

On the Ethical Dimension of Heraclitus' Thought*

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Heraclitus is more often read as a natural philosopher or metaphysician than as an ethical thinker. However, few today would deny he was also interested in the human condition, and in questions about how we should live. Still, scholars differ in how central they think ethical concerns were for Heraclitus, and over how these concerns to relate to other aspects of his thought.¹ Furthermore, the ethical dimension of Heraclitus' thought has seldom been the object of focused study.² My purpose in this paper is to examine the ethical dimension of Heraclitus' thought in detail, and to explore its connections to his other views. When I speak of Heraclitus' "ethical thought," I use this label broadly. I believe Heraclitus was deeply interested in the question of how we should live. Furthermore, I believe his views on this question were integral to, and integrated with, his broader philosophical outlook. This is the aspect of his thought I wish to explore.³

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¹ Many scholars marginalize the ethical dimension of Heraclitus' thought. For example, G. S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments [Cosmic Fragments]* (Cambridge, 1954), reads Heraclitus primarily as an empirically minded natural philosopher. For reasons that will become clear, I disagree with Kirk's claim, in his preface, that the extant fragments "fall not unnaturally" into two distinct classes: the "cosmic fragments," which deal with the world as a whole, the logos, fire and the opposites, and the "anthropomorphic fragments," which deal with the soul, epistemology, ethics and politics. M. Marcovich, *Heraclitus: Greek Text with a Short Commentary [Heraclitus]* (Sankt Augustin, 1967) includes a brief section on Heraclitus' ethics at the end of his book. However, he reads Heraclitus as a straightforward advocate for the martial and elitist ethical values typical of aristocrats in his day, and finds little of philosophical interest. By contrast, others, such as Kahn, *Art and Thought* and R. Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus [Studies]* (Hildesheim, 1995), have read Heraclitus as centrally interested in the human condition. However, neither Kahn nor Dilcher connects Heraclitus' ethical thought to his psychology, epistemology, natural philosophy and theology in quite the way I do here.

² A notable recent exception is D. Sider, "Heraclitus' Ethics," in *Doctrine and Doxography: Studies on Heraclitus and Pythagoras*, D. Sider and D. Obbink (eds.) (Berlin, 2013), 321-34. However, Sider construes the label "Heraclitus' ethics" more narrowly than I do here. As Sider observes, "investigations into Heraclitus' ethics are scarce on the ground" (1).

A recent piece by Kurt Raaflaub, on the political aspect of Heraclitus' thought, appeared too late for me to incorporate its main ideas into the body of this paper (K. Raaflaub, "Shared Responsibility for the Common Good: Heraclitus, Early Philosophy and Political Thought," in R. McKirahan et al. (eds.), *Heraklit im Kontext* (De Gruyter, 2017), 103-27). Suffice it to note that Raaflaub's efforts to locate Heraclitus within the context of the development of Greek political thought more broadly prove quite productive, and generate interesting new insights into several fragments. Raaflaub follows a very different thread through Heraclitus than I do, and most of his ideas seem compatible with my main claims here; although, as will become clear in what follows, I am inclined to read Heraclitus's prominent "common"/"private" distinction more in epistemological terms.

³ My claim is that Heraclitus was deeply and centrally interested in questions about how we should live,

In keeping with this goal, I begin (§1) with Heraclitus' views on the *psuchê*, or “soul.” As is now widely recognized, Heraclitus was an important innovator in the history of early Greek thinking about the soul. Here, I highlight ways in which his ideas on this theme are most significant for the history of Greek ethics. Next (§2), I turn to his closely related views on human understanding, and explore their connections to his ethical concerns. Specifically, I argue, Heraclitus believed an adequate comprehension of the world, and of our place within it, is necessary for a living a good human life.⁴ I also ask why, according to him, most people lack this understanding. Finally (§3), I argue that Heraclitus' views on the relationship between god and man – and his contrasts between human and divine – undergird his ideas about the importance of wisdom for living well.

1. The Soul

Heraclitus was an innovator when it comes to the *psuchê*, a term I translate here, following tradition, as “soul.” The nature of his innovations, and their importance for his ethical thought, can best be appreciated against the backdrop of earlier views. Much has been written about the use of the term “*psuchê*” in Homer, and about its shifting meaning in the centuries that followed.⁵ Speaking generally, and with some risk of oversimplification, the term “*psuchê*” had a narrower and more specific meaning in earlier texts, then gradually expanded its semantic range during the sixth and fifth centuries, in both philosophical and non-philosophical writings.⁶ In Homer, as has been

and concerning what makes a human life go badly or well. I take these to be ethical questions, broadly construed. My aim in this paper will be explicate and explore his answers to these questions. I doubt Heraclitus ever systematically addressed questions about the nature and extent of our obligations to others, of the kind central to much contemporary normative ethics. At least, I find insufficient evidence in the extant fragments and testimonia to justify attributing specific views on such matters to him. But what we *do* find in Heraclitus, I shall urge, are views about wellbeing and an ethics of human excellence in which wisdom, tempered by discipline and self-control, plays a leading role. See also next note.

⁴ My claim will be that Heraclitus regarded such comprehension as *necessary* for living well, and as something most people lack – not that he deemed it alone *sufficient* for wellbeing.

⁵ For detailed discussion of this development, with supporting examples, see D. Claus, *Toward the Soul: An Inquiry into the Meaning of the Word Psuchê Before Plato [Toward the Soul]* (New Haven and London, 1981). For a summary and overview of changes in the use of the word “*psuchê*,” see H. Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of Soul,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2009 revision).

⁶ The idea that “*psuchê*” gradually expanded its meaning over time has now largely displaced the older view, influentially articulated by J. Burnet, “The Socratic Doctrine of the Soul,” *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 7 (1916), 235–59, that Socrates' invocation to his fellow Athenians to “care for their

widely observed, it denoted either (i) that without which a person is dead, a “life force,” which warriors risk in battle, or (ii) that which leaves a person at death to continue its existence as a “shade” in Hades. In addition, the word was used only when death is in some way salient.⁷ To have a *psuchê* was to be alive. However, although the soul was viewed as responsible for life, its role *in* life was felt to be limited: it was not the “core” of the living human being, the basis of personality, or the source of our various psychological attributes. In particular, it was not regarded as responsible for our desires or feelings, was not held to serve as the center of cognition or bodily coordination, and was not treated as the bearer of ethical value.⁸

In contrast to the limited and specific early use of “*psuchê*,” Heraclitus assigned the soul significant new roles.⁹ In particular, he was the first thinker we know of to treat the soul of the living person as the centre of cognition and the bearer of ethical value. In treating the soul in these ways, Heraclitus anticipated the ideas of later philosophers, for whom the *psuchê* played a central role in psychology, epistemology and ethics. I begin with the following Heraclitean fragments, which all assign new significance to the soul:¹⁰

B107: Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to people if they have barbarian souls.

B117: A man when drunk is led by a boy, stumbling and not knowing where he goes, having his soul moist.

B118: Gleam of light: the dry soul, wisest and best.

In these fragments, Heraclitus treats the soul of a living person as something that can be

souls” marked an abrupt and radical break from the still dominant Homeric usage of the word.

⁷ This feature of Homeric use was emphasized by B. Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, [*Discovery*] T. G. Rosenmeyer (trans.) (Oxford, 1953) (originally published *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, Hamburg, 1946).

⁸ Here and in what follows, when I refer to the soul as the “bearer of ethical value,” I mean that its good or bad state during life determines, at least to a large degree, whether a human being lives well or badly, and hence that the soul’s state should be an object of ethical concern.

⁹ The novelty of Heraclitus’ use of the term ‘*psuchê*’ has long been recognized. See especially M. Nussbaum “‘*Psuchê*’ in Heraclitus,” [*‘Psuchê*’] *Phronesis* 17.1 (1972), 1-16, 153-70, and M. Schofield, “Heraclitus’ Theory of the Soul and its Antecedents,” [*‘Theory*’] in S. Everson (ed.), *Companions to Ancient Thought 2: Psychology* (Cambridge, 1991), 13-34. Nussbaum and Schofield both argue Heraclitus not only deviated from the Homeric conception of *psuchê*, but also deliberately challenged it.

¹⁰ I refer to all fragments using the numbers of Diels-Kranz. Translations are those of R. McKirahan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 2nd Ed. (Indianapolis, 2010), sometimes slightly modified.

in better or worse states. Furthermore, in all three fragments, the soul's condition is linked to the state of a person's cognitive powers. First, in B107, some human souls are said to be "*barbarous*," an adjective that usually denoted those unable to speak Greek. Some have argued that the word had this specific meaning here too. On this view, Heraclitus argued that our senses mislead us if we don't know "how to hear or speak" (cf. B19) our own language.¹¹ Others, however, have interpreted Heraclitus as using the term metaphorically, to claim that a person whose soul is *barbaros* is as uncomprehending of what his senses "tell" him as *barbaroi* are of the Greek language.¹² For present purposes, the important point holds on either interpretation: Heraclitus was not rejecting the senses outright, but rather claiming they are "good witnesses" only when their evidence is rightly interpreted and understood. Furthermore, crucially, on both interpretations Heraclitus traces our inability to understand what the senses tell us specifically to a defect in our souls. For him, it seems, understanding the world through our senses requires that our soul – treated as the locus of this cognitive power – be in the right state.

Fragment 117 reinforces the thought that the soul is the seat of cognition, and also the idea that it can be in better or worse states. The condition of the drunk is humiliating: he is reduced to the point where he is inferior to, and dependent on, an immature child, who must lead him along. Heraclitus traces the source of the drunk's cognitive impairment – which leaves him stumbling, unaware of where he goes – specifically to the condition of his soul, which is moistened by the drink he has consumed. This idea would probably have startled Heraclitus' audience, unaccustomed as they were to regarding the soul as the centre of cognition and physical coordination. Taken as a whole, the image is playful, but also clearly had a serious point. Heraclitus' disdain for the drunk is palpable: a grown man should be superior to and leading a child, not vice versa.¹³ Implicitly, Heraclitus urges us to remain self-possessed and clear-headed, and not to allow our souls to enter such a state. This message echoes that of other fragments, in which Heraclitus

¹¹ E.g. Nussbaum, "*Psuchê*," 7-15, and also K. Robb, "*Psyche and Logos in the Fragments of Heraclitus: The Origins of the Concept of Soul*," *The Monist* 69.3 (1986), 315-51, at 327-33.

¹² E.g. Snell, *Discovery*, 145; Kirk, *Cosmic Fragments*, 281, 376; Marcovich, *Heraclitus*, 47-8, Kahn, *Art and Thought* 106-7. Incidentally, this second interpretation does not require anachronistically attributing to Heraclitus anything as specific as the modern notion of "sense data," as critics have claimed.

¹³ Heraclitus also appeals to the superiority of adults to children in B79, B121.

extolls sound thinking and self-control (*sôphronein*).¹⁴ It also chimes with fragments in which Heraclitus associates physical pleasure with moistening of the soul, and in which he denigrates bodily gratification.¹⁵

In B107 and B117, Heraclitus considers souls that are in bad shape; by contrast, in B118, we learn about the state of the best soul. In sharp contrast to the moistened, impaired soul of the drunk, it is a “dry” soul, Heraclitus claims, that is “wisest and best” (*sophôtatê kai aristê*). Here, the soul in its best state is characterized as an *augê*:¹⁶ usually, a beam of light, like a sunbeam. Heraclitus may have chosen this image to emphasize clarity of thought in the good soul. In any case, he again connects the good condition of the soul to the good state of the agent’s cognitive powers. Indeed, by placing the superlative adjectives in parallel, Heraclitus effectively *identifies* the best soul with the wisest. In this way, this fragment tells us both about the physical state of the best soul (it is dry), and also about its corresponding cognitive state (it is wise).

I shall return to Heraclitus’ views on the nature and importance of wisdom shortly. First, though, it will be useful to briefly consider the soul’s physical constitution, in relation to its good state. For Heraclitus, the *psuchê* was not immaterial, as the translation “soul” might misleadingly suggest to some modern readers. Rather, he envisaged it as

¹⁴ In B112 and B116, Heraclitus strongly praises *sôphronein* (“thinking soundly”). This term connoted not only sound thinking, but also self-possession, self-awareness and self-control. It was, therefore, the antithesis of what the drunk displays. Some (e.g. Marcovich, Kirk) have doubted the authenticity of these two fragments; others (e.g. Kahn) have defended them. Yet even if we grant that Stobaeus may have “flattened out” the aphorisms he reported, he is generally a respectable source, while the Ionic forms give some confidence. On the whole, it is reasonable to think the praise of *sôphronein* is genuinely Heraclitean. Further evidence that Heraclitus favoured self-control may be found in B110 (“it is not better for people to get all they want”) and in B85 (“it is difficult to fight passion (*thumos*), for whatever it wants it buys at the price of soul”). R. Bolton, “Nature and Human Good in Heraclitus,” in K. Boudouris (ed.), *Ionian Philosophy* (Athens, 1989), 49-57, argues that Heraclitus’ praise of *sôphronein* (which he translates as “moderation”) lay at the heart of his ethics, since to be moderate is to make oneself orderly, and hence to resemble the orderly natural world. This idea is appealing, but speculative. At any rate, I believe Heraclitus placed more emphasis on understanding the *cosmos* than on imitating it.

¹⁵ B77: “For souls it is pleasure, not death, to become moist.” As J. Mansfeld, “Heraclitus on the Psychology and Physiology of Sleep and on Rivers,” *Mnemosyne* 20 (1967), 1-29, has argued, there is no need to amend the received text, contra Diels and others. Getting drunk both brings pleasure (*terpsis*, “sensual delight”) and moistens the soul – but it does not destroy it. It may be “death” for souls to become water (B36), but Heraclitus clearly thought a soul could become progressively moister (or drier) without ceasing to be soul. Heraclitus implicitly denigrates bodily gratification in B29, when he says the many “stuff themselves like cattle.”

¹⁶ Reading *augê*, with Diels-Kranz. For arguments for this construal of the text, which is questioned by Marcovich, see J. Bollack and H. Wismann, *Héraclite ou la separation* (Paris, 1972), 325-7.

composed of some kind of material stuff. Scholars have disagreed about what kind of stuff this is: some have argued for fire, some for air, some for an alternative to both.¹⁷ For present purposes, there is no need to adjudicate between these possibilities. Still, we might wonder how the material composition of the soul relates to its role as bearer of ethical value and seat of our cognitive powers.¹⁸ As far as we know, Heraclitus took no interest in, say, the physiology of cognition. Nevertheless, he clearly believed there is at least a correlation between the physical state of one's soul and one's psychological and ethical condition. Furthermore, he seems to have envisaged causation running in both directions: physical changes to the soul can cause psychological effects, as in the case of the drunk of B117 (cf. B77), while our mental states can alter the soul's physical condition. For example, passion (*thumos*) can diminish the soul (B85), while attaining understanding transforms it into a dry gleam, the soul that is "wisest and best."

Some scholars have located an important connection between Heraclitus' conception of the soul and his ethics in his theory of the afterlife. On this view, Heraclitus took our soul's posthumous fate to reflect our ethical conduct. For example, some claim that the best Heraclitean soul is rewarded upon death with ascent to the aether, where it joins the surrounding cosmic fire.¹⁹ However, the extant fragments do not support attributing this view to Heraclitus. His claims that "greater deaths win greater destinies"

¹⁷ The view that Heraclitean soul is fire is widely held. See e.g. Marcovich, *Heraclitus*, 361, 377; G. S Kirk, J. E Raven and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (2nd Ed.) (Cambridge, 1983), 203-10; Schofield "Theory," 20; D. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy: The Complete Fragments and Selected Testimonies of the Major Presocratics, Part I* (Cambridge, 2010), 192. For arguments that it is air, see Kahn, *Art and Thought*, 238-40, followed by T. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments – A Text with Translation and Commentary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 104-5. G. Betegh, "On the Physical Aspect of Heraclitus' Psychology" ["Physical Aspect"], *Phronesis* 52 (2007), 3–32, surveys the evidence and concludes that Heraclitean soul was probably neither fire nor air, but rather "exhalation" (*anathumiasis*) – that is, roughly, vapour which arises from water in the presence of heat, and which can exhibit a range of states from heavy mist to dry air. This interpretation has strong support in ancient testimony, including the Stoics and Aristotle (*DA* 1.2 405a24). Moreover, as Betegh emphasizes, it readily accommodates Heraclitus' idea that the soul can become progressively moister or drier while remaining in existence. This feature of Heraclitus' view is crucial for his ethics, but is difficult to square with the idea that soul is fire, since it is hard to make sense of the idea of moist fire.

¹⁸ It is perhaps worth noting that the idea of a physical stuff bearing mental functions was probably not considered especially strange at this time. In support of this thought, see Betegh, "Physical Aspect," who argues that Heraclitus shared with other early thinkers, such as Diogenes of Apollonia and Anaxagoras, the general metaphysical assumption that "that which is the bearer of mental functions in us is a stuff that occurs also elsewhere in the world in smaller and larger quantities" (233).

¹⁹ See especially G. S. Kirk, "Heraclitus and Death in Battle (fr.24 D)," *American Journal of Philology* 70 (1949), 384-93, followed by Kirk, Raven and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 207-8.

(B25) and that “gods and humans honour those slain in war” (B24) could refer to posthumous reputation as easily as to a literal afterlife (cf. B29: “the best renounce all things for one thing, the eternal fame of mortals ...”). Fragment B27 (“things unexpected and unthought of await humans when they die”) hardly justifies ascribing any positive eschatological doctrine. The meaning of B98 (“souls sniff in Hades”) is obscure, but its point may have been epistemological or even satirically anti-Homeric; at any rate, it is unlikely Heraclitus intended to endorse a traditional view of souls persisting as “shades” in Hades. In fact, none of the extant fragments clearly supports attributing a belief in an afterlife to Heraclitus *at all*, and some scholars have doubted he held any such belief.²⁰ Yet even if he did believe in an afterlife for the soul, our textual evidence provides no sound basis for attributing a specific, positive, eschatological doctrine to him. In any case, as far as his ethical views are concerned, it seems his focus lay more on the state of the soul in *this* life than on its fate in the next.

For present purposes, I have said enough about Heraclitus’ conception of the soul. To recap, Heraclitus was an innovator when it comes to the *psuchê* and its role. His most significant innovation – and the most important for this paper – is that he granted the soul of the living person new significance as the centre of cognition and bearer of ethical value. The soul can be placed in better or worse states by the actions we perform, the emotions we feel, and the choices we make. Furthermore, for Heraclitus, this clearly matters: we should care about the good condition of our soul. In its best state, the soul is both “dry” and “wise.” Achieving this state requires, it seems, discipline and self-control. In addition, it also requires acquiring insight and comprehension. Indeed, as we will see, Heraclitus has a great deal to say about the importance of understanding in a good human life. If this is right, Heraclitus anticipated two of the central strands in Socratic (and post-Socratic) ancient Greek ethical thought. First, he claimed people should care about the state of their souls. Second, he considered wisdom essential for living well.

2. Human Understanding

²⁰ Nussbaum, “*Psuchê*,” 153-69; J. Mansfeld, “Heraclitus on Soul and Super-Soul, with an Afterthought on the Afterlife,” *Rhizomata* 3(1) 2015, 62-93.

On even a cursory reading of the extant fragments, it is clear that human understanding – and its lack – was among Heraclitus’ central concerns. Time and again, he denounces the masses, and various figures with a popular reputation for wisdom, for their incomprehension. At the same time, the fragments are replete with epistemological vocabulary.²¹ By focusing on human understanding, rather than merely stating how things are, Heraclitus became a more self-conscious and (we might say) philosophical thinker than many of his predecessors. In addition, I believe his views on insight (*noos*) and wisdom (*sophia*) lie at the heart of his ethical outlook. I will argue that Heraclitus is not best understood as dogmatically asserting positive doctrines, then arrogantly berating others for failing to understand what he said, as is often supposed. Rather, I maintain, his emphasis on the incomprehension of others reflects his fundamental stance on the human condition. In particular, Heraclitus believed most people are oblivious to, and at odds with, the world in which they live – and, crucially, live badly as a result. If this is right, then understanding his views on the nature and causes of human incomprehension is essential for appreciating his stance on how humans should live, and why.

One of Heraclitus’ central ideas – and a recurring motif in the extant fragments – is that most people are not fully present in, or aware of, their own world. Despite appearing to be awake, they are like sleepwalkers; despite appearing to listen, they are like the deaf; and, in general, despite appearing to be present, they are “absent.”²² When Heraclitus made such remarks, it was clearly no ordinary kind of ignorance he had in mind. His point was not that most people are unable to understand his (or anyone else’s) scientific or metaphysical theories, or that there are gaps in their knowledge of particular facts. Rather, Heraclitus was claiming that most people are oblivious in some fundamental way to the very nature of the world in which they live – and even, as he says, to what they do and say. Furthermore, crucially, they are unaware of their own sorry state.²³ But what is it that ordinary people are ignorant of, and oblivious to, according to

²¹ For discussion of Heraclitus’ epistemological vocabulary, focusing especially on *noos*, *gnôsis*, *sunesis* and their derivatives, see J. Lesher, “Heraclitus’ Epistemological Vocabulary [“Vocabulary”]” *Hermes* 111 (1983), 155–70.

²² Ordinary people are compared to sleepers in B1 (quoted below) (cf. B73 and B89), and to the deaf in B34: “Uncomprehending when they have heard, they are like the deaf. The saying describes them: though present they are absent.”

²³ Cf. B17: “For the many, in fact all that come upon them, do not understand such things, nor when they

Heraclitus? This much seems clear: on his view, what they fail to grasp can be referred to as “the *logos*.” The following fragments shed light on this idea:

B1: Although this *logos* holds always humans prove unable to understand it, both before hearing and when they have first heard.²⁴ For although all things come to be in accordance with this *logos*, people are like the inexperienced when they experience such words and deeds as I set out, distinguishing each thing in accordance with its nature and saying how it is. But other people fail to notice what they do when awake, just as they fail to notice what they do while asleep.

B89: For the waking there is one common world, but when asleep each person turns away to a private one.

B114 (first part): Those who speak with insight must rely on what is common to all, as a city must rely on law, and much more firmly.

B2: For this reason it is necessary to follow what is common. But although the *logos* is common, most people behave as if they had their own private understanding.

B50: Listening not to me but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all things are one.

Although much is unclear in these fragments, it seems safe to say the following. First, despite the arguments of a small minority of scholars, what most people fail to understand, for Heraclitus, cannot simply be his own account.²⁵ This is not only because he accuses people of failing to comprehend the *logos* before they have even heard what he has to say (B1). Nor is it simply because he weightily distinguishes between listening to him and listening to “the *logos*” (B50). Rather, it is above all because the *logos* is said to be “common” (*xunon*) (B2). It might be argued that when Heraclitus says “the *logos* is common,” he means simply “my account is true.” However, the recurrence of “*xunon*” in other fragments, where it is consistently contrasted with “the private” (e.g. B89, B114,

have noticed them do they know them, but they seem to themselves <to do so>,” and B56 (first part): “People are deceived about the knowledge of obvious things.”

²⁴ To avoid prejudging important interpretive questions, I leave the term “*logos*” untranslated. I explain how I understand its meaning below.

²⁵ The view that “*logos*” in B1, B2 and B50 refers simply to Heraclitus’ own account is defended by M. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient* (Oxford, 1971), 124-9, and by J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (London, 1982), 59.

quoted above), shows it means not “true,” but rather something like “public,” “shared,” “available to all.” If this is right, what Heraclitus claimed most people fail to understand is something shared and available to them all. It is not Heraclitus’ own, particular *logos*, then, but rather the one, common, cosmic *logos*.²⁶

How should we make sense of this idea of a cosmic *logos*, which is available to all, yet which people constantly fail to understand? I have argued elsewhere that it is possible to do this without anachronistically taking the word “*logos*” to denote something like a fixed “formula” or “law” underlying change in the cosmos.²⁷ Rather, I submit, Heraclitus chose the word “*logos*” because he took understanding the world as a whole to be relevantly like understanding a written or spoken “account” (the usual meaning of “*logos*” in his day). Specifically, on this view, much as one must go beyond the meanings of individual words (*epea*) to understand the meaning of a connected account (*logos*), so one must go beyond isolated experiences to understand the meaning of the world as an interconnected whole.²⁸ On this view, the word “*logos*” – at least as used in fragments B1, B2 and B50 – denotes neither Heraclitus’ own account, nor an unchanging “cosmic law,” but rather the world’s constant, common “account” of itself to us all.²⁹ If this is right, understanding the cosmic *logos* is neither understanding what Heraclitus says nor grasping a fixed “formula” underlying change. Rather, it is comprehending the world as whole, based on its revelation of itself to us in our experience.³⁰

²⁶ In addition, in B72 “the *logos*” is characterized as something with which people are “in continuous contact,” yet with which they are “at odds,” with the result that “the things they meet every day appear strange to them.” Marcus Aurelius may have been paraphrasing. Yet the basic idea here, if even remotely Heraclitean, is impossible to square with the view that the *logos* in question is Heraclitus’ own account.

²⁷ Johnstone, M., “On *Logos* in Heraclitus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 47 (Winter 2014), 1-29.

²⁸ Here, I agree with Leshner, “Vocabulary,” 167-8, who argues Heraclitus’ most original epistemological idea was that, in general, comprehension (*sunesis*) of a whole requires grasping the relations among its elements. Just as understanding the meaning of a spoken *logos* requires more than hearing individual words, so grasping the meaning of the cosmic *logos* (Leshner’s phrase) requires more than familiarity with the elements perception provides.

²⁹ Cf. D. Graham, who writes that for Heraclitus “what is needed is not simply more sense experience or more information, but an improved way of comprehending the message (*logos*) that the world offers” (‘Heraclitus,’ in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2011 Edition)*, E. N. Zalta (ed.) URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/heraclitus/>).

³⁰ A key difference between my account and those of many others is that, on my interpretation, Heraclitus’ use of “*logos*” does not show he took understanding the *cosmos* to be a matter of grasping a single, quasi-mathematical “formula,” “principle” or “law,” which underlies change but is itself unchanging. This is not to deny that Heraclitus regarded the *cosmos*, and its changes, as orderly and comprehensible. Indeed, that he did so is clear, I think, from his (novel) use of the word “*cosmos*” (“arrangement”) to denote the whole

The question of how best to understand the meaning of the word “*logos*” in these Heraclitean fragments will surely remain controversial. Nevertheless, the key point, upon which I insist, is that when Heraclitus called others “uncomprehending” (*axunetoi*, B1) of the *logos*, he meant they fail to grasp the fundamental nature of the world in which they live. But what exactly are they missing, and why? And what should they *do*, to attain understanding? To answer these questions, it will be helpful to examine Heraclitus’ views on the value and use of the senses, and on inquiry. As noted, Heraclitus does not reject the senses outright. This is clear from B107 (quoted above); for in claiming that the senses are “bad witnesses” for those with “barbarian” souls, Heraclitus suggests they can be *good* witnesses for those whose soul is in the right state. In addition, he explicitly praises using the senses: “all that can be seen, heard, experienced: these are what I prefer” (B55). For Heraclitus, it seems, the senses give us what we need to acquire wisdom. Nevertheless, sense experience is not sufficient. Rather, the evidence of our senses must be interpreted rightly if it is to lead to understanding the world.

Heraclitus’ attitude towards empirical inquiry was apparently similar to his attitude towards sense experience. Such inquiry is useful, and perhaps even necessary, for acquiring insight and wisdom (“men who are lovers of wisdom must be inquirers into many things indeed” (B35)). However, it is by no means sufficient, as is clear from the fact that many actual “inquirers into many things” manifestly lack the kind of insight we should seek:

B40: Much learning (*polumathiê*) does not teaching insight (*noos*). Otherwise, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and moreover Xenophanes and Hecateaus.

Much could be said about why Heraclitus criticizes these particular figures. Nevertheless, his general point is clear enough. Although these men inquired into many things, none of them acquired true insight (*noos*) as a result of their researches. Much learning does not convey insight. But how does one overcome the limitations of polymathy, interpret one’s evidence correctly, and comprehend things aright? Not, it seems, by relying on prominent

(B30), and from his emphasis on “measure” in nature (e.g. B30, 31, 94).

intellectuals, traditional poets, or the popular “wisdom” of the crowd:

B104: What insight (*noos*) or intelligence (*phronêsis*) 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.

B57: 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.

B42: Heraclitus said that Homer ought to be expelled from the contests and flogged, and Archilochus likewise.

B129: Pythagoras the son of Mnesarchus practiced inquiry (*historiê*) more than all other men, and making a selection of these writings constructed his own wisdom, polymathy, evil trickery.

B28 (first part): The knowledge of the most famous persons, which they guard, is but opinion ...

We might suppose that Heraclitus’ goal in making such remarks was to reduce the standing of potential rivals in the eyes of his audience, and thereby to establish his epistemic superiority. However, I believe he was not simply claiming everyone else is wrong, while he alone is right. Rather, I suspect, he was doing something more interesting: recommending that we avoid placing our trust in what *anyone* else tells us, *including him*. In other words, Heraclitus urges us not to rely on the testimony of others, but rather to inquire into the nature of things ourselves.³¹ Several considerations support this idea. First, Heraclitus chastises others for their gullibility and the ease with which they are “set aflutter” by what they hear (B87: “A fool is excited by every account (*logos*)”). Second, B101a (“eyes are more accurate witnesses than ears”), often read as ranking sense modalities, may instead be saying we should prefer “eye-witnessing” to

³¹ Here, I agree with J. Lesher, “Early Interest in Knowledge,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, A. A. Long (ed.) (Cambridge, 1999), 225-49: “Heraclitus shifted the focus of philosophical interest in knowledge, away from the conventional view of wisdom as embedded in the teachings of revered poets and self-proclaimed experts, away also from the superficial awareness of the features of the world available to us through sense perception, and toward a theoretical understanding of the cosmos that is available to us through reflection on its complex and hidden nature” (236).

hearsay.³² Third, Heraclitus claimed he engaged in self-examination, not learning from others (B101: “I searched [for] myself”), and apparently urged others to seek self-knowledge too (B116). Fourth, as noted, Heraclitus urges others to listen not to him, but to the *logos* (B50). If, as I have argued, this requires attending directly to the world, he was effectively saying: “to comprehend the world, don’t just listen to me; rather, see for yourselves.” Finally, as I have urged, Heraclitus thought wisdom comes, not from learning new facts, but from correctly interpreting what is already before our eyes.³³ One does not achieve this merely by listening to, and accepting, what others have to say.³⁴

However, although Heraclitus urged his audience to “wake up” and comprehend reality for themselves, he clearly thought achieving true insight is no easy matter (“nature (*phusis*) is wont to hide” (B123), “an unapparent connection (*harmonia*) is stronger than an apparent one” (B54)). What do most people miss, and why is it hard to grasp? A full and adequate answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this paper. However, I suspect his basic idea was something like this: instead of regarding the world as a collection of distinct, separate, and generally static things, we should recognize it is a single, dynamic, and interconnected whole.³⁵ This is not a mere matter of assenting to the claim that “everything is interconnected.” Rather, it requires understanding that and how this is so, which, in turn, requires adopting a way of thinking adequate to the structure of reality. What does this involve? When Heraclitus claims, in B50, that “all things are one” (*hen panta einai*, B50), I suggest his idea was not that we should dismiss multiplicity and diversity as illusory, as some Eleatic monists were later inclined to do. Rather, it was that we should hold “one” and “all things” in our minds at once, without collapsing one into the other, since, at the highest level of generality, unity and diversity depend on each

³² As argued by Kahn, *Art and Thought*, 106 and Robb, “*Psyche and Logos*,” 331-2.

³³ Arguably, B93 (“the lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither speaks nor conceals, but gives a sign”) – often read as a reference to Heraclitus’ own “riddling” style – actually conveys a similar point. Heraclitus may have intended, not to compare himself to Apollo, but rather to insist that understanding reality requires the hard work of interpretation, since the meaning of things does not rest on the surface.

³⁴ Allow me to offer two speculative thoughts to corroborate this idea. First, Heraclitus had a reputation as a recluse. If this reputation was deserved, he cannot have thought acquiring wisdom requires a teacher. Second, Heraclitus’ aphorisms seem ill-suited to convince others that his positive doctrines are superior to his rivals’, but are well-suited to serve as a reprimand, provocation, and spur to thought for his audience.

³⁵ Here, I concur with D. Furley, *The Greek Cosmologists*, Vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1987): “many of surviving quotations from Heraclitus’ book can be given a context and a connected meaning if we think of them as directed against giving too much autonomy to individual beings in the world” (33).

other.³⁶ The same holds for change and rest: much as the barley drink persists only when stirred (B125), or a river abides only when its waters flow (B12), so the whole *cosmos* persists, not *despite* changing, but *by* changing.³⁷ Wisdom consists in grasping and appreciating this interdependence of opposites, from particular instances to the *cosmos* as a whole. This, I submit, is what most people ultimately fail to do, on Heraclitus' view. As a result, they lack understanding, both of the *cosmos* and of each of its parts.

Let us take stock. I have argued that Heraclitus was deeply interested in human understanding, believed that most people fundamentally fail to comprehend the world in which they live, and exhorted them to strive for insight for themselves. I have also sketched, in very general terms, what I believe Heraclitus thought most people are missing, and why. But what does this have to do with ethics? As I understand him, Heraclitus believed we *ought* to strive, perhaps above all else, for the wisdom and insight he describes. Why ought we to do this? I suspect that Heraclitus, like many later philosophers, did not value wisdom for its usefulness for achieving other ends, such as wealth, pleasure, or honour. Rather, I submit, he had three main reasons for thinking we should strive for wisdom. First, he believed that becoming wise improves the soul. As noted, Heraclitus believed our souls can be in better or worse states, and that the state of our soul is a proper object of ethical concern. If, as he claims, the best soul is the wisest, and if we care about our souls, we should therefore care about acquiring wisdom. Second, Heraclitus may have believed that living in profound ignorance, oblivious to the world in which one lives, just is a bad thing. After all, we don't want to be "at odds" with the world in which we live, or to "sleepwalk" through our lives, as all would agree.³⁸ Here, Heraclitus may have thought, we hit normative bedrock: it is intrinsically bad to be ignorant of, and oblivious to, the fundamental nature of reality. If people are in this state, they just are living badly.³⁹ Third, and finally, Heraclitus seemingly believed that by

³⁶ In B50, *hen* ("one") and *ta panta* ("all things") can both serve as grammatical subject. This parallel construction may have been deliberate. As is often noted, Heraclitus emphasizes the "opposition of unity" as much as the "unity of opposites." On this point, see e.g. M. M. MacKenzie, "Heraclitus and the Art of Paradox," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 6 (1988), 1-37, especially 9-12.

³⁷ Cf. B84a: "Changing, it rests."

³⁸ Cf. B73: "One ought not to speak and act like people asleep." Although Marcus Aurelius may have been paraphrasing, I believe the ethical sentiment is genuinely Heraclitean: Heraclitus thought it was simply *bad* for us to sleepwalk through our lives, oblivious to, and at odds with, the world in which we live.

³⁹ There is another possible reason for pursuing wisdom, related to this one. Heraclitus may have thought

becoming wise we become like god. It is to this last idea that I now turn.

3. God and Wisdom

Heraclitus was deeply interested in religion. The extant fragments include frequent references to god or gods, and numerous remarks on religious practices and themes.⁴⁰ On the basis of these remarks, it is clear he believed in divinities, and also – as we will see – that he inclined towards the idea of a single, powerful, all-pervading deity. In addition, Heraclitus criticized certain religious rites and practices that were common in his day. On the basis of these remarks, some have read him as a relatively straightforward critic of Greek popular religion, who wished to highlight the absurdity of, for example, absolution through blood sacrifice, worshipping statues, or the Dionysian festivals. Others have regarded his stance on popular religion as more subtle: he argued not that such practices should be *abandoned*, but rather that they should be *reconceived*, so their true meaning is appreciated and understood.⁴¹ Whatever the case, Heraclitus clearly believed there was something wrong with the way his contemporaries worshipped and appeased the gods. In this way, he urged his fellow Greeks to change the way they live. However, I want to focus here on a different theme: not Heraclitus’ attitude toward popular Greek religion, but rather the connections he drew between god and wisdom.

Heraclitus believed that gods are vastly superior to human beings:

B78: Human nature has no insight, but divine nature has it.

B79: A man is called foolish by a divinity, as a child is by a man.

B83: The wisest of humans will appear as an ape in comparison with a god in respect to

that if we are ignorant of the world, we will also be ignorant of ourselves, since we are parts of the world. The badness of this ignorance could be cashed out in the terms I use here, if it is intrinsically bad to lack self-knowledge. But it could also be developed in a different way; for Heraclitus may have thought acting and speaking well requires understanding oneself and one’s world, since only then can one become congruent with nature. On this view, wisdom has *instrumental* value, since it leads to (or, at least, is necessary for) right speech and action. I am grateful to David Wolfsdorf for suggesting this possibility.

⁴⁰ The extent of Heraclitus’ interest in religion is documented and emphasized by G. Most, “Heraclitus on Religion,” *Rhizomata* 1.2 (2013), 153-67.

⁴¹ See for example M. Adoméas, “Heraclitus on Religion,” *Phronesis* 44.2 (1999), 87-113.

wisdom (*sophia*), beauty, and all other things.⁴²

In emphasizing the gulf separating gods from humans, Heraclitus worked within a long tradition in ancient Greek thought.⁴³ Indeed, his claim that “human nature has no insight” is reminiscent of Socrates’ famous conclusion, in Plato’s *Apology*, that “human wisdom is worth little or nothing” (23a6-7). Such comparisons between humans and gods aim to instil humility in the face of our human limitations. In a similar vein, Heraclitus likened human opinions to children’s playthings (B70), emphasized the insignificance of a human lifetime (B52), and urged us to avoid *hubris* (B43). Of course, Heraclitus believed some humans are vastly superior to the *hoi polloi*, and included himself in this select group.⁴⁴ However, as the example of Socrates also shows, it is possible to combine a humble belief in the inherent weakness of human nature with a firm sense of one’s own superiority to the common run of humankind. I suspect that Heraclitus, much like Socrates, derived his sense of superiority, above all, from his belief in the profound ignorance of most of humankind. The comparison should not be overdrawn. Heraclitus, unlike Plato’s Socrates, apparently believed he had *acquired* the kind of profound insight most people lack. In addition, unlike Socrates, he believed wisdom requires understanding the world. Nevertheless, the ignorance of human beings and the cosmic insignificance of their lives were clearly important themes in Heraclitus’ thought.

Heraclitus also connected divinity with wisdom. In all three fragments quoted above, the gods’ superiority to humans is intellectual, above all. His praise of the gods’ superior insight and wisdom suggests he regarded divine wisdom as a kind of ideal, to which humans can aspire (I revisit this idea below). In addition, Heraclitus sometimes refers to god as “the wise” (*to sophon*):

⁴² The authenticity of this fragment from the *Hippias Major* is questioned by, for example, Marcovich, *Heraclitus*, 488. It is cautiously defended by Kahn, *Art and Thought*, 174 (with n.211).

⁴³ See Snell, *Discovery*, 136-52.

⁴⁴ Heraclitus sometimes singles out particular contemporaries as vastly superior to the common herd, as in B121 (Hermodorus) and B39 (Bias of Priene). He also says “one person is ten thousand to me if he is best” (B49). Incidentally, while these remarks – and his general disdain for the masses – suggest Heraclitus was not sympathetic to democracy, I find no evidence in the fragments that he took an active interest in the central questions of political philosophy, as opposed to those of ethics.

B32: The wise is one (*hen to sophon*): it alone is both willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus.⁴⁵

B41: The wise is one (*hen to sophon*): knowing (*epistasthai*) the intelligent plan (*gnômên*) by which all things are steered through all.

B108: Of those whose accounts I have heard, no one reaches the point of recognizing that the wise (*sophon*) is set apart from all.

These fragments shed light on both Heraclitus' conception of god and his conception of wisdom. In B32, the label "*to sophon*" refers to god, as the reference to Zeus makes clear. By referring to god as "the wise," Heraclitus indicates that he regarded wisdom as among god's central attributes, if not as *the* central divine attribute. This wise deity is "both willing and unwilling to be called by the name of Zeus (*Zênos*)." In agreement with most commentators, I understand Heraclitus' point roughly as follows. God is willing to be called "Zeus," since this name, of all the names we have, is uniquely apt to denote the most powerful deity and ruler of all. Yet at the same time, god is unwilling to be called by this name, since he is unlike the Zeus of traditional religion, presumably because he lacks the human attributes (and concomitant flaws) commonly associated with the king of the Olympians. If this is on the right track, it seems Heraclitus regarded god as powerful and a ruler, but not anthropomorphic.

In B41, Heraclitus again claims "the wise is one" (*hen to sophon*). Commentators dispute whether "*to sophon*" in this fragment refers to god (i.e. "that which is wise"), or to "wisdom" in general. In fact, it may refer to both. Since the phrase ("*hen to sophon*") refers to god in B32, it is *prima facie* likely Heraclitus intended it to do so here too. However, the remainder of the fragment reads like an account of wisdom in general. To be wise, Heraclitus seems to say, just is to "know" (*epistasthai*) the "intelligent plan" (or "thought," *gnômên*) by which "all things are steered (*ekubernêse*) through all things." On the basis of B64 ("thunderbolt guides all things"), we know Heraclitus conceived of god as "steering" or "guiding" all things (the thunderbolt is a traditional symbol for Zeus). For Heraclitus, then, it seems that true wisdom consists in grasping the divine "plan" for

⁴⁵ Reading *mounon* with the whole predicate phrase.

the *cosmos*. But this is something god knows most of all. If this is right, then, as often with Heraclitus, the ambiguity of the phrase “*to sophon*” may have been deliberate. True wisdom consists in knowing the “plan” by which all things are steered through all things; and this is exemplified by god, the “one” who is paradigmatically wise.⁴⁶

In B108, Heraclitus claims that “the wise” (or “wisdom,” *sophon*) is “different from all” (*pantôn kechôrismenon*). Interpretations of this fragment vary widely. However, most commentators agree that Heraclitus is again referring to god.⁴⁷ If this is right, the question becomes how best to understand the claim that god is “different” (or “separate”) from all. It seems to me unlikely that Heraclitus was claiming god is a transcendent intelligence, as some have maintained.⁴⁸ Literal physical separation is inconsistent with Heraclitus’ claim, in B67, that “God is day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger, but changes the way <oil>, when mixed with perfumes, is named according to the scent of each.” The image is of oil mixing with perfumes and taking on their various scents.⁴⁹ In an analogous way, it seems, Heraclitus envisaged god as *pervading* and *underlying* the phenomenal world, not as spatially distinct from it. In fact, though, this image suggests a better interpretation. Heraclitus’ point may have been that although god pervades and underlies the world we perceive, he should not be simply identified with it, or it with him. Rather, for Heraclitus, god is distinct from the phenomenal world, just as, on his view, “one” (*hen*) is distinct from “all things” (*ta panta*). I argued above that when Heraclitus claimed that “all things are one” (B50), he was not maintaining, in Eleatic fashion, that apparent multiplicity is illusory, and that all

⁴⁶ My interpretation of B41 agrees with that of Kahn, *Art and Thought*, 170-2.

⁴⁷ For a survey of the various possibilities, see Kirk, *Cosmic Fragments*, 398-400. For a very different interpretation, see Alex Long, “Wisdom in Heraclitus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 33 (2007), 1-17. Long argues that Heraclitus was referring to wisdom, which he took to be “different” from “all things,” since it alone is exempt from the general principle of the “unity of opposites.”

⁴⁸ See e.g. Marcovich, *Heraclitus*, 438-9.

⁴⁹ The received text, transmitted by Hippolytus, contains a lacuna. Following Diels, this is often filled with “fire” (*pur*). However, H. Fränkel, “Heraclitus on God and the Phenomenal World,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 69 (1938), 230-44, makes a compelling case for preferring “oil” (*elaion*). Among his many arguments, there is the simple point that “fire” makes no sense of the image: even if “*thuômata*” could mean “incense” (the term more commonly denoted perfumes), incense is not “mixed with” fire, not are fires named after the incense burned in them. By contrast, as Fränkel shows, it is well attested that the Greeks scented oils with perfumes and named oils after their scents. Neutral oil manifesting various scents would therefore provide an apt analogy for a single god manifesting himself in the variety of the phenomenal world.

things should be subsumed into a unity. Rather, his view was that unity and multiplicity are somehow interdependent (cf. B10: “... out of all things one, and out of one all things”). My suggestion is that, for Heraclitus, god constitutes and supplies the “one.” By contrast, “all things” are the plural manifestations of god in the world. We should not conflate the one god with his many manifestations, any more than the oil of B67 should be identified with the various scents it takes on. That, I propose, is the point of the claim that “the wise” (who is one, *hen*) is different from all (*pantôn*).

I have argued Heraclitus believed in a god who is omnipresent in the world, and who underlies its manifest diversity, while steering its changes. This god is supremely wise; indeed, for Heraclitus, god’s knowledge of how “all is steered through all” *exemplifies* wisdom. If this is right, can humans reasonably hope to acquire wisdom, or does it lie beyond our grasp? I see no need to read Heraclitus as deeply pessimistic on this point.⁵⁰ To be sure, he emphasized the ignorance of the common run of humankind, and the epistemic gulf separating human from divine. However, this is perfectly compatible with thinking some people are considerably wiser than others, since we may more or less closely approximate the wisdom of god. Heraclitus clearly believed some humans, including him, are superior to the masses in wisdom, while still falling short of divinity (I see no reason to think Heraclitus considered himself a god, or a divinely inspired prophet).⁵¹ He also seemingly urged his audience to believe their fate is within their power; that, at least, I take to be the point of B119: “a person’s character (*êthos*) is his guardian spirit (*daimôn*).” This does not mean Heraclitus believed there are radically different *kinds* of wisdom: human and divine. Rather, his idea, as I understand it, was that the god’s wisdom serves as a (single) paradigm for human wisdom. We can *approach* the wisdom of god; and as we do, we become more *like* god.⁵² Since god is better than us,

⁵⁰ For a fuller defence of an optimistic view of Heraclitus on human wisdom, see P. Curd, “The Divine and the Thinkable: Towards an Account of the Intelligible Cosmos,” *Rhizomata* 1.2 (2013), 217-47, especially 233-8.

⁵¹ How special did Heraclitus think he and this select few were? I suspect he thought most people are capable of attaining wisdom, at least in principle, even if most fail in practice. For one thing, “thinking (*phroneein*) is common to all” (B113). In addition, the manner in which he chastises others for their ignorance and obliviousness suggests he thought they were capable of more.

⁵² The view that for Heraclitus becoming wise is becoming like god is shared by H. Granger, “Death’s Other Kingdom: Heraclitus on the Life of the Foolish and the Wise,” *Classical Philology* 95.3 (2000), 260-81. However, I doubt Heraclitus thought the wise live “at a higher pitch” (277), equated foolishness with death, or believed in no middle ground between foolishness and wisdom, as Granger maintains.

and wise above all, we become – and live – better thereby.⁵³

Conclusion

Heraclitus was deeply interested in ethical questions, construed broadly as questions about how we should live. Furthermore, these concerns were not peripheral to his philosophical project, but were instead central to his thought. In this paper, I have explored the ethical dimension of Heraclitus' philosophy. My central idea is that Heraclitus valued wisdom above all, and regarded it as essential for living well. On my account, he believed most people live badly because they are oblivious to, and at odds with, the true nature of the world in which they live, and that wisdom consists in understanding this world. Heraclitus denounced both the masses and famous figures for their ignorance, gullibility, and lack of insight. I have argued that these criticisms reflect more than arrogance on his part (although they do reflect that). Rather, Heraclitus was aiming to startle his audience out of their complacency, urging them to “wake up” and grasp the natures of things for themselves. This does not require finding expert teachers, or studying remote phenomena, or withdrawing from the realm of the senses. Rather, it requires a reorientation towards, and reinterpretation of, a shared world already available to us all. The culmination of this process, if all goes well, is an understanding of the world as an interconnected and dynamic whole, as opposed to a mere collection of independent things. If we achieve this understanding, we will become congruent with reality, improve our souls, and approach the state of god, the one who is supremely wise.

In advancing these views, Heraclitus anticipated several ideas that played a central role in later Greek ethical thought. Since these similarities are widely overlooked, I close by highlighting them. First, as I have emphasized, Heraclitus was the first Greek

⁵³ I have argued god's main role in Heraclitus' ethics is as an exemplar of wisdom. Some think god plays another role: he lays down “divine law,” to which humans should adhere. The main evidence cited in support of this view is B114, which, as commonly translated, includes the claim that “all human laws are nourished by one law, the divine law.” However, in fact, the text does not mention “divine law”: it says only “by the one divine” (*hupo henos tou theiou*). The passage could equally well be translated as saying all human laws are “sustained” (*trephontai*) by god (the “one divine”), who has ample power, as the fragment concludes by stating. For criticism of the view that Heraclitus distinguishes divine and human law in B114, see A. Mourelatos, “Heraclitus Fr. 114,” *American Journal of Philology* 86 (1965), 258–66, and, more recently, M. Schofield, “Heraclitus on Law (Fr. 114 DK),” *Rhizomata* 3.1 (2015), 47–61.

thinker we know of to treat the soul (*psuchê*) of the living human being as the centre of cognition and the bearer of ethical value. Furthermore, he was the first to (implicitly) urge us to care for the state of our soul, and the first to connect this good state closely to wisdom. Second, like many ancient philosophers, Heraclitus apparently regarded wisdom as an intrinsically valuable thing: something we should pursue, not because it helps us to acquire other things we want, but simply because it is good to be free from ignorance and to comprehend reality aright. Third, in a striking anticipation of Socrates, Heraclitus urged his fellow Greeks to recognize they are profoundly ignorant and yet complacent, oblivious to their own state of ignorance. Also like Socrates, he insisted on a vast epistemic gap separating human from divine. However, unlike Socrates, Heraclitus' conception of wisdom required that we understand, not the nature of virtue, but rather the fundamental nature of our world, taken as a whole. Finally, like many later philosophers, notably the Stoics, Heraclitus believed in a supremely wise god who pervades, steers, and governs the cosmos. He also took the wisdom and insight of this god to provide an ethical ideal: a state we can approximate, and towards which we should strive. In this way, finally, Heraclitus introduced into Greek ethical thought, perhaps for the first time, the idea that humans should aspire to wisdom as a way of becoming like the divine.

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