

## Towards Understanding Physis

Since the concept of physis - φύσις - is central to my philosophy of pathemathos, it seems apposite to offer a more detailed explanation of the concept, and my usage of it, than I have hitherto given, deriving as the term does from Ancient Greece and used as it is by Heraclitus, Aristotle, and others, and occurring as it does in texts such as the Pœmandres and Ἱερός Λόγος tractates of the Corpus Hermeticum.

As I mentioned in my translation of Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1015α [1] - and elsewhere - physis is usually translated as either 'Nature' (as if 'the natural world', and the physical cosmos beyond, are meant) or as the character (the nature) of a person. However, while the context - of the original Greek text - may suggest (as often, for example, in Homer and Herodotus) such a meaning as such English words impute, physis philosophically (as, for example, in Heraclitus and Aristotle and the *Corpus Hermeticum*) has specific ontological meanings. Meanings which are lost, or glossed over, when physis is simply translated either as 'Nature' or - in terms of mortals - as (personal) character.

Ontologically, as Aristotle makes clear [2], physis denotes the being of those beings who or which have the potentiality (the being) to change, be changed, or to develop. That is, to become, or to move or be moved; as for example in the motion (of 'things') and the 'natural unfolding' or growth, sans an external cause, that living beings demonstrate.

However, and crucially, physis is not - for human beings - some abstract 'essence' (qv. Plato's ἰδέα/εἶδος) but rather a balance between the being that it is, it was, and potentially might yet be. That is, in Aristotelian terms, it is a meson - μέσον - of being and 'not being'; and 'not being' in the sense of not yet having become what it could be, and not now being what it used to be. Hence why, for Aristotle, a manifestation of physis - in terms of the being of mortals - such as arête (ἀρετή) is a meson, a balance of things, and not, as it is for Plato, some fixed 'form' - some idea, ideal - which as Plato wrote "always exists, and has no genesis. It does not die, does not grow, does not decay." [3]

According to my understanding of Heraclitus, physis also suggests - as in Fragment 1 - the 'natural' being of a being which we mortals have a tendency to cover-up or conceal [4].

Furthermore, physis is one of the main themes in the Pœmandres tractate of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, for the author seeks "to apprehend the physis of beings" [5] with physis often mystically personified:

"This is a mysterium esoteric even to this day. For Physis, having intimately joined with the human, produced a most wondrous wonder possessed of the physis of the harmonious seven I mentioned before,

of Fire and pneuma. Physis did not tarry, giving birth to seven male-and-female humans with the physis of those viziers, and ætherean...

[For] those seven came into being in this way. Earth was muliebral, Water was lustful, and Fire maturing. From Æther, the pneuma, and with Physis bringing forth human-shaped bodies. Of Life and phaos, the human came to be of psyche and perceivation; from Life - psyche; from phaos - perceivation; and with everything in the observable cosmic order cyclic until its completion...

When the cycle was fulfilled, the connexions between all things were, by the deliberations of theos, unfastened. Living beings - all male-and-female then - were, including humans, rent asunder thus bringing into being portions that were masculous with the others muliebral." [6]

Physis is also personified in the *Ἱερός Λόγος* tractate:

"The divine is all of that mixion: renewance of the cosmic order through Physis For Physis is presented in the divine." [7]

### **The Numinous Way Of Pathei-Mathos**

As mentioned elsewhere, what I have termed the philosophy of *πάθει μάθος* (pathei-mathos) is just my weltanschauung, developed between 2011 and 2013 after I had, upon reflexion, rejected much of and revised what then remained of my earlier (2006-2011) 'numinous way' [8].

In the philosophy of pathei-mathos, physis is used contextually to refer to:

- (i) the ontology of beings, an ontology - a reality, a 'true nature' - that is often obscured by denotatum [9] and by abstractions [10], both of which conceal physis;
- (ii) the relationship between beings, and between beings and Being, which is of us - we mortals - as a nexion, an affective effluvium (or emanation) of Life (*ψυχή*) and thus of why 'the separation-of-otherness' [11] is a concealment of that relationship;
- (iii) the character, or persona, of human beings, and which character - sans denotatum - can be discovered (revealed, known) by the faculty of empathy;
- (iv) the unity - the being - beyond the division of our physis, as individual mortals, into masculous and muliebral;
- (v) that manifestation denoted by the concept Time, with Time considered to be an expression/manifestation of the physis of beings [12].

My concept of physis is therefore primarily ontological and rooted - as is my

philosophy of pathei-mathos - in the pagan culture of classical, and Hellenic, Greece.

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### Notes

[1] I have appended to this essay my translation of, and notes on, the relevant part of 1015α.

[2] See Appendix 1, below, and also my *Personal Reflexions On Some Metaphysical Questions*.

[3] πρῶτον μὲν αἰὲν ὄν καὶ οὔτε γιγνόμενον οὔτε ἀπολλύμενον οὔτε ἀύξανόμενον οὔτε φθίνον (Symposium 210e - 211a).

[4] See Appendix 2.

[5] Pœmandres 3; qv. my *Mercvrii Trismegisti Pymander de potestate et sapientia dei: A Translation and Commentary*, 2013.

[6] Pœmandres 16-18.

[7] Ἱερός Λόγος 3; qv. my *Ἱερός Λόγος: An Esoteric Mythos. A Translation Of And A Commentary On The Third Tractate Of The Corpus Hermeticum*, 2015.

[8] Refer to my *Concerning The Development Of The Numinous Way*, 2012.

[9] In my philosophy of pathei-mathos, I use the term denotatum - from the Latin, denotare - in accord with its general meaning which is "to denote or to describe by an expression or a word; to name some-thing; to refer that which is so named or so denoted."

[10] An abstraction is a manufactured generalization, a hypothesis, a posited thing, an assumption or assumptions about, an extrapolation of or from some-thing, or some assumed or extrapolated ideal 'form' of some-thing. Sometimes, abstractions are generalization based on some sample(s), or on some median (average) value or sets of values, observed, sampled, or assumed.

Abstractions can be of some-thing past, in the present, or described as a goal or an ideal which it is assumed could be attained or achieved in the future. Abstractions are often assumed to provide some 'knowledge' or some 'understanding' of some-thing assigned to or described by a particular abstraction.

[11] Refer, for example, to my *The Error of The-Separation-of-Otherness in The Numinous Way of Pathei-Mathos*, 2012.

[12] *Time And The Separation Of Otherness - Part One*. 2012.

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## Appendix 1

### Some Notes on Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 5, 1015a

#### Text

ἐκ δὴ τῶν εἰρημένων ἡ πρώτη φύσις καὶ κυρίως λεγομένη ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία ἡ τῶν ἐχόντων ἀρχὴν κινήσεως ἐν αὐτοῖς ἢ αὐτά: ἡ γὰρ ὕλη τῷ ταύτης δεκτικὴ εἶναι λέγεται φύσις, καὶ αἱ γενέσεις καὶ τὸ φύεσθαι τῷ ἀπὸ ταύτης εἶναι κινήσεις. καὶ ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς κινήσεως τῶν φύσει ὄντων αὕτη ἐστίν, ἐνυπάρχουσα πῶς ἢ δυνάμει ἢ ἐντελεχείᾳ.

#### Translation

Given the foregoing, then principally - and to be exact - physis denotes the quidditas of beings having changement inherent within them; for substantia has been denoted by physis because it embodies this, as have the becoming that is a coming-into-being, and a burgeoning, because they are changelements predicated on it. For physis is inherent changelement either manifesting the potentiality of a being or as what a being, complete of itself, is.

#### Commentary And Notes

*physis*. φύσις. A transliteration, since (i) this is a fundamental philosophical principle/term that requires contextual interpretation, and (ii) the English words 'nature' and Nature not only do not adequately describe this principle but also lead to and have led to certain misunderstandings of Aristotle in particular and of classical Greek culture in general.

*quidditas*. οὐσία. Quidditas - post-classical Latin, from whence the English word 'quiddity' - is more appropriate here than 'essence', given the metaphysical (ontological) context and given that 'essence' now has so many non-philosophical connotations. An interesting alternative would be the scholastic term haecceity. As with physis, quidditas is a philosophical term which requires contextual interpretation.

*changelement inherent*. The expression ἀρχὴν κινήσεως is crucial to understanding what Aristotle means in respect of physis. In regard to κινήσεις,

since Aristotle here does not mean 'motion' or 'movement' in the sense of Newtonian physics (with its causal concepts of force, mass, velocity, kinetic energy), and since such physical movement is what the English words 'motion' and 'movement' now most usually denote, then alternatives must be found. Hence the translation 'change'.

For what Aristotle is describing here is 'change', as for example in the natural development, the unfolding, the growth, of some-thing living that occurs because it is living; because it is possessed of Life and which Life is the ἀρχή of the change, the 'original being' (the φύσις) from whence being-becomes to be often perceived and classified by us in orderly ways.

What is described is an a-causal change, of being-becoming - of being unfolding - and thus fulfilling the potentiality of being within it. Hence why here Aristotle writes ἀρχὴν κινήσεως, which describes the potential change inherent in certain beings. <sup>1</sup> That is, the a-causal origin of beings-becoming, or having become, and which beings (having changed, developed, unfolded) we then perceive and classify in orderly ways <sup>2</sup>, such as by shape or usefulness to us, or by a notion such as causality: in terms of physical- 'movement'. Which is why, in Aristotle, there is a relation between φύσις, μορφή, and εἶδος - εἶδος in the sense of 'perceivability' and not, as in Plato, denoting an abstract 'form' or an 'ideal' - διὸ καὶ ὅσα φύσει ἔστιν ἢ γίνεταί, ἤδη ὑπάρχοντος ἔξ οὗ πέφυκε γίνεσθαι ἢ εἶναι, οὐπω φαμέν τὴν φύσιν ἔχειν ἂν μὴ ἔχη τὸ εἶδος καὶ τὴν μορφήν.

Thus φύσις is what is a-causal in beings and which acausality is the origin of the 'natural' order that unfolds because of the potentiality of being to become, to presence in the causal, whence to be perceived by us in various orderly arrangements and/or arranged in terms of usefulness, and which arrangements/usefulness include τὸ καλόν - and thus schemata, τάξις <sup>3</sup> - and ἀρετή.

*substantia*. ὕλη. I have chosen to use the etymon of the English word 'substance' - qv. substantia in Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia libri Metaphysicae* - to again (i) emphasize the need for contextual interpretation in respect of a specific philosophical term, and (ii) to avoid whatever misunderstandings may arise from the modern (non-ontological) connotations of words such as 'matter' and 'substance'.

*as have the becoming that is a coming-into-being, and a burgeoning, because they are changes predicated on it.* καὶ αἱ γενέσεις καὶ τὸ φύεσθαι τῷ ἀπὸ ταύτης εἶναι κινήσεις. The sense of γένεσις here implies a 'coming-into-being' rather than just 'generation', just as φύω implies a being 'burgeoning' - unfolding, revealing itself (its physis) - rather than just 'growing'.

*the potentiality of a being or as what a being, complete of itself, is.* The Greek word ἐντελεχεία is compounded from ἐν ελεῖ ἔχει and the sense here - in relation to ἐνυπάρχουσα - seems to be twofold: of a being as an unchanged

being, and of what a being has become (or is becoming) as a result of a change, for both types of being actually exist, are real. One exists as a being as it is and has remained, and one exists as the being it has become (or is in the process of becoming) through the potential for change inherent within it. Thus, for Aristotle, *physis* denotes the being of both types of being.

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[1] In respect of ἀρχὴ as implying what is primarily inherent, *qv.* 1012b-1013a.

[2] As Thomas Aquinas wrote: "Sciendum est autem, quod principium et causa licet sint idem subiecto, differunt tamen ratione. Nam hoc nomen principium ordinem quemdam importat; hoc vero nomen causa, importat influxum quemdam ad esse causati." *Sententia libri Metaphysicae*, liber 5, lectio 1, n 3.

[3] Regarding 1078a, τοῦ δὲ καλοῦ μέγιστα εἶδη τάξις καὶ συμμετρία καὶ τὸ ὠρισμένον (the most noticeable expressions of *kalos* are *schemata* and harmony and consonancy), my view - given the context - is that τάξις here is best translated as "schemata", rather than "order" or "arrangement" both of which are vague, open to mis-interpretation, and unrelated to the context, which context is mathematical beauty. Similarly, ὀρίζω (to me) suggests consonancy, echoing as that (now somewhat obscure) English word does both by its use by, among others, Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2, 286) and also by its relation to the almost 'mathematical beauty' of some music (as evident for example in the counterpoint of JS Bach).

Furthermore, just because the Greek has συμμετρία it does not necessarily follow that the English word 'symmetry' is an appropriate translation, considering how the word symmetry is now used and has been used, in the West for many centuries, and especially in relation to art (in terms, for example, of objects and the human body).

Given that Aristotle in 1078a is referring to geometry in particular and mathematics in general, then an appropriate translation is 'harmony' - as in "a collation of representative signs or marks, so arranged that they exhibit their agreement and account for their discrepancies or errors." A harmony, in other words, that is most evident (as I mentioned in my essay) in Euclid's *Elements*, as *schemata* and consonancy are therein evident, most of the contents (theorems) of which book - deriving from people such as Pythagoras - were known to Aristotle.

Thus, a translation such as "the chief forms of beauty are order and symmetry and definiteness" can in my opinion lead to projecting onto Aristotle what he may not necessarily have meant; and projecting onto in respect of how we now, over two thousand years after Aristotle, understand and use such common

English terms. Hence, also, why I sometimes use obscure English words (which may suggest a relevant meaning) or transliterations (as in physis).

## Appendix 2

### Some Notes on Heraclitus Fragment 1

#### Text

τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἔόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπείροισιν εἰκόσσι, πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, ὁκοίων ἐγὼ διηγεῖμαι κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔχει· τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λαυθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσιν, ὅκωσπερ ὁκόσα εὐδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται

#### Translation

My translation of the fragment is:

Although this naming and expression [which I explain] exists, human beings tend to ignore it, both before and after they have become aware of it. Yet even though, regarding such naming and expression, I have revealed details of how Physis has been cleaved asunder, some human beings are inexperienced concerning it, fumbling about with words and deeds, just as other human beings, be they interested or just forgetful, are unaware of what they have done.

#### Comments

##### 1. λόγος

In respect of fragments 80 and 112 I have suggested that it is incorrect to interpret πόλεμος simplistically as 'war', strife, or *kampf* <sup>[1]</sup> and that, instead of using such words, it should be transliterated so as to name a distinct philosophical principle that requires interpretation and explanation with particular reference to Hellenic culture and philosophy. For, more often than not, such common English words as 'war' are now understood in a non-Hellenic, non-philosophical, context and explained in relation to some ideated opposite; and in the particular case of the term 'war', for example, in contrast to some-thing named, explained, or defined, as 'peace' or a state of

non-belligerence.

In respect of fragment 1 <sup>[2]</sup>, does λόγος suggest a philosophical principle and therefore should it, like πόλεμος, be transliterated and thus be considered as a basic principle of the philosophy of Heraclitus, or at least of what, of that philosophy or weltanschauung, we can adduce from the textual fragments we possess? Or does λόγος, as I suggested in respect of fragment 112 and 123 <sup>[3]</sup> imply:

both a *naming* (denoting), and a *telling* - not a telling as in some abstract explanation or theory, but as in a simple describing, or recounting, of what has been so denoted or so named. Which is why, in fragment 39, Heraclitus writes:

ἐν Πριήνηι Βίας ἐγένετο ὁ Τευτάμεω, οὗ πλείων λόγος ἢ  
τῶν ἄλλων <sup>[4]</sup>

and why, in respect of λέγειν, Hesiod wrote:

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,  
ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι <sup>[5]</sup>

I contend that fragment 1 also suggests a denoting, in the sense of expressing some-thing by denoting it or describing it by a 'name'. That is, that λόγος here does not refer here to what has often be termed Logos, and that the 'ambiguous' ἀεὶ <sup>[6]</sup> is not really ambiguous at all.

For one has to, in my view, take account of the fact that there is poetry in Heraclitus; a rather underrated style that sometimes led others to incorrectly describe him as ὁ σκοτεινός, the ambiguous (or the obtuse) one, and led Aristotle to write:

τὰ γὰρ Ἡρακλείτου διαστίξαι ἔργον διὰ τὸ ἄδηλον  
εἶναι ποτέρω πρόσκειται, τῷ ὕστερον ἢ τῷ πρότερον, οἷον ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ  
αὐτῇ τοῦ συγγράμματος:  
φησὶ γὰρ "τοῦ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος ἀεὶ ἀξύνετοι ἄνθρωποι γίνονται":  
ἄδηλον γὰρ τὸ ἀεὶ, πρὸς ποτέρω δεῖ διαστίξαι. <sup>[6]</sup>

It is the poetic style of Heraclitus that I have tried, however badly, to express in my often non-literal and rather idiosyncratic translations/interpretations of some of the fragments attributed to him. Hence my interpretation of the first part:

Although this naming and expression [which I explain] exists - human beings tend to ignore it, both before and after they have become

aware of it.

The 'which I explain' being implicit in the sense of λόγος here as a naming and expression by a particular individual, contrasted (as often with Heraclitus) rather poetically with a generality; in this instance, contrasted with human beings - 'men' - in general.

## 2. ἀεὶ

In my view, "tend to" captures the poetic sense of ἀεὶ here. That is, the literal - the bland, strident - 'always' is discarded in favour of a more Heraclitean expression of human beings having an apparently rather irreconcilable tendency - both now and as in the past - to ignore (or forget or not understand) certain things, even after matters have been explained to them (they have heard the explanation) and even after they have discovered certain truths for themselves.

## 3. διαίρων and Φύσις

I take the sense of διαίρων here somewhat poetically to suggest not the ordinary 'divide' but the more expressive 'cleave', with it being undivided Physis that is cleaved into parts by "such naming and expression" as Heraclitus has revealed. That is, Heraclitus is not saying that he has described or expressed each thing 'in accordance with its true nature' (or divided things correctly, or something of the kind) but rather that the process of naming and categorization is or has divided Physis, obscuring the true nature of Being and beings, and it is this process, this obscuring, or concealment. of Physis - of cleaving it into separate parts or each thing, 'each' contrasted with a generality<sup>[7]</sup> - that he has revealed and is mentioning here, as he mentioned it in fragment 123:

Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ

Concealment accompanies Physis<sup>[8]</sup>

Which is why I have transliterated Φύσις as referring to a general philosophical principle of the philosophy of Heraclitus, or at least of what, of that philosophy or weltanschauung, we can adduce from the textual fragments we possess.

## 4. πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων

In respect of ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, the Homeric usage<sup>[9]</sup> is, for me, interesting as it implies a proverbial kind of saying rather than just 'words' and 'deeds':

Τηλέμαχ', οὐδ' ὄπιθεν κακὸς ἔσσει οὐδ' ἀνοήμων,  
εἰ δὴ τοι σοῦ πατρὸς ἐνέστακται μένος ἠΰ,  
οἷος κεῖνος ἔην τελέσαι ἔργον τε ἔπος τε:

Telemachus - you will not be unlucky nor lacking in resolution  
If you hereafter instill into yourself the determination of your father  
Whose nature was to accomplish those deeds he said he would.

Furthermore, I take the sense here of πειρώμενοι poetically to suggest a "fumbling about" - as the inexperienced often fumble about and experiment until, often by trial and error, they have gained sufficient experience to understand and know what they are doing and what is involved, which rather reminds one of a saying of Pindar <sup>[10]</sup>:

γλυκὸν δὲ πόλεμος ἀπείροισιν, ἐμπείρων δέ τις  
ταρβεῖ προσιόντα νιν καρδίᾳ περισσῶ

## 5. ἐγερθέντες and εὔδοντες

Given that, as mentioned above, there is poetry in Heraclitus, I am inclined to avoid the literal, and usual, understanding of ἐγερθέντες and εὔδοντες, particularly given the foregoing πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων which renders such a literal understanding not only out of context and disjointed but decidedly odd. Human beings forgetting things when they sleep? If, however, and for example, ἐγείρω here poetically suggests alertness, an interest or excitement - as ἤγειρεν in the Agamemnon suggests an alertness and excitement, an interest in what has occurred, and thence the kindling of a pyre <sup>[11]</sup> - then there is, as often in Heraclitus, a flowing eloquence and that lack of discordance one might expect of an aphorism remembered and recorded long after the demise of its author.

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## Notes

[1] γν. *The Abstraction of Change as Opposites and Dialectic, and Some Notes on Πόλεμος and Δίκη in Heraclitus B80*

As mentioned in *The Abstraction of Change as Opposites and Dialectic*:

"In addition, Polemos was originally the δαίμων [not the god] of kindred strife, whether familial, or of one's πόλις (one's clan and their places of dwelling). Thus, to describe Polemos, as is sometimes done, as the god of conflict (or war), is doubly incorrect."

[2] qv. Sextus Empiricus: *Advenus Mathematicos* VII. 132

[3] Regarding 123 - *Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ* - qv. *Physis, Nature, Concealment, and Natural Change*, e-text 2010

[4] "In Priene was born someone named and recalled as most worthy - Bias, that son of Teutamias."

[5]

We have many ways to conceal - to name - certain things  
And the skill when we wish to expose their meaning

[6] Aristotle: *Ars Rhetorica* Book 3, chapter 5 [1407b]

[7] As in Homer et al, for example *Iliad*, Book VII, 215 -

Τρῶας δὲ τρόμος αἰνὸς ὑπήλυθε γυῖα ἕκαστον

But over the Trojans, a strange fear, to shake the limbs of each one there

[8] qv. my *Physis, Nature, Concealment, and Natural Change* [Notes on Heraclitus fragment 123], e-text 2010

[9] *Odyssey*, Book II, 272

[10] Fragment 110

[11] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 296-299

σθένουσα λαμπὰς δ' οὐδέπω μαυρουμένη,  
ὑπερθοροῦσα πεδίον Ἀσωποῦ, δίκην  
φαιδρᾶς σελήνης, πρὸς Κιθαιρῶνος λέπας  
ἤγειρεν ἄλλην ἐκδοχὴν πομποῦ πυρός.

The torch, vigorous and far from extinguished,  
Bounded over the Asopian plain  
To the rocks of Cithaeron as bright as the moon  
So that the one waiting there to begin that fire, jumped up

Note that here the watchman is not awakened from sleep.

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