

The Balance of Physis - Notes on λόγος and ἀληθέα in Heraclitus

Part One - Fragment 112

σωφρονεῖν ἀρετὴ μέγιστη, καὶ σοφίη ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαίοντας. ^[1]

This fragment is interesting because it contains what some regard as the philosophically important words *σωφρονεῖν*, *ἀληθέα*, *φύσις* and *λόγος*.

The fragment suggests that what is most excellent [*ἀρετὴ*] is thoughtful reasoning [*σωφρονεῖν*] - and such reasoning is both (1) to express (reveal) meaning and (2) that which is in accord with, or in sympathy with, *φύσις* - with our nature and the nature of Being itself.

Or, we might, perhaps more aptly, write - such reasoning is both an expressing of inner meaning (essence), and expresses our own, true, nature (as thinking beings) and the balance, the nature, of Being itself.

λέγειν [*λόγος*] here does not suggest what we now commonly understand by the term "word". Rather, it suggests 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 ^[2]

and why, in respect of *λέγειν*, Hesiod [see below under *ἀληθέα*] wrote:

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,
ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι ^[3]

φύσις here suggests the Homeric ^[4] usage of nature, or character, as in Herodotus (2.5.2):

Αἰγύπτου γὰρ φύσις ἐστὶ τῆς χώρης τοιήδε

but also suggests Φύσις (Physis) - as in fragment 123; the natural nature of all beings, beyond their outer appearance.

ἀληθέα - commonly translated as truth - here suggests (as often elsewhere) an exposure of *essence*, of the reality, the meaning, which lies behind the outer (false) appearance that covers or may conceal that reality or meaning, as in Hesiod (*Theog*, 27-28):

ἴδμεν ψεύδεα πολλὰ λέγειν ἐτύμοισιν ὁμοῖα,
ἴδμεν δ', εὖτ' ἐθέλωμεν, ἀληθέα γηρύσασθαι ^[3]

σωφρονεῖν here suggests balanced (or thoughtful, measured) reasoning - but not according to some abstract theory, but instead a reasoning, a natural way or manner of reasoning, in natural balance with ourselves, with our nature as thinking beings.

Most importantly, perhaps, it is this *σωφρονεῖν* which can incline us toward not committing *ὑβρις* (hubris; insolence), which *ὑβρις* is a going beyond the natural limits, and which thus upsets the natural balance, as, for instance, mentioned by Sophocles:

ὑβρις φυτεύει τύραννον:
ὑβρις, εἰ πολλῶν ὑπερπλησθῆ μάταν,
ἂ μὴ 'πίκαιρα μηδὲ συμφέροντα,
ἀκρότατον εἰσαναβᾶσ'
αἶπος ἀπότομον ὠρουσεν εἰς ἀνάγκαν,
ἔνθ' οὐ ποδὶ χρησίμω
χρήται ^[5]

It therefore not surprising that Heraclitus considers, as expressed in fragment 112, the best person - the person with the most excellent character (that is, ἀρετῆ) - is the person who, understanding and appreciating their own true nature as a thinking being (someone who can give names to - who can denote - beings, and express or recount that denoting to others), also understands the balance of Being, the true nature of beings [cf. fragment 1 - κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον], and who thus seeks to avoid committing the error of hubris, but who can not only also forget this understanding, and cease to remember such reasoning:

τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ
πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον ^[6]

but who can also deliberately, or otherwise, conceal what lies behind the names (the outer appearance) we give to beings, to "things".

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Notes:

[1] Fragmentum B 112 - *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels, Berlin 1903

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

[3]

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

[4] *Odyssey*, Book 10, vv. 302-3

[5] "Insolence plants the tyrant. There is insolence if by a great foolishness there is a useless over-filling which goes beyond the proper limits. It is an ascending to the steepest and utmost heights and then that hurtling toward that Destiny where the useful foot has no use..." (Oedipus Tyrannus, vv.872ff)

[6] " 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."
(*Fragment 1*)
