

Heraclitus

Selected fragments

(Fragments numbered by Kirk, Raven and Scholfield, unless otherwise stated)

Heraclitus of Ephesus, whose exact dates are a matter of speculation was thought to be in his prime around 500 BCE. He is said to have been born to a wealthy family, but that he gave up his wealth and went to live a frugal and hermit-like life in the mountains outside the city of his birth. He was known, even in his own time as "the obscure" because his teachings were extremely compressed, and delivered with little explanation: our own view of him is even more obscured because of the fragmentary character of his surviving works. It has been suggested that he may have not even have written anything at all, and that his teachings were entirely oral – although this goes against the testimony of Sextus Empiricus (2nd century CE).

His metaphysics and cosmology centred themselves on the idea of change, and the fact that all change is a matter of something moving between two opposites – and thus that Strife rules over everything: in other words, that reality is held in a constant state of flux by the tensions that hold the extremes from flying apart. This view spills over into his views on human learning and contribute to the early outworking of dialectic where judgements are subject to questions and testing. Our discussions will go some way to exploring this initial movement towards a systematic understanding of dialectic which flowers within the Platonic tradition.

* * * * *

Heraclitus says somewhere that everything gives way and nothing is stable, and in likening things to the flowing of a river he says that one cannot step twice into the same river. (215, from Plato's *Cratylus* 402a)

* * * * *

Towards Dialectic

Section 1 – our ordinary condition

"Of the Logos* which is as I describe it men always prove to be uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when once they have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Logos men are like people of no experience, even when they experience such words and deeds as I explain, when I distinguish each thing according to its constitution and declare how it is; but the rest of men fail to notice what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do when they sleep. (197)

* *Note: the word Logos is notoriously difficult to translate – it means word, reason, account, measure, principle, and so on.*

For the waking there is one common world, but when asleep each person turns away to a private one. (Fragment found in Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Superstition* 166c)

For this reason it is necessary to follow what is common. But although the logos is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding. (198)

One ought not to act and speak like people asleep. (Fragment found in Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 4.43)

Of all those whose *logoi* I have heard, no one reaches the point of recognizing that what is wise is set apart from all. (Diels/Kranz fr. 22b108)

* * * * *

Section 2 – our own constitution

I searched for myself. (249)

Everyone has the potential for self-knowledge and sound thinking. (Diels/Kranz fr. 31)

The things I rate highly are those which are accessible to sight, hearing, apprehension. (197)

Eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men if they have souls which cannot understand their language. (198)

You will not be able to discover the limits of soul on your journey, even if you walk every path; so deep is the principle it contains. (235)

The soul has a self-increasing logos. (Fragment found in Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.180)

Thinking (*phronein*) is common to all. (Fragment found in Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.179)

Men who are lovers of wisdom must be inquirers into many things indeed. (Fragment found in Clement, *Miscellanies* 5.140.5)

Human nature has no insight, but divine nature has it. (208)

* * * * *

Section 3 – what lies underneath the surface

An unapparent connection (harmonia) is stronger than an apparent one. (210)

What is opposed brings together; the finest harmony [harmonia] is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be [or, “occurs”] in accordance with strife. (Fragment found in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.2 1155b4)

Those who seek gold dig up much earth but find little. (Fragment found in Clement, *Miscellanies* 4.4.2)

Let us not make random conjectures about the greatest matters. (Fragment found in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.73)

* * * * *

Section 4 – the one embraces the many

The road up and the road down are one and the same. (203)

The true nature of a thing tends to hide itself. (211)

They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and lyre. (212)

Things taken together are whole and not whole, <something that is> being brought together and brought apart, in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity and out of a unity all things. (206)

* * * * *

Section 5 – the dialectic hunt

Those who speak with understanding (nous) must rely firmly on what is common to all as a city must rely on [its?] law, and much more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law; for it has as much power as it wishes and is sufficient for all and is still left over. (253)

For many, in fact all that come upon them, do not understand such things, nor when they have noticed them do they know them, but they seem to themselves <to do so>. (Fragment found in Clement, *Miscellanies* 2.8.1)

They are at odds with the logos, with which above all they are in continuous contact, and the things they meet every day appear strange to them. (Diels/Kranz fr. 22b72)

Unless he hopes for the unhoped for, he will not find it, since it is not to be hunted out and is impassable (*aporon* sometimes translated as *trackless*). (213)

Listening not to me, but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one. (199)

* * * * *

The extant fragments are presented in several standard works; in English translation that of Kirk, Raven and Schofield is the most widely available (Cambridge UP); but a more recent exploration of Heraclitus and the other early Greek philosophers is Waterfield's *The First Philosophers* (Oxford Paperbacks) – the fragments here are mainly drawn from this edition or from *A Presocratic Reader*, tr. McKirahan and Patricia Curd