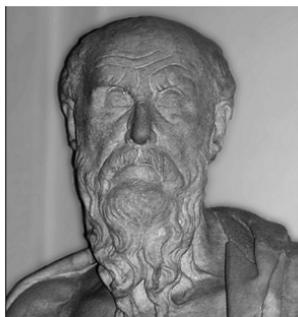


## HERACLITUS

Flourished c. 502 BC.<sup>91</sup>

Heraclitus (Herakleitos, circa 542-480 BC) is famous for the expression *panta rhei*, all things flow, and for his cryptic way of expressing his thoughts, as well as his consistently bad mood and obnoxious comments. He thought that Homer “ought by rights to be ejected from the lists and thrashed” for his weak understanding of cosmological matters,<sup>92</sup> and no higher was his opinion on Hesiod:



*Heraclitus.*

*For very many people Hesiod is (their) teacher. They are certain he knew a great number of things – he who continually failed to recognize (even) day and night (for what they are)! For they are one.*<sup>93</sup>

Hesiod said that night “produced” day, whereas to Heraclitus there is no more difference between the two than the lack of sunlight in the former.

The worship of the gods he found outright mad. People believed themselves to be purified with the blood from sacrifice, “as if one who had stepped into mud should wash himself off with mud”, and that was not all:

*Furthermore, they pray to these statues – as though one were to carry on a conversation with houses.*<sup>94</sup>

<sup>91</sup> Diogenes Laertius says the 69<sup>th</sup> Olympiad, which was 504-501 BC. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, translated by R. D. Hicks, volume II, Loeb, London 1950, p.409.

<sup>92</sup> Robinson, T. M., *Heraclitus: Fragments*, Toronto 1987, p.33 and 108f.

<sup>93</sup> Robinson, p.39 and 120f.

<sup>94</sup> Robinson, p.13.

Though it is clear that he saw nothing divine neither in these practices nor their objects of worship, Heraclitus recognized something of divine nature as well as something moral, judgmental, in the cosmos. He did not accept a multitude of gods, but one, although with many names and different qualities:

*God (is) day (and) night, winter (and) summer, war (and) peace, satiety (and) famine, and undergoes change in the way that (fire?), whenever it is mixed with spices, gets called by the name that accords with (the) bouquet of each.*<sup>95</sup>

Instead of “fire” in this fragment of his works, interpreters have also suggested “air”, “myrrh” or “olive oil”.<sup>96</sup> What seems most likely in the drastic comparison between a single god’s spread over celestial opposites on the one hand, and the bouquet of spices on the other, would be something in the line of olive oil. That would also be in line with Heraclitus’ drastic way of expressing his thoughts.

Heraclitus does give fire a central place:

*Fire, having come suddenly upon all things, will judge and convict them.*<sup>97</sup>

Although to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century Christian writer Hippolytus this seemed to point directly to the fires of hell and a punishing god, it should rather be interpreted as a cosmological statement,<sup>98</sup> since Heraclitus also stated:

*To god all things are fair and just, whereas humans have supposed that some things are unjust, other things just.*<sup>99</sup>

The god of Heraclitus is of cosmological nature, a natural order, not bothering with human affairs – somewhat the same as the all-encompassing meaning his inter-

<sup>95</sup> Robinson, p.45.

<sup>96</sup> Robinson, p.128f.

<sup>97</sup> Robinson, p.45.

<sup>98</sup> Robinson, p.127.

<sup>99</sup> Robinson, p.61.

preters have given to his use of the word *logos*. This god seems as abstract as a formula, not in any way a personality with a will of its own, not even responsible for making the world, which to Heraclitus is:

*the same for all, no god or man made, but it always was, is, and will be, an ever living fire, being kindled in measures and being put out in measures.*<sup>100</sup>

This is an automatic cosmos, governed only by its own natural laws, where fire is the basic element and its dynamics are what make things appear as well as dissolve. This grand, eternal process is completely impersonal:

*Things grasped together: things whole, things not whole; being brought together, being separated; consonant, dissonant. Out of all things one thing, and out of one thing all things.*<sup>101</sup>

Another fragment has him simply state:

*All things are one.*<sup>102</sup>

When man accredits meaning to it all, and traces a higher will in what takes place and how things behave, he is merely fondling illusions. He is dreaming. And dreaming evidently intrigues Heraclitus. The strange difference between being asleep and awake addresses what the world really is:

*for those who are awake there is a single, common universe, whereas in sleep each person turns away into (his) own, private (universe).*<sup>103</sup>

The implication of those opposite states of mind goes further:

*A person in (the) night kindles a light for himself, since his vision has been extinguished. In his sleep he touches that*

<sup>100</sup> Robinson, p.25.

<sup>101</sup> Robinson, p.15.

<sup>102</sup> Robinson, p.37.

<sup>103</sup> Robinson, p.55.

*which is dead, though (himself) alive, when awake touches  
that which sleeps.*<sup>104</sup>

This cryptic fragment has been interpreted in several directions, sometimes so that night signifies the night of death.<sup>105</sup> Also when read more directly, it shows how Heraclitus marvels at the border of being awake and asleep, implying clues to what death may be. He shares this bewilderment with countless thinkers and cultures all through human existence. Our dreaming forces us to question what reality really is.

Death fascinates this somber man. He does not claim to understand it, but to see its vast significance:

*There await people when they die things they neither expect  
nor imagine.*<sup>106</sup>

Here he voices a firm distrust in what the myths have to say about the realm of death, but also the appreciation of the question's obtrusive importance to each and everyone.

He still dares to state something about death, but this is in relation to his view on the elements of the cosmos. The soul, he claims, is made up of water, and therefore: "for souls it is death to become water", in the same way as it is death for water to become earth, out of which it has come into existence.<sup>107</sup>

This does not mean that the soul, by many philosophers compared to air, would to Heraclitus be water. But it emanates from water, much like vapor.<sup>108</sup> Nor does it mean that he regards death as final. But from his words on

<sup>104</sup> Robinson, p.23.

<sup>105</sup> Robinson, p.93f.

<sup>106</sup> Robinson, p.23.

<sup>107</sup> Robinson, p.29.

<sup>108</sup> Water is quite damaging to the soul, according to Heraclitus. For example, the drunken man stumbles because his soul is wet. Robinson, p.69.

the matter, here and in other fragments, it is at least clear that he is not convinced of an afterlife, of whatever nature.<sup>109</sup>

He treats immortality mostly as a paradox:

*Immortals mortal, mortals immortal, these living the death of those, those dead in the life of these.*<sup>110</sup>

This saying has been discussed as to its meaning. Although the expression *immortals* was generally used by the Greek for their gods, this needs not be the case here.<sup>111</sup> What Heraclitus states, no doubt, is the uncertainty of it all – life ending or not, death real or not, a puzzle impossible to solve. If it refers to the gods being alive only in the imaginations of the people, then the immortals are mortal in the sense that they die when the people believing in them do, and at the same time people dreaming of eternal gods do in a sense make themselves immortal, if only in this way, akin to a dream.

Heraclitus is vague on those grand matters, because he is uncertain, and what he can state firmly is little but the disillusioning fact that none can know any better. The world being such an uncertain thing, illusive and elusive, his research found a single means:

*I investigated myself.*<sup>112</sup>

It did not make him jolly.

According to Diogenes Laertius, Heraclitus had no teacher, but “inquired of himself”. The same source mentions that some have Xenophanes as his teacher – if so, he was hardly a pupil loyal to his master’s thoughts.<sup>113</sup> His attitude to intellectual feats was not that respectful at all. Diogenes quotes him saying:

<sup>109</sup> Robinson, p.104f.

<sup>110</sup> Robinson, p.43.

<sup>111</sup> Robinson, p.124f.

<sup>112</sup> Robinson, p.61.

<sup>113</sup> Diogenes Laertius, volume II, p. 413.

*Much learning does not teach understanding; else would it have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, or, again, Xenophanes and Hecataeus.*<sup>114</sup>

He preferred to play knucklebones with young boys at the temple of Artemis.<sup>115</sup>

His cosmology is definitely a monotheistic one. He rejects the gods of Homer and Hesiod without the least hesitation, and enjoys doing it. Considering the determination with which he denounces the mythology of his fellow men, it is surprising that his cosmology is not a completely atheistic one.

<sup>114</sup> Diogenes Laertius, volume II, p. 409.

<sup>115</sup> Diogenes Laertius, volume II, p. 411.