discourse is discernible. Their skepticism of the fundamental principle that governs nature informed their scientific inquiry, while their skepticism of the divine shaped theological thought. Their inquiry can be read as an attempt to harmonize rationality, observation, and theological comprehension in our pursuit of catching the intricacies of reality.

⁴⁷ Walther Kranz, *Antik Felsefe*, çev. Suad Y. Baydur (İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınları, 1994), p.35.

⁴⁸ Collingwood, *Doğa Tasarımı*, 48.

⁴⁹ F.M. Cornford, *Yunan Dini Düşüncesi: Homeros'tan İskender Çağına*, çev. Orhan Özgüç (İstanbul: Pinhan Yayıncılık, 2021), 60.

⁵⁰ Çiğdem Dürüşken, *Antikçağ Felsefesi: Homeros'tan Augustinus'a Bir Düşünce Serüveni* (İstanbul: Alfa Basım yayını, 2013), 73. Kranz, *Antik Felsefe*, 34.

In the preceding section, we examined the particular arguments put forth by the Miletus philosophers in support of their position on natural theology. These arguments were based on their study of nature. One rationale for concluding that they were engaged in natural theology is their repudiation of relying exclusively on religious texts, such as myths, and their pursuit of an understanding of nature and the supernatural through an initial focus on observations of the natural world. The transition entails a shift in focus from myth-centered thinking to rational thinking, whereby the former is replaced by the latter. They considered the potential natural principles and causes that could explain the occurrences, moving beyond the realm of mythological interpretations. This is a significant departure from the conventional methodology for studying this area. Philosophy was not an arbitrary development; it was a deliberate and comprehensive process of inquiry that arose in conjunction with the prevailing beliefs in mythological traditions and dominant religious practices. It endeavored to comprehend the divine essence of nature by conducting direct observations of the natural world.

The Milesian program's second fundamental concept is the pursuit of a singular principle (*arche*). Thales proposed that water is the foundational element of all entities. Anaximander introduced the concept of *aperion*, which signifies the state of being unbounded or infinite, while Anaximenes maintained that air is the fundamental element of reality. These concepts collectively indicate a fundamental interconnectivity within the natural world, aligning with the objective of natural theology, which is to unify our understanding of the presence of God in the universe. By adhering to a single governing principle, they have succeeded in articulating a comprehensible and coherent view of nature. The concepts of water (Thales), *aperion* (Anaximander), and air (Anaximenes) embody this principle, which can be interpreted as a divine force or intelligence regulating the universe. For them, if change is a fundamental aspect of reality, then there must be an unchanging foundation upon which it rests. Similarly, if limits exist, then it follows that there must be an unlimited one beyond which they extend. The perishing thus suggests the possibility of an immortal existence.

While the School of Miletus refers to material elements such as water and air in naming the first principle, their objective is not to search for a material first principle but rather to reach a single abstract principle that has causal power. This can be understood from the predicates they use for this principle and the references they make to God and the divine in their cosmogony. The teachings of the Milesian school can be reconciled with natural theology through the idea that nature is a manifestation of the divine. One could contend that their philosophical investigations into nature unveil a manifestation of divine sagacity and organization. If rational principles govern nature, it can be argued that this indicates the rationality of a creator or divine intelligence. This viewpoint enables a fusion where the investigation of the natural world serves as a means to comprehend the divine. The Milesian pursuit of understanding the fundamental substance of the universe can be interpreted as a *religious* investigation of the ultimate reality or divine nature.

Promoting investigation is another fundamental element of this method. The establishment of the foundation by the Milesians stimulated subsequent philosophers to further explore the intricate relationship between nature and the divine. Their inquiries into the fundamental essence of existence emphasized the importance of empirical evidence and logical reasoning, both of which are essential in philosophical and theological exploration.

This tradition promotes a perspective on natural theology that places importance on scientific investigation as a means to acquire an understanding of metaphysical realities.

The objective has been to demonstrate that the logos-centered physicists, from Thales to Anaximander, did not reject the divine in their study of nature; rather, they sought to ascertain the fundamental essence of nature that gives it its orderly and harmonious character. They attempted to achieve this through scientific inquiry, eschewing the contemporary scientific method and the focus on mythos. It is crucial to understand that a logos-centered approach to thought does not entail the dismissal of the divine or the disregard of religious beliefs. Myths are a recurring theme in the works of these philosophers, serving as a conduit for conveying their ideas.

Furthermore, while examining the works of these philosophers, our objective was to ascertain their implications for natural theology. It has been demonstrated that the fundamental premise upon which these physicists based their theories is an infinite, immortal, and unchanging principle that is the cause of change in the observable universe and an agent that does not introduce this change randomly. These philosophers, who believed that their conceptualization of the universe was closely aligned with their understanding of God, attributed the cosmic order and harmony observed in the universe to a divine principle rather than to chance and randomness.

In general, the contributions of the Milesian School provide a foundation for understanding the natural world from a perspective that can harmoniously coexist with the principles of natural theology. By emphasizing rationality, unity, and inquiry, the Milesian School facilitates a profound discourse between natural sciences and theology, thereby encouraging an enduring investigation into the interconnectivity between the natural world and the divine. Because of the aforementioned bias above, people either read the Milesians as evangelists of the prophetic way or as scientists who focused on nature without any theological assertions. As a result, this paper demonstrated that analyzing the Milesian School within natural theology could provide valuable insights both for the history of philosophy in general and the philosophy of religion in particular.

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