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Time, the Cosmos, and the Soul in Heraclitus

It is not possible to step into the same river twice, according to Heraclitus.
—PLUTARCH

All aphorisms must therefore be read twice.
—GILLES DELEUZE

HERACLITUS'S PSYCHOCOSMOLOGY

We saw in the last chapter how Parmenides forges a metaphorical "route of inquiry" to true knowledge and uses language to bind and bound metaphysical reality. For Heraclitus, by contrast, both the route and its destination are boundless.

> ψυχῆς πείρατα ἰὼν οὐκ ἂν ἐξεύροιο, πᾶσαν ἐπιπορευόμενος ὁδόν· οὕτω βαθὺν λόγον ἔχει. (B45/D98)
>
> Going to the limits (*peirata*) of the *psukhē* you could not discover them, although you travel (*epiporeuomenos*) every road, so profound is the account (*logon*) it holds.

In this fragment it is as if the Parmenidean traveler falls off a cliff: the *poros* becomes aporia as the road opens beneath our feet onto an abyss.[1] *Logos* is the measure of that abyss. Simultaneously the principle of coherence of Heraclitus's cosmos and the site of a necessary and generative incoherence, *logos* is a bottomless paradox and the expression of a reality that is itself profoundly paradoxical.

Epigraph: From *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, by Gilles Deleuze, translated by Hugh Tomlinson, 31. Copyright © 2006. Reprinted by permission of Columbia University Press.

1. Betegh (2009) explicates well the textual and interpretive difficulties of B45/D98. *Bathus* usually connotes marine depths, but it can also indicate height. See Porter (2016, 531; 2020, 231) on the spatial disorientation of a metaphysical perspective, and compare B60/D51: "The road up, down: one and the same." The metaphor of the road recurs at B18/D37 and B71/R54; in both cases it figures aporia.

In the depths of this aporia Heraclitus locates the *psukhē*. In *The Discovery of the Mind*, Bruno Snell, citing this fragment, credits Heraclitus with devising a "new concept of the soul."[2] No longer just a spectral emanation of the dead (as it was in Homer), with Heraclitus, Snell claims, the *psukhē* becomes properly psychological: an autonomous entity within the individual that presages (in Snell's teleological account) the modern subject.[3] But Heraclitus's *psukhē* is far from the modern psyche, as we shall see. Closely associated with breath and vitality, it denotes the life of the individual and is intimately bound up with the life of the cosmos.[4] Heraclitus's cosmology describes a dynamic cycle of elemental transformation, from fire to water to earth and back again. A material element like fire, water, or earth, the *psukhē* is part of this cosmic process, and if it has no ends (*peirata*, B45/D98) that is because it revolves in an elemental circle of which "the beginning and end (*peras*) are in common" (B103/D54). To seek the limits of the *psukhē* is thus to explore the profundity of the cosmos as a whole.[5] This assimilation of the *psukhē* to the physical universe would seem to leave no room for Snell's autonomous soul as the site of individual experience, memory, and self-consciousness. The *psukhē*'s measure (*logos*) would seem to be identical to that of the cosmos, and Heraclitean psychology to be cosmology by another name.

And yet, boundless as it is, the *psukhē* is not precisely coterminous with the cosmos. Its divergence, I shall propose, arises in relation to the experience of time. The measure of the cosmos is boundless, but the human journey is finite, and while the cosmic cycle revolves forever, our lives are brief and delimited by death. The difference between cosmic eternity (*aei*) and the finite human life span (*aiōn*) means that the human subject is always out of step with the rhythm of the universe. This chapter examines the asynchrony between *aei* and *aiōn* and its ramifications for Heraclitus's cosmology and his psychology. Heraclitus attempts to align human understanding with the unchanging structure of the cosmos and in this way both to reveal and to secure the cohesion of a universe in which opposites merge and "all things are one" (B50/D46). Yet even as he sings that "unseen harmony" (B54/

2. Snell 1953, 17. Cf. Reinhardt 1959, 201.

3. Snell 1953, 17–22. Snell's linear trajectory from the physical *psukhē* of Homer to the psychological soul of Socrates is followed by Furley (1956); Nussbaum (1972a); and Robb (1986), and critiqued by Claus (1981); Holmes (2010, 5–9, 29–30); and Sassi (2018, 113), who nevertheless follows its general lines, (110–38). Many scholars identify in Heraclitus a new conception of the *psukhē* but they differ on its precise nature. Some, like Kahn (1979, 107, 127–29), stress rational cognition; others, like Laks (2018, 253–54), the controlling function (cf. Nussbaum 1972a); others still the capacity for self-consciousness or self-transcendence (Long's [1992] "objective self").

4. As forcefully argued by Porter (2023, 2024). I agree with Porter that these two are thoroughly intermeshed for Heraclitus, but am also interested here in the difference he preserves between them, the slight interval between individual life and life in general or between *psukhai* and *psukhē* (B36/D100).

5. Kahn 1979, 14–15, 116, 118, 119, 122–23, 127–30, 252; Hussey 1982; and Long 1992, 271. Many adopt Reinhardt's (1959, 196–201) microcosm-macrocosm homology of self and cosmos, e.g. Dilcher (1995, 90–98); and Sandywell (1996, 267–75).

D50), Heraclitus also sustains a note of dissonance in the interval between human time and cosmic. This asynchrony is felt as an occasional disruption, a stutter or syncopation, in his fragments' formal symmetry. In these moments, I propose, Heraclitus preserves a space for the emergence of the individual psyche in its difference from the material cosmos and for the flourishing—ephemeral though it may be—of human life.

These opposing lines of force toward coherence and incoherence form the "back-turned harmony" (B51/D49) that characterizes Heraclitus's *kosmos* both as a unified physical and metaphysical order and as an aesthetic order the integral beauty of which is manifested in Heraclitus's writing.[6] Heraclitus is the most brilliant stylist of the early Greek philosophers. Although he composed in prose, "he wrote many things poetically (*poiētikōs*)," as one ancient commentator observed, and indeed his fragments are markedly poetic in their vivid imagery, rich internal resonances, riddling ambiguity, and intricate verbal patterning.[7] These effects are not merely cosmetic. Instead, they both mimetically represent and materially instantiate the *logos* that is the deepest structure of reality. Unlike Parmenides, for whom (as we saw in the last chapter) language and being circle one another in a tense intimacy, for Heraclitus language is a manifestation of and model for the systemic order of the cosmos.[8] Speaking in unison with what he calls the "common" (*xunos*) *logos* (B2/D2), Heraclitus's own *logos* seems to enact the concord that binds the universe, the principle that "what differs with itself agrees with itself" (*homologeei*, literally "speaks the same *logos*," B51/D49).[9] But if what differs with itself agrees, what agrees with itself also differs, and these two *logoi* never fully harmonize. Further, as we shall see, the cosmic *logos* never fully harmonizes with itself. This metaphysical discord, even as it creates a rift in Heraclitus's unified cosmos, also produces the space in which his philosophical inquiry unfolds. *Logos* thus emerges as both a principle of coherence and a principle of incoherence, both

6. As noted above, chapter 1, n. 25, the word *kosmos* originally meant an aesthetic or military ordering and only later came to refer to the universe, perhaps first in Heraclitus. On Heraclitus's use of *kosmos,* see further Kirk 1954, 311–16; Kahn 1960, 224–27; Finkelberg 2017, 58–64; and Schofield 2019, 70–72.

7. Suda H.472 (< A1a/R11). Ancient judgments on his style are collected at Laks-Most R5–11; cf. Mouraviev 2002, 9–26. Kahn (1979, 7–9) compares his style to the odes of his contemporaries Pindar and Aeschylus; his commentary emphasizes the ambiguity and linguistic density of Heraclitus's fragments and the resonances between them (see esp. 87–95). On Heraclitus's poetic style, see further Deichgräber 1963; Lilja 1968; Hölscher 1974; Dilcher 1995, 133–44; Most 1999, 357–59; Bernabé 2009; Sassi 2018, 98–109; and the exhaustive poetological study of Mouraviev 2002, 2006.

8. Kahn 1979, 107, 123–24, 131.

9. On the unity of Heraclitus's own *logos* and *logos* as the structure of the cosmos, see e.g. Verdenius 1966, 93; Robinson 1991, 2009; Voigtländer 1995; Hülsz 2013, 292; Johnstone 2014; and Lebedev 2017. Mourelatos (2008b) terms this a "*logos*-textured world" and sees Heraclitus as the first to articulate it. Ramnoux (1968), by contrast, emphasizes the uncertain relation between words and things in Heraclitus's thought (e.g. 67–99).

the condition of possibility and the condition of impossibility of his philosophy—a *bathus logos* indeed!

The paradoxical nature of *logos* suggests that dissonance and difference are not incidental to Heraclitus's philosophical discourse but ineradicable, necessary, and productive. Aristotle, as we saw in the Introduction, identifies univocity—the singularity of meaning, the law of noncontradiction—as the foundational principle of philosophical inquiry (*Metaph.* 4.4 1006b7–13). But Heraclitus delights in flouting the law of noncontradiction: the way up is the way down (B60/D51); day and night are one (B57/D25a, B106/D25b); mortals are immortal, immortals mortal (B62/D70).[10] Perhaps we might imagine that, if we ponder them long enough, his paradoxes will yield to some sort of *doxa* or univocal good sense and his riddles resolve into a more fundamental and unitary meaning. Heraclitus's own metaphors of depth and concealment might lead us to expect that beneath the puzzling surface of things we may discover the singular truth of a nature that "tends to hide itself" (B123/D35).[11] But "those who search for gold dig much earth and find little" (B22/D39), and paradox, as we shall see, is not a mere surface effect of Heraclitus's discourse but part of the deepest structure of his cosmos: it is paradox all the way down.[12] If the *xunos logos*—the rational structure of reality—is itself paradoxical, then Heraclitus's riddles will never yield a common sense (*xunos logos*). Instead, they produce sensations, effects more corporeal and affective than cognitive.[13] Through these sensations, Heraclitus allows us to experience the coherence of

10. See further B8/D62, B10/D47, B48/D53, B51/D49, B59/D52, B67/D48, B80/D63, B88/D68. Bernabé (2009) provides a taxonomy of such polar expressions. Aristotle reports that "some think" Heraclitus breaches the principle of noncontradiction (*Metaph.* 4.3 1005b23–26, 4.7 1012a24–26, 11.5 1062a30–b11). Aristotle does not say whether he is among these (Rapp 2017); but Barnes (1982, 69–81) clearly is. Heraclitus's unity of opposites has been variously understood: see, e.g., Emlyn-Jones 1976; Hussey 1999, 93–98. Stokes (1971, 89–100) lays out the interpretive possibilities clearly. For Mackenzie (1988) the frustration such contradictions produce is designed to establish the law of noncontradiction elenchically; cf. Cook 1975. In the unity of opposites, most scholars lay the stress on the former term, seeing oppositions as merely apparent. Notable exceptions are Bollack and Wismann 1972; and Porter 2024.

11. Cf. B54/D50, B93/D41, B18/D37. Heraclitus was compared in antiquity to a "Delian diver" (Diog. Laert. 2.22 < A4/R5a), and his homey similes suggest an underlying reality latent within everyday objects, from bows and lyres (B51/D49, B48/D53) to carding combs (B59/D52) and even lice (B56/D22). Note also the language of *lēthē* (B1/D1, B16/D83, B71/R45), which Heidegger (1975, 102–23) examines as a trope of concealment; concealment and emergence are central to his reading of Heraclitus (Heidegger 2018, 35–135). The paragon of the hermeneutics of concealment is Mouraviev (2002), for whom Heraclitus's poetics constitutes a "code" (401) that, once reconstructed, allows the scholar to decipher his vision of reality.

12. In Hölscher's oft-quoted words, "His language, too, must be one of paradox, simile, and riddle, precisely insofar as it seeks to proclaim the essence of what is. . . . His speech is paradoxical because his truth is paradoxical" (1974, 233–34). Cf. Hölscher 1968, 136–41; Gallop 1989; and Porter 2024.

13. I am playing on Deleuze's (1990, 74–81) concept of paradox as non-sense that reverses both good sense and common sense and of sensation as affective and corporeal apperception (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 163–99).

the cosmos but also its incoherence, a gap not only between human reason and the cosmic *logos* but within that metaphysical *logos* itself. Heraclitus does not fully close that gap but instead holds it open as the asymptotic limit of the philosophical journey: "Going to the limits of the *psukhē* you could not discover them . . . so profound is the *logos* it holds."

Incoherence is thus a significant feature of Heraclitus's fragmentary text as a whole. Probably originally disseminated in written form, Heraclitus's work has come down to us only in fragments, of course.[14] This is true of all early Greek philosophers, but in Heraclitus this historical accident seems to reiterate a deliberate aesthetic choice. The philosopher's famed "brevity" and a relative lack of connective particles suggest that the fragments were never part of a continuous stream of connected prose and thus that the enigmatic aphorism was not a byproduct of preservation but the primary expressive unit of Heraclitus's thought.[15] Aphorism is by definition incoherent, "separated off" (*aphorizein*). This generic incoherence is emphasized in Diels-Kranz's edition by the pointedly arbitrary arrangement of the fragments: exceptionally, Diels gave up on logical ordering and simply listed fragments alphabetically by source author, from Aëtius to Tzetzes (with the exception of the first two, which ancient sources place at the opening of the book). Repeated images—fire, rivers, sleep—and marked verbal and structural resonances bind the dispersed fragments, promising to make the book an instance of the principle that "all things are one."[16] "Like a sweeping at random of things scattered (*hōsper sarma eikē kekhumenōn*) is the most beautiful *kosmos,*" says Heraclitus (B124/D60). But just as Heraclitus's paradoxes never resolve into a univocal *doxa*, so his fragments never cohere into a singular doctrine or dogma. To say this is not to chastise Heraclitus for failure to rectify his inconsistencies, but rather to posit incoherence as a positive and productive feature of his thought.[17] The ambiguous placement in this fragment of the adverb "at random" (*eikē*)—a

14. Diog. Laert. 9.6 (< A1/P13) reports that Heraclitus deposited his book in the temple of Artemis, and the complex structure of his writing seems to require a text that can be read and reread: see Kahn 1983; Sassi 2018, 98–109. But as Robb (1983b, 182–201) notes, his prose is full of aural effects, and I agree with Deichgräber (1963, 5–13) that the text was meant to be read aloud, and more than once (cf. Havelock 1966, 55; and Robb 1983b, 183).

15. Hölscher 1974, 236–38; Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983, 184; Robb 1983b; Hussey 1999, 88; and Most 1999, 357; contra, Barnes 1983, 97–105; and Finkelberg 2017, 33–38. Diogenes (Diog. Laert. 9.7 < A1/R5c) praises the "brevity and dignity" of his style, while Demetrius (*Eloc.* 191–92 < A4/R7) condemns the obscurity produced "when the whole is asyndetic and dispersed." Theophrastus's diagnosis of "melancholia" (i.e. inconsistency) may speak to the same qualities (Diog. Laert. 9.6 < A1/R5c). There were contemporary models for Heraclitus's discontinuous style in the maxims of the Seven Sages and the enigmatic pronouncements of the Delphic oracle: see Granger 2004; and Sassi 2018, 103–6.

16. Kahn 1979, 90.

17. *Pace* Barnes 1982, 57–81. The text of B124/D60 is uncertain, and *sarma* ("sweeping") is Diels's emendation.

stylistic quirk to which we will return—preserves randomness within the beautiful order of the cosmos and suggests that it is precisely that randomness that accounts for its beauty. In reading the fragments of Heraclitus we come to appreciate the *kosmos* of incoherence as a philosophical as well as a poetic principle and to sense the productive force of asynchrony both for philosophy and for human life.

AEI AND *AIŌN*

The non-synchrony of human time and cosmic time is established in the very first fragment.

> τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος ἀεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπείροισιν ἐοίκασι, πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, ὁκοίων ἐγὼ διηγεῦμαι κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔχει. τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσιν, ὅκωσπερ ὁκόσα εὕδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται. (B1/D1)
>
> Of this *logos* that is always (*aei*) mortals are always uncomprehending, both before they have heard it and when they have first heard it. Though all things come about in accordance with this *logos* they are like people without experience even when they experience such words and deeds as I expound, distinguishing each thing according to its nature and saying how it is. But other men are not aware of what they do when they are awake, just as they forget what they do when asleep.

This book begins with the word, *logos*. Appearing at the opening as a kind of authorial *sphragis*, "this *logos*" seems to refer to the work we are about to read, the "words and deeds" the philosopher will expound.[18] But in its eternal being this *logos* also signifies the structure of the physical and metaphysical universe of which Heraclitus's own *logos* will be an account. A single word operating on two different planes at once, this equivocal *logos* makes for a perfect Heraclitean opening. But does its ambivalence unite opposites—"all things are one"—or does it bespeak a schism within the fundamental structure of the universe?

This question unfolds as a matter of time. The *logos* occupies a temporality of eternal being: it is always (*eontos aei*). By contrast, humans live in the time of becoming (*ginontai*). This is a temporality of before and after, of transformation (from inexperience to experience and incomprehension to comprehension) and temporal rhythms (sleeping and waking). But the ambiguous placement of *aei*

18. Kahn (1979, 97) notes that an introductory reference to the author's own *logos* is typical of Ionian prose. Sextus Empiricus (*Math.* 7.132–133), who quotes the fragment, tells us that it came at the opening of the book; see also Arist. *Rh.* 3.5 1407b15–16 (< A4/R6). The passage was likely preceded by a statement of the author's identity, such as Diels-Kranz suggest ("Heraclitus son of Bloson of Ephesus teaches the following"). Dilcher (1995, 11–13) discusses the parallels.