ARCHAIC NATURE PHILOSOPHY:

REVIEW NOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Naming the Problem: Nature and the Syntax of Time

Greek philosophy began under the title Peri Phuseōs--"On Nature"--and can therefore be called a nature philosophy, what we call "physics." Neither our concept "nature" nor the subject matter of modern physics tell us much of what was distinctive about the earliest Greek physics, however. What we mean by nature is largely determined by the first Judeo-Christian and later Roman experience of a separation between nature and history--between the world in the sense of an impersonal cosmos and man in his intelligence and freedom. Moreover, in modern physics we restrict ourselves to those features of the cosmic order from which not just intelligence but life itself is excluded.

The Greeks experienced the cosmos not only as including intelligence and life but as wholly permeating and transfixing the affairs of men as well. They express their awakening to the self-expressive life which includes all things by conferring on its style of presence the name phusis: "growth," "emergence," "unfolding."

From the first philosopher of this tradition, Thales, we have only the word phusis itself. At the core of his philosophical system we know there was some sort of affirmation about water being the source or enduring wellspring of universal life, but reconstruction of the position is made difficult by the widespread assumption (made immortal by Aristotle) that it concerned the elemental construction or "matter" of everything.

This assumption cannot be correct. Thales did not say anything like "everything is made of water," as we can see from the statement that has survived from his follower and perhaps student Anaximander:

> The archē /source, origin, beginning/ of the All is Limitlessness /to apeiron/.
>
> /From this source arise the fundamental tensions of opposition which give limit and definition to universal emergence,/ (My reconstruction of a missing step in his argument.)
>
> And from them genesis comes to beings, into them perishing is to happen, according to Necessity; for each gives justice and makes reparation to one another for injustice, according to the structure /taxis: "syntax"/ of time.

From many sources besides their philosophy we know how profoundly Greek culture valued limit and restraint. Anaximander has replaced Thales' reference to water with what is clearly the same concept in a more abstract form: pure limitlessness, incomprehensible, indefinite, wholly featureless absence-of-limit--i.e. nothing. He thereby makes it clear that these first philosophers mean to deny that nature has a source in the metaphysical sense of something anterior to or outside of it--e.g. a god or gods. They mean to say that an insight into universal emergence all the way to its "bottom" sees not into some further realm of being, but rebounds from the incomprehensible vacancy of an "outside of nature" back into the self-sufficiency of its inner process. Nature is a self-nourishing self-expressive whole, an inside with no outside.

Anaximander goes beyond Thales in specifying the structure of this unique unity, however. It is a perfectly balanced composition of opposites--or to say it better, of oppositions, since nature is always thought of as life or process, not as on aggregation or assemblage of things.

In the fragment which has remained to us, two pairs of oppositions are named: there seem to have been others, and many of them have become important in later philosophical systems. The pair of becoming/perishing is perhaps the most important, but the "ethical metaphor" of the concluding phrase has always provoked the imagination of later philosophers. Probably we are forced to admit that the single sentence is inadequate to support much speculation about the full strategy of Anaximander's cosmology. Yet the closing words, "the structure of time," show that already in Anaximander the Greeks recognized where "composition of opposites" cosmologies run into the deepest conceptual difficulties: the problem of conceiving time. I shall dub this problem "the syntax of time."

The Archaic Solution: Transcendent Unity

Late in the Sixth and early in the Fifth Centuries B.C. Greek nature philosophy reached its maturity in the figures of Heraclitus and Parmenides. Standard interpretations of these philosophers make it appear that they contradict one another --the one, Heraclitus, emphasizing the universality of change and becoming to the exclusion of being, the other, Parmenides, excluding all becoming from a theory of pure undifferentiated unity.

In fact, both systems say the same thing, but from perspectives whose differences reflect an intrinsic ambiguity in the very thing they agree about.

Heraclitus received from Anaximander an understanding of universal phusis whose key achievement involved an insight into the syntax of time. Anaximander had conceived time as a limit-creating struggle between pairs of cosmic opposites --opposites which "left to themselves" would simply cancel one another out leaving "zero," the apeiron or featureless limitlessness out the bottom of the All. The struggle between the oppositions does not add up to nothing, however, because Necessity holds the limit-giving process together, and Justice makes a life for herself in the midst of the cosmic give-and-take.

Such an account of the syntax of time must be sharply contrasted with the modern concept of pure temporal sequence as represented by the "time line" (the one-dimensional extensive continuum of "times t" which correlate with instantaneous states of local three-space). As pure sequence, time is empty, merely a kind of "space" for "temporal events." In contrast with such a conception, Anaximander had described a universal feature of the "events" themselves: namely, the way in which the overall balance of nature is maintained by the cyclic replacements of developments in one direction with their opposites. Every event requires its opposite, and helps to bring about its opposite in the very act of becoming definitely what it is. For there to be day, there must be night.

As Heraclitus says:

> All things come into being through opposition.
>
> Though it is at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a harmony of opposed tensions, as in the bow and the lyre.
>
> In opposition their is agreement; between unlikes, the fairest harmony.
>
> Changing, it rests.

How does one catch sight of the necessary and just interdependence of, say, day and night? It is always either day or night. One can't step aside from day and night so as to see them both at once. Nevertheless the rhythm and regularity of their cycle is apparent, as anyone can tell. There is apparently a hidden harmony --i.e. there appears to be a unity which hides. ("Nature loves to hide.")

Heraclitus calls that feature of nature, by which we can tell that her cycles are unified expressions of a universal and eternal life, logos. In more modern philosophical language we could say that the concept of logos names a transcendent unity. Like the harmony of a chord, which expresses itself by transcending the multiple notes in a way which continues to require them, not displace them, logos names nature's capacity to be expressive of her unity of life, to show herself one, without replacing but precisely by requiring the interior polemics of generative cycles.

The term logos is intrinsically suitable for expressing such a transcendent unity. It is a noun associated with the verb legein, which had come to mean "to tell, to say" on the basis of an original sense very much like that level of our own word "tell" which means "take together, gather" (cf. the bank "teller"). To gather is to draw out expressive unity, to bring together and take as one. Hence the logos is a name for language considered not as a system of words, but as a phenomenon intrinsically echoic of nature (for those awake to its power).

"All things come to be in accordance with this logos." That is to say: only insofar as there is an all-pervasive life which gathers the oppositions of nature into limits will anything be. Only a transcendently unifying gathering principle can hold them in that restrained and lawful conflict which is the matrix for all emergence or nature.

Heraclitus has awakened to the fact that what we would call "logic" belongs first of all to nature, and to men only insofar as they can hear in it what is true by nature. The logos is a phenomenon of nature, not of human talk.

Now in order to do justice to this position it is important to recognize what "true by nature" would mean for a Greek. "True" in Greek is alēthēs; truth is alētheia. Lethes means slipped away, forgotten, "hidden"--hence the mythical river Lethe, the waters of forgetfulness. That which we name with a word meaning "stand firm" (English truth has the same etymology as tree) is for the Greeks something a-lēthēs: un-hidden, dis-closed, "revealed."

Hence when Heraclitus directs us toward the truth of nature, when he defines wisdom as "telling and doing truth according to nature", nothing like the correctness, rectitude, or trustworthiness of something human is involved. To wake to nature is exactly not to stand over against the All and generate "truths" which can be argued to "correspond" to nature "out there." This is what hoi polloi do, who are as though asleep, each keeping to the privacy (idiocy) of his inner experience. Wisdom consists in letting one's telling and doing be transparent to the universal emergence--in participating in nature's "coming true", her self-disclosure, her alētheia.

Logos, in summary, is the transcendent unity of the universal process of emergence. It makes it possible for the cosmos-constituting oppositions to "agree to differ." And like the telling and gathering power of language, nature's logos is a principle not only of unity but of expressiveness. The logos "calls nature out," brings her out into the open. For us, to hear the logos is to hear nature out--in the literal sense of participating in her own self-expressive life.

Heraclitus affirms only that there is such a logos, however. He refuses to schematize how the logos actually "works" (to treat it as a logic, in short). In a certain way, he is not even interested in the logos itself so much as in the experience of universal struggle which his faith in logos gives him the wisdom to endure.

Parmenides dared to speak in the person of Truth herself, dared to "give voice" in the mode of argument to the logic of the transcendent cosmic unity. His poem on nature represents the goddess of truth herself telling him the secrets of her "well-rounded heart."

The goddess distinguishes two ways in which she can express herself (i.e. be true). One way is the truth itself: that is, what intrinsically unveils itself and illuminates everything. To think along this way one must know the necessity of saying "is" and of excluding "is not" completely. For thought and speaking themselves, long before they fall into the hands of men, answer to this necessity:

> It is necessary: both the telling and the thinking being to be.

There is another way, however, which falls short of truth in its attempts to deal with nature, but in its own arena deserves to be heard. This is the way of opinion, the way of mortals who are like dazed beats, divided against themselves in their thinking. This is the logic of "same and not the same," of the composition of opposites which is the basis for the appearances of nature. Since these opinions have to be "fitting"--that is, have to represent a genuine structure of natural truth--the goddess will fit Parmenides out with an adequate stock of mortal opinions also.

But she warns against generalizing from the way of appearance andopinion to the way of truth itself. One must not think that being and nonbeing are "the same and not the same." Being does not distinguish itself from its opposite in a mutual engagement, for being has no opposite. Not to be is not, for it cannot be thought or spoken. The inability of thought or speech to express nonbeing is not a defect, but an outcome of the nature of "expression" or manifestation itself (truth, unhiddenness).

Thought and being share with one another a unique one-sidedness, a pure self-expressive presence which never had to overcome its opposite (absence) but is, simply, present, "simultaneously total, whole, coherent." Thought and being are together an inside without an outside. They are together a single life which unfolds itself (phusis) into the transcendent unity (logos) of its own universal unhiddenness (alētheia) or presence to itself. They configure, in short, a Self (to auto) with no Other.

> For Self--it is Thought and also Being.

Or in another formulation:

> Mind and the is-thought are one Self; for you will not find thought apart from being, in which thought is what-has-been-made-manifest.

The Greek sense for a unifying transcendent life expressing itself in the "unfolding" all around us and in us which we call nature, which began with Thales, culminates in Parmenides' vision of a cosmic selfhood--a mind which is also being, a being which is intrinsically mind. Such a life simply is; it is an entirely simple self-presence which never came to be and can never cease to be. The Now of this presence (which metaphysics will call "eternity") leaves no room for any

"was" or "will be." Within the simplicity of this one life there seem to be structures of opposition such as mortals discern, but to dwell in these appearances alone is to fail to see into the heart of truth. The truth is: Being and Thinking belong to one "sphere of influence."

Clearly Heraclitus and Parmenides share one set of basic problems. Both aspire to comprehend a transcendent unity which keeps to itself in the multiplicity of natural appearances. Both are concerned to interpret this unity in its truth--that is, as the one disclosedness, the one self-illuminated presence. But where Heraclitus only invokes the logos of this truth, Parmenides sets out to spell it out. Parmenides is the first to treat the logos as a logic, a pattern of argument, a method (Meta-hodos: "along the road"). Hence while Heraclitus opens himself up to the pattern of natural struggle and considers it wisdom merely to dance with it, Parmenides tries to envision the whole, represent it in concept, and give an account of it. And this laid the basis for a new nature philosophy: the scholastic pluralism which led to the classical period and to metaphysics.

But that is another, and much more complicated story.

Suggestions for Further Reading.

***Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics, Chapter Four, "The Limitation of Being." (Available in pb in the Campus Store and Bookstore).

----------. What is Called Thinking? (Harper and Row, 1968) (Two copies are available in the bookstore's general philosophy shelf.)

Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return. (For a good look at pre-philosophical understandings of pre-cosmic "waters," see the chapter on "Waters and Water Symbolism" in the same author's Patterns in Comparative Religion.)

Hans Jonas, The Phenomenon of Life (Harper and Row; recently reissued as a Beacon pb.)

Barry Commoner, The Closing Circle (I especially recommend the abridged version first published in The New Yorker Sept. 25, 1971 and October 2, 1971; there may still be copies of the hardbound in the bookstore, philosophy general shelf).

Friedrich Nietzsche, Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks (Gateway pb; there should be extra copies still in the bookstore).