

Man and his Circumstance

Yannis Fikas

The philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883-1955) believed that man is 'he and his circumstance' ("I am I and my circumstance"). That is to say that man cannot be detached from his world, meaning the city and nature, and that between him and his world there is a constant exchange of energies.

Confucius (551-479 BCE) emphasized that man is mainly determined by his relationships with other people and defined the characteristics of the superior man who leads his life in accordance with the laws of nature and his fellow human beings.

The Presocratic philosophers of the 6th and 5th century B.C. proposed some universal principles to interpret all natural phenomena in their effort to harmonize the mythological world outlook with the scientific one. They laid the foundations of philosophy, directed human mind towards a rational reflection of the world and developed cosmogony, cosmology, astronomy, mathematics, biology, anthropology and physics.

According to their worldview, there is a primary substance that ensures the fundamental unity of the world. For every Presocratic philosopher this primary substance corresponds to the world of senses and particularly, to a distinct element of the natural world, such as fire, air and water. Thus, Thales of Miletus (6th century B.C.) chose water; Anaximander of Miletus (612-545 B.C.) Infinite (*'apeiron'*); Anaximenes of Miletus (585-525 B.C.) took for his principle air; Heraclitus of Ephesus (6th-5th century B.C.) fire and Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (500-428 B.C.) conceived Mind (*'nous'*) as an ordering principle.

Thales was influenced not only from the Greek mythological cosmogony, but also from the eastern cosmogonical perceptions. According to the ancient Egyptian creation myth the earth is a flat disk that floats onto water, while the sun crosses the sky of day and night on a boat.

Using first the term of principle (*‘arche’*), **Anaximander** claimed that an ‘indefinite’ principle (*‘apeiron’*) gives rise to all beings. For Anaximander, human evolution permeated first the sphere of water and then the sphere of earth in its universal trajectory of the cosmos creation. Anaximander’s theory is related to the homospheric sphere system as proposed later on by Eudoxus, who was influenced by Plato. Following this theory, every planet is surrounded by four concentric spheres: the sphere of earth, the sphere of water, the sphere of air and the sphere of fire.

Anaximenes reckoned that there is a primary substance, an underlying principle (*‘arche’*), from which even gods are born. Anaximenes asserted that the godly primary substance -air- condensates and hence, earth is formed. Steam emerges from the liquid parts of earth, which evaporate and become fire.

Heraclitus believed that apart from the different world substances that are subject to changes and disintegration, there is a primary substance that remains unchanged and infinite in space. For Heraclitus, this sublime element in the world which remains immortal and indestructible is the ‘Wise’ (*‘sofo’*) and fire is the element that harmonizes the wise with the natural world. He was the one to establish the term Logos and considered it to be the universal intellect, the major, true and essential power. Logos is the one that regulates time, creates and beautifies things in such a great architectural way.

Anaxagoras developed a theory about the structure of matter. In that theory he regarded material substance as an infinite multitude of imperishable primary elements. He also introduced a conceptual cause, that of Mind (*‘nous’*), which constitutes the driving force that diversifies the universe.

Democritus held that everything is composed of ‘atoms’, which are infinite in number and shape and are scattered in infinite empty space. The atoms are in eternal motion and form a swirl that makes similar atoms lean towards each other and form infinite worlds. Some worlds evolve, while some others disintegrate.

Empedocles was the first one to support that the material elements are four and are incarnated by godly forces. Empedocles did not use the term ‘element’ to describe the four classical elements but he chose the term ‘rhizome, root, foundation’ and attributed to these four ‘roots’ all the characteristics of Parmenides’ Being. He

believed that Zeus rules the element of fire, Hera air, Nestis water and Aidoneus earth.

The four elements of nature in ancient civilizations

Toltecs Aztecs

Huehuetotl he is the god of fire. He is depicted as an old man sitting with his legs crossed and eyes closed. His characteristic symbol is the cross. The symbolic movement on the vertical axis, such as the movement of fire, is a way of liberation from the four inferior elements of nature - fire, air, water, earth, which are symbolized by the cross.

Quetzalcoatl In the Cospi and Borgia codices, mention is made of the correlation between this god and the planet Venus. He also takes on the form of Ehecatl the creator-god and wind god.

Chalchiuhtlicue This is the deity of horizontal waters, of the sea and land. She is the wife and sister of Tlaloc.

Mictlantecutli is the lord of the distant ninth level of the underworld. His name means Lord of Mictlan, the realm of the underworld.

India

Indra According to F. Guirand and C. Sivaramamurti, Indra is the god of warriors, king of heaven and rider of the clouds who resides on mount Meru.

Agni He is the god of fire. He was born out of the friction of two pieces of wood, the Aranis.

Vayu He is the Lord of the winds.

Mitra and Varuna They regulate the circulation of the waters, the energy that flows in the solar system.

Yama He is regarded as the god of death and lord of justice.

Egypt

Fernard Schwarz mentions that the deities of Egypt are the incarnated powers of nature. The meeting of gods and men causes an exchange of powers, a heavenly offer, and a chance to communicate with the divine.

Amon He was worshipped at Thebes, Luxor and Karnak together with his wife Mut, the universal mother, and their son, Khonsu, the god that crosses the sky with a boat and protects the Ka of the pharaoh.

Neith This deity, whom the Greeks identified with the goddess Athena, was the protector of Sais.

Su This is the creative, spiritual, solar wind. He is depicted in the form of a man who holds the goddess Nut and leans on the god Geb.

Thoth He is the patron god of knowledge and writing. According to the priests of Hermopolis, he was the real creator of the world. Only with the power of the word he created the gods, who continued the creation process based on the power of his word. He is the companion of the goddess Maat, goddess of justice and laws.

Anubis He is the god that protects the dead and their luminous guide through the darkness.

Hathor She is depicted with the head of cow, and she is the goddess who protects the sky, the sun, music, dancing and the arts. She also protects the royal family and in some representations she is holding the king in her arms or on her lap, breastfeeding him. Under the name "Queen of the West" she is considered the protector of the Necropolis of Thebes. The centre of her worship was Dendera.

Sekhmet She is the patron goddess of heavenly rewards and of the punishment of the lawbreakers of Maat. The deities Sekhmet-Hathor represent the executive function of justice, the laws that spring from Maat.

Osiris He is patron god of the underworld, king of the dead.

Heket She is the frog-goddess that protects all births and creation.

Greece

Zeus He begins the third consecutive dynasty, after the reigns of Uranus and Cronus, which restores order to the universe. On the whole, the characteristics of the gods of this dynasty are closer to human nature. Zeus, according to Felix Guirand, symbolizes the intellect that puts the world in order, sustains the balance of the parts, the different sections of the universe, and holds the moral and physical order. Together with Poseidon and Pluto, he rules the whole world.

Athena She is the daughter of Zeus, a goddess of war who gives victory and ensures peace for the people that worship her. Athena supports heroes in all their good works and deeds, as well as their perils. She was the one who helped Perseus, Hercules in his labors, Achilles and Odysseus.

Hephaestus He is the god of the celestial fire that falls in the form of a lightning, but also of the natural fire that forges metals into shape. He is a cripple by birth, just like the fire before growing into wavy flames.

Hera She is the queen of the heavens, but also the archetypal woman and wife. She is represented sitting on her throne with magnificence and dignity.

Hermes He is the lord of divine utterances, the god of writing, joy and prosperity. He is the god of creation, drawing life from chaos and light from darkness. He is the god that reconciles opposites, the god of wind, of movement, of twilight, of the rising and

setting sun, of day and night, of awakening and dying, of sleeping and living. He is the messenger between men and the gods Zeus and Pluto.

Poseidon He is the Lord of the waters. The middle realm, his domain, is found between heaven and earth. The unity of the three worlds is depicted symbolically by Poseidon's trident, which pierces through the three different worlds, the archetypal, the psychological and the physical world, holding them together.

Aphrodite She is the goddess that is connected with beauty in the physical world, love in the psychological world and abundance in the spiritual world.

Pluto He is the Zeus of the underworld, king of the dead.

Bibliography:

Berrin, K. and Pasztory, E., *Teotihuakan: Art from the city of the Gods*, London and New York, 1993.

Confucius, *The Analects*, Indictus, Athens, 2001.

Fikas Yannis, *Art and Culture of the Ancient World*, Karakotsoglou, Athens, 2005.

Fikas Yannis, *Philosophy, World, Polis, Man*, Nikas, Athens, 2013.

Guirand, Felix, *World Mythology*, Yovanis, Athens.

Pasztory, Esther, *Teotihuakan*, University Oklahoma Press, 1997.

Ridgway, Sismondo Brunilde, *Prayers in Stone: Greek Architectural Sculpture (C. 600-100 B.C.E.)*, University of California Press, 1999.

Schwarz, Fernand, *Symbolique de l' Egypte*, Huitieme jour, Paris, 2006.

Sejourne, Laurette, *Burning Water, Thought and Religion in Ancient Mexico*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1978.

Sivaramamurti, C., *The Art of India*, Harry N. Abrams, N.Y., 1977.

Soustelle, Jacques, *The Four Suns*, New York Grossman Publishers, 1971.

Soustelle, Jacques, *The Aztecs*, Kardamitsas, Athens, 1997.

Kereni, K., *Mythology of the Greeks*, Hestia, Athens, 1974.

Papahatzis, Nicolaos, *Religion in Ancient Greece*, Athens Publishing, Athens, 1996.

Popol Vuh: *The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiche Maya*, Kastaniotis, Athens, 1989.