

THE DOWNFALL OF THE CHILDREN OF NIGHT

PHYSICAL AND NON-PHYSICAL ENTITIES IN FIFTH-CENTURY B.C. GREEK THOUGHT

by

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Tragedy and the Epic Inheritance

Chaos, says Hesiod in the **Theogony**, came into being first:¹ and Earth next, but unrelated. Earth's children were Heaven, then the Titans; gods, then people followed.² Chaos' descendants were of a different quality. First Erebus (the world of the dead), then Night.³ Erebus' union with Night produced Aether and Day, then by parthenogenesis Night produced: Doom, Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams, Blame, Woe, the Hesperides, Destinies; Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos (the three Fates), Retribution, Deceit, Love, Age and Strife.⁴

Strife proved almost as prolific as Night: Toil, Forgetfulness, Famine, Sorrows, Fightings, Battles, Murders, Manslaughters, Quarrels, Words, Disputes, Lawlessness, Ruin, Oath.⁵

This is a nice tidy archaic aetiology. The author's aim is to explain and comment on human experience. Most of the entities are of a threatening kind - Love is the chief exception - and their derivation from Chaos and Night is very understandable. They are shown as gods, but distanced from the familiar anthropomorphic gods by their derivation from Chaos instead of Earth. Most of these gods represent things which in modern systems of thought are regarded as abstract.

This paper will argue that when Hesiod wrote (perhaps in the seventh century B.C.), and down into the fifth century, these entities - gods - were predominantly thought of as physical, in just the same way as the Olympian gods were thought of as having bodies, as having visited their temples (in the days before the world became too wicked for them to come into), as being able to go and visit the blameless Ethiopians,⁶ and so on.

In 438 BC Euripides produced the **Alcestis**. In this play, Death (**Thanatos**, the god of death⁷) comes on stage and refuses to be

persuaded by Apollo not to take Alcestis down to Hades.⁸ Later in the play she dies and her body is taken away and buried. But afterwards Heracles, feeling he has behaved badly by arriving and enjoying himself, by eating and drinking in a house of mourning (Admetus had carefully given the impression that the woman who had died was one of the servants), goes to the tomb and wrestles with Death, forcing him to release Alcestis, who is brought back to the house and restored to her husband.

The audience sees Death only at the beginning of the play, in the scene with Apollo, before any human characters have appeared. The death of Alcestis happens on stage, with sorrowing relatives by her bed and no reference is made in the scene to the god Death.⁹ But death, which in particular cases is an event, and in general is an abstraction, is overcome by Heracles with physical force. Heracles to the Greeks was a strong man (his twelve Labours being trials of his strength), but he also features in this case as a mediating figure between humans, in the physical world, and gods, whose existence is not viewed as purely physical. As a part-human, part-divine person he can wrestle with an abstraction - this is the logic of the play: and according to Euripides' logic the world of gods is (as in Hesiod) also the world of qualities and abstractions. These things in the gods' world are viewed as physically tangible via the physicality of that world (Heracles, the demi-god, can wrestle with Death), but aren't thought of as 'non-physical' in the normal modern sense of the term.

The **Iliad** and the **Odyssey** were certainly instrumental in the persistence of the view of the world of the gods as also the world of qualities and abstractions. They were much the best known literary works in fifth-century Greece. In the **Iliad** Patroclus, with his last words, warns Hector that Death is standing near him.¹⁰ This is easily misread as metaphor by a modern reader; but people about to die were thought of as having an exceptional ability to prophesize and to sense the next world: the poet means to communicate that Patroclus saw the figure of Death (the same god as in Hesiod: the one brought on stage by Euripides) actually standing by Hector.

And in a wider sense the epic tradition recalled and promoted the Hesiodic view of abstractions as gods or shadow-entities whose locus of existence was set in the same areas as that of dead souls: when

in the first century B.C. Virgil came to develop, drawing on **Odyssey XI**, the Underworld in which Aeneas was to travel, he made the region near its gates the home of Mourning, Cares, Diseases, Age, Fear, Want, Death, Toil, Sleep, Evil, Joys of the Mind, War, the Furies, Discord and Dreams.¹¹ The split in this list between entities mentioned by Hesiod and ones introduced by Virgil is about half and half. Virgil was asking a Roman audience six or seven hundred years after Hesiod to think in archaic terms (the audience's familiarity with the epic tradition would help), but for him the entities were metaphorical in a sense in which, to early Greek hearers, Death in Patroclus' dying vision had not been.

On Stage in Comedy

The epic tradition, then, gave Euripides a background in his audience's mind against which he could make Death a god and have Heracles wrestling with him. Another figure, or rather figures, from Hesiod's lists of the children of Night and Strife, featured on the fifth century Athenian stage: **Logoi**, Words. In Aristophanes **Clouds** (produced in 424 BC) there is a debate scene between two **Logoi** (one the 'better', the other the 'worse').¹² They argue about whether old-fashioned education or modern education is better. In accordance with the Greeks' stereotype of sophistical argument, the worse **Logos** wins.¹³ Comic incongruity derives from two abstractions-made-physical bickering over ideas¹⁴, and as the **Logoi** pursue their backbiting dialogue, they keep on blurring the distinction between abstract and concrete:

- W: But I'm going to beat you, even though you claim to be better than me.
B: So what clever trick are you going to pull off?
W: I'm going to find some fresh ideas.
B: Yes . . . **they** burst into flower because of **these** idiots!
(indicates audience)¹⁵

Ideas here have become flowers. Later they are scraps of food:

- B: You're doing well for yourself: but I remember when you were a beggar . . . you kept on saying you were Telephus the Mysian and chewing at Pandeletus' ideas out of a little bag.¹⁶

Finally they turn up again as hornets:

W: ... and if you go on complaining, your whole face and eyes are going to end up in tatters, stung to bits by my ideas-like by hornets.¹⁷

Rhetoric and Contradiction

This is clever, surrealist, and laughable. But the category of thought whereby threatening abstract entities are viewed as gods, and as in some sense actually or potentially physical, is still behind it. And it persists in an anonymous philosophical text of the turn of the fifth/fourth centuries, the **Dissoi Logoi** (= 'Twofold Words' or 'Contradictory Words'). This opens:

Twofold words are spoken in Hellas by the philosophers about the good and the bad. For some say that the good is one thing, but the bad is another. But others say that it is the same thing, and to the same man on one occasion good, on another occasion bad.¹⁸

The measure of physicality hinted at in this is confirmed when the writer moves on to another pair of opposites:

For some say that the nice¹⁹ is one thing, but the nasty is another, differing, as the word, so also the body (**soma**).

Here, whether or not the writer thought of his **Logoi** as children of Strife, he clearly speaks of moral qualities (nice, nasty) as bodies: things, in some physical or almost-physical sense.

Some examples of an ethnographical kind follow. In support of the relativist position the author proposes that to do your friends good is nice, but to do your enemies good is nasty;²⁰ and says that among the Thracians tattooing is used as a beauty-treatment for girls, while for other peoples tattoos are a punishment for criminals;²¹ and that in Egypt men weave and make wool, while women do business - the reverse of the Greek practice.²² There are other examples too, all things which people of one nation think are nice, and people of another think are nasty. Then when he comes to stating the case for regarding the terms as having an absolute meaning, the author produces a very remarkable piece of imagery:

But they say that if anyone brought together the nasty things from the nations from everywhere, then called out and ordered, that anyone should take away the things which he thought nice, everything would be taken away as nice. I am surprised that nasty things brought together should be nice, and not such as they were. If indeed they brought horses or oxen or sheep or men, they would take away nothing else . . . Look here, if someone brought a nasty man, would he take him away nice?²³

The picture is of a sort of international rubbish-heap. Every ethnic group puts on it the practices it considers nasty. The Greeks, of course, would put doing-good-to-your-enemies on the heap. The Egyptians, presumably, would get rid of women-making-wool in the same way. Then it is announced that anyone who sees something nice on this heap can take it away. The Greeks would be happy with women-making-wool, and in fact, for every possible custom, there would be someone who thought it was all right.

The reader (or hearer) is being asked to think of abstract ideas as if they were concrete things which you could dump, or carry away with you. The objection offered at the end is that a nasty man (the analogy drawn with a nasty practice is direct, even if fallacious) will be just as nasty when carried away as when dumped. It might be going too far to say that the writer thought abstract things were really another sort of concrete things, but it is obvious at least that he does not recognise the difference in attributes between an abstract thing and a concrete thing which modern people are usually conscious of.

Empedocles and Anaxagoras: Love, Strife and Mind

This view of abstractions as not being different in kind from physical objects, together with the tendency evident in the **Alcestis** and the **Clouds** for the representation of abstractions as gods to be acceptable to play audiences, goes some way towards explaining the outlook of the philosopher Empedocles. Rather than being what we might now regard as a rationalist, Empedocles (working about the middle of the fifth century) offered a cosmology which was in effect a remythologization of ideas of the origins of the world and the human race that were familiar from Hesiod and other traditional stories. He viewed the universe as a system which oscillated between being 'one' and being 'many',²⁴ and suggested that it was the mutually opposed influences of Love and Strife which caused this oscillation.

Love and Strife, which a modern reader would instinctively react to as if they were abstract principles explaining observed effects, were apparently viewed by Empedocles in a quite straight forward fashion as gods. Love, in Hesiod a child of Night, Empedocles identifies with Aphrodite, whom he thinks of as the first deity worshipped by human beings;²⁵ and Strife he speaks of as having limbs.²⁶ His remythologization of prehistory offered a scheme in which the functions of the divine actors were perhaps more easily analysed in aetiological terms than in the traditional scheme. Certainly by Plato's time, a generation or so after Empedocles, the inscrutable motives, or downright immorality, of the gods was provoking objections.²⁷ At any rate Empedocles' scheme involved a balance of forces - an idea useful in view of his preoccupation with the issue of 'one' and 'many'. But principles took shape in his mind in personal terms as gods. Unlike Euripides and Aristophanes, Empedocles was not concerned with the personalities and effects which could be brought on stage: but all three authors, in different contexts, exemplify how reification of abstract concepts involved also their deification: a thing which was not physical or inanimate would be treated as divine.

But a shift away from this view did take place. It was neither quick nor, in a sense, complete. It began in the same generation in which Empedocles and Euripides were working, and there is some reason to think that the writer of the **Dissol Logoi** was a rather old fashioned voice a generation later when his nice and nasty things were given their physical quality in his argument.

Anaxagoras, an older contemporary of Empedocles, whose philosophical work was apparently done later than the younger man's,²⁸ took a different direction in his thinking. It may be significant that he was a prose author, while Empedocles was a poet: this may indicate alignment with the sophistic style of thought and speculation which was gaining ground at this period, since the sophists made their income from giving instruction in public speaking (hence in prose writing). Anaxagoras was interested in deductions from observation, and his overall theory involved Mind being the controlling entity in the universe; everything else was a mixture, but Mind, Anaxagoras thought, was pure and unmixed:

All other things have a portion of everything, but Mind is infinite and self-ruled, and is mixed with nothing but is all alone by itself. For if it was not by itself, but was mixed with anything else . . . the things that were mingled with it would hinder it so that it could control nothing . . . For it is the finest of all things and the purest, it has all knowledge about everything and the greatest power; and Mind controls all things, both the greater and the smaller quantities of it, while nothing else is like anything else, but each single body is and was most plainly those things of which it contains most.²⁹

This is not quite a description of an abstract entity: it is 'fine' and 'pure' and there are 'quantities' of it.³⁰ But there are two important elements which suggest that he has thought things out on different lines from Empedocles. First, he has produced a sort of criterion of physicality: the idea of 'a portion of everything in everything' may have its difficult aspects - but as a way of defining a physical thing, as distinct from an abstraction, it has something to recommend it. Second, he has got away from the children of Night. His work is not a selective reinterpretation of the myths recorded in the **Theogony**. Mind may not be a fully abstract entity in Anaxagoras' system, but it is also not a god.

Socrates and Plato: the Birth of Idealism

Reading Anaxagoras' book, Socrates was not satisfied with the place which Mind was assigned in the way the physical world worked.³¹ He felt Anaxagoras gave physical causes for phenomena without facing the question why it was best that things should be as they were - and the world's being the best possible, Socrates thought, was implicit in Anaxagoras' assertion that it was controlled by Mind. But all the same, the progress towards conceiving and defining an abstract entity which is in evidence in Anaxagoras' work was a prerequisite for the Socratic/Platonic view of what a non-physical thing was. Socrates' insistence on being given the definition of a quality 'by itself'³², as distinct from instances exemplifying it, reflects and perhaps draws on Anaxagoras' idea of Mind existing 'all alone by itself'.

Consider the soul. In the **Odyssey**, souls of the dead are shades - strengthless versions of the physical bodies of the deceased. Odysseus can even keep them away from the blood of the sacrifice with a

sword.³³ By drinking the sacrificial blood, a soul becomes more physical - more like a living person:³⁴ able to talk and think, which a ghost is envisaged as being unable to do. In the *Phaedo*, though, the soul is treated as non-physical. Socrates treats with jocular contempt the idea that the soul, on leaving the body at death, might get scattered by the wind;³⁵ and earlier in the dialogue he has laid stress on the need for the soul to escape from all physical contacts and associations in order to seek reality.³⁶ The antithesis between body (as physical) and soul (as non-physical) is very strong here: the soul is not treated as **ghost** but as something which has its existence in a completely non-physical realm. There is a description of the afterlife at the end of the dialogue where the next world is described in physical terms: but it is referred to as a 'tale' (**muthos**) and its function is to deal with how the soul goes away from the visible world:³⁷ the distinction between physical and non-physical worlds is well understood and well marked in the dialogue, and the apparently only half-conscious shift from abstract to concrete in the *Dissoi Logoi* seems a long way away.

To conclude, there are category words which we would normally regard as **abstract** nouns denoting events (e.g. death), feelings (e.g. love) or qualities (e.g. lawlessness). They can be used quite unself-consciously, and presumably usually were in Archaic and early Classical Greece. But when someone wonders 'what is x? (where x is death, or love, or lawlessness), a challenge to understanding arises. The picture built up in Hesiod, particularly by the lists of the children of Night and Strife, suggest that in the Archaic mind the answer to 'what is x?' was, 'a god.' The *Iliad* bears this out, and the same answer could be assumed in the fifth century by Euripides and Aristophanes and Empedocles.

The current of fifth-century thought involving Anaxagoras and Socrates moved away from this view of abstractions, though the tendency to envisage abstractions in a physical way persisted at least as late as the date of the *Dissoi Logoi*. As this tendency slipped into the past, Plato developed an idealist system whereby objects in this world were understood to correspond to, or be derived from, Forms existing in a non-physical, intelligible world. A sort of reversal took place: Plato's Socrates thinks of this world and the things in it as less real than the non-physical world;³⁸ whereas earlier the standard of

reality had been the physical world, and things which were not physical had been understood as belonging to the world of the gods or (as in the case of ghosts) as being only partially real.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Hesiod **Theogony** 116-7.
- 2 Hesiod **Theogony** 126-7, 207-8, 453-7 and elsewhere.
- 3 Hesiod **Theogony** 123.
- 4 Hesiod **Theogony** 124-5 and 211-225.
- 5 Hesiod **Theogony** 226-232.
- 6 Homer **Iliad** 1.423: Africans in Homer are an exception to the rule that humanity is too evil for the gods to visit the earth.
- 7 R. Graves (**The Greek Myths** I (Harmondsworth, 1955), p.224) identifies Death with Hades, the god of the Underworld. But A.M. Dale (Euripides **Alcestis** (Oxford, 1954, p.54) treats Death as 'an ogreish creature of popular mythology'. This is much more likely to be right. Hades was regarded as a very powerful god (Zeus' brother) and one might have some reservations about betting on Heracles to beat him at wrestling.
- 8 Euripides **Alcestis** 72-6.
- 9 Euripides **Alcestis** 244-392.
- 10 Homer **Iliad** XVI.853-4.
- 11 Virgil **Aeneid** VI 273-284.
- 12 Aristophanes **Clouds** 899-1114.
- 13 The fear that the outcome of rhetorical training will be that the worse case will be more convincing and win the day is alluded to by Plato **Apology** 18b 6-9.
- 14 Though it is worth noting that K.J. Dover says (Aristophanes **Clouds** (Oxford, 1970), p.xxiii) that 'that the two **logoi** should be personified and brought before us as speaking characters is fully in accord with traditional Greek categories of thought.'
- 15 Aristophanes **Clouds** 894-8.
- 16 Aristophanes **Clouds** 920-4.
- 17 Aristophanes **Clouds** 945-8.
- 18 H. Diels and W. Kranz **Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker** II (Berlin, 1935), pp.405-416. This quotation from 1.1. Further reference to this text by chapter and section only.
- 19 **Dissoi Logoi** 2.1; 'nice' is **kalon**: 'nasty' is **aischron**. This is not an elegant translation but the point is to catch the aesthetic, as well as the moral, connotations of the terms.

- 20 **Dissoi Logoi** 2.7.
- 21 **Dissoi Logoi** 2.12.
- 22 **Dissoi Logoi** 2.17.
- 23 **Dissoi Logoi** 2.26-8.
- 24 G.S. Kirk and J.E.Raven **The Presocratic Philosophers** (Cambridge, 1957), no. 423. Further references to this book as **KR**.
- 25 **KR** no. 424, and no. 466.
- 26 **KR** nos. 429 and 430.
- 27 At the beginning of Plato **Republic** book 3 Socrates uses the assumption that the gods are good to support the conclusion that a lot of Homer is wrong and ought not to be taught to children: **Republic** 386a1 - 391e12.
- 28 **KR** no. 428 and commentary on p.363.
- 29 **KR** no. 503.
- 30 Kirk and Raven (**KR**, p.374) comment that 'it has many of the qualities of an abstract principle', but that for Anaxagoras, as for Empedocles, 'the only ultimate criterion of reality is extension in space'.
- 31 Plato **Phaedo** 97b9 - 99a4.
- 32 e.g. at Plato **Euthyphro** 6e2-6.
- 33 Homer **Odyssey** XI.48-50.
- 34 Homer **Odyssey** XI.146-149.
- 35 Plato **Phaedo** 77d-e.
- 36 Plato **Phaedo** 79c2 - 80b8.
- 37 Plato **Phaedo** 107d7 - 114d6.
- 38 e.g. at Plato **Phaedo** 80a10-b7.