

Stepping into Rivers: *Ontology in Heraclitus*

Cratylus famously attempted to correct Heraclitus by amending his claim that “you cannot step twice into the same rivers; for fresh waters are flowing in upon you” (B2) to the more radical position that one cannot step even once into the same river (Arist. *Metaph.* 1010a10-15).¹ This reading of Heraclitus, which commits him to a radical doctrine of flux, in which things fail to maintain any sort of ontological unity through time, was popular in ancient times, and is preserved in both Plato and Aristotle as the main teaching of Heraclitus. While more recent scholarship has cast doubt on this traditional interpretation of Heraclitus, most of the discussion of the issue has centered on philological considerations, pertaining to whether or not Heraclitus had been properly interpreted by Plato and Aristotle.² The modern attempt to alter Heraclitus’ reputation as the philosopher of *ta panta rei* has thus been left open to the charge that the new interpretation is not coherent with regard to the extant fragments. So, W.K.C. Guthrie argues that, “in fact, the extant fragments offer no challenge to the universal ancient view.”³ In the course of this paper, I propose to evaluate some of the philological issues at stake, as a precursor to a philosophical discussion of the extant fragments, in the hope of at least sketching a response to the challenge set by Guthrie. I will therefore demonstrate on the basis of the text that Cratylus was mistaken, and that the ontological unity of the river does in fact persist through time. Such a broad approach will necessarily involve commenting on some of the more difficult issues in Heraclitus scholarship, such as the nature of the unity of opposites and the *logos*. In such cases, an attempt has been made to opt for the least controversial readings.

Plato’s comments on Heraclitus, explicit in his dialogue *Cratylus* but also implicit in other places, make it clear that he supposes him to have held a radical theory of flux. In what is likely a reference to fragment B12, Plato claims that Heraclitus wrote that we cannot step into the same river twice. Plato deduces from this that Heraclitus believed that all things are constantly changing (Pl. *Crat.* 402a). The river image, which of itself only speaks to the continuity of change of the water in a river, is extended to cover the domain of all things. Of course, Heraclitus’ preferred mode of presentation is through images, which he rarely even supplements with explanations or arguments.⁴ The scope of the flux was certainly intended to be broader than just in rivers or water; the question is whether the intended scope of the metaphor includes all things at all times, as Plato would have it, or some subset of things.

Of course, Plato in the *Cratylus* is not attempting to write an objective history of philosophy based on a close reading of the available text. He instead makes use of specific aspects of Heraclitus’ thought to facilitate the explanation of his own philosophical views by means of comparison. Assum-

¹ We follow the translations provided in John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 3rd ed., (London: A. and C. Black, 1920), according to the Diels ordering of the fragments.

² In addition to Kirk’s view which is presented below, an earlier argument against the *Flusslehre* is presented in Bruno Snell, “Die Sprache Heraklits,” in *Hermes*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (1926).

³ W. K. C. Guthrie, “Flux and Logos in Heraclitus,” from W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy, Vol. I: The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge: CUP, 1962), reprinted in *The Presocratics*, ed. Alexander Mourelatos, (New York: Anchor Press, 1974), 204.

⁴ C. J. Emlin-Jones, “Heraclitus and the Identity of Opposites,” in *Phronesis*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (1976), 96.

On Stepping Into Rivers

ing, as the modern consensus seems to be, that the *Cratylus* was written roughly contemporaneously with the *Theaetetus*, it may represent one of Plato's first succinct statements on his theory of Forms.⁵ If this is true, Plato would have a clear motive for conjuring up the idea of a world in which everything is not only susceptible to change but actually changing all the time. Such an idea, so easily invoked by attributing it to the authority of Heraclitus, would provide a powerful dramatic contrast to the "beautiful itself" and the "good itself" (Pl. *Crat.* 439c), which he establishes as necessary to provide meaning to such a world of constant flux.

What follows in the dialogue is a fairly light-hearted treatment of this doctrine, in which Heraclitus is compared to Homer - a comparison most likely intended as an insult to a thinker who so deliberately sets himself apart from the poets (cf. especially B40, B42). This parodic exposition of Heraclitean thought leads one to suspect that Plato may be distorting the true content of Heraclitus' thought. Against such suspicion, W. K. C. Guthrie points out that even if Plato appears to be dismissive of Heraclitus, Aristotle writes that he had a profound influence on Plato, and indeed provided the catalyst for his invention of the Forms.⁶ So in spite of the caricature in the dialogue itself, Plato must have privately held this to be an authentically Heraclitean doctrine. The first problem with this line of argument is that there may be philological evidence that Aristotle's conclusions are based solely on the text of the *Cratylus*, and not on any other independent authority.⁷ The second problem is that even if Plato was influenced by this theory of flux, this still does not establish that it was ever an authentically Heraclitean teaching.

Guthrie raises an additional philological concern in his defence of Cratylus' radical flux doctrine. He claims that it is extremely implausible that "Plato grossly misunderstood [Heraclitus] and every subsequent Greek interpreter meekly followed his lead, in spite of possessing either Heraclitus' book or at least a much more comprehensive collection of his sayings than we have."⁸ While Kirk does doubt whether Plato actually read so many of the fragments, his argument is flawed.⁹ As noted above, Plato makes casual allusions to the fragments on rivers and poets. These references seem to suggest that both Plato and his audience were familiar with Heraclitus' fragments, since Plato would have expected his audience to pick up on the allusions. But the mere fact that the Greeks had better access to the text by no means constitutes a strong *prima facie* case for the Platonic reading, as Guthrie suggests. As discussed above, a misrepresentation of Heraclitus need not represent a misunderstanding on the part of Plato, rather than an appropriation of his name for dramatic purposes in the *Cratylus*. Later Greek interpreters were similarly motivated by their own agendas; Guthrie himself admits that Aristotle misrepresents Heraclitus as a Milesian thinker, in order that he might present the history of philosophy as culminating in his own physics.¹⁰ The combined authority of Plato and Aristotle would presumably have inspired at least some meekness on the part of would-be dissenters.

Hopefully these preliminary philological remarks are sufficient to cast doubt on the Pla-

⁵ G. S. Kirk, "The Problem of Cratylus," in *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (1951), 226.

⁶ Guthrie, 201.

⁷ Kirk, 242ff.

⁸ Guthrie, 203.

⁹ G. S. Kirk, "Natural Change in Heraclitus," *Mind*, Vol. 60 (1961), 35.

¹⁰ Guthrie, 202.

tonic reading of Heraclitus. We now proceed to some philosophical analysis as to the place of ontological unity through time in Heraclitus' thought as a whole, in an attempt to prove that the Platonic reading is incompatible with some less contested teachings of Heraclitus.

The first and most obvious consideration is that of sense perception. There are certain fragments, which suggest that Heraclitus held a sceptical view of sense perception. In fragment B107, he claims that eyes and ears are poor witnesses to a barbarian soul, and again in B34, he states that, "fools when they do hear are like the deaf..." But these fragments taken in isolation provide an unbalanced view. It is true that he does not hold sense perception to be sufficient for understanding (*nous*). But, he does write: "The things that can be seen, heard, and learned are what I prize the most" (B55).¹¹ On another occasion, he seems to indicate that sense perception may even be a necessary condition for knowledge: "Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all..." (B114). On the evidence of these fragments (which can be supplemented with consideration of B2, B19 and B89 for a more complete analysis), the meaning of B107 seems to be less a condemnation of sense perception in general, but more so it is simply a recognition that it is not sufficient to gain understanding; for that, one's soul must not be barbarian, for example one's soul must speak Greek, or rendered in a more cosmopolitan spirit, one's soul must "speak the language" (B107).

Now that it has been established that Heraclitus is not a sceptic concerning the value of sense perception like Parmenides, we can attempt to evaluate the claim of the doctrine of flux based on the evidence of the senses. It seems doubtful that there could be much sensory evidence for Plato's interpretation of perpetual change. Guthrie brings up an image used by Aristotle to illustrate the theory of flux as potential sensory evidence, namely that of water dripping onto a stone.¹² This is supposedly evidence that even if sense perception can not detect change as it occurs, the erosion which takes place over time can bear witness to the steady flux of all things. But there are several problems with this image. The dripping of the water is not itself a continuous stream. The change that it causes is indeed imperceptibly small, but it is intermittent, not continuous. This is not a trivial point, but is one which can be corrected by simply amending the image to that of a continuous stream of water; in order for the argument to work in support of Plato's explanation, *ta panta rei*, all change has to be shown to be continuous.

One can try to salvage the argument by positing an invisible phase of change which persists in between drops, but in order to do so, one must posit some sort of imperceptible motion, an idea to which Heraclitus' aversion was already noted above. And the problem is even starker for things that are not moving in any obvious way, such as a stone without any water pouring over it at all. More generally, one does perhaps perceive a tendency of all things to wear away with time, but there is certainly no perceptual evidence to suggest that this erosion is continuous rather than intermittent, as seems more intuitive at least for objects.

Just as Heraclitus is not a sceptic with regards to the value of sense perception, nor is he

¹¹ The target of this fragment is probably Greek religion as depicted by the poets (also under attack in B44 and B33), and/or extrasensual philosophising such as that of Anaximander, who posited the existence of an *apeiron* (unbounded, limitless) substance which remains imperceptible.

¹² Guthrie, 202.

On Stepping Into Rivers

committed to any sort of relativism. In the above discussed fragment B99, Heraclitus makes it clear that there is a cognitive component involved in understanding complementary to the senses, namely the soul's language, which allows it to comprehend the *logos* and not simply hear it, as if one remained absent while present (B34). The *logos*, which is generally translated as "account," "word," or "reason," refers here to that which inheres in the order of things independent of our sense perception of it. So, although Heraclitus most prizes those things that can be seen and heard like physical changes, which are perceptible, these things are not to be taken as true merely on the basis of individual perception. They are true because they are in some sense "governed" by a *logos* which exists apart from any individual: "...though [the *logos*] is common, yet the many live as if they had a wisdom of their own" (B2). If one may be permitted to speak of an "epistemology" in Heraclitus, it is clearly objective, and not relativistic. In light of these considerations, one of the fragments which best lends itself to a relativistic interpretation can be understood differently. Heraclitus' states that "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 destructive" (B61). This is better viewed as a paradoxical statement about how seawater is of its nature both pure and impure, rather than a claim that the seawater is somehow in and of itself different for men than it is for fishes.¹³

As this discussion begins to impinge on some controversial interpretations of Heraclitus' theory of unity in opposition, let it suffice to say that Heraclitus is committed to a world and a *logos* that are common to all. We can agree with Plato that these claims are not easily reconciled with a view of the world in which things are constantly changing. There are severe difficulties with both a theory of language and a theory of truth that arise from denying that anything ever remains constant. But to admit, as one must on the strength of the textual evidence, that Heraclitus dedicated much thought to the eternal existence of the cosmos, for which the *logos* remains unchanged, while simultaneously supposing that he holds that all things are constantly changing, is to accuse Heraclitus of an extremely fundamental and equally improbable intellectual inconsistency.

To return once more to the question of perception, Heraclitus remarks that different senses are useful under different conditions: "If all things were turned to smoke, the nostrils would distinguish them" (B7). While Heraclitus clearly does not believe that all things are smoke, this fragment does provide a clue as to what he does believe to be the most valuable sense in this world; the mention of smoke creates associations of fire. And in fact Heraclitus explicitly links vision with fire in fragment B26: "Man is kindled and put out like a light in the night-time." Vision is therefore best able to make sense of a world, which is illuminated by fire, or the sun.

And yet it is a fragment about the sun that seems to most contradict attempts to dissociate Heraclitus from the doctrine of *ta panta rei*. In fragment B6, Heraclitus writes, "The sun is new every day." If the sun is new every day, then it seems to be the sort of thing, which is perpetually changing and indeed in such a way that this change is imperceptible, as the sun does not generally appear significantly different from day to day. Granted that the sun may occasionally appear a different colour under certain atmospheric conditions, but this is hardly a necessary connection that would cause one

¹³ For a different argument as to how this fragment does not commit Heraclitus to any form of relativism, see Marie I. George, "What Wisdom is According to Heraclitus the Obscure," in *Lyceum*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (1993), 11.

to speak of a new sun “every day.” And while the sun’s relative pattern through the heavens does change in a necessary fashion, it seems unlikely that this daily change is sufficient grounds for positing the existence of a whole new or even substantially different sun. This imperceptible change certainly seems to speak against the arguments about Heraclitus and sense perception mentioned above. But perhaps there is a particular reason for considering that the sun may be a privileged entity in this regard. Indeed this should hardly be surprising, given the pivotal role given to fire. As Heraclitus states, “the world...was ever, is, and ever shall be an ever-living fire...” (B30), and he attributes central cosmic brilliance to the sun, stating: “If there were no sun, it would be night,” since the other stars would not suffice to make it day (B99).

The privileged place given by Heraclitus to fire in his philosophy gives it a superficial similarity to the material monism of the Milesians, who were, it is true, his main philosophical influences. In the material monism of Anaximenes, for example, all things come into existence by rarefaction and condensation of Air. If it were simply the case that everything comes to be from fire in a similar way, it would be easy to explain why the sun would be new every day, since a different proportion of its fire would have been condensed or rarefied into new beings. But Heraclitean fire underlies the universe in a way that is fundamentally different than Thalesian water or Anaximenesian air.¹⁴ The Milesian interpretation of Heraclitus’ cosmology bases itself on fragment B90: “All things are exchanged for fire, and fire for all things, even as wares for gold, and gold for wares.” But as Guthrie points out, this change is not a simple matter of transformation; Heraclitus could easily have written that gold takes on the shape of jewellery, or candlesticks, or any other wares.¹⁵ But instead he describes the affair as a sort of commerce.

Indeed, it may be worth pointing out, to extend the analogy, that commerce can take place on the basis of credit, such that the gold need not be immediately transferred for wares, but that this could take place over time. So just as the human merchant keeps track of what he is owed personally, a cosmic bookkeeper keeps track of what it is owed: “The sun will not overstep his measures; if he does, the Erinyes, the handmaids of Justice, will find him out” (B94). Heraclitus can thus hardly be said to hold an elemental physical theory, at least not in the Milesian sense. Moreover, he describes matter not in terms of its own substance, but as something in tension being pulled in different directions.¹⁶ The three main substances identified in the extant fragments are fire, water, and earth (cf. B36). He writes, “The transformations of fire are, first of all, sea; and half of the sea is earth, half [kindling]” (B31). Taking sea to be a stand-in for water, we see that water is never defined in its own terms, or in terms of its own properties. Instead, it is described as something perpetually in tension between the two other substances; half of it remains fire, from whence it came into being, and half of it becomes earth, which comes to be from water (B31). In this sense then, “the way up and the way down is one and the same” (B60).

To leave aside the complexities of Heraclitean cosmology, we see that even though fire’s role in the system is fundamentally different from that of water for Thales, we are still able to see

¹⁴ Gregory Vlastos, “On Heraclitus” in *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 76, No. 4 (1995), 367.

¹⁵ Guthrie, 205.

¹⁶ Gregory Vlastos, “Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies,” in *Classical Philology*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1947), 164.

On Stepping Into Rivers

how fire is involved in the coming to be of other beings. To return to the problem of the sun fragment B6 discussed above, we can now say that it is the involvement of fire in all change which takes place (though this change does not take place perpetually), which accounts for a “new sun” rising every day.

In order to sketch an idea of what the true purpose of the river image is, if it is not to suggest a materialist theory of flux, we should consider the place of *psukhe* (soul) in the context of the extant fragments. The central role played by the *psukhe* in Heraclitus’ thought has often been overshadowed by his more dramatic cosmic notions of fire, the identity of opposites, and of course, the theory of flux. This tendency has claimed support from the purported title of Heraclitus’ book, *Of Nature*.¹⁷ But this is uncertain evidence at best, since Aristotle’s designation of the Presocratics as “natural philosophers” caused virtually every Presocratic text to come to be known by this name, and it is almost certainly not an authentic title.¹⁸ On the other hand, in an interesting recent work, Roman Dilcher has proposed that the proem to Heraclitus’ work (B1) is actually quite similar to other proems of its day.¹⁹ This analysis leads him to the conclusion that the “acts and deeds” mentioned in B1 are the true subject matter of his work, thus suggesting that the study of the *psukhe* is more central than that of the cosmos to Heraclitean thought.

Leaving aside such philological considerations once more, it is clear enough from the text that any interpretation of flux in Heraclitus must take proper account of the soul. For souls seem to be a particularly good example of something that does flow and constantly changes. A human soul is always affected by what it experiences, and since the soul experiences in every waking moment, it is constantly in a state of flux. Moreover, this reading seems consistent with the other key fragments relating to soul. For example, in fragment B45, it is said that even in travelling every path of the soul, you will not find its boundaries because its *logos* is so deep. This suggests that the soul is effectively limitless, and thus incomprehensible. One reason something might be said to be effectively limitless is that it continuously changes, so that even if we travel every path, by the time we finish, the paths themselves will be different. The soul is limitless because it is constantly in flux; indeed, it contains the principle of its own growth (B115). Furthermore, even while recognizing that the quest to find the boundaries of the soul will never fully succeed, Heraclitus endorses this search, in an irregularly self-referential fragment: “I have sought for myself” (B101). This is a claim concerning his method, which possibly even enables him to claim to have a privileged relation to truth with such bravado in fragment B1.

Of course, the assertion that the soul is constantly in a state of flux would not at all be surprising to a proponent of the Heraclitean interpretation *ta panta rei*. But according to the reading above, the soul is in flux in a privileged way. Because the soul is that which is most immediate to us, and because we can have understanding of it independently of external sense perception, we can see that it is always in a state of change. But for Heraclitus to propose soul-searching as a meaningful activity, he needs to allow that there is in some sense an ontological unity to the person conducting the

¹⁷ Françoise Joukovsky, *Le Feu et le Fleuve*, (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1991), 53.

¹⁸ G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 2nd ed., (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), 184.

¹⁹ Roman Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, (Zürich: Hildesheim, 1995), especially 11-18.

search. With regards to the effects of aging, he writes that it is in fact the same thing to be young or old (B88). By virtue of becoming old, one does not become essentially different. Certain aspects of one's being are merely reversed. When things are in flux, like the river, the point is not that they become something else; their *logos* remains the same. The point is rather that it is only by changing that something can find repose, that it can be what it is. So, "it rests by changing" (B84a). It is because of this that it is in a certain sense death for someone to sleep. One is no longer oneself, because the flow of change in the soul has been temporarily interrupted (B26). Similarly, the barley drink separates when it is not stirred (B125). The drink can only be what it is by being in motion.

On this reading, the river image is significant in a different way. Heraclitus is making an argument against a strictly materialist ontology, not for it. He does not mean that a being persists through time only by virtue of its material components, but that there is a non-material component, or *logos*, which defines that being. When he points out that a river is constantly in flux, he does not mean to say that it ceases to be the river that it is; in light of the above reading, it could only cease to be the river that it is by *failing* to be in flux. The river image points out that "fresh waters flow in upon you" as you stand in the river, but what this is meant to demonstrate, is that in spite of the material change of the river, it does remain the same. Like so many other fragments in Heraclitus, the claim that one cannot stand in the same river twice is thus best understood as a paradox, intended to draw our attention to the relationship between material composition and the *logos* which is the true being of all beings. It is a rhetorical device, not a serious claim about the ontological structure of the world. Though not actually always changing, all things are susceptible to change; even the sun, the symbol of fire, which appears most immutable, is in fact new each day. But the nature of things (*phusis*) cannot hide (B123) from that which never sets (B16), which can always be seen and is common to all, the *logos* (B2). It is thus the *logos* that governs being for Heraclitus, not the temporary imbalances of material makeup, which are in any event always repaid to the cosmic bookkeeper.

This reinterpretation of the extant fragments in an attempt to dissociate Heraclitus from the doctrine of flux raises its own perplexing questions: what sort of existence is the *logos* itself meant to possess in Heraclitus' ontology, and how can it govern the being of beings without being connected with any particular material being? Does allowing that all things can in principle change, even if they aren't actually always changing, really avoid the epistemological and linguistic problems originally raised by Plato in *Cratylus*? Regardless of the answers to such questions, which cannot be addressed under the constraints of this paper, it is clear that the above interpretation is more consistent with the rest of Heraclitus' philosophy than the ancient view of Heraclitus as the philosopher of *ta panta rei*. Heraclitus' original claim cannot have been meant as an endorsement of strict materialism, since his commitment to the independent existence of a *logos* which governs all things makes such a reductionist ontology impossible. If the existence of a river were determined solely by the waters which flow through it, there would of course not be any need for it to be governed by any external *logos*, its material composition would already be sufficient for its being. Cratylus was therefore seriously mistaken when he claimed that Heraclitean philosophy was committed to the claim that one cannot step into the same river even once.

Stephen Aylward

On Stepping Into Rivers

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Aristotle. *Metaphysics: Books I-IX*. Trans. Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1979.
- Burnet, John. *Early Greek Philosophy*. 3rd edition. London: A. and C. Black, 1920.
- Plato. *Cratylus. Parmenides. Greater Hippias. Lesser Hippias*. Trans. H.N. Fowler. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1926.

Secondary Sources

- Dilcher, Roman. *Studies in Heraclitus*. Zürich: Hildesheim, 1995.
- Emlyn-Jones, C. J. "Heraclitus and the Identity of Opposites." *Phronesis*. Vol 21, Number 2, 1976. 89-114.
- George, Marie I. "What Wisdom is According to Heraclitus the Obscure." *Lyceum*. Vol. 5, No. 1, 1993. 1-20.
- Guthrie, W. K. C. "Flux and Logos in Heraclitus." from W. K. C. Guthrie. *A History of Greek Philosophy*. Vol. I: *the Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962. Reprinted in *The Presocratics*. Edited by Alexander Mourelatos. New York: Anchor Press, 1974. 197-213.
- Joukovsky, Françoise. *Le Feu et le Fleuve*. Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1991.
- Kirk, G.S. "Natural Change in Heraclitus." *Mind*. Vol. 60, 1961. 35-42.
- Kirk, G.S. "The Problem of Cratylus." *The American Journal of Philology*. Vol. 72, No. 3 1951. 225-253.
- Kirk, G.S., J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Snell, Bruno. "Die Sprache Heraklits." *Hermes*. Vol. 61, No. 4, 1926. 353-381.
- Vlastos, Gregory. "Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies." *Classical Philology*. Vol. 42, No. 3, 1947. 156-178
- Vlastos, Gregory. "On Heraclitus." *The American Journal of Philology*. Vol. 76, No. 4, 1995, 337-368.