Heraclitus

A Brief Interpretation of His Art and Thought

An account of Heraclitus can reasonably begin with his views on the nature of knowledge. Is knowledge possible, and, if so, under what circumstances and to what extent? The problem had been posed earlier by Xenophanes (fragment 34), and the response had been a pessimistic one: *There never was nor will be a man who has certain knowledge about the gods and about all the things I speak of. Even if he should chance to say the complete truth, yet he himself knows not that it is so. Seeming, rather, is wrought over all things.* For Heraclitus, by contrast, knowledge is not only possible, but its specific and most significant object — the plan that directs the operations of the universe — in fact embodies the fullness of wisdom (fragment 41). Its attainment, however, is beset with pitfalls, and several fragments alert us to what those pitfalls are. An uncritical acceptance of what passes for knowledge among popular bards, or the ordinary run of people (fragment 104), for example, will lead us nowhere; nor will unfocused, random conjecturing (fragment 47), or the piling up of an unstructured mass of learning (fragments 40 &129). The apparent obviousness of the “connectedness” of certain things is a poor basis for a serious claim to knowledge; apparent connections hold more firmly than do obvious ones (fragment 54). Like the apparently obvious, a feeling of comprehension of certain states of affairs, even when bolstered by direct experience, is also an unreliable basis for a claim to knowledge (fragment 17); much more is needed to avoid self-deception. Uncritical reliance on the senses will frequently let us down unless the process is directed by what Heraclitus calls a “comprehending soul” (fragments 46, 107). Getting all worked up over everything attests merely to the stupidity of our soul (fragment 87), not to our progress in knowledge. In certain areas — not least in matters theological — knowledge should be recognized as impossible of attainment without a concomitant “belief” or “confidence” (πίστις, fragment 86).

On the positive side, whatever knowledge we can achieve, is achievable in certain clear and precise ways. One must first focus on the real nature (φύσις) of things, and one is most likely to succeed in doing this by paying heed to that which is common (ξύνον) to all, in the sense that is potentially observable by all. This will involve careful observation, despite the known deceptiveness of the sense of sight (fragment 46). Of all the senses, sight and hearing, are, however, the most reliable (fragment 55), and, of these two, sight is the most reliable (fragment 101a). A trustworthy guide to knowledge is experience (fragment 55), and this is gained by enquiry into a wide range of things (fragment 35), not least into oneself (fragment 101) (for self-knowledge, like knowledge of other things, is attainable [fragment 116]. Two necessary conditions for the success of such enquiry are openness to possibilities (fragment 18) and patience before the difficult task of uncovering a reality and truth that lie concealed (fragment 123), but are worth digging for (fragment 23).

If knowledge is attainable, of *what* is such knowledge claimed by Heraclitus to be? It is of the content of that universal *logos*, which, says Heraclitus, “holds forever,” but of which “people forever prove uncomprehending, both before they have heard it, and when once they have heard it” (fragments 1 and 2). But *logoi* are uttered by persons. Which person, or persons, utters this cosmic *logos*? In broad terms, it is one who has learned wisdom such as Heraclitus himself; in the most exact and strict terms, Wisdom, that principle of wisdom in and of the universe which Heraclitus at various times calls “that which alone is wise” (fragment 32), the thunderbolt steering all things (fragment 64), and that reality “separated from all things” which is “willing and unwilling to be called Zeus” (fragment 32). Descriptively, the *logos* as a “rational account” is that everlastingly true statement which describes a reality both everlastingly stable and everlastingly subject to change; prescriptively, the *logos* is the divine law which underpins all human law (fragment 114).

This leads us to the heart of Heraclitus’ system, that is, the *content* of that logos as “statement,” listening to which is to listen, first, to Wisdom’s own description of the way things have been, are, and always will be, and, secondly, to wisdom’s own prescription of the norms of conduct. A powerful element in that all-encompassing statement, serving in large measure as a summary of the way things are, is the affirmation that “all things are one” (fragment 50). Whatever the surface diversity of reality, what makes ultimate sense of it is the unity that underpins it. Such unity in things obtains even though surface investigation might suggest merely the opposite: “what opposes,” he says, “in fact, unites” (fragment 8). Other forms of unity discoverable by the patient investigator are the unity of inseparability (fragment 57), the unity and identity of essence or nature, in the sense of “real constitution” (fragment 106), and the unity underpinning differences of perspective (fragment 60; cf. fragment 61).

A corollary of the unity amid diversity of things is the fact that apparent opposites are in fact in some sense connected. The point is made powerfully, if obliquely, in fragment 67. In this statement, God and the real are taken to be synonymous, and its clear import is that change in the cosmos is never more than the incidental change of what is in itself changeless. A similar statement, couched boldly in terms of identity, runs: “as one and the same thing, there is present in the world living and dead, waking and sleeping, old and young” (fragment 88). Many see here a supposed doctrine of “unity of opposites,” but Heraclitus’ own explication makes it clear that the “sameness” is one of *terminus*, attained through a form of change which is cyclical: “for the latter, having changed around, are the former, and the former, having changed around, are back again to being the latter” (fragment 88; see also fragment 62). Taken together, the statements strongly suggest that for Heraclitus “opposites” such as night and day are “the same,” but merely in terms of a given perspective; they do not share a common identity. Day and night, for example, are the same from the perspective of the common substance of the world, of which they are cyclical features; so likewise are, for example, waking and sleeping from the perspective of the individual of whom *they* are cyclical features. This fascination, on Heraclitus’ part, with perspective emerges in other fragments as well. “Sea water,” he says, “is very pure and very foul water: for fish, drinkable and life-sustaining, for men, undrinkable and lethal” (fragment 61). In other words, one and the same substance can produce different effects on different people or objects, (see also fragment 9 and 13). A related point seems to be made elsewhere: “Doctors who cut and burn complain that they do not receive an appropriate fee for doing these things” (fragment 58); that is, something ordinarily considered harmful can, under different circumstances, be considered beneficial for one and the same person.

All this strongly suggests that for Heraclitus, the supposed sameness of opposites — a doctrine too often attributed to him — is in fact the much more interesting and defensible doctrine of the *interconnectedness* of opposites. It is a doctrine expressed with characteristic power and subtlety in a famous fragment: “they do not understand how, while differing from itself, it is agreement with itself. There is a back-turning connection, like that of a bow or a lyre” (fragment 51). The fragment is commonly, and it seems to me rightly, taken as referring to the cosmos: the world is a unity, a functioning whole, like the bow or the lyre. The world is forever “connected,” “turning back” upon itself in an everlasting process of cyclical change, while losing nothing of its essential nature as the world, just as the bow and the lyre are each “connected” wholes, “turned” and “bent back” upon themselves to form that state of balanced tension which makes them what they are. In all these instances, the “connectedness” of polar points or states makes for the unity of the substance in question, for the bow and the lyre the conjunctive aspect being the taught string(s), for the world a planned (“measured”), balanced, predictable, and unending process of change. “The ordered world,” he says, “the same for all, no god nor man made, but it always was, is, and will be an ever-living fire, being kindled in measures, and being put in measures” (fragment 30). The “measures” in question, laid down by that Justice which is surely to be equated with “that which alone is wise” (fragment 32), are in effect the unbreakable laws of physics. “The sun will not overstep his measures, otherwise the avenging Furies, ministers of Justice, will find him out” (fragment 94).

Whether the fire of fragment 30 is meant to be taken as Heraclitus’ basic substance (ἀρχή), a metaphor for change, or both, is disputed. Fragment 31a, however, strongly suggests both its substantiality and its status as the physical *arche* which makes the cosmos the unity that it is. The process of cosmic is taken to be cyclical in something like what the Milesian thinkers Anaximander and Anaximenes envisioned for their respective versions of the *arche*: “the transformations of Fire are, first of all, sea; and half of the sea is earth, half whirlwind” (fragment 31a). Such change is, once again, characteristically, described in terms of measure and proportion: “the sea is poured forth from earth, and is measured in the same proportion as existed before it became earth” (fragment 31b; see also fragment 36). We will return to the role and status of “Heraclitean fire” soon, but for now, suffice it to notice that for Heraclitus “stable” and “changing,” “being” and “becoming,” are clearly non-contradictory properties of the universe (“changing, it rests,” as he says [fragment 84]). This is a point forcefully affirmed in what is arguably his most celebrated piece of metaphor, “You cannot step into the same river twice; for new waters are ever flowing upon you” (fragment 12; see also fragment 49a).

The unified, ordered world of balanced change is also a world in which the “laws” or norms of justice prevail: “Justice will catch up with fabricators of falsehoods and those who bear witness to them” (fragment 28b). More generally, such norms can be described as “divine law” in nature, a law that is common in its accessibility and its applicability: “those who would speak with insight must base themselves firmly on that which is common to all, as a city does upon its law — and much more firmly, for all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law” (fragment 114). But the justice that is cosmic law is the justice of disruption and revolution, of war and violence, not that of balm and healing. “One must realize,” he says, “war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife.” Elsewhere he puts it thus: “War is the father of all and the king of all” (fragment 53). If this strikes us as paradoxical, it is because of our failure to recognize the different perspective that a God’s-eye-view necessarily has of reality: “to God, all things are fair and just, whereas humans have supposed that some things are unjust, other things just” (fragment 102). According to such a God’s-eye-view, all change however violent, be it macro-changes of nature and the outer cosmos, or war among states, or civic strife, or the battles that rage in the human heart, can be seen as integral parts of the law or *logos* that “steers all things” (fragment 41), producing through change, that higher unity which is the cosmos.

Two problems remain a major matter of dispute: whether Heraclitus believed in the constant interchange of four elemental masses of material in the universe (earth/fire/air/water) or simply three (earth/fire/water); and whether his philosophy included a theory of the periodic conflagration (ἐκπύρωσις) of the sum of things, as the Stoic philosophers later believed. He probably believed in four, not three elemental masses, and the fragments (notably fragment 66) can at any tolerate an interpretation in terms of a doctrine of periodic ἐκπύρωσις as well as one continuous elemental transmutation.

Such, in brief, appear to be Heraclitus’ broad commitments. As far as his particular beliefs are concerned, one can being with a short description of his views on the macro-cosmos. First and foremost is the prominence of the role played by fire, and more specifically of that *aether* (αἰθήρ, or fiery substance of the outer heaven) which, like so many of his fellow Greeks, he had no difficulty in equating with divinity, and particularly cosmic justice: “Fire,” he says “having come suddenly upon all things, will judge, and convict them” (fragment 66). Fire is apparently both the ἀρχή of which the universe’s other elemental masses are transmutations, (fragments 31a-b; see also fragment 90), and especially in its macro-cosmic manifestations, the directive force that guarantees that such changes take place according to a rational and predictable pattern (fragments 31a-b): “the thunderbolt” he says, “steers the totality of things” (fragment 64). In its most perfect physical manifestation — αἰθήρ — and in the most impressive manifestation of *aether*’s activity — the thunderbolt —“ever living fire” not only symbolizes but *is* that justice or wisdom which “is both willing and unwilling to be called by the name Zeus” (fragment 32). The mention of Zeus, the supreme god, is important: manifestations of fire *other* than *aether*/thunderbolt will also manifest and symbolize divinity, but divinity of a lesser power and stature. “The sun,” he says, “will not overstep (his) measures. Otherwise, the avenging Furies, ministers of Justice, will find him out” (fragment 94). The sun’s role, however, in the scheme of things is still pivotal, despite the smallness of its size (fragment 3), and its ongoing power to perform that role is perhaps to be traced to its daily rejuvenation (fragment 6). In the matter of controlling the “seasons that bring all things” the later writer Plutarch maintains that, according to Heraclitus, Zeus actually shared the task with the sun (fragment 100), and a famous fragment catches its importance as the lightener of cosmic darkness (fragment 99).

For other, putatively Heraclitean views on astronomy and the macro-cosmos, we have only secondary sources to guide us, and they do not always agree on details. It seems, however, reasonable to believe that for Heraclitus, sun, moon, and stars consisted of bowls, the contents of which are fed by exhalations from the sea. Most of the time the bowls have their concave side turned towards the earth; eclipses are caused when the concave side of the sun or moon is turned upwards, and/or when the bowl “turns and slopes sideways.” Of the astral bodies, the stars are furthest away, which is why they give less light and warmth; the moon is the nearest astral body, and is not a citizen of that realm of pure *aether* that the sun and stars inhabit. As for other celestial phenomena, “thunder is caused by the aggregation of winds and clouds and the crashing of masses of air into the clouds; lightning is caused by the act of kindling of what gets burned; and hurricanes are caused by burnings and dousing rushing down from clouds.”

In all of this, Heraclitus never budges from a basic commitment to the hylozoism espoused by his predecessors and contemporaries: the macro- and microcosms are alive, and the principle and sustainer of that life is soul. So much is easy to say, but a full understanding of soul will be forever beyond us: “one would never discover the limits of soul, even if one should traverse every road — so deep a *logos* does it possess” (fragment 45). Some things can none the less be said. Soul, it seems, is not simply a principle of life; inhumans, it is the principle of rationality: “whenever a man is drunk, he is led along, stumbling by a beardless boy; he does not perceive where he is going, because his soul is wet” (fragment 117). It is a material substance, born initially of water (fragment 36) and ranging in character from air to fire. The degree of its rationality depends on the quality of its dryness: “a flash of light,” Heraclitus says “is a dry soul, wisest and best,” (fragment 118). The air that constitutes the soul of the drunken man (fragment 117) is sodden, and close to that point at which it condenses to form water and ceases to be a soul at all: “for souls it is death to become water” (fragment 36). This process he wryly admits can also be very pleasurable: “for souls it is a joy or death to become wet” (fragment 77). The soul of the best and wisest person, by contrast, consists of air that is dry, and the reward for a brave death in battle in particular is transformation of the warrior’s soul into that of a guardian demigod, that is, transformation from dry air to something still higher on the scale of rationality/divinity — *aether*, the ultimate in dryness. “War,” he says, “shows some men to be gods” (fragment 53).

The rationality of the soul is also, as it happens, a currency that circulates freely, and is used with particular abandon by our passions, says Heraclitus: “it is difficult to fight passion, for whatever it wishes it buys at the price of its own soul” (fragment 85). But whatever the difficulty, passion, and particularly the passion of *hybris*, must be resisted: “there is a greater need to extinguish *hybris* than there is a blazing fire” (fragment 43). The *hybris* in question is apparently that of setting oneself above the law, and “the people must fight on behalf of the law as they would for their city-wall” (fragment 44). Such a law would not necessarily be that of a democratic institution: “it is law,” he says, “also to obey the counsel of a single one” (fragment 33), and “one man is the equivalent of ten thousand, provided he be very good” (fragment 49) — a point missed apparently by the people of Ephesus, his own city. “The adult Ephesians,” he says, “should…go hang themselves, leaving the city to adolescents. For they expelled Hermodorus, the most valuable man among them, saying, ‘We will not have a single one as the most valuable among us. If such there be, let him be so elsewhere and among others’” (fragment 121). Some people (like Bias of Priene) are quite simply of more account (λόγος) than others (fragment 39), and such people, whom Heraclitus calls “the best” or “the most notable,” “choose one thing in place of all other things — ever-flowing glory among mortals” (fragment 29). The aristocratic prejudice hinted at here (and a commonplace in his day) seems reinforced elsewhere: “the majority are bad,” he says, “only the are good” (fragment 104), and “the majority” — by contrast with the minority who are “the best” — “glut themselves like cattle” (fragment 29). However, some sympathy for the feelings of the ruled may occasionally have stirred him: “weariness is toiling for the same people and being ruled by them” (fragment 84b).

The virtue of “the best men” is for Heraclitus, as for so many other Greeks, most clearly manifested on the battlefield. “Gods and mankind,” he says, “honor those slain by Ares” (fragment 24). Not all death, however, is noble; and the problem of how ordinary people deal with their own death prompts Heraclitus to a statement of peculiar poignancy: “once born, people consent to live and face their fate, and leave behind them children to become in their turn subject to their own particular fates” (fragment 20). As for death as such, his views on the matter are expressed in ways that continue to defy universally acceptable interpretation. On the one hand, he seems committed to the view that certain souls can, by such abuses as drunkenness, be actually destroyed (fragments 36, 117); one the other hand, the souls of “the best” seem to be assured of divinization and immortality (fragments 53, 62, 63). Not all souls, then, are assured of a hereafter. Those that do achieve it have, however, fallen into no “sleep of death;” their new life is one to which they in fact awake (fragments 21, 63), kindling for themselves a light to illuminate the surrounding darkness (fragment 26). What awaits them in their new state they can hardly even guess at: “there await people when they die things they can neither expect nor even imagine” (fragment 27). One such surprise may be that, whatever other perceptual losses they may suffer, one sense at least, that of smell, will remain active (fragment 98); another surprise will be that Justice, then if not earlier, “will catch up with fabricators of falsehoods and those who bear witness to them” (fragment 28b).

Some of Heraclitus’ views can be cautiously pieced together by comparative inference, since a good deal of his time is spent ridiculing and lampooning others for what he takes to be their foolish notions. The great poets of Greece, for example, are no guide to wisdom, nor are the popular bards who recite them (fragment 42). Worse than that, some are a positive source of mischief, and deserve punishment, not praise: “Homer ought by rights to be ejected from the lists, and thrashed, and similarly Archilochus” (fragment 42). Others, like Hesiod, have become the teachers of Greece; yet his ignorance was such that he continually failed to recognize even day and night for what they are! For they are one” (fragment 57). Even Homer, who was wiser than all the Greeks, could be on occasion equally deceived (fragment 56). So “what discernment or intelligence” is shown by those who use such people as their guide?” (fragment 104).

The same scorn is heaped on other Greek philosophers. Pythagoras in particular is singled out as the “chief captain of swindlers” (fragment 81a). One of his errors, shared by several, was to assume that polymathy could lead to understanding: “a lot of learning does not teach understanding; were it so, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, or for that matter Xenophanes and Hecataeus” (fragment 40). Another error of Pythagoras lay, not in his determination to investigate reality (which is in fact imperative, [fragment 35]), but in a certain selectiveness in that investigation which led to the construction of a private, rather than a universal wisdom (fragment 129).

As for the majority of mankind, they are just about beyond redemption. Apart from the fact that the majority of people “glut themselves like cattle,” and “only a few of them are good” (fragment 104), ordinary people’s religious beliefs are often illogical and absurd. “They vainly try to purify themselves with blood,” for example, “when they are defiled with it!” — (which is) as if one who had stepped into mud should try to wash himself off mud!” (fragment 5). They see, but do not notice (fragment 1); they experience, but do not learn from that experience (fragment 1); “uncomprehending, even when they have heard the truth, they are like deaf people,” and the saying “absent while present” fits them well” (fragment 34). Like dogs, they bark at everyone they do not know (fragment 97); like donkeys, they would prefer straw to gold (fragment 9).

But their political leaders cannot escape censure for some of the misguided beliefs of the general run of mankind. “What discernment or intelligence,” he asks, “do such leaders possess?” (fragment 104). “They place their trust in popular bards, and take the mob for their teacher” (fragment 104). Their religious leaders, lampooned as “night-wandering wizards, Bacchants, Leneans, initiates” (fragment 14), are no less worthy of castigation. “The initiation-rites accepted amongst mankind,” he says, “they perform in an impious manner” (fragment 14), and their singing of shameful hymns πρὸς τὰ αἰσχρά is saved from shamefulness only by the fact that, unbeknownst to them, Life (Dionysius) and Death (Hades) are one and the same (fragment 15).

None of this is to suggest that for Heraclitus, there are no features of popular religion that are worthy of respect. Popular belief in the Zeus of Olympus, for example, points to the profounder truth that the world is directed by a wisdom “which is willing and unwilling to be called by the name Zeus” (fragment 32). A similar pointer to the truths that comprise the *logos* are the utterances of Delphic Apollo: “the lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither indicates clearly nor conceals, but gives a sign” (fragment 93). The same can be said of the Sibyl, mirthless though her utterances may be (fragment 92). Such “signs” will, of course, figure prominently among the “many things” that “lovers of wisdom ought very much to be enquirers into” (fragment 35).