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Thales (ca. 585 B.C.)

Thales' question was apparently *what is the first principle of reality, that from which all derives*? *(Apparently*: the few fragments that remain to us from Thales are embedded in the writing of other philosophers, especially of Aristotle (#60) , and can be very cryptic.) Aristotle gives the following, in explanation of Thales' answer: *Over the number, however, and the form of this kind of principle they (the Milesian philosophers) do not agree: but Thales, the founder of this type of philosophy, says it (the first principle) is water, and therefore declared that the earth is on water…(Metaphysics 983 b 6).* Thales' water-answer falls in line with the cosmological thinking of those Babylonian and Sumerian speculations—**indeed** with the perspective of the Book of *Genesis*—for which our just created world is imagined floating on a body of water, the mists from which gradually clear to reveal the firm contours of a landmass. In any case, we clearly see the difference between Thales' imagination, in addressing the meaning of the world, and that of the other two Milesian thinkers—Anaximander (#26) and Anaximenes (#28)--frequently joined to him.

*Thales asserted Water to be the principle of things. For he saw that matter was principally dispensed in moisture, and moisture in water; and it seemed proper to make that the principle of things, in which the virtues and powers of beings, and especially the elements of their generations and restorations, were chiefly found. He saw that the breeding of animals is in moisture; that the seeds and kernels of plants (as long as they are productive and fresh), are likewise soft and tender; that metals also melt and become fluid, and are as it were concrete juices of the earth, or rather a kind of mineral waters; that the earth itself is fertilised and revived by showers or irrigation, and that earth and mud seem nothing else than the lees and sediment of water; that air most plainly is but the exhalation and expansion of water; nay, that even fire itself cannot be lighted, nor kept in and fed, except with moisture and by means of moisture**.** He saw, too, that the fatness which belongs to moisture, and which is the support and life of flame and fire, seems a kind of ripeness and concoction of the water. (Francis Bacon; 1561-1626)*