



Heraclitus

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Heraclitus was a native of Ephesus, and so far as we know he remained at home and did not, like Pythagoras and Xenophanes, emigrate to the West. He had heard of their doctrines, for he mentions them by name; and...all three of them had certain fundamental points of agreement in their thinking. But his philosophical activity was probably later than theirs, and would fall mainly in the first years of the fifth century. He put his ideas in writing, and sufficient fragments of his work have been preserved to enable us to make out the main features of his system without the reliance on later tradition which is necessary in the case of the Milesians and Pythagoras. He wrote, however, in an oracular fashion, expressing his thoughts in short, epigrammatic sentences, with the result that his meaning is frequently obscure and he gained the nickname of “the Dark.”

It is abundantly clear that Heraclitus was conscious of the quality of his style; and he appears to regard it as the appropriate vehicle of his thought. No doubt this style was partly the expression of his individuality, which was marked, and partly due to the spirit of the age; but it also seems to have a philosophical significance. This manner of writing was quite different from all ordinary prose, and Heraclitus is at pains to dissociate himself from other thinkers, some of whom he mentions by name. Running through all his criticisms of these thinkers there is the idea that they had failed to use their understanding — Homer had prayed for the end of strife and had not understood that this would mean the destruction of the world; Pythagoras had practised scientific inquiry and knew many things, but his knowledge was not genuine understanding. And so, speaking in general, Heraclitus says: “Of all whose discourses I have heard, not one has advanced so far as to understand that wisdom is separate from all things”. For the same reason also he despised the common people, who never really thought and who acted as if they were asleep. He seems therefore to feel that a true understanding demands digging down beneath the surface of things to a hidden truth, which no one else had found; and that wisdom is to be gained by penetrating insights, such as characterized the utterances of the Delphic oracle.

Consonant with this attitude are certain remarks which he makes on the subject of experience by the senses. “Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to persons who have untutored (lit., barbaric) souls”. Again and again the author contrasts understanding or wisdom with the testimony of the senses, the mere learning of many things, or scientific inquiry; and the fragments of his work leave no room for doubt that he neither was nor wished to be a scientific investigator. Sense experience, knowledge of many things, and scientific inquiry were characteristic of the common herd, the poets, and previous investigators, all of whom, as we have just seen, Heraclitus condemned. It can therefore hardly be questioned that he meant to distinguish understanding from mere sense experience, that he connected the

former directly with the soul, and that he thought of it as superior to the latter. There is no warrant for attributing to him any more definite psychology than that ; but that much is philosophically important as indicating that thus early in the development of Greek philosophy a distinction, rough and vague as it may have been, was made between the evidence of the senses and a higher faculty of the soul.

What then does the understanding of Heraclitus discover when it penetrates below the surface of things? It discovers that underneath all the apparent multiplicity and strife there is a hidden unity and harmony. But this doctrine of unity is not merely an explicit rendering of the implication which had been present in the thought of the Milesians and Xenophanes — if it had been only that? there would have been no reason for Heraclitus to condemn his predecessors so roundly. What he meant by unity was that the various separate things in the world were really not separate and distinct from one another, but all one. Anaximander had taken his stand on the evidence of sensation when he maintained that there were “opposites,” like the hot and the cold, and that one of these opposites could never be reduced to the other — hot was not cold and never could become cold. But Heraclitus maintained that if you used your understanding with your senses, you would see that opposites do precisely what Anaximander suggested they could not do — they pass into one another. “Cold things become warm and the warm cools, the wet dries and the parched is moistened” In the doctrine of Heraclitus the unity of the world involves the passage of opposites into one another, a conception whose absence, he believed, had vitiated all earlier explanations of the world.

It is evident that if things pass into their opposites, the world must be in a continual flux, and that is the conclusion which Heraclitus drew. The appearance of stability in things is an illusion of the senses, which must be corrected by the understanding; and the understanding shows that a thing is not permanently fixed and stereo-typed against its opposite, but is inevitably destined to pass into it. All things are changing, and the whole is like a river which is never the same on account of the flow of fresh water. The world is a process.

Now a continual flux of all things would by itself be a mere chaos, and as the world is not a chaos, there must be some principle which unifies and regulates the changes. Heraclitus believed in the first place that all the petty changes which are visible in different objects could be reduced to the transformations that occur between three gross substances, earth, water, and fire. In studying the Milesians, we have seen that they believed they perceived certain qualitative transformations between various materials, which later investigations proved to be illusory; and we therefore need not be surprised to find Heraclitus assuming the same kind of changes. In fact he seems to have held that earth is liquefied so that it turns into water, and that the sea gives forth exhalations which feed the fire in the sun and the other celestial bodies; and on the other hand, the fire of the sun appears in the fiery storm-cloud which produces water, and water turns to earth, as happens in the case of alluvial deposits. It will be seen that these transformations form two regular series, first that from earth to sea to fire, second that from fire to sea to earth; and as Heraclitus localized the fire in the heavenly bodies, especially the sun, he called these two series of transformations “the upward and the downward path.” He thus held that all changes are explicable by the transformations of materials in the upward and the downward paths.

But there was still something that needed explanation, and that was how the three gross elements, and indeed all objects, could give the appearance of stability and permanence,

if they were really continually changing. Heraclitus met this problem by the theory that every transformation involves a “measure,” and is matched by a transformation of equal “measure” in the opposite direction. Thus in proportion as the earth turns into sea, the sea turns back into earth; and in proportion as the sea gives off exhalations to the celestial fire, it receives fresh complements of water from the heavens; so that at any moment, the sea, for instance, has one part changing into fire and another part changing into earth, but still maintains its individuality by exchanges from the other two substances. But apparently Heraclitus did not hold that the measures which governed all transformations were absolutely fixed, but supposed on the contrary that they varied within limits; and in this way he accounted for the alternation of day and night, winter and summer, and phenomena of that variety.

This Heraclitean conception of measures is philosophically significant as a fresh attempt to appreciate natural regularity. Anaximander had argued from the alternation of sensibly stable opposites, like the hot and the cold, to a law of retribution, compensating for any advance of one opposite over the other, which he regarded as injustice. Heraclitus, on the other hand, seems to suggest that the understanding must interpret this apparent strife of opposites as a harmony of interaction within pre-ordained limits. There is therefore an explicit contrast between the notions of strife and harmony, and a latent contrast between retribution after the fact and preordained limit. This latter contrast corresponds roughly to the difference between the notion of political law as a means of rectifying injustice when committed, exemplified probably in Draco’s codification, and the notion of previously defined rights, which is implied in the constitutional reforms of Solon and the later legal structure based upon them. ² Thus, when Heraclitus says: “the sun will not transgress his measures, and if he does, the Erinyes, the assistants of Justice, will find him out”, we are to think of these measures as natural law in the sense of preordained principles of cosmic activity.

The measures that regulate the constant flux of earth, water, and fire, seemed to point to an ultimate, unifying force; and Heraclitus believed this force was fire. “This ordered world, the same for all beings, no one of gods or men has made; but it was always and is and shall be ever-living fire, with measures kindling and measures going out”. Sea and earth must therefore represent transformations of fire, and fire is thus both the cosmic process of transformation and also one of the stages of the process. No doubt Heraclitus was combining the notions of combustion (process) and of flame (thing), in somewhat the same way as a modern physicist might speak of electricity as a mode of behavior of matter and as electrons, only it is doubtful if Heraclitus clearly distinguished the two notions. It is only fair to him to recognize that if everything is in flux, not even fire can be excepted, so that the “thing” called fire must be in the end only a stage in the ultimate process. Yet it can hardly be doubted that a confusion of thought lurks behind the phrases in which Heraclitus speaks of his principle, and that this confusion is due to the fact that he had only partially freed his mind from the old notion of the principle as the material out of which present forms have arisen.

If the world is really a unified process whose essence is fire, then not only do opposites pass into one another, but they are identical. From the cosmic point of view of the understanding, opposites are transformations of the same fire and are passing through the same process, and even the upward and the downward paths are one and the same. Heraclitus never tires

of asserting the identity of things which are ordinarily considered opposites — day and night, winter and summer, life and death, harmony and discord, and even good and bad. These assertions can only be intelligible as implying the ultimate unity of the world and as based upon the distinction between sense experience and understanding; that is, opposites are identical only for the understanding and only because they are ultimately the same cosmic fire. Professor Burnet holds that Heraclitus did not mean “that good is evil or that evil is good, but simply that they are two inseparable halves of one and the same thing”; but Heraclitus might well maintain that the two halves are the same thing. His meaning can be made quite clear by putting his statement that “to God all things are fair and good and just, but men hold some things unjust and some things just” together with the other statement that “the character of man has no wisdom, but that of god has”. The distinction between good and evil, which is typical of all opposites, is sensible to beings who lack wisdom and understanding, but disappears for god and the author, who have understanding of the cosmic unity. Hence the real unity of the world involves not only the passage of opposites into each other, but also the final identity of opposites for the understanding; and the full appreciation of this fact is the ground for the author’s attitude of superiority toward previous thinkers and the common people.

If we ask why Heraclitus selected fire, rather than sea or earth, for his principle, we get no direct answer from him; but we may be sure it was in general because of the three things fire alone could perform the functions required by the system. More specifically the notion of constant activity implied in the flux was not associated with earth, and the notion of intelligent self-direction implied in the cosmic harmony was not associated with sea; while both these attributes were connected with fire through the intermediate notion of soul. Probably many features of the principle, as Heraclitus conceived it, were based upon an analogy between macrocosm and microcosm, which was generally presupposed in Greek philosophy; and a study of the author’s conception of the human soul will thus facilitate an understanding of his cosmic principle.

It is evident that Heraclitus had advanced beyond the Homeric idea of soul as a shade which only came into being at death, and that he believed in a soul that was the principle of life in the body. When he says: “it is difficult to fight with desire, and yet that which it wishes it buys at the cost of soul”, he must be thinking of soul as a force at work in living bodies; and it is natural to suppose that this idea was at least partially the result of the mysteries, which had such a profound impression on Pythagoras. Moreover, we have already seen that Heraclitus connected understanding directly with the soul, which must therefore be considered the principle of real knowledge. Finally there can be no doubt that he identified the soul with fire, and thought of it as an epitome of the cosmic principle. “It is death to souls to become water”, because souls are fire, and in general life, sleep, and death correspond to fire, water, and earth respectively. “The dry soul is the wisest and best,” because the soul is fiery by nature and can best exercise its faculty of understanding when in its naturally pure condition. In short, the soul of man was for Heraclitus the principle of intelligent self-direction, in the form of fire in the body.

It is impossible to get from the extant fragments the author’s idea of the relation of human souls to the cosmic principle of fire; but he speaks as if they were fractions of the whole. Probably at death a soul might take the downward path to earth and lose its individuality, or it might continue its separate existence in another shape as a guardian demon of the living and the dead, the issue being determined by the character manifested during life. “Gods

and heroes” are no doubt souls who have justified their semi-independent life, and from this point of view they are the same as mortals. Moreover several of the fragments suggest a belief in reincarnation, which would be simply the reverse of the process from life to death.

After this we shall not be surprised to find that Heraclitus thought of the cosmic fire or principle of the world as soul and as god. “You could not find the limits of soul by travelling, so deep a measure has it”— this is intelligible if soul is the immanent principle of the world. “The wise alone is one, and it is willing and unwilling to be called by the name Zeus” — this must mean that the principle is the only unity in the world, that it is endowed with wisdom, and that it can be spoken of as Zeus, if that epithet does not suggest the whimsical personality who goes by the name in Homer. And so for human beings, “wisdom is one, to know the thought which steers all things through all things”. The fire which is the principle of the world is god, because it has the capacity for spontaneous movement ; and it is soul, because it is intelligent.

It is obvious that several features of Heraclitus’ cosmological doctrines had ethical implications, and three of these are important enough to deserve our attention. In the first place, after the emphasis Heraclitus has placed on the understanding, both as a means of gaining true knowledge and as an attribute of god, we are not surprised to find him saying that “understanding is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak true things and to act needfully according to the nature of the world”. From its inception in Miletus, cosmological inquiry had been predicated upon an impulse to explain and to understand, and in the Pythagorean practice this inquiry had apparently been held up as the best way of life; but it was Heraclitus who first explicitly maintained that understanding was the chief virtue or excellence of man, and that knowledge of the principle of nature suggested a life in accordance with the operation of this principle.

In the next place, Heraclitus believed that as the principle of the world, fire or soul, was the hidden unity that underlay the apparent diversity of all things, it was in reality “common” to all things, and to live according to nature is thus to “follow the common”. But to live according to nature is wisdom or understanding on the part of men, and the common principle of the world is the divine thought which steers all things, so that the injunction to follow the common means that the thought of men has the capacity of direct communion with the divine thought. It can hardly be doubted that in these ideas Heraclitus had been influenced by the mystical doctrines. Obviously too it was only through the understanding, or (in physical terms) a perfectly dry condition of soul, that men could appreciate the divine wisdom; and this leads the author to condemn the crowd, who live as if they had a private or uncommon wisdom, and wanton seekers after pleasure, whose souls are cut off from the common wisdom just as much as if they were asleep. Heraclitus also believed that the common was embodied in the constitution of a city, and he accordingly urged the people to fight for their laws as for their walls.

In the third place, for the understanding even the distinction between good and evil disappears; and as Heraclitus held that men had the capacity to understand, he may have believed that it was possible to advance to a position where the distinction between good and evil was meaningless — at least he himself had advanced to that point. But he does not develop the thought further. This reference to a condition beyond good and evil, together with the doctrine of the common, and the emphasis on wisdom, indicate plainly enough that presocratic cosmology was not without an ethical interest.

Finally there is a logical aspect of Heraclitus' thought, which must be noticed. In one way or another we have seen him identify the principle of the world with fire, god, soul, understanding, law, and virtue. These latter are not described as different aspects or roles or forms of the one principle, but the principle is said to be these various things. It is evident that such usage, as well as the identification of opposites, raises the question of the ultimate significance of predicates, and in general of the nature of thought. On this point Heraclitus had nothing to say, but it was on this point that he was attacked by... Parmenides.

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