# The Metamorphoses of Philosophy I

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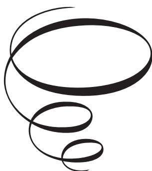
## *An Account of Cognitive Emergence in Philosophy and Science*

By

Jürgen Lawrenz

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-1927-9
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1927-5

*In der Veränderung des Wissens ändert sich ihm in der Tat auch der Gegenstand selbst, denn das vorhandene Wissen war wesentlich ein Wissen von dem Gegenstande; mit dem Wissen wird auch er ein anderer, denn er gehörte wesentlich diesem Wissen an.*

HEGEL

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book had a long gestation period—as it transpired, 20 years almost to the day that Cambridge Scholars Publishing offered to take it on. In those years it went through several complete 'turnovers', as tends to happen with labours of love which have no specific delivery date attached to them.

Over this time I had innumerable conversations with many people and benefitted from their viewpoints and criticisms. Far too many, indeed, to mention them all, although I attach particular importance to the adult students who attended my courses. Their feedback kept sending me back to the manuscript, refining and clarifying.

Nevertheless, I wish to name a few whose influence on my thinking has been crucial in one or another respect. First among them, Prof. *Gerd Lassner* of Leipzig University, the late great mathematician and friend, who endorsed my philosophical approach to science enthusiastically before regrettably he died. Then Prof. *Adolf Grünbaum* of the Physics Dept. of Pittsburgh University, who agreed to an extended correspondence on the fundamental of his science. *Paul Agutter* of the Theoretical Medine and Biology Group, Glossop, world authority on matters of biology, author and editor, whose support has been an invaluable asset to me for over a decade. Prof. *Geoffrey Klempner,* Director of the Philosophical Society of England and founder of Philosophy Pathways, guided and encouraged my first steps into publishing. Prof. *Wayne Cristaudo* of Darwin University, Australia, colleague and friend, cast a benign eye over the manuscript and gave a crucial impetus to its final shape. Finally *Adam Rummens* of Cambridge Scholars, who wrote out the commission and over an initial rocky passage, at last steered the ship safely into its harbour.

Thank you to them all!

But most especially my thanks go to Caterina Pangallo, my partner in life and intellectual pursuits. To vary an old adage: Whatever faults this book may have, are all my own doing. Whatever virtues it may have, are due to her advice, persistence and generosity. I dedicate this book to her.

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# *Introduction*

> *Some Truths seem almost Falsehoods, and some Falsehoods almost Truths; wherein Falsehood and Truth seem almost aequilibriously stated, and but a few grains of distinction to bear down the balance. Besides, many things are known, as some are seen, that is by Parallaxis, or at some distance from their true and proper beings, the superficial regard of things having a different aspect from their true and central Natures. And this moves sober Pens unto suspensory and timorous assertions, nor presently to obtrude them as Sibyls leaves, which after considerations may find to be but folious apparences, and not the central and vital interiours of the Truth.*
>
> SIR THOMAS BROWNE

METAMORPHOSIS relates to *changes of form* without changes to the underlying unity of an entity. In botany and zoology the term designates the changing body structures of a developing organism; but we also gaze at clouds and recognise cumulus, cirrus, lenticular as varieties; and mythology tells the story of Proteus, a god-beast whom no-one could apprehend because he had the ability to adopt all living forms.

In transferring this metaphor to philosophy, we take cognisance of both these features: the form taken by enquiry itself and the perspective gained on its subjects of study. Philosophy is endlessly self-metamorphosing: for even though we suppose an almost unbroken line to continue from ancient Greece to the present day, it can hardly be maintained that we are in each case speaking of the same kind of practice. The history of European culture in which philosophy is embedded requires us to identify at least three disparate phases; and in like manner, the concurrent streams of philosophical thought tend to be assigned to a variety of compartments. Yet something seems to be missing here, namely an account of the distinctive cultural conditioning of philosophy to correspond to the cultural ebb and flow and, vice

versa, the reciprocal impact of philosophical thought on cultural practice. Contrary to Hegel's characterisation of philosophy as "the owl of Minerva which flies only at dusk", which underestimates its productive power and prolixity, an examination under the aegis of cultural criteria will indeed reveal an endlessly metamorphosing Proteus, as it is passed from hand to hand, and never quite firmly in the grip of any one of its acolytes.

In a sense philosophy is a metaphor on its own accord; for despite the apparent explicitness of the words in which it must be couched, it seems forever to be pointing beyond itself. Thus, as a metaphor, it adopts perspectives: on itself and on the world, where the governance of reason and ratiocination is but one of the many wefts of its fabric.

II

With these remarks we are setting ourselves on course of an exploration of philosophy along a route much less travelled than standard accounts tend to follow. The chief criterion is cognitive emergence, which is not an attribute of Minerva's owl. It is the thread that winds its way along the whole route and seeks to identify the various signposts and bifurcations which mark out the direction of the philosophical enterprise. As we delve deeper into the web of ideas that have left a permanent mark on the philosophy and science of the western world, we notice a persistent recurrence, although it always involves reorientation. But this cannot be explained in isolation, as cognition is not a stand-alone faculty. Thinking relies on the prior perceptive order supplying both the raw material and conclusions preliminary to their conceptual framing.

Our context demands rebuttal of the notion that sensibility is uniform across mankind. The perceptive order is, on the contrary, disbranched for many reasons. The habitat, environment, culture, nurture and education all stand behind it and shape minds in different ways. When ancient, medieval and modern Greeks pronounce the word 'God', they each have a different conception in mind. In short: what they sense, perceive and conceive results in an internal, self-supporting, trigrammatology of experience, knowledge and beliefs.

Yet cognitive emergence is not a self-explanatory term. Rather it drapes a veil over these three disparate processes, taking their

constant conjunction for granted, whereas their coordination occurs in time and tends in some cases to be retarded by incompatibilities whose resolution may take years or even abort. For on one hand, what we sense and perceive must be comprehended in a pre-cognitive way, as well as memorised, since an organism remembers for the sake of *anticipation* and the *recognition of trends*. Accordingly it necessitates the stabilisation of impressions in a mental artefact called 'percept'. Beyond this survival necessity, human sensibility has the privilege and power of converting percepts to concepts; and then of concepts reciprocally pollinating percepts. It is the unique aspect of this two-way traffic that subsequent to coordination, *percepts modified by concepts determine what we perceive*.

We deal with it under the two-fold head of *assimilation* and *acclimatisation* of both percepts and concepts. It is not a compulsory process and indeed easily dissipated in a social environment that regards it as an hostile intrusion. Yet most new ideas implanted into a stream of thought, including philosophy and science, are initially brushed against the grain of current understanding and must bide their time until the conceptual artefact is ready for *assimilation to the perceptual order.* Whereafter the second step of *acclimatisation to the conceptual order* may ensue. This is the paradigmatic instance of what is termed *cognitive emergence* in these pages.

These two criteria, assimilation and acclimatisation, seem hardly to have made an impact on the historical exegesis of philosophy. The reason, one suspects, is an adamant prejudice for the prepotence of our rational estate and its concomitant relegation of the perceptual order to the status of a handmaiden. Yet *both together* comprise the indispensable substructure of the intellectual adventure which began in 6th century Greece and reigns again in the modern era. This book is therefore a study of the perceptual and cognitive patterns discernible in philosophy in two historical epochs when minds came to grips with reality, reading it in such light as their discriminative powers bestowed on them and emphasising its empirical comprehensibility. Accordingly a central concern is to investigate how ideas emerge from an intellectual habitat of indistinct specificity and how the cognitive landscape is modified by their growth and dispersion; further how these effects in turn make for adjustments to those

filters which govern continued emergence and further potentiate the agencies of assimilation.

Our account therefore largely eschews suggestions of 'efficient causes' emanating from the physical environment or from the effect of trade and politics, which abound in the literature—explanations that are essentially of the type which try to explain the wetness of water. Our concern throughout is with the fundamental bearing of the aforesaid patterning of intellectual effort—with the unacknowledged, impalpable and generally unperceived determinants of those presuppositions by which we think, feel and live, which tend to evade objective scrutiny precisely because they are the subconscious auxiliaries of the obvious, the plausible, the indubitably right and manifest. Paradoxically all these refer back to the philosophical dilemma that all thoughts must be thought for the first time by someone. But this, in the context elaborated here, is not a matter of plain intuition, of dicta of survival or the throw of the dice, but of an unambiguous and pervasive patterning to the process of cognitive emergence.

This term therefore designates a particular type cognitive phenomenology. It suggests that philosophy reacts to vaporous intuitions as to an irritant; but this is a reactivity which depends in great measure on the accidental features impinging on a mind that may provoke, under a favourably biased stimulus, an attempt at cognitive apprehension.

As already hinted, cognition is not a once-and-for-all functionality of mind, but an idiosyncratic mode of performance with a high degree of contingent impulsion. The patterns of cognition here and in every other matching instance are *epigenetic* and *culture specific*—neither predictable as a response of the human organism to pressures (whether external or societal) nor universally applicable. In some respects this is visible to the naked eye and therefore an obvious and trivial insight. One has only to look across any cultural gap to notice at once a fundamental discrepancy in attitudes to phenomena which impinge identically on all human sensoria, yet are apprehended and understood in sometimes radically divergent fashion. Hence the emergence of cognitive patterns and their interplay with the percept structures that are alive in a particular milieu is a game of mutually supporting roles; and the dependence of the former on the latter a significant concern throughout our researches.

III

Viewed under such auspices, philosophy reveals itself as *the endeavour to extend the boundaries of cognition*. It is the effort to explore and conquer new tracts of *terra incognita* in the terrain of knowledge. The analogy to discovery offers itself readily in that the penetration of unknown territory is fraught with difficult and perilous circumstances; the lack of guides and concomitant ignorance about the lay of the land increase the danger of missteps at every juncture. But once a new plot is possessed, the first step is to produce a map so as to gain an assured schematic of access and use. This reduction of what was formerly unknown to both synoptic and detailed perspectives bears on the analogy, for in acquiring knowledge of the terrain, one begins the process of assimilating it to perceptions. *Familiarity is not a cognitive, but a perceptive matter*; and from this realisation springs an important subsidiary criterion: for if the terrain happens to be not assimilable in this manner, then for all intents and purposes the effort has drawn a blank.

Philosophical concepts arise and spread, or fail to do so, in a like manner. Man proposes, but his perceptions dispose. Therefore the world in which we move reveals itself not primarily to our ratiocination, but, as Hobbes rightly maintained, to the experience of *resistance* offered by objects to our instruments of sensation. In an ultimate sense, *all* sensations are tactile in nature. Certain consequences ensue from this, relative to both our perceptive and cognitive abilities.

Unlike sensation, which is to a greater or lesser extent a quasi-mechanical *function* performed by the nervous system and therefore spread throughout the animal kingdom along the line of least adaptive variability, perception is a *faculty* found only among creatures endowed with a brain, while ratiocination represents a mode of intuitive power—*co-gnition*—restricted, for all we know, to our own species.

Cognitions, however, are always individual before they become repeatable. Moreover, this individuality is likely to rest on the variability of epigenetic influences: in the sense that human beings, who are normally members of a particular culture group, are thereby susceptible to nurture according to its intraspecific customs.

But perception is the stem from which that supererogatory offshoot, the human mind, burgeoned forth. Whatever attributes are laid upon perception are therefore primary attributes of the mind as well. Now concept formation, a prerogative of the mind, leaves the (relative) simplicity of perceptive judgement far behind; but to stay with the plant metaphor for a moment, we are here looking at the most brilliant flowering of life's potential yet to make its appearance on earth. Nonetheless, it remains fixed to the stalk from which it draws its nourishment, that is, perception. Put into drab prose, ideas meet their horizon where percept structures and concept structures fail to mesh and result in incompatibility; and this failure to fuse inevitably spells doom to the percept structure. However, this is not tantamount to a 'law of association': it is not not even a hard and fast rule. For it is a peculiarity of at least the human percept structure that it remains, in principle, malleable—for ultimately it is 'designed' to adjust to novelty. One outcome of this felicitous accommodation is the rise of quite a numerous bevy of thought and belief systems, of which perhaps the most surprising aspect is, how far they coincide in outline, while distinguishing themselves by a happy proliferation of internal detail without cross-cultural allegiance.—But it is not my intention to pursue this issue beyond these few preparatory remarks. I cannot here pre-empt the substance of 900 pages, in which this relation—cognitive novelty/assimilation/perceptive acclimatisation—plays the role of an *eminence grise* behind the scenes.

IV

In the last two centuries, under the hegemony of science in the western world, the accelerating pace of cognitive and perceptual influxes has spawned an altogether new clutch of intelligibility problems. They afflict not only 'the man in the street', but the intelligentsia as well with the syndrome of vulnerability to a glut of indigestible information. Signs proliferate that we are prone to succumb to a version of the 'cargo cult syndrome', i.e. responding to the inordinate demands on our capacity to assimilate an incomprehensible world unveiled by science with indifference and accepting what is given, unconcerned that the indispensable percept structures are faltering. These problems are endemic, indicative of perceptual and cognitive overload.

One side effect of these problems is a (wholly illusory) impression of 'progress', of 'knowledge' superseding philosophy and metaphysical thinking. Science has indeed become the despair of philosophy, as testified (for example) in the writings of Heidegger, who resolutely ignored it, yet in his later years retreated into a mute language, where mere signs deputised for those hollowed-out semantics which no longer served his fata morgana of a promised land for philosophy beyond science, even beyond metaphysics. Wittgenstein, too, gazed into this chasm and retrieved from his metaphysical vertigo just one sentence of ultimate pertinence: namely that science-qua-knowledge has nothing to say about human values and that those matters which are truly and profoundly important to us elude rational discourse and cannot intelligibly be talked about.

In such laments of existential abandonment, men under the bludgeon of science mouthed their fear of the Medusa, forgetful of the example of Perseus who mirrored her image on the aegis of Athena, preserver of wisdom. Truly an apt metaphor! For what might have been, and must perhaps soon be recognised, is the impotence of science in the speculative arena, where values are transacted under the seal of human privilege. No scientific principles or methodologies uninformed by the subjectivity of the subject yield an ounce of wisdom, and it is delusionary to suppose that any such intent could ever be laid upon them. We modern denizens of a scientific culture have been lured into a cul-de-sac of the wrong kind of understanding—of disdaining the paradox of life and seeking to tame it by pseudo-scientific quips of the ilk of "it's all in the chemistry" or "all arrows point to physics". But the paradox will not be silenced, that life brought 'things' of a very peculiar kind into the world, such as intentionality, intelligence, information, intuition, imagination, creativity, recognition, will power, language, thinking which don't lend themselves to weighing and measuring, nor to reduction down to chemical or subnuclear processes. All this spells out that the Medusa is an harmless delusion, the existential terror a mere subterfuge and better replaced by the admission *mea culpa.*

For in the last resort, knowledge is the result of perceptions both sensory and cognitive, that have been analysed by minds into comprehensible relations and conditions such that in their repeated occurrence the mind so subjected is enabled to perform

judgements appropriate to the phenomena which impinge on it. In turn, the mind imposes patterns on these phenomena that are meaningful in terms of its own operations, of which the ulterior intent may be a course of action involving the body's musculature or some purely cognitive behaviour of the type that may be classed as 'understanding'. Stated in this fashion there is a clear implication of phenomena external to the mind, and this in turn implies that phenomena which have not become possessions of the mind may exist in unlimited number in some unperceived realm of being from which our perceptions may at one time or another retrieve them.

*The principle of emergence* enunciated in these pages defines in terms of the processes of discovery and invention the conditions under which the human mind is empowered to make them. In a manner not susceptible to ready explication the mind traverses this domain, drawing inferences at a multitude of synapses to construct its own internal deductive chains and exploring or asserting their logical interdependence. What is here termed 'cognitive patterns' must accordingly be understood not as fixed units of perceptive-cognitive matter, but as fluid and completely unpredictable meaning and sense units, which *become* what they are to our understanding in the process of translation. Hence the chief mystery is that in one era—that of western European civilisation—they have yielded such a rich harvest and conferred immense power upon that species. For if one were to look at other civilisations that have arisen in the past, one would quickly be disabused of the notion that cognitive patterns are invariant, determined or given (in the Kantian sense) as *a priori* manifestations of cognitive ability. Historical civilisations teach us, on the contrary, that their understanding of the world displayed at most an asymptotic congruence with ours. They looked at the same world as we do, yet found it different in many essential respects. But this extends also to the internal processes of western philosophy from the Greeks to the present day, which are the subject of this book.

As regards the contemporary world, we devote ourselves to a philosophical perspective on the phenomenology of science that has largely been abandoned by philosophers since the middle of the 19th century. The idea of *cognitive emergence* in scientific discovery is here reclaimed for philosophy, as a great deal of its

theory is metaphysical in origin and its doctrinal ramifications. Therefore science needs the help of philosophy, as philosophy cannot do without the factual bedrock provided by science. The path to understanding is along both routes—as has always been the case historically, for in the end end, they are one.

BOOK I

# At the Threshold of Knowledge

*Those who omit philosophy from their education are like the suitors of Penelope: they find it easier to win over the maidservants than to marry the mistress.*

ARISTIPPOS

CHAPTER I

# Ionian Genesis

## 1. Prologue to Philosophy

One of the most dramatic images ever conveyed to mankind of its own habitat was the picture sent back from the Moon by the first astronauts, aptly entitled 'Earthrise'—a startling vision of a frail little world clad in delicate tints of blue and white hanging in the midst of a black void. Commentators did not fail to point the message of the utter loneliness of our planet in the immensities of nothingness, and of the deadness of the dust-covered surface from which the picture was taken: but also, and not least, that here was unimpeachable proof of the Earth's spherical shape, that it is a world both finite and completely encompassed.

It did not silence the minority who believe otherwise. There is in us a tenacious and inexplicable resistance to 'proof' of whatever kind when it conflicts with preciously guarded beliefs. And if now we seek to comprehend how people like you and I, living centuries and millennia ago, misread the plainest signals given us by Nature, we often feel appalled and forget our own blind spots. We forget that such people may not have looked at Nature with our kind of attention. They may not have had our bent for 'objectivity' in study; or they may have been told by higher authorities that believing in sense-based impressions is a way to succumbing to illusion. Reality is all too often 'what we want it to be'.

Long before Columbus, there were mariners who surmised that the Earth must be round. Yet it is a difficult habit to break to 'see' flat vista before our eyes, which all experience tends to reinforce. Our habitat appears Euclidean to us; and contrary evidence—such as ships sailing outward and dipping out of sight near the horizon—is not compelling if the opinion holds that this view of things is simply the way our vision functions. We also

'see' railway tracks running in parallel while as a plain fact of vision the rails converge at some distance ahead on a point, appropriately called the 'vanishing point', and form a triangle.

This dichotomy between seeing *what we see* and *what we expect to see,* and cognately what and how we think, will, believe and evaluate in manner as customs and habits dictate, plays an important part in all walks of life. Even from these quite ordinary examples, it is clear already that seeing is never unforced, 'naïve', but always informed by some prior visual and/or cognitive presupposition.

Dozens more such specimens could be marshalled in support of our argument, that they point to perception and thinking as 'prejudiced behaviour'. Our own much-vaunted objectivity may be merely another prejudice in a long list; and the best that can be said for it is that Nature seems to answer our type of enquiry more readily than others, and in particular that it enables us to exploit our perceptions in useful inventions.

This of course says nothing about whether we are actually getting closer to, or further away from Nature. But irrespective of our response, this *attitude* has a very long pedigree behind it. It determines whether an anthropomorphic or empirical approach to Nature is considered the proper way of dealing with it. The former is much the older, presumably reaching back into our hominid days. But then, about 2600 years ago, inquisitive souls wondered what the *real* meaning of the world may be and changed the very sense of "what it means to think about the world." Fortunately for us, there is some testimony in witness of this momentous occurrence, albeit unreliable and much frought with false scents and traces. But it is a story with a great deal of interior drama, worth recounting, for we today remain its legatees. To understand the sources of our thinking, we ought to visit the sites where scattered fragments of this cultural re-negotiation are still on exhibit. They are, if the metaphor be permitted, the relics of the infancy of our minds.

**2.** *The Cradle of Mythology.* The 'tales of old' in all tribes and cultures reflect anthropomorphic impulses in their understanding of the world. Lacking technology, our archaic ancestors were exposed to the full brunt of natural forces with very few resources to either combat or understand them. The most ready to hand device was to conceive of those forces as 'spirits' and

seek to influence or placate them in ways similar to dealing with a dominant personality or with ruthless enemies. Accordingly we notice among these tales an insistence that the apparently self-evident disparity between material and spiritual existence is blurred; the way of gods and demons, shamans and magicians was to infuse with life not only the inanimate, like rocks and air and water, but sites as well: mountains and valleys, river bends and cross roads. Sign posts, from little heaps of pebbles to ornamental temples, dotted the landscape to remind the denizen and the traveller to beware of the ubiquity of spirits. They may be benevolent or malicious, but always self-willed and not always mindful of the human presence in their midst.

The tales about them serve to fix a fleeting image of what these spirits purport to be. This is done largely within a framework of narrative and mimesis; hence the predominance of story and enactment in anthropological cultures, both ancient and contemporary. Either of these techniques will help with forming an image that can settle in the mind as a *referent*—not necessarily to something concrete and apprehensible, but as a helpmate in the conception of the singular within the whole texture. All myths, all religions, are holistic.

The intent of myths, however, is not chiefly to *read* the signs of Nature. Rather, they rely on humans to *invest* them with meaning. And once such meanings have taken root in the minds of the tribe or culture where they first appear, they determine those further perceptions that may arise in connection with them, that may be appended to the first, and then to the second, and so on, until the whole cloth is woven. And unless they are violently disturbed, these meanings and their associated perceptions are likely to endure—sometimes for millennia.

Can we doubt, then, that meaning is the offspring of perceptions shaped differently from place to place, from culture to culture? Can we doubt that among tribal or nomadic dwellers on Earth these perceptions are shaped by the very landscape, by the fauna and flora of their habitats? And that among humans, a species capable of short-circuiting experience by teaching, the minds of newborn children must necessarily become imbued with the perceptions of their elders?

We cannot doubt it, for the evidence is overwhelming to any traveller even today. What the inhabitants of polar regions, of the

Kalahari desert, New Guinea jungles, the Andean mountains perceive and understand, the meanings with which they invest phenomena, the vocabularies of their languages, are in great measure shaped by their habitats and by the changing seasons. Not only because of the preponderance of snow or sand, mountains or trees, but because the visual field, tactile impressions, the sounds and smells which abound here or there convey each their own specific perceptual impressions. It is not impermissable, perhaps, to extend the metaphor and claim that in all places on Earth, phenomena that are the same undergo many metamorphoses, engender perspectives and inseminate the people who live there with perceptions, import, meaning, comprehension and a cognitive character distinctively and recognisably their own.

It was from the apprehension of this characteristic of unforced, but dispositional perception that philosophy was born. Philosophy is the endeavour to extract a coherent matrix of perceptions from the world that may be classed as *sub species aeternitatis*. But we need not, and cannot, accept this sight unseen. For the disposition to philosophising is itself dependent on time and place and the mores of its host culture. Philosophy, as much any human endeavour, revolves around prior understanding, the legacy of set conditions. In its efforts to free itself from this bondage, it has sought to adopt in turn the perspective of the human mind, the divine spirit, the world of matter, the world of process: but each of these is also a perspective. And so *philosophy continues the metamorphosis of the world* as it continues to metamorphose itself; it continues to change our understanding of what is, why it is and and where it comes from.

**3.** *I and Thou.* According to an old Chinese proverb, the beginning of wisdom consists in giving things their right names. This echo from eons of mythological practice, which relies on naming to apprehend the phenomena of Nature as a means toward their personification, also spells out the driving impetus behind the philosophic enterprise.

Naming is an ineradicable instinct. To cite a pertinent example, the pious believer who clings to the name 'Ananke' and the philosopher who substitutes the concept of 'Necessity', thereby *define each in their own way their relationship to an otherwise identical phenomenon*.

Yet in naming, the attributes of a phenomenon undergo many

subtle changes. For a believer the anthropomorphised objects, conditions and events possess personally relevant characteristics imbued with all the qualities of humanness, including feelings such as happiness, hope, terror, dependence, benignity and malevolence. The whole experience of Nature is subsumed in an "*I and Thou*" co-existence and completely expressed by the meanings which the 'I' and 'Thou' convey to each other. The result is a type of knowledge that is direct, emotional and (critically speaking) inarticulate.*

But concepts depersonalise; they remove the condition of tactility and its creature-dependent emotional affiliation. The philosophical idea of Necessity differs from the mythical idea of Ananke mainly in its idea of a law governing (if not regulating) both men *and* divinities; and clearly this confers a different kind of import on natural phenomena. Among many other criteria, it furthers a belief in human independence and self-accountability, and, as a platform for rational theorising, gives rise to an emotionally neutral and highly articulate form of knowledge, which reports on the experience of Nature as experience *kat exochen*, "as it is".

However, another criterion acquires importance in this disparity between philosophical and mythological thinking. It pertains to the nature of knowledge itself, on what one is to understand by the idea of 'knowledge' in either of these contexts.

**4.** *Mythography as knowledge.* Since we are now entering upon known historical terrain, it is incumbent upon us to narrow our focus to a specific geographical and temporal region. Philosophy was a product of Greek classical antiquity; accordingly this is where we must set up our tent and look around. And what we learn on doing so, is that philosophy was born in the same cradle as the old stories with all their perceptive bric-a-brac—and born of the same 'spirit of place' that infused the life habits of the many disparate Grecian tribes, notwithstanding innumerable local variations. They were scattered along the Mediterranean shores "like frogs around the edge of a pond", as Plato wrote.

*Cf. Frankfort, H. *et al.*: *Before Philosophy*. Pelican, Harmondsworth 1949, chapter 'Myth and Reality', pp. 11-36. Quintessence of that whole book: One negro on a plantation says to another, "When I get home tonight, I'm gonna tell God all about my troubles".

But though they spoke dozens of dialects, it was the same language; and their poets trundled up and down, around and athwart the main and the islands, offering their wares: the tales of gods and heroes of which their auditors could never hear enough. In their view, philosophy, that bastard offspring of the poeticising faculty, could only raise a pitying smile: for what could *reason* accomplish that Mnemosyne, the Muse of memory and hence of poetry did not know?

Now in the Greece of that age, the poet's office was that of *custodian of knowledge*. But this must not be confused with the idea that the poet was expected to possess the knowledge he conveyed to his audiences.* Rather he was understood *to be possessed by it*. The preservers of this mythical knowledge, they who genuinely possessed it, were the Muses; and as we know from the invocations at the beginning of many recitations, it is their aid which the poet must enlist to become fruitful in his endeavours—

> *. . . for you are goddesses, always present, knowing everything . . . I could not name the numberless heroes if the Muses did not remind me of all those who sojourned to Ilion.*†

Hence knowledge as such is a property peculiar to divine beings, and in Greek mythological lore, the office of preserving it was that of 'memory' in the wider sense, anthropomorphised according to the customs prevailing in this age in the persons of these goddesses. As divine beings, inhabiting an atemporal and immutable realm, they are not merely the preservers, but the immediate and intimate *witnesses* to the deeds, events and works they commemorate. This is of immense importance to an understanding of the collision between mythography and philosophy at the tangents of their respective concepts of knowledge. The poet is not privy, hence the call for en-light-enment:

> *"Tell me, o Muse, of the ire of Achilleus . . ."*

The Muses, having been privy, have unmitigated cognisance, whereas the poet is generally aware of his subject matter only

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*In this respect, the discussion by Plato in his *Ion* is dreadfully misleading and explicable only by his ulterior motive of rivalry, cf. Ch. III.
†Homer, *Iliad,* ii, 484f.

because of its repute, its fame, or because he has been taught by a teacher whose narrations have been memorised—though even in the latter case, it is rarely a question of anyone among a chain of rhapsodes having personally attended what they sing about: it is in all instances a reliance on *fame*, on that indefinable attribute of the human presence which survives physical demise. But truth cannot be vouchsafed by fame; to be knowledge, such fame must have been acquired by being witnessed, being there, reporting at first hand.

We see here, in these tenuous approaches to a *concept* of knowledge, the shaping force of a deeply anchored perceptual criterion: knowledge is bound up with *presence*, with *being there.* In default of this immediacy, which is beyond his attainment, the poet appeals to those divine beings who are able to vouchsafe the truth in virtue of *having been present* at the events to be depicted. It was further understood that one was a poet due to a 'call' having reached him—a poet being a person capable of *en-theosiasmos*, the root of our word 'enthusiasm', which means having received the spirit of the god, having been 'in-spir[it]ed'.

This conception of knowledge and its acquisition carries certain obligations for philosophy as well. Knowledge refers to 'what is'—in the present tense relative to the Muses, whose estate as immortal beings suspends the temporal divisions; but (for the poet) in the past as an accomplished deed or work, or in the future as a prophecy. Philosophy, however, seeks to position itself in vis-à-vis to the Muses, effectively to *replace* them.

The overt simplicity of this structure conceals something of considerable depth and subtlety—something the Greek thinkers strove mightily to bring to the surface of consciousness: namely that the *mneme* is not the event, nor the work, nor even its tale, but the *knowledge itself*. As such it is intimately bound into their conception of the logos, and this will eventually be seen as the hinge of transformation on which the whole philosophical movement enacted its revolution. The philosophical enterprise may partly be understood in terms of its assumption of the concept of knowledge as a *form of the logos*, which entails the assimilation of a concept of 'knowledge' capable of being formed in a finite and circumscribed segment, like a finite bubble of actuality enclosed by an infinite realm of the possible. Knowledge is preserved by memory; but memory is a species of thought, and

thought must be shaped to acquire intelligibility, hence form. Accordingly it is a facet of the logos.

This differs immensely from poetic practice; yet to the extent that Greek philosophy was born in a cultural climate which related its daily routines of work and leisure to the spiritual tales communicated by poets rather than priests, we can best appreciate the conditions on which that change hinged by looking at the prior conditions of this confrontation.

**5.** *Before 'physics'*. In bringing the mythological past before our eyes and contemplation, the poet does not primarily aim at indulging our sentimental inclinations, nor is an appeal to pride in a glorious patriarchal lineage the first consideration, as a fashionable socio-anthropological perspective seeks to persuade us. It goes deeper than this, as the rank accorded to such as Homer, Pindar and the dramatists testifies.

The Greek *paideia* exalted Homer above all. He was singled out from even the august company of fine poets for a very special quality, and we ought to be curious what it was, seeing that the veneration of his works still continues.

Our clue is precisely the aforesaid appeal to the Muses. Perhaps it could be said slightly tongue-in-cheek, that Homer seems also to have been singled out by the Muses, for in both his epics—*Iliad* and *Odyssey*—he conveys with unmatched conviction a sense of the past *growing into* the present, of bringing home a 'knowledge' of the past that has intimate relevance to the present in the sense that *is the present*.* Thus an awareness of the atemporality of the whole realm and its contrast to the transience of everything human within it, notwithstanding that they are *one realm*, informs the whole Greek cultural era. Homer's legacy is the abiding philosophical backdrop, the 'coin of the realm' in the sense that he enjoyed the status of "teacher of all Hellas".

Nevertheless, Homer was not alone; therefore in the search for precedents for the "Ionian Enchantment" (as the rise of philosophy has been called†), much attention has recently been focused on the arch-prophet of Greece, the poet and seer Hesiod

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* Boeder, Heribert: *Topologie der Metaphysik*. Karl Alber, Freiburg 1980, pp. 58-65; Gigon, Olof: *Der Ursprung der Griechischen Philosophie*. Schwabe, Basel 1968, pp. 13-17.

† Wilson, Edward O.: *Consilience,* Little Brown, London 1998 ch. 1.

and his *Theogony*, his account of the "The Birth of the Gods".

These researches bespeak a desire to discover the philosophical substrate on which the Ionian thinkers cut their teeth. Of course, no amount of sweet-talking will ever turn a poet into a philosopher; but by the same token it is true that, for example, the conceptions of Anaximander or Parmenides can scarcely be understood unless Hesiod is kept before our eyes as a counterfoil to their thought.

Most noticeable in this context is the way Hesiod differs from the Homeric tradition, taking for his metier the grand spectacle of Genesis. Yet this is a different genesis from the one we are familiar with—here is no omnipotent God creating the world from nothing, but rather a pre-existent though undifferentiated chaos, which by reproductive processes analogous to animal sexual procreation sets in train the beginnings of a *conscious cosmos.*

As tradition dictates, he invokes the aid of the Muses; but in the sequence of events, the birth of those very Muses is included. This paradoxy is never resolved; and in addition Eros, the power of procreation, is also assumed to be on stage as and when the process begins. Hence we note the unchanged implicit appeal to 'poetic licence'.

Yet the inherited formulae suited Hesiod for other reasons as well. Firstly, it is plain from both the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* that he was a pious man and a poet who believed in the actual reality of the gods of Olympus. Secondly that he wished to depict poetically how the *reign of justice* was established by Zeus, after overpowering the reigns of chaos and terror. There is in this intent a deep motive—let us by all means call it a philosophical idea—that was to have an incalculable and enduring influence on Greek thinking overall. In order to accomplish this task, Hesiod begins at the beginning—and here is the second important motive to be eventually adopted by philosophy: *the quest for the origin of things as a structured whole, a cosmos.*

All the same, being a poet, Hesiod performs this office in the approbated manner of depicting a gallery of *personalities*; his vision remains anthropomorphic; and even the first of the first, Chaos, is a *named* entity and followed at once by 'broad-bosomed Earth' and Eros, the latter in his office as the agent of fecundity.

But the 'story' itself, a pretty gruesome succession of murder, pillage, rapine, violence, war and especially parricide and infanti-

cide, culminates in the *Titanomachy,* the decisive battle between Zeus and the older Titans, from which the former as the champion of lawful power emerged victoriously. However, the lineage from which he sprang hoarded up a massive trove of *blood guilt* in the process, for each of the 'characters' in this epic, in striving for their place in the light, conquers and maintains it by the exercise of utterly ruthless violence. This guilt motive, the enduring curse of blood spilled in the assumption of power, is a recurrent motive in later Attic drama, and makes its most dramatic entry in philosophy in the framing of Anaximander's famous sentence (cf. *infra).* Hesiod's gods are seen to pay dire reparations each to their predecessors, until with the reign of Zeus this cyclicity is assumed to have been overcome. And this passage from Chaos to Order is again very characteristic of Greek thinking. The reign of Zeus is at the same time the reign of the *logos.*

To return momentarily to the conception of chaos: it is etymologically related to the word for a mouth opened wide; accordingly it is very different from the meaning we nowadays associated with the word. To a Greek it meant 'cleft' or a 'big gap'. With it, Hesiod tried to formulate a vision of a yawning primeval abyss wedged between Heaven (Uranos) and Earth (Gaia), where Day and Night were born. However, we perceive in this conception a philosophically misappropriate contradiction which reveals Hesiod's naivety. For in the *Theogony*, the question of origins is effectively suppressed in the triune beginning of the genealogy. Clearly something unstated pre-exists the birth of the gods. Accordingly primary creation (as in the Bible) is not part of Greek creation mythology; existence is always 'by itself', without the contrivance of a prior, let alone intelligent, Being.*

We can now proceed to some conclusions. The three motives I've emphasised above—*Presence, Origins* and *Justice* (Order)—may be taken as *signatures* of the Greek mind; they are the tentative harbingers of something stirring below the surface of anthropomorphic thought. The overarching principle of *genealogy* indicates a continuing allegiance to the mythographic legacy, but

* Gigon, p. 33: "The idea of a Creator is altogether un-Greek . . . even the Platonic demiurge, whose place in the cosmogony of the *Timaios* remains peculiarly indistinct, is closer to the Hesiodean Eros, at work on the inside of the cosmos, but not its creator.".