



Philosophical Review

The Importance of Heraclitus

Author(s): Theodore de Laguna

Source: *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (May, 1921), pp. 238-254

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of [Philosophical Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2179135>

Accessed: 06/10/2013 13:12

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Duke University Press and Philosophical Review are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Philosophical Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE IMPORTANCE OF HERACLITUS.

WE call the early Greek philosophers 'cosmologists,' as their successors called them *φυσικοί*; and, as usual, the epithet conceals as much as it reveals. The oldest thinkers from whom we have any considerable remains are Xenophanes and Heraclitus. Of the latter's work *Περὶ Φύσεως*, only one out of the three parts which the ancients recognized was devoted to physical questions proper. The other two parts were devoted to religion and morals. And as for Xenophanes, it is only necessary to read the comparison which he draws between himself and the Olympic victor, to realize what he regarded as the supreme value of his teachings. It is the promise of *good government* and the prosperity which that ensures. For note the point of the comparison: "Even if there arise a mighty boxer among a people, or one great in the *pentathlon* or at wrestling, or one excelling in swiftness of foot—and that stands in honor before all tasks of men at the games—the city would be none the better governed for that. It is but little joy a city gets of it if a man conquer at the games by Pisa's banks; it is not this *that makes fat the store-houses of a city.*"¹

The early philosophers were cosmologists in contrast with the thinkers of the Sophistic period, who had little or no interest in cosmological problems. They were cosmologists in the eyes of the historians, because it was their theories of the cosmos that exhibited the richest historical variety and charm. They are fairly to be regarded as cosmologists *par excellence*, because the whole background of their thought, in relation to which all special problems are viewed, is cosmological. But if we say more than this we exaggerate.

There is another way in which, from excess of caution, we may easily do injustice to these men; and illustrations are not far to seek. It is notorious that the 'love' and 'strife' of Empedocles and the 'intelligence' of Anaxagoras are physical bodies, ex-

¹ Fragment 2, Diehls ed.; Burnet tr.

tended and moving. But if we emphasize this aspect of the matter, we may distort the facts not less seriously than if we neglected it altogether. For the physical characteristics of 'intelligence,' for example, are conceived as they are because of the peculiar functions that are ascribed to 'intelligence'—the teleological ordering of the heavens, on the one hand, and of plant and animal organisms on the other. Picture-minded, indeed, Anaxagoras is; but to set down *νοῦς* as a finely divided substance with certain definite physical characteristics is utterly insufficient. The like must be said in relation to his brethren.

The first claim of Heraclitus upon the attention of the world—his most distinctive and original contribution, in which, so far as he knew, no other thinker had anticipated him—is his theory of the nature of 'wisdom,' or science. "Of all whose discourses I have heard," he writes, "there is not one who attains to understanding that wisdom is apart from all (*πάντων κεχωρισμένον*)."¹ His predecessors and contemporaries had endeavored to learn the nature of things. He first turned his attention to the nature of that knowledge, which, in their indiscriminating fashion they had tried to find.

Let it not be urged by way of objection that 'wisdom' is for Heraclitus not wisdom in the abstract but the exceedingly concrete primary substance, the universal fire; or that in a writer of his time a spatial term such as *χωρίζεσθαι* is not to be taken as a mere metaphor. For to Heraclitus there is no need of metaphor in the case. Wisdom and fire are one; and from his point of view there is not the slightest difficulty connected with their identification. The separateness of wisdom is at the same time a logical and a spatial separateness; and it is both indistinguishably. There is all the more reason for us to be on our guard against being led—by motives of a false historical economy—to ignore the more deeply significant aspect of the matter.

In the first place, science (*σοφίη, τὸ σοφόν, νόον ἔχειν, φρονεῖν, φρόνησις*) must be distinguished from mere information (*ἱστορίη*), or the knowledge of many things (*πολυμαθίη*).² "The learning

¹ Fr. 18, Bywater's arrangement; Burnet tr.

² There is, however, no distinction between theoretical and practical knowledge. *Σοφίη* is at once knowledge of natural law and practical wisdom—espe-

of many things (*πολυμαθίη*) teacheth not understanding (*νόον ἔχειν*), else would it have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and again Xenophanes and Hekataios."¹ "Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchos, practiced inquiry (*ἱστορίην*) beyond all other men, and choosing out these writings, claimed for his own wisdom (*σοφίην*) what was but a knowledge of many things (*πολυμαθείην*) and an art of mischief."² It is in the sense of this distinction that the term *κεχωρισμένον*, noted above, must primarily be taken.

On the other hand, the knowledge of particulars is necessary for science. "Men that love wisdom (*φιλοσόφους*) must be acquainted (*ἱστορας*) with very many things indeed."³ And the particulars must be established by direct observation. "The things that can be seen, heard, and learned are what I prize the most."⁴ But the observed facts must be understood. "Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men if they have souls that understand not their language (*βαρβάρους ψυχάς*)."⁵

The distinguishing characteristic of science is its universality. "Wisdom (*τὸ σοφόν*) is one thing. It is to know the thought (*γνώμην*) by which all things are steered through all things."⁶ Science is universal, first, in its application. ". . . All things come to pass in accordance with this Word. . . ." ⁷ Secondly, it is universal in its validity for men. There is diversity of opinion, but there is one science for all. "So we must follow the common, yet the many live as if they had a wisdom (*φρόνησιν*) of their own."⁸ Its validity for all men is, of course, far from implying that all men recognize it. "They are estranged from that with which they have most constant intercourse."⁹ A multiplicity in science would amount to a multiplicity of worlds; but the world "is the same for all."¹⁰ It is only for our uncontrolled imagination that this could fail to hold. "The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own."¹¹ "It is not meet to act and speak like men asleep."¹²

cially wisdom in the conduct of government. The explicit refusal of Socrates to distinguish between wisdom and temperance is exactly in accord with the spirit of the Ionians.

¹ Fr. 16.⁵ Fr. 4.⁹ Fr. 93.² Fr. 17.⁶ Fr. 19.¹⁰ Fr. 20.³ Fr. 49.⁷ Fr. 2.¹¹ Fr. 95.⁴ Fr. 13.⁸ Fr. 92.¹² Fr. 94.

With regard to method the fragments have nothing to say. We find only warnings of the necessity of faithful endeavor in spite of obstacles. The task is supremely difficult. "Nature loves to hide."¹ "If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it; for it is hard to be sought out and difficult."² "Those who seek for gold dig up much earth and find a little."³

It is more than probable that Heraclitus had nothing to say about scientific method. Plato tells us that Heraclitus's followers (of the Sophistic period) did not distinguish between perception as such and knowledge.⁴ It may be assumed *a fortiori* that no very fundamental distinction of this sort existed in Heraclitus: that for him knowledge and opinion were alike perception. When we look over the fragments to see how the difference between those who know and those who do not know is described, we find only this set down: that the former perceive what escapes the latter's attention. "For though all things come to pass in accordance with this Word, men seem as if they had no experience of them. . . ."⁵ "The many do not take heed of such things as those they meet with, nor do they mark them when they are taught, though they think they do."⁶ Hence the common inability to understand scientific doctrine. "Fools when they do hear are like the deaf: of them does the saying bear witness that they are absent when present."⁷ But if knowledge is no more than duly attentive perception, a theory of method is superfluous. The beginnings in this field must be ascribed to Parmenides.

Nevertheless, when this important reservation has been made, it remains true that the distinction between science and natural history, on the one hand, and the distinction between science and opinion, on the other hand, are laid down by Heraclitus substantially as they have remained through almost the whole later course of speculation.

Heraclitus's theory of nature is based upon an induction of the greatest range and moment—a generalization which is now

¹ Fr. 10.

² Fr. 7.

³ Fr. 8.

⁴ *Theaetetus*, 179 D.

⁵ Fr. 2.

⁶ Fr. 5.

⁷ Fr. 3.

part and parcel of our educated common sense, but which when first proposed constituted one of those profound transformations by which the world of barbaric tradition has grown to be the world of science. To ordinary observation nothing is more evident than the distinction between motion and rest, between that which changes and that which abides. Change appears to be by no means universal. Most of the things that we contemplate appear to be stable. If the guess might be hazarded that everything must at some time or other be in some degree modified, it is none the less clear to us, as we look abroad upon the world, that most things are motionless most of the time.

To Heraclitus we owe the observation that change is universal and continual.¹ The thing that seems to keep its individuality untouched is in truth like a river. From one moment to another, every part of it is transition. To speak of it as the 'same' is only half true. "You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you."² And that which seems most individual, the self of each one of us, is not exempt. "We step and do not step into the same rivers; we are and are not."³

Upon what evidence was this conclusion based? Upon the best evidence that was available—evidence which has been considerably enlarged since Heraclitus's time, but which has not been essentially improved upon. As a matter of fact, such propositions can never be formally demonstrated. As well try to demonstrate the uniformity of nature. However far our study of change may go, the experience has its limits; and beyond those limits, either in an encircling *ἀπειρον* or in an elementary particle, the changeless still may lurk. We accept the universality of change, not because it is proved but because it appeals to us,

¹ The nearest approach that had been made to the universal flux had been in the doctrine of Anaximenes that air is always in motion, "for if it were not it would not change as much as it does." Burnet's comment is thus beside the point: "Meanwhile we remark that the idea was not altogether novel, and that it is hardly the central point in the system of Heraclitus. The Milesians held a similar view. The flux of Heraclitus was *at most* more unceasing and universal" (*Early Greek Philosophy*, 2d ed., p. 162; *my italics*).

² Frs. 41, 42.

³ Fr. 81.

and it appeals to us because it lies in the direction of our expanding knowledge. So much that to a superficial view has appeared to be at rest has upon examination showed itself to be compact of motions, that nowhere any longer can we find credible evidence of a limit to this state of affairs. So it was with Heraclitus. The example of the river faithfully records his thought. The hills, the sky, the stars seem stable. But so does the river, if one looks at it from a distance. Even so, "the sun is new every day."¹

If change is universal, why is it not generally discernible? The most natural explanation would seem to lie in the slowness of the processes. Heraclitus does not reject this explanation and he doubtless made use of it. But he emphasizes a very different explanation. It is that each process is compensated and thus concealed by another and opposite process. The corollary of universal change is universal opposition. "Homer was wrong in saying: 'Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!' He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away."² "Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself. It is an attunement of opposite tensions, like that of the bow and the lyre."³

How Heraclitus was led to this interpretation of the facts we do not know. But there are certain circumstances (strangely overlooked by the commentators) which were ready at hand and which may well have influenced him.

Anaximander (as Aristotle informs us) defended his theory of the infinitely extended primal substance on the ground that only if this were unlimited in amount could the processes of nature be endlessly prolonged. Hence arose the theory of the innumerable worlds, scattered through the boundless universe, ever coming into existence and passing away. Now, for reasons which we have already suggested, Heraclitus was opposed to this theory; in fact we have the indirect testimony of Theophrastus that he definitely rejected it. The universe, he held, is finite,⁴

¹ Fr. 32.² Fr. 43.³ Fr. 45.⁴ Against this statement must be considered Fragment 71: "You will not find the boundaries of soul [the primary substance] by traveling in any direc-

and there is but a single world. A plurality of worlds would not lie down easily with the unity of science. As little would the notion of a world that arises and passes away. "This world," he wrote (using the technical term *κόσμος* which must just then have been coming into fashion), "which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be an ever-living Fire, with measures kindling, and measures going out."¹ But if the all is limited and the world is one, how is the argument of Anaximander to be met? How does natural change continue? Heraclitus, we may surmise, finds the answer in his theory of compensation. If natural processes were simple—if there were no opposition—the world indeed could not continue. But if every process is double, containing moments which are opposed and mutually balanced, the continuance of the cosmos is assured. Plato, in his rendering of Heraclitus's theory of human survival after death, uses a similar argument,² and there is little doubt that he is here reproducing what was in the older thinker's mind.

tion, so deep is the measure of it." But the language is not decisive; and, indeed, the concluding words (*οὐτω βαθὺν λόγον ἔχει*) imply for the Greek rather finitude than infinitude. (*βαθός*, of course, means simply *large*; there is no necessary implication of *downward* in it, any more than in *altus*). The fragment cannot safely be taken to mean more than that the all is animate; which, from Heraclitus's point of view is equivalent to asserting the universality of natural law. All things considered, we cannot do better than follow the ancient tradition.

¹ Fr. 20.

² *Phaedo*, 72 B–D. The relation between Plato and Heraclitus, with respect to the doctrine of survival, is easily misunderstood. The debt of the younger thinker to the older is indeed evident. Heraclitus's reasoning is faithfully reproduced as an essential factor in the argument of the *Phaedo*. Life and death are typical opposites that pass into each other in the everlasting oscillation. "And it is the same thing in us that is quick and dead, awake and asleep, young and old; the former are shifted and become the latter, and the latter in turn are shifted and become the former" (Fr. 78). Moreover, as in the *Phaedo*, the state after death is of the nature of a reward or punishment: "Greater deaths win greater portions" (Fr. 101). And this fact, as in the *Phaedo*, implies a continuance of the individual. (This has been held to be inconsistent with the theory of the universal flux; but it is no more so than the duration of the present life). On the other hand, in the teaching of Heraclitus, there is no implication of individual *immortality*, and every motive for questioning it; and Plato, in taking over his argument, is far from assuming that it warrants any such conclusion.

Heraclitus's theory of the primal substance follows almost inevitably from his conception of the universality of balanced change. That there was such a substance he did not call in question. It is part of his heritage. The doctrine that in its transformations this substance does not alter in amount is first (so far as we know) stated by him;¹ but it is clearly implied in the theories of his predecessors, especially in Anaximenes's theory of rarefaction and condensation. Heraclitus accepts without question the conception of the primal substance as not only that of which things are made, but that which makes them. It is the source of all motion, that is to say, of all life. It is itself a living being, conscious, rational, supremely just. The portion of the substance present in each one of us in its primitive form is (at least according to Anaximenes, and not improbably according to the earlier Milesians) the soul. Heraclitus uses the term 'soul' freely as a name for the primal substance.

Now water is a mobile substance and is essential to all living things. The 'air' of Anaximenes² is if anything more mobile; and it is the breath of life. But if the universal motion is what Heraclitus has declared it to be, the first principle must be such that its very nature, its very existence, is a balanced change. Moreover, perception is at least as characteristic of animal life

¹ Fr. 23.

² I enclose the word in single quotation-marks in order to avoid for my text an unnecessary complication. But in this note I wish to touch briefly upon the disputed point. Anaximenes taught that *ἀήρ* (mist) is everywhere present, though generally in an imperceptible state. When it is rarified or condensed (as fire or cloud, for example), we perceive it, but in its normal state it escapes our observation. In view of these facts, Mr. Burnet declares, air as such must be regarded as unknown to Anaximenes; and its discovery must be assigned to Empedocles, because the latter was the first to recognize it as a distinct substance, different from mist and water. This appears to me to be altogether illogical. Anaximenes, like his predecessors, believed, of course, in a single, first principle; and all the forms in which this presents itself are, according to his theory, distinguished only by their different degrees of rarefaction and condensation. But the invisible *ἀήρ*, according to him, is as distinct from visible mist as it is from fire, or as water is from earth. Shall we say that air was not discovered till modern chemists isolated its constituents? As for Mr. Burnet's assertion that Empedocles's clepsydra-experiment proved that air was distinct from vapor of water, it is absolutely without foundation. (Cf. Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophers*, 2d ed., pp. 78 ff., 263 ff.)

as breathing; and in the case of vision it is evidently (to naive observation) a *shining forth* of light from an internal source. The flame which maintains itself by consuming its fuel and passing away in smoke, and which sends out light in all directions, is clearly what is required. Add to all this the phenomenon of bodily heat, and the identification of fire and soul is inevitable.

With regard to the general course of natural changes Heraclitus has nothing new to say. Anaximenes had arranged the various form of matter, not in pairs of opposites, but in a linear series, according to density, from fire to earth and stones; and he had declared that they passed into one another, to and fro, in this order. Heraclitus takes over this scheme. He simplifies it by taking together 'air' and water as water,¹ and, conventionally enough, putting all solids under the head of earth. The transformations of substance are then in the order, backward and forward, of fire, water, and earth. The Theophrastean tradition is that he accepted Anaximenes's doctrine that the transformations are essentially changes of density, but that he "explained nothing clearly." This may well be true. The fragments speak only of 'transformations' (*τροπαί*) or, metaphorically, 'exchange' (*ἀνταμοιβή*): "All things are an exchange for Fire, and Fire for all things, even as wares for gold and gold for wares."²

However that may be, the only original feature of Heraclitus's theory of the matter is his application to the cycle of changes, of his theory of universal opposition. Every change is accompanied by its opposite; or rather the two form but a single unity. "The way up and the way down is one and the same."³ In this application, if we are to judge from the somewhat scanty evidence, the triple division is somewhat of a nuisance. Water occupies a middle position, where it should be equally opposed to fire and to earth. But, as a matter of fact, in the particular explanations that have come down to us, it is only fire and water that count in any active way. The hot, dry fire struggles with the cold, wet water; and the struggle is the existence of both and of all things. Earth counts only as a passive spectator.

It has often been pointed out that if the balance of changes were indeed complete, the theory would have explained apparent

¹ Frs. 25, 21.

² Fr. 22.

³ Fr. 69.

rest too well—it would have made perceptible changes impossible. The balance must therefore be a moving one: it is an oscillation. The principle appears to be that, since each of the forms of matter depends for its continuance upon the existence of the others, any temporary encroachment, or excess of one form over another, gives rise to a later recession, or defect.¹ It is in this way that the great cyclical changes of nature—in particular the succession of the seasons and the alternation of day and night, are accounted for. Fire and water are the great enemies. The warm, dry day and summer, and the cold, damp night and winter, mark the ascendancy of the one and the other.

How far does the oscillation ever go? In particular, does it ever lead to a swallowing up of all things in fire? The fire, being unfed, would instantly begin to go out; so this condition of affairs would be only momentary. In that moment the opposition of force would have disappeared in a perfect concord, which would in a sense be the destruction of the world, though in a deeper sense the world—that is, the uniformity of nature—would still prevail. Did Heraclitus believe that this might, or indeed would, happen? The natural interpretation of his words would imply this: “Fire in its advance will judge and convict all things.”² Largely on the ground of a supposed logical inconsistency, some have been unwilling to accept this interpretation, and have insisted that the fire need not “convict” everything at once. That is possible but not plausible; and the underlying motive is clearly mistaken. There is no more contradiction involved in the utmost conceivable swing of the pendulum than in the least of perceptible oscillations. “The sun will not overstep his measures”—this expresses the perfect balance—“if he does the Erinyes, the handmaids of justice, will find him out”³—this expresses the oscillation.

It has not been sufficiently appreciated by the commentators that in Heraclitus's theory of balanced change we have to do

¹ The reasoning is thus similar to that by which naturalists explain the balance of a given flora and fauna. Consider, for example, a species of carnivora and their habitual prey. If the prey become scarce, the carnivora die down or are dispersed; whereupon the prey multiply rapidly and thus bring about a new increase of their enemies.

² Fr. 26.

³ Fr. 29.

with an architectonic conception of the first, or almost the first, importance—a conception comparable in its possible utility with that of latent heat, or perhaps even with that of potential energy. The historical fact is, I suppose, that the conception has remained practically unutilized, a logical scheme without specific application, until almost our own day; that is to say, until its adoption by Gibbs in the formulation of the theory of phases.

The various aspects and consequences of the universal opposition are developed by Heraclitus in a remarkably thorough-going fashion. (1) Contraries mutually imply each other, thus forming a single complete unity. "Hesiod is most men's teacher. Men think that he knew very many things, a man who did not know day or night. They are one."¹ "Couples are things whole and things not whole, what is drawn together and what is drawn asunder, the harmonious and the discordant. The one is made up of all things, and all things issue from the one."² "Good and ill are one."³ (2) The opposites are constantly passing into each other. "Cold things become warm, and what is warm cools; what is wet dries, and the parched is moisted."⁴ (3) Each opposite is indistinguishable without the other. "Men would not have known the name of justice if these things were not."⁵ (4) An immediate consequence of this is a principle of great moment; namely, that opposites must be understood together. There is no incontestable evidence in the fragments that Heraclitus drew this inference;⁶ but it lies so close to his center of interest that he can hardly have overlooked it. It means that there is not one theory of the warm and another of the cold, one theory of the dry and another of the wet, one of day and summer and another of night and winter. As the opposites are conjoined in reality, so they must be conjoined in knowledge. (5) But the most interesting application is found in Heraclitus's theory of values: "Good and ill are one." This proposition apparently has a

¹ Fr. 35.

² Fr. 59. Or, if we continue to read *συνάψεις* instead of *συνάψεις*, "You should couple together things whole," etc.

³ Fr. 57.

⁴ Fr. 39.

⁵ Fr. 60; evidently referring to acts of injustice.

⁶ But see note 3.

double sense. In line with what we have just noticed is the interpretation, that good and evil are conjoined in each man's experience, passing into each other much like any other pair of opposites. "It is not good for men to get all they wish to get. It is sickness that makes health pleasant; evil, good; hunger, plenty; weariness, rest."¹ This is one of the Heraclitean doctrines which the Socrates of the *Phædo* has taken over. But also what is good for one is bad for another. "Swine wash in the mire, and barnyard fowls in dust."² "The sea is the purest and the impurest water. Fish can drink it, and it is good for them; to men it is undrinkable and destrucitve."³ At the same time, all things, however good or bad, enter into one world, the ever-living fire, and all are in accordance with its constitutive law. Thus in relation to the world, nothing is evil. "To God all things are fair and good and right, but men hold some things wrong and some right."⁴ This doctrine, that evil is relative to the limitations of the creature, has had historical consequences upon the importance of which it is not necessary to dwell. From the *Timæus* to our own day its influence has been unbroken.

Again, in the field of ethics and politics, Heraclitus is the author of theories almost equal in their importance and in the extent of their continued influence, to his theory of science. The fact must not be lost sight of that, writing at the beginning of the fifth century, he included reflections of this nature within the range of his systematic thought. For he is no mere proverbial moralist. He is as much the philosopher in his theory of practice as in his theory of the cosmic order; and, indeed, the two theories are most intimately conjoined.

His contributions in this field may, for the most part, be brought under two heads: *intellectual asceticism* and *intellectual aristocracy*; the latter, however, being his characteristic application of a far more general principle, that of the *life according to nature*.

Underlying all his practical philosophy is the conception, introduced into philosophy by Anaximenes, of the analogy between the macrocosm and the microcosm. The world, the Milesian

¹ Fr. 104.² Fr. 53.³ Fr. 52.⁴ Fr. 61.

had said, is a living, breathing being, and its breath is its soul. Heraclitus applies the conception to his own theory of the primal substance. In man, as in the cosmos as a whole, there are fire, water, and earth; and the fire is the soul.

The relation between the soul within and the soul without is described in a well-known account preserved in Sextus Empiricus.¹ The theory is an almost inevitable modification of that of Anaximenes, in accordance with the changed first principle. Anaximenes is right, of course, in supposing that the life in us is constantly fed from without; and he is right in fixing upon breathing as a way in which this process takes place. But breathing by itself is capable of maintaining only a low intensity of life. We breathe even in sleep. What distinguishes waking life, the life of active intelligence, is that the senses are open—as we see in the case of the open eyes, and as is evident enough in the renewed activity of the other senses—and that through them we come into a fuller contact and communion with the mind without. “Just, then, as embers, when they are brought near the fire, change and become red-hot, and go out when they are taken away from it again, so does the portion of the surrounding mind which sojourns in our body become irrational when it is cut off, and so does it become of like nature to the whole when contact is established through the greatest number of openings.”

In man, as in the cosmos, the everlasting struggle between the opposites goes on; and here, as there, the opposition that really counts is that between fire and water. It is this which provides the general schema for the explanation of the rhythm of life, as it does for that of the rhythm of nature. And, in particular, it serves to bring under the one general conception the moral conflict. As generally, though by no means universally, in later Greek philosophy, the special activity of the soul is regarded as intelligence, or reason. Passion is viewed as something really foreign to the soul; it is impressed upon it from without. For Heraclitus, ‘pleasure’ is the activity of the water in man upon the fire: “It is pleasure to souls to become moist.”² It is note-

¹ *Adv. Math.*, pp. 129 ff. Burnet has given a clear and simple rendering of the passage; *op. cit.*, p. 173.

² Fr. 72.

worthy that here, as so often in later usage, 'pleasure' means, not simply what we should mean by the term, but the indulgence of passion, a certain absorption in the satisfaction of appetite—what Browning in true Heraclitean fashion has called: "Sense quenching Soul." We are not surprised, therefore, at Heraclitus's attitude toward this phenomenon. It betokens for him the destruction of that which is most worthy in us. "Wantonness needs putting out, even more than a house on fire."¹ "It is hard to fight with one's heart's desire. Whatever it wishes to get, it purchases at the cost of soul."²

Thus already in Heraclitus³ the intellectualistic ideal—the idol of the cave of the Greek thinker—asserts itself; and it finds expression in a withering contempt for the vast majority. "There are many bad and few good." Among the common herd the appetites have an absolute mastery: "Most of them are glutted like beasts." In a few noble instances, the one thirst for glory is dominant: "For even the best of them choose one thing above all others, immortal glory among mortals."⁴ "Gods and men honor those who are slain in battle."⁵ But a radically different type of man exists, exceedingly rare though it may be—one in which reason is supreme: "The dry soul is the wisest and best."⁶

That human wisdom is due to contact of human reason with the divine reason, is illustrated with especial clearness in the field of politics. The laws of cities, imperfect as they are, are the best of human possessions—"The people must fight for its law as for its walls"⁷—and they are derived from the laws by which the whole world is controlled: "For all human laws are fed by the

¹ Fr. 103.

² Frs. 105-107.

³ Not improbably before his time. For the same ideal was present in the Pythagorean society and may have descended from their founder.

⁴ Fr. 111.

⁴ Fr. 102. Perhaps this fragment should be interpreted as conveying a higher praise than its juxtaposition with Fr. 111 would indicate. It was a familiar Greek conception that the supreme sacrifice of the soldier meant the subjection of all other impulses to the respect for law; and this, for Heraclitus, would be a subjection of passion to reason. Heraclitus is so ardent a militarist, that in his enthusiasm he may well upon occasion rank the soldier with the scholar.

⁶ Frs. 74-76.

⁷ Fr. 100.

one divine law.”¹ Accordingly a criterion is found for the value of human laws: *they are good or bad as they accord or fail to accord with the universal tendencies of things.* The just law is that which, in this sense is in accordance with nature. Once more Heraclitus is the great initiator. At the dawn of science he already employs—if he does not openly proclaim—a principle, which for good or ill has profoundly influenced the later course of speculation.

Heraclitus’s own special application of the principle—apart from his militarism—is to the criticism of democracy and the defence of the rule of the “one wise man.” In the first place, the differences of rank among men are a consequence of the universal struggle. “War is the father of all and the king of all; and some he has made gods and some men, some bond and some free.”² These differences are natural and necessary, and therefore right. But, furthermore, it is natural law that those who know, however few they may be, should direct those who do not know. The validity of knowledge is altogether independent of the number of those who possess it. The truth is not to be determined by counting heads. “One is ten thousand to me, if he be the best.”³ Hence—“It is law, too, to obey the counsel of one.”⁴ Democracy is the very inversion of justice. It is the leveling-down of the state to the stature of the mob. Its most prominent trait is the intolerance of superior ability. “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 Hermodorus, the best man among them, saying, ‘We will have none who is best among us; if there be any such, let him be so elsewhere and among others.’”⁵ Here, too, Heraclitus anticipates the Socratic-Platonic doctrine.

One of the three portions of Heraclitus’s treatise was devoted to his religious teaching. If reason in man is fire, so the universal fire is reason. The “thought that steers all things through all things” is thought like ours. But it is more than that: it is ideal thought. “The way of man has no wisdom, but that of

¹ Fr. 91 b.³ Fr. 113.⁴ Fr. 110.² Fr. 44.⁵ Fr. 114.

God has."¹ "Man is called a baby by God, even as a child by a man."² The cosmic order is supremely beautiful and excellent: "The wisest man is an ape compared to God, just as the most beautiful ape is ugly compared to man."³ Accordingly, in the double interest of clear thinking and decent living, the popular religion (and the poets as its expounders) are bitterly assailed. In this attack Heraclitus is preceded by Xenophanes, and he goes beyond him only in the fierceness of his satire.

But in Heraclitus's treatment there is this that is distinctive: that the criticism is intimately connected with his theory of science. He will not admit any *authority* whatsoever, except the witness of reason itself. The most revered poets have, as a matter of fact, been ignorant of the very elements of wisdom.⁴ But even in his own case he is careful to say: "It is wise to hearken not to be but to my Word."⁵

In the details of the criticism, it is noteworthy that the Olympian and the Dionysiac religions fall equally under his condemnation—or that if either is more severely handled it is the latter. The notion of Zeus may, indeed, be regarded as a foreshadowing of the truth. But, "The mysteries practiced among men are unholy mysteries,"⁶ the phallic hymn is "shameful";⁷ in their sacrifices, "they vainly purify themselves by defiling themselves with blood,"⁸ in their prayer to the images, it is "as if one were to talk with a man's house."⁹ Even the rites of burial are irrational: "Corpses are more fit to be cast out than dung."¹⁰ Intellectual emancipation never went beyond this. But perhaps the most perfect expression of Heraclitus's rationalism is to be found in the following brief phrase: "Man's character is his fate (*δαίμων*)."¹¹ The old magico-religious conception of a supernatural control over individual destiny is a delusion. The sources of happiness and misery are not to be looked for in such a power, but in the natural individual himself.

To the ancient popular consciousness, the most striking feature of Heraclitus's philosophy—aside from its obscurity—was

1 Fr. 96.

5 Fr. 1.

9 Fr. 126.

2 Fr. 97.

6 Fr. 125.

10 Fr. 85.

3 Frs. 98-99.

7 Fr. 127.

11 Fr. 121.

4 Frs. 35, 45.

8 Fr. 129.

its pessimism. He was the 'weeping philosopher.' Certain of the fragments amply justify the characterization. Yet we have seen him upholding the doctrine that the world as a whole is perfect—that for God all things are right and good. How are such optimism and such pessimism reconcilable, and how, indeed, are they reconciled?

It requires no very deep examination to show that they need no reconciliation—that they are substantially the same doctrine. For we see that 'good' in relation to the world means simply 'in accordance with the universal law of nature'; and the supreme law, if Heraclitus is right, is that every change is balanced by an equal and opposite change. All human efforts are self-annulling. Every victory is a father of defeat. Not only do all things flow, but all things *turn*; and, as Heraclitus says, "In the circumference of a circle the beginning and the end are common."¹ There is no real progress, no genuine accomplishment. The course of history is but the endlessly repeated alternation of birth and death. "Man is kindled and put out like a light in the night-time."² "When they are born, they wish to live and to meet with their dooms—or rather to rest—and they leave children behind them to meet with their dooms in turn."³ It is all good, in the sense that it is all *regular*; but it is also absolutely *idle*. "Time is a child playing draughts"—without care or forethought, moving us poor 'men' about his checkered board—"the kingly power is a child's."⁴

The formula of optimism and the formula of pessimism are one and the same: *this* is the best of possible worlds.

THEODORE DE LAGUNA.

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE.

¹ Fr. 70.

² Fr. 77.

³ Fr. 86.

⁴ Fr. 79.