The Organic Roots of Conatus in Early Greek Thought

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Abstract

The focus of this paper will be on the earliest Greek treatments of impulse, motivation, and self-animation – a cluster of concepts tied to the hormē-conatus concept. I hope to offer a plausible account of how the earliest recorded views on this subject in mythological, pre-Socratic, and Classical writings might have inspired later philosophical developments by establishing the foundations for an organic, wholly naturalized approach to human inquiry. Three pillars of that approach which I wish to emphasize are: practical intelligence (i.e., a continuity between knowing and doing), natural normativity (i.e., a continuity between human norms and the environment), and an ontology of philosophical dialectic (i.e., a continuity between the growth of human understanding and the growth of physis).

Keywords: *conatus; pre-Socratics; Homer; Plato; Aristotle*

I. Introduction: Nature's persistence through change

Philosophers have long hoped to integrate the impulses of human behavior within the movements of the natural world. It could be said that philosophy itself commenced when a handful of thinkers in the Greek colonies of Asia Minor began to look for explanations for the natural processes – or *physis* (φύσις) – around them. The philosophers that Aristotle called *physikoi* "looked at the world with the steady gaze that did not see any part of it as separate and cut off from the rest, but always as an element in a

living whole, from which it derived its position and meaning."[1] They did not feel the need to question the veracity of their interactions with the world, and therefore did not speak in terms of "experiences," as later Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers would. Instead, the Greeks spoke in terms of organic objects, endowed with powers of self-animation, capacities to act, and potentialities to fulfill. As Aristotle explained in the *Physics*, natural things:

> present a feature in which they differ from things which are not constituted by nature. For each of them has within itself a principle of motion [...]. On the other hand, a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort, *qua* receiving these designations – *i.e.*, in so far as they are products of art – have no innate impulse [*hormê*] to change [...] that nature is a source or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself.[2]

It is interesting to note how the English word "nature" is not a perfect analog for the Greek conception of *physis*, which carries a connotation of organic growth – evident in English as the root of words like "physics" or "physiology." By contrast, "nature" is derived from the Latin *natura*, which connotes a completed, after-product of "birth," apparent through its connection with words like "nativity" and "prenatal." Because of its implicit view of nature as dynamic and growth-oriented, Greek philosophy posited an inherent impulse from which all motion (both human and natural) derived. This concept was known as *hormê* (ὁρμή) and was even more difficult to capture fully in Latin translations.[3]

As Rome transitioned from republic to empire, Greek *physis* was increasingly associated with Latin *natura* and Greek *hormê* with Latin *conatus essendi*. Although Roman thinkers largely lacked the same implicit growth-principle in their concept of nature, they still made heavy reference to *conatus* and its synonym *impetus*. In fact, wherever intellectual achievement occurred for the next millennium, some notion of self-animation – whether conative in

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[1] Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture: Volume I. Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens*, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945), xx.

[2] Aristotle, *Physics*, 192b12-24.

[3] Even Cicero, who was celebrated for his talent in translating Greek, struggled to find a phrase to adequately capture it. As John Glucker notes: "Cicero has no fewer than five [Greek-into-Latin remarks] on this term: Luc. 24. Fin. III.23 ("adpetitio animi"); Fin.V.17 ("adpetitus animi"); Fin. IV.39 ("naturalis adpetitio"); ND II.58 ("conatus et adpetitio");" cf. John Glucker, "Cicero's Remarks on Translating Philosophical Terms – Some General Problems," in *Greek into Latin from Antiquity until the Nineteenth Century*, eds. John Glucker, and Charles Burnett (London; Turin: The Warburg Institute; Nino Aragno Editore, 2012), 45.

name or in theory – seems to have been in play. It percolated through the Neo-platonic and neo-Aristotelian writings of the medieval period; motivated the mechanics of Galileo, Thomas Hobbes, and René Descartes; engendered the cosmologies of Vico, Spinoza, and Leibniz; animated the theories of "will to life" and volition in late German idealism, and undergirded notions of instinct at the beginnings of modern psychology. It can even be found today as a key concept in theories of neurobiology (e.g. Antonio Damasio's somatic marker theory), ecology (e.g. the deep ecology movement inspired by Arne Næss), educational theory (through the works of Maria Montessori) and perhaps even evolutionary biology, if one takes heed of what Richard Dawkins has written about memes and selfish genes. In fact, it could be argued that the *hormê-conatus* concept is one of the most successful memes in the history of philosophy.

Perhaps one reason for this successful self-replication is how useful the idea is in dealing with a longstanding philosophical problem – *viz*. the reconciliation of change and permanence. Nearly every ancient Greek philosopher tried to find some semblance of order in the chaos of their world. Theirs was a maritime culture, built by the chapped hands and weathered brows of sailors. The early Greeks were a people who understood all too well how quickly clear skies can darken and tranquil conditions take a turn for the worse and, to this day, that anyone on a long, arduous journey fraught with danger is said to be on an odyssey. While philosophers like Heraclitus and Parmenides, or Democritus and Aristotle may not have faced the literal precariousness endured by Odysseus, they did witness the kinds of political and social upheaval that forces one to cast about for answers.

When one is on that kind of intellectual quest, it seems natural to wonder if things really are as they seem. This is why so many of the Greek philosophers questioned the distinction between appearance and reality. They wondered if there was some *archē* underlying the world they experienced, and so, they posited that *logos* might be one way to organize all of the noise into one coherent *theoria*. Regardless of how an individual philosopher worked through those questions, the underlying assumption was always that human understanding was part and parcel of this larger picture, not separate from it, and the most successful ideas were the ones which posited human reason as a movement within the movements of the world.

We face a similar uncertainty in our own time, but perhaps there is insight waiting for us in the ancient roots of the conatus idea. That is why the focus of this paper will be on the earliest Greek treatments of impulse, motivation, and self-animation – a cluster of concepts tied to the *hormê-conatus* concept. I hope to offer a plausible account of how the earliest recorded views on this subject in mythological, pre-Socratic, and Classical writings might have

inspired later philosophical developments by establishing the foundations for an organic, wholly naturalized approach to human inquiry. Just three pillars of that approach which I wish to emphasize here are: practical intelligence (*i.e.*, a continuity between knowing and doing), natural normativity (i.e., a continuity between human norms and the environment), and an ontology of philosophical dialectic (i.e., a continuity between the growth of human understanding and the growth of *physis*).

II. Impulse, action, and practical intelligence in mythological Greece

Despite the distinction Aristotle drew in his *Metaphysics* between the *mythologoi* and *physiologoi*,[4] I believe a study such as this one must adopt a pluralistic approach that breaks from the philosophical tendency which separates *logos* from *mythos*. In Greek mythology, the *daimona* Hormê was an energetic activity personified and, as Pausanias (c. 110-180 CE) recounted, there was an altar dedicated to her in the Athenian agora.[5] With regard to warfare, Hormê was understood as the outset of an attack or assault and, in this sense, could be associated with Eris, the *daimona* of strife. Just as Hesiod depicted two types of Eris in his *Works and Days*,[6] there appears to have been at least two sorts of Hormê in the theogonic usage, one associated with marching into battle and the other with productive diligence. The latter sense appears frequently in Homer's works (particularly the *Odyssey*), where it is associated with its corresponding verb form *horma-ô* (to urge, to start, to rush) and the subsequent derivation *hormain-ô* (to deliberate, to ponder).[7] Thus, it appears that *hormê* in the Homeric usage, could also be associated with practical intelligence, something later Greeks, and particularly the Athenians, held in high esteem. This may be one reason *hormê* became so prevalent during the Hellenistic period, particularly in the Stoic theories of action and the self. Under the Stoic view,

> rational "appearances" or "impressions" (*phantasiai*), which express the way things "look" to human beings, play a crucial role in explaining human action. The fact that people "assent" (say yes) to certain types of impression, namely those that ascribe value to courses of action, is adequate to explain the "impulse" (*hormê*) to act in a given way.[8]

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[4] Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 983b-984a. This distinction can be seen more sharply where Aristotle distinguishes between Homer and Empedocles in Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447b17-20.

[5] Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.17.1.

[6] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, Lines 11-41.

[7] Jeffrey Barnouw, *Odysseus, Hero of Practical Intelligence: Deliberation and Signs in Homer's Odyssey* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2004), 116.

[8] Christopher Gill, *Greek Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 9.

The general weight of scholarly opinion until the latter part of the 20th century was that early Greek poetry held no conception of decision making and, *ipso facto*, was unable to present any sort of coherent praxeology.[9] The account usually offered was a developmental one, from the alleged "primitive" understanding of human agency offered in Homer to the "sophisticated, volitionalist" views in Plato and Aristotle. However, a handful of scholars more recently, for instance Bernard Williams in his *Shame and Necessity*[10] and Martha Nussbaum in her *Fragility of Goodness*,[11] have challenged this view. As Williams puts it, regardless of whether or not Homer presents a full-fledged theory of action, "beneath the terms that mark differences between Homer and ourselves lies a complex net of concepts in terms of which particular actions are explained, and this net was the same for Homer as it is for us."[12] Williams argues that, despite the arguments to the contrary, Homer depicts the ability of special characters, who possess "an iron *thumos*," to act against their own urges. Priam's appearance before Achilles at the end of the *Iliad* and Odysseus' decision not to kill the handmaidens at the end of the *Odyssey* are paradigmatic cases of Homeric characters showing self-restraint without reference to any semblance of rational will. Rather, their restraint is likewise said to stem from the *thumos* itself; these men have the capacity to endure against feeling. They have the momentum of a larger, more sustained urge that allows them to overcome the lesser, fleeting ones. It is worth noting that Williams connects this ability, although in passing, to the Greek verb *hormainein*.

Taking this etymological connection a bit further in *Odysseus, Hero of Practical Intelligence*, Jeffrey Barnouw situates an analysis of the Homeric conception of *hormê* within a larger discussion of psychological struggle, as depicted during the moments of deliberation within the *Odyssey* to which Williams referred. Barnouw echoes Williams in asserting that the poet couched such struggles not in Platonic terms of reason versus desire (*logos* and *thumos*), but rather one between rival impulses.[13] In Homer's account, the practical intelligence Odysseus displays consists not in taming the appetites with noble reason, as Plato famously claimed,

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[9] Cf. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley, LA, and London: University of California Press, 1951); Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953); Jean-Pierre Vernant, and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1990).

[10] Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

[11] Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[12] Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 34.

[13] Barnouw, *Odysseus*, 229.

but is instead a matter of a self-motivated mental fortitude, one that enables him to subordinate one impulse to another. According to Barnouw, this aspect of Homer's account is not only a precursor to the Stoic moral psychology found in Chrysippus, but also anticipates the theories of Hobbes, Leibniz, C. S. Peirce, and John Dewey,[14] perhaps best summed up in Peirce's dictum: "The feeling of believing is a more or less sure indication of there being established in our nature some habit which will determine our actions."[15] Indeed, Barnouw labels Homer's Odysseus a "visceral thinker," one whose ability to check his own urges (such as the urge to kill Polyphemus) stems from *thumos* (desire, heart), not *logos*:

> the implication in Homer is not that a supervening conscience, a "higher faculty," suppresses impulses coming from some other source. The source of action, of checking and enduring as well as daring, is *thumos*, whether as a sudden particular impulse, an enduring impulse or a locus of impulses.[16]

Barnouw sees this as a shift in views from the *Iliad*, in which (quoting Hermann Frankel), "As soon as [one] knows what has to happen, he needs no further decision to move on to the act," a view which would seem to follow from the popular view that Homer had no concept of decision and which informs our contemporary befuddled understanding of impulse.[17] In opposition to the characters of the *Iliad*, Barnow explains, the *Odyssey* portrays Odysseus and Penelope as deliberative and purposeful and the verb most closely associated in the text with that sort of emotional deliberation is, once again, *hormainein*.[18] Although "Homer seems to insist on the continuity between thinking of doing something and the impulse to do it," the cunning of Odysseus he praises is precisely his ability to subsume immediate impulses (*e.g.* revealing himself to Penelope before encountering the suitors) under a long term impulse (ridding Ithaca of the suitors once and for all). Barnouw explains:

> This element of incipience in *hormaô* is important to the role of urge or impulse in deliberation, as it allows that what is being pondered are not merely ideas or possible acts but active tendencies, the beginnings of the acts themselves.[19]

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[14] Ibid., 2.

[15] Charles S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly* 12 (1877): 1.

[16] Barnouw, *Odysseus*, 99.

[17] Ibid., 100.

[18] Ibid., 113-116.

[19] Ibid., 117.

Barnouw holds up Poseidon's final assault on Odysseus at 5.365 as the prime example. The Butler translation reads: "While he was thus in *two minds*, Poseidon sent a terrible great wave" however, the key terms in the Greek here are, once again, *hôrmaine* (to ponder, to turn over) and *thumon*, which should tip the reader off that Homer's view is not as logo-centric as the translator implies.[20] Barnouw shows how the poet brings together several sorts of urges under the same term, "linking *hormaô* and *hormê* to *hormainô*." He concludes:

> [Odysseus'] physical effort (*hormê*, 416) against the great wave, and his mental visceral activity, 'pondered' (hormaine, 424), work in parallel [...]. The reciprocity of man and nature in struggle, driven in different ways by the gods, is captured by the repeated mirroring of the related terms.[21]

Three points can be drawn from this connection between *hormê*, *hormaô*, and *hôrmaine*. First, there is a connection in Homer between human impulses and those of the natural world, one that points beyond a simple "man vs. nature" narrative toward a more naturalized praxeology, if not invoking harmony with nature, at least one of mutual adjustment. Second, there is the absence of a logo-centric theory of action, one that pits reason against the passions or the appetites. Finally, as the upshot of these first two points, arises a suspicion about the old distinction between mythos and logos, between poetry and philosophy. Even though, as Bruce Lincoln puts it:

> Heroic accounts of [...] the beloved Greek Miracle, regularly grant a prominent place to the transformation in speech and thought that led from the *mythos* of Homer and Hesiod to the *logos* of Heraclitus and Plato, a transformation associated with the move from symbolic to rational discourse, anthropomorphism to abstraction, and religion to philosophy. [...] the story is hardly as simple as it is often made out to be.[22]

The developmental theories of Greek notions of self tend to go hand in hand with this tidy narrative Lincoln calls into question. In a similar critique, Kathryn Morgan writes:

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[20] Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Samuel Butler (Ottawa: East India Publishing Company, 2020), 45.

[21] Ibid., 119.

[22] Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

Logos, conceived as intellect, is present in the earliest preserved Greek literature. Homeric gods as civilized and 'rational,' and the beginnings of theodicy, are traced in the *Odyssey* [...]. To an even greater degree, Hesiod's *Theogony* strives towards systematization and rational regulation of life. One may envisage a broad movement from irrationality to rationality, but the precise moment and nature of the boundary between the two mental states is hard to specify. No myth is totally irrational; no philosophy (at least before Aristotle) is totally devoid of mythical elements.[23]

It is just this sort of striving towards systematization and regulation of life (whether "rational" or not) that I believe linking the impulses between humanity and nature could accomplish. This is where one might consider Hesiod's account of Strife in both *Works and Days* and *Theogony*.[24] For instance, at *Theogony* we find: "But abhorred Strife bore painful Toil and Forgetfulness and Famine and tearful Sorrows, Fightings also, Battles, Murders, Manslaughters, Quarrels, Lying Words (*Logoi*) [and] Disputes."[25] *Logos,* for Hesiod, is associated with the loathsome sort of Strife. In fact, both *Theogony* and *Works and Days* contain passages connecting logos to seduction, falsehoods, cunning, and the discourse of the weak.[26] The duality of Strife presented in *Works and Days* builds upon this association. Destructive Strife stems from quarrels, lawsuits, and war, but the constructive sort, which Hesiod claims is born of night, is responsible for the *zelôs* (zeal) between neighbors. Competition and emulation of like with like, he says, "is wholesome for men."[27] How much of this idea is handed down to the early philosophers is, of course, hard to say. However, there appear to be several recurring themes here picked up by pre-Socratic writers.

III. Nature, norms, and humanity in the pre-Socratics

It is well known that many of the earliest Greek philosophers, from the Milesian monists to the atomists, sought a solution to the persistence-

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[23] Kathryn A. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy from the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32.

[24] Here I am setting aside the issues of textual interpolation from later rhapsodes, which is only obliquely relevant to an analysis of the transmission of ideas I have in mind.

[25] Hesiod, *Theogony,* Lines 226-229.

[26] Cf. Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth*, 11.

[27] Hesiod, *Works and Days*, Line 24.

through-change quandary. However, the issue is typically couched in terms of substance ontology. If one were to focus not on the substances, but rather on the processes in pre-Socratic metaphysics, on that which is dynamic rather static, could new insights be gleaned? Those thinkers whose work united both the epistemic, and psychological sense of *hormê* found in Homer with the theogonic, and metaphysical sense embedded in Hesiod might be most relevant to such an investigation. Xenophanes may have achieved something like this in his cyclical cosmology, combining a rejection of the Greek mythological pantheon in favor of a singular god. Likewise, Heraclitus brought together *logos* and *eris* in his predilection for change and, despite his derision toward his predecessor, wound up with a depiction of the divine quite similar to Xenophanes. Parmenides' *doxa* also holds striking similarities to Xenophanes, insofar as it presents a theory of recurrent cosmological mixture of two primary bodies. Empedocles presents an even more interesting study, as it is he, who first offered something of a forerunner to Aristotle's four elements, posited two primordial *daimones* (*eros* and *eris*) which initiated the cosmic cycle, and claimed that cathartic purification could lead one through a process of reincarnation toward a state of divine intelligence.

In the interest of brevity, I will try to cast a synoptic look at the evolution of the three main points I find running through the four pre-Socratics just named (to recapitulate: a theory of intelligent action driven by an inner, natural impulses, a normative view of nature, and an ontology of philosophical dialectic). Along the way, the themes which connect them to their mythopoetic forbears should likewise become clearer. Generally speaking, the thinkers I have selected are prime examples of a pre-Socratic view which situates norms of psychological, ethical, and political life within the whole of nature. It should be noted (following Julia Annas and Christopher Gill) that despite being framed with an intimate connection between normative ideals and "physicalist"[28] thoughts about nature, such a view is not necessarily on par with contemporary understandings of physicalism, materialism, or ethical naturalism precisely because "the idea of nature [did not function] for them as a norm within ethical theory."[29] Simply put, pre-Socratic normative nature is not subject to Moore's open question argument because it is not involved in trying to convince anyone that it is rational to be morally good. Instead, thinkers like Heraclitus and Empedocles see normative ideals (*e.g.*, friendship, harmony) as applying to nature, and they claim that the person who recognizes

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[28] Julia Annas states, "In its ancient form, physicalism is the theory that everything that exists, including the soul, falls under *phusikê*, enquiry into the constituents and structures of the universe;" Julia Annas, *Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 3.

[29] Gill, *Greek Thought*, 69-70.

this will experience a type of ethical and psychological growth. In this way, the poet-Muse relationship informs the new vision of reality which many of the pre-Socratics wish to communicate.[30]

As a rhapsode who also wrote against the epic poets, Xenophanes' life is symbolic of the complex transition from the Archaic to the Classical ages. He sought to preserve only the sorts of poetry which offered either a true description of the universe or held some social utility. Though he valued the mythic tradition, he was skeptical of humanity's ability to garner knowledge from it and rebuked the Homeric and Hesiodic portrayals of the gods for demonstrating the worst features of human frailty. In this way, Xenophanes offered not a different account of the mythological universe he inherited, but rather an account of a wholly different universe. He claims that if oxen and horses could paint gods, they would make them look like horses and gods. He claims everything is born of earth and water, the admixture of which are the two primary bodies in a cyclical cosmogonic process, whose impulse is the mental power of a singular, completely whole god. Human actions, it is implied, are imperfect reflections of this process and a harmony can be achieved only if one is able to hear the "true words" of mythic poetry – *i.e.*, those elements which maintain social decorum. Xenophanes anticipated what some have called "the god of the philosophers" – that is, a purely abstract, motionless and unknowable entity. He, thus, likewise set up the distinction between true opinion and knowledge that would be heavily employed by Plato.

Perhaps because he was a writer of prose, Heraclitus had an even graver outlook on the poets. He was deliciously cantankerous, and it is probably safe to say he was the most iconoclastic of all the early Greek iconoclasts. He called the epic poets fools and Pythagoras a fraud. His view of the relationship between *mythos* and *logos* appears, at first blush, to differ greatly from that of Xenophanes – since he is well known as an early champion of the *logos* and never once is *mythos* mentioned in his extant fragments. However, there are several points of connection. First, it is the variety of functions *logos* holds for Heraclitus. In one instance it is treated as a principle of cosmic order, in another as the core of philosophical discourse, and yet another as "the one wise" who allows himself to be called Zeus. Like Hesiod, Heraclitus gives Strife a prominent role, holding the tension between opposites essential for cosmic harmony.

A widely held interpretation of the phrase "*παλίντροπος ἁρμονίη ὅκωσπερ τόξου καὶ λύρης*" in fragment 51 sees it as suggesting a tension between two opposite but equal vectors, or a "connection working in both directions."[31]

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[30] Cf. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 46-88.

[31] Quoted in Edward Hussey, *The Pre-Socratics* (London: Duckworth, 1972), 43.

The Greek in this fragment, however, has been a source of dispute among specialists for two reasons. The first conflict surrounds the proper understanding of *harmoniê* as Heraclitus would have meant it. During the time of Homer, *harmoniê* would have held the meaning of "fitting together" into a structure and was often used in reference to masonry and carpentry, but also in reference to military treaties – a meaning the English word "accord" might best capture.[32] However, by the time Heraclitus would have been writing, the word had also taken on the association with music that its English cognate holds today, which could suggest the give-and-take of resonance, or mutual reverberation. This meaning also seems to fit within the context of the fragment itself and the representations of the cosmos it employs – *viz.* a bow and a lyre. The second component of the dispute surrounds the choice of the word *palintropos* – which could be translated as "back turning." The received version of the fragment was unclear here though, and some scholars have suggested that the word intended was instead *palintonos* – which could be translated as "back stretching." Edward Hussey has suggested,

> If palintonos is correct, then the bow and lyre are thought of as not functioning, but at rest and in a state of tension, as indeed they both are when strung. If this is so, then the unity of opposites expresses itself in a static state, an equilibrium in which the opposed forces balance each other.[33]

Hussey continues, "If palintropos is correct, then the bow and the lyre are thought of as in use. Their proper functioning implies the movement in opposite or alternate directions of their complicated structure."[34] If the intended meaning of this passage was a "back-turning" (in alternating resonance) then we might be better off to adopt a view centered on the notion of dual-oscillation. This calls to mind the way that Karl Popper suggested we read Heraclitus – *i.e.* as a precursor to process philosophy, but a process in which *logos* is understood as an emergent law, rather than some sort of static *archê.*[35] It seems clear Heraclitus deemed the language of the mythic tradition as conceptually inadequate to convey this message. For him, the sort of *logos* he had in mind should have been apparent and a source of harmony, because it was common to all, but it had been ignored by those claiming simplicity. The only way to rectify this, he believed, is for humanity to search nature,

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid., 44-45.

[34] Ibid., 45.

[35] Cf. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1963).

both human nature and nature at large. His oracular style appears to be a call for just that sort of reflection. Like the other pre-Socratics, Heraclitus found himself in the midst of a struggle between narrative and argumentative styles of discourse precipitated by the advent of the written word. Like Xenophanes, he rejected prior mythopoetic discourse, albeit more explicitly, and should be counted as one more step in the shift of discursive authority from narrative (thought to be motivated by external forces, *i.e.* the Muses) to self-motivated argument.[36] Despite this shift, most of the pre-Socratics sought to appropriate mythic authority for their new form of discourse – and this is where Heraclitus should be set apart.

The other two thinkers I wish to highlight can be grouped together even more closely, and not simply because of the traditional connection often made between Parmenides and Empedocles. As Aryeh Finkelberg has argued, Empedocles' physical doctrine can be viewed as "the final stage of a development which can be traced back through Parmenides' *doxa* back to Xenophanes' 'physics.'"[37] Drawing upon testimonies from Theophrastus, Hippolytus, and Simplicius, she suggests that, like the others, Parmenides posited a recurrent cosmological generation and corruption.[38] A process that, for Parmenides, involved the admixture of night and light and the operation of love (*eros*) and discord (*bellum/discordia*). In a move reminiscent of Hesiod, Parmenides also associated cognition with emulation of like by like (this according to Theophrastus). One finds in his *doxa*, a precursor to Empedocles portrayal of love and strife, couched in terms of a *daimona* which governs the recurrent cosmogonical mixture of the two primary bodies. For Empedocles, however, human life itself is only a part of this cosmogonical dance caused by strife, one in which a miserable cycle of metempsychosis is set off due to "false speech." Like Homer and Hesiod, Empedocles invokes the Muse, but his invocation calls for something different – *viz.* to have logos placed in his visceral organs. He sees purification and the ultimate rescue from metempsychosis in the combination of poetry and argument where "one may become a prophet, singer, doctor, or leader, and eventually a god."[39] It is, of course, the relationship between *physis* and *nomos* with which these thinkers engaged that became a major concern for Socrates and his successors and provided Western thought with an enduring idea – that the human body is itself a microcosm, or, in other words, a tiny cosmos. Human inquiry, then,

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[36] Indeed, it could be said that Aristotle's syllogism contains a sort of impulse, insofar as the conclusion "follows" from the premises.

[37] Aryeh Finkelberg, "Xenophanes' Physics, Parmenides' Doxa and Empedocles' Theory of Cosmogonical Mixture," *Hermes* 125, no. 1 (1997): 1-16.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Quoted in Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 62.

is not so much a retreat to a "view from nowhere," but rather an integrated part of organic life that seeks to maximize an organism's functionality with its surroundings. The logical extension of such a line of reasoning leads to the prospect that human animals are continuous with their surroundings, that they are experiencing fields immersed within an environing field.[40]

IV. Philosophical conatus and the ontology of dialectic

In March of 2014, Sarah Broadie, Professor of Moral Philosophy and Wardlow Professor at the University of Saint Andrews, was invited to give the Howison Lecture at Berkeley. The title of her talk was: "The Theoretical Impulse in Plato and Aristotle." In it, she offered a description of philosophical inclination couched in terms of moral psychology and painted a beautiful picture of "the human being as a theoretical adventurer," focusing on how Plato and Aristotle could be used together, rather than "defend one against the other."[41] In the remainder of this paper, I hope to look more deeply at the underlying causes for the human impulse to philosophize. Like Broadie, I will attempt to marry aspects of Plato to Aristotle, not strictly in the interest of equity, but in order to accentuate something of the organic attitude which underlies their thinking.

Among the many conclusions Broadie drew, two stand out. Firstly, while Plato's philosophical exemplar is the one that frees herself and others from impediments to intellectual progress, Aristotle's is the one that is actually experiencing the moment of discovery. This suggests that the ultimate philosophical goal for Aristotle is the act of inquiry, while for Plato it is the "condition of not being hobbled by delusions." This jibes well with the traditional depictions of each: Plato the educator and Aristotle the scientist. According to those depictions, Plato hoped philosophers would remove delusions in others, while Aristotle hoped they would discover (and rediscover) insights, in perpetuity. Apparently, for Plato, the state of philosophical health is more important than the moment of recovery from delusion, and, for Aristotle, the state of philosophical health is just a continuous series of such recoveries. The drive to philosophize for Plato seems to come from the nourishment one receives from a clear vision of ideas. For Aristotle, it is inherent ("by nature") to our biology as a species. I find each of these answers, by itself, lacking. I shall return to this criticism in a moment.

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[40] This way of stating the continuity between humans with their environments is employed by Paul Kurtz in his essay, "Naturalism in American Philosophy," in *Philosophy and the Civilizing Arts: Essays Presented to Herbert W. Schneider*, eds. Craig Walton, and John P. Anton (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1974).

[41] Sarah Broadie, "The Theoretical Impulse in Plato and Aristotle," filmed March 19, 2014, at Berkeley Graduate Lectures, Berkeley, CA, video, 59:52, https://gradlectures.berkeley.edu/lecture/plato-aristotle/.

The second point that stood out in Broadie's talk was a suggestion that Plato's approach, *i.e.*, of clearing delusions by use of the intellect, when taken to its logical conclusion, might lead to a deep-seated distrust of reason. After all, if intellect is used to clear away the impediments produced by the intellect, there arises an obvious circularity. When the intellect is turned inward, on itself, it might foster a solipsistic kind of skepticism. After all, reflectivity seems to go hand in hand with reflexivity. However, despite the long history of this tendency, it may actually be traceable to a wholly contingent transition that occurred in ancient Greece between the seventh and fourth centuries BCE. As Eric Havelock has put it,

> The Socratic dialectic was introduced into Greek culture [...] at precisely that time when the slow transition of [cultural] storage speech away from the [poetic, oral] version and towards a mastery of the [conceptual and literate] had reached a crisis.[42]

Plato stands out among the greatest of philosophers in part because his corpus consisted in a documentation of the Socratic dialectic that was one of the first and still one of most ingenious responses to this reflexivity paradox. Havelock again:

> The dialectic was logos, yet remained exclusively oral, not out of eccentric choice, but because its practitioner [Socrates] grew up as an oralist, a traditionalist, who yet committed himself to a paradoxical task.[43]

At once method and ontology, understanding the interplay and unity of opposites that is dialectic has been the cornerstone of some of the most insightful additions to Western civilization. I believe this legacy is, simultaneously, the greatest inspiration and the biggest stumbling block for countless philosophers. I hope to at least diagnose one facet of the difficulty. I believe the answer has something to do with that first impulse a budding philosopher feels to venture into the theoretical.

This is of course another one of those perennial problems of philosophy; and as a solution, many of the earliest Greek thinkers posited an inherent

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[42] Eric A. Havelock, "The Orality of Socrates and the Literacy of Plato: With some Reflections on the Historical Origins of Moral Philosophy in Europe," in *New Essays on Socrates*, ed. Eugene Kelly (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984), 74.

[43] Ibid., 77. Later, he writes: "The pioneers preferred to adapt old terms, rather than invent new ones. *Noein*, to be aware or sensible of, *phronein*, to have wits, *logizesthai*, to tally, *skopein* to look at, *epistasthai*, to get on top of (in mastering a skill) were converted to the senses of thinking, reasoning, analyzing, understanding scientifically, and the corresponding nouns, phronesis, episteme, nous, dianoia (thought, science, mind, intellect) began to turn into indexes of sheer thought and abstract intellection [...]. In oral language the actions of agents commonly acted upon something; the subject did something to an object. But here was a new kind of action, namely sheer intellection, which perhaps was not an action at all;" Ibid., 81.

impulse from which movement (both human and natural) could be derived. To illustrate what I wish to pursue, I should like to consider Plato's ideas concerning education, especially in the story known as the "Allegory of the Cave." When reading his allegory of the cave in terms of education, I find it curious that Plato would give an elaborate account of the learning process (especially when his metaphor is extended) yet provide no machinery to start the journey. On one hand, this may only be another indication of Plato's philosophical assumptions; on the other, it could be an intentional omission, itself symbolic of a philosophical truth. The difference that makes a difference here, I must concede, hangs on an interpretive choice – but one that I believe is warranted.

Much has been made of the allegory's political and epistemological symbolism. Likewise, because Plato believed that education was such an essential component in realizing his ideal individual/city, nearly as much has been said about this allegory with regard to the philosophy of education. However, in the true spirit of "allegory," or ἄλλος ἀγορεύω, I should like to suggest a "different" way of reading the story which places the metaphor in "wide open (conceptual) space."[44] Thus, before we delve too deeply into the upshots of that choice, let me first recount the story, holding it under a somewhat novel light.

The allegory begins when Socrates turns to the concept of παιδεία: "Next," I said, "compare the effect of education (παιδεία) and the lack of it on our nature to an experience like this."[45] The reference to *paideia* is worth noting, not only because we see Socrates begin Book VII with his second account of education within the ideal city, but also because of the connection to the previous book's analogies of the sun and divided line, in which a kind of enlightenment – or highest form of knowledge – is presented. Depending on the context, Plato used the Greek terms φρόνησις, σοφία, νοῦς, and διάνοια interchangeably to stand for enlightenment, but in each case the value rested at the pinnacle of dialectical progress that transcended the commonplace. This is interesting because, on the one hand, *paideia* could be understood as an across-the-board term for the conventions of a society, as well as the process by which those values are transmitted. In this sense, *paideia* refers to a lifelong edification, one which entails both what is called in English education *and* culture, a sort of "building up" of ideals. Yet, on the other hand, enlightenment for Plato was:

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[44] In Greek, "ἀλληγορία" (*allegoria*) is "veiled language, figurative," from "ἄλλος" (*allos*), "another, different" + "ἀγορεύω" (*agoreuo*), "to harangue, to speak in the assembly" and that, in turn, from "ἀγορά" (*agora*), "assembly."

[45] Plato, *Republic*, 514a.

> [...] the intellectual virtue of the philosopher. It [was] to have the intellectual virtue of the person who has come to grasp the nature of the unchanging Forms. This philosopher's knowledge is both scientific and theoretical, since it constitutes the grasp of the unchanging realities through which all other things become known.[46]

Therefore, we see in this first line of the allegory two ideas being placed in juxtaposition: conventional, communal *paideia* and transcendent, individual enlightenment.

Taking this as our cue, we might look at the rest of the allegory with an aim to decipher its symbolism. It is rather uncontroversial, in light of its similarity to the caves of Orphic stories and to the grotto of Empedocles, to suggest that Plato's cave is meant to represent the ignorance of the mundane, in this case that of those who have not yet received philosophical initiation. But, what shall we make of the rest of the scene? It seems the cave itself is representative of "state sanctioned education," or what we might call *schooling* today, understood in opposition to "self-directed inquiry." In Athens, this was the type of education for which young Athenians paid men like Gorgias or Protagoras handsomely. It also reflects what is described earlier, by Socrates, regarding the education of auxiliaries and the first part of a guardian's schooling within the model city. That the cave is only partially illuminated by a dim fire might be symbolic of the inadequacy of this form of education in divulging the truths of enlightenment. For those of us who teach ideas for a living, it is all too clear how difficult it is to impart critical inquiry to our students. Unless they take it upon themselves to reach for it, it may never be handed down. Many are more interested in receiving brute facts than in trying to see for themselves how the facts hang together. Part of the problem, for us and for the teachers of Plato's day, is that our best efforts are often concealed, as if behind a low-lying wall, by cultural traditions and norms, which often preclude students from seeing their lessons clearly. At best, one can offer them mere shadows of the ideas one wishes to convey. Furthermore, students are often just as bound by the egoism, prejudices, and skepticism of conventional society as the prisoners are by their chains in the allegory. Of course, those who taught ideas for a living, in Plato's day, were known as the Sophists. If we continue our extension of the metaphor, we might say that they are represented by the merchants, hocking their wares on the path between the fire and the wall.[47] Notice that we modern teachers are

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[46] Lawrence Becker, and Charlotte B. Becker, eds., *Encyclopedia of Ethics,* Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1314.

[47] Any symbolism is dismissed here: "The men are merely a part of the necessary machinery

in a position similar to theirs. Perhaps this could tell us something about how Plato would view the over-professionalization of philosophy today.

When one of the prisoners in the story is suddenly freed, he quickly sees the inadequacies of this system. Fear, anger, and resentment would very likely be his natural reaction. In our contemporary schools, is it any wonder that the brightest students are often those who match this description and are frequently the ones given medication and told simply to "calm down?" The freed prisoner quickly makes his way toward a more brilliant source of light, the sun, at the mouth of the cave. He emerges from the cave of ignorance, and through a slow, arduous process of dialectical edification, he reaches an understanding of the good itself. He is enlightened – or so the story goes. But how was he freed? Plato does not tell us. He does imply that it is an impulse at 515c when he writes that something "suddenly compels" (ἀναγκάζω ἐξαίφνης) the prisoner, "by nature" (φύσις).[48] This should be a matter of no small concern for us. If dialectic is the path one must traverse to become a philosopher, then how does one break the bonds of ignorance and convention and start on that journey? How does one break *into* dialectic? From what's been said here it should seem obvious that philosophical education is a voyage of self-discovery as well as a discovery of the self. To illustrate, consider the insights of the late political scientist, Michael Oakeshott, who wrote of education,

> A human life is not [merely] a process in which a living organism grows to maturity, succeeds in accommodating itself to its surroundings or perishes. It is, in the first place, an adventure in which an individual consciousness confronts the world he inhabits, responds to what Henry James called "the ordeal of consciousness," and thus *enacts* and [through enacting, only then] *discloses himself*.[49]

In the same way that one cannot simply say, "Today I will become a philosopher," it does not seem possible to take it upon ourselves to begin the task of reflection. It is an act that is only available to us after we have disclosed ourselves through the context of harmony with the world around us. In this way, the human conatus toward personal growth is an *outgrowth* of the conative principles of nature.

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of the image. Their shadows are not cast on the wall. The artificial objects correspond to the things of sense and opinion in the divided line, and the shadows to the world of reflections, *εἰκόνες*;" Plato, *Republic*, 7.514b.

[48] Plato, *Republic*, 515c.

[49] Michael Oakeshott, "A Place of Learning," *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children* 3, nos. 3-4 (1982): 74.

If we keep in mind that both the *Symposium* and *Parmenides* place Socrates in the position of interlocutor, we might consider this to be something of an origin story for the philosopher. It is also important to note that Parmenides tells Socrates that his objections to the Theory of Forms must be overcome, lest we lose the ability to carry on discourse[50] and that Diotima told Socrates all other loves are just defective forms of philosophy.[51] So maybe the idea that unites these dialogues is that the student of philosophy is attracted to, and strives after, enlightenment but never actually obtains it. Perhaps ideas are beautiful objects of philosophical affection that constantly move away from their suitors. The point is not the destination, but the pursuit. We must remain forever "in between." If we consider what lies "in between" wisdom and a lack of understanding not as a static position, but rather as a dynamic process, we may be offered some insight into how Socrates, the lover of wisdom, might serve as a model for the rest of us who claim to be lovers of wisdom. This is the point of Socratic dialectic, *viz.* the move from a desire to know toward the fulfillment of that desire. But, unlike bodily desire, which results either in satisfaction or frustration, intellectual desire has no final end. Every culmination must eventually sink back into a new desire. This is an important point both theoretically and practically. In this way, the Socratic elenchus is the embodiment of the dynamics of *hormê*.

It appears Plato may have been cognizant of this. Although he claimed each part of the tripartite soul derived from its own *hormê*, only the impulse of *logos* was qualified to rule – either over the individual or the *polis*.[52] Like Homer's Odysseus, Plato's philosopher-king is one whose impulses toward longer-term, more sustainable goods are able to overcome the impulses toward instant gratification.[53] Philosophical education, therefore, collapses when it seeks only to nurture and individual's growth toward singular ends, in a linear fashion. A proper, nonlinear sort of growth comes about not from some teleological design prior to action, but rather emerges through the action itself. As I have written elsewhere,

> The difference between linear and non-linear conceptions of growth is equivalent to the difference between the progress made when traveling toward a set destination and the general progress one makes when fitness training. Only in the former type of activity is growth measured according to a quantifiable

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50 Plato, *Parmenides*, 135c.

51 Plato, *Symposium*, 211d.

52 Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 409a-410a, and 580d-586d.

53 Cf. Ibid., 603d-606d.

telos. Yet, when a new indeterminate situation arises, those who have experienced non-linear growth, instead, will be able to adapt to the changes in the situation like a healthy organism can adjust to changes in its environment or a skilled jazz musicians can improvise around the notes she hears.[54]

This, I believe, is the legacy both of 1) Plato's freed prisoner, who, once suddenly released from his bonds, is compelled to come back to try to free others and 2) Aristotle's empirical philosophy of becoming. The other prisoners in the cave cannot hear him because they must grasp for themselves the world around them and take the first steps toward becoming philosophers. On such a model, a teacher is a guide, a mentor, a midwife – *not* a leader, or a master, or a birth giver. Therefore, the only break involved in entering the dialectical process is a break from one's old habits of thought (and learning to see those habits as tied up with one's own *inhabitation*) is the initial impulse of that process.

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[54] Christopher C. Kirby, "Dewey and 'the Greeks:' Inquiry and the Organic Spirit of Greek Philosophy," in *Dewey and the Ancients. Essays on Hellenic and Hellenistic Themes in the Philosophy of John Dewey,* ed. Christopher C. Kirby (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 69-70.

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