

*Vincit qui patitur.*<sup>1</sup>

# Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>

Heraclitus

## The Problem of Identity and Change



Heraclitus and the Eleatic philosophers<sup>3</sup> were concerned with the metaphysical question: What is the one and how does it become the many? That is:

How does the basic unity which we rationally assume (we assume there is a basic unity in the universe) change into the diversity that is encountered in everyday experience? This diversity is found in our experience of hot and cold, light and dark, different textures and so on. How is it that we perceive this and how does it relate to the assumption of an underlying unity?

The second question they considered was epistemological: how do we relate the unity we assume with the the many that we perceive?

Lastly they asked, what is the nature of motion, change or becoming?

These are difficult concepts so first go back and check that you understand the meaning of: metaphysical and epistemological. Modern scientists hanker after a “theory of everything.” We do have a sense that there is an underlying unity or “oneness” to life. At the same time we do perceive the world around us as diverse. Things do change – an apple rots, a cup of tea gets cold and so on. How can there be change if everything is “one”?

Heraclitus (Hair-a-KLIY-tus) (544BC 484BC)

The works of Heraclitus come to us in fragments but we know something of his character. He disdained the masses of common people and considered that most people did not bother to think. He considered they were dupes to their senses and not sufficiently critically-minded He was also scornful of their their political order and the way they lived their lives. This is not untypical of philosophers in general throughout the ages. They are often arrogant. The Christian should be humble because everything we have comes from God – even our insights into life. In Heraclitus' case it also explains why he was willing (as you will see below) to come to conclusions that were so contrary to common sense! He was not bothered by this because he thought the masses were stupid.

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1 He who perseveres conquers.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnw.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

3 See next lesson.

His ideas were so much better than the common herd!

For Heraclitus the unity of the world was explained by the fact that everything is fire. This idea seems not to be like that of Thales (everything is water) or Anaximenes (everything is air) As far as we can know he meant we could think of it as fire – rather like a figure of speech. Fire is not a material thing like air or water. Fire is something that is always changing yet always the same. He was trying to say that everything is changing but it is changing by degrees, by measure, in an orderly way. The orderliness means it does not seem to us as if things are changing. Of course some changes are obvious – we change our clothes for instance. Yet, the shirt I take off does not stop being the same shirt when I take it off – it is the same. Over time the shirt may eventually wear out. This is change yet it does not seem to change all the time. He went on to theorise that everything – a table, a rock, whatever it – is changing. His famous saying was: "You can't step in the same river twice." What we call the same river is always changing. So it is, said Heraclitus, with everything in life. The change is by measure and there is a pattern to the change so we do not pay attention to it. He gave an analogy of a box falling through space. If we were in such a box and there were no windows we would not know we were falling through space because we would all be falling at the same rate. Heraclitus thought that because things change *by measure* this gives the illusion of permanence.

Heraclitus called his concept of eternal fire a *logos* – λόγος. This Greek word is found in the New Testament where it means "word" and is in John 1:1 a name for Jesus Christ. Λόγος in Greek does not always a spoken or verbal thing but can stand for a concept, an idea, a reason or a matter of thought. We see the broader use of the word in English in words like **biology**, **geology**, **cosmology** and so on. Heraclitus identified God with the λόγος. He thought that the world order *was* God. Disdaining the popular Greek religion of his day with its contemptible gods he thought the masses were so stupid they made gods after their own image. Instead he proposed that all is flux but it is a λόγος which is God. This λόγος is something, he thought, which controls things, makes them understandable and gives a reason for why things happen. Everything is changing but there is a reason that characterises it all. For Heraclitus this God is indifferent to human notions of justice, compassion, equity and love and the natural world is not concerned with your feelings about right and wrong. Since it is a matter of reason it is something we can discover with the use of our own thinking. Heraclitus is therefore the beginning of the idea of natural law and natural religion – a kind of pantheism.

Heraclitus' λόγος is very different to the Christian λόγος. In the New Testament the λόγος is not an immanent (present throughout the universe and identical with it) force that is indifferent to human emotions but a transcendent (beyond) personal Being. "In the beginning was the logos and this logos was Jesus Christ" this is a historical person who is identified the reason for everything that exists. Jesus Christ is the one who gives order to reality and He is the one who is interested in justice and compassion. Heraclitus' contrasting pantheistic and morally neutral logos is a feature of non Christian and heretical thinking throughout Western thought.

These ideas do not match up with the common sense which Heraclitus so disdained. As Christians we can understand that both unity and diversity are present in the universe because this reflects the character of the God who created it. He is the Trinity the ultimate unity and diversity.

In the next lesson we will look at how the Eleatic philosophers answered the questions Heraclitus considered.