

Preface

Anaximander is famous for three things: ‘the boundless’, which he is said to have made the principle of everything; the surviving fragment of his book on those things that give recompense and pay restitution to each other for their injustice; and his conception of the Earth floating unsupported in space. In 1989, in my doctoral dissertation, I discussed the interpretation and translation of Anaximander’s fragment, whereas in my later work I have leaned towards concentrating on Anaximander’s cosmology. However, in all those years I have never really understood what could be meant by ‘the boundless as a principle of everything’. For example, an interpretation as current and influential as Kahn’s posits that ‘the ἄπειρον of Anaximander is then primarily a huge, inexhaustible mass, stretching away endlessly in every direction (...) the great cosmic mass encircling the spherical body of our star-studded heaven’, which ‘originally served as the ἀρχή or starting point in [the world’s] formation’ and ‘which must be such as to offer an inexhaustible store of creative power and material. He called this unknown world source τὸ ἄπειρον, ‘that which is inexhaustible’, and he identified it with the equally mysterious outlying body which holds the visible world in its embrace’.¹ But how do we imagine this alleged Anaximandean cosmic mass, lying outside our cosmos and yet serving as a reservoir for everything within it? I have tried to imagine this huge cosmic mass through the analogy of the all-pervading black matter of modern cosmology, which is also invisible but influences the whole cosmos by the gravitational force it originates. The more I have thought about this and other interpretations, the less I have been able to make sense of them, let alone the astonishing idea that such a bold metaphysical concept like ‘the boundless’ could have been thought at the very beginnings of philosophy, coming as it does

¹Kahn (1994, 233–237).

between such concrete thinkers as Thales and Anaximenes who are said to have taught that the principle of everything was either water or air. Another thing that has always bothered me is that several scholars assure us that the main concern of the early Greek philosophers was nature, and that accordingly their key word should be φύσις. However, this word does not seem to take a prominent place in the remaining texts of those early philosophers, with scholars also assuring us that the title of their works, περὶ φύσεως, was only given to their books much later.

In 2009, Zdeněk Kratochvíl and Radim Kočandrle invited me to give a number of lectures on Anaximander's cosmology at Charles University in Prague. There, I became acquainted with their ideas about the concept of nature in ancient Greek thinking and especially in Anaximander, a topic which Radim and I further discussed in email correspondence. In 1989, after a discussion of 'the boundless', I wrote (translated from the Dutch): 'Surveying the material discussed we may say that the ἄπειρον may be thought as a creative or procreative power', and ἄπειρος does not only mean "immense", but also "imperceptible".² Now, finally, I have begun to understand the full implications of these words. In *Heaven and Earth in Ancient Greek Cosmology* (2011), I formulated my first tentative lines of an interpretation that makes 'boundless' a predicate of 'nature' as the all-encompassing generative power.³ In 2013, Radim and I co-wrote an article, *Anaximander's Boundless Nature*, in which we further elaborated upon this interpretation, after which Radim persuaded me to write this book together with him. It is up to the reader to judge whether we have succeeded in clarifying to some degree one of the three issues that Anaximander is famous for, and whether he or she can agree with my conviction that we have formulated an interpretation of Anaximander's 'principle' that is both intelligible and makes sense, in spite of its contradiction of a long-standing understanding of Anaximander's metaphysics.

We have written this book in close cooperation and in continuous discussion. This holds also for the study of the intricacies of the development of nature in Anaximander, which is treated in the last three chapters, and which is mainly Radim's area of expertise. I hope we have even succeeded in throwing some new light on Anaximander's fragment B1, which is perhaps even more mysterious and harder to understand than his ἄπειρον.

This preface was written to explain why Radim Kočandrle, to whom I am very grateful for having shared his ideas with me, counts as the first author of our book.

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²Couprie (1989, 147, 149–150).

³See Couprie (2011, 94–96).

Apeiron

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