

Φύσις of the Ionian thinkers

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Ph. D. Dissertation - summary

The thesis aims to investigate the notion of φύσις within the context of the early philosophy. The regular translation of the term φύσις is *nature*. Generally, the notion of φύσις is considered to play a central role in the way of thinking that originated in Ionian Miletus. Therefore the concept of φύσις is essential for the early philosophy – doxography would later interpret this period as the period of the „inquiry into nature“, ἱστορία περὶ φύσεως; and almost all the early philosopher's writings would be called Περὶ φύσεως. The thesis, however, deals merely with the oldest conceptions. It concentrates on the notion of φύσις of the two Ionian philosophers, namely Anaximander of Miletus and Heraclitus, the Ephesian. The set of fragments by Anaximander contains the oldest direct philosophical fragments to be preserved. While in Heraclitus, there is the first occurrence of the word φύσις to be documented in the history of philosophy. Furthermore, the pre-philosophical use of the notion φύσις by Homer is also discussed, since it implies some notable observations for the development of the notion.

The substantial part of the investigation is formed up by the critical reflection of the authors who mediated the relevant text records. Such a critical approach is fundamental for studying Milesians especially. Their philosophy remained preserved only through the quotations of peripathetics. Thus, we have to face the fact that the whole Milesian philosophy, so far as we know it, is completely subordinated to the conceptual schemes of Aristotle and his disciple Theophrastus. In case of Anaximander it means, that the conception of φύσις is generally interpreted through the paradigm of the origins and causes, ἀρχή; material cause in particular. The thesis challenges the Aristotelian interpretation showing that it is just a peripathetic conception and presenting the conception of the φύσις in terms of the τὸ ἄπειρον. Consequently, there is stated the interpretation of the „first philosophical text“, as the fragment DK 22 B 1 is traditionally referred to. However, there is no possibility to reconstruct the original Milesian position because of the loss of the alternative text evidence free of the peripathetic point of view.

Meanwhile the thesis aims to characterize the way of thinking which originated in Miletus and which is traditionally understood as the „inquiry into nature“. The thesis shows, that the crucial portion of these investigations was occupied by the astronomy. This knowledge of astronomy was supported by investigations which later on give birth to special disciplines like

geography, meteorology, biology and so on. This early „constitution“ of genuine sciences was, however, naturally and deeply embedded in the religious apprehension. Thus, it is concluded that the Anaximander of Miletus must be understood in complexity – i.e. in the broadest range of the „inquiry into nature“, which is in question - and not only through the limiting perspective of the metaphysics with its later topics and concepts, which is usually the case.

The conception of φύσις of the Heraclitus of Ephesus is exposed on the ground of the four fragments whose authenticity is generally accepted. In this case the alternative text evidence is provided. Though the fragments produce an evidence for that Heraclitus used the notion φύσις in its original Heraclitean meanings, the use of the term is so vague that it give reasons for the conclusion that its meaning is above all constituted by the concrete context of the use as well as by the totality of the Heraclitus' thoughts. Spontaneity, with which the term is used, might also indicates, that the word *physis* was presumably used (with the high degree of probability) by the Milesians, as well. Though, in their case it is impossible to dispense from the Aristotelian interpretation.

The thesis does not and in fact can not state any definite and generally shared notion of the φύσις. Such a general concept would be necessarily misleading in concrete contexts. The thesis rather displays different contexts of the use of the term, compares various places of its occurrence and investigates its various connotations. Furthermore, it presents later interpretations and understandings to the concepts proposed by the mediators and commentators. Hence, not only the nature of these texts emerges, but also the nature of the φύσις itself, even though the φύσις „loves to hide“.