THE CONSEQUENCES OF IDEAS

Understanding the Concepts That Shaped Our World

R. C. SPROUL

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Introduction

Why Philosophy?

THE SUMMER OF 1959: This date marked the end of my sophomore year in college and the tail end of the decade of "Happy Days." The beloved "Ike" still occupied the Oval Office, the New York Yankees still dominated major-league baseball, and the turbulent decade of the Sixties was still a year away.

My biggest concern was summer employment. Many friends who were engineering students had found lucrative summer jobs that paid well above the minimum wage. My prospects were bleak: I was a philosophy major. I did not find in the newspaper a single want ad calling for philosophers. My only real option was a job for unskilled labor paying the minimum wage. Even at that I was delighted to be offered work in the maintenance department of a hospital.

When the foreman heard I was a philosophy major, he handed me a broom and said, "Here, you can think all you want while you're leaning on the broom." My coworkers enjoyed this calumny. Among other responsibilities, I was to sweep the hospital's driveway and parking area.

During my first week on the job, I was reaching the end of my sweeping territory. My zone ended where the main hospital driveway intersected the parking lot of the nurses' home. I noticed another man sweeping the adjacent parking lot. He greeted me, and we exchanged names and

pleasantries. When I told him I was a college student, he asked what I was studying. When I said philosophy, his face brightened and his eyes lit up. He fired a barrage of questions at me, inquiring about Descartes, Plato, Hegel, Kant, Kierkegaard, and others. I was astonished at this man's knowledge. He obviously knew far more about philosophy than I did.

"Dangerous" Thoughts

I thought it bizarre that an adult whose chief occupation is to sweep driveways could be so erudite in the abstract field of philosophy. The whole conversation seemed incongruous to me. I had to ask him how he knew so much about philosophy. His story was heart-wrenching.

My new friend was from Germany. He had his Ph.D. in philosophy and had been a professor of philosophy in Berlin. When Adolf Hitler came to power, the Nazis were not content to find a "final solution" for Jews and Gypsies. They also sought to eliminate intellectuals whose ideas were at odds with the "values" of the Third Reich. My friend was removed from his position. When he spoke out against the Nazis, his wife and all but one of his children were arrested and executed. He escaped from Germany with his young daughter.

When I asked why he was no longer teaching, he said that teaching philosophy had destroyed the lives of his loved ones and ruined his own. With tears in his eyes, he said he now lived only for his daughter.

When I heard this man's story, I was twenty years old. To me World War II was a dim memory. To a twenty-year-old, fourteen years seem like an eternity. But to my German friend, who was in his mid-fifties, the war years seemed like yesterday. His memory of the past was by no means dim.

I mused on something else that morning, which is why I am recounting the tale here. I was pushing a broom because I lived in a culture that sees little value in philosophy and gives scant esteem to those who pursue it. My friend was pushing a broom, on the other hand, because he came from a culture that gave great weight to philosophy. His family was destroyed because Hitler understood that ideas are dangerous.

Hitler so feared the consequences of my friend's ideas that he did everything possible to eliminate him—and his ideas.

As you read this book, you probably are not outside reading by sunlight or inside reading by candlelight. More likely you are reading in a room illumined by artificial light. Where did that light come from? You probably got to where you are right now by automobile. Where did that car come from? There is probably no outhouse behind your kitchen. Your place of residence probably has running water and indoor plumbing. Where did that come from?

I ask about things that were virtually unknown just a century ago, but that we now consider essential elements of everyday living. These practical things are there because someone first thought about them (perhaps while leaning on a broom) before they were invented or brought into existence. The idea preceded the product, which is how it usually works.

Not all ideas issue in tangible products. Some ideas are hare-brained. Yet even a dreamer's fanciful ideas often become honed into sharp concepts with massive consequences.

Foundational Thoughts

Philosophy forces us to think foundationally. By *foundational* I mean first principles or basic truths. Most ideas that shape our lives are accepted (at least initially) somewhat uncritically. We do not create a world or environment from scratch and then live in it. Rather we step into a world and culture that already exists, and we learn to interact with it.

For example, few people today debate the virtues of a graduated or progressive income tax, in which one group pays not only more money but also a higher percentage of their income (how unlike the tithe—God's "flat tax"!). Rarely does anyone challenge the justness of such a scheme, because it has been in force for so long. It is an accepted reality. When enacted, however, it was the focus of fierce controversy.

Nor do we find much deep discussion about political or legal theory, such as marked the Enlightenment. Then, when the structure of

monarchy was giving way to new forms of government, people focused on foundational theory. But today (except perhaps during impeachment trials) we rarely hear discussions of the difference between a republic and a democracy. Nor do we hear loud controversies about the foundation for law (save when Supreme Court-justice nominee Clarence Thomas alluded to natural law during his confirmation hearing and Senator Joseph Biden responded with a heated retort).

Our country's Constitution was established more than 200 years ago. This idea has already been implemented. Today we merely tweak it with new legislation here and a new judicial decision there. Never mind that we have tweaked the original beyond recognition and are in danger of being pecked to death by baby ducks.

We step into the game long after the game was conceived. The rules have been decided and the boundaries set. We are amused when Descartes labors so long and thinks so deeply in order to conclude that he exists. We think it is funny; we think it a foolish waste of time to prove something we all know is true—that we exist. Or we are puzzled by Kant's spending his life analyzing *how* we know anything that we know, when from our vantage point we simply know it.

Or do we? Thinkers like Descartes and Kant are not merely gazing at their navels. Foundational thinking lays bare all of our assumptions so that we may discover those assumptions that are false and often lethal. Foundational thinking cares about the difference between truth and falsehood because it cares about good and evil. The ancient maxim still applies: "The unexamined life is not worth living." To any serious thinker, and especially to the professing Christian, an unexamined life is not an option.

If my thinking has no value in the marketplace or is not esteemed in the court of public opinion, I can always go back to sweeping parking lots. But I cannot *not* think. To not think is unthinkable.

This book is written not for philosophy scholars but for laypersons—albeit educated laypersons. I hope it serves as an enticing foretaste for

future study of theoretical thought. I have intentionally avoided the apparatus of technicalia, which tends to intimidate the laity. In addition to using primary sources, I have leaned on experts in the history of philosophy: Roger Scruton, Gordon Clark, Samuel Stumpf, and others.[1] I hope you find this overview of the history of ideas helpful.

R. C. Sproul
ORLANDO
JANUARY 2000

1

The First Philosophers

THE ORIGINS OF Western philosophy are rooted in the ancient Aegean world. A sharp distinction between science and philosophy was unknown to thinkers of that day. The word *science* in its etymology simply means "knowledge," and the term *philosophy* derives from "love of wisdom." As ancient man sought to understand himself and the world around him, knowledge and wisdom were interrelated ideas. He was concerned about the nature of things.

Philosophy was born in the ancient quest for ultimate reality, the reality that transcends the proximate and commonplace and that defines and explains the data of everyday experience. Three burdens dominated the thinking of the original philosophers: first, a quest for "monarchy"; second, a quest for unity in the midst of diversity; and third, a quest for cosmos over chaos. Though these quests may be distinguished at one level, at a different level all three involve the search for a metaphysical answer to the physical world.

What is meant here by monarchy may be understood by a brief analysis of the word's original meaning. The term monarchy is made up of a prefix and a root. The prefix mono means "one, singular." The root, which is more significant, is *archē*, which means "chief, beginning, or root." It is often used as a prefix in English, as in *archbishops*,

archenemies, *archetypes*, *archheretics*, and *archangels*. Here *arch* means "chief, ruler." An archangel is a chief or ruling angel, as an archbishop is a chief or ruling bishop. The later connotation of *monarch* as a political figure rests on the idea of one chief ruler.

In the ancient quest for monarchy, philosophers sought the chief or ruling substance, or *archē*, of which all things are made or from which they exist. It was a search for the supreme essence or substance of things, a quest for the ultimate "stuff" of the real world.

One of the most vexing problems encountered by the ancient thinker (a problem that remains vexing today) was that of unity and diversity, or of "the one and the many." It was a matter of discovering sense amid vastly different manifestations of reality: How do all things fit together in a meaningful way?

Today we speak, often somewhat glibly, of "the universe." The term *universe* is something of a mongrel, in which the words *unity* and *diversity* (the one and the many) are jammed together to coin a single word. Institutions of higher learning are often called "universities" because there the various elements of the universe are studied.

The so-called "analytical method" of the Enlightenment reflected this ancient quest as it sought the "logic" of the facts—that is, as it sought to deduce laws or universals from the raw data of the particulars. It used the scientific method of learning that combines the tools of induction (observing and collecting data) and deduction (drawing logical inferences and conclusions from the data). The logic was that which gave sense, coherence, or unity to the diversity.

In his famous book *Cosmos,*[1] drawn from the television series of the same name, Carl Sagan begins by affirming that the world is cosmos, not chaos. A cosmos is orderly, chaos is not. Chaos is the archenemy of science. If reality is ultimately chaotic, science itself becomes a manifest impossibility.

Perhaps you have heard of "chaos physics." This name suggests a kind of commitment to chaos, but the opposite is the case. Chaos physics probes elements of *apparent* chaos in order to discover patterns of order

that lurk beneath the surface. These physicists study such things as the dynamics of fluid motion, the topography of seacoasts, the structure of snowflakes, and the patterns of wind currents that influence weather. In some respects modern chaos theory recapitulates in a more technical and sophisticated manner the pursuit of cosmos by ancient philosophers.

Thales of Miletus

When asked about the ultimate stuff of which humans are composed, we may answer that boys are made of "frogs and snails and puppy-dog tails," while girls are made of "sugar and spice and everything nice." This children's ditty may amuse, but as a scientific analysis of the real differences between the sexes, it obviously does not suffice.

When we look at Thales' answer to the question of ultimate reality, we may conclude that he too was spinning a childish ditty. Thales argued that all is *water.* Everything that *is* is composed of water, and water serves as the unity, the *archei,* of all things.

Before dismissing Thales to the land of fairy tales and mythology, however, we must afford him the benefit of a second glance. One reason Thales is regarded as the father of Western philosophy is that he distanced himself from traditional mythology and poetry. He sought instead a scientific answer to the nature of things. Nor can Thales be dismissed as a primitive blockhead with no eye or brain for real science. Thales can be regarded as a pre-Renaissance Renaissance man whose diverse achievements are comparable to those of Leonardo da Vinci and rival those of Archimedes.

Thales solved engineering problems by diverting the flow of a river. He devised a system of measuring the heights of Egyptian pyramids based on the movement of their shadows. He developed techniques of navigating by the stars and created an instrument for measuring distances at sea. But his crowning scientific achievement was his accurate prediction of a solar eclipse that occurred on May 28, 585 B.C. So much for puppy-dog tails!

Although the original writings of Thales have been lost, some of his thought can be reconstructed by way of anecdotes told about him by

other ancient writers, their quotations from his writings, and their allusions to his ideas. We do not know the full measure of his argument that water is the ultimate reality. Water has several factors to commend itself as the ultimate reality. First, the three great mysteries of ancient (and contemporary) science are life, motion, and being. The third is the issue of metaphysical essence. Thales noted that all things he observed in this world come in innumerable sizes, shapes, and colors, and that they all appear in one of three possible states: liquid, gas, or solid.

To reduce reality to a single element, Thales looked for one that manifests itself in all three states. The obvious choice is water, which appears as liquid, steam, or ice. From here it is a short speculative step to consider all liquids as particular forms of water, all gases as particular forms of steam, and all solids as particular forms of ice.

What about the mystery of life? Thales could easily see that living things are dependent on water. He knew he could not live long without it. And if he wanted to grow grass from seed, he knew he had to water the seed. Ancient people linked their survival to the presence of rain and the absence of drought.

Finally, Thales faced the problem of motion: How does one explain the origin of motion in light of our understanding of the law of inertia—that bodies at rest tend to remain at rest unless acted on by an outside force? The obvious question is, What set that outside force in motion? (The quest for an "unmoved mover" did not begin with Aristotle.)

To solve this part of the puzzle, Thales needed an automobile. No, I do not mean a Buick. Thales sought something that was hylozoistic, something that has the capacity for self-motion (auto-mobile). He needed something that can move itself without being acted on by something else. As he observed the flow of rivers and the constant motion of the tides, water again became an enticing candidate. Before dismissing Thales as being "all wet" for not perceiving the forces of gravity, especially as exercised by the moon on the ebb and flow of tides, we owe him the benefit of the doubt.

Thales was the first philosopher, but by no means the last. He was succeeded by others who sought to correct or refine his theories. The pre-Socratic philosophers can be organized into four distinct camps, depending on their view of the nature of ultimate reality: 1) corporeal monism, 2) incorporeal monism, 3) corporeal pluralism, and 4) incorporeal pluralism. These four categories can be reduced to two crucial issues: 1) Is ultimate reality physical (corporeal) or nonphysical (incorporeal)? 2) Is ultimate reality one (monism) or more than one (pluralism)?

Table 1.1. Ultimate Reality

	Monism	**Pluralism**
Corporeal	1. *Corporeal monism*: Ultimate reality is physical and one. (Thales)	3. *Corporeal pluralism*: Ultimate reality is physical and more than one. (Empedocles, Anaxagoras)
Incorporeal	2. *Incorporeal monism*: Ultimate reality is nonphysical and one.	4. *Incorporeal pluralism*: Ultimate reality is nonphysical and more than one.

Thales, seeing water as the one ultimate essence, was a corporeal monist. He was succeeded by his student Anaximander, who rejected the theory that reality can be reduced to one specific element. Anaximander looked for something even more basic, something that rises above or transcends the arena of this world, a world with chronological and spatial boundaries. He searched for a boundless, ultimate realm from which all things come. It is the realm of what he called the *apeiron* or the indeterminate boundless, what we might call the infinite.

Anaximander had a young associate named Anaximenes, who was the last of the group known as the Milesian philosophers. Dissatisfied with the vague idea of a mysterious "boundless," Anaximenes sought to bring philosophy back to earth by combining or synthesizing some of Thales' concerns with those of Anaximander. Anaximenes looked for

something that is both specific and spread everywhere. This he found in *air*. Air has many of the same advantages as water: it has different states of rarefaction and condensation, is essential to life, and appears to have the power of self-motion when the wind blows.

Pythagoras

One of the most fascinating groups that preceded Socrates and Plato was the Pythagoreans, people who clearly influenced Plato.

Every high-school student who has taken geometry has heard of the Pythagorean theorem. Pythagoras migrated from Samos to southern Italy, where he developed his theory of numbers. He had a spiritual and religious interest in mathematics by which mystical significance was assigned to numbers. He considered the number ten to be the perfect number. In the study of math, the formal (pertaining to form or essence) becomes more important than the material, the intellectual or spiritual more important than the physical. For Pythagoras and his followers, mathematics is a matter of the soul.

Pythagoreans held music in high regard because of its therapeutic value to the soul. To them music is what "soothes the savage beast." They developed a mathematics of harmony, seeing that sounds can be broken down into numerical ratios or mathematical proportions. Our modern scales owe their origin chiefly to the insight of the Pythagoreans.

Medicine, for Pythagoreans, was also subject to mathematics. They saw bodily health in terms of balance or harmony between such opposites as hot and cold and among the body's chemical functions, anticipating the current biomedical concern for hormonal balances.

Pythagoreans applied mathematics to astronomy, seeking the "harmony of the spheres" in an effort to plot and predict the motion of heavenly bodies. This was no mere exercise in speculation; ancient people depended on the stars not only for navigation but, even more importantly, for measuring time (calendars) so they could plant and harvest their crops at optimum times.

That math has served as a crucial handmaiden to advances in natural science is documented by history. Advances in mathematical theory have ushered in several revolutions such as the Copernican revolution, the revolution initiated by Isaac Newton with his physics, and the revolution in our day of nuclear science.

Two philosophical giants in the pre-Socratic era were Heraclitus and Parmenides. Some have said that all philosophy is nothing more than footnotes to the thought of Plato and Aristotle; one could also argue that Plato and Aristotle were but footnotes to the thought of Heraclitus and Parmenides.

Heraclitus

Heraclitus is sometimes called the "father of modern existentialism" because of his attack on essences. His thought is summarized with the Greek phrase *Panta rhei,* "All things are flowing." According to Heraclitus everything is always and everywhere in flux. To introduce an important philosophical concept here, this means that all things are in a state of *becoming* as distinguished from *being*.

For Heraclitus, whatever *is* is always changing. He illustrated this by declaring that you "cannot step into the same river twice." If you put one foot into a river, by the time you can put your other foot in the river has flowed on. It has changed. Its banks, due to imperceptible erosion, have changed, and you yourself have changed—if in no other way than that you are a few seconds older.

Nevertheless, whatever is changing is still a *something*. Reality is not pure diversity; there remains an abiding unity. Heraclitus looked to fire as the basic element in things because it is constantly in flux. Fire must be constantly fed, yet it constantly gives off something—smoke, heat, or ashes. It is always "in process," always being transformed.

For Heraclitus the process of change is not chaotic but is orchestrated by "God." I put *God* in quotes because for Heraclitus "God" is not a personal being but more like an impersonal force. Flux is the product

of a universal reason Heraclitus calls the *logos.* Here we see the philosophical roots of the *logos* concept that the apostle John appropriated to define the preexistent and eternal person of the Godhead who became incarnate. It would be a serious mistake, however, simply to equate or identify John's use of *logos* with that of Greek philosophy, because John filled the term with Hebrew categories of thought. At the same time it would be an equally serious mistake to separate completely John's use of the term from Greek thought.

Heraclitus was looking for a principle of *telos,* a teleology or purpose that would give order and harmony to things in flux, that would give unity to diversity. For him the *logos* is the universal law that is immanent in all things. In the final analysis it is *Fire* with a capital *F.* His system is at root a kind of pantheism.

In examining the presence of flux in all things, Heraclitus sought to account for the reality of strife, which he located in the conflict of opposites. Just as fire works through the conflict of opposites, where nothing is ever lost but only changes its form, so all conflict ultimately is resolved in the overarching fire or the *logos* of things.

Parmenides

Parmenides, a younger contemporary of Heraclitus, founded the Eleatic school of philosophy (so-named for Elea, Italy, where he lived). I first heard of Parmenides while in college. My philosophy professor quoted Parmenides' best-known assertion, "Whatever is, is." I laughed and blurted out, "And he's famous?" With this verbal ejaculation I revealed myself as the quintessential sophomore. I assumed that Parmenides had done nothing more than stutter.

As I reach my twilight years, perhaps the last three holes of the back nine, I have lost the omniscience I briefly enjoyed as a college sophomore. On reflection I can think of no concept I learned in philosophy that has provoked more thought than Parmenides' "Whatever is, is." It forces me to contemplate being itself, which has the salutary benefit

of stretching my mind to consider the things of God himself. What I once ridiculed now absorbs me and carries me to the brink of holy apprehension, where I tremble at my own inadequacy.

For Parmenides, if anything exists in an absolute way, it cannot change ("Whatever is, is."). It cannot *be* and *not be* at the same time and in the same way. If it is becoming, it cannot be being. If it is not being, it is nothing. It must *be* absolutely or not at all.

This raises the ultimate philosophical question: Why is there something rather than nothing? If indeed there is something, then there must be being, for without being nothing could be. At the same time, Parmenides understood the principle *Ex nihilo, nihil fit,* "Out of nothing, nothing comes." The idea that something could come out of nothing or that nothing could give rise to something Parmenides rightly considered to be absurd. Manifestly, if ever there were a time when there was nothing, then there would be nothing now.

Change is for Parmenides an illusion. The very concept of change is unthinkable; that is, we cannot really think of it. We cannot think of change because there is no "it" to think about. If something is changing, then in reality it is not an "it." To think of change would require us to think of something in terms of what it is not, which is impossible.

For Parmenides, not only can something not come out of nothing, but also, something cannot arise out of being. If something arises out of being, it already is. Here we see the folly of any concept of self-creation, which requires something to be before it was and which therefore defies all logic. The law of noncontradiction declares that something cannot be what it is and not be what it is at the same time and in the same sense.

It is important to note, however, that Parmenides was apparently attacking not only the absurd notion of self-creation but also any notion of creation, which by implication includes the Christian notion of creation. Though the Christian notion does not suffer from the absurdities of self-creation, it is nevertheless not without difficulties. The "how" of creation and the way in which the creature's being differs

from the creator's remain impenetrable mysteries. (We take comfort, however, that *mystery* is not a synonym of *contradiction*.)

The impasse on the matter of change became a dominant question for later thinkers, who sought to resolve the difficulties between being and becoming. The impasse also provoked a period of skepticism, during which some concluded that the philosophical quest for ultimate reality is a fool's errand, doomed to failure.

Zeno of Elea

Zeno of Elea was a student of Parmenides who devoted himself to answering his mentor's critics. The "common sense" critics argued that the five senses confirm the outward reality of physical things that are many and that undergo change. Sense perception proves the reality of physical things.

Zeno set out to prove that the senses deal only with *appearances* and not with *reality.* To prove that the senses can easily deceive us, Zeno set forth four arguments or paradoxes. To answer the pluralists, who declared that the world is divisible, with discrete units, Zeno used the illustration of a racetrack: To circle the track, the runner must traverse an infinite number of points in a finite number of moments. The runner would first need to reach the halfway point. Then he would need to go halfway to the end from there, then another halfway, and another, all the way to infinity, never reaching the finish line.

The second paradox concerns a race between Achilles and a tortoise: To give the slow tortoise a chance, Achilles gives him a head start. To beat the tortoise Achilles must first catch up to the tortoise. In the time that it takes Achilles to reach the spot where the tortoise began the race (with his head start), the tortoise has moved on. This process continues forever so that Achilles is always chasing the tortoise but never catching him.

The third paradox involves an archer and an arrow: An arrow in flight must always occupy a space equal to its length. But for an arrow

to occupy a space equal to its length, at that moment it must be at rest. Since the arrow always occupies a space equal to its length, it must always be at rest. Hence the arrow's "motion" is an illusion.

The fourth paradox, like the others, demonstrates the relativity of motion in terms similar to those used today, which indicates that motion has no clear definition.

Empedocles

Zeno's skepticism concerning matter and motion was challenged by the Sicilian philosopher Empedocles. He argued that the reality of motion (and change, which is a form of motion) is too obvious to deny. He located the problem in Parmenides' monism and countered with a philosophy of pluralism. His pluralism was corporeal, with reality being composed of immutable and eternal particles. These particles possess "being" and do not change. The objects composed of these particles, however, do change, as they undergo changes in their composition. Empedocles identified four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. (This led later thinkers to look for a transcendent element, a "fifth essence," that would unite the four, thus creating the word *quintessence.*) For Empedocles, motion and change were explained by equal and opposite forces in nature that attract and repel each other. He called these forces love and hate, or harmony and discord. The governing principle of harmony is love, which "makes the world go round."

Anaxagoras

Anaxagoras made a major contribution to the pre-Socratic era with a single modification of corporeal pluralism. He viewed the material world as being composed of eternal units called "seeds" or *spermata.* Unique to Anaxagoras was his view that reality is composed not only of matter but also of mind. In searching for a rational principle to bring order and harmony to the seeds of a material world, he developed his concept of the *nous.* The Greek term *nous* means "mind," and from it we get

the English adjective *noetic,* "pertaining to the mind." Still, Anaxagoras did not fill his concept of *nous* with the idea of a personal creator or governor of the universe. His concept was more abstract, an impersonal power or force that is the teleological (purposeful) principle of reality.

Other developments in pre-Socratic philosophy include the primitive atomism of Democritus and the rise of ancient skepticism. We will examine the impact of skepticism on Plato's great mentor, Socrates, in the following chapter.

Table 1.2. The First Philosophers

	Century (B.C.)	Birth–death (approx.)	Place of birth	Primary place of residence	Major work
Thales	6th			Miletus, Asia Minor	
Pythagoras	6th	570–497	Samos	Croton, Italy	
Heraclitus	6th–5th	540–480		Ephesus, Asia Minor	*On Nature*
Parmenides	5th			Elea, Italy	*The Way of Truth, and the Way of Seeming*
Zeno	5th			Elea, Italy	Title unknown
Empedocles	5th	495–435	Acragas, Sicily	Acragas, Sicily	*On Nature, Purifications*
Anaxagoras	5th	500–428	Clazomenae, Asia Minor	Athens	Title unknown