

July 2000

Chapter 1: How may we understand four elements theory today

J.L. Benson

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgc

Benson, J.L., "Chapter 1: How may we understand four elements theory today" (2000). *Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements*. 5.
http://scholarworks.umass.edu/art_jbgc/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Art, Architecture & Art History at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Greek Color Theory and the Four Elements by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact scholarworks@library.umass.edu.

I.

HOW MAY WE UNDERSTAND FOUR ELEMENTS PHILOSOPHY TODAY

THE IDEA OF MACROCOSMOS (WORLD) AND MICROCOSMOS (HUMAN BEING)

“And first he (Bacchus viewing the doors of the palace of Neptune) saw, depicted with a wealth of colour, the confused features of primeval chaos, with a representation of the four elements about their divers functions. Above was fire, sublimely independent of matter and, ever since Prometheus stole it, the source of life to all living things. After it, soaring lightly and invisibly, came air, that found its habitat more readily and left no corner of the world, however hot or cold, unfilled. Earth, disposed in hills and valleys, was clad in green swards and blossoming trees, whence the beasts that inhabited it derived their varied sustenance; while, scattered about the land mass, water was clearly to be perceived, not merely nourishing many a species of fish, but supplying the humidity essential to existence.”

—Camoens, *The Lusiads* Canto VI (W.G. Atkinson translation).

THE CONCEPT OF A FOURFOLD WORLD

There are overwhelming obstacles to assured understanding of Presocratic philosophy—the mental equivalent to Greek art in the generations from the High Archaic to the High Classical Periods. First, our knowledge of it depends entirely on fragments preserved by later, sometimes very much later, authors and their commentators. There is not even certainty in many cases that the preserved fragments were actually written by the philosophers with whose names they are associated and, in any case, the context is lost.¹ How disastrous that is need hardly be insisted upon. All this gives rise to an ample secondary literature interpreting, at a vast distance of time, a large body of fragments of ancient secondary literature.

Secondly, the potentiality for misinterpretation of the intent of words was already formidable in the last mentioned and is increased by an inverse ratio in modern

secondary literature; for any words we use for translation and interpretation are freighted with a ballast of associations accumulated over thousands of years² and—what is more problematic—filtered through minds which can hardly escape being affected by a skeptical, materialist-positivist world view. However much we may feel that the Presocratics form the first link in the chain leading to this view, it would have been historically impossible for them to have had anything like it. Their rather poetic musings on how divine forces actually operated physically in the world are reminiscent of the way Galileo and Descartes emerged from a religious cocoon while hoping to enhance the glory of God with their discoveries. Yet in Greece there was no powerful church to restrain natural philosophers and public opinion was largely tolerant. To the outside world their ideas, if noticed at all, must have seemed as strange as the constantly changing style of the statues gracing temples and public places. In this milieu the Four Elements philosophy and contrapposto were in place by the middle of the fifth century (close dates are hard to come by³ but see Chapter II, *The Ancient Sources*, Demokritos section D, paragraph 3): on the one hand the first scientific method for a profound exploration of reality and, on the other, a formula (the Canon) for a profound understanding of the human body-mind interaction, a subject never previously brought to full consciousness. The two men responsible for this climax, Empedokles and Polykleitos, might be called midwives who delivered the two perhaps most revolutionary impulses that informed mature Greek culture and its ever widening influence.⁴ Yet the Four Elements philosophy, though ultimately prevalent, was to some extent misunderstood and contested by contemporaries of Empedokles, whereas the contrapposto stance invented by Polykleitos seems to have been immediately and instinctively grasped and became the touchstone for all later Greek sculpture (and beyond).

Although some generalizations about Presocratic philosophy can be made, there is no help for the verbal impediments to interpretation pointed out above. It has seemed to me therefore to be useful to consult the uncontaminated non-verbal record afforded by Greek art: at least theoretically and *grosso modo* a richer experience of the two categories should be attainable by allowing ideas derivable from the one to reflect onto the other and vice versa. That will be the method pursued in this study. Given that the current wisdom says that these are two unrelated aspects of Greek culture which should be kept apart, my results may seem unfamiliar to those who expect, after all, pure art historical analysis with perhaps a few references to what was going on in contemporary philosophy, or else a review of Presocratic philosophy with a few happy parallels from sculpture and painting. I will not fulfill either of those expectations, especially since others could do that better. My whole purpose in writing is to see whether it is feasible to pursue consistently the philosophical quality of Greek art and the artistic quality of Greek philosophy—both as vital aspects of “Greekness”.

It is not within my competence to enter technically into the dispute as to how much Presocratic schools owe to influence from Oriental sources. The prevailing tendency, with notable exceptions, seems to be to deny this as much as possible,⁵ whereas in regard to art the opposite tendency has long been characteristic of archaeologists. This question of the Greekness of Greek creativity, in whatever category,

is obviously of profound significance for accuracy of historical interpretation but at the same time demonstrates, in the hefty divergences of opinions about the same facts, that feeling and willing in individual coloration play no less a role in modern scholarship than they did in the sixth century B.C. In this light I present my opinion as to what was really different about the modality of thought introduced in Miletos and Ephesos, Samos and Croton from what had previously prevailed. It will be well initially to set aside the well-worn formula: from mythical to rational thinking, the complexities of which G.S. Kirk⁶ has graphically demonstrated. More generically, the Greek tendency was to pursue a line of creative endeavor tenaciously over generations, until the “right form” for it was attained, after which creativity expressed itself horizontally rather than vertically, in variants. Rhys Carpenter’s⁷ derivation of this judgment from the history of the orders seems to me to throw light also on the history of figure style in Greek ceramics. While each of its stages, beginning with silhouette style in Greek pottery, continuing with blackfigure in Corinthian and Attic pottery, and ending with Attic redfigure style, had its own rationale, collectively they represent an unceasing striving to find the most effective way of depicting in two dimensions the naked human form, simultaneously being worked out in an unbroken series of three dimensional stone statues. It is not without interest that the development of redfigure is generally considered to have peaked in the first half of the fifth century when the final struggle to achieve what we call *contrapposto* in sculpture was taking place. Thereafter redfigure drifted into a more theatrical stance and was exploited, especially in Magna Graecia, rather than developed further in the original sense indicated above. To some extent this parallels the exploitation of the orders once they were finally crystallized.

The kind of formal order which emerged in Attic Geometric and Archaic painting has less tangible but certainly recognizable parallels in the literary endeavors of Hesiod—and then in the next stage in the parallel stream of Orphic inspiration: Pherykydes and Pythagoras, and then in the Ionian School. It is not difficult to see that each of these was searching for the “right” explanation of the experiential world, but their methods differed so greatly that to find a common denominator is not easy. Certainly what did not change from an earlier stratum of experience is that in all of these the foundation of existence was felt to be divine, even if traditional religious formulae could be put in doubt or even discarded.⁸ It is exactly this which removes them furthest from our intellectually self-eviscerated age. To assert that Antiquity, no less than the Middle Ages, was an Age of Faith (even though, of course, the definition of faith has to be broadened accordingly) is not to help anyone understand that. But to visualize through art that, in the critical period we are considering, the “unbroken” world of the Archaic Greeks became the “broken” world of the Classical Greeks,⁹ might help.

THE FOUR ELEMENTS

*The stones (sc. minerals) have a fixed condition
and the plants have their growth.*

*The dumb beasts have all that and their soul pictures as well
but the power of reasoning (is) peculiar to human-kind.*

—Adapted from Chrysippos as quoted by Clement of Alexandria
(*I. von Arnim, Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, no. 714 Leipzig 1903)

By the middle of the first millennium B.C. cumulative human experience with the basic structure of the earth and its denizens was evidently sufficiently extensive and inwardly absorbed that a “philosophy”—a rationalization—of that structure could be formulated. Based on well over a century of tentative ideas and speculation¹⁰ about the elementary composition of the world, a literally classic theory of four equal and commensurate elements was formulated by Empedokles at the latest and taken up by Plato and Aristotle. They pointed out that earth, air, fire and water do not only exist in recognizable isolation but also are constantly combined in nature by mixing into innumerable inorganic and organic compounds, giving the basis for substances and beings that came to be summarily classified as mineral, plant, animal and man. The order is hierarchical with mineral having only one element (earth) and man having all four.

The elements were understood equally as substance or the processual activities associated with it (solidification, liquefaction, rarefaction and combustion)¹¹ and certain qualities were seen as inherently associated with the four: hot, cold, wet, dry; and the four temperaments and perhaps more. The interdependence and commensurability of the microcosmic and macrocosmic forms of the elements under the influence of attraction and repulsion (love and strife) were fundamentally assumed. But I must stress that this summary is an *ideal* description of what was in ordinary life probably more felt and instinctive than articulated. In the light of this specific schema we become aware that, by the time of its formulation, in art the division between man and god was still being drawn with self-evident precision. The consciousness of an earlier millennium about it is reflected in the well-known ritual vase from Warka (Figure 1).¹² Earth—or the mineral realm—is represented or at least implied by the supporting base of the receptacle itself, above which the realm of water is depicted as a conventional design. Over that is a frieze depicting the realm of plants—which live from water into air—and then above the plants a frieze showing the realm of warm-blooded animals who also live from water and air into warmth through their blood and breath. Above this again is a taller frieze of men, servitors, who embody the sublimation of inward warmth to self-conscious activity in the service of the gods. Then towering over all this is a taller frieze depicting the goddess (or her priestess) toward whom all the activity and resources of the world flow. The divine world honored by the height of the frieze floats above the tangible world. At this stage it

must have been impossible to conceive of the fourfold world without divine overseers, as is equally evident in the art of the Pharaonic state, the First Babylonian Dynasty and in the Biblical account of the Hebraic theocracy.

This is the conception inherited by Greece from the past and still vitally and visually alive in the pediments of Olympia. Yet what the Ionian philosophers as a whole achieved was the detachment of the concept of certain individual underlying elements from the total scheme so that these could be individually scrutinized and evaluated as to their qualities. The process of intellectual inquiry thus initiated was *prima facie* specialized and one-sided, a tendency that appears to be reflected also in the concentration of Archaic sculptors on a narrowly defined schema of the human body—the youthful male or *kouros* type—as the key to unlock the fundamental riddle of the body-soul relationship. Other themes, even the female body, were neglected accordingly. This creation of philosophical inquiry and of a basic statue type of consummate perfection constitutes *ipso facto* a new stage of human self-consciousness that separates the Greeks from anything in the older civilizations, however much they may have taken materials from these.

It is again altogether in keeping with the Classical mentality that the discovery of substance *per se*, at the price of one-sidedness, should have been drawn back by Empedokles into a dynamically balanced philosophical system. He at least is the first thinker we know of who specifically proclaimed the commensurability of the four elements and their incessant interaction (this includes human thinking). Yet there is no reason to doubt that Empedokles and, in fact, most philosophers, continued to recognize the existence of a higher spiritual realm and the compatibility of the highest expression of the *four* elements: man himself, with it.¹³ Nevertheless, consciousness henceforth began to be drawn subtly and inevitably to phenomena and processes of the visible world; in effect, the divine factor came to be relegated to an extraterrestrial sphere considered to be, as it were, a fifth element—*aither* in Aristotle's *De Caelo*, then *quinta essentia*—obviously more subtle than warmth. As the quadripartite conception showed itself increasingly useful and versatile, the elimination of the divine factor from practical considerations (the quintessence becoming eventually the bailiwick of the alchemists) brought a certain freedom to downgrade or even ignore it.

In Hellenistic times a kind of pallid forerunner of modern “secular humanism” may have arisen; but Greek sculpture, drama and mainstream philosophy never totally lost a sense of spiritual realities, in whatever shading these might find expression. Paradoxically, from an early stage of its development onward, the Greek mind was also instinctively and creatively turned to the physicality of the world by the Four Elements theory, an explanation so deeply rational and fundamentally apposite to the human condition, that it could still today be profitably taken into account by the scientific establishment which all too often remains in a maze of mathematical abstractions as it pursues power over nature (see *Select Bibliography*, paragraph 2).

THE FOUR MEMBERS

At least two historians of ancient art have found it necessary in their analyses¹⁴ of Greek sculpture to refer to various “levels” or “souls” inherent in the human make-up. And they did not do this theoretically or as a quaint theory of the past. However, since their use of this concept was not systematic—and could not have been without full scale discussion of the Four Elements theory—I shall attempt to provide that systematic investigation here. The concept of souls is undoubtedly the least understood aspect of the parallel structuring of the macrocosm and microcosm although hardly the least known. There are enough references to it in Plato and Aristotle to guarantee that, in some way, the total system existed in antiquity as experience and perhaps tradition. In fact, once it is grasped, indications of it—even fairly systematic ones—can be recognized in earlier cultures, particularly that of Egypt. Yet modern scholarship on the whole has not shown much interest in that subject.

There are gaps, sufficiently plentiful that one can proceed only by analogy and deduction. On the one hand we have in the *Timaeus* Plato’s description of the earth as an organic World-Soul enveloped by a (physical) body. As Cornford¹⁵ then put it: “The parallel of macrocosm and microcosm runs through the whole discourse...and the soul itself is a counterpart, in miniature, of the soul of the world.” But for us too much is assumed to understand this easily. We also have the Empedoklean, Platonic and Aristotelian total commitment to the inter-mixing (*krasis*) of the four elements as the basis of all physical and organic reality. On the other hand, we have Aristotle’s description in *De Anima* of the structure of the human being, whose parts bear a relationship to the processual spheres of the four elements. If not much else is spelled out, we can assume either that it was too obvious to need comment, or was discussed in lost writings or—perhaps most likely of all—that the full systematic implications of the microcosmic-macrocosmic four elements theory lay beyond the particular interests of ancient philosophers. After this we find rather its traces, as a world view taken totally for granted, in such things as medicine and alchemy, for centuries, even millennia to come.

Stated in the most reduced terms the system requires that the members of each living being correspond in quality to subsuming similar members of the living world organism in which they in fact exist and without which they would perish. This is, for example, most easily understandable in the case of the individual physical body, which cannot be conceived of without its mineral component—for there would be no skeleton or, in the lowest echelons, visible substance. The recurring fantasy in films about “invisible men” demonstrates, moreover, that in the modern artistic imagination, at least, the human being is not limited to physicality but is shot through with invisible processes on which sentience and consciousness rest. It is precisely these processual systems, of which only the *effect* can be observed, and without which the physical body becomes a corpse, that comprise the upper three levels or souls of the four member system. The four member system is most concretely documented by Aristotle (although he tends to take the physical level for granted and thus does not actually speak of four). Though at present the least regarded aspect of the Four Elements theory, this

quadripartite articulation of the human being has remained as the essential frame of reference of the western world and still survives—largely unexamined and uncoordinated—in our conceptual life as physical anthropology (study of skeletal systems, among other things), physiology (study of the vital systems, particularly glandular), psychology (study of the emotional and mental capacities, particularly as carried by the nervous system) and ego. Since modern psychology has no concept of soul as such, it overlaps into conclusions about the ego, which in the Greek system corresponds to a separate fourth member, *nous*, the cogitative faculty, not present in animals. In effect, the crowning term of the four—all derived from the Greek language and fossilized in our time—should be philosophy. The latter, deprived of its former relation to peoples who understand themselves in fourfold terms, has had no choice but to become increasingly abstract and peripheral in human affairs.

Despite the present tattered condition of the system, it was used in a dynamic correlative sense as late as the 19th century by Ignaz Paul Troxler (Basel) and others for medical and philosophical conclusions¹⁶ and even later by Nikolai Hartmann (1882–1951) as a framework for his philosophical system.¹⁷ It has been used for the interpretation of ancient Near Eastern art by Walter Andrae (see note 12). To the historian's eye the full integration—or re-integration—of this system by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) as the basis of his cosmology indicates that the four elements theory is still evolving.¹⁸ To my knowledge Steiner, working closely with concepts from Goethe's scientific work, is the only modern thinker to give full weight to the macrocosmic aspect of the microcosmic foursome. Above the physical body (which Aristotle dealt with *en passant*: de An. 411a he uses the term etheric body for Aristotle's *threptikon* or nutritive soul, astral or sentient body for the *aesthetikon* or sensitive soul and ego for *nous*. His subordinate parts of the *nous* are likewise documented in Aristotle (see my study of Greek sculpture). The etheric body of an individual (plant, animal, man) regulating the vegetative, liquefying processes of life is dependent on the etheric body (roughly atmosphere) of the earth organism as a whole. The individual sentient body (of animal, man), seat of the feeling life, is correlative to the sentient body (a collective phenomenon, from the individual point of view) of the earth. The ego (of man alone) is related to a macrocosmic ego of divine nature.

All of this is, explicitly or implicitly, a Hellenic view¹⁹ of human reality. It is probably safe to say that its existence, in varying degrees of explicitness and understanding, was never seriously challenged in principle until the intellectual effects of the nominalistic controversy of the Middle Ages began to condition the definition and practice of natural science. Even then it was too massive to be totally displaced, as noted above, and it has also had a succession of powerful defenders, e.g., Kepler and Goethe. Nevertheless, the nominalistic world picture that originated in medieval philosophy and culminated in the materialism of the 19th century has us all in its grip, despite our perhaps valiant efforts to escape it²⁰—even though 20th century quantum physics and relativity theory have discredited much of it (in a manner, unfortunately, too abstruse and impersonal to penetrate or fructify public consciousness²¹). The natural sciences each pursue their own agenda to infinite particulars while the social sciences make what they can of the results of the elite sciences. Nor can ancient studies stay above this

obtrusive intellectual turmoil. This is not said in a spirit of criticism of its practitioners but to explain why I am impelled to offer this study: it is my way of trying to make sense of the crisis²² sketched out above.