



**THE STOIC
PHILOSOPHER**

On Heraclitus Welcome to the Logos

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Introduction

This essay is a short version of my essay for the excellent course: “On Heraclitus”.

Heraclitus, known as ‘the Riddler’, was a pre-Socratic philosopher who lived in the Greek city of Ephesus around 500 BC. In his fragments, Heraclitus describes several concepts of his worldview in his own unique and paradoxical way: Fire, flux, Logos, the common, unity of opposites, etc. Here I will only present parts of his idea of Logos that give hints (more is not possible), as to what Logos is and how to recognize it.

To understand Heraclitus' thinking, we have to knock on his door, metaphorically speaking, and enter his world. All Heraclitus fragments in this essay are taken from this source, unless otherwise stated, and are cited only by fragment number.

Knocking on Heraclitus' door

“Come into this smoky cabin; God is here also: approve yourself to him.”
(Character, 1860, p. 360)

Imagine knocking on Heraclitus' door, opening it and standing in a smoky hut. Then Heraclitus, who is standing at his stove in front of the fire, says “Come in, God is here too!”. Would you go in? For Heraclitus, the divine is present everywhere. We can avoid Heraclitus, who lived a modest life, but not the work of the divine. We can be put off by the smoke in the hut, but this divine does not care. Perhaps it is precisely this smoke and the darkness that we need to face up to and reduce our sensual perception and learn to see the essence of things. Not the essence of things as we would like them to be, but as they really are.

Little by little, I would like to clear away some of the smoke that obscures the idea of the (divine) Logos of the ancient “enigmatic genius” Heraclitus, so that we can better recognize the essentials together.

A word about the word

Logos is a word of great importance in ancient Greek philosophy. The root of the word logos is “leg” (Geldard, 2000, p. 33). The verb on which logos is based is “légō” and means something like “(lay) down”, “collect”, “read”, “tell”. In English, a Greek heritage can be recognized in the word collect (Brann, 2011, p. 10). In Homer and Hesiod we find logos in the meaning of “word”, “discourse” or “narrative (account)” (Mitevski, 1994). The



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development of meaning from “collect” to “speak” results when language is understood as a 'collection of words'. (Etymology Online, n.d.). In this way, language becomes a “vehicle for human reason” (Brann, 2011, p. 10).

Logos in Heraclitus

“Therefore it is necessary to obey the universal; but although the Logos is universal, most people live as though they had a private understanding.” (Heraclitus, trans. Burnett, 1920, Fragment 2)

The word logos is not an invention of Heraclitus. As shown above, it has the meanings of “word” or “language” as an expression of rational thought to bring order to what we experience. Upon entering Heraclitus' world of thought, however, a new, infinite depth of meaning of the word Logos opens up. A picture of Heraclitus' Logos only emerges when we engage with all the facets that describe the Logos.

Heraclitus' words are, logically, also logoi. However, they are word orderings that appear to us as paradoxes or riddles due to his intentional principle of order. In this way, his logoi enable us to better understand the Logos. He challenges us to leave our own private world of concepts and relationships and to see it anew. In this way, in addition to the original meanings, we can understand the Logos that we all share as a universal ordering principle, as a force that unites opposites, through which everything is in flux and also manifests itself as the eternal creative fire of the cosmos. We will now look at these levels of meaning before we delve deeper into how Logos can be (better) understood.

Logos as a universal organizing principle

“The Logos, (which is) as I describe, proves incomprehensible, both before it is heard and even after it is heard. For although all things happen according to the Logos, many act as if they have no experience of it, even when they do experience such words and action as I explain, as when I separate out each thing according to its nature and state how it is; but as to the rest, they fail to notice what they do after they wake up, just as they forget what they do when they sleep.” (1)

The fragment that we know as the first fragment of Heraclitus already describes a great deal of what constitutes the Logos. “all things happen according to the Logos” i.e. it is a universal principle of order. If we add a fragment from fragment 31 “It (Fire) becomes liquid sea, and is measured (metron) by the same tale (Logos) as before it became earth.”, Logos can also be understood here as “measure” (metron, as in metronome) (Geldard, 2000, p. 34). For Heraclitus, fire is the primordial cosmic element, not as a physical phenomenon but as a metaphysical principle. Logos functions as the principle that gives measure and order to the universe and is the organizing principle that regulates the rhythmic flaring up and extinguishing of fire. Logos is the principle behind the finely tuned laws of nature that make our lives possible.

Recognizing the Logos

Heraclitus' idea is that there is a Logos that expresses itself as words uttered by reason, but also as a principle that organizes opposites, or cosmic, eternal fire. It is the Logos that relates everything to everything else and



creates harmony. “Logos is nature and its language” (Brann, 2011, p. 125). But how can we hear, experience or recognize the Logos?

Insight into the wise and the alone

Heraclitus has a special idea of wisdom or what the Wise is. In fragment 41 we learn that “Wisdom is one thing (en to sophon). It is to know the thought by which all things are steered through all things”. This “One Wisdom” manifests itself as Logos in everything, but at the same time goes beyond each individual manifestation. This becomes particularly clear in fragment 32: “The wise is one (en to sophon) only . It is unwilling and willing to be called by the name of Zeus.”. This paradoxical formulation shows: The “One Wise One” needs names and manifestations (is “willing”), but at the same time transcends them (is “unwilling”). Logos is the manifestation of the “One Wise One” in everything, but the “One Wise One” itself remains transcendent.

He is concerned with a special wisdom. It becomes clear in fragment 78 that only the divine way makes such insights possible: “The way (ethos) of man has no wisdom (gnome), but that of God has.”. This is not about religious knowledge of God in the traditional sense, but about a philosophical path of knowledge that goes beyond ordinary understanding. When we take the “divine path”, we are not looking for the mythological Zeus, but for what is hidden behind the symbol of Zeus: Fire, consciousness, Logos - the universal principle in everything.

The One Sage acts IN everything as Logos (immanence), but is at the same time separate FROM everything (transcendence). This becomes clear in fragment 108: “Of all whose discourses (logoi) I have heard, there is not one who attains to understanding that wisdom (sophos) is apart from all.”. This tension between immanence and transcendence is fundamental to Heraclitus’ thinking: The One Wisdom permeates everything as Logos, but at the same time remains separate from everything in its essence.

If we listen properly, are not asleep but open to knowledge, and abandon dualistic thinking and surrender to paradoxical nature, we can recognize the wise principles that Logos brings with it and through which everything is guided. “The wise is one only”. Everything is one. All One. Alone.

How does one learn that “All is One”?

If we take a look at fragment 1 (see above), it becomes clear that Heraclitus is of the opinion that we cannot gain an understanding of the Logos, neither before we have experienced it nor afterwards. The sleeping are particularly unfortunate: “but as to the rest, they fail to notice what they do after they wake up, just as they forget what they do when they sleep” (1) and “... the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.” (89). Living in their private world (see fragment 2), the sleeping never experiences the waking experience, because “The waking have one common world...” (89). So can it only be experienced directly? Awake, without indulging in memories or dreams? For the Logos works always and everywhere. Things become and pass away in the “AllOne”. Here and now.



Understanding the right thing

So what is to be “done” in order to be counted among the awake? How do we arrive at this right apprehension of the Logos? We can make a start with fragment 116 (following Brann, 2011, p. 26): “It pertains to all men to know themselves and to learn self-control (sophroneo)” (116)

This echoes the inscriptions from the Temple of Apollo in Delphi, which did not yet exist in Heraclitus’ time: “Know thyself” and “Nothing in excess”. It is given to all people to be self-controlled and to do nothing in excess. Let’s add fragment 112: “Self-control (sophroneo) is the highest virtue, and wisdom (sophos) is to speak (legein) truth and consciously to act according to nature”.

Sophroneo can have several meanings, in addition to being self-controlled it can also mean prudent, dispassionate or wise. Self-control could then be understood to mean that one should encourage oneself to apply Heraclitus’ method of “dividing each thing according to its kind (physis) and showing how it truly is” (part of 1) and to leave out everything private and egotistical. This is the work of the philo-sophos: “Men that love wisdom (philosophos) must be acquainted with very many things (historias) indeed.” (35) In order to understand the wisdom of Logos, one must be knowledgeable about many things.

However, Heraclitus also emphasizes that “The learning of many things (polymathia) teacheth not understanding” (40). By this he means that there are two different kinds of knowledge and that the most important is the one that gets to the bottom of things, because polymathy does not lead to the understanding of the Logos that Heraclitus is concerned with.

The polymath does not achieve a deep understanding like the “polyhistor” – a word composed of poly/much and historias/exploration. The polyhistor Heraclitus knows that self-knowledge is possible for all people (116) and therefore recommends searching in a special place in order to understand the Logos. The problem is “Nature loves to hide” (123) - but we’ll solve that in a moment.

Searching in the right place

“I have searched for myself” (101)

Heraclitus searches in his self and finds that the content of the soul resembles the Logos: “You will not find the boundaries of soul by traveling in any direction, so deep is the measure (Logos) of it” (45). Thus the soul becomes a mirror of the cosmos (Brann, 2011, p. 127), in the soul one recognizes the reflections of the various manifestations of Logos. He has also recognized within himself that the more one recognizes, the more knowledge increases: “To the soul, belongs the self-multiplying Logos.” (115).

In order to understand the Logos, however, we must also leave our private sphere. And this in several senses: (1) we must be open and not dream, for dreaming is the “most private and spiritless state” (Brann, 2011, p. 131). We must (2) recognize that there is a common law, a nomos/Logos, which equalizes all “private wisdom” and (3) this Logos is not just a “private thing”, but everyone has this Logos quality in their soul, so that we have this in common with other people, even if it is hidden from one another. “So we must follow the common, yet though my Word (Logos) is common, the many live as if they had a wisdom of their own.” (2) We should therefore follow this common, because the Logos also belongs to the common.



It is precisely thinking and understanding that everything has in common: “Thought (phroneein) is common to all.” (113) . He makes this clear in fragment 114, when he says “Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all as a city holds fast to its law, and even more strongly. For all human laws (nomoi) are fed by the one divine law. It prevails as much as it will, and suffices for all things with something to spare” So whoever wants to express sensibly in words what concerns the understanding of the Logos should hold even more strongly to what is common than a city holds fast to the politically common law (Geldard, 2000, p.75 & Brann, 2011, p. 130). Further dimensions of the common are expressed here: the human community or human nature. But all this commonality is also nourished by the divine law, certainly the Logos.

With the idea of the common, one also understands what distinguishes the waking from the sleeping: “The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.” (89) and this also closes the circle that I opened in the section on “Insight into the wise”: when we recognize this common, we no longer sleep. With this understanding of the 'common', we can now better recognize the depth of the Logos concept.

The Logos of Heraclitus is something that relates everything to everything else - internally and externally. Forming the cosmos through fire, the Logos brings the individual parts into form (informs them) and continues to work in them through certain laws. In this way it becomes a kind of SuperLogos (Brann, 2011, p. 124).

So with man: the Logos has brought us into this world. This gives us an outside. At the same time, it has given us an “inside” in which we can perceive it and its laws. On the one hand, we emerge from it and on the other, we merge with it, so that one could think that we produce ourselves. Like the fire. For Heraclitus, what must the soul be like for such knowledge to be possible?

Preserving the nature of the soul

“The dry soul is the wisest and best.” (118)

Let’s start with this: Drunks have a wet soul: “A man, when he gets drunk, is led by a beardless lad, tripping, knowing not where he steps, having his soul moist.” (117). For a soul, however, it is death to be wet: “For it is death to souls to become water, and death to water to become earth. But water comes from earth; and from water, soul.” (36) But it is the normal cycle of a soul’s transformation in Heraclitus’ world. However, the soul also takes pleasure in becoming intoxicated: “For souls it is pleasure or death to become wet.” (77). The soul can therefore become wet and thus unreceptive to the knowledge of the Logos (117) if it indulges in false pleasures.

Since “water is always flowing in” (“You cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you” (12)), we as humans face a special challenge: we are in this flux that impairs our ability to perceive the Logos, but at the same time this is a manifestation of the Logos. Wonderfully paradoxical.

So how do we keep our souls dry? That is the constant work of the philosopher. Constant because even when we notice the Logos, we are already out of cognition again (“before it is heard and even after it is heard” (part of 1) and we get wet “for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you” (part of 12).

This constant work influences man’s character. “Man’s character (ethos) is his fate (daimon)”. (119) This is a difficult fragment. It says “Ethos is daimon for a man”. Daimon can mean God, divinity, the power of fate or also spiritual being (of man). The daimon appears again in fragment 79: “Man is called a baby by God



(daimon), even as a child by a man.” Ethos is also heavy with meaning. It can mean essence, character or habit. (see fragment 78 “The way (ethos) of man has no wisdom (gnome), but that of God has.”). What then do we have before us with fragment 119? The essence/character/habit of man is his destiny/divinity/spiritual being.

“In the circumference of a circle the beginning and end are common.” (103)

I introduced this essay with a story about standing in front of Heraclitus’ door, knocking and him answering “Come in, God is present here too!”. He knew that no one can hide from God and the Logos, because the “divine law” (from 114) is always at work in everything. You only have to step inside or you can stay outside; and you can recognize that you are already inside, even if you think you are not.

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