

Archaeology and Classical Humanities Volume 1

Acheloios, Thales, and the Origin of Philosophy

A Response to the Neo-Marxians



Nicholas J. Molinari



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Archaeology and Classical Humanities

Volume 1

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Northbridge, Massachusetts

To Thales, the original Acheloios fanatic

'.....maybe this isn't the right way of making exchanges for virtue, by exchanging pleasures for pleasures and pains for pains and terror for terror and the greater for the less, as if they were coins, but maybe this alone is the right coin for virtue, the coin for which all things must be exchanged—thoughtfulness. Maybe this is the genuine coin for which and with which all things must be bought and sold'

-Socrates¹

¹ Plato, *Phaedo* 69a, trans. Eva Brann, Peter Kalkavage, and Eric Salem, *Plato's Phaedo* (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 1998).

Abstract

This book presents a new account of Thales based on the idea that Acheloios, a deity equated with water in the ancient Greek world and found in Miletos during Thales' life, was the most important cultic deity influencing the thinker, profoundly shaping his philosophical worldview. In doing so, it also weighs in on the metaphysical and epistemological dichotomy that seemingly underlies all academia—the antithesis of the methodological postulate of Marxian dialectical materialism vis-à-vis the Platonic idea of fundamentally real transcendental forms. Unbeknownst to many scholars, there are various Neo-Marxian thinkers that position the origin of coinage as the pivotal technological development giving rise to impersonal “metaphysical cosmology,” suggesting that the value of money was more-or-less projected back onto the cosmos in the form of “ideal substances.” While the arguments are incredibly sophisticated and persuasive, their conclusions (either stated or implied) are rather difficult to swallow: the self is merely an illusion, abstract ideas of an ultimate source of value, like God or the Good, are totally delusional (as is the soul, and presumably any notion of inherent human dignity), and essentially everything is reducible to mankind's enslavement to commodities and the notion of our own objectified labor, which is the true source of all value according to Marx. Not only is this an alarming belief that many scholars (consciously or unconsciously) have adopted, since essentially any action could be “justified,” it is also demonstrably false, since it rests on a misunderstanding of Thales and misconception of philosophy as such.

My work rectifies that misunderstanding. In an important sense, it is an attempt at redefining philosophy as a “love of wisdom,” which I argue was accurate even in the Presocratic setting, and it uses the influence of Acheloios on Thales to do so. Throughout its pages I explore the etymology and historical uses of the word ὕδωρ, examine the archaeological context of 7th to 6th century Miletos, consider various aquatic myths Thales encountered, and highlight a hitherto overlooked tradition stemming from Thales and influencing such thinkers as Pythagoras, Empedokles, and Hippo, which culminates in a completely new reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*, a dialogue in which Plato responds to the exact type of thinking employed by the Neo-Marxians. It is there that we find Socrates and Phaedrus surrounded by the iconography of Acheloios and the nymphs, all while they lie reclined like river gods (the sinews of Acheloios) on the banks of the Ilisos. And it is in that dialogue that Plato defines philosophy as a love of wisdom—the beholding of a multiplicity of hermeneutical frameworks—and alludes to the fact that it began with the sacrifice of Acheloios, the initial philosophical maneuver which he attributes to Thales. The book ends with a threefold rejoinder to the Neo-Marxian school, corresponding to the λόγος, μῦθος, and ἔργον of Acheloios. It turns out that, (1) the λόγος of Acheloios contained the ideal preconditions conducive to an abstraction to a more refined philosophical worldview in which divine water operated as the One among the Many; (2) the μῦθος of Acheloios actually encouraged the application of the notion of sacrifice to Acheloios himself (thus revealing his essence as divine water); and, (3), the ἔργον of Acheloios, in which he kneels in assent to sacrifice, is found on a coin that was probably designed by Thales. In the final analysis, I suggest that the tradition of Acheloios is reflective of a greater philosophical truth, and that by following Thales' lead, we transcend the Marxian hermeneutic of doubt and reorient ourselves toward the οὐσία ὄντως οὐσία.

Introduction

'For if this book is a joke, it is a joke against me. I am the man who, with utmost daring, discovered what had been discovered before.'

-G.K. Chesterton¹

Arguments concerning the ultimate principles of reality tend to assume remarkable forms at different times throughout history. In one peculiar case some have maintained that all philosophical speculation has its origin in coins. Plato's colorless, formless, and intangible Being (*οὐσία ἄντως οὐσία*), St. Thomas Aquinas' *quod sit per se necessarium*, Kant's synthetic *a priori*—all of it originates from stamped little globules of metal with specific markings. Indeed, many of the adherents to this theory consider such ideologies entirely delusional, and believe that universal forms and values emerging from abstraction are complete fabrications on the part of man, with no independent ontological status. Fairly recently, the basic argument that coins caused philosophy was given tremendous force, specifically in Richard Seaford's *Money and the Early Greek Mind*. Seaford's argument, as compelling as it is, is an exercise in strict historical materialism, and the result of his investigation radically reduces the character of Presocratic philosophy to the confines of 'metaphysical cosmology.' While it might seem, on face value, that this topic would be of little interest to any but a small group of academics, in truth it is one of the most important philosophical discussions of our time (and all time). In fact, as I'll venture to show, the question of Thales and the origin of philosophy is part of a conversation started by Plato thousands of years ago, one in which he was responding to the very same type of thinking employed by the Neo-Marxians. There, he offered a response to such thinking in a shrine to Acheloios on the banks of a river, and likewise, my response to the Neo-Marxians will also have recourse to Acheloios, for, as I hope to show, Acheloios is fundamentally important to the history of philosophical activity, then and now.

Accordingly, the purpose of my work here is essentially twofold: on the one hand, I plan to refute the Neo-Marxian account of the origin of philosophy, an account which is rooted in the dialectical materialism of Marx himself. I believe refuting the Neo-Marxian claim is incredibly important because the ramifications of accepting such a viewpoint are the elimination of God and the soul, which are defended in this work in a variety of ways. On the other hand, the refutation of the Neo-Marxian account will consist in establishing the undeniable relation of the cult of Acheloios and its surrounding mythos to the philosophy of Thales. This latter demonstration is equally important because, so far as I can anticipate, it will help initiate a new type of philosophy that emerges in the face of the critical methodology and its underlying hermeneutic of doubt.

Such bold claims demand lots of evidence and such an ambitious work requires a thorough introduction, so I have decided at the outset to provide an overview of the argument in its entirety, found below. This should help the reader get his or her bearings before evaluating the evidence in the text, but should by no means be seen as covering all aspects of the argument. I have also opted for Greek fonts. The alternative would be to use transliterations,

¹G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane Company, 1909), 18.

but if the reader has no knowledge of Greek, I see no legitimate reason—I do, however, list the transliteration after the first appearance of all Greek words that appear regularly throughout the work. Additionally, although there are many footnotes throughout the manuscript, for the vast majority they do not provide any additional rationale—the reader is therefore welcome to skip over them for a smoother reading though should he or she want to see the evidence, it is *all* there, along with what I think are interesting anecdotes. Finally, this book is an inference to the best explanation and should ideally be read from start to finish in its entirety (a courtesy I admittedly was unable to extend to all of the books I relied so heavily on). I'd like to warn in particular about skipping directly to Chapters 9-12 without examining the many pages of evidence that precede them, particularly the account of Thales' philosophy in Chapter 3 and the overview of Acheloios in Chapter 4.

In terms of the book's contents, the first chapter begins with an analysis of abstraction and resultant ideologies according to Marx. Marx proposed a theory in *Das Kapital* that the exchange-value of commodities, specifically abstract human labor, gave rise to all ideologies. However, he insisted that such ideologies were essentially like 'optical illusions' that did not correspond to some objective reality outside the mind, hence many refer to Marx's enterprise under the banner of dialectical or historical materialism, considering it the rigorous employment of a methodological postulate rather than a proper 'worldview.' As a critical theory, dialectical materialism explains the superstructures of social reality and their material underpinnings in processes of (and struggles to control) production and consumption; but it also has an ontographic dimension, despite the fact that Marx does not participate in bourgeois philosophy. In this second sense, dialectical materialism implies, ontologically, that all reality is reduced to dialectical exchange in a thoroughly immanent, material world (the opposite of Hegel), and these ontological parameters have serious implications insofar as all transcendental forms and values are essentially non-existent. Indeed, even consciousness—the static, persistent individual experiencing the world through time—is itself delusory. Thus, all reality, having no fundamental, permanent parameters, is reduced to flux and probability (Plato's 'becoming'), however well we may be able to anticipate or explain behaviors using the methodological postulate.

Upon this basis there are two early theories that argue the social use of coinage literally caused philosophy. These theories are found in the work of George Thomson and Alfred Sohn-Rethel. On the one hand, Thomson offers an important cultural critique of archaic coinage and Presocratic philosophy, and shines a light on the often-overlooked fact that philosophy and coinage emerged in nearly the same place at the same time. That is, electrum coinage, the very first true coinage of the world, appears in the second half of the seventh century BC in the area of Ionia and Lydia, in the same half century that Thales was born, thus a generation or so before he began philosophizing. Thomson argues, largely following Marx, that the social exchange of money engendered abstract philosophical frameworks in the sense that the value of money was reflected back onto the world via a 'false consciousness,' and his historical survey is evidence of such a causal relation. But Thomson's theory lacked sufficient discussion of the inner workings or machinations that take place in the mind during the process in which exchange value undergoes some metamorphosis into something else. This ambiguity was somewhat clarified by Alfred Sohn-Rethel, sworn enemy of the looming technological takeover of mankind, who presented an abstract critique of epistemology in his discussion of how exchange-abstraction gives rise to philosophical frameworks, juxtaposing his view with

Kant's system of Transcendental Idealism. For Sohn-Rethel, instead of the mind projecting *a priori* categories onto the world, social interactions in the world (specifically, the exchange of coined money) change the physical brain in such a way that it can then project universal frameworks and values onto the world.

The second chapter of this book examines Richard Seaford's works, which combine and expand upon the theories of Marx, Thomson, and Sohn-Rethel. Seaford argues, following his predecessors, that the absence of use-value in money makes it an 'ideal substance,' and this notion of ideal substance is then projected onto the cosmos by the Presocratics in their identification of various material candidates for the *ἀρχή* (*archē*). For evidence, Seaford presents a tenfold scheme in which he compares coined money to Anaximander's *ἄπειρον* (*ápeiron*). Briefly, he argues that both coinage and the *ἄπειρον* exhibit ten common characteristics, and such a parallel supports the idea that coinage engendered philosophical activity, which Seaford defines as 'metaphysical cosmology' consisting of 'abstract ideas of the universe as an impersonal system.' On top of this, in his later works, Seaford goes so far as to explain the perceived unity of individual human consciousness as also deriving from coinage, solidifying him among the rank and file of the Neo-Marxians. Here he argues that the abstract impersonal substance encompassed in money is 'introjected' into the mind, essentially producing the 'false consciousness' advocated by Marx and his followers.

With this background, the first step in disputing what I call the Neo-Marxian school of exchange-abstraction is to point out some of its apparent shortcomings, which I do in the second part of Chapter 2. Here I begin by building upon a poignant critique of Seaford by Joshua Reynolds. He points out three things: (1) Seaford is not explaining the conscious thoughts of the Presocratics and focusing only on unconscious motivators; (2) There is an abundance of evidence that exhibits a pre-coinage distinction of sign and substance; and (3) Seaford's account does not explain the actual cognitive processes at play in the origin of philosophy. But Reynolds' critique is no nail in the coffin, and Seaford's argument still has incredible strength. I therefore add additional critiques which I build upon throughout the remainder of the book. Notably, I point out that Seaford's argument is based too heavily on the Aristotelian tradition (specifically as interpreted since Hegel), which many scholars have criticized because it employs anachronistic terminology when discussing archaic thinkers. But an even more serious issue with Seaford's account, and likewise Thomson's and Sohn-Rethel's, is that they all almost completely ignore Thales. The rationale is that he is so obscure and the evidence so fragmentary that we cannot determine much. Conveniently, by ignoring Thales it allows the argument for exchange-abstraction to gain a much stronger foothold, since the ambiguity (or even mysticism) surrounding Thales is such that it is incommensurable with the precision of the exchange-abstraction paradigm. Moreover, by ignoring Thales the very definition of philosophy changes and begins with Anaximander's (seemingly) far more delineated *ἄπειρον*. In the course of this book, I hope to show that philosophy is something other than what Seaford makes it out to be; that is to say, it is not simply the projection of 'abstract ideas of the universe as an impersonal system,' but, rather, an authentic *love* of wisdom that stems from beatific vision.

Having identified the core problems, I begin the investigation into an alternative that reestablishes Thales as the original philosopher, properly understood. Thus, I turn to Thales and Acheloios quite generally in the next two chapters. In Chapter 3 I review the ancient

accounts of Thales' philosophy we can rely on for the larger project, and in this case we will see that it amounts to just three things: (1) ὕδωρ (*hýdōr*) is the ἀρχή; (2) the Earth rests on ὕδωρ; and (3) all things are full of gods. All other elements of his philosophy are far too uncertain to depend upon at this initial stage and will not be given any attention here—not because they are completely out of the realm of possibility, but because an accurate assessment of them would prove far too demanding here, and will be much easier to interpret after an examination of the Acheloios tradition. In any case, in this chapter we will see that it is erroneous to think that Thales believed water was the constitutive cause of all things, and also that ἀρχή likely meant more than simply 'origin.' Herein I'll suggest that Thales viewed ὕδωρ as divine water and, metaphysically, this can best be construed in a threefold sense distinct from the traditional Aristotelian conception, as the originating, underlying/governing, and final principle of all things.

In Chapter 4, I present an overview of Acheloios, based largely on my earlier work with Dr. Sisci. Here we will see that Acheloios emerges from a widespread Orientalizing phenomenon in which itinerant mercenaries and seers collectively crystallized the mythos of Acheloios and formed a cultural *koine* spanning much of the Mediterranean, which is reflected in literature as early as Homer. All of these practices and related mythologies were largely filtered through earlier Near Eastern predecessors. Most importantly, Acheloios was equated with water and viewed in some important accounts as its ultimate source. This point, which has been overlooked in all discourses on Thales until now, is utterly essential. If Thales said that (divine) water was the ἀρχή, regardless of the ontological dimension of his conception of ἀρχή, surely a deity equated with water is relevant to a discussion of the mythological and religious influences on Thales. And this equating of Acheloios and water is not cherry-picked from one or two obscure passages examined in isolation, but rather comes from a robust, widely-held belief system exhibited in literature and cult. I follow the work of contemporary archaeologist and classicist Dr. Hans-Peter Isler, who expanded greatly upon the original theory of Nicola Ignarra (a remarkably brilliant, 18th century scholar). The major ancient sources for this tradition are the earlier versions of Homer's *Iliad* (advocated by both Megakleides and Zenodotus), fragments of Ephorus, the works of Euripides, Achaëus, Sophokles, and Aristophanes, the *Derveni Papyrus*, the *Oxyrhynchus Papyrus*, Virgil, Servius, and Macrobius. Ultimately, Acheloios was widely viewed as the ultimate source and strength of water and the rivers of the world were seen as the 'sinews of Acheloios'—both meanings, strength and sinews, contained in the Greek ἴς (*is*) (a word we find paired with Acheloios in antiquity).

With these basic parameters set—an assessment and initial critique of the Neo-Marxians and a basic overview of both Thales and Acheloios—the real work of the book begins, namely, demonstrating that Thales was influenced by the cult of Acheloios and its surrounding mythos. In Chapter 5, I begin to forge the Acheloios-Thales connection by first examining the very word Thales used to identify the ἀρχή, namely, ὕδωρ. Here I look at its use in Homeric times and, as it turns out, it always refers to fresh water unless employing a very specific epithet (and then only in the *Odyssey* and very rarely). This is our first indication that we need to look beyond Okeanos in assessing the mythological and religious influences on Thales. In fact, it bodes well for Acheloios, who is often identified with fresh water in particular. I then turn to the etymology of ὕδωρ, specifically its roots in the Akkadian *edû* and *adû* and its distant cousin, the Sanskrit *udan*. In all cases we find consistency with the Greek: the Akkadian and Sanskrit

equivalents of ὕδωρ also mean fresh, or pure, unadulterated water—water as such—and there is also invariably some divine or sacred dimension to it.

Chapter 6 examines the archaeological evidence demonstrating that the cult of Acheloios was actually in Miletos during Thales' life. The first objective was to determine when Thales lived. This was not easy, because what evidence there is, is mostly unreliable. Still, we can be certain that he was born in the second half of the seventh century and died in the second half of the sixth century, and those general parameters are sufficient for our purposes. Moving on from Thales' dates, I exhibit several pieces of material culture that demonstrate Acheloios was known to the Milesians during Thales' life: a unique electrum stater featuring Acheloios Meandros as a winged man-faced bull, three small electrum fractionals also featuring Acheloios, two pottery fragments excavated at Berezan, a Milesian colony, both featuring Acheloios, and several aryballoi in the form of the head of Acheloios from Naukratis, another Milesian colony.

Having established, beyond reasonable doubt, that the cult of Acheloios was operative in Miletos during Thales' life, I move in Chapter 7 to a more philosophical argument that Thales must have transitioned from a more mythological and religious mindset to a philosophical mindset, else he could not be credited with establishing anything new. Here I focus mostly on critiquing the work of Patricia O'Grady, who wrote a monograph on Thales, and who insists that Thales was not influenced by myth at all. First, I point out some obvious (and serious) shortcomings in her work: (1) a conflation of myth and religion; (2) a complete lack of research into the culture of seventh to sixth century Miletos; and (3) an unjustified overextension of some fragments of Xenophanes and Heraclitus. I then provide a philosophical argument, largely following Francis Cornford, that insists philosophy could not emerge *ex nihilo* in the manner O'Grady describes, but must have developed analogously from myth and religion. Theories like those of Cornford have diminished in influence since the mid-20th century because they assumed too much about the internal machinations of the thinker. But now we have proof of Acheloios in Miletos, providing the nourishment for fresh, fruitful speculations about mythological and cultic influence on philosophy. I end the section by reviewing the major developmental theme of the origin of philosophy promoted by Herman Diels and instituted by Walter Kranz, and followed by many others. With this developmental scheme in mind, it is clear that the problem question confronting Thales was not, 'What is that from which all things originate, all things consist, and all things return?' (O'Grady's Aristotle), nor Panchenko's reduced version borrowed from Anaximander, which amounts to something like, 'What is that from which all things originate and to which all things return?' I say this because such questions were already answered by myth and religion—perhaps not perfectly articulated, but enough so that the theory could be formulated that ὕδωρ was the ἀρχή, without a clear, delineated abstract question concerning ἀρχή in search of a candidate.

With this philosophical point put aside, I then turn to an examination of other possible mythological and religious influences on Thales that might have helped give rise to philosophy proper. First and most obvious is Okeanos, whom many others, apparently since Hippias, have suggested might have had an influence on Thales. First, however, I discredit that he (Okeanos) was the primary influence based on the following: The two lines in Homer from Book 14 concerning Okeanos probably refer to river gods and might indeed be later interpolations, since the evidence presented by D'Alessio concerning Book 21 is so convincing, and Book 14 is well known for its internal inconsistencies. I support the 'orthodox' view of Acheloios,

again following D’Alessio, with the authority of Megakleides, the pre-Alexandrian scholar, and Zenodotus, a former librarian at the Library of Alexander, both of whom were ethnic Ionians that advocated Acheloios was the original source of all water. Overall, I insist that there is no strong evidence that Okeanos was worshipped or even known about in seventh- to mid sixth-century BC Miletos, so it is impossible to say he definitely influenced the thinker. Nonetheless, there is some evidence of a conflation between Okeanos and Acheloios that appears after Thales, and since we know Okeanos was attested in Attica c. 590 BC, I do not dismiss the possibility of influence entirely.

Following these observations, I look east, largely following W.K.C. Guthrie and M.L. West, and examine Apsu and Asaluhi in the Near East and Nūn in Egypt. These figures show remarkable similarity to the idea that divine water is the ‘origin,’ or ἀρχή as traditionally construed in Homeric epic, insofar as they operate as the primordial water from which all things emerge. I then examine Yahweh, who also has a distinct aquatic dimension and who, like Acheloios, was probably represented in art as a man-faced bull up to the sixth century BC. Finally, I’ll look at two Milesian figures: Aphrodite (*Aphrogeneia*), worshipped there and at other Milesian colonies as a sea goddess, and Poseidon, who had an early cult in Miletos. Combined, these two figures provide an interesting example of a multiplicity of deities in the same area all sharing an underlying aquatic dimension, seemingly indicative of Thales’ historically consistent use of the term ‘gods’ in reference to water, which was likely influenced by earlier Dodonaean practices. Altogether, these similar aquatic deities indicate that Thales was confronted with various (sometimes competing) myths as he developed as a thinker and particularly as he traveled (a point recognized by von Fritz and Popper), and thus the problem question he faced was a question concerning the underlying unity or truth behind these myths—a vindication of myth by a pious sage, in other words, not an abandonment or rejection of sacred traditions. Thus, as I’ll demonstrate, Thales seems to have transitioned from the particular watery myths to the general ὕδωρ, and I show in the next chapter that this happened through Acheloios.

I therefore offer an essential component to the overall argument in Chapter 9, that Acheloios was the primary and most influential deity on Thales, for a variety of reasons. Here, I will present a more robust picture of Acheloios and expand on some of the details that were summarized in Chapter 4. Briefly, I will demonstrate that the ‘modified’ (or qualified threefold) Aristotelian ἀρχή was presaged (or tacitly expressed) by Acheloios. First, I will exhibit the evidence of Acheloios as a shapeshifter, able to become anything, and also a deity pivotal in sustaining life, instrumental in birth, and essential to the emergence of personal and civic identity, all of which indicate Acheloios was an ‘originating’ deity in antiquity. Next, we will examine the importance of the cultic belief in assimilation with Acheloios and how this is indicative of the later ἀρχή as ‘governing’ principle. Furthermore, in this section we will look at the positioning of Acheloios as the ultimate, chthonic source of water, and how this characteristic tacitly expresses the later notion of water as underlying principle. Finally, we will look at Acheloios as a psychopomp and his role in death rituals, and here I will demonstrate that he was rather widely and very openly associated with death, hence ‘that to which all things return’ was tacitly incorporated into his overall mythos. The second part of this chapter looks at the notion of the One among the Many in relation to the idea that the rivers of the world are the sinews of Acheloios, and that he is their underlying strength. Here the double meaning of ἰς as both strength and sinew is reflected in the notion of ἀρχή as One among the Many. This section will also entertain arguments concerning the abstraction inherent in

the iconic identification of Acheloios as a man-faced bull, in which case I'll point out that recognition of the man-faced bull as a local embodiment of Acheloios requires a process of abstraction conducive to philosophical activity. Combined, all these aspects of the Acheloios tradition appear to have provided the groundwork for Thales to develop a more delineated notion of a nominally demythologized principle of all things analogously from the Acheloios tradition.

At this point in the book, the question naturally arises: If the cult of Acheloios was so influential on Thales, why hasn't anybody noticed this until now? The answer is actually quite simple, and there is compelling evidence of a chain of connection from Thales to Plato, wherein we find an all-encompassing presentation of Thales' philosophy specifically in relation to the cult of Acheloios (and nature and man quite generally). But before getting to Plato, I exhibit the traces of the Acheloian-Thaletan tradition in subsequent thinkers leading up to the Platonic dialogues.

Chapter 10 therefore consists of an examination of Pythagoras, Hippo, and Empedokles, who I will argue were part of a single, largely overlooked tradition that was ultimately filtered through Thales. In Part I, I provide the evidence for the claim that Pythagoras was a highly regarded pupil of Thales and seemingly instrumental in spreading elements of the cult of Acheloios throughout Magna Graecia and Sicily. In Part II, I exhibit evidence that Hippo went so far as to advocate an aquatic soul, and this has been compared, however loosely, to Thales' theory ever since Aristotle's commentary. In Part III, I will review evidence from my earlier work that ties Acheloios to Empedokles which, when combined with the well-attested association of Empedokles and Pythagoras, is indicative of a tradition that stems from Thales. Ultimately, once the Thales-Acheloios connection is made, all of these fragmentary pieces of evidence begin to fall into place, and will be significantly reinforced when we examine the treatment of Thales by Plato.

In Chapter 11, I examine Sophokles, and offer a detailed explanation of some key components to the *Trachiniae* that shed light on the ancient belief concerning the role of assimilation with Acheloios and the notion of purification as it relates to Herakles' apotheosis. Although Sophokles does not mention Thales, there are many important insights into the myth of Acheloios, in particular Sophokles' beautiful illustration of the general Orphic concerns with the individual soul in relation to the divine, here using Herakles as the paradigmatic example. In terms of specifics, after providing an overview of the play, I will exhibit the many allusions to Acheloios beyond the battle in the opening stanzas, viz., open transgressions against Acheloios and Kypris, repeated mention of Dodona (where patrons were to sacrifice to Acheloios), specific recognition of Locri, where Acheloios was worshipped as a psychopomp, among many others. The underlying theme emerging from this analysis is that Herakles' apotheosis is achieved only through assimilation with Acheloios, who occupies a position as 'the only god on earth' that operates in this liminal capacity. In the final analysis, Sophokles is clearly playing upon a previously unwritten ancient tradition with roots in Orphic and Dodonaean customs and one that Thales was certainly aware of (as will be evident in the coverage of Plato).

I therefore end the overview of the ancient Thaletan-Acheloian tradition with Plato's *Phaedrus*, in which Acheloios is positioned as the very foundation for an understanding of colorless, formless, and intangible Being (οὐσία ἄντως οὐσία). In other words, Plato captures in the

dialogue the idea that it is through the sacrifice of Acheloios that we are given a glimpse of the transcendent realm of the forms. Rather remarkably, the dialogue itself takes place in a shrine to Acheloios, in which the two interlocutors, much like the sinews of Acheloios, sit reclined like river gods discussing the role of love and beauty in the process of abstraction. I divide the chapter into two parts, the first with allusions to Acheloios, where the setting (a microcosm of Dodona), the discussion of abstraction, the notion of assimilation, the employment of aquatic language, the references to Sirens, Nymphs, and Dodona, and finally the ‘banquet of the gods,’ are all indicative of Acheloios. Complementing this section, I will present various important pieces of contemporaneous art from the region (mostly Attica itself) that reinforce my interpretation of the dialogue. The second part of the chapter concerns allusions to Thales. Here we see that the conflation of self-knowledge and ἀρχή, the notion that ‘all things are full of gods,’ the relation of motion to the soul, the inferior position of written documents, and the differentiation between wisdom and love of wisdom are without a doubt allusion to Thales. I will support this position with recourse to some of Plato’s other works in which he mentions Thales outright in the same context. Finally, the chapter ends with a short section on the positioning of Acheloios vis-à-vis Being and how this juxtaposition is Plato’s recognition of the moist seed of dualism in Thales’ philosophy. (This will be particularly important in transcending the confines of the Neo-Marxian school).

The conclusion of the book offers the direct confrontation with the Marxian enterprise of dialectical materialism, which turns out to be the exact type of thinking Plato rallied against in writing his dialogues, also making use of the Acheloios tradition. The confrontation is essentially threefold, corresponding to three different elements of the Acheloios tradition that influenced Thales: the λόγος (lógos) of Acheloios, the μῦθος (mýthos) of Acheloios, and the ἔργον (érgon) of Acheloios. The reason for presenting a threefold explanation is straightforward: since the Marxians will not engage in a philosophical argument, we must meet them at their level and present historical and archaeological evidence (i.e. evidence of the ἔργον of Acheloios). However, since we are interested in both the influences on Thales and the ideas he actually held, we must also have a more philosophical account (corresponding to λόγος). The mythological account, following Plato’s use of myth in the *Phaedrus*, binds the two approaches together and reveals truths inaccessible to the other two individually.

In terms of the λόγος of Acheloios, I discuss how the abstraction concerning ἴς in relation to Acheloios and his sinews combined with the abstraction inherent in assigning or recognizing the locative epithets of Acheloios are much better suited to explain the impetus behind Thales’ philosophical activity when compared to the Neo-Marxian notion of exchange-abstraction. This, to me, should be rather obvious at this stage, especially since Acheloios’ *mythos* and cultic practices always involve water, the basis of Thales’ entire philosophical enterprise. Why explain the origin of philosophy via unconscious social influences when we have evidence of a myth Thales knew and could consciously extrapolate from?

The discussion of the μῦθος of Acheloios concerns the particular insight into the sacrifice of Acheloios as marking the origin of the philosophical experience. Here I argue that the notion of expiatory sacrifice inherent in the myth was particularly influential on Thales. Thales recognized a twofold meaning in the μῦθος of Acheloios, as exhibited especially in Plato’s treatment of the philosopher and related contemporaneous art. On the one hand, Thales saw that taming rivers (physically regulating the flow of rivers) will produce great agricultural



Figure 1a: Electrum stater (the 'Badge of Thales'). Image courtesy of Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, background edited by author. Inv. Gulbenkian 720.



Figure 1b: Obverse enlargement of the 'Badge of Thales.' Image courtesy of Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, background edited by author. Inv. Gulbenkian 720.

abundance, hence the cornucopia overflows with crops (the standard interpretation of the myth). On the other hand, he saw that, by struggling with the water-bull deity one also gains access to ultimate knowledge—participating in the banquet of the gods. The two-fold meaning of the myth therefore corresponds to physical and intellectual pursuits, respectively. Thales’ real genius moment was that he applied the lesson of the myths to Acheloios himself, and the result, the sacrifice of Acheloios, brought forth ὕδωρ as qualified threefold ἀρχή—the governing origin of all things (hence a metaphysical cosmology). Thus, Thales indeed discovered a nominally demythologized way of explaining the world through the sacrifice of Acheloios. However, by saying ὕδωρ is the ἀρχή Thales also recapitulated Acheloios and likewise the deeply held religious beliefs of various seventh to sixth century Mediterranean cultures. Essentially, everyone’s religious beliefs in an originating, primordial, divine water were correct in Thales’ new formulation, and not in some delusional way but in a way all could agree to since divine water was the common ground (though it was given different names and narratives in different areas). Thus, the two formulations, ὕδωρ is ἀρχή and Acheloios is ἀρχή, are certainly not contradictory but more tautological, and Thales therefore moved from the particular watery deities to the more general ὕδωρ through the sacrifice of Acheloios. It was therefore recognition of this—the beauty of the sacrifice of Acheloios—that allowed for a beholding of a multiplicity of hermeneutical frameworks that is at the heart of an authentic love of wisdom.

The ἔργον of Acheloios is the final component of the Acheloios tradition to consider. Here I will present evidence that Thales’ very insight concerning the sacrifice of Acheloios is captured on a coin that was, I’ll argue, probably designed by Thales himself—the Badge of Thales (Figure 1a and Figure 1b). In this section I advocate for the often-held position that electrum types featuring various iconic ‘blazons’ were the marks of officials, prominent citizens, or other elites, and there is no better person to create this coin than Thales (assuming one accepts my assessment thus far). Thales was the most widely-hailed citizen of Miletos—the crowning jewel of the ornament of Ionia—who regularly engaged in regional politics, traveled abroad, and seemingly also made major financial purchases. He is probably even buried beneath the agora of Miletos. And, if he was indeed the first to recognize the intellectual dimension to the Acheloios myth and apply the notion of sacrifice to Acheloios himself, it makes terrific sense that he was behind the design. The coin features a winged Acheloios kneeling in assent to being sacrificed, an iconic representation that would be exhibited throughout the Greek world for hundreds of years to come. Because the winged man-faced bull is the iconic equivalent of divine water (whereas wings symbolize divinity and the man-faced bull, water), all the elements of the origin of philosophy appear on the obverse of this extraordinary coin: Acheloios Meandros as a winged man-faced bull kneeling in assent to being sacrificed, thus exhibiting his essence as ὕδωρ (divine water), Thales’ ἀρχή. The coin, in other words, is an allegory for the origin of the philosophical experience, and it was not the coins that shaped Thales’ mind, but rather Thales who fashioned the coin. Hence, the ἔργον of Acheloios, his loving iconic posture, produced the initial glimmer of the beatific vision experienced at the very origin of philosophy.

If my assessment of Thales and the influence of Acheloios is accurate, then the account of the origin of philosophy advocated by the Neo-Marxians is successfully refuted, and the gateway leading us out of the Marxian tragedy revealed. The social use of coins did not cause philosophical speculation, even if it did trigger the mind to formulate ‘abstract ideas of the universe as an impersonal system’ by projecting the idea of an ‘ideal substance’ onto the

cosmos. Philosophical speculation, which consists of the love of wisdom prompted by beatific vision, was precipitated by abstractions from and engagement with the Acheloios tradition, and involves the recognition of various ways of assessing the world, with particular emphasis on the fact that such hermeneutical frameworks are not mutually exclusive, but complementary or perhaps even tautological. Hence, ὕδωρ is the ἀρχή and ‘all things are full of gods.’ Thus, the problem with the Marxian framework turns out to be its exclusivity—in their account all ideologies have (or correspond to) no permanent, fundamentally real existence outside of the social context, and therefore any philosophical hermeneutic beyond the methodological postulate of dialectical materialism is necessarily erroneous. While the Marxian framework is of course useful for insisting on the inclusion of historical context, the recognition of serious economic imbalances, and in pointing out the dangers of the super-structures of social reality (which often *are* delusional), it offers an incomplete (and therefore insufficient) view because it is incapable of recognizing the validity of anything outside the system—we are left with only flux. But now we have the necessary insight to transcend the confines of the Marxian methodological postulate. Now we can look again to Acheloios, just as Thales did, and there, hidden in plain sight this entire time, we will see that the man-faced bull is the liminal icon that can reorient us toward the οὐσία ὄντως οὐσία. Indeed, some 2600 years after Thales, Heidegger asked, ‘What element, concealed in the ground and soil, enters and lives in the roots that support and nourish the tree [of philosophy]?’ That element is none other than divine water, and the new beginning of philosophy emerges with the recapitulation of its glory.

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