

## HERACLITUS AND *LOGOS* – AGAIN

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ABSTRACT:

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Another paper on *logos* in Heraclitus? The mind quails. But Delian divers, it seems, are still called for, if we are to judge by the continuing controversy over the word's various possible meanings. Among the many I might mention are 'operation of thought' (Wundt), 'meaning' (Snell), truth (Boeder), insight (Jaeger), Fate (Spengler – of course), das Legen (Heidegger), *Weltsinn*, or *die ewige Wahrheit* (Neesse, Gigon), *die geistige Welt-Macht* (Neesse again),<sup>1</sup> along with 'value', 'norm' and 'principle', and old faithfuls like 'God', 'fire', and 'war', and a raft of terms like 'statement', 'proposition', 'account', 'word', 'law' (the preference of Marcovich), and the like. Then add to these 'measure' (Freeman), and 'formula' or 'plan' (Kirk), a formula or plan which he finishes up equating with 'structure', a structure he finds 'corporeal' in nature;<sup>2</sup> and no doubt many more that have escaped my attention.

The technique I shall be adopting will be that of the 'process of residues' beloved of John Stuart Mill, in which I shall do all that I can to point out the impossibilities and high improbabilities running in the pack, in the hope that the residue which survives my strictures lies somewhere on a spectrum ranging from low improbability to low possibility to – dare we even mention it? – moderate to high possibility.

Let me lay out my hermeneutical assumptions at once, so that you can start sharpening your weapons without further ado.

– I shall be talking about the use of the word *logos* in DK fragments 1, 2, 31b, 39, 45, 50, 87, 108, and 115, but especially 1, 2 and 50.

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<sup>1</sup> I draw gratefully for this list on Gottfried Neesse (1982, 60 ff).

<sup>2</sup> G. S. Kirk (1954, 69–70).

– I shall attempt to use as my evidence nothing but Greek-language sources known to be antecedent to, or contemporaneous with, Heraclitus.

– I shall attempt to take note of what passes for a context, among ancient commentators, for various DK texts, and comment on what I think may or not prove valuable about it. In so doing, I shall attempt to distinguish what I **shall (call?)** ‘primary’ from ‘secondary’ contexts. The latter are the easiest to pin down, being simply the place in which we find statements that have settled down as B fragments in Diels-Kranz, and this place can be fat or thin, depending on whether we feel inclined to quote a page or more around the quotation, or simply the phrase ‘and Heraclitus also says’, or something similar.

Primary context is what purports to be the Heraclitean context for the secondary context. This will be of particular interest to me, especially if it demonstrates that our source clearly has in front of him a text of Heraclitus which might turn out to be all or at least a large part of what Heraclitus actually wrote (or uttered). It will be of even more interest if our source looks as though he is using this primary context as some sort of guide to any interpretation he happens to be offering of what is going on.

– I shall do my level best to bring a minimum number of personal assumptions to the reading of the various fragments, knowing full well how difficult this is, but still shooting for it as an objective.

– In particular I shall try to avoid reading the texts through the lens of Stoicism, or Gnosticism, or Philonism, or early Christian apologetics, or Hegelianism, or Marxism, or Heideggerianism, or contemporary Anglo-American logico-linguistic pre-occupations, or existentialism, or post-modernism, or any other fashionable contemporary –ism. This may prove impossible, of course, but I just want to signal here that I plan to give it a good try anyway.

Let me begin with a word on the DK ordering of the fragments. It’s an absurdity, of course, but a helpful absurdity, I think, because it at least offers us a totally neutral working space in which to operate; the case has not been pre-judged for the reader by a contemporary editor’s own particular ordering. So I shall cheerfully refer simply to the DK text from this point on.

A second point I wish to touch on at the outset is the constant use of transliteration of the word *logos* by translators rather than a translation. This, it seems to me, simply further confuses an already confusing situation, and signals a putative ‘strangeness’ to the term, when in fact it was a standard word (though not, admittedly, a common word) in the language. My point is that the first hearers of the word *logos* in Heraclitus’ book would not have found anything strange about the word as such, though they might well have finished up puzzled about what Heraclitus did with it.

So my instinct would be to offer what seems to be a viable translation of the word in any context, appending a footnote (ten pages long if necessary) to talk about nuances, on the grounds that the first hearers were hearing a standard word in their language, not a word that was foreign to them, in the way *logos* is clearly a foreign word to us.

Finally, to conclude these introductory comments, I would like to say a very brief word about the use of the word *logos* in fragments other than 1, 2 and 50, since I consider this a relatively unproblematic matter. All of them make sense, or some sort of sense, in terms of four standard translations of *logos*, statement, account, measure and proportion, and a mound of philological evidence from antecedent and contemporary sources corroborates this. So I take it that Heraclitus wants to say, among other things:

- Sea is poured forth <from earth> and is measured in the same proportion (*logos*) as existed before it became earth (fr. 31b)
- In Priene was born Bias, son of Teutamides, who <is> of more account (*logos*) than the rest < of his compatriots?> (fr. 39)
- One would never discover the limits of soul, should one traverse every road – so deep a measure (*logos*) does it possess (fr. 45)
- A stupid (sluggish?) person tends to become all worked up over every statement (*logos*) he hears (fr. 87)
- Of all those accounts (*logoi*) I have listened to, none gets to the point of recognizing that which is wise, set apart from all (fr. 108)
- Soul possesses a measure (or: proportion, *logos*) which increases itself (fr. 115).

The only point I would wish to make here is that all four senses share something basic and going back to the word's linguistic roots. That is to say, each can be formulated as a rational proposition. A measure, a proportion (or ratio), an account (in the sense of a reputation), and of course a statement are clearly grounded in our ability to describe the world in various ways, whether by using human language or a natural substitute for it, like arithmetic or geometry. They are all still firmly moored, like ships, to the word's focal meaning.

That said, I would begin, in fragment 1, (and, proleptically, in fragments 2 and 50) by translating *logos* as 'account' or some such word, and subjoin a lengthy footnote defending my choice. It would be my choice of the word *in those particular instances*, of course; the whole point of the footnote would be to indicate how other translations make better sense in other fragments, as I have just mentioned, and how translations *other than* 'account' might also make reasonable sense in *these* ones too, even if they are not my preference.

I choose 'account' because that was the word used by Ionian prose authors of the day when they came back from their travels (Hecataeus of Miletus, for example, or Ion of Chios),<sup>3</sup> and offered an account of what they had seen. Any hearer of Heraclitus' text would have naturally taken it this way until informed that perhaps there was more to it than that. As for being asked (fr. 50) to 'listen', not to Heraclitus himself but rather to 'the account', he would have naturally asked 'Whose account, if not yours?', since Heraclitus had unfortunately not made this clear. Had Heraclitus wanted to say 'My account', he could have said it with great clarity by saying *tou*

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<sup>3</sup> For the references see Charles H. Kahn (1979, 97).

*logou mou*. But he simply said *tou logou*, and the hearer's question remains in the air, in tantalizing suspension.

Are there any translations of the word *logos* in fragments 1, 2 and 50 as likely as, or better than, 'account'? On the assumption that these fragments contain the first uses, or very close to the first uses, of the word in Heraclitus' book, a 'primary context' point we learn very usefully from Sextus (*Adv. Math.* 7.132, 8.133), would say Probably No. But of course I would have to leave open the possibility that, in light of what might be said in further fragments, this opinion would need to be revised. Just as the first hearer of the book, if he were honest, would have had to do the same. At the back of my mind, among viable-looking alternates, would from the outset be 'description', 'story', and possibly even 'word' – provided it were being used in the sense of 'the word on the street' (where we are talking about the circulation of *talk* about things), or perhaps in the sense of word in the sentence 'I give you my word', but in no way in the sense of the word 'word' usually attributed to the author of the Fourth Gospel.

In the final analysis, however, I would reject the word 'word' as a translation, on the grounds that fragment 1 already contains an excellent word for 'word' – *epos* – and there is nothing to suggest that Heraclitus is using *logos* as a synonym of it.

And I would certainly have to reject a number of possibilities that seem to preclude any intelligible use of the word 'hear' or 'listen to'. So there seems to me no chance for Freeman's 'measure' or Kirk's 'structure'; we don't listen to measure or measures, and we certainly don't listen to structure or structures, corporeal or not.

As for Snell's 'meaning', or Marcovich's 'law', it can certainly be said that the *logos* of which Heraclitus speaks in fragments 1, 2 and 50 is *de facto* the law of the real, and is totally meaningful. But no reader hearing the word right at the beginning of Heraclitus' book could reasonably be expected to be aware of this at that early stage. What he thinks he knows is that he is listening to an account of something, whatever that account finishes up amounting to, and whoever, other than Heraclitus himself, turns out to be the proponent of the account.

So I plan to move on, in search of enlightenment, with the phrase 'Whose account?' goading me just a little, as Heraclitus' first hearers must have been goaded. When has an account ever been claimed to 'hold <true?> forever' (fr. 1), except perhaps in the case of an account of things uttered by some divinity? And what could possibly be made of the assertion that all things happen 'in accordance with this account' (*ibid.*)? Is the word 'account' starting to be used, right from the outset, in a way that is beginning to stretch its normal boundaries?

Fragment 2 certainly offers more information, if not enlightenment: the account now turns out to be 'common', glossed by Sextus as 'universal', and something we 'must follow'. But we are in difficulties with this statement right away; for many commentators it is simply a piece of moral exhortation by Sextus, and not the work of Heraclitus at all. It is also, as it stands, probably corrupt as a piece of Greek, and the crucial word '<common>' at the beginning is what looks like a necessary insertion of Bekker.

On the other hand, the locution ‘follow’ in the sense of ‘obey’ is an archaic one, and if the ‘account’ turns out to coincide with the ‘divine <law>’ of fragment 114, it might just be referring to an account which is to be thought of as prescriptive not just descriptive, and in each instance something of universal import. Or to put it a little differently, an account which, unlike other accounts we know of, has the force of deontological and physical universality. Leaving us, and I imagine, Heraclitus’ earliest readers too, with the question: are we talking here of the everlasting, ongoing formulation of this remarkable account by some divinity, and if so, which one? And if not, by what other competing entity?

Let us start with the putative competition, which would in reality amount only to one serious possibility, Heraclitus himself. This is the position adopted by Nussbaum,<sup>4</sup> who sees Heraclitus as the stand-in for all of us as we, in our ‘discourse (she is presumably translating *logos*) and thought’, impose order on a changing world. But this sounds more like Kant than Heraclitus.

On the other hand, a missing *mou* clearly doesn’t exclude the possibility that the subject of the account is *inter alios* Heraclitus, if he sees himself as some sort of *prophetes* for a true source of the account, which will be a divinity. And in so doing he would of course have been in the excellent company of Parmenides and Empedocles.

With that as a concession, we can continue our search for what we might call the basic proponent of the account. And we do find him/it, in fragment 32, where he/it is named as that sole ‘wise thing’ that is ‘willing and unwilling to be called Zeus’, and is (fr. 108) ‘set apart from all’.

Willing to be called divine but unwilling to be specified, *to sophon* (in fr. 108 it is called, synonymously, *ho ti sophon esti*) is eternally engaged in offering an account of things which amounts basically to a statement that ‘all things are one’ or ‘all things constitute a single thing’, fr. 50). The word I have translated as ‘all things’ seems to mean all things as a collectivity, or the universe seen in terms of the sum total of its component parts, and it is this universe which is being claimed, apparently, to be one.

Why is this important? Because the alternate – a chaos theory of matter, a boundless universe, and such a universe’s ultimate unknowability *because* boundless – is easy to affirm, however false, and will be so affirmed in detail very soon by Democritus.

But our most significant source for these fragments, Hippolytus (*Ref.* 9. 9), has his own views on these things. Heraclitus, he tells us, says that ‘the all’, or universe (*to pan*), is a number of things, as follows: ‘divisible, indivisible, created, uncreated, mortal, immortal, *logos*, *aeon*, father, son, god, just’.<sup>5</sup>

He then proceeds to offer us his evidence for the claim, and this turns out to be a fairly lengthy – and precious – series of what are now B fragments in Diels-Kranz.

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<sup>4</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, Internet window “Heraclitus”, last modified 1997.

<sup>5</sup> See Catherine Osborne (1987, 329).

Looking at them, we find that at various junctures Heraclitus does indeed talk of god (fr. 67), of *aeon* (fr. 52), of father (53), of *logos* (1, 2, 50, *alib.*), and so on, but nowhere that I can see does he come near claiming that they constitute a 'list' of realities that adds up to that sum of things which is *to pan*. And the substitution of 'son' for 'child' (fr. 52) in his list is an importation of what looks like Hippolytus' own trinitarianism. But the deeper problem lies in his misunderstanding of the import of Heraclitus' claim (fr. 50) that '*hen panta einai*'. Assuming that that the 'one thing' in question is that 'one thing' which is the universe (*to pan*), he understands Heraclitus to be saying that the universe is made up of all the things he, Hippolytus, has just listed, including something called *logos*.

But there has been a major and wholly unacceptable move of his own that vitiates his reasoning. Even if we grant that, linguistically, the phrase *hen panta einai* is as reasonably translated 'one thing is all things' as 'all things are one thing', and imagine him opting for the former interpretation rather than the latter, he offers no evidence for further understanding this *hen* as *to hen*, and then to read this in turn as *to pan* ('the universe'), or for apparently reading *panta* as meaning 'All the things appearing in the little list I have just put forward'. On the contrary, the pieces of evidence he adduces seem to be saying something quite different. What they say, with some clarity, is not that *to pan* is father, but that war (*polemos*) is father (fr. 53); not that *to pan* is *aeon*, but that *aeon* (whatever that turns out to mean) is a child playing (fr. 52); not that the child in question is somebody's son, but that he is a child at play (*ibid.*); not that *to pan* is God, but that God is day and night, winter summer, etc. (fr. 67). In the quotations attributed to him, Heraclitus talks unequivocally of God, father, child, *aeon* etc. as subjects; Hippolytus has turned them all into predicates, with bewildering results.

Even if we understand him as having, a little more plausibly, read Heraclitus' phrase as meaning 'all things are one thing', and getting his own subject, *to pan*, from a reading of *panta* as meaning, effectively, *ta panta*, his case still turns out to be a poor one. Because now his route would be even longer and more tortuous than the first one, in which he would now need to say that *to pan* consists of the items on his little list and furthermore, that they all constitute one thing (*hen*) in reality. But for this idea to convince the evidence he proffers in support of it must convince, and this it conspicuously fails to do, for the same reasons as I suggested before.

One could spend a long time on Hippolytus' list, and what in his mind it counts as supposed evidence for, but my subject is *logos*, so I will confine myself to that strange item on it. Why is *it* there? The answer turns out to be purely Hippolytean, and again seems to turn on a very peculiar translation of his own. At *Ref.* 9. 3 he writes: 'He (Heraclitus) says that the all (*to pan*) is always *logos*', and he goes on to quote as his evidence what we now know as fragment 1. For this to really serve as evidence, however, the opening lines will of course need to be translated as something like 'Of this thing which is always *logos* men are always uncomprehending, etc.', and Osborne (1987, 331) offers us something like this translation. But again a definite article, this time a real one rather than an absent one, wrecks Hippolytus'

case. Heraclitus' words talk not of *logos*, but of *the logos*, leaving us with the much more natural, and rightly preferred translation, 'Of this *logos*, which holds forever, men prove forever uncomprehending, etc.,' and continuing to goad us into asking the question, 'Whose *logos*?'

But surely, it might be urged, Hippolytus has the advantage of likely having in front of him a much more complete text of Heraclitus than we can hope to have? Is not this grounds for at least initial respect? Possibly, but only on the assumption that he offers us evidence that he does indeed have a bigger text of Heraclitus than he is quoting (possibly the complete book, or the complete set of aphorisms, or whatever it was), and that the evidence of this bigger text is guiding him towards his interpretation. But there is unfortunately no reason to believe the latter, even if the former happens to be the case; the quotations he presents us with, not some other source of information in Heraclitus' broader text, are apparently *themselves* the evidence that he – amazingly – seems to think substantiates his interpretation of what Heraclitus is trying to tell us about the real. What now constitute a score of B fragments in the DK text float as cheerfully context-free in *Ref.* 9 as they do in Diels-Kranz, and, by contrast with the precious primary evidence offered us by Sextus about the place in Heraclitus' opus where he found it, we are in Hippolytus' case left simply to guess at the nature of the womb from which the quotations were untimely ripp'd.

So at this point I plan to bid farewell to Hippolytus and return to the notion of *to sophon* as the most natural utterer of the account that Heraclitus speaks of. And being divine, he/it will utter an account that holds forever (fr. 1), and has the force of law (fr. 114), be this descriptively the laws of physical nature (fr. 1) or prescriptively the laws of civic conduct (fr. 114).

What can Heraclitus possibly have had in mind by calling his divinity *to sophon*? Three things are I think worth noting. First, the neutral form of the noun, suggesting a strong desire to get rid of all suspicion of anthropomorphism while still identifying the divinity as divine. Then the specific attribution of rationality, allowing him to claim that any utterance of *to sophon* will have the force of rational constraint, in the realm of both physics and ethics. As for the use of the adverb *aei*, this will reinforce his claim that we are dealing with an unchanging state of affairs, and unchanging constraints, in a universe that is itself eternal (fr. 30).

A natural conclusion from this that we are talking some sort of pantheism here, with *to sophon* describable as the world's mind, or perhaps as the universe *qua* rational. And a little-quoted source on the matter – Plato, perhaps surprisingly – is worth a mention in this regard. In the *Timaeus* he describes World Soul as purely rational, and forever sequentially uttering true descriptions of the real as it does an everlasting tour, so to say, of the physical body it inhabits. The operative, and, I think, very significant word he uses is '*legei*':<sup>6</sup> the World Soul is in an everlasting state of uttering an account or description (*logos*) of the way things are.

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<sup>6</sup> For World Soul's 'statements' see *Tim.* 37ab.

This sounds to me remarkably Heraclitean, and evinces a much more accurate understanding of what Heraclitus was after by his use of the word *logos* in what we know as fragments 1, 2 and 50 than anything achieved by the Stoics, or by Hippolytus. And it is an understanding which has, paradoxically, come into its own in more recent times.

At a low level, it emerges as the notion, propounded with force by Galileo and then more recently by Einstein, that the universe is a book, in which is written, in language comprehensible to those who wish to learn it, the world's description of its own operations. We have earned to think of that language as largely mathematical, with one of the major chapter-headings in the book undoubtedly being 'e = mc squared'.

But there has been in recent times a quantum leap, I would maintain, to a new and more exciting level of metaphor that seems to me even closer to the vision I think Heraclitus espoused. Let me explain what I mean.

With the passage of time we have become aware that moving systems in the universe, from planets to stars to galaxies to galactic clusters to super-clusters, spin round central point and while doing so give off a series of waves, notable among them being radio waves. These waves radiate ceaselessly in all directions, and are now traceable by us in some detail. What they offer us, once we download the information they provide us, is, so to speak, an ongoing self-description of what is going on. If we take the nearest star, for example, Alpha Proxima Centauri, we can quickly learn in some detail from our radio telescopes the size, weight, speed of rotation, heat, gaseous content, mineral content, etc. of that star.

We can make mistakes in interpreting the signals, of course, and probably frequently do. But the star itself, like every other moving system in the universe, makes no mistakes. The account that the real is forever offering of itself is forever correct, and illuminating to all who bother to learn the language it speaks. Heraclitus would have understood this perfectly.

What contemporary astrophysics is also telling us is that the world is, in four-dimensional terms, precisely what Heraclitus, bound to a three-dimensional view of things, claims that *to sophon* propounds, and that is, that the real, in sum (*panta*), is a single, finite entity. The only difference between the two claims, and a simple function of the difference between tri- and quadri-dimensionality, is that the finitude of a Greek universe that is *hen* is a bounded one, and the finitude of an Einsteinian universe that is *hen* is an unbounded one.

Heraclitus, Plato's *Timaeus*, and Einstein, could they but know it, have finished up with a notion of the universe and what it has to say about itself that is staggeringly similar. Who could have imagined it?

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