

# Heraclitus of Ephesus

Even in antiquity, Heraclitus (born c. 540 B.C.) was seen as obscure and difficult to understand. He proposed an intricate world-view according to which a divine *logos* governs the universe.

[1] Heraclitus, son of Blosson or, according to some, of Heracon, was a native of Ephesus. He flourished in the 69th Olympiad. He was lofty-minded beyond all other men, and overweening, as is clear from his book in which he says: 'Much learning does not teach understanding; else would it have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, or, again, Xenophanes and Hecataeus.' For 'this one thing is wisdom, to understand thought, as that which guides all the world everywhere.' And he used to say that 'Homer deserved to be chased out of the lists and beaten with rods, and Archilochus likewise.'

[2] Again he would say: 'There is more need to extinguish insolence than an outbreak of fire,' and 'The people must fight for the law as for city-walls.' He attacks the Ephesians, too, for banishing his friend Hermodorus: he says: 'The Ephesians would do well to end their lives, every grown man of them, and leave the city to beardless boys, for that they have driven out Hermodorus, the worthiest man among them, saying, "We will have none who is worthiest among us; or if there be any such, let him go elsewhere and consort with others".' And when he was requested by them to make laws, he scorned the request because the state was already in the grip of a bad constitution.

[3] He would retire to the temple of Artemis and play at knuckle-bones with the boys; and when the Ephesians stood round him and looked on, 'Why, you rascals,' he said, 'are you astonished? Is it not better to do this than to take part in your civil life?' Finally, he became a hater of his kind and wandered on the mountains, and there he continued to live, making his diet of grass and herbs. However, when this gave him dropsy, he made his way back to the city and put this riddle to the physicians, whether they were competent to create a drought after heavy rain. They could make nothing of this, whereupon he buried himself in a cowshed, expecting that the noxious damp humour would be drawn out of him by the warmth of the manure. But, as even this was of no avail, he died at the age of sixty.

Diogenes Laertius 9.1–3, trans. R. D. Hicks

[5] He was exceptional from his boyhood; for when a youth he used to say that he knew nothing, although when he was grown up he claimed that he knew everything. He was nobody's pupil, but he declared that he 'inquired of himself,' and learned everything from himself. Some, however, had said that he had been a pupil of Xenophanes, as we learn from Sotion, who also tells us that Ariston in his book *On Heraclitus* declares that he was cured of the dropsy and died of another disease. And Hippobotus has the same story. As to the work which passes as his, it is a continuous treatise *On Nature*, but is divided into three discourses, one on the universe, another on politics, and a third on theology. [6] This book he deposited in the temple of Artemis and, according to some, he deliberately made it the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt.

Diogenes Laertius 9.5–6, trans. R. D. Hicks

[7] Here is a general summary of his doctrines. All things are composed of fire, and into fire they are again resolved; further, all things come about by destiny, and existent things are brought into harmony by the clash of opposing currents; again, all things are filled with souls and divinities. He has also given an account of all the orderly happenings in the universe, and declares the sun to be no larger than it appears. Another of his sayings is: 'Of soul thou shalt never find boundaries, not if thou track it on every path; so deep is its cause.' Self-conceit he used to call a falling sickness (epilepsy) and eyesight a lying sense. Sometimes, however, his utterances are clear and distinct, so that even the dullest can easily understand and derive therefrom elevation of soul. For brevity and weightiness his exposition is incomparable.

[8] Coming now to his particular tenets, we may state them as follows: fire is the element, all things are exchanged for fire and come into being by rarefaction and condensation; but of this he gives no clear explanation. All things come into being by conflict of opposites, and the sum of things flows like a stream. Further, all that is limited forms one world. And it is alternately born from fire and again resolved into fire in fixed cycles to all eternity, and this is determined by destiny. Of the opposites that which tends to birth or creation is called war and strife, and that which tends to destruction by fire is called concord and peace. Change he called a pathway up and down, and this determines the birth of the world.

[9] For fire by contracting turns into moisture, and this condensing turns into water; water again when congealed turns into earth. This process he calls the downward path. Then again earth is liquefied, and thus gives rise to water, and from water the rest of the series is derived. He reduces nearly everything to exhalation from the sea. This process is the upward path. Exhalations arise from earth as well as from sea; those from sea are bright and pure, those from earth dark. Fire is fed by the bright exhalations, the moist element by the others. He does not make clear the nature of the surrounding element. He says, however, that there are in it bowls with their concavities turned towards us, in which the bright exhalations collect and produce flames. These are the stars.

[10] The flame of the sun is the brightest and the hottest; the other stars are further from the earth and for that reason give it less light and heat. The moon, which is nearer to the earth, traverses a region which is not pure. The sun, however, moves in a clear and untroubled region, and keeps a proportionate distance from us. That is why it gives us more heat and light. Eclipses of the sun and moon occur when the bowls are turned upwards; the monthly phases of the moon are due to the bowl turning round in its place little by little. Day and night, months, seasons and years, rains and winds and other similar phenomena are accounted for by the various exhalations.

[11] Thus the bright exhalation, set aflame in the hollow orb of the sun, produces day, the opposite exhalation when it has got the mastery causes night; the increase of warmth due to the bright exhalation produces summer, whereas the preponderance of moisture due to the dark exhalation brings about winter. His explanations of other phenomena are in harmony with this. He gives no account of the nature of the earth, nor even of the bowls. These, then, were his opinions.

Diogenes Laertius 9.7–11, trans. R. D. Hicks

Below is a selection of the surviving fragments of Heraclitus. The following translations are from *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia*, P. Curd, R. D. McKirahan [Hackett, 2011].

Although this *logos* holds always humans prove unable to understand it both before hearing it and when they have first heard it. For although all things come to be [or, 'happen'] in accordance with this *logos*, humans are like the inexperienced when they experience such words and deeds as I set out, distinguishing each thing in accordance with its nature (*physis*) and saying how it is. But other people fail to notice what they do when awake, just as they forget what they do while asleep.

Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.132 = DK 22 B 1

For this reason it is necessary to follow what is common. But although the *logos* is common, most people live as if they had their own private understanding.

Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians* 7.133 = DK 22 B2

We would call oxen happy when they find bitter vetch to eat.

Albertus Magnus, *On Vegetables* 6.401 = DK 22 B4

What is opposed brings together; the finest harmony [*harmonia*] is composed of things at variance, and everything comes to be [or, 'occurs'] in accordance with strife.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 8.2 1155b4 = DK 22 B8

Asses would choose rubbish rather than gold.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.5 1176a7 = DK 22 B9

Things taken together are whole and not whole, <something that is> being brought together and brought apart, in tune and out of tune; out of all things there comes a unity and out of a unity all things.

[Aristotle], *On the World* 5 396b20 = DK 22 B10

Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow.

Arius Didymus, fr. 39.2 = *Dox. Gr.* 471.4–5 = DK 22 B12

Pigs rejoice in mud more than in pure water.

Clement, *Miscellanies* 1.2.2 = DK 22 B13

This *kosmos*, the same for all, none of gods nor humans made, but it was always and is and shall be: an ever-living fire, kindled in measures and extinguished in measures.

Clement, *Miscellanies* 5.103.3; tpc = DK 22 B30

For souls to become water is to die; for water to become earth is to die; but from earth, water comes to be; from water, soul.

Clement, *Miscellanies* 6.17.2; tpc = DK 22 B36

Pigs wash themselves in mud, birds in dust or ash.

Columella, *On Agriculture* 8.4.4 = DK 22 B37

Much learning ['polymathy'] does not teach insight. Otherwise it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras and moreover Xenophanes and Hecataeus.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.1 = DK 22 B 40

The wise is one (*to sophon*), to know the intelligent plan (*gnōmē*) by which all things are steered through all.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.1; tpc = DK 22 B41

Heraclitus said that Homer deserved to be expelled from the contests and flogged, and Archilochus likewise.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.1 = DK 22 B42

Willful violence [*hubris*] must be quenched more than a fire.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.3 = DK 22 B43

The people must fight for the law as for the city wall.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.2 = DK 22 B44

You would not discover the limits of the soul although you travelled every road: so deep a *logos* does it have.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.7 = DK 22 B45

[He said that] conceit is a holy disease [and that] sight tells falsehoods. (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.7 = DK 22 B46)

Let us not make random conjectures about the greatest matters.

Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 9.73 = DK 22 B47

The name of the bow is life, but its work is death.

*Etymologium Magnum sv bios* = DK 22 B48

We step into and we do not step into the same rivers. We are and we are not.

Heraclitus Homericus, *Homeric Questions* 24 = DK 22 B49a

Listening not to me, but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.9.1 = DK B50

They do not understand how, though at variance with itself, it agrees with itself. It is a backwards-turning attunement like that of the bow and lyre.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.9.2 = DK 22 B51

Most men's teacher is Hesiod. They are sure he knew most things—a man who could not recognize day and night; for they are one.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.2 = DK 22 B57

The road up and the road down are one and the same.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.4 = DK 22 B60

The sea is the purest and most polluted water: to fishes drinkable and bringing safety, to humans undrinkable and destructive.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.5 = DK 22 B61

Thunderbolt steers all things.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.7 = DK 22 B64

Fire is want and satiety.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.7 = DK 22 B65

God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger, but changes the way <fire,(?)> when mingled with perfumes, is named according to the scent of each.

Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 9.10.8 = DK 22 B67

Fire lives the death of earth and *aēr* lives the death of fire, water lives the death of *aēr*, earth that of water.

Maximus of Tyre, 41.4 = DK 22 B76

It is necessary to know that war is common and justice is strife and that all things happen in accordance with strife and necessity.

Origen, *Against Celsus* 6.42 = DK 22 B80

The most beautiful of apes is ugly in comparison with the human race.

Plato, *Hippias Major* 289a3–4 = DK 22 B82

The wisest of humans will appear as an ape in comparison with a god in respect to wisdom, beauty, and all other things.

Plato, *Hippias Major* 289b4–5 = DK 22 B83

Changing it rests.

Plotinus, *Enneads* 4.8.1 = DK 22 B84a

It is difficult to fight against anger, for whatever it wants it buys at the price of the soul.

Plutarch, *Life of Coriolanus* 22.2 = DK 22 B85

The same thing is both living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old; for these things transformed are those, and those transformed back again are these.

Pseudo-Plutarch, *Consolation to Apollonius* 106E = DK 22 B88

For the waking there is one common world, but when asleep each person turns away to a private one.

Pseudo-Plutarch, *On Superstition* 166c = DK 22 B89

All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods.

Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi* 338d–e = DK 22 B90

[It is not possible to step twice into the same river]. . . . It scatters and again comes together, and approaches and recedes.

Plutarch, *On the E at Delphi* 392b = DK 22 B91

I searched [or: inquired into] myself.

Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1118C = DK 22 B101

To god all things are beautiful and good and just, but humans have supposed some unjust and others just.

Porphyry, *Notes on Homer, on Iliad* 4.4 = DK 22 B102

What understanding (*noos*) or intelligence (*phrēn*) have they? They put their trust in popular bards and take the mob for their teacher, unaware that most people are bad, and few are good.

Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Alcibiades I* 117, Westerink = DK 22 B104

Of all those whose accounts (*logoi*) I have heard, no one reaches the point of recognizing that what is wise is set apart from all.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.174 = DK 22 B108

It is not better for humans to get all they want.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.176 = DK 22 B110

Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.178 = DK 22 B111

Right thinking (*sōphronein*) is the greatest excellence, and wisdom (*sophia*) is to speak the truth and act in accordance with nature (*physis*) while paying attention to it.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.178 = DK 22 B112

Those who speak with understanding (*noos*) must rely firmly on what is common to all as a city must rely on [its?] law, and much more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law; for it has as much power as it wishes and is sufficient for all and is still left over.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.1.179 = DK 22 B114

It belongs to all people to know themselves and to think rightly (*sōphronein*).

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.5.6 = DK 22 B116

A man when drunk is led by a boy, stumbling and not knowing where he goes, since his soul is moist.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.5.7 = DK 22 B117

Gleam of light: the dry soul, wisest (*sophōtate*) and best.

Stobaeus, *Selections* 3.5.8 = DK 22 B118

A person's character is his divinity [*daimōn*].

Stobaeus, *Selections* 4.40.23 = DK 22 B119

Nature (*physis*) loves to hide.

Themistius, *Orations* 5.69 = DK 22 B123

The most beautiful *kosmos* is a pile of things poured out at random.

Theophrastus, *Metaphysics* 15 = DK 22 B124

Even the *Kykeōn* falls apart if it is not stirred.

Theophrastus, *On Vertigo* 9; tpc = DK 22 B125