

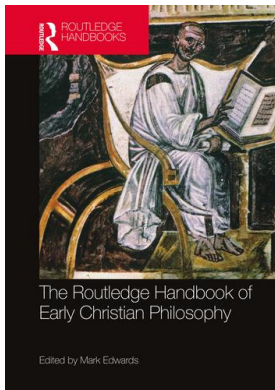
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Nature

Johannes Zachhuber

Introduction

For the perennial question of the relationship between Patristic philosophy and the Hellenistic tradition, the Christian use of the concept of ‘nature’ (Greek: *physis*, φύσις) is of unique importance. With the Christological definition adopted by the Council of Chalcedon (451), ‘nature’ became a central part of the Christian dogma; but by assigning such a foundational role to this term, the Christian Church adapted language that had been at the centre of Greek philosophical thought from its very inception. Ever since the alleged marriage between Christianity and Hellenism became controversial in Western modernity, therefore, debates about the legitimacy of the Christian use of *physis* terminology have loomed large as well, and Patristic authors from Origen to Gregory of Nyssa and Cyril of Alexandria have been accused of unduly pandering to this problematical heritage. The terminological and conceptual connection between the Patristic usage and modern controversies about natural law and natural theology have meant that these debates inevitably took on a confessional dimension as well.

This chapter will provide an overview of Patristic uses of this key term. No such account can be given without paying attention to the earlier philosophical tradition, from the Presocratics to the Middle and Neo-Platonists, but Christian debates will, nonetheless, turn out to have been remarkably independent of this influence. Their main non-Christian source was Philo of Alexandria, but from the second century onwards, Patristic authors, while obviously not sealed off from their intellectual environment, would largely engage with other Christian thinkers. In this sense, the history of the Church Fathers’ engagement with *physis* terminology provides a fascinating test case for the understanding of Patristic thought as an autonomous philosophy emerging as part of Christianity’s rise as the dominant religion of the Greek-speaking world during the first millennium of the common era.

An account of ancient views of nature is nearly tantamount to its history in Greek-speaking writers. *Physis* is a Greek word for which many other languages do not seem to have obvious equivalents. Most modern European languages, where they do not work with derivatives of the Greek term, have borrowed the Latin *natura*, but this was itself only coined to render *physis* and did not, for a long time, lose a somewhat artificial ring. Syriac and Hebrew writers invented technical vocabulary, once again with the overt purpose of translating Greek ideas

into their own idiom. Latin authors in late antiquity, such as Seneca, Epictetus, and Augustine, employed *natura* to develop their own ideas, but all major intellectual stimuli originated with Greek thinkers during this period. This was only to change in the Middle Ages and throughout early Modernity when Latin became the medium of theological and philosophical speculation on nature.

Greek philosophy

Greek philosophy began with reflection about nature. The fact that many of the Presocratic philosophers are supposed to have authored books *On Nature* (περὶ φύσεως) may not be historically accurate but evidently reflects the centrality this concept had for their thought. One may summarise the fascination this term possessed for Greek thinkers throughout the centuries by observing two main uses they made of it. On the one hand, *physis* could denote the essential being of a thing or the principle of its existence. When, in the *Odyssey*, Hermes points out to Odysseus the *physis* of a plant (φύσιν αὐτοῦ ἔδειξε) he meant to indicate its miraculous healing power which made the hero immune to the witchcraft of Circe, the sorceress (*Odyssey* X 303). We can render *physis* here with ‘nature’ in a sense that is recognisable even today: it was the nature that is, the essence or the particular character of this plant to have precisely such an effect. On the other hand, however, *physis* could also mean ‘origin’ or ‘generation’. In this sense, Empedocles denied that there was *physis* ‘of any of all mortal things, neither any end of destructive death’ (fr. B8 D/K); his most recent translator plausibly rendered *physis* here with ‘birth’ (Graham 2010: 347).

This dual meaning was and remained key for the adoption of *physis* terminology by Greek philosophers who were interested, in equal measure, in the essence or true being of things and in their ultimate origin. Employing *physis* served both ends; it was suggestive, moreover, of a common root connecting the two: understanding a thing’s character accordingly implied knowledge of its origin as well. Thus, Greek philosophy had a built-in tendency to assume that the world contained in itself answers to its fundamental questions insofar as knowledge of its true being or essence somehow also explained its cause and origin. Philosophical interest in *physis* was therefore closely related to the quest for the *arche* (ἀρχή), the origin and principle of all things. Both jointly emerged in our earliest philosophical sources, the so-called Presocratics.

Among these thinkers, it was Heraclitus who presented the most elaborate version of this kind of nature philosophy. He tasked the philosopher with an analysis of reality ‘according to its nature’ (κατὰ φύσιν: fr. B1 D/K). This was necessary because *physis* was the true ontological foundation of all things indicating their origin and the principle of their development; precisely as such, however, nature was also difficult to grasp and understand. In a celebrated phrase, Heraclitus ascribed to *physis* the desire to hide itself (φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖν: B123 D/K). In direct opposition, Parmenides expressed reserve towards the concept of *physis*. From extant fragments of his didactic poem, it appears that he wrote of ‘nature’ only in its opinion part (fr. B4, 5–8 DK; Curd 1998: 24–63) which spoke of what was only seemingly true. Mockingly, Parmenides there referred to the familiarity with ‘the nature of ether and all the constellations of ether’ (αἰθερίαν τε φύσιν τὰ τ’ ἐν αἰθέρι πάντα σήματα: fr. B10, 1–2 D/K) as examples of vain pseudo-knowledge. The approach of traditional nature philosophy was thus radically critiqued: truth, according to Parmenides, was not to be found in the dynamic flux and fluidity of nature but, rather, in a stable and immutable vanishing point that was itself detached from the empirical realm.

With his emphatic opposition to nature philosophy, Parmenides wielded a strong influence over subsequent developments. For the history of *physis* terminology, however, his legacy was ambiguous: it led to a fundamental critique of nature as the realm of transience and instability which philosophical reflection did well to transcend, but also to a recalibration of the concept of *physis* by stipulating that nature in its truest and most fundamental form was identical with non-empirical, transcendent reality.

Support for both options can be found in Plato. Overall, references to nature in his dialogues are notable mainly for their scarcity; *physis* clearly was no central concept in Plato's thought. When Socrates in the *Phaedo* reported his early attachment to 'natural history' (τῆς φύσεως ἱστορία), the upshot of his narrative was a fundamental critique of this approach together with an affirmation of the theory of forms as a better alternative (95b–102a). Yet in the *Republic*, Plato indicated that and how *physis* could be integrated into his own philosophy referring to God, the creator of forms, as 'maker of nature' (φουτούργος) because he, unlike human artificers, produced what 'by nature is' (ἡ τῆ φύσει οὐσα: 597b) and what 'by nature is one' (μία φύσει: 597d). Thus far, God himself was beyond being as well as nature (cf. *Republic* VI, 509b), but the primary, true, and immutable being generated from this ultimate source was also paradigmatic nature. This notion, which preserved the centrality of *physis* in earlier philosophy but largely abandoned its traditional connotations of dynamic mutability and generative self-sufficiency, paved the way for the reception of *physis* terminology in Jewish and Christian thought.

There can be no doubt that Aristotle produced the most worked-out and the most influential account of *physis* up until his own time and, arguably, of ancient philosophy in its entirety (Bostock 2006: 1–18). Yet in early Christian thought, little evidence of its influence can be detected except where this is mediated through Stoic or Platonic authors. The Stoics recapitulated earlier Presocratic views of an immanent conception of *physis*; they employed the anti-dualist arguments Aristotle had developed against Plato and the Academy but turned them against the Stagirite himself to arrive at a radically monistic conception of the world. The ultimate vanishing point of their doctrine of nature, however, was human practice, individual as well as communal (cf. Annas 1993: 159–179). Stoic physics was based on the premise that the world as a whole was ontologically homogeneous. The cosmos was a dynamic body comparable to a living being. *Physis* was uniquely fine stuff spread equally throughout the all and connecting its parts into an overall unit. Some Stoics explained the effect of the whole on its parts with 'seminal principles' (λόγοι σπερματικοί: DL VII 148–149), a notion that was to become important for later Christian authors. Stoic ethics and politics demanded a life 'according to nature'; some of their most enduring ideas, such as theories of natural law, derived from this principle.

Stoic philosophy with its monistic ontology, its materialistic cosmology, and its determinism offered few direct points of contact with Jewish or Christian thought. If, nonetheless, Stoic ideas of *physis* were to cast a long shadow over Patristic thought, this was mainly due to their reception and transformation by Platonic philosophers of the Hellenistic and Imperial era. The interference of Stoic and Platonic ideas can be seen, for example, in the second-century Platonist Atticus, whose view of Plato's world soul is largely cast in Stoic terminology, thus aligning the dynamic concept of the 'physical' world with the ontologically layered account of the Platonic tradition (fr. 8, 17–19 Des Places; Köckert 2009: 76). In this trajectory, Neoplatonists, such as Plotinus and Proclus, conceived of nature as the lowest part of the intelligible world which, unlike soul, is directly in touch with matter shaping the latter on the basis of its intuition of higher parts of the intelligible cosmos (Plotinus, *Enneads* III 8, 4; O'Meara 1995: 74–76; Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus*, 10, 13–26 Diehl).

Philo

In Philo we find the most important early attempt to integrate the concept of *physis* into an overall theistic framework. Given the particular background of this concept in Greek philosophy, such an attempt was *prima facie* counterintuitive. After all, the adoption of *physis* terminology had been closely linked to a worldview rather different from that of the biblical religions with their emphasis on a personal God who radically transcended the cosmos as its creator. There were, in principle, two ways of dealing with this challenge: either that of restricting *physis* exclusively to creation while insisting on its radical separation from the divine, or the application of *physis* terminology to God himself, thus effectively aligning it with the language of being and substance (*ousia*). The latter, which was the more radical transformation of traditional usage, was only adumbrated in Philo but became dominant in the Patristic tradition. The former, which, similar to the strategy employed previously by Parmenides and Plato, would insist on a radical distinction between God and nature, thus understanding *physis* as the totality of created being, was Philo's preferred view.

This position was attractive insofar as it permitted an integration of the duality of meanings that had made the use of *physis* terminology philosophically desirable in the first place. After all, the theistic philosopher faced the problem of how the radically transcendent God could also be creator and originator of a world that was so different from him. Understanding the world as *physis* could help bridge this gap insofar as it introduced an element of dynamic generation, a principle of evolution and development which, while ultimately pointing to the world's creator, could explain the world's mutability and change on its own terms. Philo thus connected *physis* with the evolution of a plant from its seed (*Quis rerum divinarum heres sit*, 121), the growth and ripening of fruit (*De congressu eruditionis gratia* 4). He called nature the 'universal mother' of humanity to whom people owed their organs of sense perception, such as the tongue (*De decalogo* 41–42; *De specialibus legibus* II 4) and referred to the maternal womb as 'nature's workshop' (τὸ τῆς φύσεως ἐργαστήριον: *Legatio ad Gaium* 56).

In this specific sense, then, *physis* for Philo was the origin of all things, namely, their *direct* or immediate cause which, however, was itself subject to the authority of the divine creator. As in the earlier Greek tradition, this notion of origin or cause was connected with the notion of nature as a thing's essence or its ontological character. This was particularly the case for human beings whose 'nature' corresponded, as it did in Stoicism, to their task of ethical and religious perfection. As they could, however, either fulfil this task or fail to do so, Philo's references to human nature were ambiguous throughout. While he occasionally intimated the existence of a 'fleshly nature' in human beings that could explain their 'unnatural' existences (*Quod deterius potiori insidiari solet* 83–84), his preferred argument resorted to human free will (Wolfson 1947, vol. 1: 437; Martens 2003: 72). In this as in other views, Philo was clearly dependent on Stoic thought, but he only received it in a characteristic twist in which the notion of a physically determined and ontologically self-sufficient *physis* was replaced by a physical world created towards its perfection by a transcendent and benevolent God.

As in Stoicism, nature for Philo was, further, connected with ideas of order and structure, and for this, the Jewish thinker was happy to borrow from his Stoic predecessors the association of *physis* with *logos*. In other words, nature was not simply the direct cause of particular beings but the reason the world existed in a regularised and orderly fashion. In fact, Philo appears to have been the first author who with some consistency spoke of 'natural law' (νόμος φύσεως: Horsley 1978; Martens 2003: 75–77). This interest in nature as a source of rational order and structure was not without its theological motive insofar as it permitted aligning nature with the revelation of God's word (*logos*) in and through the Thora, the divine Law (*nomos*).

The philosophical reader of the Jewish law would thus observe a correspondence between the notion of universal nature inscribing rules into the cosmos as a whole and into human life in particular on the one hand, and the religious idea of a nomothetic God whose goodness is communicated to his human creatures through the revelation of his commandments.

Throughout most of his writing, Philo was keen to separate God from nature and reserve *physis* terminology for created being. Yet there are passages in which he wrote of ‘God’s nature’ (Martens 2003: 77–80). The interpretation of these passages within the entirety of Philo’s corpus is not wholly clear, but the most likely explanation would understand them as resulting from Philo’s biblically founded concern not to detach God too radically from the world and, in particular, from humanity as encountered famously in his description of human beings as ‘existing on the boundary’ (μεθόριον) between the created world and the divine (*De opificio mundi* 133–135). Elsewhere, however, Philo strongly insisted on a dualism between creator and creation, arguing, for example, that human beings could not be ‘in the image’ of God (cf. Gen. 1, 27) but only in that of his *Logos* (*Quaestiones in Genesim* II 62). As many of his Jewish, Christian, and Islamic successors, then, Philo vacillated somewhat between a tendency sharply to emphasise the utter transcendence of God and an attempt to bridge the ontological gap between creator and creation. This ambiguity has left its traces in his use of *physis* terminology too.

Philo’s importance for subsequent developments can hardly be overestimated. He drew on Stoic ideas but transformed them in a way that philosophically owed much to the Platonic tradition but was, ultimately, inscribed into the theistic framework of the Hebrew Bible. Without this particular form of transformative reception, later Patristic developments cannot be understood even though the Church Fathers pursued an intellectual path that was, ultimately, rather distinct from that of Philo himself.

From the New Testament to Origen

Physis terminology is almost entirely absent from the New Testament, which is all the more remarkable given its popularity in roughly contemporaneous Jewish-Hellenistic writers, such as Josephus (Koester 1973: 264–270). The only notable exception is the late text 2 Peter 1, 4, promising believers to ‘become participants of the divine nature’. Reception of physical language and related ideas began in earnest with those second-century authors that have conventionally been grouped together under the label of ‘Gnosticism’. These authors were soon attacked as deviating from standard, Catholic Christianity. It is not, however, apparent that their use of *physis* terminology was criticised as such even though their particular interpretation of it was. Rather, the Gnostics appear to have initiated a broader willingness among Christian writers to operate with this terminology.

The primary context in which Gnostic authors employed *physis* terminology was soteriological. The Valentinians, we learn from Irenaeus, distinguished three kinds (γενή) of human beings, pneumatic, psychic, and hylic, according to the three sons of Adam – Cain, Abel, and Seth. From them (ἐκ τούτων) descended ‘three natures, no longer individuals but races’ (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I 7, 5; cf. Aland 1977). In support of this theory, the Valentinians cited Gen. 5, 1 (γένεσις τῶν ἀνθρώπων: *Excerpts from Theodotus* 3, 54). Nature, then, refers to unity in kind on the basis of genealogical descent. This conception is related to the older terminological history of *physis* with its combination of the notions of essential character and origin, but the latter is now conceived specifically as genealogy. On the basis of this community of origin, the pneumatics were ‘by nature’ destined for salvation (φύσει σωζόμενον), whereas the hylics were destined to perish (*ibid.*). A similarly genealogical relationship existed between the pneumatics and God whose nature was ‘immaculate, pure and invisible’ (Heracleon in Origen, *Commentary*

on *John* XIII 25) and who was worshipped ‘in spirit and truth’ (*John* 4, 24) by those who were ‘of the same nature with the Father’ (*ibid.*, cf. Wucherpennig 2002: 333–357).

With the anti-Gnostic Fathers of the late second and early third century, we stand at the beginning of a genuinely Patristic philosophy for which the use of *physis* terminology became increasingly pivotal. The most important among them was Origen, the first Christian author, as far as we can make out, who employed this language on a broad scale. In doing so, he drew on Philo but also on Stoic and Middle Platonic authors (Köckert 2009; Tzamalikos 2006). Nonetheless, it is arguable that his opposition to Gnostic ideas was particularly pertinent for this aspect of his thought as the tendency of his innovative adoption of physical language can best be explained against this backdrop.

The most characteristic, but also unexpected, observation in this connection is that Origen understood by ‘nature’ a plane or sphere of being. He could thus write that God created ‘two natures’, visible and invisible (‘*duas generales naturas condiderit deus: naturam visibilem, id est corpoream, et naturam invisibilem, quae est incorporea*’: *First Principles* III 6, 7). Against his Gnostic opponents, he would emphasise that all rational creatures are ‘of the same nature’ (‘*unius namque naturae esse omnes rationabiles creaturas*’: *First Principles* III 5, 4). At the same time, he denied – against Heracleon – that they are *homoousios* with God (*Commentary on John* XIII 25), who, as ‘uncreated nature’, had to be radically distinguished from all created being. The ‘nature of the Trinity’, Origen insisted, ‘had nothing in common with creatures except the good it does to them’ (‘*nihil sit cum creatura commune nisi beneficentiae opus*’: *Commentary on Romans* VIII 13, 7). He could therefore also say that the Son is ‘by nature’ (φύσει) like the Father (*Commentary on John* II 10, 76), anticipating later trinitarian language.

What is remarkable about all these passages is less their underlying theology, let alone their division of being into intelligible and sensible, but the way Origen integrated a particular concept of nature into each of these arguments. As we have seen, the use of *physis* for the Godhead had hardly any precedent in either pagan philosophy or in Philo. The latter had written of ‘nature’ as the totality of created being but retained for this the dynamic component so characteristic of the term’s use in earlier Greek thought. Origen introduced into Christian parlance a use of *physis* from which this dynamic dimension had almost completely disappeared. Also absent was the dual meaning of ‘character’ and ‘origin’. This is not to say that these terminological nuances could never be called upon by Christian authors; in fact, Origen himself retained the more traditional understanding of the term in other contexts. But henceforth ‘nature’ could be used without any of those connotations, simply to denote a particular ontological plane or sphere regardless of its particular place in the metaphysical hierarchy: there was divine as well as created nature; sensible as well as intelligible nature, visible as well as invisible nature, and so forth. This innovation in Origen soon became widely accepted among Christian authors and served as the basis for later doctrinal uses of the term.

More traditional was Origen’s use of *physis* terminology in the context of his doctrine of creation. Against the Valentinian theory of the three races of human beings, Origen developed an account of the creation of ‘human nature’ which, although not in itself material, contained the seeds (λόγοι) of future humanity (*Against Celsus* 4, 40). Here, the dynamic element of *physis* is as much in evidence as its relationship with notions of principle and origin.

In sum, one finds in Origen almost the whole gamut of future Patristic uses of *physis* at least *in nuce*:

- 1 *Physis* can be applied to any plane or sphere of being.
- 2 As such a sphere of being, *physis* is, inevitably, universal nature. Using the term in this sense will often, therefore, at least imply a generic sense.

- 3 When applied to created being, the more traditional, dynamic sense of *physis* is retained.
- 4 From all it follows that *physis* can also, quite traditionally, stand for the particular character of an individual thing.

Ultimately, *physis* was not, however, a key term in Origen's thought. While he used it in certain ways, which were partly traditional and partly innovative, and while he was evidently keen to weaponise it in his anti-Gnostic polemic, the term is not foundational for either his doctrine of God or for his accounts of creation and redemption.

Gregory of Nyssa

Gregory of Nyssa's entire thought was deeply influenced by Origen, and this holds for his use of *physis* as well. His main, additional step beyond his Alexandrian forebear was the promotion of this concept to a central pillar of his own, elaborate version of Patristic philosophy (Zachhuber 1999, 2010). At the same time, Gregory had to reckon with more recent doctrinal developments in which *physis* terminology was directly implicated. Most important in this regard was the Nicene watchword *homoousios*. This had already been glossed with the terms ὁμογενής and ὁμοφύης in the third-century controversy between Dionysius of Rome and his Alexandrian namesake (ap. Athanasius, *On the Opinion of Dionysius* 18). In the mid-fourth century, Athanasius took for granted the identity of *homoousios* with 'of the same nature' (cf. *Tome to the Antiochenes* 6), an assumption that was, apparently, universally shared by that time. For Gregory, therefore, the use of *physis* terminology became inextricably intertwined with his defence of the Nicene trinitarian settlement.

In a second development during the same period, the soteriological use of *physis* terminology, which had already been central to second-century Gnostics, was re-emphasised in the context of the trinitarian controversy. Athanasius, drawing on Irenaeus, opposed his Arian opponents with the claim that only a radical affirmation of the Son's divinity would safeguard human salvation. In his early writing *On the Incarnation*, he used the metaphor of a king entering a city to advance the argument that Christ's assumption of 'human nature' in the Incarnation would subsequently lead to the transformation of humanity more generally and thus to human salvation understood as divinisation (*On the Incarnation* 9.3; cf. 54.3). This soteriological use of *physis*, it should be noted, served to solidify the novel, Christian understanding of 'nature' as sphere or plane of being; 'divine' and 'human' natures are merely different kinds of being entering into a uniquely intense union in the Incarnation, and this new state is passed on from there, on account of the ontological cohesion of humankind, to all those who are to be saved.

For Gregory, these trinitarian and soteriological uses of *physis* terminology were, therefore, already part of the Patristic tradition which he received. In a third main area in which he worked with this conceptual apparatus, the doctrine of creation, he equally followed earlier Patristic precedent. His main contribution, then, was not the introduction of *physis* terminology in areas to which it had not previously been applied, but the increased systematic coherence with which he worked *physis* into the conceptual backbone of his Christian philosophy. In fact, Gregory contributed comparatively little to the one doctrinal field in which *physis* terminology was to play a major role later, Christology.

Physis for the Nyssens meant, firstly, being at all its levels and in all its variations. As Origen, therefore, Gregory too employed 'nature' to denote planes or spheres of being using expressions such as divine or uncreated, created, intelligible, or material nature (*On Infants' Early Deaths* pp. 6–7, 77 Mueller). He could even write of 'wet' or 'warm' nature (*in Hexaëmeron*, *Patrologia Graeca* 44, 65D; 105B), meaning simply beings that are of such a kind. From this usage, Gregory transitioned, as easily as Origen before him, to an understanding of *physis* as universal being. Gregory's interest in the latter concept was, however, much stronger than that

of his Alexandrian forerunner or, in fact, that of any other, earlier Christian thinker, as far as we know. He developed a full-fledged theory of universal being on the basis of this notion of *physis*. In his cosmology, Gregory retained from Philo and Origen the traditional, dynamic understanding of *physis* indicating the coherence between unity and plurality of the created order (cf. in *Hexaëmeron*, *Patrologia Graeca* 44, 72B; 108A–B).

Gregory's specific understanding of *physis* took shape as part of his contribution to the final phase of the trinitarian controversy. In his writings against Eunomius of Cyzicus, he defended the neo-Nicene doctrine advanced originally by his older brother, Basil, conceptualising the Trinity as one *ousia* in three *hypostases*. Gregory, assuming the identity of *ousia* and *physis*, elaborated on Basil's idea that *ousia* was 'the common' (τὸ κοινόν) as opposed to hypostasis as 'the particular' (τὸ ἴδιον): divine nature was one, he urged, on account of the common 'account of being' that can be applied to all the three Persons. Divine *physis* was thus the community of ontologically coordinated individuals connected by a common origin in the Father. Nature is truly one, as Gregory argued against the charge that this doctrine amounted to tritheism, but only exists in its independently existing hypostases:

Nature, however, is one, unified with itself and a precisely undivided monad, not increased through addition nor decreased through subtraction, but in what it is it is one and remains one even though it appears in a multitude. It is indivisible, continuous, and complete and not divided alongside the particulars that participate in it. And just as a people, a community, an army, and an assembly is always said in the singular, but each is known in the plural, so according to the more precise formula, 'man' is properly said as one, even though those who are shown in the same nature are a multitude.

(*To Ablabius* 41, 2–12 Mueller)

Gregory was unusual among the early fathers in his willingness to inscribe this same philosophical theory into other main elements of his theology, especially his doctrine of creation and salvation. In the former, he argued influentially that Gen. 1, 27 must be understood of 'universal' (καθόλου) humanity which, in God's foresight, was 'potentially' contained in his first creation already (*Making of Man* 16; cf. Zachhuber 2005a: 94–97; but cf. Hübner 1974: 67–91 for a different interpretation). Human nature in this sense, is a unity-in-multiplicity existing in a limited number of individuals; once their full number (πλήρωμα) has been reached, the history of the world comes to its end and the whole of human nature will be resurrected (*On the Soul* = *Patrologia Graeca* 46, 128C–D). In this connection, Gregory also affirmed universal salvation since the injection of divinity into human nature in the Incarnation will inevitably spread to the entirety of the race (*Catechetical Oration* 16; 32).

In its conceptual coherence and its systematic potential, Gregory's doctrine of *physis* became foundational for the future development of Patristic philosophy. According to his theory, *physis* was both the totality of individuals as well as the common item identically present in each member of the class and expressed by a shared definition; it thus combined a concrete and an abstract aspect while avoiding transcendent, Platonic forms. Within a generation, this theory became widely accepted and shared by Eastern theologians regardless of their school affiliation although not, initially, in the area of Christology.

***Physis* and Christology**

For the introduction of *physis* terminology into the language of Christology, Gregory of Nyssa's older contemporary, Apollinarius of Laodicea, was crucial. From the fragmentary remains of

his work, it is evident that his philosophical ambition must have been a close match to that of the Nyssen. While his condemnation as a heretic at the end of the fourth century limited his influence on subsequent developments, his significance should not be underestimated. Apollinarius emphasised the unity of divinity and humanity in Christ by speaking of him as the ‘one incarnate nature’ (μία φύσις σεσαρκωμένη: *To Jovian; To Dionysius A2*). His preferred analogy was that of a human being consisting of body and soul. As Alois Grillmeier observed (1975: 334–335), ‘*physis* is here by no means the static, abstract “essentia”. [. . .] *Physis* is the “self-determining being” (ζῶον αὐτοκίνητον, αὐτοενέργητον)’. In other words, Apollinarius emphatically affirmed, within the context of a Christian philosophy, the dynamic element that had been characteristic of the earlier philosophical use of *physis*. His opponents mostly fastened onto his rejection of a human mind in the saviour, thus accusing him of teaching an ‘incomplete’ human nature in Christ. As part of this argument, Gregory of Nazianzus affirmed the need to speak of two natures in the God–man (φύσεις μὲν γὰρ δύο Θεὸς καὶ ἄνθρωπος: *Letters* 101, 19). In this context, however, the requirement that universal *physis* had to exist in concrete hypostases was neglected. While the Cappadocians can thus be said to have prepared the language of Chalcedon, they were also responsible for the regular charge that the teaching of two natures implied the existence of two hypostases as well as there could be ‘no *physis* without hypostasis’ (cf. Leontius of Byzantium, *Against the Nestorians and Eutychians* 1; John the Grammarian, *Apology for the Council of Chalcedon* IV, 82–83 Richard).

In the controversy between Apollinarius and the Cappadocians, the concept of *physis* was not yet central, but this changed in the conflict between Cyril and Nestorius half a century later. Significantly, both parties took the Cappadocian understanding of *physis* as their starting point. On this basis, Nestorius reasoned that the affirmation of two natures, divine and human, in Christ had to imply the existence of two hypostases as well whose union could only be mysteriously guaranteed by stipulating a single *prosopon* (Book of Heraclides, 231 Bedjan; see Grillmeier 1975: 507). Cyril, by contrast, emphasised the unity of hypostasis and thus affirmed the doctrine of ‘one incarnate nature’ in the saviour. In doing so, he drew on Apollinarius, whose writings he believed were written by orthodox Fathers. A significant part of his followers therefore saw the definition of Chalcedon with its affirmation of two natures in Christ as a betrayal of Cyril’s genuine position even though the Council Fathers inscribed their Antiochene language into a Cyriline framework.

Physis in the controversies after Chalcedon

The parallel between the Christological use of *physis* and its use in the trinitarian context was suggested by the so-called ‘double homoousion’, the affirmation that Christ was ‘homoousios with the Father according to his divinity and homoousios with us according to his humanity’ (Wiles 1965). From the 430s onwards, this formula was widely used and, in 451, became part of the Chalcedonian formula (ACO 2,1,2, 129, 26–27). Nonetheless, there is no evidence that its affirmation at this point indicated a fundamental willingness to integrate Trinitarian theology and Christology into a single philosophical framework.

This only changed in the early sixth century, when John the Grammarian (of Caesarea) authored an apology of the Council of Chalcedon in which he sought to align the Christological use of *physis* with the older Cappadocian theory. The Grammarian argued that in Christology as in the Trinity, *physis* like *ousia* stood for universal being; the Chalcedonian formula thus merely affirmed the generally recognised truth that Christ was both divine and human, i.e. participated in both these natures. This was an ingenious move. Chalcedonians who, until then, faced the criticism that the Council had broken with Patristic precedent as represented

by Cyril, could now retort that their doctrine was simply the application to Christology of the Cappadocian conception of *physis* that was generally accepted as authoritative. While details of the Grammarian's view remained controversial, the principle that a single philosophical conception of *physis* was needed for both theology and economy soon became universally accepted by Chalcedonians as well as their opponents.

The leading miaphysite thinker of the early sixth century, Severus of Antioch, opposed the Grammarian's claim that the Incarnation was the union of universal natures as, in this case, the consequence would be that the whole Trinity was incarnate in the whole of humanity (*Against an Impious Grammarian* II 22; III 23). The only way to avoid this conundrum, Severus believed, was to accept that *physis* became individuated in each hypostasis. The single nature of Christ, which Severus considered to be the doctrine of the fathers, would thus be a 'unified nature' (φύσις σύνθετος) underlying the divine-human hypostasis of the saviour. This theory was consolidated by the leading Patristic philosopher of the sixth century, John Philoponus (Lang 2001a). He identified Severus' particular nature with the 'particular substance' (μερικὴ οὐσία) which the Aristotelian commentators of late antiquity had introduced. Nature, Philoponus suggested, could be either universal or particular in the same way a universal term, such as 'human being', could be applied to the whole race or to the individual (*Arbiter* 7, *ap.* John of Damascus, *On Heresies* 83 *addit.*). In the Incarnation, divine nature became human only insofar as it was 'individuated' in the second Person, the Logos. Likewise, the object of the Incarnation was the human nature individuated in Jesus. As Severus before him, Philoponus supported this claim with the evident absurdity that otherwise the whole Trinity would have taken flesh in the whole of humanity.

At its time, the introduction of particular natures represented the most consequential transformation of the Cappadocian, classical theory in the interest of accounting for the individuality of the Incarnate Christ. It could, perhaps counterintuitively, claim the support of a considerable number of passages from unquestionably orthodox fathers who had used *physis* (or *ousia*) for the particular instance of a nature (e.g. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Poems on the Mysteries* 2.8) Yet its repercussions for Trinitarian doctrine were severe as it could be argued that the three trinitarian Persons were also three particular natures and thus three substances and three deities (Ebied et al. 1981: 34–43). Philoponus, who philosophically was a particularist (Erismann 2008), sided with these 'tritheists', thus discrediting the introduction of particular natures despite his philosophically rigorous argument in their favour (Lang 2001b).

***Physis* in Chalcedonian Christology**

Discussions about nature became so important during this period that no full account of it can be given in the present place. Practically every major Chalcedonian author between the sixth and the eighth century dwelled at length on questions directly or indirectly arising from the use of this terminology in the Christological controversy and in the doctrine of the Trinity with more or less attention to its more traditional uses in the doctrines of creation and salvation. In what follows, only a brief survey can be given of particularly characteristic positions that can be encountered in some of these writers.

a) In his *Epilyseis*, Leontius of Byzantium reported the question posed by his miaphysite opponent of whether Christ assumed a universal or an individual nature. His response was that it was an individual nature, but that this was the same as the universal nature (Leontius, *Epilyseis* 1). This response soon became popular; we find it repeated even in John of Damascus (see later). Few Chalcedonian authors, however, explained what they meant by it. Some, such as Anastasius of Antioch, evidently chose to ignore the conceptual challenge posed by their opponents

insisting that universal natures, as introduced by the Cappadocians were perfectly suited to explain the Christological dogma as well:

We call him God, not a God, and we call him man, not a man. For he is God and man, and the [use of the] universal terms indicates that of which he is [composed] – not of particular hypostases but of universal substances (*Oration III*, 54, 15–18 Sakkos).

In the face of Severus' and Philoponus' innovative teaching, Anastasius evidently sought to affirm the traditional, Patristics view according to which natures (or substances) were universal, not particular. Two natures in the saviour, therefore, did not make impossible the single hypostasis guaranteeing Christ's unified person. Yet this argument could only appear plausible because the additional assumption in Gregory of Nyssa, according to which universals could only exist in and through particular hypostases, was jettisoned. Universal nature as affirmed by Anastasius and other Chalcedonians was an abstract essence, a concept the Cappadocians had avoided as it could suggest that the trinitarian *ousia* was an entity separate from its three hypostases.

b) Other writers, such as Leontius of Jerusalem, were more willing to accommodate the conceptual challenges identified by Chalcedon's opponents. Leontius recognised that the union of two natures in one hypostasis could only be explained by severing the link in Cappadocian thought between the individuation of universal natures and their concrete, hypostatic existence. This he attempted by introducing 'individual natures'. It was such an individual nature (φύσιν ἰδικήν τινα) which the Logos assumed into his own hypostasis (*Against the Nestorians I* 20). At first sight, Leontius' individual nature seems utterly similar to Philoponus' particular nature. Yet while the latter was based on the ontological division of the universal – and thus imperilled ontological realism – Leontius' theory introduced a difference between the *concept* of individuals (the compound of universal plus particular properties) and their actual, hypostatic realisation. Characteristically, he illustrated his theory by appealing to fictional individuals or to people who had long dead but were still known to us 'according to their [individual] nature' but not in their hypostasis (*Against the Nestorians II* 19). In this manner, Christ could have had an individuated human nature including both generic and individual properties without possessing a second, human hypostasis. Leontius' conception is highly innovative (Richard 1944; Krausmüller 2006); he probably was the first thinker in antiquity to conceptualise 'existence' as such, in abstraction from individuating properties thus preparing the later convention of distinguishing essence and existence.

c) Yet another approach is to be found in Maximus Confessor, the single most influential Chalcedonian theologian up until the Arabic conquest. Maximus developed his own theory of universal nature harking back in major aspects to Gregory of Nyssa's Cappadocian philosophy (Balthasar 1988; Törönen 2007; Zachhuber 2005a). His purpose, while related to the doctrinal controversies of his time, was ultimately the integration into the Byzantine tradition of the speculative, Origenist heritage, endangered after the condemnations of the sixth century. Maximus therefore utilised universal nature to explain unity and multiplicity in the world as part of the process of salvation history in which all things have their origin in God to whom, also, they will ultimately return. Inscribed into this narrative is a description of universality and particularity as perfectly complementary. Universal natures could not exist without the individuals of whom they consisted (ἐκ γὰρ τῶν κατὰ μέρος τὰ καθόλου συνίστασθαι πέφυκε: *Ambigua II* 10,42), but by the same token, it was equally the case that no particulars existed or could ever exist without their universal kinds (*Ambigua II* 10, 32). Like Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus was a realist for whom the genera 'that are united in substance are one (ἓν), the same (ταυτόν) and indivisible (ἀδιαίρετον)' (*Ambigua II* 41).

This complementariness, however, was only possible due to the dynamic character of *physis*. Universal nature and its individuals were engaged in a permanent ontological movement of division and synthesis, from the highest to the lowest and back (*Ambigua* II 10, 37). Its theological basis was Maximus' doctrine of creation in which, as previously in Origen and Gregory of Nyssa, created being was initially only potentially (*δυνάμει*), not actually (*ἐνεργεία*) complete (*Questions to Thalassius* 2; *Ambigua* II 7). Thus, the single, divine Logos is manifold in the context of creation (*πολλοὺς εἴσεται λόγους τὸν ἓνα λόγον*), while the intellectual and mystical intuition of the world recognises in the many *logoi* the one Word as its creator, origin, and principle (*Ambigua* II 7; cf. Dalmais 1952; Larchet 1996: 112–124).

While the influence of Neoplatonic ideas, received mainly through ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite, is stronger in Maximus than in many other Patristic authors, the main contours of his appropriation of *physis* are, once again, inherited from the tradition of Origen and the Cappadocians.

d) John of Damascus was interested in *physis* mainly in the Christological context. Many earlier theories are encountered again and integrated into a thought-through, systematic presentation (Cross 2000; Zachhuber 2013: 466–469). In *The Orthodox Faith*, he distinguished three meanings of *physis* (*Exposition* 55): it is either universal nature which has no independent existence (cf. Simplicius, *Commentary on the Categories*, pp. 8–10, 83 Kalbfleisch); or it is nature 'as seen in the species' (*ἐν τῷ εἶδει θεωρουμένη φύσις*); or it exists in the hypostasis together with individual properties and is, as such, 'seen in the individual' (*ἐν ἀτόμῳ θεωρουμένη φύσις*). The Incarnation, Damascene argued, cannot be said according to the first of these, but both the second and third options have some claim to truth. With this solution, John seems to come close to Leontius of Jerusalem's position, but his statement that nature as 'seen in the species' and as 'seen in the individual' are the same echoes Leontius of Byzantium's more equivocal view.

Conclusion

Patristic reflection on nature was intense and diverse. The classical theory developed by Gregory of Nyssa was retained in principle but also critiqued and modified in the centuries after Chalcedon. Resulting theories included the particularism of John Philoponus and the intriguing distinction of essence and existence introduced by Leontius of Jerusalem. Among the various topics of Patristic philosophy, this was one of the most influential. John of Damascus' views were frequently quoted and much discussed in scholastic texts since the twelfth century. Dionysius Petavius in the early seventeenth century presented a lengthy overview of relevant texts in his *Dogmatic Theology* (*De trinitate* IV 9), influencing thinkers as diverse as Ralph Cudworth (1743, vol. IV: 34) and Isaak August Dorner (1839: 57).

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