



THE ONTOLOGY OF WATER AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE: REINTERPRETING THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITION

Gayratjon Umarovich Otajonov

Philosophy Lecturer, Kokand University

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21404616>

Abstract

This article examines water as a fundamental condition for the existence of life within the framework of natural philosophical thought. Particular attention is paid to the concept of water as the primary principle of being in the teachings of ancient Greek philosophers, as well as to its place in the cosmological and ontological concepts of different historical periods. The study concludes that water functions not only as a natural resource but also as a universal philosophical symbol of life, movement, change, and harmony.

Keywords: water, natural philosophy, life, primary principle of the world, cosmology, ontology, nature, being, philosophy of nature.

Water is one of the most essential elements of nature, without which life on Earth would be impossible. Since ancient times, it has attracted the attention of philosophers, scholars, and thinkers as the source of life, a means of purification, a symbol of renewal, and the foundation of the universe. Water occupies a special place in natural philosophy—a philosophical tradition that explores nature as an integrated system and seeks to reveal the fundamental principles of existence.

Modern science confirms the exceptional importance of water for the existence of living organisms. However, long before the emergence of scientific research methods, ancient thinkers attempted to explain the origin of the world through water as the primary substance. Therefore, studying the natural philosophical aspects of water allows us to gain a deeper understanding not only of the history of philosophical thought but also of the evolution of humanity's perception of nature. The purpose of this article is to analyze philosophical concepts of water as the source of life within the context of the natural philosophical tradition and to identify their significance for the modern understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature.

The philosophical interpretation of water begins with ancient Greek natural philosophy. One of the first thinkers to propose a rational explanation for the origin of the world was Thales of Miletus. According to Aristotle, Thales maintained that **"Water is the principle of all things"** [1, p. 71]. In his view, everything that exists originates from water and ultimately returns to it. This idea was based on observations of nature: plants require moisture, animals and humans cannot survive without water, and life itself emerges in a moist environment. As Aristotle noted, **"Thales considered water to be the origin of everything because the nourishment of all things is moist, and heat itself arises from moisture and lives by it"** [1, p. 72].

In Thales' philosophy, water is not merely a physical substance but a universal principle of existence. This marked an important transition from mythological explanations of the world to rational philosophical inquiry. Expanding upon early natural philosophy, other thinkers proposed their own concepts of the first principle. Nevertheless, water continued to be

regarded as one of the fundamental elements of the universe. Empedocles, for example, included water among the four classical elements—earth, water, air, and fire—that together constitute the diversity of the world.

From an ontological perspective, water represents a unique form of being that combines stability and changeability. It is capable of existing in different states: liquid, solid, and gaseous. Consequently, water becomes a symbol of the unity of opposites. Heraclitus viewed the world as a continuous process of becoming and transformation. Although he considered fire to be the primary principle, many of his ideas can be associated with the nature of water. His famous statement, **"No one can step into the same river twice,"** emphasizes the constant changeability of existence. The river remains the same, yet the water flowing through it is continually renewed. Thus, water serves as a vivid expression of the dialectical nature of reality.

From the standpoint of natural philosophy, water demonstrates a fundamental property of nature—the capacity for self-motion and transformation. It participates in the circulation of matter, connects different forms of life, and ensures the continuity of natural processes.

Water also occupies a special place in Eastern philosophical traditions. In ancient Chinese philosophy, it symbolizes wisdom, flexibility, and harmony. The *Tao Te Ching* states: **"The highest goodness is like water. Water benefits all things and does not compete with them"** [3, p. 18]. This idea reflects the understanding of water as the perfect embodiment of the principle of the Tao. Water does not resist obstacles, yet it overcomes them through its softness and persistence. Laozi emphasized that the strength of water lies precisely in its apparent weakness. It can erode solid rocks, shape landscapes, and transform the surrounding world without violence.

In the Indian philosophical tradition, water is likewise regarded as one of the primordial elements of the universe. Vedic cosmology associates the origin of the world with the primordial cosmic waters from which all existence emerged.

Natural philosophical ideas about water have found confirmation in modern science. According to contemporary biological research, water constitutes the foundation of all living organisms. The water content of cells reaches 70–90%, and many biochemical processes are possible only in an aqueous environment. The distinguished biochemist Albert Szent-Györgyi wrote: **"Water is the matter and matrix of life, mother and medium."** This idea remarkably echoes Thales' natural philosophical conception of water as the basis of existence.

Modern theories of the origin of life suggest that the first organic compounds emerged precisely in an aquatic environment. Research on hydrothermal vents, ocean depths, and the ancient atmosphere of the Earth confirms the possibility that life originated in water. Thus, scientific evidence allows ancient natural philosophical ideas to be viewed not as naive speculation but as the first rational attempts to understand the fundamental role of water in nature.

In the twenty-first century, the issue of water has acquired global significance. Population growth, climate change, and environmental pollution are leading to the depletion of freshwater resources. Philosophical reflection on water contributes to the development of ecological consciousness. If water is regarded as the source of life and a fundamental element of existence, then its preservation becomes not only an economic or political task but also a moral imperative.

Contemporary environmental philosophy emphasizes the necessity of harmonious interaction between humanity and nature. In this context, water serves as the connecting link between natural ecosystems and human civilization. The German philosopher Hans Jonas, in his concept of responsibility, stressed the need to care for the future of humanity and preserve the natural conditions of life. Water is one of the most important objects of such responsibility.

Beyond its natural significance, water possesses profound symbolic meaning. In many cultures, it is associated with birth, purification, renewal, and immortality. In religious traditions, water is frequently used in purification rituals. In Christianity, water is the central element of the sacrament of baptism. In Islam, water plays a crucial role in ritual purification. In Buddhism, it symbolizes purity of consciousness.

From a philosophical perspective, water represents a universal archetype of life. It unites the natural and spiritual dimensions of human existence. Through its ability to change continuously while preserving its essential nature, water becomes a symbol of the eternal movement of being.

Modern philosophy of nature considers water an element of the planet's global ecosystem. Research in synergetics demonstrates that natural processes possess the properties of self-organization and self-regulation. Water plays a key role in maintaining the stability of the biosphere. It participates in climatic processes, ensures the functioning of ecosystems, and supports the circulation of matter.

The concept of the biosphere developed by Vladimir Vernadsky emphasizes the fundamental role of water in the development of life on Earth. Vernadsky noted that living matter and the hydrosphere form a unified planetary system. From the perspective of contemporary natural philosophy, water is not merely a substance but the most important structural element of the Earth's integrated natural organism. The scientist wrote: **"Living matter encompasses and transforms all chemical processes of the biosphere"** [4, p. 46].

The analysis of the natural philosophical aspects of water demonstrates that it occupies a special place in the history of human thought. From the teachings of Thales of Miletus to contemporary ecological concepts, water has been regarded as the fundamental basis of life and one of the most essential elements of the universe.

Natural philosophy was the first to raise the question of a rational explanation of nature through the search for a primary principle. Water became one of the earliest philosophical symbols of the unity of the world, the source of life, and the continuous movement of existence. Modern scientific research largely confirms the profound intuition of ancient thinkers concerning the decisive role of water in the origin and development of life.

In the face of contemporary environmental challenges, the philosophical understanding of water acquires particular relevance. Recognizing its fundamental significance contributes to the formation of a responsible attitude toward nature and the preservation of the conditions necessary for the existence of future generations..

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