CHAPTER 2

Philological Observations and Approaches to Language in the Philosophical Context*

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1 Language

1.1 Sophistic Methods prior to the Sophistic Movement

According to Xenophanes, no man ever has seen nor ever will see τὸ σαφές, “that which is clear” (B 34 D.-K.);¹ Heraclitus believes that it is impossible to reach the boundaries of the soul (B 45 D.-K.);² according to Democritus, “truth is in the depths” (B 117 D.-K. ἐν βυθῷ), i.e. far beyond our reach. Yet despite such statements, the world of archaic physikoi is predominantly the world of

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¹ See F. Decleva Caizzi [1974], who composed a classic study on fr. 34 of Xenophanes. I am inclined towards the ‘pessimistic’ interpretation.

² The text of the fragment is controversial (cf. Dorandi [2010a]; Mansfeld [2010]), but the overall meaning is clear.
certainty. So fully convinced are they of their assertions that they hardly ever find it necessary to support their opinions with arguments and to assess the grounds in favor and against their views.\(^3\)

In the iconography of the ancient scholar, intellectual—but also physical— isolation is a recurrent element. Take the case of Heraclitus: in principle, he does not seem to be averse to engaging with the overall community, but his aspiration is that the community should conform to his ideals. Since such an outcome is not accomplished, he withdraws disdainfully and turns to playing dice with some small boys (D. L. 9.3). However, isolation cannot give rise to debate,\(^4\) and if debate does not come into being, then neither does science; moreover, if science does not come into being, neither does a scientific language, nor the interest in creating one. But what is a scientific language? First and foremost, it consists of speakers’ willingness to agree on the meaning of certain terms.

In a passage from Politics (1261a15–21), Aristotle writes:

> I refer to the ideal of the fullest possible unity of the entire state (τὸ μίαν εἶναι τὴν πόλιν...δει μᾶλλον τὰ σφυρακών), which Socrates takes as his fundamental principle. Yet it is clear that if the process of unification advances beyond a certain point (γινομένη...μία μᾶλλον), the city will not be a city at all; for a state essentially consists of a multitude of persons, and if its unification is carried beyond a certain point, city will be reduced to family and family to individual, for we should pronounce the family to be a more complete unity than the city, and the single person than the family; so that even if any lawgiver were able to unify the state, he must not do so, for he will destroy it in the process.\(^5\)

But Socrates (i.e. Plato) never uttered the statement attributed to him here. What he asserts is that the good city must be “one”, but in the sense of “unitary”.\(^6\) Aristotle, on the other hand, insists on the meaning of “one” as “homogeneous”,

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3 A quest for consensus and support was present among the archaic thinkers as well (see Obbink [1992] 196), but it was not systematic.
4 This is Cornford’s well known argument [1952]. According to a widespread tradition, Heraclitus is said to have written his biblion in a deliberately obscure style, “in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt” (D. L. 9.6; transl. Hicks [1925] 11, 413).
6 Resp. 5.422e–423a, and above all 462a–b: “Do we know of any greater evil for a state than the thing that distracts it and makes it many instead of one, or a greater good than that which binds it together and makes it one?” (transl. Shorey [1930] 469).