



## **Heraclitus**

**[Ephesus,  
around 500  
BC]**

Heraclitus lived around 500 BC in the city of Ephesus in Ionia, Asia Minor. He became famous as the "flux and fire" philosopher for his proverbial utterance: "All things are flowing." Coming from an eminent aristocratic family, Heraclitus is the first nobleman in the cabinet of Greek philosophers. He introduced important new perspectives into Greek thought and produced a book of which his followers said that it is hard to read.

"They say that Euripides gave Socrates a copy of Heraclitus' book and asked him what he thought of it. He replied: "What I understand is splendid; and I think what I don't understand is so too - but it would take a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it." (Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Philosophers, II 22).

In spite of the difficulties, Heraclitus was admired by his contemporaries for the theory of flux, which influenced many generations of philosophers after him. Judging from his writings,

Heraclitus doesn't appear to be a complaisant character. Not only does he condemn all of his philosophic predecessors, but his contempt for mankind leads him to think that dullness and stupidity are innate human traits.

He repeatedly lets fly at mankind in general and in particular scolds at those who do not share his opinion. Here is a taste of it: "The Ephesians would do well to hang themselves, every grown man of them, and leave the city to the beardless lads; for they have to cast out Hermorodus, the best man among them [...]" There is only Teutamus being saved from despise of whom he says that he is "of more account than the rest." Investigating the reason for the praise one finds that Teutamus had said that "most men are bad."

As it might be expected, Heraclitus believed in war. He said: "War is father of all, king of all. Some it makes gods, some it makes men, some it makes slaves, some free." And: "We must realize that war is universal, and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife." Now, if this sounds like Nietzsche, it doesn't come as a surprise, in fact Nietzsche had been a great admirer of Heraclitean philosophy.

Rigid moralism is also found in Heraclitus' ethics, which may be described as disdainful asceticism. He prays to refrain from alcohol: "A man, when he gets drunk, is

lead by a beardless lad, tripping, knowing not where he steps, having his soul moist." Heraclitus praises the power obtained through self-mastery, and despises the passions that distract men from their chief ambition, self-purification: "It is not good for men to get all that they wish to get. Whatever our desire wishes to get, it purchases at the cost of soul."

In the end, Heraclitus became a hermit, leaving the city and living in the mountains where he fed on plants and herbs. Because of this he contracted dropsy and was forced to return to the town. He asked the doctors in his riddling fashion if they could change a rainstorm into a draught. When they failed to understand him, he buried himself in a byre, hoping that the dropsy would be vaporized by the heat of the dung. But he met with no success even by this means and died at the age of sixty.

Knowing Heraclitus' personality may help us to put his philosophical theories into the proper light. Let us look at the idea of flux and fire. Before Heraclitus, the world of the ancient Greeks had been fairly static. The Olympic Gods were eternal as the world they were gazing down upon. Everything was firmly embedded into an indivisible universe. The common principles of nature were perceived as everlasting and unchangeable, although what mankind knew about them was certainly limited.

The Greeks before Heraclitus focused on the essence of things, its nature and being, which they deemed unchangeable. In contrast, Heraclitus said: "You cannot step into the same river twice, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you." This simple sentence expresses the gist of his philosophy, meaning that the river isn't actually the same at two different points in time. - It is a radical position and Heraclitus was the to conceive it. He looked at everything being in the state of permanent flux and, hence, reality being merely a succession of transitory states. He told people that nothing is the same now as it was before, and thus nothing what is now will be the same tomorrow. With this he planted the idea of impermanence into Greek thought, and indeed, after Heraclitus Greek philosophy was not the same anymore.

Heraclitus held that fire is the primordial element out of which everything else arises. Fire is the origin of all matter; through it things come into being and pass away. Fire itself is the symbol of perpetual change because it transforms a substance into another substance without being a substance itself: "This world, which is the same for all, no one of gods or men has made; but it was ever, is now, and ever shall be eternal fire." and: "Fire lives the death of air, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of earth, earth

that of water. Measures of it kindling and measures of it going out." (Diogenes Laertius)

Like Anaximander, Heraclitus sees a cosmic balance in the struggle of the elements, water, air, fire, earth. Due to the eternal transmutation of forms, which are made of the elements, no single element ever gains predominance. This implies that Heraclitus thinks of fire as a non-destructive; but merely transforming power. The process of transformation does not happen by chance, but is, according to Heraclitus, the product of God's reason -logos-, which is identical to the cosmic principles.

When Heraclitus speaks of God, he doesn't mean the Greek gods, neither a personal entity. Instead he thinks that God is living in every soul and even in every material thing on earth. The fiery element is the expression of God in everything, thus he is in every sense a pantheist.

Another of Heraclitus' main teachings can be called the "unity of opposites". The unity of opposites means that opposites cannot exist without each other - there is no day without night, no summer without winter, no warm without cold, no good without bad. To put it in his own words: "It is wise to agree that all things are one. In differing it agrees with itself, a backward-turning connection, like that of a bow and a lyre. The path up and down is one

the same." Comparing the convergence of opposites with the contrary tension of a bow and a lyre is perfectly in harmony with his theory of flux and fire.

From a modern perspective it seems trivial to state that opposites are the same, yet to the Greek it was not entirely obvious. Hot and cold can both be expressed as a degree of temperature, dark and bright as a degree of light. Nonetheless, the Heraclitean theory of perpetual flux and universal transformation goes far beyond what was obvious to the ancients:

"Science, like philosophy, has sought to escape from the doctrine of perpetual flux by finding some permanent substratum amid changing phenomena. Chemistry seemed to satisfy this desire. It was found that fire, which appears to destroy, only transmutes: elements are recombined, but each atom that existed before combustion still exists when the process is completed.

Accordingly it was supposed that atoms are indestructible, and that all change in the physical world consists merely in rearrangement of persistent elements. This view prevailed until the discovery of radioactivity, when it was found that atoms could disintegrate. Nothing daunted, the physicist invented new and smaller units, called electrons and protons, out of which atoms were composed; and

these units were supposed, for a few years, to have the indestructibility formerly attributed to the atoms.

Unfortunately it seemed that protons and electrons could meet and explode, forming, not new matter, but a wave of energy spreading through the universe with the velocity of light. Energy had to replace matter as what is permanent. But energy, unlike matter, is not a refinement of the common-sense notion of a 'thing'; it is merely a characteristic of a physical process. It might be fancifully identified with the Heraclitean fire, but it is the burning, not what burns. 'What burns' has disappeared from modern physics." (Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 1945)