



**THE STOIC
PHILOSOPHER**

Remembering Heraclitus: Themes

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If the dry, fiery soul is the wise, “enlightened individual” (Sweet, p. 59, 2007), then the damp, wet, or even drenched soul needs genuine, philosophical insight. And how curious to encounter this footnote in *Remembering Heraclitus*: “Ortega y Gasset in his *Loss of Self in Art* suggests that the philosophic impulse arises from ‘feeling shipwrecked upon things’” (Geldard, p. 96, 2001). The image is striking: a sopping-wet captain and his crew attempting to flee their ship that has crashed on craggy rocks! How far from being dry are those souls and in that sinking moment, when lives and fortunes are ruined, they are left wondering what has become of them. What twisted turn of events in navigation, reading bearings, and accounting of weather did they go afoul? They have become shipwrecked and now the process of recovery and the path to dryness and even fire begins – their first impulse to philosophy commences.

Perhaps the analogy can be further considered. Will the shipwrecked crew try again? Will they take the lessons they learned to heart to avoid a future shipwreck, or even despite their best efforts to avoid misfortune, will they nonetheless run aground unforeseen shallow rock? Is this never-ending cycle of flux their fate? Do their *daimons* lead them down this looping path to the point that their fate defines their character? And lastly, if they are to tread the endless path of flux, do they ever stop and wonder what their purpose is – what their *telos* is? Perhaps, like Zeno of Citium, a shipwreck offers transcendence and brings deep and fundamental discernment to the unfortunate soul, thus revealing their *telos*, and they never return to their former endeavor (see Long, p. 109, 1986). Is misfortune truly fortune? This essay will ruminate on these questions using Richard Geldard’s *Remembering Heraclitus* (2001) as the backdrop for the discussion.

Your Character is your Daimon

Fragment 119 is translated in various ways. Geldard (2001) notes that most translators translate it as “character is fate.” Sweet’s (2007) translation is “one’s character is one’s divine fortune” while Robinson’s (1991) is “a person’s character is his fate (divinity). As for Geldard (2001), he translates it as, “for human beings, character is the divine force.” There is a spectrum of interpretations for how one may grasp the meaning of this fragment. We may suppose our fate is entirely out of our hands and we seemingly resign ourselves to the fates the gods have doled out to us. Or we may interpret this fragment as a declaration of our freedom in which we get to control our attitude, narrative, and volition – we are



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the authors of our character. Geldard reviews various analyses of this fragment, one of which represents both ends of the spectrum as one and the same.

We have no say in the matter of which life we are thrown into. We don't get to weave our DNA and choose our parents, nor even choose the best traits and aspects of our parents. In fact, we may even be chained with generational baggage, emotions, and "debt" if you take an Eastern philosophical view of the matter (see Geldard, p. 89, 2001). From this perspective of the fragment, our *daimon* is exerting destiny and fate upon us the moment our cells begin to replicate. But that is only one side of the coin, to reference the analogy Geldard uses. The other side of the coin represents the "so what?"

The character Andy Dufresne from *Shawshank Redemption* (Darabont, 1994) faced stacked odds against him, but how he responded to his fate (his *daimon*) ultimately defined his character. Indeed, our fate or perhaps our *daimon*, as our guardian spirit, senses the required obstacles we must face which act as catalysts for us to either succumb to defeat or to achieve a defining moment. From this side of the coin, then, we should not moan or gripe in the face of impediments, but rather we should thank the gods for showing us the way to finding our true character. As the well-known Marcus Aurelius passage teaches, regarding other people, the elements, and even wild animals, these are "hindrance[s]" and "obstacles" that indicate the "path" on which we can advance (Meditations 5, 20). In sum, our fate and impediments point the way to our character.

However, in a cosmos that never rests from change, we must be cognizant of the unending myriad of obstacles. We may think our character has been refined through the process of managing an impediment, but the reality is that the constant state of flux will demand we confront barriers endlessly.

Constant Flux

Fractals are intriguing mathematical constructs that exhibit self-similarity at different scales yet are vastly complex and ever-evolving. In other words, they are shapes that look similar or even identical depending on the focus and scale of the perspective. They're often intricate and detailed, yet they are built on simple repeating patterns or processes. Fractals can be found in nature, such as in the branching patterns of trees, the distribution of galaxies, the structure of coastlines, and even in the shape of clouds. Perhaps fractals are an apt metaphor for reality and existence as a whole: infinite, ever-changing, ever-evolving. Once set in motion, the math behind the fractal iterates and expands endlessly.

One of the major themes of Heraclitus is the nature of flux and the cause of it. According to Heraclitus, part of the process of acquiring wisdom is to be awake and conscious to comprehend "the thought that directs all things through all things" (Geldard, p. 46, 2001). Geldard then makes an interesting connection by quoting Anaxagoras who noted, "mind is infinite and self-sustaining, is unmixed, alone, and by itself . . . [and] drives the whole revolution, so that it revolved initially, first in a small area and now more widely, and eventually more widely still" (p. 46, 2001). Could this description be applied to a fractal? Perhaps. And if this is the true nature of the Cosmos and as humans are intricately entwined in the details of the Cosmos, we must accept the idea that *our own minds* are tiny fractals in a larger fractal both of which are constantly changing and evolving and part of a massive chain which is infinite. Consider Fragment 45: "One would never discover the limits of soul, should one traverse every road - so deep a measure does it possess" (Robinson, 1991). Succinctly stated, change causes change and never ceases.



However, what does flux mean to the individual? First, the individual must heed the wisdom Heraclitus states. We must accept that change is constant and never-ending. To wail at the passing of every dead skin cell or formation of a wrinkle or to be overjoyed at the birth of a kitten or bloom of a rose is not wisdom. Implied in these overextensions of emotion is a desire for something to remain the same. A better reaction to change is to accept it and even embrace it.

Secondly, the individual must look both deeper into and take a wider perspective of the fractal. Upon further reflection of flux, and the more one becomes familiar with change, he will begin to note that there is a cyclical nature to existence. Seasons change; families shrink and grow; history seems both different, yet the same. If one becomes discerning enough, he will realize that feeling sadness or anxiety about change is folly, especially since he may have a chance to experience something anew. Spring flowers are never lost. Embracing a loved one on their deathbed may seem to be final, yet sometimes we may feel we love the same soul in another person, such as the way a grandmother may have cooked a particular dinner is revealed again in the way a grandchild mimics the meal.

Lastly, for the individual facing endless change, perhaps the most important lesson for them to embrace is this: given the constant change and given the fact that the more change happens, the more we see similarity, then perhaps the long-term response to all flux and cycles is to live in harmony with the Cosmos – to live according to Nature as the Stoics would propose. One could argue that the individual should assume a long-term perspective and attitude about life. If change is constant and if we encounter repeated obstacles, then we ought to seek the choice that most aligns with the nature of existence. While an entire paper can be spent on this topic, instead of reading that essay, the reader may wish to watch and ponder two videos regarding the well-known economics game theory model called The Prisoner's Dilemma. Video one (Agar, 2014) explains the prisoner's dilemma, while video two explains the fascinating strategies employed while playing the game repeatedly (Agar, 2016). One, brief commentary on these videos is that the successful, long-term strategies used in iterative prisoner dilemma games are not unlike living a moral, virtuous life based on Stoic ethics.

Recurrence, to what end?

While applied ethics may be one reason to assume a long-term perspective, a related idea worth discussing would be the topic of ultimate ends for the individual. Geldard (2001) dedicates an entire chapter on *telos* and what we can learn from Heraclitus on this topic. This essay began by discussing philosophical and actual shipwrecks and how they are catalysts for change. The literal shipwreck must have been caused by one or many variables. Was the cause a faulty rudder, an incompetent navigator, or a lackadaisical captain, or were the elements – Nature – the sole causes of the ship crashing upon waves and rock? Were the captain and the crew completely helpless and only had God to blame for the crash? Once recovered on dry land or perhaps while drowning in the deep sea, they may have wondered: who's in charge of all this or is it all chaos? What's the purpose behind all this? Geldard contends that in Heraclitus' perspective, there is "someone or something at the helm, which in turn implies a vessel with a rudder going somewhere" (p. 109, 2001). And with that implication, an aim for the individual could be found.

While Heraclitus does observe natural cycles and emphasizes constant change, he does not explicitly formulate a doctrine of recurrence or eternal return in the same way that later philosophers, like the Stoics and Nietzsche, do. However, there are a couple of gems found in Robinson (1991) and Sweet



(2007) that indicate recurrence is a theme of Heraclitus and that with it, there is a heading to be found for the individual. Robinson quotes Aetius who wrote, “Heraclitus held that the recurrent fire is everlasting, and that destiny is a logos which fashions existent things through the contrariety of the directions in which they tend to run” (p. 173, 1991). Sweet, in his commentary on the themes of life, death, and the soul, discusses the dry and wet soul analogies of Heraclitus. He notes that Heraclitus proposes the soul gains power through wisdom and “becomes a dry soul” and “to the extent that it is identified with the universal fire” (p. 67, 2007). Furthermore, the truly wise person can attain such a degree of wisdom that their soul is unified with the universal fire and achieves a type of immortality. However, upon death, the wet or unwise soul turns to water and then earth and is merged into nature. While Sweet is not explicit, it could be assumed that the unwise person is reincarnated to try again, as it were.

Therefore, if it were assumed that flux is endless and recurrent and that individuals are tossed into the mix over and over again until they get it right and only when they become wise do they find an exit through unity with the universal fire, is this our answer to what our *telos* or aim in life is? One perspective Geldard brings into the analysis is that of Fowles. In this endless flux (what Fowles calls “The Situation”), “the only *telos* possible is an existential one” (p. 112, 2001). He quotes Fowles who writes, “To accept one’s limited freedom, to accept one’s isolation, to accept this responsibility, to learn one’s particular powers, and then with them to humanize the whole: that is the best ... for this situation” (p. 112, 2001). In brief, one perspective is to simply accept existence as is. However, if this may seem distasteful, perhaps a more transcendental attitude of existence might invigorate life. Geldard offers the aim of unity with the Cosmos, or to be more precise, *metaxy*.

Fragment 10 focuses on unity with the whole. “Seizures – wholes and non-wholes, being combined and differentiated, in accord and dissonant: unity is from everything and from everything is unity” (Sweet, 2007). Fragment 30 similarly notes, “this cosmos [the unity of all that is] was not made by immortal or mortal beings, but always was, is and will be an eternal fire, arising and subsiding in measure” (Geldard, p. 129, 2001). Geldard proposes that “the unity is the *telos*” of the human and that many texts from the same period of Heraclitus reflect this desire for transcendence away from the human existence Fowles describes and towards a *metaxy* or “in-betweenness” – a place between human existence and the Logos (p. 113-114, 2001). Geldard then reviews similarities between the teachings of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, the Buddha, and Lao Tse and the fragments of Heraclitus, all of which offer ideas for achieving unity.

Practice Again and Again

Since the individual finds himself in an endless flux that recurs, and his *telos* is to transcend into *metaxy*, what key lessons must he practice repeatedly to achieve his *telos*? Geldard notes similarities between Heraclitus and his peers of the time. The first is Jeremiah who calls the people, like a shepherd to his sheep, to “feed [on] knowledge and discretion” (p. 116, 2001). Geldard notes that this call to knowledge and discretion invokes a greater individual responsibility for people to come to God’s terms and perspective. In a similar vein, Heraclitus teaches that “to God all things are beautiful, good and just” (p. 116, 2001) and humans irresponsibly assume a narrow, closed-minded perspective. If we are to achieve our *telos*, we must practice abandoning our restricted point of view and practice embracing the perspective of the Cosmos.



Related to the practice of assuming a Cosmic attitude is the work of letting go of the ego and its related attachments and embracing the will of the Universe. Geldard references the Buddha's doctrine of separating the selfish ego of one's identity and in its place, assuming an identity equal to that of Divinity. When we cease being fearful of losing ourselves and cease the longing for fame and ego, we begin to break "the bonds of attachment" (p. 118, 2001). Heraclitus similarly admonishes in Fragment 2 that we must "obey the universal" and not be like common people who cling to their own "private understanding" (p. 119, 2001). To achieve our *telos*, we must practice relinquishing our selfish egos every day. Every flinch or snap judgment towards grasping at some portion of fame, or power or status should be met with practicing a desire to flow with Nature and being unified with the Nature of things.

Lastly, Lao Tse noted the tension of justice in the Universe by observing that tautness is needed for a bow to succeed. If there is no tension because the string is too long, then the string must be shortened and if there is not enough string, then it must be lengthened (see p. 120, 2001). A sage practices and demonstrates his knowledge rather than simply retaining it. True, divine understanding and judgment is not simple learning, but rather, being truly awake and aware and acting accordingly. To this end, Heraclitus teaches us to not heed him, but the Logos (Fragment 50) and that common humans do not have good judgment, but only divine judgment is good judgment (Fragment 78). Therefore, to achieve our *telos*, we must avoid the common and instead practice observing true wisdom. It will take skill to know when to apply a virtue and how much or how little for the right amount of tension.

Conclusion

The idea of a philosophical life beginning from a shipwreck is not novel. Many observers through the years have found the analogy quite compelling. Vidauskytė (2017) notes that not only is a shipwreck a metaphor for the initiation of a philosophical life, but that seafaring also signifies the human discontent with staying on land and the desire to transcend the human domain of land and venture out to the beyond. She rightly observes Diogenes Laertius's commentary on Zeno of Citium, who survived a shipwreck and traded his lost cargo of purple dye for living a philosophical life on dry land. But not everyone's fate is a shipwreck. Our character is defined by our fate, through the endless flux of impediments and obstacles. And sometimes, the monotony and recurring nature of existence forces us to wonder what our ultimate aim is. Perhaps after enough voyages and challenges, we arrive at true wisdom and begin to see the Cosmos as it really is – we lose our common ego and pivot to a desire to be at one with Nature. With enough practice of taking the Cosmic perspective, laying aside our ego, perhaps we achieve transcendence, return to land, and dry our soul by a flaming, wise fire.

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