



Herakleitos and Parmenides

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Herakleitos

§39. It is above all in dealing with Herakleitos that we are made to feel the importance of personality in shaping systems of philosophy. The very style of his fragments is something unique in Greek literature, and won for him in later times the epithet of “the dark.” He is quite conscious himself that he writes an oracular style, and he justifies it by the example of the Sibyl (fr. 12) and of the God at Delphoi (fr. 11), who “neither utters nor hides his meaning, but signifies it.” Here we see the influence of what has been called the prophetic movement of the sixth century BC, though we are not entitled to assume without more ado that Herakleitos was influenced by that in other respects. The truth is that his central thought is quite simple, and that it is still quite possible to disentangle it from its enigmatic surroundings. Only, when we have done this, we must not suppose we have given a complete account of the man. He is much too big for our formulas.

The date of Herakleitos is roughly fixed by his reference in the past tense to Hekataios, Pythagoras, and Xenophanes (fr. 16), and by the fact that Parmenides appears to allude to him in turn (fr. 6). This means that he wrote early in the fifth century B.C. He was an Ephesian noble, and it appears that the ancient dignity of Basileus (at this date no doubt a religious office) was hereditary in his family; for we are told that he resigned it in favor of his brother. We get a glimpse of his political attitude in the quotation (fr. 114) where he says: “The Ephesians would do well to hang themselves, every grown man of them, and leave the city to beardless lads; for they have cast out Hermodoros, the best man among them, saying, ‘We will have none that is best among us; if there be any such, let him be so elsewhere and among others.’” There can be no doubt that Herakleitos was a convinced aristocrat and had a sovereign contempt for the mass of mankind.

But it was not only the common run of men that Herakleitos despised; he had not even a good word for any of his predecessors. He agrees, of course, with Xenophanes about Homer (with whom he classes Archilochos), but Xenophanes himself falls under an equal condemnation. In a remarkable fragment (fr. 16) he mentions him along with Hesiod, Pythagoras, and Hekataios as an instance of the truth that much learning does not teach men to think. The researches of Pythagoras, by which we are to understand in the first place his harmonic and arithmetical discoveries, are rejected with special emphasis (fr. 17). Wisdom is not a knowledge of many things; it is the clear knowledge of one thing only, and this Herakleitos describes, in true prophetic style, as his Word, which is “true evermore,” though men cannot understand it even when it is told to them (fr. 2). We must endeavor, then, to discover, if we can, what Herakleitos meant by his Word, the thing he felt he had been born to say, whether anyone would listen to him or not.

§ 40. In the first place, it is plain that the Word must be something more than the doctrine of Fire as the primary substance, or even the theory of Flux. If Herakleitos had merely substituted fire for the “air” of Anaximenes, that would only have been a further advance

on the lines of Anaximenes himself, who had substituted “air” for the water of Thales. It is not at once obvious either that the doctrine of flux is an improvement on that of rarefaction and condensation; and, even if it were, such an improvement would hardly account for the tone in which Herakleitos speaks of his Word. It is not in this direction we must seek for his innermost thought. The doctrine of flux is, no doubt, a great scientific generalization, but no single scientific discovery is attributed to Herakleitos. That is significant. Further, everything we are told about his cosmology shows it to have been even more reactionary than that of Xenophanes or the school of Anaximenes. On the other hand, though he uses the language of the mysteries, he condemns them in the strongest terms. The “Night-walkers, magicians, Bakchoi, Lenai, and Mystai” of whom he speaks (fr. 124) must be the contemporary Orphics, and we are told by Clement of Alexandria, who quotes the words, that Herakleitos threatened them with the wrath to come.

Yet Herakleitos has one thing in common with the religious teachers of his time, and that is his insistence on the idea of Soul. To him, as to them, the soul was no longer a feeble ghost or shade, but the most real thing of all, and its most important attribute was thought or wisdom. “Now Anaximenes had already illustrated the doctrine of “air” by the remark that it is breath which keeps us in life (§ 9), and we have seen how the same idea affected the Pythagorean cosmology (§ 28). The Delphic precept “Know thyself” was a household word in those days, and Herakleitos says “I sought myself” (fr. 80). He also said (fr. 71): “You cannot find out the boundaries of soul; so deep a measure hath it.” If we follow up these hints we may perhaps find ourselves on the right track.

§ 41. A glance at the fragments will show that the thought of Herakleitos was dominated by the opposition of sleeping and waking, life and death, and that this seemed to him the key to the traditional Milesian problem of the opposites, hot and cold, wet and dry. More precisely, Life, Sleep, Death correspond to Fire, Water, Earth, and the latter are to be understood from the former. Now we see that the soul is only fully alive when it is awake, and that sleep is really a stage between life and death. Sleep and death are due to the advance of moisture, as is shown by the phenomenon of drunkenness (fr. 73). “It is death to souls to become water” (fr. 68). Waking and life are due to the advance of warmth and fire, and “the dry soul is the wisest and the best” (fr. 74). We see further that there is a regular alternation of the two processes; sleep alternates with waking, and life with death. Fire is fed by the exhalations of water, and these exhalations are in turn produced by the warmth of the fire. If there were no water, there could be no fire; and, if there were no fire, there could be no exhalations from the water.

If we look next at the macrocosm, we shall see the explanation is the same. Night and day, summer and winter, alternate in the same way as sleep and waking, life and death, and here too it is clear that the explanation is to be found in the successive advance of the wet and the dry, the cold and the hot. It follows that it is wrong to make the primary substance an intermediate state like “air.” It must be the most living thing in the world, and therefore it must be fire like the life of the soul; and as the fiery soul is the wisest, so will the wisdom which “steers” the world be fire. Pure fire is to be seen best in the sun, which is lit up afresh every morning, and put out at night. It and the other heavenly bodies are just masses of pure fire ignited in a sort of basin in which they traverse the heavens, and this fire is kept up by exhalations from the earth. The phases of the moon and eclipses are due to a partial or total turning round of the basins. Darkness too is an exhalation from the earth of another kind. These last remarks prove we are not dealing with a scientific man, as science was understood in Italy.

§ 42. But, if fire is the primary form of reality, it seems that we may gain a clearer

view of what Anaximander had described as “separating out” (§ 7), and Anaximenes had explained by rarefaction and condensation” (§ 9). The process of combustion is the key both to human life and to that of the world. It is a process that never rests; for a flame has always to be fed by fresh exhalations as fuel, and it is always turning into vapor or smoke. The steadiness of the flame depends on the “measures” of fuel kindled and the “measures” of fire extinguished in smoke remaining constant. Now the world is “an everliving fire” (fr. 20), and therefore there will be an unceasing process of “flux.” That will apply to the world at large and also to the soul of man. “You cannot step twice into the same river” (fr. 41), and it is just as true that “we are and are not” at any given moment. “The way up and the way down,” which are “one and the same” (fr. 69) are also the same for the microcosm and the macrocosm. Fire, water, earth is the way down, and earth, water, fire is the way up. And these two ways are forever being traversed in opposite directions at once, so that everything really consists of two parts, one part travelling up and the other travelling down.

Now Anaximander had held (§ 6) that all things must return to the Boundless, and so pay the penalty to one another for their injustice, and what Herakleitos regarded as his great discovery seems to attach itself to this very pronouncement. It is just the fact that the world is “an everliving fire” which secures its stability; for the same “measures” of fire are always being kindled and going out (fr. 20). It is impossible for fire to consume its nourishment without at the same time giving back what it has consumed already. It is a process of eternal “exchange” like that of gold for wares and wares for gold (fr. 22); and “the sun will not exceed his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the auxiliaries of Justice, will find him out” (fr. 29). For all this strife is really justice (fr. 22), not injustice, as Anaximander had supposed, and “War is the father of all things” (fr. 44). It is just this opposite tension that keeps things together, like that of the string in the bow and the lyre (fr. 45), and though it is a hidden attunement, it is better than any open one (fr. 47). For all his condemnation of Pythagoras, Herakleitos cannot get away from the tuned string.

But, in spite of all this, it is possible for the “measures” to vary up to a certain point. We see that from the facts of sleeping and waking, death and life, with which we started, and also from the corresponding facts of night and day, summer and winter. These fluctuations are due to the processes of evaporation or exhalation and liquefaction which formed the starting-point of all early Ionian physics. Yet these fluctuations exactly balance one another, so that, in the long run, the “measures” are not exceeded. It appears to be certain that Herakleitos inferred from this periodicity the survival of soul in some form or other. We see that day follows night and summer follows winter, and we know that waking follows sleep. In the same way, he seems to have argued, life follows death, and the soul once more begins its upward journey. “It is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old” (fr. 78). That is the game of draughts that Time plays everlastingly (fr. 79).

§ 43. Such, so far as we can make it out, is the general view of Herakleitos, and now we may ask for his secret, the one thing to know which is wisdom. It is that, as the apparent strife of opposites in this world is really due to the opposite tension which holds the world together, so in pure fire, which is the eternal wisdom, all these oppositions disappear in their common ground. God is “beyond good and bad” (fr. 57, 61). Therefore what we must do to attain wisdom is to hold fast to “the common.” “The waking have one and the same world, but sleepers turn aside, each into a world of his own” (fr. 95). If we keep our souls dry, we shall understand that good and evil are one, that is, that they are only passing forms of one reality that transcends them both. Such was the conclusion a man of genius drew from the Milesian doctrine of evaporation and liquefaction.

§ 44. For, with all his originality, Herakleitos remains an Ionian. He had learnt indeed the importance of soul, but his fire-soul is as little personal as the breath-soul of Anaximenes. There are certainly fragments that seem to assert the immortality of the individual soul; but, when we examine them, we see they cannot bear this interpretation. Soul is only immortal in so far as it is part of the everliving fire which is the life of the world. Seeing that the soul of every man is in constant flux like his body, what meaning can immortality have? It is not only true that we cannot step twice into the same river, but also that we are not the same for two successive instants. That is just the side of his doctrine that struck contemporaries most forcibly, and Epicharmos already made fun of it by putting it as an argument into the mouth of a debtor who did not wish to pay. How could he be liable, seeing he is not the same man that contracted the debt? And Herakleitos is an Ionian, too, in his theology. His wisdom, which is one and apart from all things, “wills and wills not to be called by the name of Zeus” (fr. 65). That is to say, it is no more what the religious consciousness means by God than the Air of Anaximenes or the World of Xenophanes. Herakleitos, in fact, despite his prophetic tone and his use of religious languages, never broke through the secularism and pantheism of the Ionians. Belief in a personal God and an immortal soul was already being elaborated in another quarter, but did not secure a place in philosophy till the time of Plato.

Parmenides

§ 45. We have now to consider the criticisms directed against the fundamental assumptions of Ionian cosmology from another side. That Parmenides wrote after Herakleitos, and in conscious opposition to him, seems to be proved by what must surely be an express allusion in his poem. The words “for whom it is and is not the same and not the same, and all things travel in opposite directions” (fr. 6, 8), cannot well refer to anyone else, and we may infer that these words were written sometime between Marathon and Salamis. We know from the poem that Parmenides was a young man when he wrote it, for the goddess who reveals the truth to him addresses him as “youth,” and Plato says that Parmenides came to Athens in his sixty-fifth year and conversed with Sokrates who was then “very young.” That must have been in the middle of the fifth century BC, or shortly after it. Parmenides was a citizen of Elea, for which city he legislated, and he is generally represented as a disciple of Xenophanes. It has been pointed out, however, that there is no evidence for the settlement of Xenophanes at Elea (§ 16), and the story that he founded the Eleatic school seems to be derived from a playful remark of Plato’s, which would also prove Homer to have been a Herakleitean. We have much more satisfactory evidence for the statement that Parmenides was a Pythagorean. We are told that he built a shrine to the memory of his Pythagorean teacher, Ameinias, son of Diochaitas, and this appears to rest on the testimony of the inscription in which he dedicated it. The authorities Strabo followed, in referring to the legislation of Elea, expressly called Parmenides and Zeno Pythagoreans, and the name of Parmenides occurs in the list of Pythagoreans preserved by Iamblichos.

§ 46. Parmenides broke with the older Ionic tradition by writing in hexameter verse. It was not a happy thought. The Hesiodic style was doubtless appropriate enough for the cosmogony he described in the second part of his poem, but it was wholly unsuited to the arid dialectic of the first. It is clear that Parmenides was no born poet, and we must ask what led him to take this new departure. The example of Xenophanes is hardly an adequate explanation; for the poetry of Parmenides is as unlike that of Xenophanes as it well can be, and his style is rather that of Hesiod and the Orphics. Now it has been clearly shown that the well-known Proem, in which Parmenides describes his ascent to the home of the goddess who

is supposed to speak the remainder of the verses, is a reflexion of the conventional ascents into heaven which were almost as common as descents into hell in the apocalyptic literature of those days, and of which we have later imitations in the myth of Plato's *Phaedrus* and in Dante's *Paradiso*. But, if it was the influence of such an apocalypse that led Parmenides to write in verse, it will follow that the Proem is no mere external ornament to his work, but an essential part of it, the part, in fact, which he had most clearly conceived when he began to write. In that case, it is to the Proem we must look for the key to the whole.

Parmenides represents himself as borne on a chariot and attended by the Sunmaidens who have quitted the Halls of Night to guide him on his journey. They pass along the highway till they come to the Gate of Night and Day, which is locked and barred. The key is in the keeping of *Diké* (Right), the Avenger, who is persuaded to unlock it by the Sunmaidens. They pass in through the gate and are now, of course, in the realms of Day. The goal of the journey is the palace of a goddess who welcomes Parmenides and instructs him in the two ways, that of Truth and the deceptive way of Belief, in which is no truth at all. All this is described without inspiration and in a purely conventional manner, so it must be interpreted by the canons of the apocalyptic style. It is clearly meant to indicate that Parmenides had been converted, that he had passed from error (night) to truth (day), and the Two Ways must represent his former error and the truth which is now revealed to him. We have seen reason to believe that Parmenides was originally a Pythagorean, and there are many things which suggest that the Way of Belief is an account of Pythagorean cosmology. In any case, it is surely impossible to regard it as anything else than a description of some error. The goddess says so in words that cannot be explained away. Further, this erroneous belief is not the ordinary man's view of the world, but an elaborate system, which seems to be a natural development of the Ionian cosmology on certain lines, and there is no other system but the Pythagorean that fulfils this requirement.

To this it has been objected that Parmenides would not have taken the trouble to expound in detail a system he had altogether rejected, but that is to mistake the character of the apocalyptic convention. It is not Parmenides, but the goddess, that expounds the system, and it is for this reason that the beliefs described are said to be those of "mortals." Now a description of the ascent of the soul would be quite incomplete without a picture of the region from which it had escaped. The goddess must reveal the two ways at the parting of which Parmenides stands, and bid him choose the better. That itself is a Pythagorean idea. It was symbolized by the letter Y, and can be traced right down to Christian times. The machinery of the

Proem consists, therefore, of two well-known apocalyptic devices, the Ascent into Heaven, and the Parting of the Ways, and it follows that, for Parmenides himself, his conversion from Pythagoreanism to Truth was the central thing in his poem, and it is from that point of view we must try to understand him. It is probable too that, if the Pythagoreans had not been a religious society as well as a scientific school, he would have been content to say what he had to say in prose. As it was, his secession from the school was also a heresy, and had, like all heresies, to be justified in the language of religion.

§47. All the Ionians had taken for granted that the primary substance could assume different forms, such as earth, water, and fire, a view suggested by the observed phenomena of freezing, evaporation, and the like. Anaximenes had further explained these transformations as due to rarefaction and condensation. That, of course really implies that the structure of the primary substance is corpuscular, and that there are interstices of some kind between its particles. It is improbable that Anaximenes realized this consequence of his doctrine. Even now it is not immediately obvious to the untrained mind. The problem was

raised at once, however, by the use the Pythagoreans had made of the theory. According to them, as we have seen (§ 28), the world inhaled “air,” or void, from the boundless mass outside it, and this accounted for the extension of the bodies whose limits were marked out by the “figures.” When the thing was put in this way, further questions were inevitable.

§48. Now the rise of mathematics in this same Pythagorean school had revealed for the first time the power of thought. To the mathematician of all men it is the same thing that can be thought and that can be, and this is the principle from which Parmenides starts. It is impossible to think what is not, and it is impossible for what cannot be thought to be. The great question, *is it or is it not?* is therefore equivalent to the question *can it be thought or not?*

Parmenides goes on to consider in the light of this principle the consequences of saying that anything *is*. In the first place, it cannot have come into being. If it had, it must have arisen from nothing or from something. It cannot have arisen from nothing; for there is no nothing. It cannot have arisen from something; for there is nothing else than what is. Nor can anything else besides itself come into being; for there can be no empty space in which it could do so. Is it or is it not? If it is now, all at once. In this way Parmenides refutes all accounts of the origin the world. *Ex nihilo nihil fit*.

Further, if it *is*, it simply is, and it cannot *be* more or less. There is, therefore, as much of it in one place as in another. (That makes rarefaction and condensation impossible.) It is continuous and indivisible; for there is nothing but itself which could prevent its parts being in contact with one another. It is therefore full, a continuous indivisible plenum. (That is directed against the Pythagorean theory of a discontinuous reality.) Further, it is immovable. If it moved, it must move in to empty space, and empty space is nothing, and there is no nothing. Also it is finite and spherical; for it cannot be in one direction any more than in another, and the sphere is the only figure of which this can be said.

What *is* is, therefore a finite, spherical, motionless, continuous plenum, and there is nothing beyond it. Coming into being and ceasing to be are mere “names,” and so is motion, and still more color and the like. They are not even thoughts; for a thought must be a thought or something that *is* and none of these can *be*.

§49. Such is the conclusion to which the view of the real as a single body inevitably leads, and there is no escape from it. The “matter” of our physical text-books is just the real of Parmenides; and, unless we can find room for something else than matter, we are shut up to his account of reality. No subsequent system could afford to ignore this, but of course it was impossible to acquiesce permanently in a doctrine like that of Parmenides. It deprives the world we know of all claim to existence, and reduces it to something which is hardly even an illusion. If we are to give an intelligible account of the world, we must certainly introduce motion again somehow. That can never be taken for granted any more, as it was by the early cosmologists; we must attempt to explain it if we are to escape from the conclusions of Parmenides.

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