

The “Opposites” in Greek Philosophy

The notion that the world is characterized by “opposites” runs throughout ancient Greek philosophy. Even those philosophers who rejected the notion that the opposites should be accorded an important role in describing Reality (e.g., Anaximenes) had to at least argue against the prevailing common opinion. Doctrines of “opposites” continued throughout Greek philosophy and medical theory.

Lists of “opposites” appear in various places in Greek philosophy. Here’s a pretty complete list of the ones that are typically mentioned.

Hot – Cold
Dry – Wet
Limit – Unlimited
Odd – Even
Right – Left
One – Plurality
Male – Female
Resting – Moving
Straight – Crooked
Light – Darkness
Good – Bad
Square – Oblong

In much of Greek philosophy the world is characterized by opposites and opposition (conflict). Note that this list contains ‘good/bad’, revealing that the opposites are *moral* as well as *descriptive* features of the universe. Some of the philosophies (e.g., Pythagoreanism) thought that the terms on the left side all were to be lumped together and those on the right also lumped together. Thus, Limit is the principle of goodness; the Unlimited the principle of evil. Note also where Pythagoreans place ‘male’ vs. ‘female’.

However, Pythagoreans seem less apt to regard the universe as a perpetual battleground between warring principles than did Anaximander (or the Persian religious leader Zoroaster, with whom the Greeks sometimes linked Pythagoras). Order, beauty, and harmony are achieved when members of the first list establish dominance over their counterparts on the second list.