

Chapter 14

Heraclitus

c. 544 BC—484 BC

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The way up and the way down is one and the same. (Heraclitus, Fragment 60, Kahn, p.75)

An unapparent connection is stronger than an apparent one. (Heraclitus, Fragment 54, Kahn, p. 65)

Heraclitus was from Ephesus, near the modern port town of Kusadasi (Bird Island), Turkey, north of Miletus and an hour's ferry ride to Samos, the Greek island where Pythagoras was born. After the destruction of Miletus by the Persians in 494 BC, Ephesus became the most powerful city in Asia Minor. Today, among other ruins on the site there stands the remains of the beautiful Roman Library of Celsus (a late 2nd century AD Platonist and opponent of Christianity) and the temple of the goddess Artemis, which was built in emulation of the temple of Hera on Samos. Heraclitus is said to have dedicated his book to this Temple of Artemis. Given his geographical location, it is not surprising that Heraclitus seems to have a good knowledge of the Milesian philosophers, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, and Pythagoras. As Ephesus rivalled Miletus and Samos, and her architects challenged their temples, Heraclitus challenged their philosophers.

There are several apocryphal stories about Heraclitus' death. I give the most extended version here, because the account, while itself quite fantastic, provides a very interesting way of speaking about Heraclitus' thought.

Heraclitus contracted a condition (edema, dropsy) that caused excessive water retention and also caused him to stumble around blindly seeking help (see Fr. 117, Kahn, p. 77. See Note at the end of this paper). Dropsy is a condition whereby the failure of the body properly to drain lymphatic fluid causes swelling in the feet, and other parts of the body, including stomach and head. Heraclitus, who hated doctors and was prone to speaking in riddles, could not communicate his problem to them. The doctors could not understand Heraclitus' complaints, so walking away in disgust, he buried himself in cow manure, in the hope that the warm, moist substance would draw the water out of his system. Coated thus, he was eaten by wild dogs and died (Diogenes Laertius, IX 3-4).

Heraclitus says that it is death for souls to become water (Fr. 36, Kahn, p. 75), that a dry soul is wisest and best (Fr. 118, Kahn, p.77), and that it is delight, not

death for souls to become moist (Fr. 77, Kahn, p. 77). ‘Moist’ here seems like drunkenness. Heraclitus also says that doctors poke and prod and charge a fee which they should not get (Fr. 58, Kahn, p. 63), and that ‘dogs bark at those they do not recognize’ (Fr. 97, Kahn, p. 57). Indeed the doctors did not help him and the dogs that devoured him did not recognize him. Another of his statements is that corpses deserve more to be thrown out than manure (Fr. 96, Kahn, p. 69). In short the elements of the strange story of Heraclitus’ death look like a humorous collection of his obscure ideas into a series of misadventures that ironically recall his own words, possibly by detractors of his cryptic style.

The difficulty with Heraclitus’ book is that it is written rather darkly, and that all we have today are indirect reports and quotations of writings which were obscure in the original. Indeed he earned himself the epithet *ho skoteinos* (obscure or dark) because of his writing style or his personality, or both. The style however, certainly made an impact: it has been suggested that Euripides recommended it to Socrates. Socrates’ own opinion of the work is reported by Diogenes Laertius ‘What I understand of it is good, as is I suspect the part I don’t understand, but it would take a diver from Delos to get to the bottom of it’ (D. L. LI, 22).

Despite the obscurity, it is possible to piece together some of the ideas of Heraclitus from the fragments of his work that remain. In the rest of this essay I will try to point out some central ideas in the thought of Heraclitus, those of *fire*, *flux*, *strife* and *logos*, all of which will be discussed below.

For Heraclitus, the order of the cosmos is represented by fire:

This ordering, the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be fire everliving, kindled in measures and in measures going out. (Fr. 30, Kahn, p. 45)

The ancient Stoics took Heraclitus’ account of fire to mean that the world constantly underwent cycles of conflagration. Continuous condensation and rarefaction of the fiery element meant that the cosmos would contract, explode and expand again and again over long periods of time.

One might think that Heraclitus resembles the reductionism of the Milesian philosophers (who suggest that everything can ultimately be reduced to one thing, such as water, or the air of Anaximenes or the boundless of Anaximander). Heraclitus appears to say that all is fire. But fire is also identified with the divine *cosmos* (order) and also the soul. The fire that kindles and goes out in life and death is connected, in structure and substance, with the fire that kindles and goes out in the universe. There is something highly symbolic, and not quite so literal in the discussion of fire. While the physical sense of fire may serve as an illustration of Heraclitus’ insight, the depth and form of his words suggest that his account is not limited merely to physics, but to the structures large (*macrocosmoi*) and small (*microcosmoi*) in the universe.

The idea that everything is in flux (*panta rhei*—literally all things flow), is attributed to Heraclitus by Plato in his dialogue the *Cratylus*, a dialogue named for Heraclitus’ follower. Aristotle claims that Plato had known and been interested in Heraclitus’ ideas of flux in his youth, and held to them in later years, combining

these ideas with the Socratic search for definitions and turning that search into a search for stable Ideas that ground the physical world of flux and our knowledge of them (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 987 a-b). This notion of flux is consistent with the idea of the continuously changing universe, a fire kindling in measures and going out in measures, but is perhaps most famously captured in the idea that man cannot step twice into the same river (Frs. 12, 91, Kahn, p. 53). The idea may be interpreted either physically, that because the water is flowing it is different water that you step into, or in terms of perspective—the river you step into the second time is the river you have stepped into before, and hence not the same as the river you first stepped into when it was the river previously un-entered. In both cases, when extended to the universe, it seems that Heraclitus is suggesting that the world and even apparently stable parts of it are constantly in motion, even though, like the river we refer to them as fixed things.

Heraclitus, a man of noble birth, seems to have shown a great disdain for many of his contemporaries and his philosophical predecessors. He was unimpressed by reputation, nobility and position; he is reported to have refused the hereditary priesthood of Demeter, a goddess of the Eleusinian mysteries, as well as refusing, in a rather ungracious fashion, the invitation of the Persian King Darius' invitation to give instruction at the royal court. In his writings, those whom he insults include Homer, Hesiod, Pythagoras, and Xenophanes (Frs. 40, 57, 106,42, 81, Kahn, pp. 37 and 41). Perhaps the most interesting polemic is his statement that when Homer wished that strife be banished from the world (in *Iliad*, 18.107) he was asking for the end of the world. (Fr. A22, Kahn, p. 67). Strife is necessary for the structure of the universe—strife and opposition in fact make the universe work:

The God: day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger. It alters as when mingled with perfumes, it gets named according to the pleasures of each one. (Fr. 67, Kahn, p. 85)

One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice and that all things come to pass ... in accordance with conflict. (Fr. 80, Kahn, p. 67)

The universe is the result of a unity of opposites or unity in opposition. To take a simple analogy, if you imagine a very simple pup tent, what is required to make it stand is the force of the two ropes that you pull in opposite directions to right the poles and make the tent stand. If there were not this opposition, there would be no structure to the universe. All of the opposites are really unified by strife in the larger structure of the *cosmos*, and distinguishable only as the fire kindles in measures and goes out in measures.

It is important to see that this order or structure is rational. The unity of opposites that through strife is given a structure is spoken of as a kind of hidden 'word' or *logos*. Heraclitus says: 'It is wise, listening not to me but to the [*logos*] to agree that all things are one' (Fr. 50, Kahn, p. 45).

Although this [*logos*] holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend, both before hearing it and once they have heard. Although things come to pass in accordance with this

[*logos*], men are like the untried when they try such words and works as I set forth, distinguishing each according to its nature and telling how it is. But other men are oblivious of what they do awake, just as they are forgetful of what they do asleep. (Fr. 1, Kahn, p. 29)

Just as the meaning of Heraclitus' own words (*logoi*) this divine, hidden rational order is not obvious to most people, who believe in their own 'private' conceptions of things, without realizing that they exemplify the *logos* on a small scale and are part of the *logos* on the 'macrocosmic' scale. Just as the sun god only gives a sign (Fr. 93, Kahn, p. 43), and the Sibyl raves with the voice of a god in her (Fr. 92, Kahn, p. 45), nature's structure, which loves to hide (Fr. 123, Kahn, p. 33), often passes unappreciated by most men. But the *logos* is common to all; people 'hear' it everywhere, although they act as if they do not understand its language.

It would of course take a book to go into all of the ideas introduced here. Heraclitus has left us with many fragments that are evocative, comical and deeply profound, and there are many ways to make connections among them. The best introduction to the thought of Heraclitus is the fragments themselves, and there are several good editions.

References and Suggestions for Further Reading

- Barnes I. *Early Greek Philosophy*. NY.: Penguin, 1987.
 Burnet, I. *Early Greek Philosophy*. 3rd ed. Cleveland and New York: 1930.
 Diogenes Laertius. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Heinemann: 1994.
 Kahn, C.H. *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*. Cambridge, 1979.
 Kirk, G.S., I.E. Raven and M. Schofield. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, 1983.
 Zeller, E. *Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy*. 13th edition. New York, NY.: Dover, 1980.

Note 'Fr.' followed by a number refers to the standard ordering of the fragments by the two German scholars, Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz. So, for example, in 'Fr. 117, Kahn, p. 77' 'Fr. 117' refers to Diels and Kranz, and p. 77 refers to the translations and page numbers of Charles Kahn's book, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*. At the back of Kahn's book is a 'concordance' of his presentation of the fragments and that of Diels and Kranz. For a further explanation of Diels and Kranz, refer to the essay on Anaximander.