

The Place of *logos* in the Philosophy of Heraclitus

In this essay I present an overview of the place of *logos* in the philosophy of Heraclitus. The essay is in three parts: 1) a survey of the various metaphysical representations of *logos*, 2) a discussion of humanity's relationship to *logos*, and 3) an evaluation of Heraclitus' use of *logos* as both a linguistic and metaphysical expression.

Any cohesiveness of the loosely connected themes found in the fragments depends in large part on a theory or doctrine that can provide a certain level of constancy in a Heraclitean world filled with constant movement and change. Heraclitus' own use of the term *logos* accomplishes this task. Of the term's many renderings, I will use "law", "account", and "word" at various times in this survey.

Part I

In fragments B1, B2, B45, B50, B72, B87, and B115, and numerous others, we discover three metaphysical representations of *logos*: (a) as universal law, (b) primordial fire, and (c) as a closely related expression of a divine god.

First, we find *logos* describes as Law, specifically, the Law or underlying ruling force in the cosmos. The universality of the Law is seen a B 1, B 2 and B 115. *Logos* is all-encompassing and pervasive; all things have come into being in accordance with the *logos* or Law. The fundamental universality of *logos* is again mentioned by Heraclitus when he states that *logos* contains all that is "commonly" found within the cosmos. All things, then, can be reconciled in

and through *logos*. In this regard, *logos* offers a universal account of the nature of the universe.

[B1 ln 4; B 2]

In addition to being the universal account of the cosmos, elsewhere we discover that not only is *logos* all-encompassing, but it is also boundless and deep. "Much like the soul," Heraclitus tells us, "one can never reach the end of *logos*. (B 45)

We further find that *logos* is everywhere present. (B 72) Heraclitus maintains the omnipresence of *logos* in his insistence on viewing the world not in its particularity, but in its universality. Even the *psyche*, with its unique needs and ruled by its own *logos*, is in full compliance with the *logos* of the world. (B 115) For Heraclitus, then, there seems to be no escaping the absolute necessity for *logos* to serve as the unifying and universal feature both as the Law of the cosmos and of the soul.

The second metaphysical representation of *logos* is evident at B 30, B 64 and various other fragments. In keeping with his predecessors, particularly the Ionian natural philosophers, Heraclitus elevates one element to the stature of primordial *archê* or first principle. For Heraclitus this first principle is Fire. Fire and *logos* as Law share similar qualities. Both Fire and the Law have a controlling influence or guidance upon the cosmos; both are eternal and universal. At B 30 Heraclitus states that the "ordered cosmos, which is the same for all, was not created ... but is was ever and is and shall be ever-living Fire."

In addition, Fire shares in the unicity and common order of the Law throughout its continual transformations into Water, Air and Earth. (B31) As with the Law, every aspect of the universe is ruled and guided by Fire. (B 64, B66)

All things find their beginning or ending point in the *logos* or universal principle of Fire.

As Heraclitus remarks at B 90: "There is an exchange: all things for Fire and Fire for all things, like goods for gold and gold for goods."

The third representation of *logos* brings us to the religious feature of Heraclitus' *logos*, the expression of the divine. Aspects of the *logos* I described above are echoed in passages Heraclitus devotes to the divine entity in his philosophy which he names "God" (θεός). Interestingly, Heraclitus' God is not an anthropomorphic manifestation or projection of humanity's own intellectual and physical image. (B 78, B 79) Nor is Heraclitus' God affiliated with the gods or practices of the cultic mystery religions with which Heraclitus disapproves. (B 14, B15) We may argue that the God of Heraclitus is intended to serve as a supreme deity above all other gods as indicated by the analogy he makes between God and Zeus. (B 32) Just as Fire perdures through its constant transformations, God remains constant and enduring. (B 67).

This deity also embodies the "oneness" that Heraclitus often cites as being characteristic of *logos*. (B 32) Similarly, the divine embodies one supreme law that "nourishes human law" and from which human law is seen as derivative. (B 114) That which is "common to all"—another key characteristic of *logos*—is also shared by God in whom all things converge and become one. "To God, all things are beautiful, good, and just; but men have assumed some things to be unjust, others just." (B102) *Logos* and God are also closely related, then, in that both seem to elude humanity's recognition. (B1, B 86)

While there is some feeling of the divine in Fire and the Universal Law, the three terms ought not to be seen as completely synonymous with each other. The predominant representation of *logos* appears to be the Law. It is this particular aspect that predominates

Heraclitus' metaphysical perspective. The Law and primordial Fire are facets of *logos*; the God of Heraclitus, an adjunct of the same eternal principle. Taken together the three can be seen as intimately related metaphysical considerations of and distinguishable illuminations of one and the same *logos*.

Part 2

Throughout Heraclitus' writings we find prescriptive and descriptive statements on humanity's response and relationship to *logos*. Heraclitus uses an apophatic method to express what he believes to be our inability assiduously to apprehend and understand *logos*. This negative way of explaining what something is by expressing what it is not (or in this case, of expressing what we cannot do) gives us a glimpse of Heraclitus as an exacting task-master and sharp-tongued prophet as he comments upon our ability to appreciate the *logos* in its role as divine Law of the universe. (B1, B2 and B 72) Despite his prophetic vitriol, Heraclitus urges us at B 50 not to listen to him but to listen to *logos* itself.

Moreover, we can adduce from his comments that the existence of the universal Law or *logos* is something *knowable*; i.e., is it both presentative and appreciable to those who are intellectually awake. (B 1) Theoretically, what *logos* reveals to us is most experienced through visual and aural processes. (B1, B101a) Yet Heraclitus tells us at B 56 that we are also easily deceived by visible things.

We all have the faculty of knowing (B 113, B114) even though we have difficulty "listening" (B 19) or comprehending what we have heard. At B 34 Heraclitus describes such people this way: "Not understanding although they have heard, they are like the deaf."

At B 72 Heraclitus contends that we encounter and rub up against *logos* every day yet we find ourselves separated from the very thing that ought to be pervading all that we apprehend. This alienation appears to be due to our inability to abstract from the account, or *logos* of nature, the common elements awaiting our acknowledgement. *Logos* has spoken; we have not responded. Yet with or without our recognition, though, *logos* continues to permeate the cosmos. *Logos* is so thoroughly pervasive that even those who are "asleep" and lack a full appreciation of *logos* are "workers (of) and share in the activities going on in the cosmos." (B 75)

On the one hand, it is difficult for Heraclitus to imagine how it is that humans fail to apprehend *logos*. He ponders this at B 16: "How could anyone hide from that which never sets?" The majority of persons do not fully profit from their "association" with *logos*; rather, the consequences of their non-receptivity produces an intellectual and moral estrangement from the Law. (B2) We are, in his words, "present yet absent" to the divine and eternal *logos* (B 89).

Heraclitus chastises individuals for being preoccupied with specificity in their approach to the intelligible phenomena of the world (B1, B2). Heraclitus also expresses dismay at humanity's proclivity towards individualism. (B2) It is our preoccupation with the *individual* laws of nature that causes our inability to see the forest for the trees, as it were. The *logos* of the cosmos is there before us, everywhere apparent: universally presentative, yet not universally acknowledged or understood. (B1, ln 5-8, B 2, B 16 and B 72)

We may be incapable of understanding *logos* as Heraclitus points out at B1, but presumably, we have "met with (*logos*) both on its own terms" (B 72) and through the medium of Heraclitus' proclamations about the "words and actions" that *logos* manifests. (B1, ln 6)

Heraclitus does not, however, wish to become the pre-eminent spokesperson for *logos*. Nor does he wish to engage in idle speculation or "conjecture at random about the greatest things." (B 47) Rather, he believes that *logos* can and does speak for itself, and in so doing, it allows humanity to learn that "all things are one." (B 50)

It would be unfair to label Heraclitus a "skeptic". He has encountered and beheld *logos*; therefore, Heraclitus never is dissuaded from acknowledging the subsistence of *logos* throughout the cosmos, even if he speaks disparagingly of the failure of others to follow suit. *Logos* can be heard, it can be perceived by us if we would truly awaken from our slumber and wipe the misleading, myopic individualism from our eyes. (B 2, B 17 B 89) Hence, in his apophatic way, Heraclitus challenges us to discover that *logos*, the underlying rationale supporting all that we experience in the world, is an intelligible, perceivable thing.

Part 3

Thus far I have explored the three main metaphysical representations of *logos*. My brief, final consideration will be of Heraclitus' linguistic use of the term *logos*. As shown above in Part 2, Heraclitus repeatedly mentions the relationship between the linguistic and communicative capabilities of *logos* and our response to the discourse or account that *logos* offers about itself. (B 101a) This central feature of Heraclitus' philosophy is most notable for its dual character and purpose: 1) *logos* serves as his explanation of the *archê* of the cosmos and as such supplies a rule of life for those who are lovers of wisdom and 2) *logos* is capable of presenting its own discourse about itself. *Logos* as Law is the definition of the divine and eternal workings of the cosmos. But *logos* is much more than the term Heraclitus uses to express the laws of nature. *Logos* as "Word"

or "Account" engages in discourse about itself through its manifestations in our world. (B 50)

But *Logos* is more than a metaphor. The *logos-word* is a powerful metaphysical and linguistic expression, a "metalinguistic" one, as it were, that includes and describes all that is to be known about itself. This raising above its own linguistic parameters allows *logos* to offer a metalinguistic accounting of the Law itself.

The *logos* of Heraclitus is at once the Self-speaking Revealer and that which is the Revealed. For it is within its very nature for *logos* simultaneously to define and express the common or universal truth which it itself characterizes. *Logos* is the cornerstone Heraclitus uses to unify the various strands of his religious and metaphysical philosophy and to bring concord to his world of constant flux and change.