



Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ
Physis, Nature, Concealment, and Natural Change

Notes on Heraclitus Fragment 123

The phrase *Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ* – attributed to Heraclitus [See Note 1] – is often translated along the following lines: Nature loves to conceal Herself (or, Nature loves to hide).

Such a translation is somewhat inaccurate, for several reasons.

First, as used here, by Heraclitus, the meaning of *Φύσις* is rather different from his other usage of the term, as such usage is known to us in other fragments of his writings. For the sense here is of *Φύσις* rather than *φύσις* – a subtle distinction that is often overlooked; that is, what is implied is that which is the origin behind the other senses, or usages, of the term *φύσις*.

Thus, *Φύσις* (Physis) is not simply what we understand as Nature; rather, Nature is one way in which *Φύσις* is manifest, presented, to us: to we human beings who possess the faculty of consciousness and of reflexion (Thought). That is, what we term Nature [See Note 2] has the being, the attribute, of Physis.

As generally used – for example, by Homer – *φύσις* suggests the character, or nature, of a thing, especially a human being; a sense well-kept in English, where Nature and nature can mean two different things (hence one reason to capitalize Nature). Thus, we might write that Nature has the nature of Physis.

Second, *κρύπτεσθαι* does not suggest a simple concealment, some intent to conceal - as if Nature was some conscious (or anthropomorphic) thing with the ability to conceal Herself. Instead, *κρύπτεσθαι* implies a natural tendency to, the innate quality of, being - and of becoming - concealed or un-revealed.

Thus - and in reference to fragments 1 and 112 - we can understand that *κρύπτεσθαι* suggests that *φύσις* has a natural tendency (the nature, the character) of being and of becoming un-revealed to us, even when it has already been revealed, or dis-covered.

How is or can *Φύσις* (Physis) be uncovered? Through *λόγος* (cf. fragments 1, and 112).

Here, however, *logos* is more than some idealized (or moralistic) *truth* [*ἀληθέα*] and more than is implied by our term *word*. Rather, *logos* is the activity, the seeking, of the essence - the nature, the character - of things [*ἀληθέα* akin to Heidegger's revealing] which essence also has a tendency to become covered by words, and an abstract (false) truth [an abstraction; *εἶδος* and *ιδέα*] which is projected by us onto things, onto beings and Being.

Thus, and importantly, *λόγος* - understood and applied correctly - can uncover (reveal) *Φύσις* and yet also - misunderstood and used incorrectly - serve to, or be the genesis of the, concealment of *Φύσις*. The correct *logos* - or a correct *logos* - is the ontology of Being, and the *λόγος* that is logical reasoning is an essential part of, a necessary foundation of, this ontology of Being, this seeking by *φίλος*, a friend, of *σοφόν*. Hence, and correctly, a philosopher is a friend of *σοφόν* who seeks, through *λόγος*, to uncover - to understand - Being and beings, and who thus suggests or proposes an ontology of Being.

Essentially, the nature of *Physis* is to be concealed, or hidden (something of a mystery) even though *Physis* becomes revealed, or can become revealed, by means such as *λόγος*. There is, thus, a natural change, a natural unfolding - of which Nature is one manifestation - so that one might suggest that *Physis* itself is this process [the type of being] of a natural unfolding which can be revealed and which can also be, or sometimes remain, concealed.

Third, *φιλεῖ* [*φίλος*] here does not suggest "loves" - nor even a *desire* to - but rather suggests *friend*, companion, as in Homeric usage.

In conclusion, therefore, it is possible to suggest more accurate translations of the phrase *Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ*. All of which correctly leave *Φύσις* untranslated (as *Physis* with a capital P), since *Φύσις* is the source of certain beings [or, to be precise, *Physis* is the source of, the being behind, our apprehension of certain beings] of which being Nature is one, and of which our own, individual, character, as a particular human being, is another.

One translation is: *Concealment accompanies Physis*. Or: Concealment remains with Physis, like a friend. Another is: The natural companion of Physis is concealment.

Or, more poetically perhaps, but much less literally, one might suggest: *Physis naturally seeks to remain something of a mystery*.

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Notes:

[1] Fragmentum B 123 - *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* ed. H. Diels, Berlin 1903. An older reference for the text, still sometimes used, is Fragment 10 [Epigrammaticus] (cf. GTW Patrick, after Bywater; et al). If the first letter of φύσις is not capitalized, then the phrase is φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ

Heraclitus flourished c. 545 - 475 BCE.

[2] Nature can be said to be both a type of being, and that innate, creative, force (that is, ψυχή) which animates physical matter and makes it living.
