

# THE BEGINNING OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

PART ONE

BY  
MANLY P. HALL

COMPLIMENTARY WITH MONTHLY  
LETTER



PHOENIX PRESS  
LOS ANGELES, CALIF.

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## PART ONE

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

The following are representative of his precepts:

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

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

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

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

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

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



*who first himself obeys the laws of his state.*

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

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

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

Being a man in high position, sorrow

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

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

The following are representative of his precepts:

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

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

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

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

5—*He who envies another is mad.*

This philosopher pardoned the murderer

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

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

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

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



Among the moral sentences of Chilon are the following:

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

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

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

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

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

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

7—*Prefer honest loss to unjust gain.*

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



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Periander, Prince of Corinth, came to be included among the Seven Sophists because of his great power and the wide sphere of his influence. He associated himself with the wisest of the Greek thinkers and became a patron of learning, both philosophical and judicial. He was hereditary prince of the Corinthians and traced his ancestry from Hercules through an unbroken line of twenty-two generations. Plutarch declared that Periander became Tyrant or ruler by an hereditary disease derived from his father. By disease Plutarch intimated inherited power. Being a wise prince, however, Periander sought to purge himself of this disease by association with the learned and by cultivation of democratic relationships with his subjects.

Two of his most famous precepts were: first, that a good mind in a human body

was the greatest in the least; second that a wise man concealed his misfortunes that they might not gladden the hearts of his enemies.

With advancing years Periander developed an excessive melancholy, and at last ordered his own death in the eightieth year of his age. He so cunningly devised the method of his decease that the time and place of his burial remained unknown, and the Corinthians erected for him a monument over an empty tomb.

Of his wisdom the following sentences have been preserved:

1—*A democracy is better than a tyranny (absolute monarchy).*

2—*Pleasures are mortal, virtues are immortal.*

3—*In good fortune be moderate, in bad fortune be prudent.*

4—*So conduct yourself that during life you will be praised and in death beatified.*

5—*To your friends be the same in prosperity and adversity.*



6—*Use new diets but old laws.*

7—*A successful democracy must have in it something of aristocracy.*

8—*Love and not armies must guard the persons of the great.*

CLEOBULOS, tyrant of Lindus, was also lineally descended from Hercules, and is described by Suidas as, "Excelling in wisdom, outward beauty and physical strength all those of his time." He was learned in the philosophy of the Egyptians and prepared many precepts and doctrines for the consideration of rulers. He wrote considerably and composed verses to the number of three thousand. His daughter was a most powerful influence in his life, having received every benefit which education could bestow, a circumstance unusual in his day. Cleobulos died at over seventy years of age and his memory was perpetuated by the grateful citizens of his state.

His most famous precepts were:

1—*Do good to your friend that he may be more your friend, and to your enemy that he may become your friend, for we should*

*beware of the calumny of friends and of the treachery of enemies.*

2—*Marry only those who are of equal social position for by matching into a higher family one procures masters, not kinsmen.*

3—*Educate your daughters as you do your sons.*

4—*Devote your life to something which is excellent.*

5—*If a leader of a state is to be happy he must trust none that are about him.*

6—*Moderation is the greatest virtue.*

7—*Rich, be not exalted; poor, be not dejected.*

8—*Learn to bear unmoved the vicissitudes of fortune.*

9—*'Tis better to love to listen than it is to love to speak.*

10—*Take care of the body and of the soul.*

11—*Listen willingly but believe not all you hear.*

12—*When you go forth, consider what you*

*have to do; when you return consider what you have done.*

13—*It is better to know a few things than to be ignorant of all things.*

SOLON, Archon of Athens, was one of the noblest and wisest of the Greeks. He earned for himself the title of The Eloquent for in discourse, rhetoric and poetry he was without a peer. Solon was initiated into the mysteries of the Egyptians and was the great law-maker of the Athenians. Of law Solon wrote: "Laws are like cobwebs which entangle the weak but through which the greater break uninjured." Being asked what constituted a well ordered city, he answered, "That in which the citizens obey the magistrates and the magistrates obey the laws."

Solon declared that there was but one thing that man had to fear, namely that he would die before he became a philosopher. Solon shared the philosophic extension of life for he died at over a hundred years, ordering his friends to carry his bones to Salamis, the city of his birth, there burn them and cause them to be scattered over the country. Solon loved knowledge to the end



and on the day of his death lifted his weary head to catch the words of some discoursing friends. Being asked why he did this he answered, "that I may learn even while I am departing from this life."

Herewith are a few fragments from the wisdom of Solon:

1—*If all men should bring their misfortunes together in one place, each one would carry his own home again rather than take an equal share from the common stock.*

2—*The happiness of the outward life arises from honest action and temperate living.*

3—To one who complained of the weight and number of his troubles, Solon said: "*Come into this tower and view the buildings below and ponder upon the number of sorrows that heretofore, now, and henceforth shall dwell together under these roofs, and speak not of misery as though you bore them all.*"

4—*Make reason the guide of every action.*

5—*Reason concerning hidden things from those things which are apparent.*

Solon studied philosophy with Psenophis



of Heliopolis and Sonches of Sais, the most learned and venerated of the Egyptian priest-philosophers, by whom, according to Plato, he was taught the language of the Atlanteans.

## GREAT SAYINGS OF THE SOPHISTS

*(From the Collection of Sosiades).*

1—*Be in childhood modest, in youth temperate, in manhood just, in old age prudent—then die untroubled.*

2—*Follow God.*

3—*Obey the law.*

4—*Worship the gods.*

5—*Suffer for justice.*

6—*Respect hospitality.*

7—*Govern anger.*

8—*Exercise prudence.*

9—*Love Friendship.*

10—*Honor providence.*

11—*Emulate wisdom.*

12—*Praise virtue.*

13—*Do that which is just.*

14—*Practice generosity.*

- 15—*Be a lover of wisdom.*
- 16—*What you know, do.*
- 17—*Converse with the wise.*
- 18—*Reverence the good.*
- 19—*Curb thy tongue.*
- 20—*Use wealth wisely.*
- 21—*Be grateful.*
- 22—*Wait for opportunity.*
- 23—*Expect age.*
- 24—*Boast not of strength.*
- 25—*Be never weary of learning.*
- 26—*Blame not the absent.*
- 27—*Teach those who are younger.*
- 28—*Put no faith in wealth.*
- 29—*Trust not fortune.*
- 30—*Keep secrets.*
- 31—*Honor yourself.*
- 32—*Return what is not your own.*
- 33—*Abstain from bloodshed.*
- 34—*Desire nothing unreasonable.*
- 35—*Trust no man—distrust no man.*
- 36—*Blame only those who are present.*
- 37—*Search into evil, but be not corrupted.*
- 38—*Be gentle to all.*

- 39—*Honor the ancestors.*
- 40—*Deride not the dead.*
- 41—*Criticise not the unhappy.*
- 42—*Be not troubled.*
- 43—*Be as generous to yourself as to your friend.*
- 44—*Apply thyself to discipline.*
- 45—*Pursue that which is noble.*
- 46—*Descend not from generals to particulars.*
- 47—*Be economical of time.*
- 48—*Instruct your children.*
- 49—*If you have, withhold nothing.*
- 50—*Fear most deceit.*
- 51—*Speak well of every man.*
- 52—*Judge honestly.*
- 53—*Approve hope.*
- 54—*Acknowledge superiority.*
- 55—*Rejoice in greatness.*
- 56—*Avoid dissension.*
- 57—*Be fearless in undertaking.*
- 58—*Admire the oracles.*
- 59—*Love those you serve.*
- 60—*Promise nothing.*