ARCHE, DIKE, PHUSIS: ANAXIMANDER'S PRINCIPLE OF NATURAL JUSTICE

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The Anaximander fragment is the source of Western philosophy and thus a truly Promethean milestone of human history. Thanks to the careful Simplicius, writing his commentaries on Aristotle at the end of pagan antiquity, after Justinian's closure of the Academy, we posses to some degree the actual words of Anaximander. Simplicius himself may have expressed gratitude to Aristotle's successor, Theophrastus, from whose treatise he presumable obtained the quotation. It is a remarkable first for many reasons: it is the first instance of Greek prose as a literary medium; it is the first occurrence of certain key terms, like *arche* (origin, beginning, principle) and *taxis* (order, disposition, arrangement); and, of course, it is the first instance where the portentious use of the definite article, *to*, is used to create an abstract concept: *to apeiron* (The Unlimited, The Unbounded, The Indefinite, etc.).

Needless to say, this fragment has been the source of a great deal of speculation as to its exact meaning and the implications which can be legitimately drawn from it. An Oxford analyst, like Jonathan Barnes, can glibly acknowledge it as the first genuine instance of "modern rationality," while Martin Heidegger can treat it as the ground from which his own theory of truth as aletheia (or "disclosure") springs--quite opposed to the traditional "rational" understanding of truth.[1] Sensitive scholars, like Charles Kahn and W. K. C. Guthrie, who don't have particular philosophical axes to grind, have attempted careful reconstructions of Anaximander's thought. In this paper, I would like to propose that one of the crucial leading ideas in Anaximander's world-view is that of justice or "fitting rightness," *dike*. This concept functions in connecting his two other major conceptual innovations: the arche as apeiron and phusis. I am here building on a magnificently insightful piece of scholarship, Gregory Vlastos' article, "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies."[2] What I propose to add is that justice (or *dike*--a much broader and richer term than our understanding of "justice" allows), instead of being merely a principle of retribution, is a guiding principle of organic or dynamic development. Justice,

In other words, was available to Anaximander as an explanatory concept for describing how the cosmos came to be, because it had this instrinsic temporal sense of generating order. To be sure, justice is a regulatory principle, holding powers in check, but it is regulatory of an overall process which has a unitary nature to it, *phusis*. *Phusis* thus can be understood as an orderly process which genuinely accomplishes or achieves something. Nature, in short, for the early Greeks, is not a random series of cause-effect relations, but a fulfillment. Aside from suggesting how this may clear up some problems in comprehending Anaximander's system, I will conclude by indicating how this notion of fulfillment or accomplishment may lead toward an understanding of the meaning of Being in later Greek philosophy, leaving the substance of the demonstration for another time.

It will be helpful to begin by outlining the basic features of Anaximander's cosmology, paying speical attention to the wording of the fragment itself, and the problems raised in interpreting it. Let us turn, then, to the passage from Simplicius:

> Anaximander called the arche an element of those things which are (*ta onta*) The Unlimited (*to apeiron*), being the first to introduce this name for the arche. He says that it is neither water nor any of the other elements spoken of, but some other "unlimited" nature (*phusin apeiron*), out of which are generated all the heavens (*ouranoi*) and the world-orders (*kosmoi*) in them; from which is generation with respect to beings (*tois ousi*), and into them destruction comes about, as it must (*kata to chreon*), for they render each other justice and due compensation for injustice, according to the disposition of Time, as he thus puts it in rather poetic terms. It is clear that, having witnessed the four elements transform into each other, he did not think it fitting to make one of these the substratum, but something else besides them. Nor does he make genesis or coming-to-be out of the qualitative alteration of the elements, but from a separation (*apokrisis*) of opposites due to eternal motion.[3]

A good deal of this passage is either Theophrastus interpreting Anaximander or Simplicius interpreting Theophrastus interpreting Anaximander (such as the attempt to explain the *apeiron* as the substratum or *hypokeimenon*). Scholars disagree as to how much of the passage can be safely counted as Anamimander's own

words; clearly we do have some, and all agree that at least the phrase describing genesis and destruction by the "elements" (*stoicheia*--another Aristotelian importation by Theophrastus) "paying their dues" to each other for their injustice is authentic. It is also likely that Anaximander used the term *apokrisis* to explain the process and described it as the result of "eternal motion"--presumably of the apeiron itself. In the *Physics*, Aristotle gives a more sophisticated version of the argument (what Anaximander should have said) and quotes an illuminating phrase from Anaximander himself, about whom he is unquestionably speaking:

> everything is either determined by some principle (*arche*) or is a principle itself, and the Unlimited (*apeiron*) cannot be determined at all, and so cannot depend upon anything else as its principle. And further, being a principle, it can have no beginning or end of existence; for whatever comes into being must come to an end, and a process of perishing must have a finish. So the Unlimited cannot be derived from any other principle, but is itself regarded as the principle of the other things, "embracing and governing all," as it is said by such as accept it . . . (206 b 7 ff; after Wickstead and Cornford).

The general outlines of Anaximander's thought are now discernible. Anaximander called that from which the cosmos was born "The *Apeiron* "(a word ranging in meaning from "limitless," as Homer's "the limitless sea," to "seamless", like an *apeiron* garment which is woven together, not stitched, to "that which is incapable of being counted or measured." It has no *peirata* or "ends." To the Greek mind, this means essentially that it is "unfinished." The process of nature will be characterized by having *peirata*; it will be a process of limitation which will eventuate in the establishment of an order of "*kosmos*."

The *apeiron* cannot be adequately characterized by the colorless English word "stuff" (a term originally meaning "a cork" or something used as a plug). One stuffs a Thanksgiving turkey, not a Greek cosmos. The *apeiron* is inherently the matrix of life and nature, *phusis*, is that process of life which is generated--and which wastes away and dies. The *apeiron* should be thought of as something eminently capable of producing offspring or children; it is "fertile." Many commentators speak of the Milesians as "hylozoists," that is, that they thought of "matter" as "alive." This sounds charming and quaint to our ears when put in such a

bungling manner (after all, in the English of Locke and Newton, "matter" is what thought of as lifeless and hard). If Anaximander had any image in mind for the *apeiron*, it is more likely to have been a sexual fluid, highly disposed toward articulating itself into cosmos.

I think this is revealed in the various versions we have of his account of how the process of separation began. Eusebius--who also seems to be relying on the doughty Thoephrastus--describes Anaximander's cosmology as follows:

> He says that at the birth (*genesis*) of this cosmos a (or the?) germ (*gonimon*) of Hot and Cold was separated off from the Eternal (*tou aidiou*), and out of this a sphere of flame grew about the vapor (*aer*) surrounding the earth like the bark (phloios, a "rind," "skin" or "membrane") around a tree. When this was torn away and shut off in certain rings, the sun, moon and stars came about. (DK A 10, after Guthrie).

The cosmos begins by "germinating," like a fertilized egg; as Guthrie observes,

> "the word gonimon . . . is an adjective meaning generative, fertile, able to bring to birth, and is used of eggs and seed. . . . The whole sentence suggests . . .that Anaximander conceived of his cosmogony on the analogy of early views concerning the seed of animals and the development of the embryo. The mythical world-egg of Orphic and other cosmogonies shows how primitive such a notion could be, and the 'separation' (apokrisis) of the seed in the womb, the part played by hot and cold, the word phloios and the 'detachment' (aporragenai) of the new organixm from the parent body, are all familiar from Greek medical writers . . . .[4]

This idea of *phusis* operating by the separation of parts, distinguished--or "limited"--by a boundary skin is repeated in the acccount we hear of how life in general came about:

> Anaximander said that the first living creatures were born in moisture, enclosed in thorny barks (*phloiois*); and that as their age increased they came forth on to the drier part and, when the bark had broken off, they lived a different kind of life for a short time. (DK A 30; Kirk and Raven 136)

Life is a process of articulation and delimitation which results in an organized being with clearly formed parts; Anaximander seems to have applied this process to the cosmos itself. The idea that the cosmos itself constitutes one whole living creature is certainly not alien to subsequent Greek thought, from Anaximander's near-contemporary, Pythagoras, to Empedocles, Plato, the Stoics, and Plotinus.

From the outset, life for the Greeks meant a self-initiating, self-determining, internal process. It signifies, moreover, a process of development. Parmenides did not so much make the claim that "Being" cannot "Become" as that what is already accomplished needs no process of coming into its own. The One, in short, starts off "grown-up." This is why Being is "full" and "perfected." After Parmenides, this sense of "living fulness" is transferred in its primary meaning to what eternally is rather than to what becomes. But it retains the idea of something "self-accomplished." But the point is that, at this stage, the paradigm conception of life is not eternal cyclic motion, but developmental process. Such a process involves differentiation as well as organization by which various powers can be exercized and yet work together. A living process is one headed toward a specific end; it seeks to realize something definite, something which has determinate limits. In this sense, the process achieves or accomplishes something--it is directed toward a goal and either realizes it or fails to. When it is well-regulated, the goal is reached, barring a catastrophic intervention.

If Anaximander was thinking along these lines, he would have sought to explain nature, *phusis*, as the process whereby cosmos is realized or achieved, as the accomplishment of something which is "a fair and orderly arrangement," as the word *kosmos* indicates. In such an account, we would expect to see greater and fairer forms of order arise from more primitive and "elementary" ones. There are two questions to be asked: what gives rise to the process? and what regulates or controls it? Anaximander's answer to the first was: *to apeiron*, something in and of itself nonordered and unarranged becasue it had no distinguishable parts, and which did or accomplished nothing, since it was unborn and deathless. Its "eternal motion" was at best a primeval restlessness (echoed in Plato's account of the Receptacle in the *Timaeus*) which set "the whirl" (*dine*) going which led to the separation of the Hot and Cold.

His answer to the second question was: *dike*. As Aristotle said, *to apeiron* "embraces and governs (or 'steers'--*kubernan*,

essentially the same word as 'govern')" the limited cosmos. As the Hot and Cold become separated, their contrary natures stand forth; they exist in dynamic tension--the life of one is the death of the other, as Heraclitus said. But there is more to the idea than simply the notion of the Hot pushing out the Cold and vice versa. If this were all, no cosmos would result, simply an eternal cycle of vengeance and retribution. Nor can they both statically coexist, each ruling its own domain, for essentially the same reason: a half-hot, half-cold universe is no "*kosmos*" for a Greek. They must cooperate in a dynamic relation to produce a fair and orderly world. Each has a tendency to assert itself--for this is what it is to have "character" for the Greeks. One makes a claim (*time*) for oneself, as Agamemnon or Achilles do. Empedocles also speaks of the four elements coming forth to exercise their claim, an action which leads, by the way, to the eventual destruction of the cosmos for him.[5] But the tendency to exercise claim often leads the hubris, to making excessive claim. Against such tendencies, *dike* is directly opposed. In general, *dike* does not prevent acts of hubris, but it eventually exacts revenge; one pays one's dues. This of course is the theme from Homer's Iliad and Odyssey to the tragic poets; it is the essence of what Aeschylus means by "wisdom won by suffering."

If we focus on the retibutive side of *dike*, however, I think we miss an important characteristic. Recall that Anaximander's problem is how to get cosmos from The Unlimited. How would mindless retribution accomplish that? Some scholars have understood Anaximander to be making the claim that existence itself is injustice, that only the undifferentiated unity of the apeiron is just. Such a point (based, moreover on a reading of a corrupted text),[6] is more congenial to a Hindu or Schopenhauer than a Greek. Postiviely, *dike* is the principle whereby men work together to frame a civilized life. In Homeric usage, *dike* is not contrasted with "injustice" so much as with uncivilized or wild behavior. It is the principle which makes life "fair," where eveyone receives what is his proper due. Much of the Odyssey, for example, is concerned with contrasting proper and improper forms of social interaction (the suitors, Circe, the Cyclops, and Odysseus' men being examples of improper conduct; Nestor, Menelaus, and the Phaeaceans being instances of proper conduct). The sense one gets is that *dike* is the means whereby everyone exists in proper relationship to each other whereby good is realized. Hence it is far richer than our dry, impersonal sense of a rule. Dike is the means by which fair and orderly conduct achieves what is good, what ought to be. If we look ahead to Plato's *Republic*, justice is the supreme virtue because it allows all the other virtues to flourish together so that the good of the whole is realized. It bring

about the good life by ordering and distributing the "claims" made by all the competing powers of human nature, apetitive, honor-loving, and rational, giving each its due or fair share.[7]

It is more evident now, I think, that when Anaximander sought to explain how cosmos came to be, he appealed to Justice as the regulator of the germinative process. *Dike* accomplishes order; it does not merely redress existing imbalance. *Phusis* is something inherently active; it is understood as a process or totality of processes which have beginnings, middles, and ends. It has, as we might put it nowadays, a narrative structure rather than a merely sequential one. In short, it is the story of stories--and that is why the Greeks thought you could understand it by means of a story which told of its birth, its upbringing, and its deeds or accomplishments, just as you would understand a hero by knowing his generalogy and actions. *Historia* was also an Ionian invention. Hesiod had tried to weave together all the genealogies of the gods into one story; as it became evident that the myths were not "literal," that they were "poetic," the question must have arisen how one could give a *literal* history. It is no coincidence, in my view, that at this time we see the beginning of the divergence between poetry and philosophy. But in the Milesians we still see that there must be a temporal and developmental "story-structure" to an account of *phusis*. This is precisely what eventually became obscured and then lost altogether. With Parmenides and Plato, the account of What Is takes precedence; in the modern period, nature is primarily a passive, inert stuff that has to be externally moved--it has no real internal story of development. Its account will most properly be that of indifferent instances obeying a timeless law. If recent developments in astrophysics, not to mention the naturalistic emergentisms in philsophy in this century, break away from the traditional modern paradigm, they look back to the Presocratics.

The connection between the social or moral conception of *dike* and that of the living organism is vividly present in the writings of the Hippocratic tradition, the heirs of the Ionian enlightenment. The four "powers" which constitute a living body must be held in equal balance for there to be health. If one gets the upper hand disease or death is the result. Imbalance is sometimes referred to as *adikia*, "injustice," as well as *harmartia*, "wrong," and the offending power receives punishment. Charles Kahn points out in this context, that "The wronged party is in this case not so much the weaker element, as the healty state of the whole body."[8] Vlastos has gone on to shown that the essence of this concept is that of the equality (*isonomia*) of the elements; health is the product of a biological democracy, so to speak.[9] The powers must cooperate for *phusis* to accomplish something, i.e., a living body. Not only is it imperative to recall that the Greeks freely used

biological ideas to think about moral or political issues, but vice versa. It is no error to see in Anaximander's appeal to *dike* both conceptions at work. Anaximander's appeal to a cosmos regulated by justice and law is not the same sort of idea as we find in, say, Newton's *Principia*. What did the appeal to *dike* signify in Anaximander's age which was also that of Solon; the power of the old aristocracies was being challenged in the name of *dike*. A new social order was emerging in which fellow citizens would fairly share in power for the well-being of the polis. It is true that the new struggle against the limited, arbitrary power of the old clans was often spear-headed by a strongman who subsequently became *tyrannos* (and Miletus had one in Anaximander's life, Thrasybulos). But ideas are often ahead of their times; Anaximander's universe is one in which order progressively establishes itself. This looks forward to the thought of Aeschylus, who also presented, in mythological fashion, the idea that *dike* was something that eventually replaced the harsh, bitter code of vengeance for that of a reasonable, law-like democracy. The *(Eumenides)* ends with the Furies, Apollo, and Orestes arguing their case before a jury of mortals in Athens (yet where Athena, wisdom, casts the deciding vote). By such a process the Furies becomes the "Well-disposed Ones," protectors of the life of the free city. In the Prometheus trilogy, we are also presented with the story of how the ruler of the universe himself transforms from an arbitrary, vengeful monarch to the establisher of the reign of cosmic *dike*.[10]

Dike, then, is not only a means whereby parts can maintain themselves for the sake of the good of the whole, but it can be understood as the process itself whereby this final order comes to be. It is an underlying principle of development toward that fair order which is cosmos. Cosmos is what is achieved or accomplished; it is an event which fulfills its possibilities; it comes to be completed. Presumably, following the organic metaphor, what is born and generated may also degenerate and die. There is no hard evidence Anaximander believed that the cosmos would come to an end, but we do hear from Aristotle that he believed that the seas were drying up and from less trustworthy sources that there were "innumerable cosmoi."[11] Since it is highly unlikely that Anaximander thought that there were "infinite worlds" presently coexisting (as did the atomists much later), he may have thought that an endless series of cosmoi were generated from the *apeiron* and perished into it.[12] It would be quite in accordance with Greek thought that to every mortal being there was an alotted span of time, as a beautiful verse by Solon on the ten ages of man bears witness.[13] In any case, the idea of *dike* as a progressive establishment of order would be consistent with the phrase of the

fragment which speaks of the "*taxis*" (disposition, arrangement, assesment) of Time. Time, it seems, disposes for the emergence, transformation, and placement of the elemental powers which in turn generate the "heavens and the *kosmoi* within them." Solon also speaks of the judgment or the court of Time in judging his achievements.[14]

We have to understand the Presocratics from the organic and dynamic point of view. What this signifies in particular, I contend, is that their vision of the cosmos involved the sense of something which was achieved or accomplished; soemthing which fulfilled a process. This was an extension of the Greek view of human life. A well-lived life was that which, in the span apportioned by time, succeeded in ahcieving excellence or *arete*. It is of note the sense of *arete* in Anaximander's time was shifting from the old Homeric ideal of courage (*arete* from *aren* as in "Ares") to that of "jsutice and piety"--*dikaiosune*. A well-lived life was like a well-wrought work of art, something palpable. Present, truly existent as what it was.

I would like to suggest, and no more, that this is the idea behind the later conception of Being or Reality which developed from the natrualistic cosmologies of the Milesians. Much later, Being came to be thought of only as the most genreal and hence least informative of the transcendetals, as Heidegger has belabored. But for Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus it stood for that which was eminently palpably "full" and alive; it was "complete" in the sense in which an athlete who has run an outstanding race and won is "complete." He has achieved himself and become what he ought to be, and this, as Pindar describes in Victory Odes, is to share to the extent mortal may in the godlike. Nature, then, for Anaximander is a process of completion, achievement, fulfillment. It accomplishes *kosmos* through the rule of *dike*. The principle or *arche* of this process is no indifferent "stuff," but a limitless, restless, rich, and fertile material highly disposed to becoming cosmos and ruled by *dike*.

Notes

1 See Jonathan Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1979) for a bizarre anti-historicist view and Martin Heidegger's essay, "The Anaximander Fragment" (in *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrel Krell, Harper: 1975), for an equally bizarre if more philsophical reading.

2 Gregory Vlastos, "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies," *Classical Philology* XLII (1947), 156-78.

3 See the establishment of the text, translation and discussion in

Charles H. Kahn, *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Centrum, 1985).

4 W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. I (Cambridge: 1962) 90-91.

5 See Empedocles, B 17.

6 See the discussion in Kahn. Nietzsche, Burnet, and Heidegger are all operating on a text without the crucial *allelois*, "to each other," in it. Hence they can speculate that "injustice" is done to the *aperion* by the opposites emerging.

7 For a discussion of *dike* see Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford: 1939) vol. I, ch. 6; see also the somewhat controversial book by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (U of California P: 1971). Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus* (U of Calfornia P: 1971). Lloyd-Jones sees less development in the idea of justice than most.

8 Kahn, p. 179.

9 See Vlastos, pp. 157-58.

10 See Lloyd-Jones for an analysis of the Prometheus trilogy, p. 95 ff. He even argues that *dike* was a character in the last play of the series, *The Women of Aetna.*

11 For a discussion of this problem, see Guthrie, p. 106 ff.

12 See adiscussion of this by Elizabeth Asmis, "What Is Anaximander's Apeiron?" *Jour. Hist. Phil.* 1981, XIX, 279-97.

13 See the translation in Willis Barnstone, *Greek Lyric Poetry* New York: Schocken, 1972) 101.

14 See Barnestone, 98; Kirk and Raven 113.