

FRAGMENTS FROM PHARCICLES¹

With Commentary

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I: The World is βεερ.

βεερ is evidently a kind of primal substance. It would appear, unlike Thales' water or Anaximenes' air-vapor, not to be one of the visible substances, but does it not seem strange to give what must be a proper name to the invisible real substance. And yet, since the word is entirely without cognates in Greek or any true Greek stem, it cannot serve as a description of the world-substance. Possibly, of course, Pharcicles has borrowed a word, and thus a familiar idea, from pre-Ionian writers, in which case much may be expected from the ultimate deciphering of Mycenaean and Cretan script. But, see commentary on Fragment VI below for possible religious significance of the use of a proper name here.

II: There is stirring, which is not βεερ, but the βεερ is first, for what would be stirred?

“Stirring” may mean simply “moving” or “motion”, in which case, Pharcicles is admitting a kind of second element, though he evidently tries to retain a monistic cosmology by maintaining the primacy of substance (βεερ). His argument is, clearly, that substance does not produce motion but is implied by it as a condition, for motion is always a motion of something. “Stirring”, however, has definite psychological connotations, though Pharcicles expressly denies, of course, the animacy of substance. He may have meant to imply some sort of active spirit, and “stirring” may refer to an intelligence or regulative principle not unlike Heraclitus' “fire” or the “Nous” of Anaxagoras. Notice, in this connection, the passive form of “be stirred”.

III: βεερ alone is βεερ, but from βεερ and stirring arises φοαμ.

“φοαμ” is another of Pharcicles’ mystifying terms, in regard to which, see commentary on Fragment I above. It has been suggested that he was intentionally obscure, like Pythagoras and Heraclitus, either out of an intellectual cult-snobbery or in order to avoid offending the religious sensibilities of the many. These two motives, of course, are not exclusive, and would, in fact, be complementary. See, again, Fragment VI for possible religious connotations. At any rate, the first clause of this fragment seems to suggest that βεερ is an inert substance in itself. Combined with “stirring” (or when “stirred”), however, it gives rise to φοαμ. If “stirring” means simply “motion”, Pharcicles is maintaining a materialistic view not unlike that of Leucippus (but see Fragment II above). For a more detailed consideration of the meaning of φοαμ, see Fragment IV below.

IV: φοαμ from βεερ and φοαμ into βεερ again.

This fragment is found in Isocrates, where it is cited as an example of conciseness and balance. Unfortunately, the passage of Isocrates’ is itself a fragment, and it is not known whether it comes from a formal oration or whether Isocrates took it from what was originally a written text. This is much to be regretted, since, if the former, this would add weight to the confirmation of Fragment VI, on which so much depends. As to the interpretation of the fragment, scholarly opinion is divided. Most hold that the “φοαμ” merely signifies transitory things in general; viz., the phenomenal world, and the fragment asserts merely the fact that this world is transitory. Possibly, however, “φοαμ” stands for mind or spirit. If so, it confirms the psychologistic reading of “stirring” (see Fragment II), and, in this case, φοαμ, arising from “Stirring” or, in our own terms, “emotional awareness”, may well imply mind or consciousness or organism. Even if “stirring” is not so construed, however, φοαμ, may still be organic life, in what must then be an interesting variation and prefiguring of Democritean materialism save, of course, that Pharcicles’ βεερ is not explicitly atomized. It is important to mention, in this connection, the important philological speculations that φ in φοαμ may represent an elision where a term beginning with an aspirated ο is preceded by επι. Assuming this, the puzzle remains about the speculative term φοαμ. It is, however, possible that the elision was preceded by a confusing and doubling of terminal consonants, as in the Eastern American “Long Nguylant”, which makes the original read, “επι φοαμ”, which, on the further assumption that the term was not invented by Pharcicles but was taken by him from familiar and already corrupted usage, may be a degenerate form of “επι φοαινόμεν”, which certainly fits Pharcicles’ use of the term, and would, in that case, represent the first appearance in history of that concept.

Mr. Bertrand Russell, writing in Mystical Logic ², points out that it is a matter of indifference to him whether one prefers the psychologistic or the merely material interpretation of this fragment; the importance of these first four fragments is clearly that the first two contradict each other, and yet both of them are required for the deduction of the third and fourth. Thus, what Pharcicles has demonstrated is that it is impossible for anything transitory or temporary at all, mind or matter, to arise in the world as it really is. “And of course,” Mr. Russell says, “he was right.”

V: Thales was a good man but he was temperance.

“Temperate?” But this is incompatible with the Greek Mind. Perhaps there is a paradox intended here, in regard to which see Mr. Russell’s opinion in Fragment IV above. See also Fragment III for comment on the obscurity and irrationality of Pharcicles’ style. Undoubtedly, however, this fragment is out of keeping with Pharcicles’ clearly defined system, and should be rejected as spuria.

VI: O followers of the god, know that you possess true divinity, for βεερ alone is truly divine.

This fragment belongs, unfortunately, among the Pharcicles dubia. Our source for it is Diogenes Laertios, who quotes it as part of the famous oration to the Dionysian revelers.³ There is some doubt, however, whether Pharcicles actually made such an oration. Even Diogenes, citing it as part of the tradition, admits that the oration may have been made by another man of the same name. It would be desirable, therefore, to have surer confirmation that Fragment IV, on which so much of our knowledge of Pharcicles depends, is in fact part of an oration, which seems to be suggested by the fact that Isocrates quotes it. If this could be established, we would know, at least, that Pharcicles was capable of and was known to deliver orations.

The fragment should not be rejected in any case, however, because, if genuine, it constitutes our only statement of Pharcicles’ explicitly religious views. The divinity of what is, of course, must have been commonplace, but it is nonetheless important that Pharcicles explicitly attributed divinity to his substance. Further, if the circumstances of the fragment are confirmed, something may be made of the relation of Pharcicles to the Dionysians on the model of that of Thales to the myth-cult of Ocean (Thalesa – “the sea”). The attribution of divinity to βεερ, further, accounts for the use of that strange term, since, if the system is construed in the light of theological as well as cosmological considerations, the appropriateness of a proper name for divine as well as primal substance is apparent. That God

cannot be truly described, of course, is not a unique idea in Pharcicles, though it points towards Oriental rather than Greek influence, which confirms our suspicion that the term may be derived from pre-Ionian sources. Unlike the Orientals, however, Pharcicles allows us to name the Divinity. It is possible, therefore, from this Fragment, taken in conjunction with what is obviously Pharcicles' philosophical practice, to infer a great deal of his philosophy of language. Clearly, he distinguishes between common names, which commit the speaker to a descriptive account of his subject, and proper names, which do not, and which, therefore, are not forbidden in Divine matters. This marks an essential difference between the philosophic, Greek temper of these speculations and the magico-superstitious mythic thinking of Oriental peoples.

It has been frequently pointed out by proponents of the Democritean or materialist reading of Pharcicles that his doctrine in which organism, life, and mind flowed upwards from the activity or "stirring" of matter, was isomorphic though opposite to the neo-platonic "overflowing" of God into matter. On the strength of this fragment, however, some have suggested that our philosopher anticipated both Plotinus and Philo by nearly five centuries. $\beta\epsilon\epsilon\rho$, these hold, equated, of course, with Being, and here with God, gives rise to $\phi\sigma\alpha\mu$ by stirring, a process of movement or emotion which, to the Greek Mind, connoted imperfection. Thus, $\phi\sigma\alpha\mu$, tainted by stirring or non-being (since $\beta\epsilon\epsilon\rho$ alone is), stands for the phenomenal world, human and material, in opposition to the perfection of Divine Being or $\beta\epsilon\epsilon\rho$. " $\beta\epsilon\epsilon\rho$ ", on this reading represents spirits. Far-fetched as it may seem, of course, this interpretation has gained some currency, and may, in future, seriously alter our understanding of these profound and profoundly puzzling fragments.

Notes:

1. I am indebted for the fragments themselves to the invaluable collection and German translation, Fragmente der philosophischen Reden u. Schriften der Altvorsokratiker, Farsikles, strengver-sammelt u. sus dem Grischeschen ubersetzt by Mannherm Leids, Berlin, 1912.
2. M.M. Notrun Co., New York, 1929.
3. It was at this oration, according to Diogenes, who disclaims responsibility for the story, that Pharcicles, inciting the revelers to activity, accused them of unwonted "temperateness." They, "misunderstanding his word", were incensed and drowned him in a vat. What they could have misunderstood and for what they might have misunderstood it is not now known.