

doctrines as those which have been mentioned, were better suited to the dim magnificence of poetry, than to the purpose of a philosophy which was to bear the sharp scrutiny of reason. When we speak of the *principles* of things, the term, even now, is very ambiguous and indefinite in its import, but how much more was that the case in the first attempts to use such abstractions! The term which is commonly used in this sense (*ἀρχή*), signified at first *the beginning*; and in its early philosophical applications implied some obscure mixed reference to the mechanical, chemical, organic, and historical causes of the visible state of things, besides the theological views which at this period were only just beginning to be separated from the physical. Hence we are not to be surprised if the sources from which the opinions of this period appear to be derived are rather vague suggestions and casual analogies, than any reasons which will bear examination. Aristotle conjectures, with considerable probability, that the doctrine of Thales, according to which water was the universal element, resulted from the manifest importance of moisture in the support of animal and vegetable life.³ But such precarious analyses of these obscure and loose dogmas of early antiquity are of small consequence to our object.

In more limited and more definite examples of inquiry concerning the causes of natural appearances, and in the attempts made to satisfy men's curiosity in such cases, we appear to discern a more genuine prelude to the true spirit of physical inquiry. One of the most remarkable instances of this kind is to be found in the speculations which Herodotus records, relative to the cause of the floods of the Nile. "Concerning the nature of this river," says the father of history,⁴ "I was not able to learn any thing, either from the priests or from any one besides, though I questioned them very pressingly. For the Nile is flooded for a hundred days, beginning with the summer solstice; and after this time it diminishes, and is, during the whole winter, very small. And on this head I was not able to obtain any thing satisfactory from any one of the Egyptians, when I asked what is the power by which the Nile is in its nature the reverse of other rivers."

We may see, I think, in the historian's account, that the Grecian mind felt a craving to discover the reasons of things which other nations did not feel. The Egyptians, it appears, had no theory, and felt no want of a theory. Not so the Greeks; they had their reasons to render, though they were not such as satisfied Herodotus. "Some

³ Metaph. i. 8.

⁴ Herod. ii. 19.