

A Note Concerning Aristotle, Reason, And Virtue

It was after recently reading a passage from *Sententia libri Ethicorum* by Thomas Aquinas ¹ that I returned to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and found the appropriate section:

εἰ δ' ἐστὶν ἔργον ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου, τὸ δ' αὐτό φαμεν ἔργον εἶναι τῷ γένει τοῦδε καὶ τοῦδε σπουδαίου, ὡσπερ κιθαριστοῦ καὶ σπουδαίου κιθαριστοῦ, καὶ ἀπλῶς δὴ τοῦτ' ἐπὶ πάντων, προστιθεμένης τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν ὑπεροχῆς πρὸς τὸ ἔργον· κιθαριστοῦ μὲν γὰρ κιθαρίζειν, σπουδαίου δὲ τὸ εὖ· εἰ δ' οὕτως, ἀνθρώπου δὲ τίθεμεν ἔργον ζωὴν τινα, ταύτην δὲ ψυχῆς ἐνέργειαν καὶ πράξεις μετὰ λόγου, σπουδαίου δ' ἀνδρὸς εὖ ταῦτα καὶ καλῶς, ἕκαστον δ' εὖ κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρετὴν ἀποτελεῖται· εἰ δ' οὕτω, τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια γίνεται κατ' ἀρετὴν, εἰ δὲ πλείους αἱ ἀρεταί, κατὰ τὴν ἀρίστην καὶ τελειοτάτην. 1.7 1098a7-18 ²

In the context of the comments by Aquinas, and later translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it was interesting how certain English words had and have been used to translate particular Greek terms and thus imbue the text with particular meanings not necessarily relevant to an understanding of Aristotle's philosophy. Such as, in the above lines, ψυχή as 'soul', ἀρετή as 'virtue', and ἔργον as 'work' or 'activity', with words such as 'soul' and 'virtue' now often associated with Christianity.

My interpretation of meaning of those lines from Aristotle is somewhat different:

Thus if the goal of humans is to actualize the Quidditas through reason or at least not disconnected from reason, and if we also say that regarding the goal of an artist and of a skilled artist of the same genre - of a Kithara player and one more skilful, and to all genres - the goal of humans with a certain type of living, of a goal to actualize the Quidditas through reason, then according to such premises it would be proper for a skilled human to act excellently in accord with reason, and if there be several such human excellences, in accord with the most meritable and accomplished of them.

Where and for example there is 'merit' in place of 'virtue' and Quidditas in place of 'soul', with Quidditas (scholastic Latin) used by Thomas Aquinas and still a somewhat neutral world which can suggest several philosophical, non-religious, meanings according to context, such as the physis - character; nature; noumenon; intangibility - of a being or existent, as in Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 5, 1015a:

ἐκ δὴ τῶν εἰρημένων ἢ πρώτη φύσις καὶ κυρίως λεγομένη ἐστὶν ἡ οὐσία ἢ τῶν ἐχόντων ἀρχὴν κινήσεως ἐν αὐτοῖς ἢ αὐτά: ἢ γὰρ ὕλη τῷ ταύτης δεκτικῇ 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.

Given the foregoing, then principally - and to be exact - physis denotes the quidditas of beings having change inherent within them; for substantia [materies, ὕλη] 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.

For me, the above example from *Nicomachean Ethics* relates to what I still find to be the vexatious issues of exegesis, of intangibility, of naming or of not naming, since what a name, a denotata, denotes, not only can and does change from century to century, from one no longer existing society to another newer one, but also has a tendency to separate and divide one being or existent from others leading to the development of categories.

According to my understanding an enigmatic quotation attributed to Anaximander expresses this:

ἀρχὴ <...> τῶν ὄντων τὸ ἄπειρον <...>

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

As described in my essay *Anaximander, Imbalance, And Opposites* ³ I interpreted this as:

< [the] source ... of beings is the un-definitive ⁴ ...>

Where beings have their origin there also they cease to exist: offering payment ⁵ to balance, ⁶ one to another, their unbalance for such is the arrangement of what is passing. ⁷

Which understanding is that once what was or appeared to be intangible is denoted by a name it is considered to be a particular being, a 'thing', or existent, and thus becomes distinguishable from other beings, we have concealed, covered-up, its physis, and as Heraclitus described Polemos is pervasive bringing-into-being discord because the process of naming is the genesis of what is perceived to be the opposite of that now named 'thing' or existent, which as Anaximander implied it ceases, for us, to be what it was, something of an intangible mystery. ⁸

Something, perhaps, that is numinous or which presences the numinous. Hence why, in the weltanschauung of patheimathos, ⁹ the wordless human faculty of empathy is considered to be a way to know and understand the physis of

human beings sans denotata, for it is:

"our faculty of empathy which provides or can provide an individual intuition - a wordless-knowing or awareness - of the numinous, and as a personal human faculty empathy has a personal horizon and thus cannot be extrapolated from such a personal knowing into some-thing supra-personal be this some-thing denotata, including an ἰδέα/εἶδος, or an axiom (ἀρχή) or a source (αἴτιος) for some 'revelation' or ideology or similar manifestations constructed by and dependent on appellation. In the case of a 'revelation' the source is often named as God or a god/the god (θεός, ὁ θεός) who or which are often described by a myth or mythoi. ¹⁰

But such extrapolation, by an δέα/εἶδος or by an axiom or by a or *the* source of a 'revelation', by the very nature of - the causality inherent in - denotata results in ἔρις, a discord of opposites: for every denotatum has or develops an opposite and thus can cleave physis, as a fragment attributed to Heraclitus poetically expressed.

εἰδέναι δὲ χρὴ τὸν πόλεμον ἐόντα ξυνόν, καὶ δίκην ἔριν, καὶ γινόμενα πάντα κατ' ἔριν καὶ χρεώμενα <χρεών>

One should be aware that Polemos pervades, with discord δίκη, and that beings are naturally born by discord. ¹⁰

David Myatt
March 10th, 2024

===

1. Primo igitur accipit ex praemissis quod proprium opus hominis sit operatio animae, quae est secundum ipsam rationem, vel non sine ratione. Liber 1, Lectio 10.

2.

σθαι. εἰ δ' ἐστὶν ἔργον ἀνθρώπου ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια κατὰ λόγον ἢ μὴ ἄνευ λόγου, τὸ δ' αὐτό φαμεν ἔργον εἶναι τῷ γένει τοῦδε καὶ τοῦδε σπουδαίου, ὥσπερ κιθαριστοῦ καὶ σπουδαίου κιθαριστοῦ, καὶ ἀπλῶς δὴ τοῦτ' ἐπὶ πάντων, προστιθεμένης ¹⁰ τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἀρετὴν ὑπεροχῆς πρὸς τὸ ἔργον· κιθαριστοῦ μὲν γὰρ κιθαρίζειν, σπουδαίου δὲ τὸ εὔ· εἰ δ' οὕτως, [ἀνθρώπου δὲ τίθεμεν ἔργον ζωὴν τινα, ταύτην δὲ ψυχῆς ἐνέργειαν καὶ πράξεις μετὰ λόγου, σπουδαίου δ' ἀνδρὸς εὔ ταῦτα καὶ καλῶς, ἕκαστον δ' εὔ κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρετὴν ἀποτελεῖται· ¹⁵ εἰ δ' οὕτω,] τὸ ἀνθρώπινον ἀγαθὸν ψυχῆς ἐνέργεια γίνεται κατ' ἀρετὴν, εἰ δὲ πλείους αἱ ἀρεταί, κατὰ τὴν ἀρίστην καὶ τελειοτάτην. ἔτι δ' ἐν βίῳ τελείω. μία γὰρ χελιδὼν ἕαρ οὐ

3 <https://davidmyatt.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/dwmyatt-anaxmander.pdf>

4. 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:

ὥς ἔφαθ', οἱ δ' ἄρα πάντες ἐποίπνουον. ἦλθε μὲν ἄρ βοῦς
ἐκ πεδίου, ἦλθον δὲ θοῆς παρὰ νηὸς εἰσης
Τηλεμάχου ἔταροι μεγάλητορος, ἦλθε δὲ χαλκεὺς
ὄπλ' ἐν χερσὶν ἔχων χαλκῆια, πείρατα τέχνης,
ἄκμονά τε σφῦραν 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.

5. 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.

6. 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.

7. 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?

8. Compare the expression κεκρυμμένον μυστήριον from tractate One, v.16 of the Corpus Hermeticum, and Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ from Heraclitus fragment 123. The former suggesting "a mysterium esoteric" even to this day - <https://davidmyatt.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/eight-tractates-v2-print.pdf> - and the latter suggesting that the natural companion of Physis is concealment, <https://davidmyatt.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/heraclitus-fragment-123.pdf>

9. *qv. Introduction: Physis And Being in The Numinous Way Of Pathei-Mathos, 2022,* <https://davidmyatt.files.wordpress.com/2022/10/numinous-way-pathei-mathos-v7.pdf>

10. *Numinosity, Denotata, Empathy, And The Hermetic Tradition,* <https://davidmyatt.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/dwm-denotata-empathy-v1b.pdf>