Chapter Two

Natural Science and Hermeneutics:
The concept of nature in ancient philosophy.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

translated by Kathleen Wright

Words tell a story. The word "nature" has penetrated so deeply into our linguistic consciousness that we do not even realize that we are dealing with a word borrowed from Latin, and that so far as the word "nature" is understood as a concept the Latin word is merely taken over from the Greek which formed the concept of physis. Now, words are vehicles for our mental imagination. The multiple meanings they radiate amount to the wealth of our ideas and thoughts. The formation of a concept, however, requires exact delimitation and differentiation in the way that Aristotle established in an immortal example in Book Delta of his Metaphysics. Philosophical analysis requires that different strands of meaning be distinguished to cancel the error of equivocation. But language itself is already the first deposit of the formation of a concept in that it enables such differences in meaning to arise in words. Philosophical analysis only takes the last step. In any case it is reasonable to become conscious of the whole inheritance of thought that lives on in language usage, and to utilize as it were the history of a word as an approach to the analysis of a concept.

1. All notes are by the translator.
The word "nature" clearly preserves today the status of a key-word. It resonates with the crisis of industrialized society on our planet, indicting a development which represents the exploitation of nature and which introduces irreversible processes of devastation and other ruinous changes. Both the general problem of environmental protection and the particular problems of nuclear energy and of air and water pollution have slowly penetrated today into general consciousness. This suggests that we should again become more conscious of how we think about nature and that we should no longer regard it simply as a deposit of reserves to be transformed into human goods. Certainly the emotional tone of the concept of nature goes back already to that criticism of culture which found its powerful spokesman in Rousseau in the late eighteenth century. He became so to speak an advocate, proclaiming the innocence of nature against the corruption of human civilization, and at the same time preaching passionately for a liberation from the forces of a rationalistic ideal of civilization and for a return to nature. To illustrate what Rousseau advocated, we need only recall how that epoch's taste for the artful design of gardens, that extension of human architecture into nature, turned to the style of the English park, to the "English garden" which intended to be a bit of nature. The return to nature also became a slogan of the French Revolution and of the emancipation of the bourgeoisie, giving the word at the same time a wide ranging social relevance. One thinks of the sans-culottes and in general of the words, crinoline (Reifrock) and peruke.2 "Nature has now awoken amid the clang of arms" -- Hölderlin could write.3

But what lies behind this formation of the concept of nature, one which we recognize, and which lives on by chance for a Heidelberger in the name of the Philosopher's Way? This name does not designate the special walk of philosophy professors but

2. Gadamer's point is that these words remind us of the connection between revolutionary politics and a change in fashion to what is natural. Men who did not wear culottes (sans-culotte), women who did not wear crinoline petticoats, and all who disdained the wearing of wigs used a fashion which went "back to nature" to make a political statement.