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ΤΟΥ Α' ΔΙΕΘΝΟΥΣ
ΣΥΝΕΔΡΙΟΥ
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ΦΥΣΙΣ AND ΔΙΔΑΧΗ IN DEMOCRITUS' ETHICAL CONCEPTION (Β 33 D-K)

SUMMARY

It is beyond doubt that Democritus ascribes great importance to the education; he, in fact, exalts clearly its role and function.

Nevertheless there are several fragments in which that role and that function seem sometimes to become vain. They are those fragments in which man's natural condition is directly or indirectly called into play. So man's life seems to be not only strongly conditioned by nature, but also quite closed in its network of «necessities»; man's actions appear ineluctably inscribed within the limits of his natural reality.

How could we solve this problem? A solution can paradoxically come out from the interpretation of one of the darkest fragments: the B 33 DK. Vlastos in his interpretation of the fragment gives some useful contribution to the explanation of its meaning. But if we consider in its entirety Vlastos' hermeneutic hypothesis, we can say that even if it explains many aspects of the relation φύσις - διδαχή, on the other hand it brings forth new difficulties.

Thus the problem is still open: what does Democritus refer to when he speaks of άνθρωπος and φύσις? What does he mean when he affirms that the education φυσισσωμεί? And above all in what φύσις and διδαχή are «similar», as in the first part of the fragment it is declared? It might be convenient then to start just from the explanation of the asserted relation of similarity, since also some other Democritus' fragments do not allow to give any definite and resolute answer to the above mentioned questions.

It might be hypothesized a similarity of function and a «dialectic» interaction between nature and education; in such a way it is possible not only a deepening of the essential concepts on which the fragment is structured, but above all it is possible to get meaningful informations on μεταγνωσία and φυσισσώμειν.

1. Undoubtedly Democritus ascribes great importance to education; he clearly exalts its role and function¹. There are nevertheless several fragments

in which that role and that function seem sometimes to become vain. They are those fragments in which man’s natural condition is directly or indirectly called into play. So man’s life seems to be not only strongly conditioned by nature, but quite closed in its network of necessities; i.e. man’s actions appear ineluctably inscribed within the limits of his natural reality. How could we solve this problem?

What relation is there between φύσις and διδαχή in man’s concrete life? We can draw some indications just from one of the ethic fragments, exactly B 33, which is simple in its formal structure but quite obscure in its contents, and sets down considerable problems of interpretation.

The fragment says: ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ διδαχή παραπλήσιον ἔστιν καὶ γὰρ ἡ διδαχή μεταφράσμα τῶν ἀνθρώπων, μεταφράσμασα δὲ φιλοσοφεῖν.

«in accordance with his personal example, first envisaged the function of education as a lifelong process...» (p. 460). Precedently, P. Natort, Die Ethika des Demokritos, Marburg 1893, had already remarked: «Einer seiner Hauptgründe übrigens ist die starke Empfindung von der Schwere und Verantwortlichkeit der Erziehungspflicht. Wie wenig er daran denkt, die Vorschrift der Enthaltung von der Kindererzeugung allgemein machen zu wollen, beweist grade der Ernst mit dem er sich eben doch auf die Erziehungsfrage einlässt» (p. 118); L. A. Stella, Valore e posizione storica dell’etica di Democrito, in «Sophia» 10 (1942), had pointed out that Democritus believes in the moulding value of education (p. 248); «egli riconosce pienamente tutto il valore formativo della paideia, che è il sommo ideale dei Sofisti e uno dei primi problemi centrali della cultura del suo tempo» (p. 250); F. Mesiano, La morale materialistica di Democrito di Abdera, Firenze 1951, had even affirmed that «di Democrito, in materia di problema educativo, non ci restano che scarse briciole che sono però il preannunzio di un nuovo ideale educativo» (p. 123). Besides, H. Langerbeck also, in Doxis epirhysmie, Frankfurt a. M. 1967, after examining some fragments pertinent to the problem φύσις-διδαχή, says: «Die Bedeutung der διδαχή wird dann durchlaufend hervorgehoben» (p. 67).

2. Referring to this problem, in addition to the fragments already quoted in Doxis by Langerbeck (p. 67) — B 278, B 149, B 183, B 277, B 59, B 182 — see also, but contextually B 297, B 85, B 56, B 109, B 57, B 192, B 61, B 53, B 242 and B 179.

3. It isn’t awkward to remember here that in Doxis, cit., Langerbeck affirms that within the ambit of Democritus’ ethics «ist die Spannung zwischen φύσις und διδαχή das entscheidende Problem» (p. 67).

4. In relation to this fragment, included more recently also by Voros — The ethical fragments of Democritus: the problem of the authenticity, in «Ellenika». XXVI (1973) — among the ones we must take as authentic (p. 206), see what says (besides Vlastos, whose thesis we’ll discuss forward) Natort, Die Ethika, cit., p. 118; Stella, Valore, cit., p. 250; Langerbeck Doxis, cit., p. 56, 67, 68, 118; C. Bailey, The Greek Atomists and Epicurus, Oxford 1928, pp. 197-198; Mesiano La morale, cit., p. 117 ff.; S. Luria, Zur Frage der materialistischen Begründung der Ethik bei Demokrit, Berlin 1964, pp. 13-17; C. C. W. Taylor,
So, it is structured in such a way as to offer in its first part a «general» enunciation, an assertion «of principle» that is to be explained or at least illustrated in the second part, which is not by chance introduced by καὶ γὰρ. Now, when we consider that such an asserted similarity between φύσις and διδαχὴ doesn’t tell us anything significant as for the object of our research, and that, at first sight, just what is enunciated in the second part seems to give a more pertinent indication, it may appear neither uncorrect nor inappropriate to separate the former statement from the latter, and to concentrate our attention only on the latter, at first. It will be seen in the following of our talk whether this separation proves to be really productive or not.

2. It is generally and not wrongly maintained that the chief obstacle to the explaining of the meaning of part 2 is represented, after all, by the two verbal forms μεταρρυσμοῦ and φωσιστοεῖτ.

The first undoubtedly gives the idea of the change that takes place in man’s life as a consequence of διδαχὴ. Education «transforms» man; but such a statement, when taken for itself and out of the context, sounds a little banal, because it is basically tautological: actually, is it possible to imagine an education which doesn’t transform man to a certain extent?


It is G. Vlastos who rescues us from the suspicion of banality, when he says that this «transformation» is suggested by Democritus through a verb that has a particular resonance in the Abderite’s talk: μεταρυσμεῖν, a verb which in his ingenious indication, also seems to reveal what the philosopher means, at least or particularly in this context, when he says ἄνθρωπος. Actually, Vlastos extends the concept of ὄσμος from atom-property to property of the atomic whole of soul, and maintains that «change of man» means here «change of soul». In other words he is sure, and he strictly says it, that μεταρυσμεῖν means the change in the ultimate physical ὄσμος of that whole, the change, by means of διδαχή, of the pre-existent «physical configuration» of soul-atoms; which involves, in his point of view, a change of man’s comprehensive βίος.

Vlastos’ thesis, which is substantially accepted by Luria, has in one way the merit of saving the democritean statement from ambiguity, but in another way it makes pleonastic what Democritus himself says afterwards. In other words it seems to us that when Vlastos concentrates his attention on μεταρυσμεῖν he somehow weakens the meaning of the following φυσιοποιεῖν. As


7. S. Luria, in Zur Frage, cit., p. 14 (referring to the first publication of Ethics in «Philosophical Review» 55, 1946), verbatim tells: «Wie G. Vlastos scharfsinnig bemerkt, ist die Seele ‘a specific atomic cluster’. Die Kunst (τέχνη), das Erlernen der Ethik (διδαχή), fr. B33) und die harte Arbeit (πόνος, fr. B 157, 182) rufen eine Veränderung der ethischen Mentalität hervor; ‘such moral change has physical effect, since it alters the pattern (ὁσμὸς) of the soul-cluster’». 
for this verb, which Vlastos points out as a democritean neologism, as a new and unique word in the greek literature, he can't but acknowledge only that «it suggests the force with which Democritus grasped the idea of 'human nature in the making'»

He therefore explains φυσιοποιεῖν by μεταρυσμεῖν and not vice versa. And he does it with a perfect coherence: since he identifies the «nature» of man with the configuration of his «soul-atoms», then education, while disintegrating the last ρυσιμός, originates a new one; as long as a διδαχή is carried out, man's nature will always be in transformation.

But what generates a certain perplexity in accepting «in toto» Vlastos' clever interpretation is that it makes even more difficult and not at all easier the understanding of the first part of the fragment. If the nature of man is, after all, to be identified with the ρυσιμός of the whole of soul-atoms, how can we explain that φύσις and διδαχή are similar? And in what sense could they be similar? From Vlastos' hermeneutical perspective only a dependence of φύσις from διδαχή results, and not a similarity.

And yet that παραπλήσιον must mean something! Indeed, and strictly speaking, when we lead «man» and «nature» to the common denominator of «configuration of soul-atoms», we should in the meanwhile exclude the similarity φύσις-διδαχή: the διδαχή seems to exercise an active role, while the φύσις only shows an attitude to receive in itself the effects of the διδαχή, that is to transform itself on the ground of its solicitations. Or should similarity mean here that nature, that is the configuration of the whole of soul-atoms, is not completely impervious to education stimuli? This would be really too little for such a term as παραπλήσιον, or, if you prefer, the term would be too strong for such a «faint» meaning.

On the other hand, it is quite hard to maintain Vlastos' explanatory structure and to keep in the meanwhile Democritus' affirmation of similarity. We could do it only recognizing to φύσις as well the power of modifying itself autonomously; but this would finally involve an uncertainty on the precise and specific role of the διδαχή in comparison with the autonomous action of the φύσις, or, which is even more important, it would involve a proper doubt on the result of transformation of man, in case the direction in which nature turns its own transformation and the direction in which an educational inter-
vention promotes this transformation are either completely divergent or clearly contrasting.

To sum up, Vlastos’ reading, however interesting and stimulating, does not dissipate all the problems but, on the contrary, it adds some more.

3. The reflections we have so far made, on the ground of Vlastos’ arguments, led us to a doubt on the effectiveness of separating the first from the second part of the fragment, and to the persuasion that even if the latter may have its own autonomous meaning, it cannot eventually claim it, since all what we may infer from the second part, is, directly or not, in contrast with what is maintained in the first part; and since, moreover, that meaning can’t in any way be used in order to explain what is asserted in the first part.

So, at this point, all questions are here once again: what does Democritus mean by φύσις? In what sense does education φυσιοποιεῖ? What does it mean that education μεταρνημοῖ τὸν ἄνθρωπον? What should we think when Democritus speaks about ἄνθρωπος? And finally: in what, and in which sense are φύσις and διδαχή similar? In order to get out of this jungle of questions, we’d better run along the most difficult road: we’d better try to explain directly the meaning of the first assertion of the fragment, i.e. to hypothesize previously a kind of similarity between φύσις and διδαχή; a similarity not only probable but able of accounting for what is asserted in the second part. Such a method almost seems to alter the substance of the fragment, ascribing the task of explaining to what (in Democritus’ intentions) had to be explained, and the role of the «unknown» to what was really supposed to be able to explain. But we could retrench this worry just conjecturing that the second part only represents a partial exemplification, without any claim or velleity to clarify exhaustively what precedes it. Anyway, there’s one thing we can certainly say: if Democritus used that unusual and hitherto unknown verb φυσιοποιεῖ, he certainly wanted to stress that education moulds man’s nature; even if it is so far uncertain to us what should we mean by «human nature».

4. So, starting from the reflection that in the above mentioned fragment Democritus emphasizes the strength and the power of the διδαχή in moulding man’s nature, we may then infer that the relation of similarity he points out does not concern the essence, so to say, of «nature» and «education», but rather their function. Therefore, the second sentence of the fragment, to tell it after Hegel, would be «one-sided»; it doesn’t enunciate the reciprocal one, but it certainly does not formally leave it out; indeed, implies it essentially. What is omitted, and left only to intuition, is that nature has the power to condition education, to mould it somehow, giving mediately directions to it, offering
roads to run and prospects to spread out. So, education conditions nature as well nature conditions education: in other words there would be a specular relationship between the two of them, which is of similarity as to the function and of interaction in the reality. Nature, the one which distinguishes the reality of a single man in a certain and exact moment of his existential history, would determine the kind of education, its effectiveness, and, after all, its effects.

This assertion may sound «strong» but not improbable. It could be perceived just by common sense also that as education «denies» man’s nature in the sense of transforming and re-establishing it, in the same way the natural requests, in a given moment, call in question (we could therefore say, in philosophical terms, «they deny») the already consolidated educational patrimony and promote a new and different kind of education. What a common sense-furnished man could hardly have explained in conceptual terms would have been that such a «putting into crisis», such a «denying» is something that does not happen only in the important moments or in the «turning-points» of human existence, but, after all, in every moment of man’s life, in every development stage of his personality. It isn’t therefore too risky to call a «dialectic relation» what Democritus designates as «similarity».

5. If any likelihood is acknowledged to this hypothesis, some interesting corollaries may flow out of it.

First of all, it seems to us that the meaning of Democritus’ ἄνθρωπος can be outlined with more precision, yet without refusing Vlastos’ suggestions. So, man would result as a unitary and well structured whole of the aggregations of soul-atoms and body-atoms; these aggregations, of course, are not «ontologically» dishomogeneous; yet, they are conspicuous for the request

9. On the theme of conditioning-power of education Voros, Democritus, cit., p. 469, more moderately says: «Teaching is not a ‘conditioning’ factor in the strict sense... but it is a ‘condition’ in a loose sense: knowledge, instruction, training can influence a future decision — life being conceived as a chain of decisions or actions within perpetually changing conditions. Education can create the frame within which a number of possible decisions are placed; but these antecedents cannot prescribe the one and only actual decision to be taken by a person at a given moment». But — as we can see — Voros speaks generally of ‘conditioning of future’ (he doesn’t deal, more specifically, with the conditioning of man’s nature by education) within the limits of problem of determinism.

10. Therefore rightly Voros, Democritus, emphasizes that «Education, as this idea emerges from Democritus’ fragments, is a lifelong function» (p. 462; cfr. p. 460 also).

11. Naturally it is almost superfluous to point out that we are only borrowing these hegelian terms as useful instruments for our work.
that each of them puts in man's concrete βίος, and interact without any solution of continuity on the ground of man's life. Therefore, in virtue of this interaction, man is not the «homo universalis» but the single individual, neither definable only on the strength of the already acquired features of his ψυχή, nor on the ground of the ones that distinguish his φύσις in a certain moment, nor even in virtue of the features of a «naturality» that he would have in common with all his fellow-creatures. The ἄνθρωπος is the place where διδαχή and φύσις constantly meet and run into each other, and where, now more now less, they continually and permanently make a new cultural patrimony, together with a new nature. It is a reality in unceasing transformation, only characterized, when considered in a certain moment, by an unstable equilibrium; that is such an equilibrium that the demands of his ψυχή from one side and of his φύσις from the other continually break in virtue of their dialectical interaction, until they find a new, temporary rest in a new harmonization, in a different but still precarious equilibrium.

Now, as the «cultural patrimony» is always in a condition of change, so is «nature» in permanent transformation, since man changes on the ground of the unceasing solicitations of both φύσις and διδαχή. And as it is inconvenient to speak about «one» culture, and less than ever about an «ideal» state of culture, but, on the contrary, about a continuous process of «learning», and of «acculturation», it is all the same impossible to point out a particular and invariable «nature», maybe congenital, of man, or even to speak about

a «human nature» that might distinguish the human species «universaliter», and supposed to be fixed, constant and «self-like» for the whole course of existence.

Besides, as the natural requests stimulate the re-creation of culture, the continuous formation of a new cultural order, culture itself does renew the natural requests as well, it opens the doors to new needs, in other words it remoulds the natural constitution of man.

So, Democritus’ statement that the διδαχή «creates» the φύσις reaches a particular and wide meaning: since the educational process is continuous, and never concluded, then the διδαχή does not «create» a «second nature» after the presumed congenital one, but after the one immediately preexistent; which means, in other words, that in the whole course of existence of a man the διδαχή «creates» infinite natures, or better, as many as the process of dialectic interaction will be able to produce. Such an assertion implies the reciprocal idea, which is not mentioned in this fragment, but which is not at all improbable: nature stimulates infinite cultures, or at least, as many cul-

13. Only Vlastos appears to get near this interpretation, when he affirms that «the nature of the soul is not fixed by the original pattern of the soul-atoms», and therefore μεταρρυθμίζει «must refer to a change in the ultimate physical rhýmamos (configuration) of the soul-atoms» (Ethics, cit., pp. 390-391). Most scholars talk about a «second nature» with regard to the congenital one. Cfr. n. 5. For example: Bailey, The Greek, cit., p. 198: «Man is born with a certain nature, education can remodel it into a 'second' nature»; Stella, Valore, cit., p. 250: «(Democrito) mantiene immutata la convinzione che per la formazione sia sostrato necessario dell’educazione la physis, cioè il complesso delle qualità innate, la buona disposizione naturale», «crede alla virtù innata»; Mesiano, La morale, cit., p. 117: «il filosofo... cerca di conciliare la buona disposizione naturale col valore dell’ insegnamento e dell’apprendimento, ponendo la φύσις a fondamento della παιδεία» (cfr. p. 121); Alfieri, Intorno, cit., p. 95: «L’azione dipende dalla natura del nostro animo, che può essere più o meno forte e capace. Per natura Democrito intende il carattere, ma anche l’energia fisica che può assecondare o ostacolare l’azione... L’educazione crea una seconda natura, con l’influenza che esercita sull’animo negli anni giovanili»; Lana, L’etica, cit., p. 206-207: «Democrito... distingue tra uomo e uomo a seconda della ‘natura’ di ciascuno: egli ammette differenze naturali tra uomo e uomo che nulla vale cancellare (B 267, B 56). Però accanto alla φύσις, ‘natura’, ‘indole’, il filosofo pone la τροφή, l’educazione»; Voros, Democritus, cit., p. 468: «Nature is the foundation for a man’s personality. Teaching can add skill and knowledge to natural abilities and perhaps modify natural inclinations and increase natural capacity»; Griechische Atomisten, cit., p. 495 n. 309: «Demokrit bestreitet, daß die 'Natur' des Menschen unabänderlich, durch Geburt determiniert ist. Der Mensch kann durch Erziehung eine 'zweite Natur' gewinnen». 
tural stages as the reciprocal action with the διδαχή will effectively be able to produce. May we properly presume that the well-read men of the V century ignored that the culture of an individual is not, nor can it be, restricted into the boundaries of what has already been acquired in a particular moment? They certainly knew, for example, the strict relation between the culture of a child from one side, and the specific requests of his age, his temporary inclinations, his real ability in acquiring and elaborating the data conveyed to him, from the other side.

Speaking in more general terms, man passes through different cultural stages, through numerous and various phases in the process of culture-acquisition, on the base of the action that his φύσις exercises in the ambit of his general βίος in the different periods of his existence and in relation to manifold and various circumstances. Nature necessarily conditions culture in the measure in which it orients the διδαχή, selecting the educational stimuli and soliciting specific operations able to satisfy his sensibility or at least more adequate to the needs which characterize him in particular circumstances.¹⁴

¹⁴ On the importance of the κατοίκος in Democritus’ ethical fragments, cfr. G. Tortora, Noè e Katòkò nell’etica democrita, in Democrito. Dall’atomo alla città, cit., pp. 101-134.

ΦΥΣΙΣ ΚΑΙ ΔΙΛΑΧΗ ΣΤΗΝ ΗΘΙΚΗ ΤΟΥ ΔΗΜΟΚΡΙΤΟΥ

Περίληψη

Είναι πέραν από κάθε άμφιβολία, ότι ο Δημόκριτος αποδίδει μεγάλη σημασία στην εκπαίδευση. Ἑξαίρετα μάλιστα σαφῶς τὸν ρόλο καὶ τὸ λειτουργημά της. Καὶ ὅμως ὑπάρχουν ἀρκετὰ ἀποστάσιμα, στὰ ὁποία δὲν φαινεται να δικαιούνται ὁ ρόλος καὶ τὸ λειτουργημα τῆς αὐτῷ. Πρόκειται γιὰ τὰ ἀποστάσιμα ἔκεινα, στὰ ὁποία ἀμεσὰ ἢ ἐμμεσα προβάλλεται ἢ φυσική κατάσταση τοῦ ἀνθρώπου. Ἐτοὶ ἢ ἀνθρώπινη ζωὴ φαίνεται όχι μόνο ἐντὸν ἐξαρτημένη (καθορισμησμῇ) ἀπὸ τὴν φύση, ἄλλα καὶ ἐγκλαιμωμένη στὸ δίχτυ τῶν ἄναγκαστήτων τῆς. Οἱ ἐνέργειες τοῦ μοιάζουν ἀναπόδραστα περιορισμένες μέσα στὰ ὀρία ὑπὸς φυσικῆς πραγματικότητας.

Πώς μπορούμε να λύσωμε αὐτό τὸ πρόβλημα; Κάποια λύση μπορεῖ να προκύψει ἀπὸ τὴν ἕρμηνεια ἐνὸς ἀπὸ τὰ σκοτεινότερα ἀποστάσιμα; τοῦ
Β33 D-K. Ὅ Βλαστός μὲ τῇ δικῇ του ἐρμηνεία τοῦ ἀποσπάσματος αὐτοῦ συμβάλλει σημαντικά στὴ σύλληψη τοῦ νοήματός του. Ἀλλὰ ἐὰν θεωρήσωμε στὸ σύνολό της τὴν ἐρμηνευτικὴ ὑπόθεση τοῦ Βλαστοῦ, μπορούμε νὰ ποὺμε ὅτι παρὸτι ἔξηγεῖ πολλὲς πλευρὲς στὴ σχέση φύσις-διδαχή, ὦμως δημιουργεῖ νέες δυσκολίες. Ἐτσι τὸ πρόβλημα παραμένει ἄνοιγτο: Τί ἐννοεῖ, λοιπὸν, ὁ Δ. ὃταν μιλάει γιὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπο καὶ τὴ φύση; Τί ἐννοεῖ, ὃταν βεβαιώνει, ὅτι ἡ ἐκπαϊδευσι ἰδεικτοποιεῖ; Καὶ κυρίως, σὲ τὶ ὀμοιάζουν ἡ φύσις καὶ ἡ διδαχὴ, ὅπως δηλώνεται στὸ πρῶτο μέρος τοῦ ἀποσπάσματος;

"Ἅσως θάταν πιὸ εὔκολο νὰ χρησιμοποιήσει κανεὶς ὡς ἀφετηρία τὴν ἐπιβεβαιωμένη ὀμοιότητα μεταξὺ τοὺς ἀφοῦ καὶ ἄλλα Δημοκρίτεια ἀποσπάσματα δὲν ἐπιτρέπουν ὅριστική καὶ ἀποφασιστικὴ ἀπάντησι στὰ παραπάνω ἑρωτήματα. Ἅσως νὰ ἐννοεῖται κάποια λειτουργικὴ ὀμοιότητα καὶ κάποια «διαλεκτικὴ» ἀντενέργεια ἀνάμεσα στὴ φύση καὶ τὴ διδαχὴ. Μὲ τὸν τρόπο αὐτὸ εἶναι δυνατὸν νὰ ἐμβαθύνει κανεὶς στὶς βασικὲς ἐννοιες, πάνω στὶς ὀποῖες εἶναι δομημένο τὸ ἀπόσπασμα καὶ, πάνω ἀπ’ ὅλα, νὰ ἄντληθοῦν οἱ πληροφορίες ἑκεῖνες, που δίνουν νόημα στὸ μεταφορμέων καὶ φυσιοποιεῖν.

Napoli Giuseppe Tortora