It was in a search for ultimates (archai) that Aristotle thought human curiosity found its highest object: Our thirst for answers would find the understanding we naturally seek when the mind had struck the most universal themes running through the varieties of things, discerned the most general character of being, and followed up on the quest for causes by tracing things to an ultimate cause. If the search went well, it would find an ultimate value as well, discover the roots of value in things and satisfy the Socratic itch to see how Intelligence orders the world and “arranges each thing in the way best for it.”

Presocratics like Thales and Anaximenes thought they had caught sight of an underlying unity and ultimate causal ground in the matter of things. Their quest survives in the modern physicist’s search for ultimate particles. But values, for the Physikoi, took a back seat, except for rather stark values like stability and the fecundity that could unfold a colorful and clamorous world from the womb of material uniformity. In Aristotle’s larger quest, the search for basic matter was just a very partial first step. What we are really after, as Aristotle saw it, are basic principles, the rules of nature’s game. Thus the talk in Heraclitus of a logos, a pattern that makes sense of change,
and the advice to look to the common—although change itself seemed the most general rule in nature.

To Parmenides, however, change seemed at war with logic. Did not change demand, against all logic, that a thing become what it is not? Plato, deferring to his friend Cratylus, conceded nature, in large part, to the rule of change, for mutability was a challenge not just to logic, or to life, but to the very possibility of knowing. It made things teasing, elusive, always slipping the epistemic net, denying them definiteness and definition, the determinacy that would make knowledge possible and the stability that Plato expected reality to manifest.

Still in tune with the Eleatic intellectualism that barred the ontic door against the unthinkable, Plato reasoned that if nature cannot hold still, it cannot be known; and what cannot be known in principle should not be said to be but only to become. So reality of any ultimate sort was kicked upstairs, to the realm of pure Ideas. Being demanded constancy. Thus it was in the realm of the immutable that the highest causes, and the highest good, were to be sought.

Aristotle fought shy of that outcome, at least in part. Focusing on what does stay constant in nature and unwilling to banish knowledge from the natural realm, he found intelligible forms in the species of things. As that choice reveals, he did not relinquish the Parmenidean bias against change. So species, as stolid objects of scientific predication, became immutable and unoriginate. This they had not been for Plato, who adjusted the likeliness of his likely story to the flickering light of nature’s cave but allowed for a becoming not just of individuals but of their natural kinds. For Aristotle, by contrast, species were pristine. Individual differences could be dismissed as insignificant, mere accidents, sports of nature that do not touch the universal essences of things. Science studies what is constant. Its aim is to discover, in the universal essences of things, why they must be as they are.

Here Aristotle’s science paid a price. Perhaps overreacting against the Democritean reduction of qualitative to quantitative change, Aristotle favored the qualitative and lost sight of the possible significance of the seemingly negligible discrepancies in pattern. As for narrative modes of

---


3 Heraclitus, Fragment 2.