

### **Xenophanes and Heraclitus**

These next two philosophers stand in a unique relationship both to the earliest philosophers, and to traditions that are part of post-Aristotelean schools of philosophy. Both Xenophanes and Heraclitus comment or respond to the works of other philosophers *outside* of their own schools. A word of caution here. It is unknown whether either Xenophanes or Heraclitus started a school. What is clear is that in the surviving texts, both Xenophanes and Heraclitus direct remarks against other philosophers.

Xenophanes, 570 - 478 BCE, was a native of Colophon and a varied thinker. For the most part, he was a poet, writing on traditional poetic subjects, i.e., drink, love, war, etc. What makes his surviving works interesting is his attack on the traditional views of the gods and the basis of Greek education. Fragment 3 indicated this rather forthrightly: Homer and Hesiod have ascribed to the gods all deeds which among men are a reproach and a disgrace: thieving, adultery, and deceiving one another. (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 21B11).

In examining the surviving fragments, we can see that there are four basic claims within Xenophanes work:

1. The means of personal excellence are piety in thought (21DKb1), service to the city (21DKb2), and a life of moderation, avoiding the pursuit of unlimited wealth and useless luxuries (21DKb3, 21DKb4, 21DKb5, 21DKb22).

2. There is one divine being of exceptional goodness, power, and cognitive capacity who affects the cosmos as a whole through the exercise of his thought alone (21DKb23 - 26); but this is not well understood by believers and the poets from whom they get their ideas on such matters (21DKb10 - 12, 21DKb14 - 17).

3. The whole natural cosmos should be understood as a product of the operations of earth and water (21DKb29, 21DKb33), with all natural processes starting from and ending in the earth (21DKb27), especially in the sea (the source of all forms of moisture (21DKb30), including the clouds, which constitute the sun (21DKb31), the rainbow (21DKb32), and the other celestial bodies.)

4. The certain truths about the gods and the basic principles of nature cannot be known by anyone (21DKb34) but our accounts should be accepted as true opinion about how things really are (21DKb35); and our way of inquiring into nature has resulted in a number of discoveries - even if human opinion is shaped by the events experienced during the brief span of a lifetime (21DKb18, 21DKb19, 21DKb36, 21DKb38).

Diogenes Laertius sums up his thought as follows: He (Xenophanes) holds that there are four elements of existent things, and worlds unlimited in number but not overlapping in time. Clouds are formed when the vapor from the sun is carried upwards and lifts them into the surrounding air. The substance of God is spherical, in no way resembling man. He is all eye and all ear, but does not breathe; he is the totality of mind and thought, and is external. Xenophanes was the first to declare that everything which comes into being is doomed to perish, and the soul is breathed.

It is clear from the surviving fragments that Xenophanes was not a dogmatic philosopher, but he had arguments to support his view. Xenophanes uses his monotheist view of God to

attack anthropomorphic views presented in Hesiod and Homer. (Explain Xenophanes argument and discuss the importance of Homer.) Little has survived of Xenophanes' physical views, but there are a few intriguing fragments concerning why the ocean is salty.

Xenophanes declared that the sea is salty because many mixtures flow together in it... He believes that the earth is being mixed into the sea and over time it is being dissolved by the moisture, saying that he has the following kinds of proofs, that sea shells are found in the middle of the earth and in the mountains, and the impressions of a fish and seals have been found in Syracuse in the quarries, and the impression of a laurel leaf in the depth of the stones in Paros, and on Malta flat shapes of all marine life. He says that these things occurred when all things were covered with mud long ago and the impressions were dried in mud. All humans are destroyed when the earth is carried down into the sea and becomes mud, and then there is another beginning of coming to be, and this change occurs in all the world orders. [Hippolytus *Refutations* 1,14.5-6 = 21A33]

Before moving on to Heraclitus, let's consider the importance of Xenophanes' views. In the section above concerning the four basic claims, one sees the beginning of the suspicion that the accumulation of unlimited wealth does little to ensure human happiness. Virtue should not be understood in terms of the possession of unlimited wealth. Moreover, the suspicion that the poets and other traditional sources of received wisdom have it all wrong is hotly argued here. The notion that divinity is a unity and is responsible for the world of experience as a product of divine thought first emerges in Greece with Xenophanes. The third element of his thought places him in the Milesian or Ionic tradition. Reducing the whole of the natural world to earth and the celestial world to water rings of the Ionic tradition. The notion that human opinion can achieve results in discovering the natural world is strikingly advanced over his other contemporaries. It will not be until the age after Parmenides that we will encounter this again. His most enduring legacy is the notion of the one god or the god-sphere. This notion will find itself back into Parmenides and the later Classical philosophers of Plato and Aristotle.

Heraclitus of Ephesus was born about 540 BCE. It is believed that he was born into an aristocratic family, but abandoned political life. The tradition holds that Heraclitus was misanthropic and loved obscurity. Charles Kahn, in his book *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, makes us aware of a number of important facts about Heraclitus that we need to keep in mind when approaching his thought. First, Ephesus was a competing *polis* with Miletus. When Miletus was destroyed or conquered by the Persians, Ephesus took the lead in trade in Ionia, and built up a reputation that lasted until the end of the Roman era. Although Heraclitus was influenced by the Milesians, because of his social standing as an aristocrat, someone from a very wealthy family who perhaps was destined to be the *tyrannos* of that *polis*, Heraclitus attempts to find a balance between these new sciences and tradition. Out of this merging comes a radical new way of thinking that continues to have influence down to the end of the Imperial era.

The Milesians were concerned to show how the order of the world had come into being, how it was maintained, and very probably how it would eventually perish. Anaximander had conceived this order as governed from without, by the primordial Boundless; Xenophanes had replaced the Boundless with an intelligent deity who moves all things by thought. Heraclitus accepts the Milesian view of a world order in which the opposition and transformation of elementary powers is governed by measure and proportion. But he denies that this order is

imposed upon the world by any power from without. Instead, he deifies one of its internal constituents. For to say that fire is 'everliving', that it 'ever was and is and will be' is to say, simply, that it is eternal and divine. Yet Heraclitus insists upon the fact that this god participates in the changing life of nature, 'kindled in measures and in measures going out'. There is a genuine parallel here to Anaximenes' conception of the primordial Air. But Anaximenes would scarcely have emphasized the extinction of his principle at the very moment that he asserts its eternity; nor would he have identified his elemental principle with the cosmos as such. What is striking about Heraclitus' statement is that it confronts us with the double paradox of a world order identified with one of its constituent parts, and an eternal principle embodied in the most transitory of visual phenomena.

The resolution of these antinomies, concerning what is 'whole and not whole' (CXXIV, D. 10), what is both mortal and everliving, must await fuller investigation. The point of importance here is that the choice of fire as a substitute for air can scarcely have been motivated by the desire for a more adequate physical theory: nothing is literally derived from fire in the way that winds, clouds, and water may be derived from air. Heraclitus' aim is not to improve the Milesian cosmology by altering a particular doctrine but to reinterpret its total meaning by a radical shift in perspective. The advantage of fire for the new point of view is that it signifies both a power of destruction and death - as in a burning city or a funeral pyre - and also a principle of superman vitality; a temporary phenomenon that dies out or is quenched and an eternal principle that is everywhere one and the same, whether in the alter flame, the domestic hearth, the forest fire lit by lightning, or the blazing torches of war. By meditating on the fire one who knows how to read oracular signs can perceive the hidden harmony that unifies opposing principles not only within the cosmic order but also in the destiny of the human psyche.

From Pythagoras of Samos, his neighbor and near contemporary, Heraclitus had learned a new conception of the destiny of the psyche, and perhaps also a new sense for the powers of number, proportion, and measure in the rational organization of the world. But Pythagoras, like Xenophanes, provokes his particular scorn, for these two have tried to expand the philosophy of nature into a general vision of god and man and have, in his view, conspicuously failed.

It is precisely this task which Heraclitus undertakes. His real subject is not the physical world but the human condition, the condition of mortality. But by its participation in the eternal life cycle of nature and also by its capacity to master this pattern of cognition, the structure of the psyche is unlimited (XXXV, D. 45). Mortals are immortal, immortals are mortal (XCII, D 62). The opposites are one; and this deathless structure of life-and-death is deity itself.

One of his nicknames is the "Riddler". One book is attributed to Heraclitus, *On Nature*, which he dedicated to the temple of Artemis. Notice from what we have gathered from Charles Kahn, even though his book was entitled *On Nature*, we do not have to suppose that his subject was physical. Kahn's suggestion is that Heraclitus is concerned with the human condition, as such, and we are also physical. This will have a role to play in understanding our place within the cosmos. We know several stories about his death, stemming from a particular diet of grass and herbs. [tell the story]. His book was divided into three parts: on the universe, on politics, and on theology. In it, he presented a rather interesting view: the *arche* (ἀρχή) was fire: all things are composed of fire and into fire they are again resolved. Fire, physical, is a manifestation of the *logos* (λογος) which permeates the universe and establishes the order of things. The divine *logos* (λογος) is akin to the human soul and, hence, human inquiry into the nature of things can lead to an understanding of the divine. Heraclitus held to a cyclical notion of time. One universe

begins as fire: through rarefaction and condensation, other elements come into being, and through the clash of opposites directed by the divine *λογος*, all things come about by destiny. The world eventually returns to a state of pure fire, and the cycle begins anew. By appealing to a cyclical notion of time, Heraclitus rejects the Milesian attempt to explain the origin of the world. His most novel view was the notion that “everything flows” (*παντα ρεα*). Everything in the universe is in a state of perpetual flux, and, what is more, all things depend on this flux for their continuity and identity.

To sum his view up: Heraclitus draws from the Milesians the notion that fire is the first principle; he draws from the Pythagoreans the notion that the order of things is due to the formal aspect (*λογος*) of them and this formal aspect is their essence; finally he draws from Xenophanes the notion of a single deity: by which he rejects the standard notion of Greek theology.

If Kahn is correct in his understanding of Heraclitus’ thought, then he must be credited with attempting to grapple with the notion of ethics in an era marked by radical political change. The enigma is that at the same time Heraclitus is attempting to present a new vision of the relationship between the cosmos and humanity and still remain conservative. In the place of the Heroic code of Homer and Hesiod, Heraclitus brings us a step closer to an understanding of ethics as a cooperative code. Heraclitus is the first thinker to identify the psyche as the seat of intelligence and moral excellence. For Heraclitus a dry soul is ‘wisest and best’ (DK22B118), whereas a man who has drenched his soul with drink stumbles on the way home, ‘not knowing where he steps’ (DK22B117). This physical conception of the soul recalls Milesian natural philosophy, but Heraclitus has more than psychophysic in mind: “You will not find the limits of the soul by going even if you travel over every way, so deep is its account (*logos*)’ (DKB45). As we have already said, Heraclitus’ thought is notoriously dark, but we can probably recognize here his own mysterious reaction to the new Pythagorean view of the deathless psyche that migrates from life to life. Heraclitus’ attitude to traditional conceptions is both critical and ambivalent. On the one hand he endorses the heroic pursuit of fame and magnifies the merit of death in battle (DKB29; B24, B25). On the other hand he despises cult in general (DKB5, B14, B15) and funeral cult in particular (DKB96), and he insists that a man’s fortune depends upon his character rather than on the gods (DKB119). He exalts the role of wisdom as excellence in a way that reminds us of Xenophanes; but Heraclitus is more explicit: “Sound thinking [or moral restraint] is the greatest virtue and the greatest wisdom: to speak truth and act accordingly to nature, knowingly” (DKB112). Here the quiet virtue of temperance or self-control has been construed as an intellectual insight that anticipates the Socratic-Platonic connection between virtue and knowledge. Drawing from Anaximander, Heraclitus understands the cosmos and natural world as one organized in terms of justice. As he puts it, “the measures of the sun’s path are enforced by the Furies, ministers of Dike” (DK22B94). And justice is typically a matter of punishment and retaliation. In the one surviving sentence of Anaximander, the elemental opposites ‘pay the penalty and make retribution (*didonai dikas kai tisin*) to one another for their injustice’, according to the ordinance of Time (DK12B1). Heraclitus invokes this notion of cosmic law as the basis and guarantee for human laws: “the people must fight for their laws as for their city wall” (B44). “Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all, as a city holds on to its laws and even more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by a divine one. It dominates as much as it wants; it is enough for all and more than enough” (B114). Heraclitus’ conception of law (*nomos*) as the foundation of civilized life prepares the way for the Stoic

theory of natural law.

In his defense of human *nomoi*, Heraclitus seems to be reacting against an early version of cultural relativism, provoked by the extensive Greek contacts with older civilizations that began in the Orientalizing period (eighth to seventh centuries BCE). In Heraclitus' own time (c. 500) Hecataeus of Miletus brought home strange tales of the customs of foreign lands and published them in his *Travels Around the World*. In the same period, Xenophanes knows that Ethiopians make their gods snubnosed and black, while Thracians make them blue-eyed and red-haired (DK21B16). This will eventually lead to a type of relativism, namely the *nomos - physis* debate of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. Needless to say, Heraclitus rejects such notions in that human laws are nourished by the divine, and the reciprocity and merging of opposites play into his physical theory as stated above.