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The Meaning of Physis in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides

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THE MEANING OF PHYSIS IN
AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES, AND EURIPIDES

by

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for the Master's Degree
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INTRODUCTION

What is in a word? We use words in a static meaning for years; then suddenly we see a word in a new context, and the word takes on some of the life that is in us. Does this same thing happen when we translate from a foreign language into our own, especially when the foreign language is an ancient one? Yes, words take on new meanings when they are imprisoned in books just as they do when they are part of a living language.

A return to the key words of an ancient language will show us their flexibility and vitality. In different contexts the same word will take on different meanings and may gradually be shaped to express the highest of human thoughts. Such a word is the Greek word--physis.

Physis is a well-worn member of the Greek vocabulary. Sometimes it was used vaguely, without real awareness on the part of the user of the meaning potential of the word. At other times physis became a very technical word to express special scientific and philosophical ideas. The word even became so popular that it lost almost all the meaning it once

had and became a sentence-filler.

There has been quite a bit of discussion on the meaning of the word. Burnet comments: "physis,--a word very inadequately rendered by 'nature'. . . ." ¹ Lovejoy says, "The possible distinguishable shades of meaning are, indeed, manifold; Liddell and Scott give twelve, without by any means drawing the lines of distinction so fine as they might be drawn." ² Beardslee wrote a whole book on the subject: The use of PHYSIS in Fifth-Century Greek Literature. ³ Finally, Holwerda has recently published a work on the topic: Commentatio de vocis quae est PHYSIS vi atque usu praesertim in graecitate Aristotele /sio/ anteriore. ⁴

It is not surprising that there is so much interest in

¹ John Burnet, "Law and Nature in Greek Ethics," International Journal of Ethics, VII (1897), p. 328.

² Arthur O. Lovejoy, "The Meaning of PHYSIS in the Greek Physiologers," Philosophical Review, XVIII (1909), p. 376.

³ John Walter Beardslee, Jr., The Use of PHYSIS in Fifth-Century Greek Literature. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1918.

⁴ D. Holwerda, Commentatio de vocis quae est PHYSIS vi atque usu praesertim in graecitate Aristotele anteriore. Groningae: L. B. Wolters, 1955.

the word physis since the word is so important. Ever since the time of Aristotle, there has been inquiry into the meaning of physis.⁵

Physis is important because of the scientific meaning it has in philosophers such as Aristotle, but it is also important because it is bound up with the humanism of Greece. During the fifth century before Christ, the meaning of physis developed greatly in Greek literature. When Aeschylus wrote his plays, physis was beginning to play a greater part in Greek cultural life. By the time that Sophocles was composing his masterpieces, physis was an important word, and Sophocles made important use of it. Euripides inherited an adaptable word and used it as such. Physis gives some insight into the humanism of fifth century Greece.

In this thesis I will study the meaning of physis in Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. To achieve a clear understanding of the meaning, I will survey the use of physis in the early centuries of Greek literature; then I will study the use of physis in the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides; finally, I will discuss the meaning of physis in relation to the

⁵Aristotle Metaphysics 1014^b 17.

themes of the plays to discover the ideas behind physis.

This study will, I hope, clarify the various meanings that physis had in early Greek literature, especially in the tragedians, and show the importance of the meaning that is in one word.

CHAPTER I

SURVEY OF THE MEANING OF PHYSIS TO THE TIME OF THE TRAGEDIANS

The word physis has a long history. From the time of its first occurrence in Homer until its last key usage (405 B.C.) by Euripides in his play, The Bacchanals, this word carried many meanings, which mirror something of the life and thought of Greece during those centuries. The survey of these three hundred and fifty years of development in the word has one purpose in this thesis: to clarify the meaning of the word in the tragedians and to interpret their plays in the light of that meaning.

Homer uses physis in the tenth book of the Odyssey. Hermes is showing the moly plant to Odysseus. The plant acts as an antidote to the potion of Circe which turned men into pigs.

Ὅς δ' ἄρα φωνήσας κόρε φάρμακον ἄργειφόντης
ἐκ γαίης ἔρυσσε, καὶ μοι φύσιν αὐτοῦ ἔδειξε.
ῥίζη μὲν μέλαν ἔσκε, γὰρ ἄκτι δὲ εἴκελον ἄνθος·
μῆλυ δὲ μιν καλέουσι θεοί· χαλεπὸν δὲ τ' ὀρύσσειν
ἄνδράσι γε θνητοῖσι· θεοὶ δὲ τε πάντα δύνανται.¹

¹ Homer Odyssey 10. 302-6. "So saying, Argeiphontes gave

Although this is the only usage of the noun in the works of Homer, it contains an important meaning which will occur later in Greek literature.

There are a number of opinions about the meaning of the word in this example. Beardslee thinks it means the "outward characteristic" of the plant.² Holwerda translates the word species.³ It is not difficult to see how these meanings developed, together with the general meaning "appearance," since Hermes proceeds to describe the plant immediately after referring to its physis. But is there any more meaning in the usage? Myres thinks so and points out that the two parts of the description of the plant stand at the beginning of the growing process and at the end of the growing process.

If you want to find moly in the dead season, you must look for a black root; in spring or summer it will have

me the herb, drawing it from the ground, and showed me its nature /physis/. At the root it was black, but its flower was like milk. Moly the gods call it, and it is hard for mortal man to dig; but with the gods all things are possible." Homer, The Odyssey, with an English translation by A. T. Murray, I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919).

²
Beardslee, 6.

³
Holwerda, 63.

a milkwhite flower. . . . The physis, then, of the moly- plant is its proceedings while it is becoming a mature plant in full flower, from being merely a black root in the ground.⁴

This description of the word physis in Homer points out two approaches to the word which will continue through most commentators' analyses of the word's meaning in Greek literature. Some see the passive sense in many usages of early Greek writers; translations such as "appearance" and "nature" are typical of this approach. Others understand the word in its more active sense, with greater emphasis on the noun's connection with the verb; translations for this group are difficult to find, but "growth" or phrases indicating the origin of the final static state are sometimes satisfactory. Beardslee and Holwerda try to give emphasis to both meanings of physis, but they do not succeed very well in developing the active meaning. Myres emphasizes the active meaning well.

These two approaches to physis will result in an ambiguity of meaning by the time of the tragedians. This ambiguity appears in the double meaning of "birth-character" in Sophocles. Even though the ambiguity does not become

4

John L. Myres, The Political Ideas of the Greeks (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1927), pp. 255-6.

explicit or developed until then, it is good to remember that the double meaning underlies many of the uses of physis in early Greek literature.

Hesiod does not use the word physis. Pindar uses physis only twice in his odes. He describes the build of Melissus by saying that he has not the "stature" of the giant Orion.⁵ He compares men to gods either as regards their intelligence or their physis.⁶ There may be some reference to mental qualities in this last example; however, the connection between physis and these qualities is not clear. Heinimann gives the best summation: "Physis bezeichnet bei Pindar immer nur das körperliche Wesen, den Wuchs. Für das, was die Ionier mit dem Worte benennen, die innere, angeborene Art, braucht er phya."⁷

From the poets I turn to the early philosophers for

⁵ Pindar Isthmian Odes 4. 49.

⁶ Pindar Nemean Odes 6. 5.

⁷ Felix Heinimann, Nomos und Physis (Basel: Verlag Friedrich Reinhardt, 1945), p. 99. "Physis in Pindar always means only bodily being, growth. For that which the Ionians signify with the word--the inner, inherited nature--he uses phya."

the deeper meaning of physis. In any discussion about the Presocratic philosophers today, there is likely to be controversy. For over fifty years scholars have been trying to piece together the bits of information that remain from the teaching of the thinkers who lived before the end of the fifth century before Christ. General statements are dangerous because of the fragmentary evidence and the variety of thought in these philosophers. The situation remains the same when it comes to a discussion of the meaning of physis in the Presocratic philosophers. There are so many opinions that it is difficult to say anything definite. Yet there does seem to be a pattern of meaning which appears in the fragments of these early philosophers.

Beardslee agrees with Lovejoy "that as a technical term, and especially in the treatises of the cosmologists, physis meant 'the intrinsic and permanent qualitative constitution of things,' or, more colloquially, 'what things really are.'" ⁸ Jaeger, talking about the Milesian naturalists, says that physis has the same meaning as genesis and includes

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Lovejoy, 376; Beardslee, 11.

in the meaning: "origin," "growth," and "source of origin."⁹
 Holwerda follows Kirk when the latter states: "Rather the truth is that at the 'primitive' stage of language there is no firm distinction between 'become' and 'be.'"¹⁰ Burnet thinks that the general title given to the work of the cosmologists should read "On the Primary Substance."¹¹ Millerd says that the title should read "Concerning Becoming" or "Concerning the Formation of Things" for Empedocles.¹² Heidel lists eleven different meanings and then says: "The main sense of Nature was, however, the sum of things as constituted by the elements and the cosmic laws and processes."¹³ All of these statements indicate some aspect of the meaning of physis, but none of them is adequate for all the uses.

⁹
Werner Jaeger, The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1947), p. 20.

¹⁰
Holwerda, 108; G. S. Kirk, Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1954), p. 228.

¹¹
John Burnet, Early Greek Philosophy, 3rd ed. (London: A. & C. Black, Ltd., 1920), p. 12.

¹²
Clara Elizabeth Millerd, On the Interpretation of Empedocles (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908), p. 18.

¹³
W. A. Heidel, "Περὶ Φύσεως," Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, XLV, No. 4 (1910), p. 129.

Heidel's analysis of the Presocratic philosophers with respect to this problem is the most complete, so I will present his position and then other ideas in the light of his classification. Heidel takes the fundamental meaning of physis to be growth. He divides this meaning into three: physis as a process; physis as the starting point of the process; and physis as the end of the process. He then takes up each of these divisions and subdivides. In physis as a process, he distinguishes concrete growth as phenomenon or fact from abstract growth as a law, principle, or force of nature. In physis as the starting point of the process, he distinguishes the process considered impersonally as physical element, original condition, or place of origin as distinct from personification. In physis as the end of the process, he distinguishes the external frame or constitution from the internal character or constitution.¹⁴ (It is this latter category which will be of major importance to the tragedians, not in the sense of physical character which occupied the attention of the cosmologists, but in the sense of mental

¹⁴Ibid., 97.

character. The mental character positively considered [power, talent, instinct, natural endowments] will come up in the Philoctetes, and the mental character negatively considered [natural limitations] will appear in the Ajax.)

The general meaning of physis for the Presocratic philosophers which Lovejoy and Beardslee follow ("what things really are") seems to be more of an explanation of the goal of the search of the cosmologist rather than a fuller exposition of the meaning of the word. Jaeger is correct in what he says (physis means "origin," "growth," and "source or origin"); but he does not cover all of the Presocratic philosophers in his statement. Kirk points out an interesting fact when he shows the lack of distinction between being and becoming in primitive thought, but Holwerda does not help the explanation of physis much in applying this fact to the Presocratic idea of nature. In trying to connect physis and einai in his book, Holwerda seems at times to force fourth-century categories and ideas on earlier literature.

What do the philosophers themselves say? Despite the fragmentary evidence, it is possible to piece together some idea of their thought in reference to physis. Ancient accounts

quote Thales as saying that water is the origin of everything and that everything is full of gods.¹⁵ Whether or not Thales actually said these things or taught similar doctrines is not really the point here because they do illustrate an early account of the physis, the origin of things, and point out the general direction that early cosmological thought would take for many years. Also important is the fact that the explanation of water as the physis of things is common sense, since water is necessary for growth of any kind. Thus in the very beginning there is a graphic example of the idea of physis.

Anaximander had as his purpose the description of the inhabited earth and the way in which it had come to be as it was. He said that the source of everything in the world was the "unlimited." This "unlimited" was "simply a boundless expanse of infinitely different ingredients so thoroughly mixed together as to be severally indiscernible in the mixture but which when segregated from the mixture are recognizable as all the differences of an articulated world."¹⁶

¹⁵ Aristotle Metaphysics 983^b 21.

¹⁶ Harold Cherniss, "The Characteristics and Effects of

This "unlimited" is not conscious or personal; a law of nature keeps the balance among the constituents of existence by drawing on the fund of the "unlimited." Thus Anaximander looks on nature as an all-inclusive system ordered by immanent law. This is his idea of physis.

Anaximenes built on Anaximander's theory with the purpose of explaining the physical processes which Anaximander neglected. He substituted air for Anaximander's unlimited and described all change by a process of condensation-rarefaction. Compression produces cold, water, and eventually solid bodies; relaxation produces warmth and eventually fire. Since air is the most evenly distributed and the most extensive body and identified with the soul that holds bodies together, Anaximenes substituted it for the unlimited of Anaximander. Air was the physis of Anaximenes.

The theory of Anaximenes was open to further development because things differed only in degree and the process alone remained fixed. Heraclitus made this conclusion the basis of his theory of the universe. Because he used fire as the symbol of continual process (since fire is always changing),

Presocratic Philosophy," Journal of the History of Ideas, XII, No. 3 (June, 1951), pp. 324-5.

he was said to have held fire to be the basis of everything. This is not true. Heraclitus was not dealing with the same problems as those of the Milesian naturalists. He was not so much interested in natural phenomena as in their meaning. In the three times Heraclitus uses physis he means by this word the real nature of a thing or a process, as contrasted with the popular opinion of it.¹⁷

Parmenides denied Heraclitus' world of change and posited instead a world of being. In a case where he does use physis, he uses it in the sense of becoming, the very thing he is denying.¹⁸

Parmenides' argument drove later philosophers to save the world of nature within the bounds that Parmenides' logic had set. Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and the Atomists devised systems to satisfy the problem which Parmenides had raised. In devising these systems, each used physis in his own way.

Empedocles got around Parmenides' difficulty by positing four physical bodies which had their own characteristics, were identical throughout, were equal, and were

¹⁷ Beardslee, 68; Heinemann, 92-4.

¹⁸ Heinemann, 90-2.

forever unchanging. The different comingling of these bodies produced the world. In the light of this theory it is easier to understand a passage of Empedocles with two uses of physis which have puzzled many commentators. Empedocles says:

ἄλλο δὲ τοι ἔρέω· φύσις οὐδενός ἐστιν ἀπάντων
 θνητῶν, οὐδὲ τις οὐλομένου θανάτοιο τελευτῆ,
 ἀλλὰ μόνον μίξις τε διάλλαξις τε μιγέντων
 ἐστὶ, φύσις δ' ἐπὶ τοῖς ὀνομάζεται ἀνθρώποισιν. 19

Here Empedocles is saying that there is no "becoming," as Parmenides had said before him; he goes on to give the name of physis to the processes of mixing and separation. This process is the meaning of physis for Empedocles. The point of the passage quoted--Empedocles' denial of an abstract physis and his affirmation of a concrete one--is important to keep in mind for an understanding of his meaning.

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Empedocles, fr. 8, in Hermann Diels, Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker, fünfte auflage herausgegeben von Walther Kranz, erster band (Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1934), p. 312. "There is no physis of all mortal things, nor even any end in destructive death, but only mixing, and separation of things mixed, and physis is a name given to those processes among men." Myres, 269.

Anaxagoras took Anaximander's idea of the unlimited and added to it the idea that everything is a mixture of everything else. This was his description of the universe.

Democritus described the universe by using building blocks of atoms. The combining or separating of these fundamental units explain the various things in the world. For those interested in the idea of physis in Democritus, there is an immediate question: does physis mean the atom in the philosophy of Democritus. The answer is not certain; Beardslee cannot find much ground for such an assertion. ²⁰ In the last of the Presocratic philosophers the sharp meaning of physis has disappeared.

The Presocratics used physis in many different ways. There was some uniformity among the Milesian naturalists in that they referred to physis as the source of everything in the universe. After Parmenides physis was used more in the sense of growth as "becoming" or "change." There is no one meaning which is applicable to all.

It is in the writings of the sophists that physis came into contrast with nomos in an extended and significant way. This distinction was a key concept in Greek thought at the

time, as was the meaning of physis itself. In the following paragraphs I will discuss the meaning of physis in the sophistic literature and its contrast with nomos.

The main source of Protagoras' teaching on physis, "The Myth of Protagoras," is found in the Protagoras of Plato. Here the divine is physis which must be mediated by aidos and dike to reach absolute nomos. Physis is the natural which must be limited to be preserved; nomos limits physis instead of opposing it.

The title of one of Gorgias' works--On Not-Being or On Nature--indicates in general Gorgias' idea of physis. In The Defence of Palamedes Gorgias gives more explanation of what he means in equating physis with not-being. Untersteiner comments thus:

"physis'. . . coincides with dike, but this dike is not able to free itself from the irremediable contrast with violence, Bia. The aporiai are, therefore, inherent in the very meaning of physis interpreted as dike, because dike means the dike of the irrepressible Bia, so that 'physis' defined as dike reveals through the ambivalence of dike the radical existence of the antitheses; hence the first part of the title of Gorgias' treatise On Not-

21

Mario Untersteiner, The Sophists, translated from the Italian by Kathleen Freeman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1954), p. 63.

Being: it is precisely fitted to serve as an advance declaration of the dramatic meaning of 'physis' which involves the theoretical dissolution of every ontological, and therefore epistemological presupposition."

Because physis is an antithesis, it is identified with not-being.

Physis is the living expression of the antitheses.

In his treatise On the Nature of Man, Prodicus states that there are two stages in the history of religion: a primitive stage in which natural phenomena gave things which were useful to men and a later stage in which men discovered these things for themselves.²³ These two stages illustrate Prodicus' application of physis and nomos: physis is the initial stage which is not contradicted but developed more fully at the second stage of nomos. Another example of this relation between physis and nomos in Prodicus is the relation of etymology and synonyms in his theory of language; there is no contradiction between the two, but one explains the other. The ethics of Prodicus make use of physis in the sense of what is natural and must be perfected; physis receives its value by the interpretation of

²²
Ibid., 144.

²³
Ibid., 212.

nomos. Physis is the given, the natural, that which is to be developed by men.

Antiphon wished to refute the philosophy of Gorgias and provide for experience and the possibility of judgment. In his system physis is the sum of what can be experienced, whether this be sensible or intelligible. Because experiences are ordered, physis is also ordered. Therefore, physis is order, equilibrium.²⁴

Hippias set as his goal the knowledge of the nature of reality; by this he means the truth of the world, what things really are. In his study of the nature of the world, Hippias discovered that positive law does not always conform with the natural law which he had found. Thus he emphasized the distinction between physis and nomos and declared the natural law more morally binding than positive law. The natural law is also called the unwritten law. Positive law arises out of necessity from this natural law so that society can have order. Thus nomos takes on a new meaning in its relation to physis. When he studied man, Hippias studied him in terms of his physis,

human nature. He recognized the unity of all humans through their identical physis. He taught that human nature was the potentiality of opposites, as in the moral deeds of man, which can be either virtuous or vicious. In his study of good and bad, Hippias studied the character (physis) of different people; this study of character became a part of his general study of nature.²⁵

An extreme conclusion to the physis-nomos distinction which ran through sophistic thought was the teaching of Thrasy-machus and Callicles. Thrasy-machus taught that justice is nothing else than the advantage of the stronger.²⁶ This doctrine is the conclusion of an exaggeration of nomos as the arbitrary directives of those who have the power to carry out their decrees. This is the same sentiment which is expressed by the anonymous author of the Constitution of the Athenians. In that work, the author was fighting against the democratic constitution and the irrationality that resulted from giving the weaker minority the power of making laws.²⁷ Callicles taught a different doctrine

²⁵
Ibid., 291.

²⁶
Plato Republic 338c.

²⁷
Untersteiner, 322.

in that he said it was only natural that the stronger and more talented should have a higher place. In this statement, the law-making power resides with the weaker, even though this power is naturally handed over to the stronger. In the doctrines of both Thrasymachus and Callicles, the law-giver looks after his own interests.²⁸

Throughout the writings of the sophists, except in the case of Gorgias, the physis-nomos distinction is important and vital. The general tendency is to try to reconcile these two principles; there are varying degrees of success. Underlying all these attempts, though, there is a remarkable consensus on the meaning of physis--that which is unwritten, spontaneous, proper to man. Gorgias, in line with his nihilistic philosophy, uses physis to mean not-being. Even here there is a use of physis in accord with previous uses because this not-being is similar to the mysterious and that which is not completely rational.

The historians use physis in ways which are common to the literature of the time and also suited to their own purposes.

Herodotus uses the word frequently to describe the appearance of something. These uses are similar to the use in Homer's writings in that they are predominantly descriptions of biological things; they seem to indicate the end result of some kind of process. Beardslee thinks that the use of physis in Herodotus, including all the qualities and characteristics of a thing, is the fundamental and original meaning of the word.²⁹ This use of the word is so frequent in the descriptions of Herodotus that Beardslee calls it the "natural history" meaning of the word.

Thucydides uses physis in the same senses which the sophists use in their philosophy. He speaks of human nature and the distinction between physis and nomos and talent. The scope of his writing gives him a chance to exploit fully the meanings of physis which had been developed at that time.

One use of physis in Thucydides is especially striking because of the development he gives to the meaning of the word in the sophists and its application in political affairs. In his History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides tells the story of the debate held between representatives of Athens and the leaders of the people of Melos before Athens conquered that

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Beardslee, 20.

island in 415 B.C.³⁰ The Athenians propose very openly their position: it is the doctrine "might makes right" pure and simple. A free and friendly Melos ruins the picture of a mighty empire which Athens wishes to project to the world, because only the powerful can preserve their freedom. When the Melians object and appeal to honor, fortune, and the help of the gods and the Spartans, the Athenians reply that they are only doing what gods and men do by natural impulse: rule when they have power. The Athenians expect others to do the same if they have the power.³¹

The largest number of uses of the word physis in fifth-century Greek literature occur in the writings attributed to Hippocrates. Here the meaning of the word is fairly uniform. The sense of physis is "constitution" or "temperament."³² The object is that which is seen by the physician; its physis is that which appears from the foundation of the thing. There is the same idea here which is present in the use by Homer and Herodotus.

The history of the meaning of physis in Greek literature

³⁰ Thucydides History of the Peloponnesian War v. 84-116.

³¹ Ibid., v. 105. 1-2.

³² Beardslee, 32.

from Homer to Thucydides is full of variety and vitality. The potentialities of the word are evident from the fact that different authors, different thinkers, and men of completely different ages were able to manipulate the basic concept of the word into the varying problems and discussions which faced them. The use of the word in its biological sense--that of the process and the stage in it, or the end of the process--runs throughout the period in the writings of Homer, Herodotus, and Hippocrates. The philosophers made use of this idea in their own way as they sought out the ultimate intelligibility of the world they found around them. The sophists used this already vital word to form one side of a dialectic which furnished material for much of their discussions. To complete this picture let us now look at the writings of the three great tragedians--Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

CHAPTER II

THE USE OF PHYSIS IN THE WRITINGS OF AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES, AND EURIPIDES

In the previous section there was a historical survey of the early meanings of the word physis. Now there is question of its meaning in the writings of the Attic tragedians themselves. In this discussion the drama-texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides will be the subject of study, and the purpose will be to find out what dictionaries and commentaries can tell about the meaning of the word physis in these authors.

There are two major lexicographical studies on the meaning of the word physis in Greek literature: The Use of PHYSIS in Fifth-Century Greek Literature by John Walter Beardslee, Jr. (1918), and Commentatio de vocis quae est PHYSIS vi atque usu praesertim in graecitate Aristotele anteriore by D. Holwerda (1955). Both of these works include the writings of the Greek tragedians in the matter they treat. Each is trying to prove a thesis in his work. Beardslee says that there are two major meanings of physis in common usage up to the end of the fifth-

century: 1) "origin," "beginning" of a person or thing; 2) "character," "qualities" of a person or thing.¹ He says that the first meaning is probably primary but that the second meaning is the predominant use of the word throughout Greek literature. Holwerda, more interested in the basic meaning of the word than in its history, has this to say: "Etiam historiae progressu non intercedente complures habere potest significationes una eademque vos diversasque simul inde ab initio continere partes, quas prout res postulat in usum suum convertere possunt loquentes."² He asserts that the basic meaning is found in the equation of physis with einai. He then proceeds to group the various meanings of physis in Greek literature under headings which point up the similarity of the word with the various meanings of einai. The word einai can be used copulatively, absolutely, or in opposition to dokein.³ Used copulatively, einai unites two nouns or a noun

¹
Beardslee, 2.

²
Holwerda, 3. "Even though historical development does not intervene, one and the same word can have many meanings and can contain from the beginning different parts at once. As the situation demands, the speakers can turn these parts to their own use."

³
Ibid., 7.

and an adjective. Used absolutely einai indicates the existence of something. In opposition to dokein, einai means "truth," "the true." Physis has the same meanings. The point of mentioning these works here is not to discuss them; it is rather to point out the major sources of my discussion on the texts of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

In his seven extant tragedies, Aeschylus uses the word physis only five times. These uses are in five different plays. When the word does occur, it is in contexts which are not vital. A survey of these five uses will show how unimportant it is in Aeschylus' vocabulary.

The first use in The Suppliant Maidens, line 496. At this point in the play, Pelasgus, King of Argos, has agreed to help Danaus and his daughters find sanctuary in Argos, to escape Aegyptus and his fifty sons. Danaus next asks for an escort to the temple altars, because

μορφῆς δ' οὐχ ὁμοίολος φύσις.
 Νεῖλος γὰρ οὐχ ὅμοιον Ἴνῳ γένος
 τρέφει.⁴

4

Aeschylus The Suppliant Maidens 496-8. "Nature made my shape unlike to yours, even as the Nile and the Inachus bear no resemblance in their nurture." Translated by S. G. Benardete in The Complete Greek Tragedies, edited by David Grene and Richmond

It is not immediately clear what Aeschylus is saying, but the general idea seems to be that the appearance of a foreigner is not the same as that of the native of a country. Beardslee explains this as the "'nature' of the body, as one sees it."⁵ Heinemann translates Wuchs, Aussehen.⁶ Holwerda refers this to species which can not only be touched but also seen.⁷ The basic meaning of Homer's use of physis seems to be the same as this early use by Aeschylus.

Another use of physis occurs in The Persians, line 441. At this point in the play, the messenger is telling the Queen of Persia of the defeat of Xerxes at Salamis. He says:

Περσῶν ὅσοι περ ἦσαν ἀκμαῖοι φύσιν,
 ψυχὴν τ' ἀριστοὶ κεύθενεϊαν ἐκπρεπεῖς
 αὐτῶ τ' ἀνακτι κίστιν ἐν πρώτοις ἀεὶ,
 τεθνᾶσιν αἰσχρῶς δυσκλεεστάτῳ μῶρῳ.⁸

Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956) [This edition will be used for translations from the writings of the tragedians unless there is notice to the contrary.]

⁵
Beardslee, 8.

⁶
Heinemann, 92.

⁷
Holwerda, 64.

⁸
Aeschylus The Persians 441-4. "All the Persians, who were in nature's prime, excellent in soul, and nobly bred to grandeur, always first in trust, met their death in infamy, dis-

Beardslee and Heinimann treat this example in the same way that they treat the previous one: as "appearance."⁹ Holwerda, however, refers this use to the constitution of the body; he compares the usage with that of the medical writers and of Thucydides in the second book of his History of the Peloponnesian

War.¹⁰ Broadhead agrees in his translation: "at the height of bodily vigor."¹¹ A fine distinction does seem to be in order; and yet it does not prove very fruitful.

In the Prometheus Bound, line 489, Aeschylus uses physis in a context which is completely different from that of other usages. In this passage Prometheus is telling all the things he has done for mankind:

γαμψωνύχων τε πτήσιν οἰωνῶν σκεθρῶς
 δῖάρισ', οἵτινές τε δεξιοὶ φύσιν
 ευωνύμους τε, καὶ δῖαιταν ἥντινα
 ἔχουσ' ἕκαστοι, καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλους τίνες

honor, and in ugliness." Translated by S. G. Benardete in The Complete Greek Tragedies.

⁹ Beardslee, 8; Heinimann, 92.

¹⁰ Holwerda, 59-60.

¹¹ H. D. Broadhead, The Persae of Aeschylus, edited with introduction, critical notes and commentary (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1960), p. 129.

ἔχθραι τε καὶ στέργηθρα καὶ συνεδρίαι.¹²

Since this passage deals with the gift of the art of augury to man, there might be a note of "external appearance" in the use of physis here, for the direction of the flight of birds was one of the signs for interpretation. Dissection of birds was also used; although more "internal," this method still deals ultimately with the appearance of that which is under examination. Holwerda, however, has a different interpretation. He translates the word as "omen" and refers it to the usage in The Persians, line 441, and in Thucydides' History, II, 50. The basic meaning here is "power" according to Holwerda.¹³ He seems to mean by power the ability to do something.

In the Agamemnon, line 633, there is another unusual use of physis. At this point in the play the Chorus is asking the Herald whether Menelaus is living or dead. The Herald replies:

οὐκ οἶδεν οὐδεὶς ὅσπ' ἀπαγγεῖλαι τορῶς,

12

Aeschylus Prometheus Bound 488-92. "It was I who set in order the omens of the highway and the flight of crooked-taloned birds, which of them were propitious or lucky by nature, and what manner of life each led, and what were their mutual hates, loves, and companionships." Translated by David Grene.

13

Holwerda, 34.

πλήν τοῦ τρέφοντος ἡλίου χθονὸς φύσιν. 14

This meaning of physis, "increase," derives directly from the verb phyo, and yet it is unusual in that it appears only once in Aeschylus and seldom in the other tragedians. The meaning, possibly, goes back to the Presocratic philosophers, men such as Thales, whose principle was the water which is the basis for all growth. Perhaps the idea of "growing" is basic to "appearance": physis could be translated as "the way things grow."

The final use of physis occurs in The Libation Bearers, line 281. Here Orestes is telling of the fate that awaits him if he does not obey Apollo's command to avenge Agamemnon's murder:

τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐκ γῆς δυσφρόνων μνηστῆρα
βροτοῖς πιφαύσκων εἶπε τάσδε νόν νόσους,
σαρκῶν ἐκασταῆρας σφρίλαις γνάθοις,
λιχίνας ἐξέσθοντας ἀρχαίαν φύσιν. 15

Paley connects this usage with the "constitution" usage found

14

Aeschylus Agamemnon 632-3. "No man knows. There is none could tell us that for sure except the sun, from whom this earth has life and increase." Translated by Richmond Lattimore.

15

Aeschylus The Libation Bearers 278-81. "He spoke of sicknesses, ulcers that ride upon the flesh, and cling, and with wild teeth eat away the natural tissue." Translated by Richmond Lattimore.

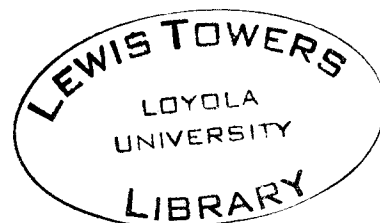
in medical literature. ¹⁶ Holwerda, Heinimann, and Beardslee give it the simple meaning of "appearance."¹⁷ This latter interpretation seems much more likely because it fits better into the general pattern of Aeschylus' use of the word physis.

With the little evidence there is to make a judgment, it is not very significant to say anything about the word physis in Aeschylus. The fact that he uses the noun and the verb (the verb fifteen times in the extant tragedies) so seldom is significant; but it is hard to say just what that significance may be. When Aeschylus does use physis, he almost always uses it in the general meaning of "appearance." This "appearance" may mean "the way things grow," to show the close relation to phyo. He shows some influence by the medical writers and by the Presocratic philosophers, but he does not exploit any of these meanings. Aeschylus is in the pattern of Homer and Pindar in his use of physis.

Sophocles' use of physis is a much more profitable study. Sophocles uses the word thirty-one times in his seven extant tragedies. His use of the word seems to be more

¹⁶
Cf. Beardslee, 8.

¹⁷
Beardslee, 8; Heinimann, 92.



deliberate and more precise. A survey of the meanings physis has in the works of Sophocles will indicate the closely related ideas which he expresses through the word.

Here and there in his writings Sophocles uses physis with the meaning of "appearance," in the same sense commonly used by Homer, Pindar, and Aeschylus. In the Electra the Paedagogus tells Electra that Orestes' running in the Delphic games was as good as his "appearance" (line 686). Oedipus asks Jocasta to describe the "appearance" of Laius for him in the Oedipus Tyrannus (line 740). Deianira judges Iole's lack of experience and her nobility by her "looks" in The Women of Trachis (line 308). In this last example physis takes on some of the tones of "nobility"; Sophocles exploits this usage much in other plays.

Sophocles also uses physis to indicate distinction of the sexes. In the Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus says of Ismene and Antigone that they gave all their "sex" could give: food, shelter, and devotion (line 445). In The Women of Trachis Heracles says that a woman not at all "like a man" has brought him down (line 1062). These meanings will have interest later in Euripides, who is very much concerned with female

characteristics.

There are other uses of physis in Sophocles which are much more important than the ones just mentioned. These uses have to do with the inner part of the person and not just his external appearance, yet there is a connection between this former meaning and the latter. Even the external appearance in the example given somehow reveals the person for what he is. When Sophocles discusses this inner part of a person, he naturally uses a word which is flexible enough to carry the extra meaning that a context will put on it. The word is physis, and the general meaning he places on it is "character".

In the Ajax there is reference to a "character" which is formed by training. Speaking of his son, Eurysaces, Ajax says:

ἀλλ' αὐτίκ' ὅποις αὐτὸν ἐν νόμοις πατρὸς
 δεῖ παλοδαμεῖν καζομοιεύσθαι φύσιν.¹⁸

It is interesting to note that there is also a physis-nomos distinction here, although it does not seem to be significant in this case. The important point is this: physis is something

18

Sophocles Ajax 548-9. "Break in the colt straight off to his father's rugged ways; train him to have a nature like his sire." Translated by John Moore.

more than is given in birth. It is developed "character."

This "character" is the result of various influences, such as environment and nationality. In the Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus criticizes his sons Eteocles and Polyneices because

ὃ πάντ' ἐκείνω τοῖς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ νόμοις
φύσιν κατασκευάσαντες καὶ βίου τροφάς.¹⁹

Here again there is a physis-nomos distinction, but it is not significant for our purposes.

The basic meaning of "character" develops into a meaning which signifies an individual's temperament, that combination of qualities which makes a particular person what he is. In this usage physis can refer to anorganic things (Oedipus the King, lines 334-5) or to people (Oedipus the King, lines 674-5). The meaning of this usage can be best brought out by two examples. In the Electra, Chrysothemis, referring to Electra's resolve to kill Aegisthus, wishes that Electra had felt the same on the day of their father's death. Electra replies,

ἀλλ' ἢ φύσιν γε, τὸν δὲ νοῦν ἤσσων τότε.²⁰

19

Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus 337-8. "In character and livelihood they are like Egyptians." My translation.

20

Sophocles Electra 1023. "I was the same in nature,

Here the tone of physis is that of temper, inclination.

Electra reacted the same in both cases, although she did not act. Another example is in line 674 of Oedipus the King.

Here Creon has reproached Oedipus for being out of temper.

Creon adds the comment:

αἱ δὲ τοιαῦται φύσεις
αὐταῖς δικαίως εἶσιν ἄλγιστα φέρειν.²¹

The same use of the word can be found in Oedipus at Colonus, line 1194:

ἕξι χιτέροις γοναὶ κακαὶ
καὶ θυμὸς οξύς, ἀλλὰ νοθετούμενοι
φίλων ἐκφοαῖς ἐξεκάρδονται φύσιν.²²

Sophocles is not satisfied with the rather simple meaning of physis as "character." His characters and themes open up the possibility of ambiguous meanings in words.

Sophocles realizes this fact and exploits it in his plays.

weaker in judgment." Translated by David Grene.

²¹Sophocles Oedipus the King 674-5. "Natures like yours are justly heaviest for themselves to bear." Translated by David Grene.

²²Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus 1192-4. "Other men like thee have thankless children and are choleric, but yielding to persuasion's gentle spell they let their savage mood be exorcised." Sophocles, translated by F. Storr, Vol. I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928).

Take for example a passage from the Oedipus at Colonus.

Oedipus is begging for sanctuary with the Chorus, but he is having difficulty because his identity is known. He argues his cause in these words:

καίτοι πῶς ἐγὼ κακὸς φύσιν,
 ὅστις παθὼν, μὲν ἀντιέορων. ὥστ' εἰ φρονῶν
 ἔκρασσον, οὐδ' ἄν ὧδ' ἐγίγνομην κακός;
 γῦν δ' οὐδὲν εἶδός ἰδόμεν ἴν' ἰδόμεν,
 ὕφ' ἄν δ' ἔκρασσον, εἰδότεων ἀπαλλύμεν.²³

Here Oedipus is fighting against the idea that he himself is evil, but because of his personal tragedy he leaves open the possibility of being evil from birth. The parents of Oedipus are the cause of his misfortune, because they knew what they were doing. The theme of the play puts the "character" meaning of physis in a new dimension, that of "birth" and "character" combined.

The use of physis with the "birth-character" meaning occurs a number of times in the plays of Sophocles. It is used to describe a slave (Ajax, 1259),²⁴ princesses (Ajax,

23

Ibid., 270-4. "And yet, how was I evil in myself? I had been wronged, I retaliated; even had I known what I was doing, was that evil? Then, knowing nothing, I went on. Went on. But those who wronged me knew, and ruined me." Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. Emphasis mine.

24 οὐ παθὼν ὅς εἰ φύσιν

1301,²⁵ and The Women of Trachis,²⁶ 379), and a youth (Antigone,
 727).²⁷ In all of these cases, birth in some way determines
 the character, whether it makes a slave of a man, a princess of
 a woman, or an "inexperienced youth" of a young boy.

Sophocles further exploits the ambiguity involved in the
 birth-character meaning in contexts which deal with family ties.
 The most striking example of this use is in Antigone. Creon
 is trying to win Haemon over to his side in his struggle with
 Antigone. As part of his argument, he says:

εἰ γὰρ δὴ τὰ γ' ἐγγενῆ φύσει
 ἄκοσμα θρέψω, κάρτα τοὺς ἔξω γένους
 ἐν τοῖς γὰρ οἰκείοισιν ὅστις ἐστ' ἀνὴρ
 χρηστός, φανεῖται κἂν πόλει δίκαιος ὄν.28

25 ἢ φύσει μὲν ἦν
 βασιλεία, λαομέδοντος·

26 ἢ κάρτα λαμπρὰ καὶ κατ' ὄνομα καὶ φύσιν,
 πατρὸς μὲν οὕσα γένεσιν εὐρύτου ποτὲ
 Ἰόλη καλεῖτο

27 οἱ τηλικούδε καὶ διδαζόμεθα δὴ
 φρονεῖν ὑπ' ἀνδρὸς τηλικούδε τὴν φύσιν;

28

Sophocles Antigone 659-62. "If I allow disorder in my
 house I'd surely have to licence it abroad. A man who deals in
 fairness with his own, he can make manifest justice in the state."
 Translated by Elizabeth Wyckoff.

The underlying supposition here is that the bonds of a family make a member of that family something more than just a part of it. There is a certain manner of acting, a submission required as a condition for being a part of the family. The emphasis on the family group is intensified by the contrast with the polis in the passage quoted. This same relationship is found between Polyneices and Eteocles (Oedipus at Colonus, 1295); between Electra and Chrysothemis (Electra, 325); between Electra and Clytemnestra (Electra, 609); and between Electra and Orestes (Electra, 1125). The passage which is the clearest example of the birth-character meanings connected with the family relationship is in line 609 in the Electra. Electra says to Clytemnestra:

εἰ γὰρ κέουκα τῶνδε τῶν ἔργων ἴδρις,
σχεδὸν τι τὴν σὴν οὐ κατασχύνω φύσιν.²⁹

The ambiguous use of birth-character as a meaning for the word physis is only fully exploited in the Philoctetes. In this drama the wordplay is very striking because of the theme of the

29

Sophocles Electra 608-9. "You may publicly proclaim me what you like--traitor, reviler, a creature full of shamelessness. If I am naturally skilled as such, I do no shame to the nature of the mother that brought me forth." Translated by David Grene.

play: one who is born noble and finds he must live up to his noble character. In the play, Odysseus recognizes the nobility of Neoptolemus, even though Odysseus himself is the one who is urging foul play.

ἔξοιδα, καί, φύσει σε μὴ κερκικότα
τοιαῦτα φωνεῖν μηδὲ τεχνᾶσθαι κακῶ. 30

Philoctetes recognizes this fact:

ἄλλ' εὐγενῆς γὰρ ἡ φύσις καὶ εὐγενῶν,
ὦ τέκνον, ἡ σὴ, πάντα ταῦτ' ἐν εὐχερεῖ
ἔθου, βοῆς τε καὶ δυσσοφίας γέμων. 31

Neoptolemus himself expresses the fact that will lead him to follow the honest course:

ἄπαντα δυσχέρεια, τὴν αὐτοῦ φύσιν
ὅταν λιπὼν τις ὀρᾷ τὸ μὴ προσεικόμενα. 32

Philoctetes gives credit where credit is due when Neoptolemus

30

Sophocles Philoctetes 79-80. "I know, young man, it is not your natural bent to say such things nor to contrive such mischief." Translated by David Grene.

31 Ibid., 874-6. "You have a noble nature, Neoptolemus, and noble were your parents. You have made light of all of this-- the offense of my cries and the smell."

32

Ibid., 902-3. "All is disgust when one leaves his own nature and does things that misfit it."

helps him instead of Odyseus:

τὴν φύσιν δ' ἔδειξας, ὦ τέκνον,
ἐξ ἧς ἔβλαστες, οὐχὶ Σισύφου πατρός. 33

With the background of ambiguity involved in the use of physis in Sophocles, it is easy to see the impact of such lines as the exclamation of Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus, when he is being questioned by the Chorus:

αἰνὰ φύσις. 34

Perhaps also connected with the birth-character meaning is the unusual passage in the Ajax, where the human realm is delineated. The definition of this realm has some connection with the human character resulting from human birth.

τὰ γὰρ περισσὰ κἀνόνητα σώματα
πίπτειν βαρείαις πρὸς θεῶν δυσπραξίαις
ἔφασχ' ὁ μάντις, ὅστις ἀνθρώπου φύσιν
βλαστῶν ἔπειτα μὴ κατ' ἀνθρώπον φρονῆ. 35

33

Ibid., 1310-11. "You have shown your nature and true breeding, son of Achilles and not Sisyphus."

34

Sophocles Oedipus at Colonus 212. "Dread my lineage!"
Translated by F. Storr.

35

Sophocles Ajax 758-61. "Whenever men forget their mere man's nature, thinking a thought too high, they have no use of their huge bulk and boldness, but they fall on most untoward disasters sent by Heaven." Translated by John Moore.

In sum, Sophocles uses the word physis in many different ways. The two main meanings of the word are "character," and "birth-character." The former meaning is found in a number of contexts, notably in passages which describe temperament. The latter meaning is always found in combination; "birth" (or "origin") is never found alone when physis is used to carry the meaning. This latter usage is especially colorful and fruitful in passages which deal with the familial bond. In these passages, the ambiguity between birth and character is not resolved but left as a point of tension to carry extra meaning. The usage is frequent enough and in such a way that Sophocles seems to be conscious of it and fully exploiting it.

Euripides does employ the "birth-character" use of physis which Sophocles developed, but he does so only once in the extant plays:

τῷ δὲ γενναίῳ φύσιν
ἄνολβα ταῦτά·³⁶

The plays of Euripides are different from those of Sophocles,

36

Euripides Iphigenia in Aulis 448-9. "The same pangs touch the high-born." Euripides, with an English translation by Arthur S. Way, vol. I (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930).

and this difference is reflected in the usage of the word physis.

A common meaning for physis in the plays of Euripides is "appearance." This meaning is the same that the word had in the plays of Aeschylus. The fact that Euripides uses the word in this sense shows some influence from Homer, Pindar, and Herodotus.

There are two ways in which Euripides uses physis in the sense of "appearance." First, there is a general usage, indicating the appearance of an animal or of a man. In The Bacchanals Cadmus says sadly,

καὶ τὴν Ἄρεως παῖδ' Ἄρμονίαν δάμαρτ' ἐμήν,
 δράκων δρακαίνης φύσιν ἔχουσαν ἀγρίαν
 ἄξω τῶν βωμῶν καὶ τάφους Ἑλληνικούς,
 ἡγούμενος λόγχαισιν. 37

At the beginning of The Bacchanals, Dionysus says,

ὦν εἶνεκ' εἶδος θνητῶν ἀλλάξας ἔχω
 μορφήν τ' ἐμήν μετέβαλον εἰς ἄνθρωπος φύσιν. 38

37

Euripides The Bacchanals 1357-60. "And Ares' child, Harmonia my wife, in serpent form shall I, a serpent, lead against our Hellas' altars and her tombs, captaining spears." Translated by Arthur S. Way.

38

Ibid., 53-4. "For this cause have I taken mortal form, and changed my shape to fashion of a man."

The second way in which Euripides uses physis in the sense of "appearance" is in reference to the beauty of particular people. In Orestes, Electra gives a short commentary on the beauty of such people as Helen:

ὦ φύσις, ἐν ἀνθρώποισιν ὡς μέγ' εἶ κακόν,
σωτήριόν τε τοῖς καλῶς κερτημένοις.³⁹

This remark is applied to people in general, but its source is one person. Euripides also uses physis to describe a particular person--Alcestis. In a moving account of her preparation for death, he says:

πάντας δὲ βωμοὺς οἱ κατ' Ἀδμήτου ὄρους
προσηλθε κἀξέστεψε καὶ προσηύξατο,
πτέρων ἀποσχίζουσα μυρσίνης φόβην,
ἄκλαυστος ἀστένακτος, οὐδὲ τούπιδον
κακὸν μερίστη χρωτὸς εὐεῖδη φύσιν.⁴⁰

In these examples of the use of physis meaning "appearance" there becomes clear the tendency of Euripides to describe the individual as well as the general concept with his words.

³⁹Euripides Orestes 126-7. "Oh, what a vileness human beauty is, corroding, corrupting everything it touches!" Translated by William Arrowsmith.

⁴⁰Euripides Alcestis 170-4. "Afterward she approached the altars, all that stand in the house of Admetus, made her prayers, and decked them all with fresh sprays torn from living myrtle. And she wept not at all, made not outcry. The advancing doom made no change in the color and beauty of her face." Translated by Richmond Lattimore.

A second meaning of physis in Euripides is "manners," "mores," "character." This meaning fluctuates from a simple description of manly qualities as opposed to those of women (Andromache, 354) to an indication of the inner character of a true woman (Bacchanals, 315). In the following paragraphs I will discuss these various meanings and point out the growth of meaning in Euripides' usage.

Andromache speaks of changing the nature of men to make it woman-like (Andromache, line 354).⁴¹ Orestes speaks of mortal natures as fraught with confusion (Electra, 368).⁴² Achilles speaks of keeping his nature free to fight with honor (Iphigenia in Aulis, 930).⁴³ These meanings come out more clearly when compared with two passages where physis is used in the same way. In Iphigenia in Aulis, the Chorus says,

διάφοροι δὲ φύσεις βροτῶν,

41 οὐ χρῆ' πὶ μικροῖς μεγάλα πορύνειν κακὰ
οὐδ', εἰ γυναῖκας ἔσμεν ἀτηρὸν κακόν,
ἄνδρας γυναῖξιν ἐξομοιοῦσθαι φύσιν.

42 φρσ.

οὐκ ἔστ' ἀκριβὲς οὐδὲν εἰς εὐάνδρσαν·
ἔχουσι γὰρ παραγμὸν αἱ φύσεις βροτῶν.

43 ἄλλ', ἐνθάδ' ἐν τροφαί, τ' ἐλευθέραν φύσιν
παρέχων, Ἄρη τὸ κατ' ἔμε κοσμήσω δορί.

διαφοροὶ δὲ τρόποι· τὸ δ' ὁρ-
θῶς ἐσθλὸν σαφὲς αἰεὶ. 44

The context here is an ethical one, and in it the variety of possible meanings ranging from "manners" to "character" becomes clear. Hecuba comments on the mores of men in the following way:

οὔκουν δεινόν, εἰ γῆ μὲν κακῆ
τυχοῦσα καιροῦ θεόθεν εὖ στάχυ φέρει,
χρηστὴ δ' ἀμαρτοῦσ' ὄν, χρεῶν αὐτὴν τυχεῖν
κακὸν δίδασσι καρπὸν; ἀνθρώποις δ' αἰεὶ
ὁ μὲν πονηρὸς οὐδὲν ἄλλο πλὴν κακός,
ὁ δ' ἐσθλός, οὐδε συμφορᾶς ὑπο
φύσιν διέφθειρ', ἀλλὰ χρηστὲς ἐστ' αἰεὶ; 45

It is the second use of the English word "nature" in this passage which is of concern here. In referring to the ethical context it includes meanings from "manners" to "character."

Euripides uses physis in the sense of "character"

44

Euripides Iphigenia in Aulis 558-60. "Many are the natures of men, various their manners of living, yet a straight path is always the right one." Translated by Charles R. Walker.

45

Euripides Hecuba 592-8. "But how strange it seems. Even worthless ground, given a gentle push from heaven, will harvest well, while fertile soil, starved of what it needs, bears badly. But human nature never seems to change; evil stays itself, evil to the end, and goodness good, its nature uncorrupted by any shock or blow, always the same enduring excellence." Translated by William Arrowsmith.

when describing individuals. Odysseus says to the Chorus before entering the cave to wound the Cyclops,

πάλαί μὲν ᾔδη σ' ὄντα τοιοῦτον φύσει,
νῦν δ' οἶδ' ἀμεινον.⁴⁶

Iolaus says,

ἀλλ' οἶδ' ἐγὼ τὸ τῶνδε λῆμα καὶ φύσιν·
θνήσκειν θελήσους· ἡ γὰρ αἰσχύνῃ πάρος
τοῦ ζῆν παρ' ἑσθλοῖς ἀνδράσιν νομίζεται.⁴⁷

Achilles says to Iphigenia,

μᾶλλον δὲ λέκτρων σῶν πόθος μ' ἐσέρχεται,
εἰς τὴν φύσιν βλέψαντα· γενναία γὰρ εἶ.⁴⁸

In all of these examples there is reference to the character of the individual, whether good or bad. Perhaps the most pointed instance of this usage, though, is in the Medea. The point where the passage occurs in the play is crucial. Medea has killed her children and appears in a chariot above

⁴⁶ Euripides Cyclops 649-50. "I knew from that first what sort you were, and now I know it better." Translated by William Arrowsmith.

⁴⁷ Euripides The Children of Hercules 199-201. "Nay, her son's nature know I, know their mood: they will die sooner; for in brave men's eyes the honour that fears shame is more than life." Translated by Arthur S. Way.

⁴⁸

Euripides Iphigenia in Aulis 1410-11. "Yet love for you now thrills me through the more that I have seen your nature, noble heart." Translated by Arthur S. Way.

the house to elude Jason. In his helpless anger Jason begins to realize what kind of woman he has married and says,

οὐκ ἔστιν ἦτις τοῦτ' ἂν Ἑλληνίς γυνή
 ἔτλη ποθ', ὅν γε πρόσθεν ἤξιουν ἐγὼ
 γῆμαί σε, κῆδος ἐχθρὸν ὀλεθριὸν τ' ἐμοί,
 Λαίαναν, οὐ γυναῖκα, τῆς τυρσηνίδος
 Σκύλλης ἔχουσαν ἀγριωτέραν φύσιν.⁴⁹

Medea's character is as unique as it is incredible.

Physis in Euripides sometimes describes the innermost part of a person. In this usage the meaning of "character" has its strongest connotation. Orestes says,

οὔδε γὰρ ὄρου
 μᾶλλον βραχίων σθεναρὸς ἀσθενοῦς μένει.
 ἐν τῇ φύσει δὲ τοῦτο κὰν εὐψυχία.⁵⁰

Electra says to the dead Aegisthus,

τὰ δ' οὐδὲν εἰ μὴ βραχὺν ὀμιλῆσαι χρόνον.
 ἢ γὰρ φύσις βέβαιος, οὐ τὰ χρήματα.⁵¹

49

Euripides Medea 1339-43. "There is no Greek woman who would have dared such deeds, out of all those whom I passed over and chose you to marry instead, a bitter destructive match, a monster, not a woman, having a nature wilder than that of Scylla in the Tuscan sea." Translated by Rex Warner.

50

Euripides Electra 388-90. "Nor bides the strong arm staunchlier than the weak in fight; but this of nature's inborn courage springs." Translated by Arthur S. Way.

51

Ibid., 940-1. "Nought wealth is, save for fleeting fellowship. 'Tis character abideth, not possessions."

This character which is inborn and permanent is something deep in the soul. Hippolytus tells Artemis,

ἄνοις διδάκτων μηδέν, ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ φύσει
τὸ σαφρονεῖν ἔληχεν εἰς τὰ πάνθ' ὁμῶς
τούτοις ὀρέεσθαι, τοῖς κακοῖσι δ' οὐ θέμις. 52

This character cannot be taught but is in a person because he is what he is. In The Bacchanals Teiresias says,

οὐκ ὁ Διόνυσος σαφρονεῖν ἀναγκάσει
γυναῖκας εἰς τὴν Κύπριν, ἀλλ' ἐν τῇ φύσει
τὸ σαφρονεῖν ἔνεστιγ εἰς τὰ πάντ' αἰί. 53

There are certain things which belong to man or woman or to individuals which are his or hers by nature.

In Euripides we find a new meaning for physis in the tragedies--"human nature." This meaning will occur later in the speeches of Demosthenes, Isocrates, and Aeschines; it has appeared in the writings of the sophists but only faintly

52

Euripides Hippolytus 79-81. "Not those who by instruction have profited to learn, but in whose very soul the seed of Chastity toward all things alike nature has deeply rooted, they alone may gather flowers there. The wicked may not." Translated by David Grene.

53

Euripides The Bacchanals 314-6. "Dionysus upon women will not thrust chastity: in true womanhood inborn dwells temperance touching all things evermore." Translated by Arthur S. Way.

54

in the tragedies. Examples of this meaning are varied, but they all show distinctions of men from other parts of the world. Speaking of the difficulty a young mare has in taking on a new running mate, Andromache says,

καίτοι τὸ θηριῶδες ἀφθογγόν τ' ἔφυ
 εὐνέσει τ' ἀχρηστον τῇ φύσει τε λείπεται.55

This example shows the foundation for human nature as a class in nature as a whole. Although nature here does not mean human nature, the contrast between humans and animals is present in the sentence. Electra laments her situation and comments on human nature in these words:

οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲν δεινὸν ἄδ' εἰπεῖν ἔπος,
 οὐδὲ πάθος, οὐδὲ συμφορὰ θεήλατος,
 ἧς οὐκ ἂν ἀραιτ' ἀχθος ἀνθρώπου φύσις.56

In Ion the Old Man asks Creusa about the Gorgon's blood,

ἰσχὸν ἔχοντας τίνα πρὸς ἀνθρώπου φύσιν;57

54

Cf. Sophocles' Ajax. 760.

55

Euripides The Trojan Woman 671-2. "And yet this is a brute and speechless beast of burden, not like us intelligent, lower far in nature's scale." Translated by Richmond Lattimore.

56

Euripides Orestes 1-3. "There is no form of anguish with a name--no suffering, no fate, no fall inflicted by heaven, however terrible--whose tortures human nature could not bear or might not have to bear." Translated by William Arrowsmith.

57

Euripides Ion 1004. "And these have some effect on men?" Translated by Ronald Frederick Willetts.

Phaedra tells the women of Troezen what she thinks of their common condition:

καί μοι δοκοῦσιν οὐ κατὰ γνῶμης φύσιν
πράσσειν κάκιον, ἔστι γὰρ τό γ' εὖ φρονεῖν
πολλοῖσιν. 58

Hecuba tries to persuade Odysseus to give her Polyxena by appealing to this human nature. The Chorus replies:

οὐκ ἔστιν οὕτω στερρῶς ἀνθρώπου φύσις,
ἥτις γόων σῶν καὶ μακρῶν ὀδυρμάτων
κλύουσα θρήνους οὐκ ἂν ἐκβάλοι δάκρυ. 59

In these contexts the meaning "human nature" takes on some of the psychological and moral associations of present-day language.

The final meaning of the word physis in Euripides is a most unusual one. In this usage the word means "Nature" in the sense of the single universal force responsible for physical movement. Beardslee says that the occurrence of this meaning in The Trojan Women is the earliest datable use

58

Euripides Hippolytus 377-9. "I think that our lives are worse than the mind's quality would warrant. There are many who know virtue." Translated by David Grene.

59

Euripides Hecuba 296-8. "Surely no man could be so callous or so hard of heart he could hear this mother's heart-broken cry and not be touched." Translated by William Arrowsmith.

60

in this sense (415 B. C.). The same meaning occurs in The Bacchanals. A look at these examples will make clear their significance. In The Trojan Women, Hecuba calls upon Zeus as Menelaus orders Helen to be brought forth:

ὦ γῆς ὄχημα κἀπὶ γῆς ἔχων ἔδραν,
 ὅστις ποτ' εἶ σύ, δυστόπαστος εἰδέναι,
 Ζεὺς, εἴτ' ἀνάγκη φύσεος εἴτε νοῦς βροτῶν,
 προσηυξάμην σε· πάντα γὰρ δι' ἀπόφου
 βαίμων κελεύθου κατὰ δίκην τὰ θνήτ' ἄγεις.61

Here the background of Nature which necessitates, Fate, becomes manifest. Hecuba identifies this fate with Zeus. The use in The Bacchanals is another example:

κούφα γὰρ δαπάνα νομί-
 ζειν ἰσχύν τόδ' ἔχειν,
 ὅ τι ποτ' ἄρα τὸ δαιμόνιον,
 τό τ' ἐν χρόνῳ μακροῦ
 νόμιμον αἰεὶ φύσει τε πεφυκός.62

Dodds' translation of the key line brings out better the

60

Beardslee, 4.

61

Euripides The Trojan Women 834-8. "O power, who mount the world, wheel where the world rides, O mystery of man's knowledge, whosoever you be, Zeus named, nature's necessity or mortal mind, I call upon you; for you walk the path none hears yet bring all human action back to right at last." Translated by Richard Lattimore.

62

Euripides The Bacchanals 391-6. "Little it costs, faith's precious heritage, to trust that whatsoever from Heaven is sent has sovereign sway, whatever through age on age has gathered sanction by our nature's bent." Translated by Arthur S. Way.

significance of this usage. "And to consider what has been accepted through long ages (to be) an eternal truth and grounded in nature."⁶³ Here there is the more philosophical view of "nature" which occurred in the Presocratic philosophers and which will return again in Aristotle. It is interesting to point out here that the Chorus in this passage from The Bacchanals has reached the same solution of the physis-nomos distinction that Plato did in Laws (890D): nomos is seen to be founded on physis.

In sum, Euripides uses many different meanings for the word physis. His major uses are the following. He imitates Sophocles in his use of the "birth-character" meaning but does not exploit this sense. He imitates Aeschylus in the "appearance" meaning, but he develops this somewhat by using it for individuals as well as humanity or other species in general. He uses the word to indicate the ways of men--their customs, their habits of action--and this, too, he uses in the double context of human ways and the ways of individuals.

63

Euripides Bacchae, edited with introduction and commentary by E. R. Dodds, 2nd ed. (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 190.

The usage with the meaning of "ways of men" is developed into the meaning of "character," the innermost part of a person. With Euripides, finally, two new meanings occur: "human nature," which is very close to the present-day use of the phrase, and "Nature," the equivalent of the philosophical use in the sense of the whole world.

In this section of the inquiry into the meaning of physis in the Greek Tragedians, I have tried to study the writings of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides to determine the philological meaning of the word in their plays. From this attempt the following facts have resulted. Aeschylus does not use the word in any developed sense but in the tradition of earlier poets such as Homer and Pindar. His major meaning for the word seems to be "appearance." Sophocles has a greater variety in his use of the word; he seems to draw on the developments in the meaning of the word which were taking place during his time. His most significant use of the word is by far in the meaning "birth-character," an ambiguous phrase which is purposely so in the plays of Sophocles.

The meaning of "character" for physis occurs without connection with the meaning of "birth" or "origin"; but

"birth" never occurs without reference to "character."

Euripides uses the word physis in many different contexts and meanings. He develops the meaning of the word by applying it to general groups, such as the human race, and to individuals as well. He uses the meanings found in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles; and he develops entirely new meanings, such as "human nature" and "Nature." He does not seem to emphasize one meaning over others; rather, he uses whatever meanings he can find to carry the ideas of his plays.

Such a study as I have attempted in this chapter is valuable but not complete for a full understanding of the meaning of the word physis in the Greek Tragedians. There must also be a study of the word in the light of whole plays before a complete picture takes shape. Such will be the task of the following chapter.

CHAPTER III

THE LARGER CONTEXT OF PHYSIS IN THE PLAYS OF AESCHYLUS, SOPHOCLES, AND EURIPIDES, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOPHOCLES

The meaning of the word physis has been the subject of the previous chapter. In the present chapter the objective will be to see this meaning in the light of whole plays so that the import of the word in the thought of the tragedians may appear. To fulfill this objective, I will take up various plays in which the word physis appears to have a significant meaning and discuss this meaning in relation to the major themes of the play. The general purpose of this chapter will be the same as that which has underlain this whole study: to attain a deeper knowledge of the meaning of the word physis in the Greek tragedians.

The first play for discussion is Sophocles' Ajax, which is interesting because of the unusual use of the word physis (line 760) in the meaning of "what is natural to man" and because of the conflicts in the play between the human

and the divine. Ajax was deeply offended when he did not receive the arms of Achilles. In his rage he slaughters a flock of sheep because he thinks they are his enemies. When he comes to his senses, he is ashamed and goes to the sea to rid himself of his guilt. Too late Teucer, his brother, learns that Ajax will die because he has angered the gods, unless he stays in his tent for that day. But Ajax is dead by the time the searchers find him. The rest of the play deals with the argument over the burial of Ajax, with Odysseus finally winning over Menelaus and obtaining a proper burial for the hero.

The word physis occurs in a context of hybris--that is, in a description of a man going beyond his powers (lines 758-61)--so I will first discuss this hybris or pride in the Ajax and then point out what light this theme throws on the meaning of the word physis.

The case against Ajax comes to light in the middle of the play, when the warning that Ajax is in danger of death arrives by messenger. When Ajax left home, he refused to listen to his father's advice to seek the gods' help for victory. Ajax boasted that he would win fame without the help

of the gods. When Athena tried to help him in battle, Ajax sent her to the other Greeks because he felt he could handle himself with little need of advice (lines 763-7). Such boasting offended Athena, who sent the madness of Ajax which eventually caused his shame and suicide.

There is a disagreement among commentators on the question of the hybris of Ajax. D. W. Lucas is shocked by the arrogance of Ajax.¹ Cedric H. Whitman passes off the idea of hybris as a concoction of the chorus and states that a noble character like Ajax had to act the way he did.² The fact remains, though, that the action of Ajax is out of the ordinary; he is above men in his prowess and beyond them in his reliance on himself. It is this that Calchas has in mind when he says that men who go beyond their nature and think thoughts too high will fall to disaster (lines 758-61). Here physis has the connotation of that natural state of man in which he depends on the gods.

¹
D. W. Lucas, The Greek Tragic Poets (London: Cohen & West Ltd., 1950), p. 120.

²
Cedric H. Whitman, Sophocles: a Study of Heroic Humanism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1951), pp. 73-4.

The situation in the Ajax and that in Prometheus Bound are strikingly similar. In both plays there is a conflict between a greater power and a lesser power, although there is a difference between the divine Prometheus and glorious yet still human Ajax. In both plays the fault is in going beyond one's powers. In this respect they both point out the dependence on the supreme deity which Sophocles expresses in the word physis. There is a further relation. Prometheus describes what he has done for man; he has given them intelligence, the practical arts, security from the elements, language, control over nature, medicine, seercraft, knowledge of valuable metals--in short, all of the arts (lines 436-506). The implication here is that these things were not natural to man. In giving these gifts to man, Prometheus gave them some thing they did not deserve and thereby offended Zeus. The point here is that Aeschylus had a definite idea of what is natural to man. He made his teaching explicit. On this point, he is very much like Sophocles.

The theme of what is natural to man is the basis for the conflict in Sophocles' Ajax. That this theme should appear in the word physis is not surprising because of the meaning of "birth" or "origin" which the word usually has in Sophocles,

with the added connotation of "character." In the Ajax Sophocles is saying that man has a certain position because of his origin, because he is human; any surpassing of this position brings divine retribution. In the next section, I will discuss more fully the "birth-character" meaning of physis to see just what the import of this theme might be in the plays of Sophocles.

It is in the Oedipus the King that Sophocles depicts a man's search for his identity. In such a play there should plausibly be an important usage of the birth-character theme because it is in knowing his birth that Oedipus will know what he is. This theme does occur in the play, and it is vital to the understanding of the whole tragedy.

There is no doubt that Oedipus is searching for his identity. He is deeply concerned about the failure of the crops and the bad omens. He wants to find out the cause, so he sends Creon to the oracle at Pytho. When Oedipus hears that the murderers of Laius must be punished, he begins an investigation to find out who they are. He does everything he can to discover the murderers; finally he summons Teiresias. It is when Teiresias makes his accusation that Oedipus' search for his own identity instead of the identity of the murderers really begins. Jocasta

enters and tries to smooth over the argument; but in her attempt she mentions Laius' murder where the three roads meet, a place which Oedipus vividly remembers. The second turning point in the play and in Oedipus' knowledge of himself occurs when the Corinthian Messenger reveals that Polybus was not the father of Oedipus. Jocasta quickly realizes the truth, but she cannot stop Oedipus from continuing his search for identity. In a reckless passage (lines 1076-85) he declares his determination to find out his ancestry. He proclaims himself a child of fortune and considers it a matter of breeding to find out the secret of his birth. Oedipus is so set in getting the complete truth that he is willing to use force on the old herdsman to get it. When Oedipus knows the whole story, he knows who he is.

As Kirkwood mentions, there is a linear development in the play as the nature of Oedipus emerges through revelations.³ It is in relation to Creon, Jocasta, and Teiresias that the present character of Oedipus and his origin come to light. From each he demands information about his identity, and through the unintended contributions of all of them he discovers who he is.

³
Gordon MacDonald Kirkwood, A Study of Sophoclean Drama (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1958), p. 55.

As Webster points out, physis for Sophocles implies growth that comes from a seed.⁴ Sophocles thinks that the seed is sown by the father and not by the mother. So the child will usually inherit the physis--the characteristics--of the father. If Oedipus can know his father, he can know himself. In the beginning of the play, Oedipus' problem is the people's problem; but as the play progresses and especially when Oedipus discovers that Polybus is not his father, his problem becomes very personal. He has two questions which he must answer: who am I and from whom did I come?

Sophocles does not use the noun physis to carry the meaning of Oedipus' search for identity in his origin, although the places where the noun does occur are poignant if they are read in the light of the full meaning the word can carry. In his use of the verb, though, Sophocles exploits the possibilities of meaning. The word phyein occurs in key passages: where there is reference to the birth of Oedipus (lines 435-8); where Oedipus finds out that Polybus was not his father (line 1019); where Teiresias taunts Oedipus by saying that he was born strongest in

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T. B. L. Webster, An Introduction to Sophocles (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1936), p. 47.

riddle-answering (line 440); where Oedipus calls Creon "ill-born" (line 627) and later asks if he himself is "ill-born" (line 822); where Oedipus realizes who he is--a wretch in birth (line 1184); where Oedipus calls Fortune his mother (line 1082); where he refers to his marriage to his mother (line 1361). The constant repetitions have their effect; together with the constant questions of Oedipus they build the theme of search for origin.

In the Oedipus at Colonus, the situation is completely different. Oedipus is no longer searching for his identity; he knows only too well who he is. He calls his lineage dreadful (line 212). Yet this is not a play about the miserable Oedipus. The oracle has vindicated Oedipus. He can bless those who are loyal to him and curse those who are his enemies. Oedipus is noble and triumphant. This is the theme of the Oedipus at Colonus. The play is an illustration of a theme instead of the linear development of one.⁵

The play is a successful demonstration of the nobility of one who has gone through much suffering. At the end of his life Oedipus shows his character, his breeding; and he does this

⁵
Kirkwood, 60.

in contrast to and comparison with the lesser characters around him. The word physis indicates this character. His sons do things in the Egyptian manner; they will not get a blessing (lines 337-8). His daughters have done everything that their sex can do; they will get a blessing (lines 445-7). Oedipus does not use the word physis to describe his own character, but the idea is there all the same. He is noble up to the very end.

There are two currents in the play, one pointing to the guilt of Oedipus, the other to his ultimate vindication. Oedipus argues to vindicate himself of the guilt (lines 270-4), yet he admits he is still the victim of an ancient curse (line 596). Oedipus' argument against his guilt is interesting; he says that he cannot be evil in character (physis), because he simply did something for which he would not be guilty even if he knew what he was doing-protect himself when Laius struck him with the goad (lines 270-4). Oedipus is personally innocent, yet he suffers. His character reveals itself best in his reaction to his state. He humbly accepts it and thus receives vindication from the gods. Notice the contrast with the theme of the Ajax. There an arrogant warrior fell before the gods on whom he depended not at all; here a humble old man meets the deity to whom

he has submitted. It is the physis of the two men which is the common bond between the plays and the point of difference between the two men.

If the Oedipus at Colonus is anything, it is a portrayal of the nobility of Oedipus' character. It is the other side of the coin which is Oedipus. In the Oedipus the King, Sophocles showed the search for origin; in the Oedipus at Colonus, he depicted the character of the man. The latter play is thus a demonstration of physis.

At first glance, the theme of the Antigone seems to be very different from the themes of the Oedipus the King and the Oedipus at Colonus. There is neither a search for identity nor a demonstration of nobility. But there is a connection with the theme of "birth-character" which runs throughout the first two plays of the trilogy, and this connection is in the idea behind the word physis in the third play.

The connection among the three plays is this. The origin of Antigone, her birth, her ancestry and partaking in the curse and noble qualities of her family, gives her a certain character which she follows in her actions. This character and relationship with the family determines certain laws for Antigone. These

laws are what might be called natural laws, as opposed to the positive law of Creon. Through character the "natural law" theme of the *Antigone* is connected with the "birth-character" themes of the first two plays of the trilogy.

Physis has different meanings for the two major characters in the play; this difference points up the basic contrast in the play and the exact role the word physis has in the "natural law" theme of the play. Creon extolls sense and reason (phronein). Goheen has well pointed out the imagery of phronein, the imagery of sight, and the imagery of nomos in the play.⁶ All of this imagery portrays what is peculiarly Creon's, and Creon himself implies that his knowledge comes with age (physis) when he disdainfully asks his son Haemon if he, Creon, at his age, is to learn from a young boy (lines 726-7). Physis here means for Creon how much one has grown. How this idea will shape his attitude toward right and wrong can be seen from the corollary of this position: the standard of right and wrong is the one who has grown the most. Creon does use an idea which will be important in the structure of

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Robert F. Goheen, The Imagery of Sophocles' *Antigone* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1951), pp. 86-93.

Antigone's position, but he uses it with his own peculiar twist. The idea is this: Creon remarks to Haemon that he has to keep his own house in order before he can expect to rule the city (lines 659-62). Here he uses physis in the meaning of "household"; however, he does not refer to the bonds of the family but only to the unit to be ruled.

Antigone's idea of physis is completely different. Although she does not use the noun in her speeches in the play, she refers to the idea through the verb and other words. When she is trying to persuade Ismene to help her bury Polyneices' corpse, Antigone taunts Ismene by saying that she will show whether she is noble or not by her action on the matter (lines 37-8). Antigone herself reveals her deep ties of familial affection by telling Creon that she cannot join him in hatred but only in love (line 523). It is in this last section that Antigone shows a family sense which has been with her during the whole play. She argues that her relation to her brother makes the present situation different from one of simple disobedience because the victim is her brother (lines 511-23). This idea is merely the simple conclusion of an attitude heavily devoted to the family tie

which comes up again and again in the play (e.g., lines 38, 45-6, 71-4, 503, 511-13, in which Antigone makes reference to the brother-sister relationship). As Kitto points out, the reason for Antigone's action is not desire to achieve peace for Polyneices' soul but more personal ones.⁷ He was her brother.

There is another direction in which the family bond causes action; this is the movement of the family curse in the fate of Antigone. The old curse on Laius for kidnapping Chrysippus, the son of Pelops, was still at work in the family blood; the life of Oedipus had shown the working of this curse, and the birth of Antigone herself was in incest (lines 857-71). Greene does not find fatalism in this curse but merely a readiness to refer to external causes what is unpleasant.⁸ The point still remains, though: Antigone recognizes a family bond even in a curse.

The theme of the family bond which appears in the

⁷
Humphrey Davy Findley Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1959), pp. 148-9.

⁸
William Chase Greene, Moira: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1944), p. 146.

curse on the family of Laius is similar to the basis for the blood vengeance which the Eumenides are determined to fulfill in the Oresteia. Because she is part of the family, Antigone shares in the curse; because he has murdered the woman who bore him, Orestes comes under the curse of the clan. The situations are different in that Orestes is personally responsible for the crime of which he is accused, but the background for both is the same tribal law which was current in Greece from 1000-750 B. C.⁹ Orestes, with the help of Apollo, eventually argues that it is the father who sows the seed and the mother who only nurtures it and therefore that the bond of blood exists only with the father. The point here is that Aeschylus does not use the word physis or the verb form to express this bond. In this respect, Sophocles and Aeschylus differ.

In the Antigone the physis-nomos distinction is incarnated. In her devotion to the family above all else, in her love for her brother, in her instinctive realization of personal duty despite positive law, Antigone well represents

⁹ Hubert J. Treiston, Poines: A Study in Ancient Greek Blood-Vengeance (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1923), p. 423.

the idea behind physis. Creon at times almost seems a caricature for nomos in his rationalistic view of things, his demand for respect, his devotion to the state above all else. The surprising thing about Antigone in the play is not that she thinks the way she does (for she is a woman) but that she is forceful enough to resist the authority of Creon and follow her convictions. The surprising thing about Creon is that he is hard-headed enough to follow his reasoning to the bitter end before he admits his mistake. In this way does the physis-nomos conflict arise.

Goheen points out the development of the physis-nomos¹⁰ theme. Creon states that a man can be known only in the exercise of power (making laws--nomoi: lines 175-7). He places the state in a supreme position. These facts give the reason for his law about the desecration of the body of Polyneices. Antigone says that the gods alone have the authority to make such a law. Under this pressure, Creon develops a view of the family which is based on mere physical generation and assistance by offspring (lines 641-60). There is no recognition of blood relationship as relevant to the law. As the male is

¹⁰ Goheen, 87-8.

dominant over the female, so the ruler is dominant over the state; thus nomos becomes a mere function of power (lines 659-65). As Goheen says, "The ethical relativism within this point of view is soon after brought to the forefront when Creon and Haemon split openly on whether the city is to get its rights and directions from one man or whether it belongs to the many and must include religiously ordained principles of justice (lines 733-49)."¹¹ In contrast to Creon, Antigone finds the values for action in what she is, her physis, and in the unwritten laws (lines 450-60). She values highly the blood-relation with her family. She sums up the difference between herself and Creon by saying that it is her nature to join in loving, not in hating (line 523).

Such is the physis-nomos contrast in the Antigone. A similar problem of natural law versus positive law appears in The Suppliant Maidens of Aeschylus, but there is not a similar exploitation of the word physis to carry the meaning. Sophocles however has discussed the problem in terms of the meaning of physis in the Antigone.

Sophocles makes use of the idea behind the word physis

¹¹

Ibid.

throughout the Oedipus trilogy. In the Oedipus the King he uses it to indicate Oedipus' search for identity. In the Oedipus at Colonus, he uses it to demonstrate the character of Oedipus. In the Antigone, he uses it to explain the character of Antigone--why she did what she did, her nobility, her devotion to her family. In the Philoctetes, Sophocles will exploit to the full the idea of physis as character which is dominant in his plays.

The Philoctetes of Sophocles is a play of character if it is anything. In it three very different men--Odysseus, Philoctetes, and Neoptolemus--form a triangle around which the action of the play moves. Odysseus is the clever man who gets the job done; he represents the authority of the Greek army. Philoctetes is a man who has suffered for a long time and through that suffering has become firmly independent; he represents the pole opposite Odysseus. Neoptolemus is the young man who is torn between conflicting loyalties in a test of character that seems impossible; he is the bridge between Philoctetes and Odysseus.

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Cf. Kirkwood, 144.

In a play which is a study of character the words which are used to describe the key figures are very significant. In the Philoctetes, Sophocles uses the word physis in key contexts to describe Neoptolemus, the figure whose character is chiefly under consideration. Odysseus himself recognizes the nobility in Neoptolemus when he asks Neoptolemus to deceive for just one day even though he is not used to it (lines 79-82). Philoctetes says that Neoptolemus' sympathy for him is due to his noble birth and character (lines 874-6). Just before he tells Philoctetes the truth about his mission, Neoptolemus says that everything is offensive when a man is false to his true self--his birth and character--and does wrong while knowing it (lines 902-3). When he receives the bow back from Neoptolemus, Philoctetes tells him that he has shown his lineage (lines 1310-11). In all of these examples of the use of physis, the double meaning of "birth-character" is present and vital to the meaning of the play.

The course of action in the play reveals how much the play is built on character with the double meaning of physis ("birth-character") as background. Odysseus persuades a hesitant Neoptolemus to help him steal Philoctetes' bow

by appealing to the young man's loyalty to the state. As the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus realizes that he must help the cause of the Greeks at Troy. In his attempts to deceive Philoctetes, Neoptolemus tries to give the wrong impression but he does not tell downright lies.¹³ Because he is the son of Achilles and a trustworthy character, Neoptolemus gets Philoctetes to give him his bow. The sufferings of Philoctetes move Neoptolemus much; finally Neoptolemus realizes that he cannot deceive Philoctetes any longer. Even though he has told the truth, Neoptolemus cannot return the bow immediately because he feels bound to the Greek army. He goes away with Odysseus, but suddenly he returns and gives the bow back to Philoctetes. Neoptolemus agrees to take Philoctetes home. His real character has asserted itself. At this point Heracles appears to tell Philoctetes to do the very thing he didn't want to do--proceed to Troy with the Greeks; but the main point of the revealing of Neoptolemus' character still remains.

The physis of Neoptolemus is his inherited character

13

S. K. Adams, Sophocles the Playwright (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1957), p. 142.

and the highest standard of conduct which he can reach. The concrete example of the meaning of the word which the play Philoctetes provides is a good summary of Sophocles' thought on physis in all his plays. It was the character of the person in connection with his birth which chiefly interested Sophocles. In the Ajax, the two Oedipus plays, the Antigone, and the Philoctetes there are fascinating characters whom Sophocles studies and develops with the intent of exploring their physis. For Sophocles, physis is quality, breeding, nobility, and worth of character which has grown from an origin as from a seed.

Euripides writes his own kind of plays, and he has his own use of the word physis. A number of his plays have themes which might exploit the meanings of the word which had been developed at that time, and Euripides himself might have followed the lead of Sophocles in developing the word and the idea behind the word. I will discuss the plays of Euripides in the rest of this chapter for the purpose of determining just what this last of the tragic playwrights did with physis.

Like Sophocles' Oedipus the King, Euripides' Ion is a search for identity. Ion, a boy in service of Apollo at Delphi, does not know who his parents are; Xuthus and Creusa

(the real mother of Ion) are searching for a cure for childlessness. Creusa tries to kill Ion when the oracle tells Xuthus that Ion is his son, and Ion tries to kill Creusa when her poison fails. In the end Creusa recognizes her son's cradle and thereby Ion, and Ion finds out that Creusa is really his mother and Apollo his father.

Euripides does not use physis to carry the meaning of this search for identity by Ion. He does use the verb to indicate the birth of Ion, his origin. The difference between Ion and Oedipus the King is this: Euripides does not exploit the word physis or the verb phyo in the course of his play. There is not the wordplay or the repetition of idea that we find in the play of Sophocles. There are not the two poles of birth and character to form the tense dynamism of Oedipus the King. Ion is a play of recognition, and physis merely points to the origin of Ion instead of taking a key role in his discovery.

The theme of the Alcestis is life and death. Admetus will never die if he can get someone to die for him. His parents refuse, so Alcestis, his wife, offers to take his place. She is brought back to life by the god Heracles, who

enjoyed Admetus' hospitality at the time of Alcestis' death.

There is some connection with physis in the theme of the Alcestis because there is a violation of what is ordinary.

Everyone must die, and everyone has a right to live as long as he can. Admetus tries to avoid this law of life through the exercise of his privilege, and he goes beyond what is natural in doing so. Pheres, Admetus' father, says as much when he explains why he refuses to die in place of Admetus: Admetus was "born" for himself, for good or ill (lines 685-6).

In that Admetus is trying to go beyond nature in avoiding death, he is similar to Ajax and Prometheus. But the parallel does not go much further because Euripides does not develop this theme as much as do Aeschylus and Sophocles.

In the Hippolytus, Euripides discusses a theme which is very much like that in Sophocles' Philoctetes. Hippolytus counts himself among those who have in-born self control (lines 79-81); he prides himself on this fact. The whole play is a confirmation of that self-control just as the Philoctetes is a confirmation of the character of Neoptolemus. There is a difference, though, and it lies in this: Euripides does

not exploit the word physis or the meaning contained in the word. Euripides, in fact, describes a character who is lacking something in his nature rather than one who is fulfilled in his character. Hippolytus resists the advances of his step-mother, keeps his oath not to reveal her passion while she falsely accuses him and kills herself, and dies because of his virtue. But his character is not developed enough to be a completely human one.

In his Medea and his Helen, Euripides describes the nature, the character, of two women. Medea is shrewd, helpless and evil; her character is indicated in contexts in which the verb phyc appears. The whole course of action in the play--from Medea's first helpless rage over the infidelities of Jason to her final decision to kill her children in revenge--has one purpose: to show what sort of person Medea is. Jason himself sums up what has developed in the play when he calls Medea a tigress and refers to her fierce nature (lines 1339-43). In Helen, Theonoe describes her own nature and uses this nature as the norm for deciding what action she should take in helping Menelaus escape from Egypt with Helen alive (lines 998-1012). In both of these plays there is reference to the

natures of individual women with some implication of a general application to all women, but the idea is not exploited to the extent that it is in the Philoctetes of Sophocles.

We may draw a general conclusion from the study of the plays of Euripides which are similar to the plays of Sophocles as regards the theme of physis. In Euripides the idea behind physis is not as operative as it is in the writings of Sophocles. The use of the word and the idea is of minor importance.

The Phoenician Maidens of Euripides portrays the working out of the curse on the house of Laius. It tells the story of the battle between Eteocles and Polyneices, Oedipus' children, over the throne of Thebes. Despite the intervention of Jocasta, the brothers duel and kill each other. The atmosphere of the play is one of the unavoidable process of Fate.

There is some reflection of this theme in contexts of physis in this play, although there is not much emphasis on this connection of Fate and physis. In trying to dissuade Eteocles from fighting his brother, Jocasta argues that nature made men equal and that it is inequality which breeds hate

(lines 528-558). After Creon has told him to go into exile to relieve Thebes of his curse, Oedipus laments his Fate which has brought so much suffering on him (lines 1595-1604). In both of these cases, the verb phyo is used.

A passage in The Trojan Women indicates that Euripides looked on physis as the determining law of Nature. Hecuba prays to Zeus to bring justice to the affairs of men; she wants Menelaus to punish Helen (lines 884-8). The significant thing is that she calls Zeus Nature's Law. The passage is not developed further in that play.

The reference to nature in a context which implies Nature occurs with greater clarity in the Bacchanals than it does in The Trojan Women. The importance of this passage lies in the fact that it is the earliest datable (415 B. C.) occurrence of Nature as a single universal force responsible for physical movement.¹⁴

Nature as a whole, as the equivalent of the cosmos, is a fundamental theme of the Bacchanals. The devotion of the women to Dionysus in the play is represented by a return to

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Beardslee, 4.

nature; the women go to the woods to perform their rites, dress in the skins of animals, and enter into a close communion with nature. The women and Dionysus represent a facet of human experience which Pentheus cannot understand yet which is real nonetheless. This facet is the irrational side of humanity, the passionate, the emotional, the feeling produced by wine and contact with the natural. The play is a presentation of the tragic result of neglecting the irrational side of humanity.

The meaning of physis in the Bacchanals becomes clear from a passage of the play (lines 893-6). The Chorus says that it costs little "to consider what has been accepted through long ages (to be) an eternal truth and grounded in nature."¹⁵ Here Euripides resolves the physis-nomos conflict by grounding the custom in nature. But what does nature mean? "To the Bacchanals 'nature' can, in the context of the play and of the ode, mean only the natural tendency to act upon irrational impulse in the herd. . . . It is the laws which the herd accepts and dictates which the Bacchanals recognise as eternal and as having an unchallengeable basis in nature; and for them, unlike Plato, man

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Dodds, 190.

is most himself when he is most like the animals, living for the day, catching the pleasure of the day, hunting and being hunted." ¹⁶
The idea of nature here is the wild, unpredictable nature of the world unmarked by the hand of man; the response of the Bacchanals is in perfect harmony with this world.

This meaning of nature and the natural is very different from the meaning used in the Ajax of Sophocles and the Alcestis of Euripides. In those plays the natural was what was congenital to man as distinguished from what was proper to the gods. When Ajax boasted of having power beyond that of men, he was guilty of hybris and eventually fell. When Admetus tried to avoid the death which is proper for men, he went beyond what is human. In the Bacchanals, Euripides is intent on developing just what is included in "the natural to man," and especially the irrational tendencies which most unite man to the world about him.

In this chapter I have attempted to give some of the background of thought in the plays of the three famous Greek tragedians insofar as this background clarifies the meaning of

16

R. P. Winnington-Ingram, Euripides and Dionysus: An Interpretation of the Bacchae (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1948), pp. 112-3.

physis. In the Ajax there was some discussion of the meaning "what is natural to man." In the Oedipus trilogy (Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone) there was a development of the "birth-character" meaning of physis in the light of Oedipus' search for his identity, his manifestation of his nobility, and Antigone's instinctive action because of the natural law which was within her. The theme of "birth-character" reached its full development in the Philoctetes. It is this play which is the best representative of Sophocles' conception of the idea behind physis. For him physis is a person, and his plays are attempts to describe different persons and the reasons which motivate their actions. Euripides' use of physis is not as clear as that of Sophocles. There is some thought background which forms a significant theme of a play, such as the search for identity in Ion, but the force of such themes is not vital. There are various points of comparison with the plays of Sophocles, such as the "what is natural to man" theme of the Alcestis and the Ajax and the "in-born nature" theme of the Hippolytus and the Philoctetes. The "women's nature" theme of the Helen and especially the Medea is similar to the treatment of the Philoctetes, but the emphasis on the woman's point of view is peculiar.

iarly Euripidean. There are other themes and backgrounds of thought which are peculiar to Euripides. The idea of Fate in the Phoenician Maidens is an example of the necessity which occurs in connection with physis in Euripides. Instead of dealing with personal character as does Sophocles, Euripides expands physis to indicate the whole world and its influence on men. This idea occurs again in The Trojan Women when Hecuba addresses Zeus as Nature's Law. The final development occurs in the Bacchanals where physis is the natural world, the cosmos, which corresponds to the animal part of humanity. In none of his plays, though, does Euripides really exploit the word or the ideas behind physis, except perhaps in the Bacchanals, where the theme is the naturalistic worship of Dionysus.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The history of physis in early Greek literature is full and interesting. The period from Homer to Euripides covers four hundred years, yet in this short time the meaning and use of physis developed much. It is possible to watch the thought of a people develop as the meaning of their words develop, and this fact is particularly true in the case of physis. As the study of the thought of a people will throw light on their language, so a study of the language of a people will throw light on their thought.

The word physis began its long history in Greek literature appropriately--in Homer, the great poet of the Greek language. The meaning of the noun in Homer is closely connected with the verb; in fact it seems to be merely a logical development from the idea of the verb. Things which grow have a certain appearance, which corresponds to a stage in that growth. The fact that physis is used only once in all of the writings of Homer does seem to be important. Was the reason for this the kind of writing

done in epic poetry? Or does this fact indicate that Homer's age as a whole was simply not interested in the meaning conveyed in the word physis? Another piece of evidence is provided by Hesiod,¹ who wrote after Homer. Hesiod does not use the word physis at all in his writings. This seems a bit surprising because he is writing about agriculture and the things of the country. For that matter, why did not Homer use physis in his sense of appearance to describe the heroes about whom he wrote? The answer to all of these questions is not clear, but it does seem safe to conclude that the people were not thinking abstractly in those early days. It was the vivid description of Homer or the account of the birth of the gods that satisfied the simple folk. Two and one-half centuries would pass before different questions would bother men and they would begin consciously to use words whose meaning had until that time remained latent.

During the sixth century before Christ, when some peace had come to Ionia under the rule of Cyrus and Darius, a few men began to wonder about the world in which they lived. This spirit of inquiry was not a sudden occurrence, for men had wondered for

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H. J. Rose, A Handbook of Greek Literature (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1960), pp. 33, 64-5.

centuries about the seasons and the gods and their political organizations. At the turn of the century (600 B. C.), Solon put in legislation at Athens which was to give that city its spirit and the foundation for its development; this legislation indicates the kind of study of law which was going on at the time. When men turned their attention to the world around them and left the practical affairs of human life, something different happened. There were no questions of how to handle a situation and how to satisfy a need; there was only one question--what is the meaning of the universe? To answer this question, thinkers like Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes felt they had to discover the source of everything. Once they and men like them had begun this study, there was no end to it. The search for the source of the universe became the search for the ultimate meaning of the universe, and that search is continued today in the science of philosophy.

In the early days of the Presocratics, the object of the philosophers' inquiry was physis. This word stood for the world which was under study, the world which blossomed and died and waxed and waned with the changing seasons. Physis contained all of this movement and life within it, and this "growth" had intelligibility behind it.

Physis was the most obvious thing to catch the attention of the earlier thinkers, and it absorbed their attention throughout the history of Greek philosophy. Thales gazed at the stars and said that water, the giver of life to growing things, was the source of everything; Aristotle discussed the constituents of the universe in his Physics and developed much of his philosophy from biology. Physis is an element common to both. Anaximander and Anaximenes proposed different things as the source of the universe, but they were both talking about the same physis. When Parmenides was subjecting the universe to his critical examination, he called that which he was denying by the name which he thought appropriate, physis. And he was right, because physis represented at that time all that Parmenides meant by "becoming." Later in Greek history, Plato would use physis in an opposite meaning--to refer to his real world, the world of ideas.² It is the impact of the sophists which makes this change in meaning possible.

The new ideas which developed with the Presocratics spread into many parts of Greek life in the sixth century before Christ. Solon's reforms in Athens and Xenophanes' attack on the polytheism and anthropomorphism of traditional Greek religion show the in-

² Plato Republic 367d.

fluence of the new ideas on the established order. But the triumph of the new was not a bloodless coup: there was a reaction by the aristocracy in the last part of that century and in the first part of the fifth century. One of the spokesmen of this reaction was the poet Pindar. He wrote of the glory of the moment of victory in the Greek games and in doing so he wrote of the glory of traditional Greece.

Pindar's regard for excellence appears in his use of physis and a word he uses more frequently--phya. The words describe the inherited characteristics of a man, his qualities. Pindar recognizes breeding and aristocracy, and he uses physis to help describe what he means by these institutions of Greek social life.

Aeschylus differed in outlook from Pindar. Aeschylus grew up in Athens first under the tyrants and then under the new democracy. Where Pindar looked back, Aeschylus looked ahead. The strains and problems of his changing world appear in his plays. He wrote of the danger of human hybris and divine retribution in The Persians. He wrote of the conflict between natural law and the positive law in The Suppliant Maidens. He wrote of the grinding mills of fate when there is a curse on a house in Seven

Against Thebes. He wrote of hybris among the gods and its ultimate punishment and made a god the symbol of suffering mankind in the Prometheus Bound. In the Oresteia he raised the problem of the blood curse and finally came to a solution of it. In all of his plays Aeschylus tried to reconcile the old myths, religious beliefs, and laws with the new knowledge and skills possessed by the men of his time. He looked to the future of a changing Greece.

Aeschylus does not use physis significantly in his plays. Perhaps he does not do so because he is a democrat and therefore has no interest in birth and breeding.³ Whatever the reason may be, the fact still stands that Aeschylus uses the word only a few times and then only in its simplest meaning of "appearance." There will have to be some sophistication in thought before the tragedians begin to develop the meaning in the word.

It is difficult to sort out the various influences of the sophists, the historians, and the medical writers on one another during the fifth century. Ideas are common to all of these groups and to the tragedians. The same is true in the case of physis. Perhaps the sophists developed the physis-nomos distinction first;

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Webster, 50-51.

perhaps Sophocles provided the real impetus to the discussion. It may even be that both groups were drawing on a common source which is lost now. For the sake of clarity, I will proceed as I have done and present a summary of the historians, sophists, and medical writers first and then discuss the findings on physis in the tragedians.

Herodotus was interested in everything in the world he found about himself, and he travelled far to learn about different peoples and personalities and animals and customs. In an age of increasing rationalism and scientific inquiry, he stood out because of his delight in stories and myths. These characteristics appear when Herodotus uses the word physis, as he does many times. Herodotus uses physis to describe the unusual things which he sees in his travels; this physis refers to all of the qualities of a thing, to that which distinguishes a crocodile from a horse, to that which typifies a river, a fire, or a man. There is little of the scientific exactness here that came in with the Presocratics. While other men wrestled with the problems of law and government and wondered about the meaning of the world, Herodotus saw as much of the world as he could and described what he saw, its physis.

The medical writers used physis in much the same way that Herodotus did. They used the word to describe the patient as he appeared to them. Thus the word came to mean the "constitution," the "temperament," the "disposition" of the patient. This is a usage peculiar to the medical writers.

The last half of the fifth century was the golden age of Athenian political life. It was the age of Pericles and the democracy. The life of the city-state was the center of attention for most people, and the political life was the goal and ambition of many. In this atmosphere a group of men whom we now call the sophists appeared and claimed to teach "wisdom." Theirs was especially a political wisdom, and the goal of their education was the political life which was so important in that day. They discussed education and its methods, man and his nature, persuasion and truth. Their teaching was not so much a philosophy as a humanism.

Throughout the remnants of sophistic literature, from Protagoras to Hippias, there are certain common themes. Man is educable. Truth is different from the appearance of truth. There is a deep dichotomy in things which must be resolved-- physis and nomos. Different sophists studied different things:

Hippias discussed law, Prodicus discussed cultural history, and Gorgias discussed truth. All found the dichotomy between physis and nomos and used it in their teaching. The physis of man can be educated; it is not the "character" which one receives at birth, as it is in Pindar. The aristocratic idea of nature gives way to a concern for human nature--what it is and what it can tell man about himself. This idea of human nature was very important; in Jaeger's words, "It was a great and funda-⁴mental discovery of the Greek mind." Thus it was that the interest of the sophists with man and his affairs helped develop Greek thought and prepare the foundation for the age of Plato.

Thucydides wrote at the same time that the sophists spoke, and he shows a sensitivity to their ideas. He had a much narrower scope than Herodotus, but he saw what he did see more deeply. He wrote of mankind in the city-state he knew so well--Athens. His view of man was not the teacher's view of the sophists; he saw man in the context of the Peloponnesian War which formed the subject of his history. Thus his concern is more with the moral and social nature of man than with his

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Werner Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, translated from the second German edition by Gilbert Highet (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1939), p. 304.

human nature. His ideas on man's nature appear when he describes history as endlessly recurring because of the constant nature of man.

Thucydides shows his connection with the sophists when he applies the idea of physis in its logical political extreme in the Melian Dialogue. The ideas of Thrasymachus and Callicles find political existence in this episode. They live on as a memorial to the fact that right has and can become the advantage of those who have physis, power.

Sophocles comes on the scene in the midst of things and leaves at the very end. He was writing plays when the sophists held their discussions on man, and he took part in these discussions through the characters in his plays. He wrote his last plays when the empire had fallen, and he shared some of the sense of Fate which was so predominant in the thinking of Thucydides. Above all he is the master of the great noble character. The people he depicts are living, and they live for the ages. Sophocles represents the highest successes of Greek tragedy.

The plays of Sophocles give a good account of his impact. The Ajax portrays a noble character caught in hybris and

driven to destruction by the gods. Some of the ideas of Aeschylus on justice and divine retribution are echoed in this play. In The Women of Trachis, Sophocles portrays another interesting and noble character--Deianira. Here again there is ultimate sorrow when Deianira kills the husband whose affection she is trying to regain, but it is a noble kind of sorrow which is worthy of a great character. The Electra delineates the sharp character of a strong woman. The Antigone depicts a strong woman also, but there is much more in this play. Antigone is trying to be honest to what she is; she finds difficulty in doing this because Creon, the representative of the state, opposes her. Here Sophocles is treating the physis-nomos dichotomy in his own way but along the same lines that the sophists treated it. The result is the vindication in death of the stand of Antigone. The Philoctetes treats of nobility of character explicitly; that topic is the theme of the play, and the word physis is used throughout to indicate the idea of "noble character." Oedipus the King and Oedipus at Colonus tell of Sophocles' most fascinating personality. They tell of his search for identity and his discovery of the awful truth, his acceptance of his lot and his final union with the gods. It is in his

last play, Oedipus at Colonus, that Sophocles reaches the ultimate in bringing to life the noble character.

In his plays Sophocles spoke most of all about character, about physis. If there is one thing which his plays have taught man, it is this.

Euripides shared ideas with the sophists, too, but stressed a different side of them than did Sophocles. Where Sophocles stressed the humanism, the harmonious development and presentation of man in his plays, Euripides criticized the world of convention that he knew and sorted out the discords of life. His characters are strong and challenging, and his plots are unorthodox. Alcestis, Medea, and Hippolytus are very much individuals, yet they stand for something more than individual. In one play passion rules supreme, in another the complete absence of passion, and in a third play the epitome of married love. As a rationalist, Euripides subjects everything to his analysis; but in his analysis he finds the irrational in man--his feelings and passions. In that he points out this irrational in his plays and stresses its importance, he goes beyond his rationalism toward a complete realistic view of man.

Euripides is a philosopher and a psychologist in one.

In the Medea he portrays the powerful passions which move a mother to kill her children; in the Bacchanals he describes the forces in women again but in connection with the uncivilized world of wild, spontaneous Nature. When Euripides has finished drawing the character of Hippolytus, he leaves behind the question: why is Hippolytus this way? Euripides probes the human heart with the human mind, and his results show the heavy imprint of the mind.

Euripides deals with ideas where Sophocles deals with the human spirit. This fact is no less true when there is question of the use of physis. There are many places in his plays where Euripides could have exploited the meaning of physis, but he does not. He uses the word in many different contexts with many different meanings, but he is more interested in the ideas than in the word. Where Sophocles will use a key word to probe the meaning of the human spirit, Euripides will use key **ideas** and a multiplicity of them. It is in these two tragedians respectively that physis finds its ultimate intensity in meaning and extension in use in fifth-century Greek literature.

APPENDIX

The Meanings of Physis in Greek Literature to the End of the Fifth Century.

Homer: "appearance," "growth"

Milesian Naturalists (Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes):
"origin," "growth," "source of origin"

Heraclitus: "the real nature of a thing" (as contrasted
with the popular opinion of it)

Parmenides: "becoming"

Empedocles: "becoming," "process of mixing and separation"

Pindar: "growth," "bodily being"

Aeschylus: "appearance"

Herodotus: "appearance"

Medical Writers: "constitution," "temperament"

Protagoras and Prodicus: "the natural"

Gorgias: "not-being"

Antiphon: "order," "equilibrium"

Hippias: "human nature"

Thucydides: "human nature," "power"

Sophocles: "character," "birth," "birth-character"

Euripides: "character," "Nature," "human nature,"
"manners"

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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by **Edward R. Sunshine, S.J.** has been read and approved by three members of the Department of **Classical Languages.**

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Sept. 23, 1964
Date

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Signature of Adviser