

***Guthrie; "The doctrine of continuous change of physical things is closely linked with that of the identity of opposites." Discuss.***

***Part One Early Greek Philosophy***

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This essay will focus exclusively on the writings on Heraclitus, discussing the relationship between his idea that everything is in constant flux, and his belief in a unity of opposites. Each notion will be examined in terms of the premises presented by Heraclitus, the logical validity of these thoughts, and how well the two concepts work together. Central to this discussion will be his idea of the *Logos*, what it means, and how central the *Logos* is in understanding the problems that arise from both the idea of continual flux, and harmony in conflict and opposition.

Heraclitus is thought to have been born around 540BCE, and lived until around 480BCE. His writing style is unusual, in that many of the surviving fragments are written in short and often cryptic phrases, earning him the ancient nickname 'The Riddler'. His references to other thinkers are almost exclusively derogatory, and this contempt carried over to humanity in general, likening the majority to "well fed cattle"<sup>1</sup>, and openly ridiculing religion and society. Despite this, he holds massive influence over later philosophy, being favourably cited in antiquity by both Plato and Aristotle, and throughout history, as Taylor states; "No philosopher before Socrates can have had such a profound influence on so many generations of subsequent thinkers as Heraclitus"<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps the most famous writings of Heraclitus are the 'river fragments', from which a great deal about his philosophy can be inferred. There are, however, two distinctly different fragments, both of which use the 'river' metaphor, and which have vastly different interpretations. On the one hand, fragment 12 reads "Those who step into the same river have different waters flowing ever upon them"<sup>3</sup>; one interpretation of this being that the constituent parts of a thing do not define its identity. Given Heraclitus' later views on change, however, it seems more likely that he did not intend to imply this, and that he was deliberately presenting a contradiction in order to show the error of referring to a river as ever being 'the same'. Conversely to fragment 12, he later states that "It is not possible to step twice into the same river"<sup>4</sup>, which Ring proposes "probably continued 'for different and again different waters flow'<sup>5</sup>. This statement is somewhat less ambiguous, and clearly implies that the river is not the same, because its constituents are different. This is the idea that is central to the notion of flux, and from this starting point we can begin to reconstruct Heraclitus' philosophy.

Heraclitus believed that we (i.e. humanity at large) suffer from a fundamental misconception about the nature of change; we perceive change to be an irregular phenomenon, something that does not usually occur, as Ring notes; "we persist in regarding change as a deviation from the norm"<sup>6</sup>, whereas Heraclitus would insist that change can be seen everywhere, and is effected on the smallest scale at every moment, in every thing. Recognising our flawed understanding of change leads to an interesting conclusion; that not only do we not correctly understand change, but that we therefore do not correctly understand *things*, for if in every moment a thing is different, we cannot say that a thing ever exists for long enough for us to term it so.

This realisation fundamentally changes our view of existence. No longer are material entities static, but their properties and hence their identities are continually morphing, changing into other things, which themselves then change again. Heraclitus held that this was true of every physical thing. An instant problem we can see with this is in the fact that things do seem to

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1 fr. 29

2 Taylor: 88

3 fr. 12

4 fr. 91

5 Ring: 67-68

6 Ring: 67

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persist, indeed it is precisely this apparent continuity that led us to have a misconception in the first place. If the world is in constant flux, why does it only change in infinitesimal amounts, why is it that in the words of Ring, "my coat remains basically blue for quite some time"<sup>7</sup>?

The reason that we can predict future events with more than random accuracy; that there is a degree of consistency in our universe, albeit ever changing, lies in what Heraclitus terms the *Logos*. Our interpretation of the *Logos* presents more than a little difficulty; Freeman translates it as "the intelligible Law of the universe"<sup>8</sup>, while Guthrie lists no less than eleven common uses of the word in fifth century Greece. However, Guthrie states that in some cases, "(Heraclitus) appears to be using the word in a specialised sense"<sup>9</sup>. Examining the common uses of the word, and the context in which Heraclitus uses it, we can at least see evidence for the conclusion that Heraclitus' *Logos* has to do with the communication and intelligibility of reasoning or principles that are universally and objectively true, and furthermore that drive the cosmos.

Given this interpretation of the *Logos*, we see that the way in which things change is governed by understandable rules. The problem of the apparent constancy of things is nullified by the existence of the *Logos* because for Heraclitus, change is not a random transformation but rather a subtle process of continual metamorphosis. As Ring notes, "the sequence of changes and the conflicts involved in it proceed, not in a wild and arbitrary fashion, but lawfully, intelligibly"<sup>10</sup>.

The second part of the question concerns itself with the Heraclitean idea of a unity of opposites. Integral to understanding what this idea entails is understanding that Heraclitus saw unity as being harmony, and stated that "harmony consists of opposing tension"<sup>11</sup>, that "everything comes about by way of strife"<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, it would be hard to conceive of the world as being in a constant state of flux without there being continual and equal opposing forces. The necessity of conflict in Heraclitus is highlighted by Ring; "strife is not an incidental feature of the universe. It is precisely what produces ... an organized world instead of a shapeless mass of stuff"<sup>13</sup>. Heraclitus goes further even than this, asserting that "all things are one"<sup>14</sup>.

This seems to present an obvious contradiction. How can opposites, two things that are by definition the very antithesis of each other, be the same? As with his view of unity and indeed the *Logos* itself, Heraclitus is using a 'specialised sense' when he talks of all things being one. This has a deeper meaning than a purely cosmological one. While Heraclitus stated that "The thunder-bolt (*i.e. fire*) steers the universe"<sup>15</sup>, to read this literally is to miss the crucial point, as Taylor writes, "The widespread assumption that Heraclitus believed that fire was an element or substrate of all things was ... a mistaken inference"<sup>16</sup>. Instead of referring to a 'basic substance', Heraclitus is suggesting that all things are part of a greater whole, linked together in unity by the *Logos*. His use of fire is yet another instance of imagery and can be seen as a metaphor for the *Logos* itself. In this way, opposites are not literally identical, but instead, like day and night, are aspects of an ever changing whole, as can be seen in fragment 67: "God is

7 Ring: 67

8 Freeman: 24

9 Guthrie: 419

10 Ring: 73

11 fr. 51

12 fr. 80

13 Ring: 72

14 fr. 50

15 fr. 64

16 Taylor: 101

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day-night, winter-summer, war-peace, satiety-famine. But he changes like (fire)<sup>17</sup>.

There is however another contradiction to be found within this explanation of opposites, when presented alongside the theory that all is in flux. The idea of opposition seems to require an absolute, unchanging element. If black is the exact opposite of white, then blackness must always be black - but surely this notion cannot be valid if everything is indeed in flux? According to Heraclitus, this contradiction is simply not intelligible. Heraclitus does not subscribe to the Pythagorean school of thought that there are absolute opposites. Rather he is concerned with relativity, and uses numerous examples to remind us that our perception of reality is determined by our relative position in it, stating for instance that "Sea water is the purest and most polluted: for fish it is drinkable and life-giving; for men, not drinkable and destructive"<sup>18</sup>, or that "Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satisfaction, weariness rest"<sup>19</sup>. With these examples, we can see that in accepting that there are opposites we need not accept the existence of static absolutes, such as 'good' and 'evil', but rather we can see that the things that are opposed are themselves in a state of flux. Moreover, it is not possible for things in opposition to be static; it is as a result of their fluctuating conflict that we may say they are opposed. In this way, the two concepts of unity and flux, when seen as linked by the *Logos*, work in conjunction with each other to produce Heraclitus' harmonic world.

In conclusion, we have seen how Heraclitus presented the notion that all things are constantly changing, how he used the metaphor of the river to illustrate this concept, and how acceptance of this premise forces us to realise that our traditional conceptions of change as being abnormal, and things as being constant, are fundamentally flawed. Furthermore, if we accept that our view of reality is indeed flawed in this way, we have no choice but to accept Heraclitus' alternative view, that all things are part of one ever changing unity, which exists in harmony with itself. On top of this, we can see how a transient unity comes about as a result of the conflict between opposing forces, which are themselves in constant flux. The factor that renders these hitherto disparate concepts as one harmonic whole, is the *Logos*, which Heraclitus tells us is intelligible, irrefutable and unchanging.

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17 Fr 67  
18 fr. 61  
19 fr. 111

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### **Bibliography**

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