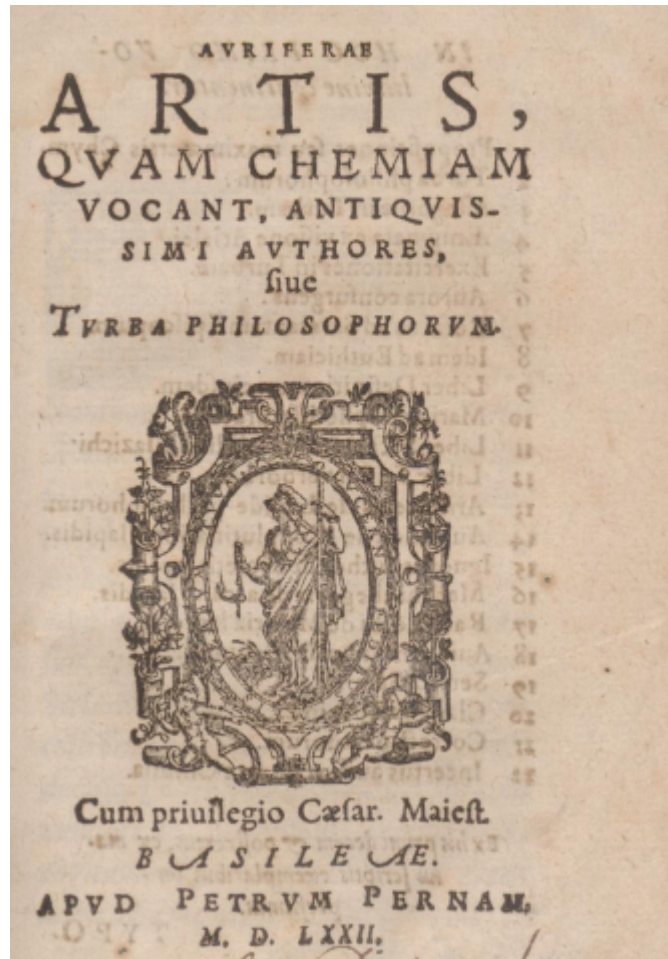


Anaximander, Imbalance, And Opposites

Three quotations attributed to the Greek philosopher Anaximander (c. 610 – c. 546 BCE) one quotation in Greek and two in Latin, have been much debated over the centuries with all three suggesting an ancient *weltanschauung* which resonated with later *weltanschauungen* such as hermeticism and alchemy, which is possibly why the two Latin quotations were included in a 1572 CE compendium on alchemy in the section titled *Turba Philosophorum* itself a Latin translation of an earlier Arabic text by Muḥammad ibn Umayl al-Tamimi (c.900–960 CE).



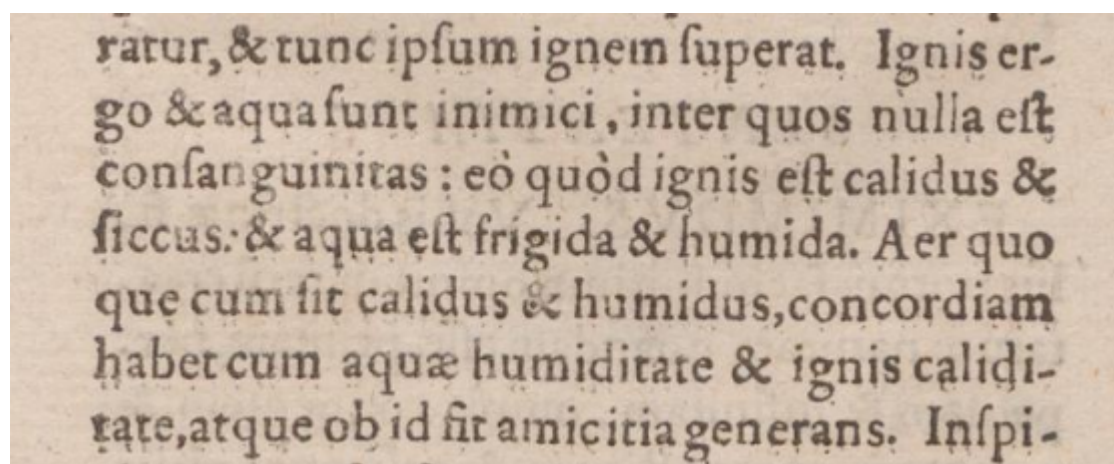
My methodology in interpreting these quotations derives from my understanding that certain Latin and Greek words as originally used by their authors represent philosophical, or hermetic or alchemical, principles or substances or what we now term 'archetypes', and that it is therefore erroneous to translate them by English words which over centuries may and often have acquired ordinary meanings, such as 'air', 'water', 'fire'.

The question of such principles is, as Aristotle wrote in his *Metaphysics*, (3.996a) an interesting and complex question answered by many in certain ways with others proposing as first principles Fire, Water, and Air - ἄλλος δέ τις πῦρ ὁ δὲ ὕδωρ ἢ ἄερα - which leads him to the question of whether or not such principles are universal or individual.

The Latin Texts

The Latin of the first quotation in *Turba Philosophorum* is:

ignis ergo et aqua sunt inimici, inter quos nulla est consanguinitas, eo quod ignis est calidus et siccus, aqua vero frigida et humida



Auriferae artis, quam chemiam vocant, antiquissimi authores, sive turba philosophorum Basileae, 1572

My interpretation of meaning:

Ignis ¹ and Acua ² are not friendly for there are no ties of kindred among them: Ignis is fiery and resolute while Acua is cool and moistening. ³

1. Retaining the Latin rather than simply translating here as 'fire' because Ignis (πυρὸς) is a philosophical, hermetic and alchemical, principle (or substance or archetype) as in the Corpus Hermeticum. For example:

σὺ εἶ ὁ θεός. ὁ σὸς ἄνθρωπος ταῦτα βοᾷ διὰ πυρός, δι' ἀέρος, διὰ γῆς, διὰ ὕδατος, διὰ πνεύματος, διὰ τῶν κτισμάτων σου

You are theos. Your mortal loudly calls out: through Ignis [Fire, πυρός], through Air, through Earth, through Water, through Pneuma, through your created beings.

Logos Δ. The Esoteric Song, Tractate XIII, 20. Myatt, *Corpus Hermeticum*, 2017. ISBN 9781976452369

Compare also a fragment attributed to Heraclitus:

ἐκ πυρὸς τὰ πάντα συνεστάναι εἰς τοῦτο ἀναλύεσθαι πάντα δὲ γίνεσθαι καθ' εἰμαρμένην καὶ διὰ τῆς ἐναντιοδρομίας ἡρμόσθαι τὰ ὄντα καὶ πάντα ψυχῶν εἶναι καὶ δαιμόνων πλήρη [Diogenes Laertius, 11:7]

The foundation/base/essence of all beings ['things'] is pyros to which they return, with all [of them] by genesis appropriately apportioned [separated into portions] to be bound together again by enantiodromia, and all filled/suffused/vivified with/by ψυχή and Dæmons.

2. Acua. I have opted for a somewhat obscure regional (Sardinian) variant of aqua rather than simply retaining the Latin or translating as 'water' because aqua is now a somewhat commercialized word with the Greek ὕδωρ, like Pyros, a hermetic and alchemical principle, qv. Corpus Hermeticum, Tractate IV, 1:

τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ σῶμα ἐκείνου, οὐχ ἄπτόν, οὐδὲ ὄρατόν, οὐδὲ μετρητόν, οὐδὲ διαστατόν, οὐδὲ ἄλλωι τινὶ σῶματι ὅμοιον· οὔτε γὰρ πῦρ ἐστὶν οὔτε ὕδωρ οὔτε ἀήρ οὔτε πνεῦμα, ἀλλὰ πάντα ἀπ' αὐτοῦ. ἀγαθὸς γὰρ ὢν, μόνωι ἑαυτῶι τοῦτο ἀναθεῖναι ἠθέλησε καὶ τὴν γῆν κοσμήσαι,

That Being has no body that can be touched or seen or measured or which is separable or which is similar to any other body: not of Fire [pyros] or Water [ὕδωρ] or of Pneuma even though all such things are from that Being. (Myatt, op.cit.)

3. (i) qv. "moistness and consistency" in the second quotation, below. (ii) cf. William Caxton: "one somer is softe and moyste, and another is drye and wyndy." Myrroure of the Worlde, 1481 CE.

ooo

The Latin of the second quotation in Turba Philosophorum is:

doceo autem vos stellas esse igneas et aera ipsas continere et quod si aeris humiditas et spissitudo non esset, quae solis flammam separaret a creaturis, omnia subsistentia sol combureret.

The Arabic of Muḥammad ibn Umayl al-Tamimi (c.900–960 CE) from *Kitab al-ma 'al-waraqī* containing the quotation is:

قال أكسميدوس الجرعاني [. . .] فالماء والنار عدوان ليست
بينهما قرابة واشجة لأن النار حارة يابسة والماء بارد رطب
فأما الهواء فحار رطب فأصلح ما بينهما برطوبته مع حرارته
فصار الهواء مصلحا بين الماء والنار. والأرواح كلهم من لطيف
بخار الهواء تكون لأنه إذا اجتمعت السخونة مع الرطوبة فليس
لهما بد من أن يخرج من بينهما لطيف يصير بخارا أو ربحا لأن
حرارة الشمس تُخرج

My interpretation of meaning:

I inform you that stars are Igneous, that Aeros ¹ bounds them, and it is the moistness and consistency ² of Aeros which keeps the flames of the Sun separate from created beings for otherwise the Sun would consume them.

1. Aeros. Here as in hermeticism and alchemy, ἀήρ is a particular philosophical principle, substance, or archetype. As in Poemandres tractate of the Corpus Hermeticum, for example v.5:

καὶ ὁ ἀήρ ἐλαφρὸς ὢν ἠκολούθησε τῷ πνεύματι, ἀναβαίνοντος αὐτοῦ μέχρι τοῦ πυρὸς ἀπὸ γῆς καὶ ὕδατος, ὡς δοκεῖν κρέμασθαι αὐτὸν ἀπ' αὐτοῦ

Since Air [ἀέρος, Aeros] is agile, it followed the pneuma, up and above Earth and Water [Acua] and as far as Fire [Pyros], to be as if it were hanging from that, there.

2. spissitudo from spissus, qv. σπιδής and cf. πυκνός. Here 'consistency' rather than 'broad' or 'dense'.

The Greek Text

ἀρχὴ <...> τῶν ὄντων τὸ ἄπειρον <...>

ἔξ ὧν δὲ ἡ γένεσις ἐστὶ τοῖς οὖσι, καὶ τὴν φθορὰν εἰς ταῦτα γίνεσθαι κατὰ τὸ χρεῶν· διδόναι γὰρ αὐτὰ δίκην καὶ τίσιν ἀλλήλοις τῆς ἀδικίας κατὰ τὴν τοῦ χρόνου τάξιν [Theophrastus/Simplicius]

My interpretation of meaning:

< [the] source ... of beings is the un-definitive ¹ ...>

Where beings have their origin there also they cease to exist: offering payment ² to balance, ³ one to another, their unbalance for such is the arrangement of what is passing. ⁴

1. Because the beginning is fragmentary it is difficult to provide a satisfactory explanation of what is meant, although many explanations have been suggested over many centuries including the speculation that 'apeiron' is the first principle, the ἀρχή, of beings, with ἄπειρον almost invariably translated by words such as the boundless, infinity, the limit-less.

However, ἄπειρον is a privation of πεῖραρ, a lack of completion; a lack of a verdict; or, often overlooked, a lack of a means, a method, an instrument, to reach a particular conclusion or of a tool do a particular task, qv. Odyssey: 3.431-435, and my translation:

ὡς ἔφαθ', οἱ δ' ἄρα πάντες ἐποίπυον. ἦλθε μὲν ἄρ βοῦς
ἐκ πεδίου, ἦλθον δὲ θοῆς παρὰ νηὸς εἰσης
Τηλεμάχου ἔταροι μεγαλήτορος, ἦλθε δὲ χαλκεὺς
ὄπλ' ἐν χερσὶν ἔχων χαλκήϊα, πείρατα τέχνης,
ἄκμονά τε σφύραν τ' ἐυποίητόν τε πυράγρην,
οἷσιν τε χρυσὸν εἰργάξετο

Such were his words, and all of his sons occupied themselves with those things
So that an ox arrived from the fields; the comrades of the vigorous Telemachus
Arrived from their well-balanced ship; the goldsmith arrived bearing in his arms
Those bronze tools with which he accomplished his art:
A hammer, anvil and well-made fire-tongs
Which he used to work gold.

Hence my suggestion here that what Anaximander might have implied is that the source of beings is 'un-definitive', incapable of resolution because we do not possess the tools, such as words, to resolve it. Which explains why he goes on to contrast δίκη with ἀδικία, which balance and unbalance I explain below.

2. Payment as in a debt owed or because of some personal need or mistake, as in our relatively recent phrase 'debt of honour'. The debt may be to a person or persons or as in ancient times to a deity either in expiation or in the hope of avoiding a misfortune wrought by some deity, for example by the "Trimorphed Moirai with their ever-heedful Furies" of the gods, Μοῖραι τρίμορφοι μνήμονές τ' Ἐρινύες.

The suggestion therefore might be that the offer of payment relates to those who, despite the fact that source of beings is 'un-definitive', having tried to define it and in the process constructed a dialectic of opposites, and thus brought conflict, realize their error. As Heraclitus noted:

εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ τὸν πόλεμον ἐόντα ξυνόν, καὶ δίκην ἔριν, καὶ γινόμενα πάντα κατ' ἔριν καὶ χρεώμενα [χρεῶν]

One should be aware that Polemos pervades, with discord δίκη, and that beings are naturally born by discord.

3. In respect of δίκη it here simply implies balance in contrast to the unbalance, the privation of balance, that is ἀδικία. The translations 'order' or justice or 'fitting' - like 'disorder' or injustice or 'unfitting' for ἀδικία - are too redolent of some modern or ancient morality designed to manifest 'order' or justice or what is considered fitting in contrast to their assumed dialectical opposites.

4. In respect of χρόνος, it is not here a modern abstract measurable 'time' (in ancient times by a sundial; in later times by a mechanical clock) but 'the passing' of living or of events as evident in the Agamemnon:

ποίου χρόνου δὲ καὶ πεπόρθηται πόλις 278

Then - how long has it been since the citadel was ravaged?

τίς δὲ πλὴν θεῶν ἅπαντ' ἀπήμων τὸν δι' αἰῶνος χρόνον 554-5

Who - except for the gods - passes their entire life without any injury at all?

Imbalance And Opposites

What I find in these fragments attributed to Anaximander is germane to our perception of our human physis and of how we have tried to understand it through words - denotata - and thus by certain named 'principles', and that ultimately we have to accept that we cannot, should not, attempt to understand it through words which bring-into-being a named opposite and thus a conflict between those perceived, believed in, and conflicting dialectical opposites with their attendant strife, discord, enmity, hatred, and suffering. That such a wordful perception is un-definitive because the tools we have hitherto manufactured and rely on are useless.

Thus, my own fallible answer to Aristotle's question of whether or not such principles are universal or individual is that they are ineluctably personal, with all we can presently hope do is use the wordless knowing of our empathy, and of our own *pathei-mathos*, as a guide.

David Myatt

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