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Heraclitus and the Work of Awakening

A Dissertation Presented

by

Nicolas Elias Leon Ruiz

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Heraclitus is regarded as one of the foundational figures of western philosophy. As such, he is typically read as some species of rational thinker: empiricist, materialist, metaphysician, dialectician, phenomenologist, etc. This dissertation argues that all of these views of Heraclitus and his work are based upon profoundly mistaken assumptions. Instead, Heraclitus is shown to be a thoroughly and consistently mystical writer whose work is organized around the recurring theme of awakening. He is thus much more akin to figures such as Buddha, Lao Tzu, and Empedocles than to Aristotle or Hegel.

This dissertation is divided into three main sections. The first chapter takes on the related issues of Heraclitus' own discourse and the route to wisdom as he conceived it. What is the status of Heraclitus' famously obscure *logos*? What are the essential preconditions for understanding it? How does one live one's life so as to get wisdom? The second chapter deals with the fundamental realities of human existence that, according to Heraclitus, elude the understanding of most people. Firstly, human existence is seen as a kind of slumber in which the sleepers do not even realize that they are asleep. Secondly, there is a treatment of Heraclitus' use of the Greek esoteric understanding that this human existence—what most of us think of as life—is

somehow, in reality and unbeknownst to us, lived out in the underworld. Finally, there is a substantial discussion of fragment 62 and its assertion that “mortals are immortals and immortals are mortals,” with comparison to Plato’s *Phaedo* and the poetry of Empedocles. The final chapter discusses Heraclitus’ theology as it relates to the issue of human spirituality. Special attention is given to the figures of Zeus and Apollo in the fragments. There is also a commentary on Heraclitus’ suggestion that he and his work somehow parallel Apollo and his divine activity.

Dedication

I dedicate this work
to my wise and good
teacher and friend,

Lawrence Ober, S.J.,

with affection and deep gratitude.

The first man never finished comprehending wisdom,
nor will the last succeed in fathoming her.
For deeper than the sea are her thoughts;
her counsels, than the great abyss.
Now I, like a rivulet from her stream,
channeling the waters into a garden,
Said to myself, "I will water my plants,
my flower bed I will drench";
And suddenly this rivulet of mine became a river,
then this stream of mine, a sea.
Thus do I send my teachings forth shining like the dawn,
to become known afar off.
Thus do I pour out instruction like prophecy
and bestow it on generations to come.

Sirach 24, 26-31

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Introduction

What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
Footfalls echo in the memory
Down the passage which we did not take
Towards the door we never opened
Into the rose-garden...

...Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,
Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.
Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.
Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.¹

—T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, *Burnt Norton*, I

This Project

Heraclitus is universally regarded as one of the fathers of western philosophy. However, the characterization of the nature of his contribution varies widely. To some he is an early example of rational, empirical, scientific inquiry into the physical world. To others he was primarily a brilliantly innovative metaphysician. Still others prefer to see him as the distant ancestor of the great German dialecticians of the 19th century. In the 20th century, certain existential phenomenologists all but claimed him as one of their own.

Behind all of this stands a fundamental set of assumptions that is never questioned. Whatever else may be the case, we know that Heraclitus was, essentially, a rational human being like ourselves. He was a philosopher, concerned with explanation and exposition. He was a thinker, and his fragments encapsulate his thought.

¹ T.S. Eliot, "Four Quartets," in *T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, 117-18.

It is because of this that Heraclitus has been completely misunderstood. We have no idea of who and what he was. We do not understand what he was saying. Perhaps the greatest irony is that Heraclitus himself, at the very outset of what he wrote, explicitly predicted that this would happen.

Everyone who writes about Heraclitus will make at least passing reference to his legendary obscurity. Some will talk about the oracular character of his writing. A few go so far as to say that his thought bears the traces of revelation, his expression, of prophecy. This is as far as it goes.

The problem is that this rather metaphorical way of talking about Heraclitus misses the point entirely. His writing was not just “obscure,” it was esoteric. Heraclitus did not merely employ an oracular mode of expression: he was an oracle. What he said was a revelation and he was its prophet. Heraclitus was far from the early rationalist or primitive scientist he has been made out to be. He was what we today would call a mystic.

The purpose of this project is to open a door to understanding Heraclitus and his philosophy in this light—and as I will argue, this is only way to truly understand anything about the man and his work. There is, however, much more at stake than the accurate depiction of a foundational figure of our civilization or a new appreciation of his writings. Heraclitus’ value to us has been variously assessed. To some he is nothing more than a historical curiosity. More imaginative people see him as giving us a new way of looking at things, or a rigorous and promising method of inquiry. But his philosophy does not offer us a path for thinking. What it does offer is infinitely more precious: a path for living.

Scope, Sources, and Methodology of the Project

This project attempts to offer to the reader an understanding of Heraclitus as a spiritual writer and a reading of his work as a spiritual text.

This project does not constitute an attempt to produce, from the point of view of the text, a new edition and translation of Heraclitus. Nor does it attempt to produce, from the point of view of commentary, an interpretation of the Heraclitean corpus that is exhaustive. This holds true whichever way we understand “exhaustive,” either in terms of covering the entirety of material available to us or in terms of understanding the material selected for interpretation from every possible vantage point of philosophical interest.

Thus there are two things to discuss: the manner of selection of Heraclitus’ words for inclusion in this project and the choice of themes highlighted by the commentary itself.

The choice of the actual Heraclitean material presented in this project was the result of two main factors: one textual and one thematic.

The selection of material for interpretation has, by and large, been carried out with a view to avoiding philological and historical debate. Thus, the vast majority of writings chosen for this project are those more or less agreed to be genuinely Heraclitean. The writings of Heraclitus that are widely claimed to be questionable on grounds of fidelity of thought to the rest of what we know about Heraclitus, textual transmission, or style, have been, for the most part, avoided. Though there is no complete scholarly agreement on these matters, my general procedure has been to err on the side of caution whenever possible.

The works of Heraclitus that I have selected for commentary have been chosen with a thematic aim in mind. As mentioned above, this project is primarily concerned to present Heraclitus as a spiritual writer who wrote spiritual texts. The material selected for interpretation, then, has been selected to assist in this presentation—the focus of the project is on Heraclitus’ philosophy as it pertains to

human spirituality, and not, for instance, physics, cosmology, politics, or theology. However, given Heraclitus' fondness for crossing boundaries between what we would consider disparate philosophical concerns, as well as the interlocking nature of his various writings into a unified philosophic outlook, this renders my method of selection less intrusive than one might expect. The interpreter of Heraclitus, whatever his or her general thematic thrust, is pretty much bound to comment on all areas of Heraclitus' writings. But it is important to note at the outset that the concerns of the project are such that they have informed the selection of material, even if this process is by necessity somewhat diluted by the nature of the material itself. When G.S. Kirk produced his seminal work, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*, he wound up commenting on many texts that were not especially cosmic or physical. My project, with its focus on the spiritual dimensions of Heraclitus, is more concerned with the human sphere, to such an extent that it might be seen as a kind of counterpoint to Kirk, and might have been entitled, *Heraclitus: The Human Fragments*. Like Kirk, however, I am forced by Heraclitus to make forays into themes and concerns not central to my project.

As to why I have chosen to focus on Heraclitus as a spiritual writer and his writings as spiritual texts, the reasons are fairly simple. It is, in the first place, a hermeneutical perspective largely absent from the scholarly literature on Heraclitus. From a purely practical point of view, then, there is simply room for it. But secondly, recent scholarship on the ancient world, and the Presocratics in particular, suggests that through a process of projection onto the texts of anachronistic assumptions, interpretive biases, and our own very human hopes and expectations, we have seriously misunderstood what the earliest Greek philosophers were doing and saying, almost entirely missing the very real spiritual underpinning and meaning of their writings. It is, therefore, a good time for an audit of the received interpretation of Heraclitus' philosophy in these terms. Finally, however, there is the fact that Heraclitus himself invites us to read him in this way. In sometimes explicit, but usually more subtle ways, Heraclitus indicates, repeatedly, that he is not an intellectual or a rationalist and that he does not view theory as real knowledge. On the contrary, he claims divine status and origin for his words, suggests that real wisdom

can only come through what we would most likely characterize as spiritual disciplines, and openly states that it is the lack of certain such disciplines that stands behind the inevitable failure of most people to understand him. In the end, then, my choice of focus and interpretive strategy are determined by what Heraclitus tells us about himself, and what he tells us is required to understand him.

We move along, then, to the discussion of the sources of this project. My work builds upon the fine foundation laid in the twentieth century by several outstanding scholars of the Greeks, the Presocratics, and Heraclitus himself.

In the Francophone world, certainly Louis Gernet and his pupils Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant have exercised considerable influence over our understanding of the Greeks; together they are responsible for a large body of high quality scholarship on the ancient world. Perhaps of greatest importance for this project is the collaborative study by Detienne and Vernant on the nature and meaning of *mêtis*, the Greek term for cunning and practical intelligence, *Les Ruses de l'Intelligence: la Mètis des Grecs = Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*. Their elucidation of *mêtis* and attendant critique of a rather monolithic understanding of truth and inquiry in the Greek world are of fundamental importance to any new study of Presocratic philosophy.

In the English-speaking literature there are five major influences that should be mentioned.

The first of these is the work of E.R. Dodds, in particular, his 1951 book *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Though Dodds himself does not always seem entirely sympathetic to the irrational elements in Greek culture and literature, he nevertheless did the tremendously important work of shattering many misconceptions about the supposed rationality of the Greeks. This paved the way to a new and deeper understanding of ancient literature, and in particular, the mystical and religious aspects of early Greek philosophy.

The second major figure in English is M.L. West. A prolific author, West has written a number of important books and articles on the subjects of early Greek poetry, religion, philosophy, and music, and has also produced numerous editions and translations of Greek texts. He is a tremendously learned scholar, drawing not just on

ancient Greek source material, but also texts from the ancient Near East, Persia, and India. This, combined with both his sharp and lucid intellect and his natural sensitivity as a reader, enabled him to produce the seminal text on the relationship between Presocratic philosophy and the East, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, published by Oxford in 1971. This work is required reading for anyone seriously interested in the study of the Presocratics and the history and origins of Greek philosophy. In my estimation, its single greatest virtue is that it makes glaringly obvious the deep affinities and similarities between the writings of the earliest Greek philosophers, which are commonly thought of as unquestionably rational and scientific, and eastern texts traditionally read as obviously mystical and religious. This deep sympathy between East and West, in terms of subject matter, basic concerns, and doctrine forces the reader with a more conventional outlook on early Greek philosophy to question his most basic assumptions about who the Presocratics were. In addition to this book, West's more recent, 1983 study *The Orphic Poems* is also highly recommended for anyone who wants to learn about the origins and nature of Greek mystical religion. It too has been of great use in the writing of this dissertation.

The third figure from the Anglophone world, and probably the most important for this project, is the provocative Peter Kingsley. In the 1990's, Kingsley, a British classicist and historian of philosophy, quietly began to publish very scholarly journal articles that called into question our understanding of early Greek philosophy, and in particular Empedocles and the Pythagorean tradition. In 1995, Oxford published his *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition*. It was widely hailed by classicists and historians on both sides of the Atlantic as well as by scholars of Islamic philosophy as a masterpiece of highly original and brilliant scholarship, with the potential, in the words of University of California Berkeley's A.A. Long, "to transform a whole discipline." The scope of the book and what it manages to accomplish are indeed formidable. Using unconventional and previously unavailable material, as well as a fresh outlook, Kingsley covers the fragments of Empedocles; their relationship to Pythagorean tradition, Greek magic, and mysticism; the hidden Pythagorean and Orphic sources of Plato's myths; and the historical

transmission of the teachings of Empedocles and the Pythagoreans into Egypt, alchemical groups, and early Sufism. In the course of all this, he manages to restore an understanding of Empedocles' philosophy as a way of life aimed at the recognition of one's divinity—a way of life that was inextricably linked with the actual practice of magic and mysticism. The disturbing implication was that nearly all of the traditional understandings of Empedocles had so grossly distorted his meaning by a process of misplaced rationalization, wishful thinking, and outright bowdlerization, that what remained was an absurd inversion of his philosophy.

The ramifications of this realization for our understanding of the other Presocratics were not lost on attentive readers, and Kingsley himself wasted no time in moving on to new territory: in 1999 his short book on Parmenides' poem and the archeological finds at Velia, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, was published; and 2003 saw the publication of his much more extensive *Reality*, which treated both Parmenides and Empedocles. These two books build upon Kingsley's earlier work and indeed in many ways go far beyond it: together they provide fairly complete accounts of the systems of mystical philosophy and practice laid out by Parmenides and Empedocles as well as an utterly novel way both of understanding their philosophical tradition and actively engaging with it.

However, these books were vastly different, in style and tone, from his earlier works. On the one hand, anyone who bothers to sort through the jumble of notes at the back of either of the two books will find a highly-condensed wealth of always first-rate, often groundbreaking insights: both of these latest works are clearly based on the same extremely competent and original scholarship that earned Kingsley his reputation. On the other hand, the writing is much, much less formal than in his early, more conventionally scholarly work: his style is at times narrative, at times almost conversationally casual and familiar, and he freely employs humor, metaphor, and even esotericism. The tone, too, is quite unlike his first book and previous articles: he completely abandons the cool and sober objectivity of the scholar for a much more personal stance of explicit involvement with the material, he invites the reader to join in this involvement, and is thoroughly dismissive of—indeed, rather relentlessly mocks—anyone who would attempt a more traditionally detached approach to

Parmenides and Empedocles—in particular, the men and women responsible for what he sees as the laughable state of the current scholarly literature on the Presocratics.

This last point has struck many, one suspects, as insufferably arrogant. However, it should be noted, in Kingsley’s defense, that there may be something extremely important, and in the end, absolutely correct, about his insistence that there is really no other way to approach Parmenides and Empedocles than first-hand involvement. If his basic thesis is right, that the writings of these philosophers both spring from and point the way to a living, to an experiential, and above all to a mystical practice, then there literally is no good way to approach them from our normal frames of reference—especially if we are actively attempting to be “objective.” Any attempt to do so is doomed from the start, because it will forever stand outside the lived experience that produced the texts and which is explicitly demanded by those same texts of the reader who would understand them.² The supposed arrogance of Kingsley’s strident denunciations of objective scholarship and the detached scholars who produce it perhaps pales in comparison with the far greater arrogance of those who would claim to be able to understand the words of mystics without actually having the mystical experience from which they came—especially when the mystics in question state, quite openly and repeatedly, that this is impossible.³

² The reader should not suppose that I am claiming any such experience for myself. In chapter 2, I will deal explicitly with the very real limitations on our, and my, possible understanding of Heraclitus. It will be noted, however, that it is, in principle, possible to recognize a mystical text as mystical (and not, for instance, scientific or metaphysical) without speaking from mystical experience or claiming to fully understand the text. For example, one can certainly say that the sutras or koans of Zen are not scientific or rationalist texts, and cannot be approached in the same way as such writings, even if one is not himself a Zennist or enlightened.

³ Recently, an intermediate approach has arisen in the field of religious studies that attempts to understand accounts of mystical experience using the tools of phenomenology and concepts such as multiple intentionalities. Such attempts constitute one possible way of getting beyond traditional approaches to mystical experience from an “outsider’s” perspective: how much is actually gotten right is perhaps only clear to a mystic with some grounding in phenomenological approaches to religious studies. In any case, this work is just getting started and at best clears the ground for a new approach without yet having built much. It is also important to note that these new phenomenologies are largely dependent on modern accounts of mystical states, whose authors use familiar psychological concepts in an active attempt to communicate their extraordinary experiences. It is uncertain if this new scholarship would be able to understand with any measure of success older texts that are often decidedly (and intentionally) esoteric. For two good examples of this new school of thought, see

Kingsley's work leaves the state of the literature on the Presocratics in a new place. Even before his work, the idea that at least some, and perhaps many, shamanic, mystical, and magical elements persisted into the days of early Greek philosophy had been widely considered to be demonstrably true for at least forty or fifty years—and was seriously considered as a thesis well before that, though no one knew quite what to do with this evidence. The work of Gernet, Detienne, Vernant, Dodds, Burkert, and M.L. West during the years preceding Kingsley's public work only strengthened and extended this predicament. But now, it seems that a shift in our understanding of the Presocratics has taken place. It now seems extremely probable that a living mystical practice was right at the heart of early Greek philosophy—and that the elements of magic, mysticism, and shamanism long noticed in the writings of the Presocratics indicate much more that the persistence of remnants of a darker age or the traces of the creative and imaginative temperaments of the first rationalists. In my judgment, Kingsley has established with reasonable certainty that Parmenides was a practicing master of cataleptic ecstasy, while Empedocles was essentially what we would today call a magician or a sorcerer. Though this upsets most of the established picture of the origins of western philosophy, the evidence is good and the argument is compelling. The burden of proof now rests squarely on the shoulders of those who would say otherwise. Any inquiry into other Presocratic philosophers that does not take these new findings seriously runs the very real risk of producing a fabrication based on worn-out biases instead of a real interpretation of the subject matter. Thus, Kingsley's approach to Parmenides and Empedocles, and to early Greek philosophy in general, is what stands in the background of this project. In particular, his insistence that an experiential approach to Presocratic philosophy is the only real route is what inspires my interpretation of Heraclitus and his writings. As we will see, Heraclitus himself is the best confirmation of the rightness of this path of interpretation.

The next major source for this project is Charles Kahn, and with him we move into the tradition of scholarship that deals explicitly with Heraclitus. His edition of the fragments of Heraclitus and his commentary are contained in the volume *The Art and*

Phenomenology of Truth Proper to Religion, ed. Daniel Guerriere; and Anthony Steinbock's forthcoming (Fall, 2007) *Phenomenology and Mysticism: The Verticality of Religious Experience*.

Thought of Heraclitus, published by Cambridge in 1979. In the English language, this has become the standard edition of the text of Heraclitus, and is certainly one of the most important commentaries—all with good reason. This is a fine piece of scholarly editing, translation, and interpretation.

The work of making editorial decisions I leave almost entirely to Kahn; as I mentioned before, it is not my intention to produce a new edition of Heraclitus at this point. Kahn does a fine job of editing as far as I can tell, and I am content with the text as he presents it. In fact, he generally favors manuscript-based readings of various texts, even when this makes them difficult to understand, opting to solve such problems not by emendation but instead by thoughtful translation and commentary. This is an extremely commendable and, alas, all-too-infrequent virtue in an editor.

Kahn's translation is the major source for the English text of Heraclitus presented in this project. Kahn is always a thoughtful and intelligent translator—I am not, however, convinced that he makes no mistakes. Many times, Kahn's rendering is perfectly adequate and indeed preferable to the alternatives. There are, however, also many occasions when I find it necessary to alter a word or two of the translation. Such alterations are always marked in a footnote, and the explicit reason for the change is given where appropriate. Where there is no indication to the contrary in my text or notes, the translation is Kahn's.

Kahn's starting point for the interpretation of Heraclitus is to align himself with an explicitly and formally hermeneutical approach: the modern reader of Heraclitus must herself provide the context for understanding Heraclitus' words. There is no "original meaning" to be discovered, and any attempt to do so will result in failure.

Kahn's hermeneutical approach is tempered by his awareness that interpretation has rules and mistakes are really possible. Indeed, he sees in the scholarship of Heraclitus a whole history of mistakes. In line with his skepticism about any escape from the hermeneutic circle, he finds these mistakes to be the result not of missing the "real meaning" of the fragments but rather of using inappropriate conceptual frameworks for coaxing meaning from the text. He also indicates that his own conceptual framework is deliberately and consciously chosen, though he is

aware of the fact that he cannot appeal to a higher authority that would guarantee the rightness of this framework over others. All this I will discuss in what follows.

The three major features of the framework that Kahn chooses for interpreting Heraclitus are the “linguistic density” of the fragments, the “resonance” between them, and the actual sequential ordering of these fragments into a meaningful flow. I will briefly comment on each of these features.

Kahn is absolutely right to notice that in Heraclitus, a given fragment or word is often semantically ambiguous or even contains an intentional multiplicity of meaning. Competing approaches that attempt to interpret each word or fragment of Heraclitus as meaning one and only one thing often fall into difficulty and contradiction because of their inability or refusal to allow for ambiguity and multiplicity. Thus, in this regard, Kahn’s strategy and hence his interpretation are entirely appropriate to the subject matter and are to be preferred to other, more insistently monolithic readings of Heraclitus.

He is also correct in assuming a significant resonance between the various fragments of Heraclitus. Whatever the original totality of what Heraclitus wrote, it was not just a random series of unconnected thoughts. Kahn proceeds from the assumption that Heraclitus has a unified and unifying vision, and that there is a profound interconnectedness between his various fragments. Indeed, the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning spoken of above are, to a large degree, only fully manifested in a given fragment when the wider context of the other fragments is taken into account. This approach also seems entirely correct to me, though I use it in a very different way.

Finally, there is the matter of the ordering of the fragments. This, I think, is Kahn’s weakest point. It is safe to assume that the fragment universally numbered “1” did indeed stand at the outset of what Heraclitus wrote. Beyond that, however, it is a shot in the dark. I myself have arranged the fragments into a meaningful sequence, but the meaning is entirely contingent on my own expository and heuristic strategies and my overall reading of Heraclitus, and I would never say or imply that this sequence had any intrinsic value beyond that. Kahn is not completely incautious, but goes several steps beyond what I would claim for my own ordering. However, he

compounds this relatively minor error with a truly awful editorial decision—he renumbers the fragments to correspond with his own ordering, and does so using Roman numerals and a visual formatting that make the comparative reader’s task of quickly referencing other works and keeping in mind which fragment is under discussion unnecessarily difficult and irritating.⁴

Overall, however, we have a great deal to be thankful for in Kahn’s text, translation, interpretive approach, and commentary. I do, however, wish to pause for a moment to critique one of Kahn’s assumptions. In doing this I am not singling Kahn out for special criticism: Kahn does not understand Heraclitus to be speaking from the same source or in the same way as I do, and it would be unfair to criticize him for adopting assumptions that many responsible commentators with his perspective would. In fact, I am doing this precisely because I think that Kahn’s assumptions are shared by many, many contemporary academics in the humanities who deal with the interpretation of texts, and because Kahn himself is so explicit about it.

I am referring to Kahn’s claims that there is no original meaning to discover in Heraclitus, that each generation must provide anew their own context and framework in order to find meaning in Heraclitus, that there is really no way to definitively determine which framework is best anyway, and that there is no escape from these hermeneutical realities.

To take Kahn’s hermeneutical stance as an axiomatic truth is in two ways half-correct and in a third way dangerously misleading.

First, even if we do assume this stance at the outset, we do not perhaps have to be so skeptical about knowing, in very general terms, what sort of framework to use in order to understand Heraclitus. Kahn, for instance, mentions philological accuracy as the absolute minimum, the baseline below which no interpretation may fall. But it seems to me that this misses something. There is another bare minimum that I think we can all agree on: courtesy. Whatever else we may do, we ought to extend to Heraclitus (and the rest of the ancients) the very basic courtesy that we extend our colleagues when we read their books or attend their talks. We listen attentively, we

⁴ For ease of citation and reference, with both myself and my readers in mind, I have altogether abandoned Kahn’s numbering and use instead the more standard numbers of the Diels and Kranz edition of the Presocratics’ fragments: *Die Fragmente Der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed.

try to understand where they are coming from—what their background is, where they are going, and what matters to them. Above all, we take very seriously any explicit introductory material that they may offer: if they tell us how their work must be understood, if they say outright why they are doing what they are doing, we, hopefully, have enough respect to pay attention to this. I think it is fair to say that whatever else we do, we must take Heraclitus’ own concerns and background very seriously, and if he tells us explicitly how to approach his work, we would be well advised to listen.

Second, I assert that Heraclitus was a mystic, and that his words point and indeed lead the way to a state that must be experienced to be understood. If this is so, then Kahn is quite right in saying that there is no ready-made meaning in the words on the page, but not in the way that he might imagine. For although there is no fixed meaning inherent in the text, it is not a matter of the reader supplying her own conceptual framework which she can then use to wrest more concepts from the text. Rather, she must supply herself instead. The text is pointing to something that is beyond the reach and power of all concepts, and that “something” cannot be approached by using intellectual frameworks and thoughtful contexts. If the reader wants to find the meaning of Heraclitus’ words, she must add herself to the equation—because she herself, and not her ideas or concepts or frameworks or contexts, is the missing element that must be added if there is to be any understanding. What precisely is meant by all this will be discussed in the body of this project.

Third, and in line with the above two considerations, I note that Heraclitus consistently asserts that reality and his discourse are in fact one, common to all, and shared. Here it is helpful to remember the tremendous similarities in descriptions of mystical states and truths across so many traditions separated by geography, language, culture, time, and religion, but not by essence. We may then speak of an “original meaning” of Heraclitus’ discourse, insofar as we bear in mind that this expression is based on the understanding that his words point and lead to the direct experience of that One Meaning beyond all words and concepts and meanings. Next to this Meaning, all of our intelligent talk about the need of each generation to supply

its own context and our contemporary certainty about the inherently relative nature of meanings fades to meaninglessness. If Heraclitus was who I say he was, I expect he would reject Kahn's basic assumption as overly simplistic and naïve, and in line with his way of dealing with those who say they understand when they do not, would likely mock him, using beautifully and economically composed language, for even assuming to know what "meaning" and "words" are in the first place.

The final source for this project that I need to talk about is the German scholar Roman Dilcher, who has given us one of the finest volumes of Heraclitus scholarship in the English language. Dilcher's Oxford D.Phil. thesis, submitted for academic review in 1993, was subsequently reworked and published to the world at large by Olms in 1995 as *Studies in Heraclitus*. Dilcher's project is a remarkable attempt to synthesize the works of Heraclitus into a coherent philosophical system. He draws upon the continental European tradition of exegesis of Heraclitus, gleaning much from the work of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger. He also makes good use of the more conventional scholarship available to him, and displays an impressive command of that literature.

Dilcher's project represents a new standard in the field of Heraclitus studies. In particular, he takes several highly innovative and fruitful steps with respect to the interpretation of Heraclitus.

In the first place, Dilcher attempts to read Heraclitus' oeuvre as constituting a coherent whole. More precisely, he attempts to unify the supposedly disparate concerns of the various fragments by uncovering the single trajectory of thought that underlies them all. Dilcher attempts this difficult feat with great erudition, rigor, and clarity.

The guiding thought behind all of Heraclitus' writings is, for Dilcher, the idea of "livingness," the most consistent, frequent, and significant manifestation of which is Heraclitus' concern with the living human being. The upshot of this claim is that Heraclitus' work is not primarily a theory of nature at all, but rather an explication of human existence to which physical concerns are of secondary or derivative importance. According to Dilcher's interpretation, the recognition of this idea as the central line of reasoning in the fragments clears up many interpretive difficulties,

especially where Heraclitus deals with life and death and the changing state of the soul during a human lifetime.

This new point-of-departure leads to several important and innovative contentions regarding age-old problems in Heraclitus scholarship.

Of particular note is Dilcher's understanding of the word *logos* in Heraclitus' work. With great elegance, he eliminates, with the highest degree of certainty in any study to date, the possibility of *logos* referring to some grand cosmic formula of how the universe works. He then undertakes a close, critical, historical look at the meaning of the word in Greek history, poetry, and philosophy—a discussion that, in itself, is a wonderful contribution to the study of early Greek literature. Though I find his ultimate conclusions unsatisfying and simply unlikely, the work that went into Dilcher's analysis of the meaning of *logos* in Heraclitus is truly worthy of much respect and admiration.

A second major interpretive move that Dilcher makes, based on his appreciation of Heraclitus' very real concern with human life, regards the relation of the so-called elemental processes and the processes of the soul. Dilcher takes up a sophisticated interpretation of the transformations of soul and the "turnings" or transformations of fire in which the processes of the living human soul are the microcosm of similar processes that occur on a macrocosmic level: the transformations of the great world masses or "elements" in the cosmos at large. I disagree with Dilcher on some fundamental points, but his essential insight, that there is a relation of microcosm and macrocosm between the human soul and the cosmos, is correct. Though others have expressed some version of this same insight in the past, it has never before been articulated with such commendable consistency or depth of meaning.

Dilcher also puts forth a very sophisticated understanding of Heraclitus as a dialectician. This fact in itself is of less concern for this project, but it has one very important and gratifying result. Dilcher's dialectical interpretation of Heraclitus is carried out with such intelligence and finesse that on strictly philosophical grounds it absolutely precludes any future facile dismissals of Heraclitus and his so-called "unity thesis" as nothing more than a confused thinker with a logically contradictory

thought. It also offers one the somewhat guilty pleasure of watching an exegete of Dilcher's tremendous intellect utterly demolish the graceless dismissals of this sort that already exist among a few of the more analytically-minded interpreters of Heraclitus. Though I will subsequently explain Heraclitus' idea of unity as a principally religious conception, Dilcher's accomplishment here allows one to rest secure in the knowledge that whatever other sins one may have to deal with from Heraclitus scholars, this particular smug condescension will no longer be among them.

There are indeed several other works that are excellent resources for the student of Heraclitus, and of which I have availed myself on several occasions; the reader will be able to find them all in my bibliography. Of particular worth and deserving of special mention, both in terms of depth of philosophical penetration and overall sensitivity to Heraclitus' concerns, is Guthrie's extensive entry on Heraclitus in his multi-volume history of Greek philosophy. Also of some use is Kirk's work on Heraclitus, both in his book-length survey *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* and his chapter in that classic textbook of early Greek philosophy, *The Presocratic Philosophers*. Though to my mind dated and essentially somewhat flawed, Kirk's work is still a decent, general introduction to Heraclitus and especially to the more traditional interpretive strategies for seeking his meaning, and thus is useful for anyone just starting out or attempting to orient themselves amidst an ocean of secondary literature.

It is time, then, to discuss the methodology of this project, which I will discuss in three points and a final note on language.

First, I completely agree with Kahn and Dilcher on the need to read the fragments of Heraclitus as a systematic whole: that is, not necessarily as parts of what we would think of as a philosophical system like that of Hegel or Kant, but certainly as proceeding from an internally consistent and interlocking vision of reality, human beings, the divine, truth, learning, and so forth. My commentary is based on this understanding of the wholeness of Heraclitus' writings.

Secondly, and proceeding from this first point, I categorically reject the practice of "religious quarantine" that I find in so much of the literature on Heraclitus.

This practice I define as the keeping of anything explicitly having to do with religion as far as possible from the other fragments, and vice versa. Of course, my overall picture of Heraclitus is as a primarily religious writer, and I am thus likely to search for a spiritual significance for a fragment that, at first glance, has little to do with explicitly divine matters. But there is one good reason to reject any absolute and impermeable boundaries between topics in Heraclitus: Heraclitus. We are told by an ancient source that Heraclitus wrote a book, and that this book was divided into three sections: the *logos*, the theology, and the politics. Commentators have offered various assessments of the reliability of this report, and I confess it does seem a strange division, as it fails to mention other major themes that do not seem to fall into these categories: the “physical fragments” concerning the cosmos, fire, and the other elements, or those fragments having to do with the soul, for instance. But whether or not we can definitively determine the accuracy or significance of this report means nothing in itself, because we can still see that the fragments of Heraclitus cross the boundaries between these divisions quite at will. Consider the following three examples:

- 1** ...this *logos* is forever...all things come to pass in accordance with this *logos*...
- 94** The Sun will not transgress his measures. If he does, the Erinyes, ministers of Justice, will find him out.
- 114** Speaking with insight, they must hold fast to what is shared by all, as a city holds to its law and even more firmly. For all human laws are nourished by a divine one. It prevails as it will and suffices for all and is more than enough.⁵

The presence, in 94, of the Erinyes and Justice, as well as the Sun, who was of course a great god, suggests a “theological” fragment—but the mention of the sun’s measures, most likely a reference to the course of the visible sun through the sky between the solstices, indicates astronomy. If this is a purely theological fragment, it

⁵ Translations in the introduction are drawn from Kahn, Guthrie, and my own work. At times, only enough of the quotation is given to make the relevant point; however, nothing here is taken from the surrounding text such that the meaning is twisted. The interested reader may use the Diels-Kranz numbers given to check context and translation for herself.

certainly is noteworthy in its concern with early physics. If it is a “physical fragment,” then it seems strange to find the gods given the governance of celestial movements, until we remember how Heraclitus is quite explicit and serious about the role of the divine in ordering the cosmos when he talks about Zeus.

In 114, it is massively unclear what we are dealing with. The first words laud the insight that holds fast to what is “shared,” which of course was a frequent Heraclitean description of both reality and the *logos*. But the comparison is to the wisdom of a city that clings to its law—surely a political statement. Yet the whole thought of the fragment is justified by the idea that the origin of all human laws is the divine law—which seems to be an explicit combination of political and theological themes. Is this fragment about the *logos*? Politics? The divine? All three? Note how absolutely unconcerned Heraclitus is to separate out religious, philosophical, and political subjects within the text.

Finally, consider the first words of what Heraclitus wrote. In 1, we at last seem clearly to be dealing with the *logos*. But this very *logos* is described as “being forever” and “that according to which all things come to pass.” The first expression is a common epithet of the divine, and the second implies a providential power over the cosmic order. Thus this exemplar of a “*logos* fragment” has manifestly theological content.

These are just three very explicit examples of the mixture of themes that marks the writing of Heraclitus—many others could be adduced. My argument is merely this: we should not be so quick to assume that an apparently philosophical or physical or political work cannot have religious significance, and thus confine our religious interpretations to only those fragments which are explicitly religious. An openness to the religious in all of the fragments is, I contend, the only way to solve certain problems of interpretation that have plagued commentators for so long. Beyond even this, however, and more importantly, this procedure is clearly suggested by Heraclitus’ explicit declarations of his own concerns, intentions, and outlook.

The third and final methodological procedure I want to mention is my habit of looking for parallels, first and foremost in the Presocratic tradition but also in the wider milieu of Greek philosophy and religion from the Heroic through the

Hellenistic periods. This comes from the recognition that although Heraclitus was a very original and independent writer, he was not completely idiosyncratic and unique. His work did not, as it were, come out of nowhere. Understanding his oblique mode of expression is a task best accomplished by looking back into the world in which Heraclitus lived and comparing his words to those of people who had similar concerns, intentions, and outlooks. This will give us some idea of what he was talking about. This is especially important given what we now know about Parmenides and Empedocles: a fresh perspective on these two Presocratic giants and their meaning is now available to us, and there are many instructive parallels to be drawn between their work and Heraclitus. I intend to make full use of this fact.

Finally, I want to explain my use of the word that I will henceforth employ throughout this project to describe the writings or fragments of Heraclitus: “works.”

Typically, anything that comes down to us from the pen of Heraclitus is called a “fragment.”⁶ This is not entirely inappropriate, as there is indeed something fragmentary about the writings of Heraclitus. Firstly, the sum total of the extant writings of Heraclitus must be considered a fragment of the original whole, much of which is lost to us. Secondly, oftentimes quotations of Heraclitus are decidedly indirect and contain glosses, rewordings, and outright fabrications by later writers—thus, it is sometimes appropriate to speak of an individual Heraclitean quotation as itself a fragment of his original form of expression.

But the word “fragment” conceals more than it discloses.

It connotes a similarity to the fragmentary texts of other Presocratic prose writers that were originally parts of much more recognizable wholes: the extended outpourings of scientific prose found in the treatises of the Milesians, for example.

Yet the Heraclitean “work” is not fragmentary in this way: it is not a few sparse lines of a much larger and originally contiguous whole. The evidence, in fact, points in exactly the opposite direction: each work was intended to be as succinct as it was. It is thus misleading to refer to them as fragments.

⁶ I assume that Heraclitus worked in writing. Kirk thinks that the “book” of Heraclitus was originally a collection of his sayings—however he is in the extreme minority in this view. See *Heraclitus: the Cosmic Fragments*, 7 and West’s powerful counterarguments in *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 113 n. 2.

Additionally, as many have noted, each work displays a deliberate, meticulous, subtle, and ingenious craftsmanship—but it is perhaps most important to notice the wide use of indirect language. Heraclitus freely employs every trick of composition, with the subtle grace of a master, to say things without saying them: allusion, double entendre, ambiguity, metonymy, wordplay, and symbolism are found again and again throughout his writings. In this sense, too, it is inaccurate to call the writings of Heraclitus “fragments”—they are indeed “works” that have been carefully put together with elegance and virtuosity.

Getting Started

I will begin the real elucidation of Heraclitus' philosophy in the first chapter. First, however, it would be good to sketch out the initial conditions of the human situation as Heraclitus saw it. What is point of departure for his philosophical activity?

Again, here we will only deal with the broadest of outlines, the roughest of sketches, without worrying too much about details. Our only concern in this chapter is to know where, according to Heraclitus, we stand. I will reference the Greek sparingly, and only give the text and treat the meaning of each work of Heraclitus to the extent to which this is useful to our present concerns.

Heraclitus' assessment of the human condition is grim. Consider the following representative sampling of quotations:

- 1 ...they are oblivious of what they do awake, just as they let slip away what they do asleep.
- 19 Not knowing how to listen, neither can they speak.
- 29 ...most people have sated themselves like cattle.
- 34 Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf. The saying is their witness: absent while present.
- 40 Lots of learning doesn't teach insight: for it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras and Xenophanes and Hecataeus.
- 42 Homer deserves to be expelled from the competition and beaten with a staff...
- 56 People are deceived in the recognition of what is obvious...
- 72 ...they are at odds with that with which they most constantly associate.
- 78 Human nature has no understanding, the divine does.

- 104** What insight or understanding do they have? They believe the poets of the people and take the mob as their teacher, not knowing that “the many are worthless,” the good are few.
- 121** Every grown man of the Ephesians should hang himself, and leave the city to the boys...
- 129** Pythagoras...made a wisdom of his own: lots of learning, a worthless artifice.

This is the characterization of human beings: oblivious as sleepers, deaf, absent, out of tune with experience, deceived, bovine, worthless, better-off-dead, unable to listen or speak. No one is exempt; indeed, the brightest minds and most venerable poets of Greece are singled out for special contempt: they are absolutely devoid of insight, fabricators, pedants who cobble together shoddy and second-rate work from their scrap-heap of facts, deserving only of physical abuse. Who on earth, then, has insight or understanding? No human being: human nature has no understanding. Wisdom is the prerogative of the divine.

Heraclitus never tires of pointing out the utter futility of the human condition, the fact that common people and great people alike are totally lost, corrupt, and ignorant. They are this way through no failing of their own: it is their nature. To be human is to know nothing. Only the divine knows. But this is certainly not to say that the practices and beliefs of conventional religion and mystery offer some escape:

- 5** They are purified in vain with blood, those polluted with blood, as if someone who stepped in mud should try to wash himself with mud. Anyone who noticed him doing this would think he was mad. And they pray to these images as if they were chatting with houses, not recognizing what gods or even heroes are like.
- 14** The mysteries current among men initiate them into impiety.
- 15** If it were not Dionysus for whom they march in procession and chant the hymn to the phallus, their action would be most shameless. But Hades and Dionysus are the same, him for whom they rave and celebrate Lenaia.
- 86** Lack of *pistis* escapes recognition.

The traditional forms of religion are empty and broken. Ritual alone is ineffective: people vainly attempt to purify themselves in ways that seem insanely counterproductive to a clear-sighted observer. Other forms of practice are just as bad: they march and chant and rave in ecstasy, but they are totally unaware of the hidden significance of what they are doing. They pray, but they completely fail to understand the beings to whom they pray. Even the contemporary, institutionalized mysteries do not work: in fact, they are worse than ineffective—they do the opposite of what they are supposed to do, plunging the sincere but naïve initiate into impiety. What has gone so wrong?

There is that little phrase: “lack of *pistis* escapes recognition.” The word translated as “lack of *pistis*” is *apistiê*. In an early Greek context, the meaning of *pistis* was quite subtle. It could be used in very mundane contexts to mean “evidence,” as in a court of law, or “credit,” in a more commercial setting. But even here we see its more basic meaning—a pledge, a sign of trust: that which gives assurance or confidence. And Heraclitus is saying that the utter lack of this assurance “escapes recognition,” that is, goes unrecognized by most people. But there is a hidden implication here as well, because no religious Greek would simply say that there was no assurance at all in divine matters. So in saying this, Heraclitus is pointing to the widespread bankruptcy of faith. What counts for most good, pious Greeks as that which gives trust, and is trustworthy—these things are not worthy of their names. And when that which truly gives assurance and is in reality to be trusted is missing: nobody notices.

Heraclitus is not attacking religion itself, but the perversion of religion he sees all around him. His complaint with blood purification is not that it is a ritual, but that it is an insane and ineffective ritual. He mocks the revelers who celebrate the festival without understanding what they are doing, but not festivals and celebrations *per se*. He castigates the mysteries, not for trying to bring the initiates into a properly pious relationship with the divine, but for failing. He does not criticize prayer itself, but the practice of praying to beings who are essentially strangers. Everything here is suggestive not of some general hostility to the spiritual, but rather of a perspective

quite common to inspired prophecy: the mystic's reaction to the failures of exoteric religion and the corruption of esoteric religion.

In all of this, Heraclitus suggests the existence of a converse, the standard against which the impotence, craziness, ignorance, impiety, and estrangement of contemporary religious practice is judged lacking. There is true religion: a practice of power, sobriety, understanding, piety, and intimacy with the divine. There is assurance and there is knowledge. The many know nothing of what real assurance and real spiritual knowledge are. But the Gnostic knows.

This is where Heraclitus steps in as a prophet speaking his everlasting *logos*, and where we make the transition to the start of chapter one, which has to do with how to get out of this nightmare situation we are in: what he is going to tell us, what the preconditions for understanding it are, and above all, how to go about getting wisdom through the way we live our lives.

Chapter 1: The Way

Proem and Initial Considerations

1 *tou de logou toud' eontos aei aksunetoi ginontai anthrôpoi kai prosthen ê akousai kai akousantes to proton ginomenôn gar pantôn kata ton logon tonde apeiroisin eoikasi peirômenoi kai epeôn kai ergôn toiouteôn hokoiôn egô diêgeumai kata phusin diaireôn hekaston kai phradzôn hokôs exei tous de allous anthropous lanthanei hokosa egerthentes poiouzin hokôsper hokosa heudontes epilanthanontai.*

1 Although this *logos* is forever people fail to comprehend, both before hearing it and once they have heard. Although all things come to pass in accordance with this *logos*, people are like the inexperienced, even when they experience such words and works as I go through, distinguishing each according to the real nature and telling how it is. But what they do awake escapes other people just as they forget what they do asleep.⁷

So begin the works of Heraclitus of Ephesus.

The need for a reading that acknowledges the esoteric aspects of Heraclitus' work is evinced in the very first lines. If this *logos* holds forever, why are people forever uncomprehending?

If Heraclitus is a theoretical thinker, concerned with promulgating a truth about the cosmos and its workings, then these lines could be read as an embarrassing admission of his limitations as a writer. There is, of course, another possibility. To say that people do not understand once they have heard could be read as a serious pointer to the esotericism of Heraclitus' work. People are, as Heraclitus said, "absent while present," and what he has to say goes in one ear and out the other.⁸ Why?

⁷ The translation of work 1 is my own. There are several things to note about this translation. The syntactical ambiguity of *aei* in line 1 is left intact. The words *apeiroisin* and *peirômenoi* are translated as "the inexperienced" and "when they experience," which are the most basic and literal renderings possible. The word *diêgeumai* is translated as "I go through" and was a standard term for the exposition or "going through" of a topic in Hippocratic treatises; on this point see Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 18. The phrase *kata phusin* is rendered as "according to the real nature"; any attempt to have *phusis* here mean "Nature," either as the entire realm of phenomena that can be contrasted with specifically human activity, or simply as the cosmic whole, is grossly anachronistic in a 5th or 6th century context; on this see Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 17 n. 19. Key issues related to the translation of work 1 are discussed more fully below.

⁸ Heraclitus, work 34.

The answer comes in the last lines—the obliviousness of most people to what they do while awake. Most people are just like sleepers even while they are “awake.” This is why they seem to have no experience of what is going on even though in some sense they do have experience. They lack the necessary preconditions for understanding their own lives and what Heraclitus has to say.

Heraclitus is not pointing to a lack of theoretical understanding—that existed already in his time, and he castigates Xenophanes, Pythagoras, and others for attempting to understand the world through polymathy and inquiry and fabricated bodies of learning. What is missing here is a quality of consciousness—wakefulness—that would allow people to grasp what Heraclitus has to say.

Wakefulness is the essential precondition for understanding what Heraclitus has to say. And because everything that happens, happens in accordance with what he has to say, wakefulness is also the precondition for understanding the world and ourselves.

With this overview in mind, let us begin a more detailed examination of the work, taking it bit by bit.

1.1-2 Although this *logos* is forever people fail to comprehend,
Both before hearing it and once they have heard.

The first thing to deal with here is how to translate the word “*logos*,” which I have deliberately left untranslated. The possibilities are at first daunting, as the meaning of the word *logos* in Greek is particularly rich.

The first issue to be dealt with is an age-old problem: does “the *logos*” refer to some general formula of the way the universe works? Roman Dilcher offers, in my estimation, elegant proof that this is not what Heraclitus is talking about here.

As Dilcher notes, Heraclitus is fairly clear about what he is talking about in the proem. Of Heraclitus’ orientation, he writes:

His starting point undeniably is human behavior, and not the structure of the cosmos. The assumption of a general formula does not fit in any way into the framework set out there...the incomprehension [spoken of in the proem] pertains to men’s own life, and not to anything

“outside”...thus there is no room in the proem for a “cosmic formula.”⁹

Heraclitus is clearly oriented towards human behavior, human misunderstanding—in short, his concern is for human existence, not for anything “outside” of it, such as a grand cosmic law.

Thus understanding *logos* as cosmic formula is out of sync with the context of the proem in which it occurs. But what, then, does it mean here? Dilcher offers a thorough analysis of the word in classical literature. This analysis I will summarize in what follows, focusing especially on Dilcher’s treatment of the early usage of the word *logos*.

In epic poetry, *logos* is still not clearly distinguished from *muthos*, but certain features of *logos* are still salient. *Logoi*, words, are often referred to as having a charming quality, are seen as “apt means for persuasion and deception.” As such, there is a sense that the *logoi* spoken of in epic usage must have some sort of coherent form: “must display a clever arrangement and deliberate shaping,” as Dilcher says, must “spring from reflection.” *Logos* in epic usage is also used to mean stories, particularly for entertainment. Thus a *logos* is “not just ‘anything’ that happens to be said...a *logos* aims at conveying something, at expounding a given subject.”¹⁰

A *logos* is also a suit pressed in a court of law, even in early usage. As Dilcher notes, “the connotation of reasoned argument must have been inherent right from the beginning.”¹¹

From all this, Dilcher extracts his philosophical interpretation of the word *logos*, which he renders as “the right way of reasoning.”

However, there is a serious problem with this. Dilcher notes the structure inherent in a *logos*, the “connotation of reasoned argument.” He assumes, however, that human beings were the ones who put that structure and that reason there. The Greeks did not.

⁹ Roman Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 31.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

From Homer and Empedocles invoking muses to help them formulate their *logoi*, to Parmenides simply carrying away and repeating the words of his goddess, the tradition of Greek poetry and philosophy assumes almost the opposite of what Dilcher seems to be assuming. It assumes that the structure, the persuasiveness, the beauty, and the proportionality of a *logos* of any particular importance are inspired or even created by divine powers, and not, as Dilcher suggests, by the effort of the human mind.

Translating *logos* as “the right way of reasoning” puts a suspiciously anachronistic emphasis on the abilities of the thinking human being to put together a *logos*. Heraclitus is quite explicit, for his part, in distinguishing his *logos*, what he has to say, from his own efforts:

50 *ouk emou alla tou logou akousantas homologeîn sophon estin hen panta einai.*

50 Listening not to me, but to the *logos*, it is wise to agree that all is one.¹²

But if *logos* is not “the right way of reasoning,” and not a “cosmic formula,” then what is it? My suggestion is that we take the word *logos* to mean speech, discourse. Of course there is the connotation of expression, formulation, persuasiveness, and calculation. However, we would do well to remember that those aspects of the word were, in the first instance, what persuaded the Greeks of the magical power and divine origin of words. Given the Greek attitude towards the magic of the spoken or written word, to say that *logos* is speech is no small thing—certainly not devoid of philosophical content as Dilcher seems to imply. The implications of this understanding of *logos* will be adumbrated more fully below.

Next there is the issue of the word *aei*, rendered here with all the ambiguity of the original Greek intact. Since the time of Aristotle the problem has been noticed. Does the *logos* of Heraclitus hold forever (*aei*)? Or are people forever (*aei*) uncomprehending in the face of it?

¹² Translation mine.

Dilcher, following in the footsteps of many scholars, proposes a philological solution to the problem, siding in favor of the *logos* holding forever, and people simply being described as uncomprehending. But any such solution is ultimately implausible and unnecessary.

Heraclitus is well known for his linguistic density, economy of style, and ability to use the written word masterfully. And, in fact, the first line of 1 is really and truly ambiguous in the Greek in a way that has nothing to do with our own inadequate understanding of the language: Aristotle himself, a highly intelligent and literate Greek, found Heraclitus ambiguous here and described the punctuation of this line as hard work. Thus, what Dilcher and others neglect to consider is that, had he wanted to make himself clear here, Heraclitus certainly would have been able to do so. If, however, we accept any solution that decides one way or the other on the punctuation of this line, we must also accept one of two things. The first possibility is that Heraclitus was a bit sloppy in his prose here: but again, given his mastery of the written word, this is highly unlikely anywhere in his work. The chances of it happening here, in the artfully and meticulously constructed opening lines of his great book, are virtually zero. The second possibility is that Heraclitus was deliberately ambiguous and yet also required his reader to decide on the punctuation of the line one way or another. But in this case, we find Heraclitus propounding a riddle regarding, of all things, punctuation: and although this might be mildly amusing coming from a teacher of elementary Greek grammar and composition, it seems almost absurd that Heraclitus would have opened his life's work by testing his readers to see if they knew where to put the comma.

It is vastly more likely that Heraclitus here is deliberately and purposefully ambiguous and is displaying a stylistic flair not unknown in the other fragments.¹³ The odd placing of the word is meant to catch the eye of the reader at the outset, forcing her to slow down, read again, and face her own puzzlement. In short, it is a verbal performance of the kind of truth Heraclitus is propounding: one that resists easy interpretation, one that requires a double take, one that baffles. The reader sees

¹³ As argued by Manchester, *The Syntax of Time*, 143.

that the problem is not one of either/or, and never was. It is both/and, and until the she is ready to accommodate herself to such a manner of understanding, the reader won't get past the first line of Heraclitus' *logoi*.

Finally, it will be noted that people are described as being uncomprehending of the *logos* after they hear it, and even before they have heard it. Again, this cannot mean, as some take it, that the *logos* is a natural law that Heraclitus is putting into words—both an anachronism and out of place in the context of the proem. The before/after juxtaposition could simply be a rhetorical or stylistic flourish signifying something like: “they understand so little of these words, it is as if they had never heard them at all.”

This may be the case, however, I want to offer another suggestion. Heraclitus has already suggested that there is something timeless about his *logos*, and also that it is not, strictly speaking, his. There is, then, the unmistakable tone of a prophet. Thus it may be the case that Heraclitus is consciously aligning himself with others who, in the past, have delivered this message that is “one,” “forever,” and “the same for all.” Other prophets from other traditions have spoken in similar ways. Jesus laments over people who forever refuse to hear the message proclaimed to them countless times throughout the ages; the Sufi Abū Sa‘īd affirms a oneness of meaning and purpose that unites a vast lineage of Muslim sages and their words. I will give their two examples, as food for thought:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.¹⁴

Seven hundred Sufi masters have spoken of the Path, and the last said the same as the first. Their words were different, perhaps, but their intention was one.¹⁵

¹⁴ Matthew 23:37. *NIV*

¹⁵ Abū Sa‘īd, *Asrār al-Tawhīd*, originally quoted in Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufism I: Meaning, Knowledge, Unity*; in turn quoted in Kabir Helminski, *The Knowing Heart*, 19.

1.2-5 Although all things come to pass in accordance with this *logos*, people are like the inexperienced, even when they experience such words and works as I go through, distinguishing each according to its real nature and telling how it is.

Again we face the problem of the significance of Heraclitus' *logos*, his words or account. What does it mean that he says that all things come to pass in accordance with it? The first, obvious move that many commentators have attempted to make is to understand the *logos* as a cosmic formula or an expression of physical law, but this, again, creates more difficulties and introduces a concern foreign to the context of the poem.

Another, more subtle understanding of *logos* is that it is to be taken as Heraclitus' words that accurately mime the universe.¹⁶ However, I think that this is an inversion of the truth.

The *logos* is described as *eontos aei*, being forever. This was a very standard Greek way of referring to something that was immortal and divine.¹⁷ This helps us make sense of the next problem. Heraclitus says that all things come to pass in accordance with the *logos*. He does not say that the *logos* is merely in accordance with all of the things that come to pass, that is, that his words accurately describe reality. Rather, the *logos* of Heraclitus is what he is saying, and all things come to pass according to it. The implication, then, is that Heraclitus is speaking the word of creation, or rather, the word of creation is spoken through him. In any event, the words he speaks do not describe reality. They determine reality.¹⁸

¹⁶ Manchester's commentary is sympathetic to something like this interpretation. See *The Syntax of Time*, 147-148.

¹⁷ In particular, this phrase was a common Homeric way of talking about the gods. See Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 93 and 97 (though Kahn fails to see that in a prophetic context, a *logos* can very well be both eternal and divine and also the words spoken by a human being).

¹⁸ The idea that one's words have the power to determine reality is, interestingly, one of the most basic tenets of magic (though the depth of the understanding, the nature, and the power of such magic of course vary from magician to magician). There are significant parallels to be drawn between Heraclitus here and Empedocles—a good place to start is with a thorough reading of Empedocles' poetry supplemented by Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic (APMM)*, chapters 15 and 16, as well as Kingsley, "Empedocles for the New Millennium" ("NM"). Also significant here is the striking legal imagery in the poem of Parmenides—imagery that suggests that somehow he, the human prophet and hero, is being drawn into a participation in the creation of the world order; see Parmenides B8 with Kingsley, *Reality*, 167-199.

We should also note here that in ancient usage *logos* has the frequent connotation of words spoken deceptively.¹⁹ If Heraclitus' words are in some way an expression of that Voice that speaks the cosmos into being, why should they be considered deceptive? The answer is simple. The cosmos, and everything in it, is deceptive. As Heraclitus would say:

123 *phusis kruptesthai philei.*²⁰

123 The real nature loves to hide.

As we will see below, the great being described by Heraclitus as willing and unwilling to be called Zeus, that god at the helm of the universe, is renowned in myth for his links with cunning and deception. The very language used by Heraclitus to describe his activity of determining the order of being suggests these connotations.

“Words and works” is an epic formulation that suggests a totality of human activity, thus meaning something like “everything that a person does.” But the question that is so rarely asked is: exactly *whose* words and works is Heraclitus talking about here?

The way in to this problem comes in the words “distinguishing each according to the real nature and telling how it is.” It seems that Dilcher and Manchester are the only ones in the history of English language Heraclitus scholarship who have noticed that the antecedent of *hekaston* in line 5 is ambiguous. Both men argue, quite cogently, that the antecedent of “each” should be construed as the “words and works,” the *epeôn kai ergôn* of line 4, and not the “all things,” *pantôn*, of line 3. To their observations I would only add that reading *hekaston* as referring to *epeôn kai ergôn* has one very obvious benefit.

¹⁹ For the word “*logos*” and its links to deception see Kingsley, *Reality*, 130 and notes on 567.

²⁰ The meaning of *phusis* as “the real nature” of a being is approached etymologically through the old Indo-European root *-behu*, which connoted plants and plant growth. The implication is that *phusis* in Greek implies the growth and unfolding from within of a being: an organic though measured process. Thus, philosophically, *phusis* suggests the view that the “real nature” of a being is only known by understanding how it got to be what it is—how it “grew” into its present “nature.” See Kingsley, “NM,” 402 n. 168 for this point and the related Sanskrit term *jati*.

It is clearly a better fit, contextually, with the very human concerns of the poem, as well as everything we know about the rest of Heraclitus' body of work. The alternate rendering is highly improbable. If *hekaston* refers to "all things," then Heraclitus is saying that he is "expounding words and facts" that concern "things" which he has "divided up" according to their real nature, and about which he will "tell it like it is." For Heraclitus to describe his philosophical activity as consisting of taking facts about physical reality gained through a process of analysis and then expounding them through the medium of plain talk would be strange indeed, for reasons which I will now explain more fully.

Such a construal forces us to understand Heraclitus here as describing either his philosophical method of inquiry or his philosophical exposition as "dividing things up" or "distinguishing things." However, we need not look beyond even any of the myriad superficial readings of Heraclitus which paint him as some species of monist to understand that analysis is precisely *not* how he came to his knowledge, and *not* what he is doing by way of philosophical exposition.

In the first case, and even if we disregard everything else he says about how he got his wisdom, we have to deal with the fact that Heraclitus at one point explicitly identifies wisdom as conforming one's own account to the fact that "all is one." Thus, something like a process of recognizing the unity of the cosmos, and not tearing it apart into tinier and tinier pieces in analysis, must be the source of wisdom.

In the second case, we are faced with massively overwhelming evidence that Heraclitus cannot here be referring to the content of his philosophical exposition. Far from "dividing things up" or "distinguishing" them, Heraclitus is concerned to do the exact opposite: he collapses all things into one. If there is one theme insisted upon most consistently in the philosophy of Heraclitus, it is that of the unity of all things. Whether we understand this as referring to one, underlying substance which is the material basis for reality, or rather some kind of unity of interdependence and interconnectedness that makes all things "one," or some other thing, the bottom line is that Heraclitus does not see the universe as made of tiny bits, but as one. He is more in the line of Thales or Parmenides than Leucippus and Democritus.

Thus, I agree with Manchester and Dilcher for their own compelling reasons and my own. However, the two disagree on whether the *epeôn kai ergôn*, the words and works, refer to those of the other human beings spoken of at the beginning and end of the proem, or to the words and works of Heraclitus himself. Manchester argues for the latter alternative, translating *epeôn kai ergôn* as “words and works” and writing:

With this, the whole sense of the passage is transformed...suddenly we hear Heraclitus describing the very features of his “words and works” with which the student of his Greek is massively familiar. He is extremely deliberate and precise in his choice of words...crafty and cunning in his maneuvering of syntactical and semantical relations among them, forcing these to our attention...²¹

Manchester goes on to argue that Heraclitus is here introducing his reader to “words as works,” where the configuration of language mirrors, in a kind of verbal “performance art,” the structure of nature. However, as I see it, there is a problem with this interpretation. While Heraclitus’ care in choosing his words is certainly not to be underestimated, does he really “tell it like it is?” Indeed, when applied to Heraclitus’ use of language, “saying it like it is” is almost the exact opposite of what we see in his work: the willful obscurity, the pervasive use of ambiguity, the choice of words with pregnant multiple meanings.

Thus I accept Dilcher’s account of the theme of the proem, in the main. Dilcher’s main contention is that the words and deeds that Heraclitus “goes through,” “distinguishes,” and about which he “tells it like it is,” are the words and deeds of other human beings. The *epeôn kai ergôn* spoken of refer to the speech and actions, the very lives, of other human beings, and Heraclitus is going to present those other human beings with the gift of themselves as they really are. However, I differ from Dilcher in one, essential respect.

In the proem, Heraclitus is clearly talking about what he does with respect to other human beings. For this reason, it is frequently assumed that Heraclitus is here delineating the scope of proper philosophical activity, and, in so doing, is giving us

²¹ Manchester, *The Syntax of Time*, 145.

the key to understanding his view of how one gets wisdom; Dilcher seems to conform to this assumption. Frankly, I find this approach dangerously misguided.

The confusion seems to stem from the assumption that if Heraclitus describes his philosophical activity vis-à-vis other human beings, he must therefore be talking about the totality of his philosophical activity and in particular how he got his wisdom. But surely this is nonsense. The logic involved in reaching this conclusion is akin to supposing that one can deduce the nature of a graduate education by observing someone with a doctoral degree teach a college course; is rather like thinking that one understands everything that goes into the training of a psychologist by observing a therapeutic session.

At other places in his work, Heraclitus is quite clear about how to become wise. It involves alertness and the conscious use of the senses, which certainly accord with the activities described in the proem. But Heraclitus also alludes to the absolute need for an activity that is deeply personal, solitary, and interior. We must not neglect this aspect of Heraclitus. There is certainly a dynamic being described in the proem, one in which Heraclitus is opposed to the great mass of people, one in which he shows them their own words and works. And it is a showing that confounds and confuses. But whatever Heraclitus is doing in the proem, it is the activity of a master among pupils, a physician among the sick, in short, a wise man among fools. It is not to be assumed that the activity spoken of here is all that Heraclitus did. It is perhaps the case that the proem describes a labor of which he was only capable after a training of quite a different sort—and indeed, this is what is suggested by the rest of his work. Socrates, too, went around his city showing people themselves and their lives, leaving them dazed and enchanted. I would hope that no one would be so obtuse as to assume that this was his only philosophical education.

1.5-7 But what they do awake escapes other people just as they forget what they do asleep.

The interpretation of this phrase is vital. It is the key to understanding exactly why other human beings always and completely fail to comprehend the *logos* of Heraclitus. The preceding lines have made clear that this failure is a total

incomprehension of the words that are true and that create reality; most importantly, these words offer people the gift of themselves—their own words and deeds as they really are. Now we are given the reason for this tragic misunderstanding of epic proportions—and, implicitly, the criteria for genuine understanding. Perhaps most importantly, here we have the essential preconditions for our own understanding of Heraclitus. As Kahn notes, the conception of the human situation laid out here “serves to define the basic framework within which the specific doctrines [of the body of Heraclitus’ work] must be understood.”²²

The interpretation of these lines is not easy. The two main ambiguities center around what, precisely, is forgotten by the “other people” and when they forget it.

Almost every translator supplies *poiouein*, “they do,” a second time after its initial occurrence. This is probably entirely correct and natural, given the parallelism of the *hokosa* clauses; but I will note that it is not, strictly speaking, required by the Greek grammar: Barnes, for instance, simply translates, “But other men do not notice what they do when they are awake, just as they are oblivious of things when asleep.”²³ However, Barnes is the exception; most translators simply read *poiouein* into both clauses without hesitation. The following is a representative sampling of translations based on this reading:

But other men are oblivious of what they do awake, just as they are forgetful of what they do asleep.²⁴

The rest of mankind, however, fail to be aware of what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do while asleep.²⁵

But the rest of men fail to notice what they do after they wake up just as they forget what they do when asleep.²⁶

²² Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 99.

²³ Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 58-59.

²⁴ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 29.

²⁵ T.M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, 11.

²⁶ Kirk, Raven, and Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 187, trans. Kirk.

While the rest remain as unaware of what they do when they are awake as they are of what they do when they are asleep.²⁷

The rest of mankind are unaware of what they do while awake just as they forget what they do while asleep.²⁸

M.L. West is, to my knowledge, alone in taking the idea of people being forgetful of what they do asleep to imply the movements of the body in the night, and not dreams.²⁹ This, however, misses the parallelism between the two clauses that should certainly be taken into account when attempting to determine the domain of human life spoken of here. Surely Heraclitus, given his preoccupation with language and thought, does not mean that people are oblivious of merely bodily actions in waking life. The whole domain of the noetic, along with the bodily, is implied. If we are going to talk about things “done in sleep,” we must interpret this to mean that it is not merely the involuntary motions of the body at night, but also the movements of the sleeping mind: the dream.³⁰

This is indeed exactly how Kirk and Robinson take “what they do asleep”: as a reference to the dream. But this raises the very serious problem of how to understand the forgetting of what is done while asleep—in particular, the “when” of the forgetting.

We can hardly understand Heraclitus to mean that people forget their dreams *while* they are dreaming. In the first place, it is rather strange, in Greek as in English, to talk about “forgetting” anything while it is happening. In the second place, dreams, of all our experiences, are characterized precisely by their vividness and presence while they are happening; indeed, it is when dreaming that everything else is forgotten *but* the dream. Thus, in terms of both a meaningful understanding of forgetting and the phenomenon of dreaming in the experience of most people, the

²⁷ West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 116.

²⁸ Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. i, 427.

²⁹ West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 116.

³⁰ Dilcher notes that West’s reading renders the simile “pointless.” Though perhaps overstated, I tend to agree with the basic idea. See Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 18 with n. 26.

suggestion that people forget their dreams while dreaming is nonsensical and baseless.

But if we take Heraclitus to mean that people forget their dreams after they wake up, we are faced with two very real problems.

In the first place, the grammar of the Greek suggests that the forgetting and the sleeping *are* happening at the same time. The word *heudontes* is a present active plural participle from the verb *heudô*; the meaning of the conjugated form used here is something like “the sleeping” or “the sleeping people.” Similarly, *epilanthanontai* is the present middle/passive plural participle from the verb *epilêthô*; the participle used here is most simply rendered “they forget.” Thus the phrase merely reads: “The sleeping people forget (what they do).” There is no suggestion of a difference in time; any reference to dreams forgotten later on, as Dilcher argues, “hardly matches the text.”³¹ Dilcher also points out that Kirk seems to realize this, and defends his reading by speaking of “slight inconsistencies...not uncommon in the archaic style.”³²

Secondly, even if we put aside for a moment the issue of Kirk’s highly questionable interpretive blurring of a fairly (grammatically) clear text, we still have a serious problem with this reading of 1.5-7. That is: we do not forget all of our dreams; indeed, the memory and importance of dreams in everyday life was probably even more pervasive in ancient Greece than in our own world. But according to Heraclitus, human incomprehension of what is done in waking life and of his words is absolute. Thus, given what he says about the totality of human incomprehension elsewhere, for Heraclitus to say it is “just like” the forgetting of dreams in the morning is manifestly self-contradictory, simply untrue.

Now, however, we are in a bit of a predicament. If we follow the general trend in translation evidenced by the above-cited English renderings of 1.5-7, we have something like, “what they do awake escapes other people, just as they forget what they do while sleeping.” To interpret “what they do while sleeping” as either nocturnal bodily motions or as dreaming cannot possibly be correct. The former is far too narrow. The latter is impossible to make sense of: either the dream is forgotten

³¹ Ibid., 18 n. 26.

³² Kirk, *Heraclitus: the Cosmic Fragments*, 44.

during the dream, which is nonsensical and contradicted by our very experience of dreaming, or the dream is forgotten later on, which is both contraindicated by the grammar and results in a simile that is self-contradictory.

The solution to this conundrum lies in the fact that *poiousin*, whether it is supplied once or twice in the translation and interpretation, refers to one and the same activity as carried out by the same subjects. Thus: the other people are *oblivious* of “what they do when they are awake.” Other people also *forget* that same “what they do when they are awake”—while they sleep. As Dilcher writes, in sleep

...the whole world lapses into darkness. It is not this or that which is dragged out of sight, no partial forgetfulness of specific things while the rest keeps unaffected. It is unrestrictedly everything that eludes the consciousness because the perception itself is affected. In the *Odyssey* the effects of sleep are thus described: “...for when the eyes are closed in slumber, people forget good and ill alike...”³³ The very existence of the world including one’s own situation in it, the good or unfortunate circumstances, is “forgotten.” It is a similar lack of awareness that prevails throughout men’s waking life.³⁴

What Heraclitus is saying here, then, is that the obliviousness of most people to what they are actually doing in their lives is on exactly the same scale as their forgetfulness of the “waking” world when they sleep. They miss everything.

This interpretation of the simile of 1 against the interpretation that has the simile refer to the forgetting of dreams is bolstered by the things Heraclitus says about sleep elsewhere. We may assume that there is a connection between the things he says about waking and sleeping in other places and here in work 1; indeed, 1 should be taken as the formal introduction of the simile that will govern the interpretation of all the other mentions of sleeping and waking. In fact, the other works that talk about sleep make it clear that the simile is here comparing the obliviousness of waking life (contrasted with some hidden awareness that we lack) to the obliviousness of the waking world that we undergo when we sleep. The whole

³³ *Odyssey*, XX.85ff. Dilcher does not provide a translation of the Greek; I supply the English translation from Samuel Butler’s edition of the *Odyssey*.

³⁴ Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 18-19.

point of the simile is to hint that our so-called waking states are, from Heraclitus' perspective, just as out of touch with reality as we ordinarily suppose our sleeping state is out of touch with our "waking" states. Heraclitus is, then, saying that what we consider to be consciousness is, for him, equivalent to sleep. To confirm this, consider the following works:

- 73** We should not act and speak like people asleep.
- 89** The world of the waking is one and shared, but the sleeping turn aside each into his private world.
- 75** The sleepers are laborers and co-workers in what takes place in the world.
- 21** Death is all things we see awake; all we see asleep is sleep.
- 88** The same...living and dead, and the waking and the sleeping, and young and old. For these transposed are those, and those transposed again are these.

The works numbered 73, 89, and 75 are considered by Kahn to be of dubious origin or transmission; I include them here for two reasons. First, they may contain something of Heraclitus' original thought. Second, they serve to confirm the interpretation of the simile in 1 spoken of above, and rule out the alternative: all the evidence we have, even the dubious evidence, points to the same conclusion; nothing, sound or dubious, contradicts it. The relevance of 73 is obvious: the simile of "waking" people as sleepers is stated rather openly. Work 89 has been taken to refer to the dream world of a literal sleeper. This is over-interpretation, surely, and I will not here argue for a metaphoric reading; however, even if the work does refer to dreams and literal sleep, the thrust of the work is the contrast between the epistemological alienation of the sleep-world and the shared quality of the waking-world. The relationship of the awake person to his formerly asleep self, or of daytime consciousness to forgotten dreams, is nowhere mentioned or implied. Work 75 has a definitely metaphoric ring; to understand it as referring to literal sleep needs, it seems to me, a certain lack of imagination and sensitivity. It evokes a recognizable tone of

wise resignation that one finds in certain enlightened masters who realize the necessity of illusion and delusion to the world order.

The exact interpretation of the more clearly authentic works 21 and 88 is quite complex and involved; I will not take it up here and will make certain assumptions that will only be justified later on—these, however, have no bearing on the present consideration of the proper understanding of the simile in 1. Work 21 absolutely demands that we take waking and sleeping to be metaphors for enlightened and delusional consciousness. The reason is simple: understood on a literal level, 21 is massively contradicted by our experience. During our daytime lives, we do not see everything as death; we see life all around us in abundance, or we think we do. During sleep, we do not see only sleep; we see dreams, which, for a Greek, also would have naturally been seen as the one place where we do have contact with the dead. Thus 21 is a reversal of the conventional expectations of a literal reading and can only be understood on a metaphoric level. The point of the metaphor is to suggest the same comparison made in work 1: our “waking” consciousness is no better than sleep, and it completely obscures the truly “awake” consciousness of which we are capable. Thus, when we are truly awake in a spiritual sense, we see that all is death: surely a counterintuitive and hidden truth in our normal “waking” state of sleep. When we are still metaphorically “asleep,” whether we are in bed dreaming or walking around in the street thinking we are quite awake, we see nothing but our own dull condition: “sleep.” Again, in 88, sleeping and waking are juxtaposed. It is unclear from the context if a literal or metaphoric reading should prevail; I find myself unable to say with certainty. However, what is clear is that here sleeping and waking are mentioned as opposing but unified states of being, along with life and death, youth and age, with no mention of dreams or forgetting.

It still might be objected that the simile, thus interpreted, has two strange characteristics when the character of its author is considered. In the first place, it seems to affirm the common human prejudice that the daytime world is “more real” than the dream world. This, indeed, might be a strange thing for a Greek mystic of Heraclitus’ day to say. Secondly, it could be argued that the nature of dreams is such that they have an oracular function that bears on our lives. When we are asleep, we do

not, in fact, forget the wishes and anxieties of the waking world; rather, the fulfillments of these wishes and the solutions to these anxieties are the very fabric of our dreams.

On the face of things, both of these criticisms sound plausible. However, as I see it, there are two major problems with this line of objection.

First, there is the fact that these criticisms run against the general stream of evidence from work 1 as well as the evidence external to 1 that strengthens that trend, while they are not themselves supported by direct textual evidence. The first consideration is really an argument about what Heraclitus should have said given who he was, not what he actually said; the second makes a phenomenological claim and seems to assume that Heraclitus would have also been aware of it. Such arguments had better be fairly immune to text-based criticism if they are to keep our attention for long.

Nevertheless, I am not wholly unsympathetic to arguments like these. Heraclitus was a mystic, and it is often very useful to keep this in mind when reading a difficult text of his. Heraclitus was also an almost preternaturally sharp observer of existence, and thus it is probably right to give him just about as much credit as we can for insight into the experience of human life.

Thus I come to my second problem with these objections: they ignore the purpose of the proem as a whole, which is the immediate context of the simile in lines 5-7. Here, Heraclitus is not merely propounding truths as a mystic or a prophet might, and nothing in 1 suggests that he is attempting a detailed psychology or phenomenology just yet. Indeed, the very point of the proem is that it is not truly expository, but introductory. Its purpose is to serve as an introduction to Heraclitus' *logos*: to explain the standing of his *logos*, where other people stand in relation to it and why, and how to approach it. Thus we are told that the *logos* is forever and that all things happen according to it, and we are also told that people are forever uncomprehending before it. The simile of the final lines is meant to specify the reason for this incomprehension and the preconditions required of anyone who would understand it.

The lines of work 1 are an initiation: the words of an initiate to a hearer who is as yet uninitiated. Thus, they must, to some extent, speak in terms to which that hearer can relate—they must speak in terms of his experience as he understands it. Of course the simile, as it is, reflects a phenomenologically shallow and mystically ignorant view of waking, sleeping, and dreaming. But the shallowness and ignorance do not belong to Heraclitus; he is evoking the hearer's assumptions to communicate with him in terms he can understand, and only to turn the tables on him.

In terms of mystical spirituality, the danger of delusion is that the deluded do not realize that they are deluded and see no danger. Before the teacher can offer a spiritually sophisticated understanding of what sleeping, waking, and dreaming are in reality, he must first demolish everything the student thinks about those things. What we see from Heraclitus here in his introduction is a Zen master's slap in the face: "You think you are awake? You miss as much of reality in what you call 'awake' as you think you miss in what you call 'asleep.' But the reality of your situation is this: you are asleep even in the daytime, and have no idea of what it is to be awake."

Now we must understand the point behind making the simile specifically about sleeping, and about formally comparing everyone to sleepers. As Dilcher writes:

...It is not merely insufficient knowledge from which men suffer, nor wrong views or misconceptions of themselves...Heraclitus aims at a deeper level behind that on which people normally perceive, think, and have opinions. Beyond, or rather underneath, the everyday awareness, there is another realm which passes unnoticed. Here it is that, like in sleep, a total impercipientia prevails. There is, as it were, a black hole right in the middle of human life. In respect to this more fundamental reality people behave like sleepers, mindless of their own existence and everything around them. Despite its constant actuality the access to it is in some way barred...the basic fact Heraclitus was interested in is...lack of consciousness.³⁵

Thus the simile evokes both the totality of the situation and also the specific nature of the problem. According to Heraclitus, human beings suffer from a total lack

³⁵ Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 19.

of consciousness. We are just like sleepers. It is for this reason that we understand nothing of what he says or of our own lives.

There is a very real significance to the fact that the words used in the parallel clauses are etymologically very, very close. The word used to explain that what people do “escapes” them, *lanthanei*, in Greek, has the sense of “slipping away.” The word that is employed to describe people who “forget” everything is *epilanthantai*. The formation of the word suggests that to forget something is to “let it slip away.” Behind both words stands the mythological reality of the river *Lêthê*—to drink from *Lêthê* meant to let one’s memories slip away into the oblivion of forgetting.

These are the terms in which Heraclitus describes human experience and misunderstanding. Because of our complete lack of consciousness, we let everything we do slip away from us into oblivion just as completely as the waking world slips away into the oblivion of forgetfulness during a night of sleep. How is it possible to let our experience “slip away” like this? Perhaps the easiest way to explain is with an old Zen parable used to illustrate the intense quality of waking awareness demanded of Zen practitioners:

Zen students are with their masters at least ten years before they presume to teach others. Nan-in was visited by Tenno, who, having passed his apprenticeship, had become a teacher. The day happened to be rainy, so Tenno wore wooden clogs and carried an umbrella. After greeting him, Nan-in remarked: “I suppose you left your wooden clogs in the vestibule. I want to know if your umbrella is on the right or left side of the clogs.”

Tenno, confused, had no instant answer. He realized that he was unable to carry his Zen every minute. He became Nan-in’s pupil, and he studied six more years to accomplish his every-minute Zen.³⁶

This little story is emblematic of the quality of consciousness that Heraclitus demands of readers who want to understand him. Most people, unfortunately, totally lack the consciousness that stays awake when awake and does not drift off into the forgetfulness of sleep, does not let the experience of life slip away into oblivion. But this consciousness is the essential precondition for understanding Heraclitus’ words

³⁶ As related in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, 34, ed. Paul Reys.

and our own lives. Without it, we stand absolutely no chance. It is, of course, worth noting that few of us have anything close to this kind of waking state that does not “let slip away” what we do when we are awake. If so, what is the likelihood that the commentators on Heraclitus have understood him rightly?

34 *aksunetoi akousantes kôroisin eoikasi. phatis autoisi marturei
pareontas apeinai.*

34 Not comprehending, they hear like the deaf. The saying is their witness: absent while present.

The origin of this saying, “absent while present,” is obscure. However, the overall thrust of 34 is clear. People do not comprehend because they hear like the deaf. This is to say, they do not hear at all. This should strike us as strange. Surely, people hear what Heraclitus has to say and understand some of it. But we are told that they do not comprehend at all, they do not even hear. Again, what is pointed to here is not a failure to understand on an intellectual or conceptual level. The suggestion is that the failure to comprehend is a result of the fact that they do not even hear Heraclitus’ words. There is, then, a paradox to be resolved. In some sense, people must hear what Heraclitus says. They are not literally deaf, of course, but they hear like the deaf. As in 1, “they are *like* the inexperienced” though they have in fact experienced Heraclitus’ words. How is it possible to hear someone’s words and not hear them at the same time? The answer comes in the form of the saying “absent while present.” Some part of Heraclitus’ listeners is literally absent when his words are spoken in their presence; is not there to hear them. The suggestion in the proem is that what is missing, what is absent, is alert, lucid, constant conscious attention.

I must point to two parallels from the Presocratics. The first of these is Parmenides’ description of the masses of mortals:

For helplessness in their chests is what steers their
wandering minds as they are carried along in a daze,
deaf and blind at the same time: indistinguishable,
undistinguishing crowds who reckon that being and

non-being are the same but not the same.³⁷

The second of these is from Empedocles, who constantly exhorts his disciple to “hear” what he has to say, when he says of mortals:

During their lifetimes they see such a
little part of life and then they are off:
short-lived, flying up and away like smoke,
totally persuaded by whatever each of them
happened to bump into while being driven
one way, another way, all over the place. And they
claim in vain that they have found the whole.
Like this, there is no way that people can see or
hear or consciously grasp the things I have to teach.³⁸

The parallels between these two fragments of Presocratic poetry are striking, and telling. In both cases, human beings are presented as missing something crucial that prevents them from hearing the message that these prophets are bringing back from another world. In Parmenides, human beings are presented as helpless wanderers who are dazed, deaf, and blind; and what is missing is the ability to make a decision between being and non-being. In Empedocles, what people lack is the ability to avoid being driven all over the place, to avoid being persuaded by the random experiences they seem to have, to avoid taking these parts of life for the whole. What is missing, above all, is the ability to use the senses consciously instead of being used by them.³⁹ It is what prevents most people from seeing, hearing, and consciously grasping what Empedocles has to teach.

Here in Heraclitus we find something similar. A quality of consciousness is what is missing. As we saw in the first work of Heraclitus, most people are like sleepers who forget what they do awake just as they do while they sleep. Heraclitus’ words here are, again, a serious pointer to a quality of intense, waking consciousness

³⁷ Parmenides B6, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 83.

³⁸ Empedocles B2, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 326.

³⁹ See Empedocles B2.9-10 and B3 for Empedocles’ instructions to Pausanias on how to begin to come out of the unconscious chaos (end result of “mortal resourcefulness”) of human existence.

that is necessary to understand his meaning. We must be present, but we are absent. To be present with the discursive mind or the rational mind is not enough. That way, something will always be missing. Rather, we must be present with the whole of our conscious awareness.

Again, we should bear in mind that Heraclitus included the foremost intellectuals of his day as among those who aspire to wisdom without actually attaining it. What is at stake here is not how smart one is, but rather, how able to listen consciously, how able to stay present. And this is a capacity that scholars and commentators on Heraclitus do not necessarily have. Heraclitus is telling us something about what is required to understand his work, but if we miss the warning, we are likely to wind up in the awkward position of thinking that we grasp his meaning when in fact we do not. No one denies that the Kahns and Dilchers of the world are very bright people. But as Heraclitus is showing us here, that is not enough.

The Promise and the Cost

116 *anthrôpoisi pasi metesti ginôskein heôutous kai sôphronein.*

116 It belongs to all people to know themselves and to think soundly.⁴⁰

It is the birthright of all human beings to fulfill the Delphic command and know what they are. Similarly, all human beings have the capacity for *sôphronein*, the ability to think soundly. In marked contrast to the elitist portraits of Heraclitus with which we are usually provided by the doxographers and the modern commentators, here we see Heraclitus preaching a gospel of universal enlightenment. All human beings have the ability to think soundly and know themselves; but something goes wrong.⁴¹

29 *haireuntai hen anti apantôn hoi aristoi, kleos aenaon thnêtôn, hoi de polloi kekorêntai hokôsper ktênea.*

29 The best choose one thing in exchange for all, ever-flowing glory among mortals; but most people sate themselves like cattle.⁴²

⁴⁰ Kahn renders the Greek word *anthropos*, its plural form, and equivalent expressions as “man” or “men,” meaning “human being(s).” Here and at other appropriate points, I change Kahn’s translation to the more inclusive “human being(s),” “person,” or “people.” In addition, I have here changed Kahn’s “think well” to “think soundly.” It seems that *sôphronein* must have meant something like this, even having connotations of “sane” thinking, which I attempt to capture in my translation. Kahn’s “think well” fails to suggest the dimension of prudence or practical wisdom that *sôphronein* implied. Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *A Greek English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (LSJ).

⁴¹ Work 113, “Thinking is shared by all” (*ksunon esti pasi to phroneein*), is frequently assumed to be some kind of paraphrase of 116. Kahn proposes a strong reading of 113 on the grounds that, if taken in its weaker form, it is merely an uninteresting paraphrase of 116, and without the qualification “belongs” is confusing as well. Kahn’s strong reading is that this work is concerned with a not at all uncommon Greek notion: panpsychism. The most obvious example of such a position comes from Empedocles, when he says at B110.10, “For you need to know that everything has intelligence and a share of awareness,” trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 520. Also significant is Parmenides’ statement, from the oft-overlooked third section of his poem, “For the full (*plenos*) is thought.” Parmenides B16, trans. David Gallop, *Parmenides of Elea: Fragments*, 87.

⁴² Translating *kleos* as “glory” in place of Kahn’s “fame.” I mean to suggest a dimension of *kleos* that goes beyond *timê*, public esteem or renown, and also implies a kind of radiant divinity that is more-or-less objectively an attribute of the subject to whom one attributes *kleos*: thus, “glory,” and not merely “fame.”

To begin with, in saying that the best human beings are those who choose “ever-flowing glory,” Heraclitus indicates that he is talking about heroism as the outcome of the well-lived life.

This, in turn, tells us two things. For the Greeks in general, the hero was a mythical being, semi-divine. Firstly, then, we have here evidence that Heraclitus, like other Presocratics, had a notion of divinization at work in his thought. Secondly, Heraclitus is presenting us with a portrait of the philosopher as a hero—as one of those mythical, almost divine beings whom the Greeks treated with such respect and awe. There is more than literary precedent for this: the historical reports tell us that Parmenides’ teacher, Ameinias, was literally treated as a hero after he died, and specifically that Parmenides himself built a hero-shrine to his teacher—an expensive and involved procedure.⁴³

Perhaps the most striking thing to note is that this heroism is a choice, though a heavy one. Every single thing must be given up, and yet the reward is equally great: divinity.

⁴³ The reference to Parmenides’ teacher in the ancient literature is found in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers*, 9.21. See the commentary in Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 173-175.

Truth All Around Us

17 *ou gar phroneousi toiauta polloi hokoiois egkureousin, oude mathontes ginôskousin, heôutoisi de dokeousi.*

17 Most people do not understand things in the way they encounter them, nor do they recognize what they experience, but believe their own opinions.⁴⁴

A recurring theme in Presocratic philosophy is the contrast between *alêtheia* and *doxa*, truth and opinion. It is, I believe, at work in 17. I suggest that we read *alêtheia* as the unspoken contrast to the *doxa* implied by the term *dokeousi*. Thus, *alêtheia*, truth, is subtly described as the fruit of understanding things the way they are encountered and recognizing one's own experience. Failure to do these two things, however, leaves one with mere *doxa*, opinion.

The first task is to determine what is meant by “understand things in the way they encounter them.” Heraclitus seems to be suggesting that there might be other ways of understanding—indeed, perhaps theoretical knowledge or some such thing, but elsewhere he seems quite skeptical of whether this kind of understanding would count as genuine understanding.⁴⁵ The “way in which things are encountered” is not, first and foremost, in discursive or conceptual thought, but in the senses, thus, I suggest that we read these words as: “understand things according to the senses.”

An excellent place to start to understand what issues of the senses and their relation to genuine understanding might have meant to an early Greek philosopher is at Empedocles B3:

⁴⁴ Kahn's translation of *phroneousi* as “thinking” connotes, for the English-speaking reader, discursive or conceptual thought. The word *phroneô*, however, covered a much vaster scope of meanings, including, but not limited to: “to have understanding, be wise, be prudent,” “to comprehend,” or even “to feel by experience.” *LSJ*. I have chosen “understanding” as a sort of compromise position—a word that implies both consciousness and self-awareness, but might—or might not—imply rational or discursive thought.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, works 35 and 40.

Come now: watch with every palm how
each single thing becomes apparent. Don't hold
anything you see as any more of an assurance
than whatever you hear, or give those loud
sounds you happen to be hearing preference
over the sharp tastes on your tongue. And don't
reject the assurance provided by any other limb
that offers some passage for perception,
but perceive how each single thing becomes clear.⁴⁶

The senses are, for Empedocles, a double-edged sword. For most people, the senses act as a terrible curse—driving them here and there, fooling them completely.⁴⁷ But as Kingsley has noted, what Empedocles is presenting to his disciple here is an extraordinary meditation technique—*koinê aisthêsis*, or common sense; it is the process of learning to attend to those “closed up palms” described by Empedocles in fragment 2, to open them and use them for the first time.⁴⁸ In other words, Empedocles is giving very precise, very specific instructions for how to use the senses so as to make them a blessing.

For Empedocles, the conscious use of the senses is the path to the living truth, which is something far more than a body of theoretical knowledge based on the application of reason to empirical data. Rather, this truth restores the human being to

⁴⁶ Empedocles B3, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 507. In line 1, the word translated as “palm” is *palamêi*, a word that also appears, in its plural form, as *palamai* in B2, where it is translated “palms.” Empedocles’ use of the terms “palm” and “palms” is commonly agreed, among scholars, to refer to the senses.

⁴⁷ The senses are the most likely candidate to serve as answer to the question, rarely asked, of what precisely does the deceptive “driving” spoken of in Empedocles’ description of mortal confusion at B2: “...totally persuaded by whatever each of them happened to bump into while being driven one way, another way, all over the place.” In the first place, the very striking word chosen to mean “the senses,” *palamai*, directly implies the potential for deception. See Kingsley, “Empedocles for the New Millennium,” 362. Additionally, the senses are described as narrow or closed-in, “*steinôpoi*,” a word that, as Kingsley notes, also always has connotations of “extreme danger, the danger of being tricked or trapped.” *Ibid.*, 363.

⁴⁸ Though Aristotle and Theophrastus would later interpret this passage along theoretical lines, as an affirmation of the scientific imperative to rely on empirical data as well as a foreshadowing of their own concern with the psychological issue of what coordinates the senses, the immediate context of an esoteric transmission from a spiritual master to his disciple leads one to suspect that Empedocles is giving his student a command that is meant to be carried out.

her proper station as a divinity able elegantly to master her world and graced with tremendous power.⁴⁹

Returning, then, to Heraclitus, we see that the first half of 17 must imply the use of the senses. For confirmation that this is what Heraclitus is talking about, we need not look beyond:

55 *hosôn opsis akoê mathêsis, tauta egô protimeô.*

55 Whatever comes from sight, hearing, learning from experience: this I prefer.

Heraclitus says that he prefers what comes from the senses and experience. But as we see in Empedocles, in a context of practical mysticism as opposed to theoretical science it is not merely the use of the senses that is at stake, but the conscious use of the senses. It is not merely the experience of life that counts, but the conscious experience of that life. Used consciously, the senses and experience are paths to the truth. One imagines that Heraclitus might have thought that what comes from the sight, hearing, and experience of most people is: not much.

For what good is experience if people are too asleep to realize what is happening to them? And what good are the senses if people cannot understand what they have to tell them? This last consideration is made explicit in the following work:

19 *kakoi martures anthrôposin ophthalmoi kai ôta barbarous psuchas echontôn.*

19 Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to people who have barbarian souls.⁵⁰

The word “*barbarous*,” translated here as “barbarian,” would have had the strong connotation in Greek not, primarily, of an uncouth person, but of a foreigner

⁴⁹ See Kingsley, “NM,” 362-368 and Kingsley, *Reality*, 507-518. See also Empedocles B111 for the master’s own words about what is possible for the human being who is able to follow his instruction all the way through to the end.

⁵⁰ Translation mine.

ignorant of the Greek language. The metaphorical meaning of this work, then, is that something or someone “speaks” to human beings through the senses, but if their souls do not know the language spoken, there is no witnessing—no evidence of the truth comes through.

The understanding, or lack thereof, that is implied here is frequently taken to be equivalent to the ability of reason to decode the empirical data of the senses and grasp the underlying, rational order of the cosmos that is simultaneously concealed by that data and made manifest in it. But as I have attempted to show, and will go on attempting to show, understanding, for Heraclitus, was concerned with something other than knowledge gained through the exercise of reason. What, then, does Heraclitus mean by his talk of the senses witnessing and his hinting reference to “barbarian souls?”

In order to answer this question we must turn back to second half of work 17 and explain what Heraclitus means when he says that most people do not “recognize what they experience.”

The word translated as “recognize” is *ginôskousin*, an inflected form of the verb *gignôskô*. Kurt von Fritz, focusing on Homeric usage, explains the early meaning of the word in terms of how it was used as distinct from other, similar words. For instance, the word *idein* “has so wide a range that it can cover all the cases in which something comes to our knowledge through the sense of vision.”⁵¹ Such cases, von Fritz writes, might include the case in which an object of vision remains indefinite and the case in which one sees and identifies a definite object. As von Fritz explains, *gignôskô* is used to distinguish the latter of these cases from other possibilities, “that is, when stress is laid on the fact that a definite object is recognized and identified (especially after first having been seen as an indefinite shape and without being recognized).”⁵²

Some trace of this meaning of distinguishing and identifying an object of vision, especially if it had previously been indistinct and unidentified, is preserved in

⁵¹ Kurt von Fritz, “Nous, Noein, and Their Derivatives in Pre-Socratic Philosophy (Excluding Anaxagoras)” in *The Pre-Socratics*, ed. A.P.D. Mourelatos, 23.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 24.

our English translation of “recognize,” and thus it will do as a translation. However, one of the possible connotations of this English word is also this: that what is identified in recognition is identified precisely by virtue of one’s prior acquaintance with the being or object in question. We certainly should not attribute to Heraclitus some such Platonic notion, and imply that for Heraclitus recognition equals recollection. The way we are using this English word as a translation for *ginôskousin* simply implies that something that was indistinct and unidentified becomes distinct and identified.

In the Heraclitean context, then, we can say that for a person to recognize his experience is for him to, as it were, see his experience for what it is—for the first time. What was blurry and hazy becomes crisp and clear. The bleary, doubled-vision of the sleeper or drunkard becomes the sharp, steady gaze of the alert and sober person. I do not choose my words here lightly. As we have seen, and will go on to see, Heraclitus repeatedly uses metaphors of drunkenness and sobriety, and in particular metaphors of sleeping and waking, to describe states of ignorance and wisdom.⁵³ It is my suggestion that this is what is at work here.

Moving back, then, to the talk of witnessing and barbarity in 19 with the concomitant strong connection to language, we can see what Heraclitus is driving at. He implies that the senses bear witness to something, but that this testimony is worthless if the soul does not know the language spoken by or through the senses.

I suggest that Heraclitus here is referring back to his view, first expressed in work 1, that most people are like sleepers, and that their condition is precisely what will prevent them from understanding what Heraclitus is saying. Remember that Heraclitus also says that his *logos* is that “according to which all things come to pass,” is somehow the voice of reality speaking through him as a prophet, or, more accurately, the creative word that determines the order of the sensible world. There is, then, a parallel between his *logos* and the language spoken by the senses. Both the *logos* of Heraclitus, as the divine and immortal creative word, and the world as given to us in the senses, which is brought into being by that word, speak to us in the same

⁵³ Works 1, 26, 63, 117, 21.

language, which is a divine tongue, and from the same source, the wellspring of reality—the innermost depths of the divine consciousness.⁵⁴ It simply takes a certain concentration of consciousness to understand the language of this realm. Unless we are able to wake up, we will forever be strangers to that country and her speech.⁵⁵

In summary, what Heraclitus is telling us in 17, 19, and 55 is that truth is to be found by attending, using awakened consciousness, to what the senses tell us. He elaborates on this theme, and on what he is *not* talking about, in:

40 *polumathiê noon ou didaskei. Hêsiodon gar an edidakse kai Puthagorên, autis te Ksenophanea te kai Hekataion.*

40 Much learning does not teach insight.⁵⁶ For it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and also Xenophanes and Hecataeus.⁵⁷

Heraclitus here attacks “polymathy,” the learning of many things. To be a polymath was to seek wisdom by collecting as much information as one could from

⁵⁴ The notion of creation proceeding from an inconceivably awake divine consciousness is found not only in the ancient Greek religion, but in many other traditions as well. On this issue in Heraclitus, see works 16, 41, and 64 and my commentary below. For other commentary on 16 and related works of Heraclitus, as well as parallels from the Indian and Persian religions, see West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 180-183.

⁵⁵ One obvious parallel to this theme in Heraclitus is to be found in Empedocles, who refers to all sense impressions as “tokens” or “pledges” from the divine muse who speaks through him, and which bear witness to the truth of her/his discourse. In addition, it is precisely and explicitly conscious perception that is required of Empedocles’ disciple Pausanias in response to these “pledges.” See Empedocles B3, B4, B21, B110, B131 and Kingsley’s commentary in *Reality*, 505-559. Parmenides, too, finds himself in a similar situation as he is told by the goddess the “signs” of reality that point to the truth—a simple but powerful invocation of the need for a subtle, heightened alertness. See Parmenides B8 and Kingsley’s commentary in *Reality*, 160-166. For Parmenides and the senses see B7 and Kingsley, *Reality*, 117-140 with notes on 566-569.

⁵⁶ *Nous* is here rendered as “insight” rather than Kahn’s “understanding.”

⁵⁷ Pythagoras seems rather a strange figure to be included here—at first glance. But we must remember that elsewhere Heraclitus castigates him for being a *histôr* (129). As Kingsley notes, the “chief and unmistakable implication” of the word *historiê* was that of “investigations carried out through visiting distant places and people.” Kingsley, “From Pythagoras to the Turba Philosophorum: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition,” 1. Pythagoras was said to have visited Egypt and Phoenicia to learn from their wise men. It seems likely that such stories would have been known to Heraclitus, and that the inclusion of Pythagoras in this list of polymaths is, then, an allusion to his wide travels to collect as much information as possible and to his subsequent synthesis of such diverse wisdom. Herbert Granger advances an interesting interpretation of *historiê* that makes it related to and indeed necessarily dependent upon polymathy; see Granger, “Heraclitus’ Quarrel with Polymathy and *Historiê*.”

other sources—invariably secondhand sources. Heraclitus is thus showing us that in his view, there is something like real insight into the truth, but it cannot be gained by putting together cleverly arranged mountains of other people’s ideas. As we saw before, insight has something to do with awakened consciousness at every moment and with using the senses consciously.

The word “*noos*” is tremendously complex and can be translated in almost as many ways as *logos*. It certainly could mean all aspects of conscious awareness, though in a philosophical context of discovering wisdom, it seems to mean something like the penetration of that consciousness into the truth of what is. Thus it is best rendered as “insight” here.⁵⁸ In any event, the point to take away from 40 is that Heraclitus is contrasting some faculty of consciousness more-or-less like insight with the learning of many things from secondhand sources instead of relying on one’s own consciousness and lived experience.

35 *chrê eu mala pollôn historas philosophous andras einai.*

35 Men who love wisdom must be good inquirers into many things indeed.

This is the first attested use of the word *philosophos*. Given two things—on the one hand, Heraclitus’ outright dismissal of both *historiê* (inquiry) and polymathy (the learning of “many things”) as the route to truth in 40 and 129, and on the other hand, the unusually straightforward statement provided by this work—it should be clear that this is Heraclitean irony.⁵⁹ *Andras philosophous* is a laughable category error when applied to those who practice inquiry and polymathy. Such people claim, in total seriousness, to love wisdom, but, like Xenophanes, Pythagoras, Hecataeus, and Hesiod, they spend all their time avoiding it—either by piling up facts and

⁵⁸ For a full discussion see Kurt von Fritz’s essay, mentioned above.

⁵⁹ As Granger notes, 129 bears on the interpretation of 40 and 35. Heraclitus did not merely mean to make polymathy a necessary but insufficient condition for truth. As 129 makes clear, Heraclitus saw polymathy in a wholly negative light and was completely capable of the harshest irony when talking about wisdom: “Pythagoras...practiced inquiry (*historiê*)...and fabricated a wisdom of his own.” This “wisdom” that Pythagoras fabricated is then immediately described as “polymathy” and “a worthless artifact.” See Granger, “Heraclitus’ Quarrel with Polymathy and *Historiê*,” 248-250.

theories without real insight or by chasing around the known world after other people's ideas instead of simply turning within themselves.⁶⁰ Again, there is the strong contrast of the knowledge of many things and theoretical knowledge with real insight, of knowledge gained by outer inquiry with knowledge gained by inner inquiry.

56 *eksêpantênai hoi anthrôpoi pros tèn gnôsin tôn phanerôn paraplêsiôs Homêrô, hos egeneto tôn Hellênôn sophôteros pantôn, hekeion te gar paides phtheiras katakteinontes eksêpatêsan eipontes: hosa eidomen kai katelabomen, tauta apoleipomen, hosa de oute eidomen out' elabomen, tauta pheromen.*

56 People are deceived in the recognition of what is apparent, like Homer who was wisest of all the Greeks. For he was deceived by boys killing lice, who said: what we see and catch we leave behind; what we neither see nor catch we carry away.⁶¹

The phrase “deceived in the recognition of what is apparent” must be taken to refer to our total lack of wisdom or insight into the truth, not merely what we would consider to be exceptional cases in which we accidentally miss the glaringly obvious. For, as Heraclitus never tires of reminding us, we are asleep, and all one sees in sleep is sleep. “What is apparent,” then, is the whole of existence: *tôn phanerôn*—“that which shows itself,” or, as we might say, “the phenomenal world.”

But the purpose of 56 is not merely to tell us that we are fools for missing the everything that is right in front of us and then assuage our shame or anger by telling the story of the great Homer who was also taken in. Rather, these few words provide us with the key to understanding the vocation of philosophy as Heraclitus conceived of it. As we will see, philosophy, for Heraclitus, is a process of “grasping” truth by insight and then abandoning what was grasped. Knowledge is not, then, a static thing that one keeps with one; it is realization in the moment that one must surrender when the next moment comes. Ignorance, on the other hand, is not merely nothing: it

⁶⁰ See Kingsley's remarks in “From Pythagoras to the Turba Philosophorum: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition,” 1-2.

⁶¹ Translating *phanerôn* as “apparent” instead of “obvious.”

conceals something quite dangerous and destructive. The practice of philosophy, of seeing the ever-changing truth and being wise enough not to cling to it, is, then, a very serious matter—to fail is to risk destruction.

Homer, we are told, was deceived by the fisher-boys when they presented him with the riddle.⁶² Dilcher imagines Homer's perplexity in the following way: "Why should one abandon what was just gained? And how could one possibly have what was not acquired before?"⁶³ Put another way, Homer's assumptions were: to see and catch is to seek out something of value and keep it; to neither see nor grasp is to obtain nothing. Heraclitus is saying that we are deceived in exactly the same way.

It is common to think of wisdom in similar terms. To perceive and apprehend is the route to knowledge—knowledge that we then keep with us. But to neither perceive, nor apprehend—this is lack, nothingness, mere ignorance.

And this is exactly wrong.

To live life as if asleep—to neither see nor grasp—is far from nothing. For in this life, Heraclitus is telling us, there is no real safe ground, no neutrality. Perhaps this could be expressed by saying that as human beings our minds simply need something to hold on to. And as Heraclitus showed us in work 17, we have two options. Either we can "understand things the way they are encountered" and "recognize what we experience," and thus have the truth; or, we can believe our own opinions. In the end, if we do not have truth, we must have something in its stead. And the only thing left to us without truth is *doxa*, seeming, opinion. To be ignorant, for Heraclitus, is not sheer lack, which might be tolerable—it is to cling to false opinion. It is not nothing. It is far worse.

For confirmation that Heraclitus thinks opinion is much more than just harmless falsehood, we should turn back to the language he uses to frame the narrative of the riddle. Kahn cites an argument from the commentary of Bollack and Wismann that notes that the word for "lice," *phtheiras*, is etymologically related to the verb "to destroy," *phtheirô*. Thus, Kahn notes, the boys are "killing the

⁶² The solution to the riddle is that the boys were catching and killing lice. Thus, what they saw and caught, they left behind, what they neither saw nor caught, they carried with them.

⁶³ Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 26.

destroyers.” Heraclitus is thus hinting at the deadliness of our seemingly innocent opinions, and the dread importance of the labor of philosophy. As one later Greek philosophical writer would say, “For mankind, Foolishness is the Sphinx.” He goes on to say that we are presented with a philosophical riddle, “what is good, what is bad, what is neither good nor bad.” If we understand, then we are saved from Foolishness. And if not?

If anyone does not understand these things he is destroyed by her, not all at once, as a person devoured by the Sphinx...rather, he is destroyed little by little, throughout his entire life.⁶⁴

To see and grasp, and leave far behind: this is our only escape from fell opinion. As I have tried to show, for Heraclitus, the route to truth has something to do with the conscious use of the senses and the immediate apprehension of non-conceptual truth. This, perhaps, more than anything else, is what is meant here by “to see and grasp.” But why is it the case that we are to “leave far behind” what we have seen and grasped?

Outside of the Greek philosophical tradition, one can certainly find traces of such a view. Certain Buddhist schools, for instance, emphasize that enlightenment is far from a static thing; that any truth gained in meditation must not be clutched too tightly, lest it become a dead thing, another delusion. And indeed, for Heraclitus, who is perhaps most famous for his supposed doctrine that “everything flows, nothing stands still,” it would be unsurprising if truth too were to turn out to be fluid, always in motion, alive.

But in order to understand what Heraclitus is saying here, I want to turn again to the later Greek philosophical tradition where this knowledge had not yet died out. Let us examine the Hermetica, and particularly Peter Kingsley’s treatment of the view of knowledge held by the Hermetic writers. The following comes from the beginning of the text we know as the *Asclepius*. As Kingsley notes, this passage “gives the key to understanding not just what knowledge was for the writers of the Hermetic texts,

⁶⁴ *The Tabula of Cebes*, 65, trans. John T. Fitzgerald and L. Michael White.

but also how those texts were composed.”⁶⁵ Here Hermes Trismegistos is speaking to his students:

Now be completely present, give me your whole attention, with all the understanding that you are capable of, with all the subtlety you can muster. For the teaching about divinity requires a divine concentration of consciousness if it's to be understood. It's just like a torrential river, plunging headlong down from the heights so violently that with its rapidity and speed it outstrips the attention not only of whoever is listening but also of whoever is speaking.⁶⁶

As Kingsley comments:

Knowledge moves so fast that you have to be as fast as it is if you want to keep pace. There is no standing still. You have to keep moving, *leaving what you knew behind; otherwise it will hold you back*. The truth flows so rapidly that anything you think you know is not the truth, because knowing is too slow. And that applies especially to the teacher. Real knowledge demands a tremendously subtle alertness. We have to be poised and empty, listening and watching...the only way we can perceive it is through a total focus, through being “completely present” as the text demands (*italics mine*).⁶⁷

In this passage from the *Asclepius* and Kingsley's commentary, we immediately see things that should be familiar to us from our reading of Heraclitus. To understand the wise person's *logos*, a listener must be “present” with her “whole attention,” indeed, with all the “understanding” and “subtlety” of which she is capable. A “divine concentration of consciousness” is what is needed. All this, of course, is exactly what Heraclitus demands of his listeners; the lack of these qualities is his stated reason for why people fail to understand anything about what he says, or even, indeed, about the world and their own lives.

⁶⁵ Kingsley, “Knowing Beyond Knowing: The Heart of Hermetic Tradition,” 23.

⁶⁶ *Corpus Hermeticum XIII*, trans. Kingsley, “Knowing Beyond Knowing,” 24.

⁶⁷ Kingsley, “Knowing Beyond Knowing,” 24-25.

The view of knowledge that Kingsley finds in the passage from the *Asclepius* is, it seems to me, what Heraclitus is hinting at when he says that we do not understand that real wisdom, and real freedom from our destroyers, comes from seeing, grasping, and then leaving behind what we have seen and grasped.

The interesting thing about all of this is that Heraclitus is not merely offering a prescription for the deluded masses. Rather, he is describing the conditions of wisdom for all people, himself included. In different but closely related tradition, we also see something very similar. A Gnostic text from Egypt contains the following words from a teacher to a disciple:

My child, it's your business to understand; it's my job to be successful at speaking the words that spring from the source which flows inside me.⁶⁸

The meaning of these words is, as Kingsley says, that it is

...not only a matter of the disciple grasping the truth of what he is told. The teacher also needs to catch something, and keep catching it. He doesn't have some fixed knowledge, but needs to discover it freshly at every moment.⁶⁹

As we have seen, Heraclitus was clear about distinguishing himself from his words, and as we will soon see, he suggests that they proceed from a divine source within his soul. Here he seems to be saying that it is never enough to grasp such knowledge and then hold on to it. Rather, as the Gnostic teacher from Egypt told his student, it comes from a living, inner source, and must be grasped anew at each moment.

⁶⁸ *Nag Hammadi Codices* vi.55.19-22, trans. Kingsley, "Knowing Beyond Knowing," 23.

⁶⁹ Kingsley, "Knowing Beyond Knowing," 23-34.

Truth in the Depths

So far, we have seen how Heraclitus' indicated the route to truth all around us, in the world of the senses. But the following constellation of works suggests the compliment to this path—the inner road to truth:

101 *edidzêsamên emeôuton.*

101 I made inquiry of myself.⁷⁰

45 *psuchês peirata iôn ouk an ekseuroio pasan epiporeuomenos hodon houtô bathun logon echei.*

45 You will not find out the limits of the soul by going, even if you travel over every way, so deep is its *logos*.

115 *psuchês esti logos heauton auksôn.*

115 To the soul belongs a *logos* that increases itself.

As I have tried to show throughout this study, Heraclitus was a profoundly religious thinker. When Heraclitus says in 101 that he “made inquiry of himself,” this should not be understood as if he were rationally and theoretically occupied with the nature of the self. Neither is he making some snide statement of his own superiority as a thinker. Rather, we must interpret this work in a different way.

Not so long ago, Nietzsche, with typical philological acumen, noted that the word *edidzêsamên*, “I made inquiry,” was from a verb often used to mean, “to make inquiry of or consult an oracle.”⁷¹ The full meaning and terrible significance of Heraclitus' use of this word here would, I suspect, take one many years to understand. But what we have now will suffice, for the moment, to change our understanding of Heraclitus.

⁷⁰ My translation.

⁷¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, 67-68, trans. Marianne Cowan.

Heraclitus, again, is not pointing to an intellectual or even a phenomenological process of self-examination. Nor is he arrogantly proclaiming his status as autodidact. He is saying that he consulted himself as one consults an oracle. What does this mean?

We must ask ourselves the following question: what is one actually doing when one consults an oracle? The answer is that one is not merely asking the oracle a question, but rather one is asking the god who speaks through the oracle. There is the oracle, and then there is the real and divine presence standing behind the oracle, speaking through the oracle. Thus, in saying that he consulted himself as one consults an oracle, Heraclitus is pointing to the Greek mystical understanding of *entheos*: “inside is a god.” There is, Heraclitus is saying, a divine presence within him. It is possible for him to ask a question that goes behind, or rather, beneath the reality of himself to the divine reality. And that divine reality answers, is the source of an oracular wisdom that speaks through him as a god speaks through an oracle.

This is the key to understanding what on earth Heraclitus is talking about when he speaks of the *logos* of the soul in 45 and 115. In 45, *logos* can possibly be translated as “measure,” though in 115 it cannot. At any rate, it does not matter. Heraclitus could have chosen any number of words in these two works had he wanted to express the ideas of “measure,” “report,” or “proportion.” He chose *logos*, which of course resonates strongly with his use of the word elsewhere to mean “what I am saying,” “the divine, everlasting words coming out of my mouth,” “the speech that is mine and not mine, according to which all things come to pass.” The *logos* of the soul is identical with the *logos* Heraclitus speaks of throughout his discourse. It is the same as what he is saying.

If we choose to cling to an artificial construction of Heraclitus the rationalist, the scientist, the theoretical thinker, then of course this makes no sense whatsoever. If, on the other hand, we choose to understand Heraclitus as a religious person, or rather, as someone who spoke from a religious life, then a different possibility emerges.

It seems so natural to subordinate Heraclitus’ *logos* of the soul to his “great account” found in the other works, to make it something different and secondary.

This is often attempted; but there is a more elegant solution. Heraclitus made inquiry of himself, or, more accurately, of the divine source within him that spoke through him. The answer was the *logos*: the deceptive words of an oracle.⁷² The *logos* of Heraclitus' book is also the *logos* "of the soul," because it is the *logos* of *his* soul: it proceeds from Heraclitus' interior, divine source of inspiration. With this in mind, we are in a position to understand works 45 and 115.

In 45 you cannot find the limits of the soul "by going." What is not said, but what everyone assumes is said, is that one cannot find the limits of the soul. What *is* said is simply that "going, traveling over every way" is not the way to do so.

It is, on a superficial level, an allusion to the aforementioned Heraclitean rejection of polymathy and fabricated bodies of learning. It is a jab at the notion that by outer travel one gains wisdom about the limits, that is, the nature, of the soul.

A more metaphorical interpretation is usually preferred by the commentators: the journey hinted at in this work is the inner "journey" of "self-search" that Heraclitus is said to describe in work 101. What most scholars understand Heraclitus to be saying here, then, is that even should one travel vastly on the inner plane of existence, one would not find the limits, the *peirata*, of the soul. This is then translated into a Heraclitean declaration of the infinite or undiscoverable qualities of the soul; but he says no such thing. Heraclitus merely says, again, that one cannot find the limits of the soul by going, traveling over every path. He does not say that they cannot be found.

Once this is realized, new interpretive paths open up. There are, as I see it, three possibilities; I do not think that to chose one is to rule out the others: they may well be complementary.

⁷² In the similarly self-referential 92 Heraclitus also makes reference at least to "The Sibyl with raving mouth" who "utters things mirthless." The rest of the quotation may be from the pen of Plutarch, as many commentators think. On the other hand, their evaluation rests in large part on the assumption that Heraclitus was decidedly anti-mystical and hostile to certain religious practices on rational grounds: as we have seen, this is simply not the case. The rest of the fragment, then, continues the thought: "...things mirthless [and unadorned and unperfumed, and her voice carries through a thousand years because of the god who speaks through her]." If these words are authentically Heraclitean, they jibe well with the more clearly authentic references in his other works to oracular or enthusiastic speech (101), the tension between the human speaker and the divine word spoken (50: ...not to me, but to the *logos*...), and the timeless quality of the message (1: ...this *logos* is forever...). However, because of the uncertainty of 92 I do not include it in the main body of my work.

It is not possible to find out what the soul is—its true form, its contours, its limits or *peirata*, by going. Perhaps, then, what is needed is not more motion, but stillness. In the words of the foundational text of Taoism:

Without stepping out the door,
Know the world.
Without looking out the window,
See the Tao of Heaven.
The farther one comes out,
The less one knows.

Therefore the sage knows without traveling,
Names things without seeing them,
Accomplishes without work.⁷³

Secondly, perhaps we can never know what the soul is by going ourselves. Perhaps we have to be *taken* to where we can hear the voice that will tell us what we need to know. The obvious parallel to this second alternative is Parmenides. It is strange and fascinating to see how some scholars and popular writers paint Parmenides as an intellectual adventurer, as some kind of Presocratic Indiana Jones figure in search of philosophical treasure. Really, if one pays attention to what is said in his poem, Parmenides is claiming just the opposite. Emphatically. Repeatedly. He goes nowhere on his own: he is carried—and in fact a form of the word *pherô*, carry, occurs four times in the first four lines of the poem, each time stressing that it was Parmenides who was being carried. He is “carried” by wise horses and the legendary road, “led on” by the daughters of the sun, “sent” by Justice. Nowhere, in fact, is there any mention of his actually doing anything for himself, at all. There is deep significance to these details. As the archeological evidence from Velia indicates, though merely confirming what was already present in the details of the poem of Parmenides and the historical accounts of his life, the father of logic was a practicing priest of Apollo. He was an *iatromantis*: a healer-prophet, a Greek shaman. All the evidence suggests that Parmenides was an expert in the technique of ecstasy known

⁷³ *Tao Te Ching*, 47, trans. Ellen M. Chen. I am indebted to Peter Kingsley for the idea of comparing these lines of the *Tao Te Ching* with Heraclitus’ work. See Kingsley, “From Pythagoras to the Turba Philosophorum: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition,” 1-2.

as incubation. The ecstatic journeys experienced by those who practiced incubation were described variously. One common expression for explaining what had happened to people in a state of incubatory ecstasy was “taken by Apollo.”⁷⁴ Parmenides needed to be carried to the depths of Hades where he could learn from the words of the goddess; it is possible that Heraclitus is indicating that we must also be taken to the depths of ourselves where we can hear the divine *logos*, too deep down for us to get to it on our own, that tells of our true nature.

Finally, perhaps the key to understanding 45 has to do with Heraclitus’ stated reason for the impossibility of finding the limits of the soul in the way described: the sheer depth of the *logos* of the soul. The morphology of the word *epiporumenoi* suggests a “traveling *over*.” The *logos*’ most significant feature here is said to be its *depth*. Perhaps this contrast is meaningful. It may be that Heraclitus is saying here that what is required is not a traveling *over*, but a descent. In a Greek mythical and mystical context, the motif of the initiate’s descent to the underworld, *katabasis*, is, to say the least, frequent. We find it in the poem and life of Parmenides, behind the legends surrounding Empedocles’ death, in the travels of Odysseus, in the prophetic activities of Epimenides of Crete, in the legends of Orpheus and the actual religious practices of the cults who took their inspiration from him, and in the tales of Heracles’ heroic exploits. That we should find it here in Heraclitus is perhaps unsurprising. The meaning, then, of work 45 in this light becomes something like the statement: “You will never know what you are, what your soul is, by playing around on the surface of things. The divine *logos* that speaks from within is only found in the darkness and depths. Therefore you must go under, go down, deep down. There lies the voice that can answer the riddle of the self.”

In all of this, there is a contrast between Heraclitus and the source of wisdom inside of him—this contrast is what separates inspired prophecy from arrogant presumption. As Heraclitus says, “Don’t listen to me, listen to my *logos*.” But it would be too hasty to assume that there is an absolute separation between Heraclitus and his source of wisdom—most obviously because he claims to have found it by turning within himself. Paradoxically, he hints that his words are both his and not his;

⁷⁴ For all the details on Parmenides mentioned here, see Kingsley, *Reality*, chapter 1.

that he is both human and yet is, at bottom, divine. One way to approach this paradox might be to say that in our depths, beneath the surface of what we take to be our selves, we are all intimately connected to a divine source—and in some sense, are that divine source. The paradoxical tension between the human and the divine thus produced puts one in mind of the tension created by the relationship between the ego-self (*nafs*) and the true or spiritual Self (*rūh*) of Sufism. The two terms of this tension are the contrasting realities of the limited ego with which we normally identify and that part of ourselves which is both the image of God and the point of union with God. As human beings, we all stand in two worlds. We are both human and divine, and although most of us only ever experience the human dimension of our being, it is also possible to experience oneself as divine, to know the Self that lies beneath oneself. This understanding finds beautiful expression in the words of the medieval Turkish poet and mystic Yunus Emre:

My love for You goes deeper than my own self.
My Way amounts to this:
I don't say I'm inside myself. I'm not.
The I within me is deeper than myself.

Anywhere I look, it's filled with You.
Where can I put You if You're already inside?

...Yunus chanced to meet a Friend
who showed him a door inside.⁷⁵

In 115 we find the odd statement that the soul (*psuchês*) has a *logos* that increases (*auksôn*) itself. Kahn is a fine example of what happens when one attempts to deal with this using the assumptions of conventional readings of Heraclitus. Though Kahn is a wonderful scholar, for whom I have great respect, by taking over these mistaken assumptions as axioms he basically makes the task of interpretation impossible for himself. The result, unsurprisingly, is a total disaster. He begins by finding a parallel to work 115 in Aristotle's report of an older definition of the soul

⁷⁵ Yunus Emre, *The Drop that Became the Sea*, trans. K. Helminski and Refik Algan. Quoted in Helminski, *The Knowing Heart*, 212.

(which Aristotle refutes) as “the number which moves itself”: he calls this a “suspicious resemblance.”⁷⁶ It is uncertain what, precisely, is so suspicious about this; at any rate, he moves on to accept 115 on the basis of its similarity to work 45 and to certain Hippocratic writings. He arrives at two conclusions. First, the self-increasing *logos* has something to do with the deep *logos* of 45, for reasons and in ways that he does not make explicit. Second, the manifestation of the power of increase described in 45 is the literal boiling up and over of heated vapor.

This is unsatisfactory for a couple of reasons. To begin with, Kahn fails to make clear what he finds “suspicious” about the “parallel” definition of soul mentioned in Aristotle; I confess that I fail to see what is so suspicious or even truly parallel about the definition in question. His first point, that the *logos* of the soul in 115 is related to the *logos* of the soul in 45, is too vague to be of any use and aside from that is only explained as a parallel by the fact that both works speak of a *logos* of the soul—and if that is really all that Kahn is saying, then he is guilty of offering us a trivial insight here. Kahn’s second point would require the attribution of material instantiation to Heraclitus’ *logos*, which is, in fact, what the Stoics would later do, but which cannot be justified by appeal to the extant writings of Heraclitus.⁷⁷

Thus we are left in perplexity. Heraclitus cannot be telling us that the *logos* is something physical that physically “increases,” whatever that means. So what does it mean to say that the soul has a *logos* that increases itself?

It seems best to me to begin by asking a fundamental question—do we have, in the other Presocratics, a parallel that might help us make sense of what Heraclitus is saying here? We do.

Here, as elsewhere, we can turn to the poetry of Empedocles for help. The relevant portion of Empedocles B110 runs as follows:

For they (Empedocles’ words or *logoi*) grow (*aukse*), each according to its own inner disposition, in whatever way their nature dictates.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 237.

⁷⁷ Kahn also thinks that the *logos* of the soul and Heraclitus’ *logos* according to which all things happen are the same. *Ibid.*, 130.

⁷⁸ Empedocles B110.4-5, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 519.

In Heraclitus we have a *logos* that *heauton auksôn*, increases itself. In Empedocles we have the *logoi* of the teacher that *auksei*, increase or grow, according to their own inner nature.

Empedocles' context is that of a master undertaking an esoteric transmission to a disciple. His words have a divine origin, and have the ability to grow, according to their nature, into something more than they are. As Empedocles writes, "From these (i.e. his words) you will come to possess many other things."⁷⁹

Something similar is going on in Heraclitus. The *logos* of Heraclitus is the divine voice that spoke when he inquired of himself. It is the source of what he says to us, which we know to be the magical word—the word of creation, that according to which all things come to pass. It increases itself, just as does a seed, into something more than it is.

That something, presumably, is what Heraclitus himself had—wisdom and purpose. The *logos* is to be found in each human soul—this is the full import of his statement that "it belongs to all people to know themselves and think soundly." But just like a seed, it will only grow under favorable conditions. What are these?

In Empedocles, the master is very clear about what must be done to his words. Pausanias is not to "reach out" for the "ten thousand worthless things that exist among humans."⁸⁰ Rather, he is to attend to Empedocles' words and his words alone, to "oversee them with good will and pure attention to the work."⁸¹ Kingsley has pointed out that the language used here is common not only to the Greek mysteries, but also to Hesiod's poetry about working the Earth—the sacred profession of farming.⁸²

We are told in the very first work that the divine *logos* will not be understood by most people, because they "let slip away what they do awake" just like sleepers

⁷⁹ Empedocles B110.4, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 519.

⁸⁰ Empedocles B110.6-7, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 519.

⁸¹ Empedocles B110.2, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 519.

⁸² Kingsley, *Reality*, 526-527.

do. In other words, what is required by Heraclitus is what Empedocles requires of his disciple: pure and constant attention, the nature of which was already illustrated in the Zen parable of Tenno and Nan-in. Without this inner agriculture, this attention and care to the *logos* of the soul, it will never grow into anything. With it, it will grow from the depths of the soul into conscious awareness. Only then will it fully be the *logos* according to which all things come to pass, for those who are willing to oversee it with the requisite purity of attention.

Virtuous Wisdom, Wise Virtue

- 112 *sôphronein arêê megistê, kai sôphiê alêthea legein kai poiein kata phusin epaiontas.*⁸³
- 112 To think soundly is the greatest virtue; and wisdom is to say and do what is true, perceiving according to the real nature.⁸⁴

Thus read, the work has two distinct halves. First we are told that to “think soundly” is the greatest virtue. Then we are told what wisdom is: it is defined for us by Heraclitus as active, or, more precisely, as right action in the domain of the word and body—to say and do what is true.

The last phrase, “perceiving according to the real nature,” is sometimes understood as a restatement, clarification, or further definition of wisdom, that is, an extension of “to say and do what is true.” I find this problematic. Perceiving, according to the real nature or not, can clearly be seen as a kind of “doing,” but it is less clear that it can be made sense of as a species of “saying.” Furthermore, if we read “perceiving according to the real nature” as referring back to main idea of what wisdom is, we have the addition here of yet another clarification! The result is an uncharacteristically clumsy Heraclitus: it is as if he is saying: a is b, and also, x is y and z, and y and z are really q. The first idea, sound thinking and virtue, is all but forgotten in an interminable run-on string of qualifications. The expression of 112, when read this way, comes across as unbalanced, breathlessly wordy, and in light of the Russian doll series of qualifications, slightly unsure of itself, scrambling for a precise formulation. This is not the Heraclitus we know!

⁸³ I punctuate after *megistê*, which I believe gives the work as a whole greater coherence and sense.

⁸⁴ Translation mine. The word *arête* is translated “virtue” where others translate “excellence.” It is, perhaps, a word laden with connotations, but not, I think, overburdened. It is precisely the well-known multiplicity of meanings that the English “virtue” carries that makes it useful here: no philosophically minded person sees the word “virtue” and assumes that the meaning is obvious or uncontested. With Manchester, I avoid the commonplace and intrusive addition of the words “of things” into the last phrase, as it is neither explicit nor implicit in the Greek; see Manchester, *The Syntax of Time*, 144.

On the other hand, if we read “perceiving according to the real nature” as referring back to “to think soundly is the greatest virtue,” then these problems are solved. First, “to think soundly” and “perceiving” both belong to the domain of the noetic, which resolves the problem of how to understanding “perceiving” as a kind of “true doing.” Secondly, from the point of view of style, this reading restores to work 112 the symmetry, balance, and vigor that are the hallmarks of Heraclitus’ style. Indeed, the work, thus read, displays the elegance of a ring structure, with *sôphronein*, to think soundly, and *kata phusin epaiontas*, perceiving according to the real nature, being roughly synonymous.

The identification of these two formulations of what virtue is has philosophical significance. To perceive according to the real nature is, basically, to see into the heart of reality with insight and understand things as they actually are. This is equated with sound thinking, *sôphronein*, which, in Greek, had a connection with the idea of sanity. Of course, seeing things the way they are in reality is a fairly accurate definition of sanity, and vice versa. For Heraclitus, of course, very few people actually see things as they are. Thus, that he talks in these terms tells us, in a very subtle way, what he thinks of our collective sanity, or rather our total lack thereof. Again, unsurprising, given everything else he says.

Wisdom, then, turns out to be something immensely practical and ethical—saying and doing what is true. It is described as an action, the action of word and deed. True virtue, in turn, has to do with conscious awareness and insight.

Wisdom, for its part, is not some kind of static thing that you get and keep in the storehouse of your mind—not a dogma, or theory, or set of facts. To begin with, it is really much more fluid than that. Wisdom is an activity whose enactment is found in what a wise person does and says. When one stops to think about it, it has to be this way. Wisdom has to be active to be alive, to be responsive to the needs of the moment, quick and alert and flexible enough to keep up with the ever-flowing nature of reality. This should remind us of what Heraclitus was saying about the nature of philosophy with the riddle of the lice.

Real virtue, on the other hand, has to do with consciousness. It is not a matter of knowing the rules and following them, or merely of cultivating good habits. For

one thing, as we have seen, this would be far too slow. Reality changes much too quickly, and situations are far too different, for virtue to ever be a question of adhering to pre-determined, correct protocols or of doing the same thing all the time. The true excellence of a human being, her perfection, is found in the exercise of the conscious awareness that sees things just as they are, and has the awake, fluid, swiftness to meet each moment just as the moment demands.

Heraclitus, like the other Greeks who seeded Western civilization, was an extremely practical Gnostic. To be good was to be awake and to see. Wisdom was action—saying and doing what was called for at just the right moment, with total awareness.

Before anything can be done, however, certain things must be understood. It has been said that in many spiritual traditions, there is something beyond even enlightenment. That something is service, and with service, purpose.

First, though, one must know who and what one is. One must come to know who the gods are. Only then can one understand one's place and role, and begin to live the divine life. It is, then, time to move on to these first things.

Chapter 2: Know Thyself

We Are Asleep

Anything that Heraclitus says about sleep is usually treated with a grim, obtuse literalness that is unhelpful in attempting to understand his meaning. However, there are two clear reasons to interpret Heraclitus' language of sleeping and waking as indicative of two different qualities of what we would call "waking consciousness" rather than literal sleep and waking.

The first, more minor reason to take Heraclitus' writings on sleep metaphorically is that the literal interpretation of the works on sleep often requires some kind of materialist physiology of sleep. I think here especially of work 26, which speaks of a sleeping and waking and employs various plays on the Greek word *haptetai*, "kindles" or "contacts," all of which has led to a great deal of learned speculation on the relationships between a supposedly fiery, material soul, some imagined vigorous, rational consciousness, and the contrasting states of foolishness and sleep. The strange result of such theorizing is that the soul is assumed to be on a kind of low burn when we sleep—as if each night we were all reduced to the pilot light of our being.

This raises a very fundamental question: how likely is such a physical account of waking and sleeping in Heraclitus? He shows little interest in such matters elsewhere. The possible exception that comes to mind is astronomy, though even his pronouncements on the movements and regularities of the celestial bodies are shot through with totally serious references to the influence of gods and divine beings. Indeed, the whole of his so-called "physical speculation," as many have noted, has more to do with explicating ideas of oneness, microcosm, and macrocosm than it does with providing a comprehensive, physical account of the natural world.⁸⁵ Given all this, it would seem highly unlikely, almost to the point of absurdity, that we would find an early reductive materialist physiology of sleeping and waking states in the philosophy of Heraclitus.

⁸⁵ West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 112-113.

The second reason is more obvious, and more important: Heraclitus' own statement that people are like sleepers in the proem—and that wakefulness is the essential precondition for understanding what he has to say. Heraclitus is saying that for him, the vast majority of people act as if they were asleep to such an extent that for all practical purposes, as far as Heraclitus is concerned, they *are* asleep. Although they do not realize it, what happens in their lives escapes them just as completely as they imagine that the ordinary daylight world does when they sleep. Only by waking up can people begin to understand his words, themselves, the cosmos, and their cosmic role.

On a literary level, we may say that the proem was meant as a sort of introduction to Heraclitus' thought as a whole—thus, it would be good to carry the metaphor of people as “waking-sleepers” over to anything Heraclitus says about sleeping and waking.

But on a wholly different and more immediate level, Heraclitus' words in the proem are a message about us, spoken directly to us, if only we can realize it. It is, above all, a warning. He is saying this: “Listen to me. As you are now, you are completely asleep. You need to wake up, or you will never understand my words or anything about anything.” This applies not to some long-dead Greek rabble at Ephesus, nor to other ancient philosophers prior or contemporary to Heraclitus, but to us, now.

When we read Heraclitus' writings on sleep and waking as if we really know what he means by those words, as if they are straightforward and simple to understand, we enact the very thing describes in the opening lines of his work. Heraclitus is proved right. We are so asleep that we cannot understand his words. When we hear him talk about people who are like sleepers, we think he is referring to someone else. When we hear about sleep, we think he is talking about something other than our present state.

I imagine Heraclitus, in response to our misplaced or literal readings of the meaning of his terms “sleeping” and “waking,” might sigh, “So you think you know what it is to be awake, do you? You've never been awake a day in your life.” This may seem strange and even arrogant to us. But we must remind ourselves, and go on

reminding ourselves as clearly, forcefully, and as often as necessary, that Heraclitus' perspective on the human condition was closer to that of Siddhartha Gautama than that of Aristotle.

Here, then, we come to the end of this initial discussion, and also the end of our experiential understanding of Heraclitus. I say this quite deliberately, and mean it quite plainly and un-metaphorically. For if we are, as Heraclitus said, fast asleep in a dream, then we cannot hope to understand the greater part of what he says in a way that is experientially real to us—and, in the final analysis, this is the only way that matters.

We are separated from him by a great chasm. He is awake and we are asleep. Up until now, I have intentionally kept silent about what Heraclitus says is discovered upon awakening. This is because anything he says to us from here on out is bound to perplex us, for, as he makes abundantly clear, it is only comprehensible to the awakened consciousness that we simply do not have.⁸⁶

We are, then, faced with a fundamental methodological *aporia*. If we try to understand what Heraclitus says on our own terms, we will only be understanding him in terms of our sleep, and we will not see his real meaning—as Heraclitus said, all we see asleep is sleep. We may erect grand theoretical edifices, the most elegant castles of thought, as many of our fellow sleepers have done right from the start, but they will not be real, nor will they have anything to do with Heraclitus. It will be nothing more than a fantasy of our own creation; as Heraclitus warned us, all sleep, all a dream. And though we make a lovely and edifying and even inspiring dream of it, it will still be a dream.

The path left to us, then, is to try to see Heraclitus and his words for who and what they are. Above all, this is a question of “fit.” In whose company does Heraclitus belong? To what class of speech do his words belong? If we can recognize him as a mystic, a prophet, and an oracle, and his words as the kind of discourse that is only comprehensible to an awakened soul, we will have achieved a great deal. We can attempt to do this by comparing him to others like him, and by comparing his

⁸⁶ I ask the reader to note that I am here, again, formally counting myself among the ranks of benighted humanity.

speech to other words made of the same substance, spoken from the same perspective. Specifically, we will lean heavily on the work of M.L. West on the affinities between early Greek philosophy and Persian and Indian religious thought; we will lean even more heavily on the work of Peter Kingsley in restoring the mystical Parmenides and Empedocles to us. In the final analysis, we can have no real understanding of Heraclitus' philosophy until we begin to do the things that he said were needed: turn within and inquire of the divine source of wisdom concealed in the depths of our own souls, use our senses consciously, stay awake at every moment. But if we can see where and in what company Heraclitus and his words belong, we will have taken an important first step; we may, indeed, provide ourselves with the necessary inspiration to undertake the labor required to understand what Heraclitus is saying.

We Are Dead

21 *thanatos estin hokosa egerthentes horeomen, hokosa de eudontes hupnos.*

21 Everything we see awake is death, all we see asleep is sleep.

When we are awake, we see that all is death. When we are still unawakened, like sleepers, we see only our own condition of sleep. What could it mean that “everything we see,” upon awakening, “is death?”

There is a very strange passage in Plato’s *Gorgias*. Socrates speaks a few words and then moves on to another idea; what is said is merely said in passing. What stands behind this innocuous, odd statement, however, is tremendously important. What Plato had Socrates say was, “Perhaps in reality we’re dead. Once I even heard one of the wise men say that we are now dead and that our bodies are our tombs...”⁸⁷ Plato very clearly states that this strange idea comes from somewhere else, from someone else. So what does it mean, and more importantly, where does it come from?

This idea that we are already dead is found again in the fragment of myth in the *Gorgias*, and then again in beautiful and memorable detail in the myth found in the *Phaedo*.⁸⁸ But in the immediate context of the two works, which both offer the most intricate and detailed mythical geographies, the meaning of the words “we are already dead” takes on a very specific sense. What is being said certainly has to do with *what* we are. But more precisely, it has to do with *where* we are. On a literal level, what is claimed in both the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo* is that we are not really living on the surface of the earth at all. Unbeknownst to us, we are living in a kind of hollow or crevice, below the true surface of the earth. But on a more symbolic and esoteric level, what is thus claimed is that we do not really exist in the world of the living that we think we do: we are already in the underworld without even realizing it.

⁸⁷ Plato, *Gorgias*, 493a, trans. Donald Zeyl in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper.

⁸⁸ For a brief discussion see Kingsley, *APMM*, 101-109.

It is fairly clear that Plato is taking over from another source both this mythical geography and the esoteric understanding of humanity as living in the world of the dead without knowing it. All the details of the narrative point to this; especially the fact that Plato has Socrates assert, repeatedly, that he learned these things by hearing them spoken by other, wise people. The origin of the idea seems to be the esoteric oral traditions of Pythagorean and Orphic groups.⁸⁹ In addition, the importance of all this for our interpretation of the rest of Plato's oeuvre, and in particular for any understanding of the allegory of the cave and the myth of Er, should be rather apparent, and does not need to be discussed here in full, only mentioned.

Turning aside from Plato to the Presocratic context, again we find striking similarities. The following is a summation of Kingsley's account of a fascinating Presocratic parallel.⁹⁰

Parmenides journeys to the underworld to meet with the goddess who lives there. During his sojourn, she describes mortals to Parmenides. What is most striking, however, are the terms in which she does this.

At Parmenides B6, mortals are described as being "*dikranoi*," or "twin-heads." We are also described as hopelessly and laughably unable to decide between the two routes of inquiry laid out by the goddess, between sheer being and absolute non-being, and thus are called "*akrita phula*," or "undistinguishing crowds." In this context, the significance of human beings being called "twin-heads" is, on one level, quite obvious. As we would say today, we are "of two minds" about things, we try to choose both being and non-being and as a result make a total mess of everything. But it is perhaps the obviousness of this first interpretation that has kept people from seeing the second implication of the description of mortals.

"Twin-heads" was also the term for a crossroads, in particular the Y-shaped, forking crossroads of ancient Greece. In everyday life, common superstition regarded such crossroads as magical places where the spirits of the dead would congregate. However, in the mysteries, initiates were also described as finding themselves at a "twin-heads" or crossroads in the underworld, faced with a choice of two paths. One

⁸⁹ For the full discussion see Kingsley, *APMM*, chapters 6-12.

⁹⁰ See Kingsley, *Reality*, 99-106.

led to everlasting life; the other, to complete destruction. In other words, in the mysteries, initiates at the great crossroads in the underworld were faced with a choice between absolute being and utter non-being.

By a remarkable coincidence, Parmenides, who, the archeological record seems to indicate, was best remembered at Velia as a healer-prophet and founder of a line of priests of Apollo, wrote a poem using the imagery and language of the mysteries in which he described himself as an initiate who descended to the underworld and was faced with a choice between a path that led to absolute being and a path that led to utter non-being.

Given who the historical Parmenides was as a healer-prophet or Greek shaman and a practicing priest of Apollo, as well as the language and purpose of his poem as an initiatory text, and finally the fact that his poem presents mortals as totally lost *precisely because* they are unable to choose between sheer being and utter non-being, we must accept that in referring to human beings as “twin-heads” who “know nothing,” Parmenides is evoking the underworld crossroads where the initiate was faced with an all-important choice. But because he is doing this in the context of formally presenting the human condition, he is also indicating that this is not merely a one-time situation in the lives of select initiates, but rather that this is the reality behind the lives of all human beings. In describing us in these terms and in this context, then, Parmenides is hinting, in a very subtle way, at the same secret of human existence that Plato’s “wise men” were trying to tell him: that human existence is lived out, unbeknownst to the humans in question, in the underworld.

There is also a parallel found in one fragment of Empedocles, where he is talking about the fall of the immortal *daimones* into this incarnate, human form. At B120 Empedocles says, “We came down into this roofed-in cave.”⁹¹ Interestingly, Plotinus and Porphyry, in quoting Empedocles, both explicitly relate his “roofed-in cave” to Plato’s grotto; Porphyry even mentions the source of the idea as Pythagorean.⁹²

⁹¹ Empedocles B120, trans. Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*, 267.

⁹² See Empedocles CTXT-96a and b = Porphyry *De Antro Nympharum* 8, 61.17-21; and also Plotinus, *Enneads*, 4.8.1.33-36.

But do we have confirmation from other works of Heraclitus that this is really what he is talking about here? We do. Let us consider the following, representative collection of works:

10 *sullapsies hola kai ouch hola, sumpheromenon diapheromenon sunadon diadon, ek pantôn hen kai eks henos panta.*

10 Things taken together: wholes and not wholes, convergent divergent, consonant dissonant, from all things one and from one thing all.⁹³

57 *didaskalos de pleistôn Hêsiodos. touton epistantai pleista eidenai, hostis hêmerên kai euphronên ouk eginôskein: esti gar hen.*

57 The teacher of most is Hesiod. It is him that they know as knowing most, who did not recognize day and night: they are one.

53 *polemos pantôn men patêr esti, pantôn de basileus, kai tous men theous edeidze tous de anthrôpous, tous men doulous epoiêse tous de eleutherous.*

53 War is father and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others human beings; some he has made slaves, others free.

80 *eidenai chrê ton polemon eonta ksunon kai dikê erin kai ginomena panta kat' erin kai chreômena.*

80 One must realize that war is shared and Conflict is Justice, and that all things come to pass in accordance with conflict.

The large pairs of opposites we find in the world are asserted to be one, to be taken together: day and night, wholes and not wholes, convergent and divergent, consonant and dissonant. In all things we find opposites coexisting, merging, collapsing into one another.

It is destructive power that is said to be creative power. War is said to be father and king of all, he who makes some gods and some people, some slaves and some free. War, then, is the power which both gives rise to all beings and determines their place in the world order. The power of destruction is also the power of creation.

⁹³ “Things taken together” being my replacement for Kahn’s “graspings.” This is the basic meaning of *sullapsies*.

The significance of these facts escapes most scholars because they do not know what to look for, or rather because they know from the outset exactly what they are looking for and are determined to find it.

First, 10 and 57, along with other works, are often said to be expressions of Heraclitus' "unity thesis," though no one seems to be able to agree on what his "thesis" actually means. Estimation of its merits varies from one commentator to another. At one extreme there are those who find it trivially and necessarily false, at the other, people who see it as a brilliant anticipation of Hegelian dialectic. But Heraclitus was not a physicist, nor a metaphysician or a dialectician. He was massively unconcerned with formal adherence to the law of non-contradiction, was not setting out to discover the nature of substance and change in the manner of Aristotle, and would likely have spat upon an intellectual progression to the Absolute as bloodless and futile.

Second, regarding 53 and 80, as well as other similar works, the situation is hardly better. At worst, Heraclitus is interpreted somewhat literally and made to seem oddly hawkish and a trifle bloodthirsty; at best, I suppose, these works are treated so abstractly that not much is left of Heraclitus when all is said and done. Philosophers, thus left to their own devices, wax poetic about the brilliance of Heraclitus' supposed metaphysical insight into the tension that underlies Being.

Of course there is another significance to these works waiting to be seen—one related to the above discussion of Heraclitus and the parallels from the tradition of philosophical mysticism in Greece. But to understand the significance, we must first know what the underworld was in the Greek consciousness.

As Kingsley notes, the most basic feature of the underworld was that it was "the place where all the opposites we feel and experience while alive come together and join."⁹⁴ He goes on to describe the underworld as

...the place at the edge of the universe where all the opposites of night and day, brilliance and darkness, life and death, start collapsing into each other and becoming one.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Kingsley, *Reality*, 30.

Finally, he gives us this important detail about the world of the dead:

The underworld is a place of paradox and inversion. In particular it is the place where polar opposites coexist and merge, and especially the place where the paradox of destructive force being converted into creative power is realized at its greatest intensity.⁹⁶

Let us take stock of what we know.

The Greek underworld was principally the place of the coincidence of opposites. Heraclitus' describes our world, consistently and repeatedly, as a place of the coincidence of opposites.

The key paradox of the underworld is that it is the place where "destructive force" is converted to "creative power." Heraclitus singles out the destructive force of war as the creative power behind everything.

Heraclitus says, repeatedly, that we are asleep and do not see reality for what it is or our lives for what they are. He also says, quite explicitly, that when we wake up, we see the truth that we had not seen before: everything we see is death. The understanding that we are living in the world of the dead without realizing it is found throughout the Greek mystical and philosophical tradition from the time of Heraclitus on through to the Neo-Platonists. It is found in the mysteries; at several important places in the dialogues of Plato; in the Orphic and Pythagorean oral tradition that informed Plato's work; in the poem of Parmenides; and in that fragment of Empedocles, quoted by Plotinus and Porphyry, who themselves amply demonstrated their ability to see what his words meant, what they were related to, and where they came from.

⁹⁵ Kingsley, *Reality*, 270.

⁹⁶ Kingsley, *APMM*, 77. As it is especially important, I will reproduce Kingsley's *APMM*, 77 n. 27 here: "The most typical example of the merging of opposites in the underworld is the mythical commonplace of Hades as a place of both fire and deepest darkness: J. Kroll, *Gott und Hölle*, (Leipzig, 1932), 396-7. For other opposites cf. Dieterich 201-2; Eitrem, *RE* xx. 259-60; also Emp. B122-3. The idea of the world of the dead as a place of paradox and inversion was widespread in antiquity: cf. Burkert 347-8, Zandee 73-8, Harva 347-9."

Given the evidence available to us, and the lack of real alternatives, it is probably best to conclude that Heraclitus was indicating this widespread mystical view that we are all dead and living in the underworld without realizing it. To paraphrase Heraclitus' own words: "While we live, we are in contact with the dead, though we are asleep."⁹⁷ The secret of human life, known to the initiate, but that the rest of us do not see in our state of sleep, is that we are already dead and in the underworld.

⁹⁷ Heraclitus work 26, which, literally, refers in the singular to the "man in the night" who "touches the dead in his sleep." See below for a full discussion of the work.

We Are Immortals

- 62 *athanatoi thanêtoi, thanêtoi athanatoi, dzôntes ton ekeinôn thanaton, ton de ekeinôn bion tethneôntes.*
- 62 Immortals are mortal, mortals immortal, living the others' death, dead in the others' life.

I will advance an interpretation of 62 in which human beings are *both* the immortals *and* the mortals in question. Rather than being a juxtaposition of an inescapably mortal humanity with the transcendently immortal gods of the Greek pantheon, this work deals with the dual issues of the human being as a fallen immortal and the possibility of the human being's return to immortality.

In dealing with 62 I want to begin by looking at the work of two major scholars on this work, namely, Roman Dilcher and Charles Kahn.

Dilcher remarks that this "artificial" construction expresses "an unequal relation, owing to the unequal distribution of life and death."⁹⁸

This maintains the traditional divide between gods and men as an "unbridgeable abyss" whose boundaries are demarcated by "death."⁹⁹

However, this entirely overlooks what Kahn rightly points out; namely, that the "symmetry of clauses" and "formal reversibility" of the first words of the passage demand a "strong reading."¹⁰⁰ This strong reading consists of taking Heraclitus' words to mean not only that "immortals live the death of mortals" and "mortals are dead in the immortal life" but also that, "mortals live the death of immortals" and "immortals are dead in mortal life."

However, when Kahn attempts to make sense of the idea of immortal death, he says that he can find no "true parallel in the classical period" with the exception of

⁹⁸ Roman Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 148.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰⁰ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 217-218.

Empedocles' fragment 35—but notes that of course, “his context is cosmogonic and allegorical: he is referring to the formation of mortal compounds from the combination of elemental principles.”¹⁰¹

He then tries to understand the idea that a mortal can become divine, noting parallels from Empedocles' *Purifications* and the gold leaves at Thurii, the myth of Heracles' acceptance by the gods and Plato's *Gorgias*—but concludes that “this is not the place to discuss the origins and ramifications of this non-standard view of the human psyche” and apologetically explains that his point

...was simply to illustrate the affinity of language between [62] and certain mystic doctrines associated with the so-called Orphic, more accurately Pythagorean, tradition.¹⁰²

Kahn then quickly explains that we should not take this to mean that Heraclitus is properly associated with any such traditions; that his “monistic tendency” makes him “really incompatible” with doctrines such as metempsychosis; and that Heraclitus uses the language of mysticism

...in part for its shock effect, to suggest the drastic novelty of his own insight into the unity of life and death, the radically “unexpected” truth that awaits men beyond the grave.¹⁰³

This is the startling response of two major scholars to this work. Dilcher, faced with the problem of immortals dying and mortals becoming immortal, prudently decides to ignore it altogether. Kahn, tackling the first half of this dilemma, notes a parallel to Empedocles, then immediately demonstrates that he follows an outmoded division of Empedocles' thought into two voices—one scientific and cosmological and one purificatory and soteriological—such that he is unable to make use of the Empedocles material in understanding Heraclitus. Trying the second half of problem, Kahn brings up several fascinating parallels from Greek religion, literature,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 219.

¹⁰² Ibid., 220.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 220.

and philosophy, then informs his reader that his commentary on Heraclitus is no place to discuss Heraclitus' potential connection to Greek mysticism, that Heraclitus couldn't have been connected with other Greek mystics since he had monistic leanings, and that we should basically dissolve this problem by understanding Heraclitus here as an idiosyncratic and agnostic provocateur.

Dilcher and Kahn are perfect examples of what happens when sharp intellects, backed by massive erudition, run aground on their own presuppositions. Heraclitus was a rationalist and could not have been a mystic, therefore it is acceptable to do what must be done to make his words fit with that assumption. The problem is that such solutions simply do not work. Dilcher circumvents the issues of mortals becoming immortal and immortals becoming mortal, but to do so he has to ignore the straightforward and obvious implications of the reversible syntax in the Greek. Kahn chooses not to ignore this, and consequently is forced to dismiss half a dozen parallels as insignificant because they do not square with his notion of what Heraclitus could have said. The purpose of this project is to help get beyond these dead-ends. I have attempted to show that Heraclitus was a writer with deep esoteric and mystical affinities for whom the search for wisdom had little to do with rational inquiry. It is only when we make room for such a perspective on Heraclitus that new interpretive paths begin to open up. We now need to travel down those paths.

Let us begin by discussing the problem of immortals becoming mortal.

While Kahn is mistaken in his negative assessment of the relevance of Empedocles' poem, his own mention of it here is very helpful in understanding 62 in a new light. If this takes us in the direction of a "non-standard" view of the human soul, perhaps it is best to allay our doubts by remembering Heraclitus' famous contempt for standard views on just about any subject.

To begin with, we have to move beyond Kahn's erroneous assumption that Empedocles' context was "cosmogonic and allegorical" rather than soteriological.

As Kingsley notes, perhaps the most significant thing offered to us by the recently discovered fragments of Empedocles' poetry contained in the Strasbourg papyri is the incontrovertible proof that Empedocles mixed scientific and

cosmological with purificatory and soteriological material in his poetry.¹⁰⁴ Though there had been a hundred years of scholars distancing themselves from the idea that Empedocles' cosmology had nothing to do with his soteriology, at last the new evidence provided by the papyrus put the matter beyond dispute.¹⁰⁵

This puts us in a much better position to understand the full implications of what Empedocles is talking about in B35, which needs to be quoted in full here.

Empedocles says:

But I shall return to the passage of songs
which I previously recited, channeling that account from another.
When strife reached the lowest depth
of the eddy and love gets into the middle of the whirl,
there all these come together to be one alone,
not willingly, but reluctantly coming together,¹⁰⁶
each from a different direction.
And as they were being mixed
ten thousand tribes of mortals poured forth;
but many stood unmixed, alternating with those being blended,
the ones that strife above still held in check;
for not yet has it blamelessly moved
entirely out to the furthest limits of the circle,
but some of its limbs remained within, and others had gone out.
And as far as it [strife] had at any one stage run out ahead,
so far did the immortal and kindly stream
of blameless love then come forward.
And immediately things which had previously learned
to be immortal grew mortal and things
previously unblended were mixed, interchanging their paths.
And as they were mixed ten thousand tribes of mortals poured forth,
fitted together in all kinds of forms, a wonder to behold.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Kingsley, "Empedocles for the New Millennium," 339-340.

¹⁰⁵ See Kingsley, "NM," 341 and n. 11.

¹⁰⁶ I follow Kingsley in reading *all' athelêma* in place of *alla thelêma*. For the argument, and the repercussions for our understanding of Empedocles, cf. Kingsley, *Reality* 394 and notes on 588.

¹⁰⁷ Empedocles B35, trans. Brad Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*, 243-245.

The first problem presented by this passage is that Empedocles himself flatly contradicts the statement that “immortal things grew mortal” if we are to construe this as “immortals die, are destroyed, pass into non-existence.” At B11, he says:

Fools—for their meditations are not long lasting—
are those who expect that what previously was not comes to be
or that anything dies and is utterly destroyed.¹⁰⁸

And again, at B12:

For it is impossible that there should be
coming to be from what is not,
and that what is should be destroyed
is unaccomplishable and unheard of;
for it will always be there,
wherever one may push it on any occasion.¹⁰⁹

Thus it cannot be the case that Empedocles’ four divine roots are destroyed when they “grow mortal”—we must seek some other solution to the enigma of what was immortal becoming “mortal.” The answer lies in the fact that the roots or elements themselves, considered by themselves, are indeed immortal and divine, regardless of the many combinations (the “ten thousand tribes of mortals”) in which they happen to find themselves. However, insofar as they are members of composite beings that eventually are destroyed in what we call “death,” which in reality is nothing more than the dissolution of a forced and unnatural mixture, they participate in the “mortal life” and are said to have “grown mortal.”

But there is still more in Empedocles that bears on our problems with Heraclitus. At B15, Empedocles says:

No one
who was wise about such matters would
prophecy in his chest that for as long as people
live what they call life they are, and experience

¹⁰⁸ Empedocles B11, trans. Inwood, *ibid.*, 223.

¹⁰⁹ Empedocles B12, trans. Inwood, *ibid.*, 221.

bad things and good, but that before being fastened together as mortals and after being released they are nothing.¹¹⁰

There are two very important points to ponder if we are to understand the full implications of Empedocles' words here.

First, there is the phrase "what they call life," a clear pointer to both the fact that most human beings are ignorant of the true nature of their lives, and that Empedocles is assuming the voice of someone who knows better.

Secondly, and even more importantly, Empedocles is asserting the immortality of the human soul. There is, of course, the obvious statement that human beings suffer good and evil things while they live, but there is also the suggestion that they have such experiences both before birth and after death; that they were suffering, experiencing beings before what they think of as their lives began, and will remain so after what they consider to be death.

Finally, and most importantly, there is the suggestion that human beings are much more than they seem to be. "Before being fastened together as mortals," Empedocles says, and the implication is that human beings are, in reality, somehow more than mortals. Certainly there is that assertion that we are conscious, experiencing beings who both consciously preexist birth and survive death. But there is also the hint that because of this, some more essential part of us is to be contrasted with the mortal combinations that we typically think we are. Some part of us, in other words, is not perishable and mixed, but immortal and pure—and this is our real nature. This part of us plays exactly the same role as one of the four divine roots—it is a basic, root essence that is mixed with the other elements to form these wondrous mortal concoctions that we think of as the reality of what we are, without realizing that we are so much more.

It is not hard to discern which element, for Empedocles, is the substance of the immortal, divine, experiencing part of the human being. For Empedocles and other Greeks with whom he had the closest of links, *aithêr*, the shining, purest air of the

¹¹⁰ Empedocles B15, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 404.

upper heavens, was the element of the conscious, immortal soul.¹¹¹ The human being, at death, dissolves into its four component roots. But the conscious *aithêr*, like the other elements, is immortal. It merely moves on to its next incarnation. This is why Empedocles says at B8:

For all mortal beings, there is no such thing as birth. Neither is there any end for them in hateful, destructive death. There is nothing at all but mixture, followed by rearrangement of the things that have been mixed: “birth” is just the name applied to those events by humans.¹¹²

And at B9:

When light has been mixed in the form of a human, or any kind of wild beast or shrub or bird, and then comes into contact with *aithêr*, this is what they call “coming into existence.” But when those elements are separated again, they call that “ill-fated destiny.” What they say is, for them, quite right; and I myself conform to their convention.¹¹³

Read on one level, these are nothing more than a few lines of lovely poetry on a frequent theme in early Greek philosophy—coming to be and perishing. But there is much more at work here. Empedocles’ mention of “ill-fated destiny”—correct from the human perspective but incorrect from Empedocles’ own divine perspective—is of course a commonplace Greek expression for death. By invoking a normal, human

¹¹¹ The association of *aithêr* with the soul and human consciousness as well as the belief in its particular divinity were widespread in ancient Greece. See Kingsley, “NM,” 382 and n. 116.

¹¹² Empedocles B8, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 420. It is worth mentioning that in his notes on 588 Kingsley writes, “...the words ‘there is no end in death’ also mean, with pointed ambiguity, ‘there is no end to death.’” The point is that in a reincarnationist and cyclical worldview, the immortality of the soul also entails a never-ending series of “lives”—and “deaths.”

¹¹³ Empedocles B9, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 422. I accept Kingsley’s emendation of B9.5 from “*ou themis...*” to “*hê sphi themis kaleousi. Nomôi d’epiphêmi kai autos,*” following his argument that Plutarch himself quotes the line by itself without a negative and “nothing in Plutarch’s main commentary on the fragment directly supports filling out Empedocles’ sentence with a negative.” For Kingsley’s full solution to the emendation and translation of line 5, as well as how this solves certain problems in the interpretation of B9, see “NM,” 383 with notes 119-121.

concern of a quite untheoretical nature—the terror of death—in his discussion of what might seem to be “pure” philosophy, Empedocles is giving us a final clue to understanding that his poem was neither cosmological nor soteriological alone, but both, and both in such a way that cosmology was soteriology, and vice versa.

Thus we can make full sense of Empedocles’ immortals becoming mortal in terms of our human concerns. In general, anything that is immortal and imperishable and takes part in mortal, perishable mixtures is said to have “grown mortal” while retaining its immortality. In terms of our existence as human beings, we may say that there is a part of us, the *aithêr* of the soul, which is a pure, aware, and immortal, though it takes part, while we live out our human lives, in a mortal existence of mixture and interchange that will one day end.

In order to make full use of this as a parallel to Heraclitus, however, we need to understand Empedocles’ words in Heraclitean terms. The Heraclitean formulation, again, is as follows:

Immortals are mortals, mortals are immortals.

Immortals live the death of mortals. Mortals are dead in the immortal life.

Mortals live the death of immortals. Immortals are dead in the mortal life.

The four elements, and more specifically, the *aithêr* of the soul, are only able to live out their immortal lives when they are in a state of purity, separated out from the mixtures in which they had found themselves. The separation of *aithêr* from the other elements of an embodied being, however, is “death” from the human perspective—though really only the dissolution of an artificial and forced mixture. This is why mortals, who are compounded mixtures of the elements, are by definition are dead in the immortal life of purity—it is only through the destruction of an impure mortal mixture that the immortal life of purity can begin again.

The elements, including the *aithêr* of the soul, do not live out their life of purity when they are mixed with the other elements, the condition of impurity named “life” by mortals; thus, they are “dead” in the mortal life. What is life to mortals, mixture and impurity, is the destruction of the elements’ life of purity; thus, mortals qua mixtures “live the deaths” of the elements, the immortals.

The “death” of immortals, then, for Empedocles is not really a death in the sense of absolute extinction or movement into non-existence; rather, it is a ceasing to live out the life proper to the nature of the immortals in question—purity—and a beginning to live out a life improper to their natures—mixture, impurity. Purity and impurity, then, is what demarcates the line of life and death of Empedocles’ immortal elements, which, to reiterate, include the immortal and conscious *aithêr* of the soul that is our true self.

A very similar parallel is to be found in Plato’s *Phaedo*, though in less explicit terms. I will attempt to bring out the parallel structure between Plato’s account of the soul, Empedocles’ account of the elements, and Heraclitus’ work 62.

In the third of Socrates’ three opening arguments for the immortality of the soul, he attempts to show his interlocutors that the nature of the soul is most like the nature of the forms, and not the sensible world. The soul is “most like the divine, deathless, intelligible, uniform, indissoluble, always the same as itself.”¹¹⁴ This is in contrast to the body, which is said to be “human, mortal, multiform, unintelligible, soluble and never consistently the same.”¹¹⁵

The soul is immortal, then, for Plato. But what is its nature or proper state that we might speak of it losing that nature or falling from that state in a kind of “death,” similar to what we found in Empedocles? The answer is that the proper or natural state of the soul is a changeless stillness produced by contact with the Forms. This state is also called “wisdom,” which Plato formally defines as what happens when the soul

...ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind [the Forms], and its experience then is what is called wisdom.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 80b1-2, trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 80b2-4.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 79d3-5.

It seems fair to say that for Plato, the natural tendency of a being, left to itself, indicates its real nature. Plato is very clear that the *telos* of the soul is towards that changeless state defined as wisdom:

Whenever the soul investigates by itself it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing, immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this, it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so...¹¹⁷

Also, knowledge gained by learning is called “our own knowledge.”¹¹⁸ Of course, there can be no real doubt that for Plato “knowledge” means “true knowledge,” that is, knowledge of the changeless world of pure, intelligible being. In saying this, Plato is indicating that this changeless, pure state called wisdom is the soul’s birthright, and, paradoxically, exactly what it loses when it is born into human existence, embodied.

This life of embodiment sullies the soul with the transient things of this world, such that it cannot achieve true wisdom in this life. For this reason Plato writes that “either we can never attain knowledge or we can do so after death.”¹¹⁹ This is why Socrates councils his listeners to approach a state as close as possible to death, for only in this way can the soul achieve something like wisdom in this life. Death, however, mortal death, is the final purifying rite by which the soul is finally freed from the encumbrance of the body and allowed to regain in full the state of changeless, pure knowing that it lost at birth.

Thus we might speak of the soul’s attachment to the body in birth as a kind of “death” of its nature—a nature defined by existing in a state of wisdom—a pure and changeless life in the company of like beings. In Empedocles the immortals “become mortal” by virtue of impurity. In Plato the soul loses its nature—contact with the forms and the concomitant changeless state called wisdom—by birth and forgetting. For the soul, to be born into embodied human existence, “life,” is to die to its true nature. Mortal “death,” providing that the soul has acted virtuously and

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 79d1-5.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 75e6

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 66e6.

philosophically while embodied, is really the immortal soul's return to its natural state of wisdom.

Thus we find two parallels to the idea of immortals being mortal, dead in the mortal life. The death in question, in both Empedocles and Plato, is not utter destruction, but a way of referring to the inability of the immortal to live out its true nature while in embodied, mortal existence.

Now, in order to learn from the parallels in Empedocles and Plato and gather what we need to understand the first half of the problem posed by work 62, we must remember that Heraclitus did not simply state that “immortals are mortals” or “immortals die,” which, as Kahn notes, would have likely earned him a draught of hemlock had he said it in Athens. There is also the all-important qualification that immortals are mortals, *and that* they are dead in the mortal life.

Heraclitus is, then, not being grossly impious here and merely suggesting that gods die, in the sense of literally being destroyed or becoming non-existent. Rather, he is saying something similar to what Empedocles and Plato were saying. But we do not have to look any further than Heraclitus himself to understand that what he meant by “death” is very similar to the examples adduced above. Consider the following works:

31A *puros tropai prôton thalassa, thalassês de to men hêmisu gê, to de hêmisu prêstêr.*

31A The reversals of fire: first sea; but of sea half is earth, half *prêstêr*.¹²⁰

76 *puros thanatos aeri genesis, kai aeros thanatos hudati genesis.*¹²¹

¹²⁰ I leave *prêstêr* untranslated. The word can be understood literally as “burner.” It seems to refer to a meteorological phenomenon, and extremely likely something associated with the sea, though the details are somewhat hazy. Kahn translates it “lightning storm.” It has also been rendered “fiery waterspout.”

¹²¹ I cautiously accept Kahn's choice of this version of 76, from Plutarch. It should be noted that there are two others—one from Marcus Aurelius and another from Maximus of Tyre. The version quoted by Maximus, fascinatingly enough, uses the exact language of the mortals-immortals text (work 62), which he also quotes. However, it is for this very reason, combined with Maximus' clearly limited access to the work of Heraclitus and his less-than-perfect accuracy in quoting 62, that Kahn judges Plutarch's version of 76 to be the more reliable, with Maximus' version being a garbled paraphrase that uncritically parrots the wording of 62 without understanding the subtle differences between the meanings of the two works.

- 76 The death of fire is birth for air, and the death of air is birth for water.
- 30 *kosmon ton auton apantôn oute tis theôn oute anthôpôn epoiêsen, all' ên aei kai estin kai estai pur aeidzôon, haptomenon metra kai aposbennumenon metra.*
- 30 The cosmos, the same for all, no god or man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire ever-living, kindled in measures and in measures going out.¹²²

The key to understanding what Heraclitus means when he talks about death is found in the word used in 31: *tropai*, reversals. Dilcher comments that:

Significantly, Heraclitus does not describe this change as qualitative transformation, but deliberately chooses a word which stresses the identity of the agent. *Tropai*, turnings, usually refer to the sun at solstice when it reaches its extreme point and thus “turns round” in its course; or to an army which takes to flight, instead of advancing turning round to retreat. In both cases we deal with a local reversal of direction by the same agent. Cosmic change is, for Heraclitus... a rapid alteration of form and character. The cosmic fire, hence, does not “transform” into something different which would be able to oppose it on equal footing. It just reverses, and, as it were, turns its back on us.¹²³

Thus the turnings of fire into sea, earth, and *prêstêr* are “changes of direction” by the same agent, not the transformation of fire into qualitatively distinct entities, or separate elements. The “elements” of water and earth are fire “with its back turned towards us.”

Work 30 confirms this reading, as fire is presented both as the essence of the cosmos as well as being formally identified as “ever-living.”

When, then, we find work 76 using the expression “the death of fire,” we cannot understand this as “the destruction of fire” or “the annihilation of fire.” Rather,

¹²² Replacing Kahn’s “ordering” with “cosmos.”

¹²³ Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 61.

we are being presented with an understanding of death that accords with the idea of death found explicitly in Empedocles and implicitly in Plato.

Turning back to the statement in 62 that “immortals are mortals, dead in the mortal life,” we are faced with four major pieces of evidence.

In the first place, we have the parallels from Empedocles and Plato that show us that there is more than one way to understand the idea of immortals being mortal, dead in the mortal life. It does not have to be thought of as the utter destruction of immortal beings. It can be understood as result of an immortal ceasing to live out its true nature and being forced to participate in some alien existence, be it mixture and impurity, or simply embodiment.

Secondly, we have the fact that to say that immortal beings are destroyed, aside from being contradictory, would have been unthinkable to most Greeks, and certainly to the more spiritually-minded among them, and it is safe to include Heraclitus in this class. While Heraclitus was certainly critical of traditional religion and the mysteries, it is essential to remember why he was critical of them: as he explicitly says, his problem with both common piety and the mysteries is precisely that they misunderstand the divine and *they are not reverent enough*.

Thirdly, following on this, we have the structure of 62. Again, Heraclitus did not merely say, “immortals are mortals,” but qualified it with the phrase “dead in the mortal life.” Thus Heraclitus is presenting us with a mystery to be solved. He is saying something strange and perhaps shocking, but not crudely self-contradictory or impious. He is practically inviting us to interpret him here as using the language of death to mean something other than absolute destruction or passing away into non-being.

Finally, the confirmation that this kind of reading is exactly what is called for here is given by the way Heraclitus talks elsewhere. He mentions the “death” of “ever-living” fire and then uses the word *tropai* to describe the “death of fire” into other “elements.” The terms in which he describes this “transformation” of fire only underscores the fact that for him it is not a case of the annihilation or true death of this immortal substance, but rather its ceasing to behave or move the way it normally does and starting to act in a different way or move in a different direction.

Now, then, we are faced with a serious question. That is: who are the immortals that Heraclitus is discussing in this work? I will contend that the somewhat surprising answer is: us.

It seems to me extremely unlikely that Heraclitus in 62 was attempting to explicate an entirely novel theology of the gods of Greek religion in which the deities were seen as radically transforming their modes of being such that they could be understood as sometimes immortal, sometimes mortal.

Though Heraclitus certainly shows real interest in the gods elsewhere and evidence of original insight into their nature, for 62 to refer to the beings of the Greek pantheon would require us to attribute to him what would be very bizarre views indeed, even for a very independent-minded and creative Ionian mystic.

Beyond the mere strangeness involved, there is the fact that such a view would not accord very well with what he says about the divinities elsewhere. With just one exception, although they may be said to contain opposing tensions within themselves, the gods are not described as subject to radical alteration in their overall modes of being. On the contrary, they are seen as exemplars and bringers of regularity, order, and stability. Zeus is the constant and watchful god who is like a star that “never sets.” He “pilots” and “steers” all things, makes the ordering of the world what it is. As we will see, the language of piloting and steering evokes the faculty of *mêtis*, which was a state of wide-awake alertness: and it is difficult to imagine this state as anything but constant in Zeus. The cosmic helmsman does not fall asleep at the wheel. Justice and her ministers, the Erinyes, bring liars to account and keep the Sun in his proper path throughout the year. Apollo is the power who speaks in signs—and signs had the deepest of associations with the ever-awake faculty of *mêtis*. It seems improbable that the shifting immortals spoken of in 62 could possibly be identified with any of the Olympian or chthonic gods described elsewhere in Heraclitus.

In fact, there is only one real instance in Heraclitus where a god is described as changing. This is:

67 *ho theos êmerê euphronê, cheimôn theros, polemos eirênê, koros limnos. alloioutai de hokôsper <elaion> hokotan summigê thuômasin onomadzetai kath' hêdonên hekastou.*¹²⁴

67 The god: day/night, winter/summer, war/peace, satiety/hunger.¹²⁵ It alters, as when oil is mingled with perfumes and gets named according to the fragrance of each.¹²⁶

However, the immediate context makes clear that this mighty, unnamed god is at least coextensive with the opposites that make the cosmos what it is. This god is described as “changing” precisely to make the point that there is one, divine, protean reality behind the all the merely apparent changes among opposites that create the phenomenal world—it is this god who unifies those opposites and underlies those changes. If this seems paradoxical, it is—intentionally so. The paradox expresses the tension between reality as it is and reality as it appears to most people. Heraclitus is always at pains to stress the disparity between the common perception of the way things are and the truth. Thus: the plurality that we experience in the world is in reality one, what we see as opposites are elsewhere called “the same,” and “one,” and here the god is the changeless, unified reality beneath our imperfect perception that creates the illusion of a changing, differentiated world.

¹²⁴ Retaining, as Kahn does, *alloioutai*, “it changes.” Dilcher is reluctant to do so, though I confess I am unable to follow his reasoning fully. He seems to think that the verb describing the god as changing cannot refer back to the oil mixed with fragrances, nor to the changes of the pairs of opposites. The former is impossible, in his view, because the oil, strictly speaking, does not “change.” This, it seems to me, overlooks the fact that the precise point of this work is to point out the underlying reality that is unified and stays the same throughout what we experience as differentiation and change. The god “changes,” then, in the sense that he is a manifestation of the same, unifying reality in different guises—a reality that we fail to see as the same and unchanging, though it is! Change, then, is seen as a result of our failure to see the oneness of all things—the god does not change any more than there actually are separate opposites that are not unified. The tension in this work is between how things seem to us and how they really are. Dilcher’s objection to the latter possibility, which would have *alloioutai* refer to changes of opposites, rests on his assertion that the opposites spoken of here do not transform one into the other, but are “co-present.” It is not at all clear to me on what grounds Dilcher justifies this assumption. For his commentary, see Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 124-125.

¹²⁵ Kahn supplies the conjunction “and” four times—needlessly.

¹²⁶ I accept Dilcher’s argument, based in turn on Frankel’s work, for reading *elaion*, oil, in place of the frequent but improbable *pur*, fire, here. Similarly, I accept his critique of Kahn, who does not supply a subject at all, and thus renders the simile, in Dilcher’s words, “pointless.” See Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 124.

The only possible candidate for this god in all of Greek religion is Zeus, indeed, this “changing god” has been said to evoke a kind of “super Zeus” and is perhaps really identifiable only with some expression like “the totality of the divine reality” or “the One.” The all-encompassing, unifying nature of this divinity makes it highly unlikely that Heraclitus would here refer to his God Almighty as “immortals.”

In addition to this, Heraclitus demonstrates time and again that he is massively concerned with issues of human existence, in a way that affirms the presence of the divine in the midst of the human, and assumes a tension between the mortal and immortal in what most people think of as merely mortal existence.

Like Empedocles, who, it will be remembered, claimed that he was a deathless god and that all human beings are immortal *daimones*, divine beings, Heraclitus, an apparently human being, speaks as a prophet on behalf of a divine reality. Heraclitus speaks, in oracular language, the everlasting word according to which all things come to pass. He describes, repeatedly, the sleep of ordinary human existence, but only to contrast it with the initiate’s awaked consciousness that sees into the heart of reality, comprehends the voice of creation, and knows the secret behind the apparently ordinary human life in which it finds itself. He implicitly claims this awareness and self-knowledge for himself but also states that it is the birthright of all human beings. He says that he consulted himself as an oracle, which is another way of saying that he knows of a divine source of wisdom within himself. Despite some modern attempts to make his plain words into agnostic skepticism, he very clearly implies that something awaits people after death and he knows what it is.¹²⁷ Finally, after repeating, again and again and again, that what he is saying is true, that he is a man of real understanding, and great and meaningful and eternal

¹²⁷ Heraclitus work 27: “What awaits people at death they neither expect nor imagine.” The expectations and imaginings of people in the ancient world ran the gamut from the metempsychosis of the Pythagoreans to the ghostly shades of the Homeric afterlife to the nothingness of dreamless sleep suggested by Socrates. Heraclitus here, as elsewhere, is taking the tone of someone who knows better. For representative commentary, see Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 84-86 and Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 210-211.

understanding at that, he makes this statement: human nature has no understanding, but the divine does.¹²⁸

All alternatives to this new interpretation of 62 in which the immortals spoken of refer to human beings have proven unsatisfactory and very unlikely: the immortals mentioned cannot refer to any of the gods that Heraclitus mentions. The remaining possibility is thoroughly confirmed and suggested by the rest of what Heraclitus says. The weight of the evidence points to one conclusion.

We are the immortals Heraclitus is talking about in 62. We are immortals, who find ourselves dead in the mortal life. Immortals are mortals.

This is not, however, the end of the story for Heraclitus. Mortals are also immortals. We attain to divinity, or rather, regain our divinity.

As noted above, Kahn cites parallels to 62 from the *Purifications* of Empedocles, the gold leaves found at Thurii, and the view of the body as the tomb of the soul found in Plato's *Gorgias*.¹²⁹ There are historical and thematic threads that connect these instances, though it might be hasty to speak of a single fount—the understanding that human beings could become divine might have come from multiple sources.

To begin with, Empedocles states both his divinity and his former status as a mortal outright: “I greet you, I an immortal god, mortal no longer.”¹³⁰ He also, quite explicitly, explains why immortal gods, or *daimones*, are born as mortals:

There is an oracle of necessity, an ancient decree of the gods,
eternal, sealed with broad oaths:
whenever it happens that any
daimôn—one of those beings who has life
for a long, long time—through some failing
pollutes its own dear limbs with blood,
[he is] made to wander away from the blessed ones

¹²⁸ Heraclitus work 78. My translation. Kahn renders “*gnômas*” as “set purpose,” which I find to be an unnecessary over-translation, one which Kahn himself admits is his attempt to “short-circuit the interpretation” of 78. For his reasoning, see Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 172-173.

¹²⁹ Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 219-220.

¹³⁰ Empedocles B112, trans. Charles Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 219.

and take on all sorts of shapes and forms of mortal existence through the course of time, exchanging one hard path of life for another. The might of *aithêr* chases it into the sea, sea spits it out onto solid ground, earths spits it up into the rays of the radiant sun and the sun hurls it into the whirlpools of *aithêr*. One receives it from another, then another from another, and they all hate it. This is the way that I too am now going, an exile from the gods and a wanderer, placing my trust in mad Strife.¹³¹

The original failing of the *daimôn* in Empedocles is the violation of an oath of purity in blood pollution. The punishment is exile from the company of “the blessed” into the shifting world of mortal existence—lifetime after lifetime lived in a state of exile and impurity. This is what is behind the powerful imagery of the incarnated *daimôn*’s rejection by the pure elements: the might of whirling *aithêr*, the radiant fire of the sun, the sea and the earth. It is a dramatic depiction of that most ancient of esoteric laws: only the pure will be allowed in the company of the pure.

For Empedocles, then, divinization was the *return* to an original state of pure divinity. It is *not* so much a case of something *originally* mortal making a leap in the order of being to godhood, as it is a case of a fallen god *returning* to his proper station. In turn, incarnate, mortal existence is not merely seen as a sort of misfortune or accident, but rather as a just punishment for transgression. It is, however, quite possible for this sin to be expiated: a “mortal,” or rather, an exiled immortal, can regain her state of ritual purity and rejoin “the company of the blessed”; i.e., become a god again.

This dual understanding of the mortal life as a kind of punishment and the divinity hidden within the mortal is also found among the Pythagoreans. West gives two Pythagorean maxims to illustrate the parallelism between the Empedoclean and Pythagorean view: “Having come for punishment one must be punished,” and, “One must not pull apart the god within oneself.”¹³² The links between Empedocles and the

¹³¹ Empedocles B115.1-2, trans. Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*, 215 (Kingsley does not give the translation). Empedocles B115.3-14, trans. Kingsley, *Reality*, 361-362, 366-367, 430-431.

¹³² M.L. West, *The Orphic Poems*, 22.

Pythagoreans have long been noticed and are fairly well established, if less well understood. At least one ancient source explicitly identifies Empedocles as a Pythagorean.¹³³

Something like this understanding that embodied, mortal existence is the punishment of a divine being is found in Plato, who relates the view to both Orphism and the mysteries.¹³⁴

The Orphic gold leaves from Thurii, indeed, confirm that these ideas were not confined to Pythagoreanism. One, clearly addressed by the initiate to the gods, states that, “I too am of your blessed race,” while another says, “I have paid the penalty for deeds not righteous.”¹³⁵ The first leaf clearly suggests that the mortal initiate is claiming some original state of divinity, while the second, in West’s words, suggest that, “the penalty seems to be the mortal life (or series of lives) recently concluded, and the unrighteous deeds must lie further back.”¹³⁶ A third gold leaf from the same source has the soul say:

For I too claim to be of your blessed race;
but Fate overcame me, and the hurler of the lightning bolt.
But I have flown out from the circle of heavy grief
and stepped swift-footed upon the circle of joy.¹³⁷

The text later reassures the soul with the following words: “Blessed and fortunate one! Thou shalt be god instead of mortal.”¹³⁸ Thus we find all of the same themes in these ritual Orphic texts: the divine origin and nature of the human being,

¹³³ Hierocles: “...as Empedocles the Pythagorean says...” in the *Commentary on the Carmen Aureum* 24.2, trans. Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*, 142.

¹³⁴ West, *The Orphic Poems*, 21.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 22-23.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

the mortal life as punishment for some failing as a divinity, and the possibility of return.

This, then, is the ancient Greek mystic backdrop against which must understand Heraclitus' words that mortals are living the death of immortals, and dead in the immortal life.

The obvious similarity is the idea that mortals are somehow former immortals, and that mortals can become immortal again: if "immortals are mortals" sums up the lot of some unfortunate immortal who finds itself "dead in the mortal life," then surely the phrase "mortals are immortals" suggests the idea that seemingly ordinary human beings can become divine again.

What is less clearly similar is the Orphic, Pythagorean, Platonic, and Empedoclean sense that somehow the formula "immortals, mortals: mortals, immortals" is to be understood in terms of transgression and punishment, corruption and purification. Heraclitus' whole philosophical system, if we may call it that, seems to be centered around the metaphor of sleep and waking. The activities of the traditional divinities are frequently described in terms of a supernaturally awake watchfulness: Zeus, again, is the god who "never sets" and from whom it is impossible to hide. Justice and her ministers the Erinyes keep a close watch on things at all times—will "catch up to" and "find out" transgressors. Apollo speaks in a language that only the very alert and awake can grasp. On the other hand, human ignorance and incomprehension is repeatedly described in terms of or as the direct result of sleep. In the one place where Heraclitus seems to be describing the divinization of human beings very openly, we hear something about beings who "...rise up and become wakeful watchers of living men and corpses."¹³⁹

Now, ideas of justice and punishment, and good and bad, are certainly to be found throughout Heraclitus. However, the very specific idea that this mortal existence is a punishment for a sin committed as a divinity is difficult to discern in the extant works of Heraclitus.

¹³⁹ Heraclitus work 63. The beginning of the text is corrupt.

The more cautious route seems to be to say that for Heraclitus, human existence is the troubled dream of an immortal who has fallen asleep. To wake up is to become an immortal again.

This interpretation of the distinction between immortals and mortals as one of waking and sleeping accords well with what we know of Heraclitus' conceptions of both death and divinity.

Remember that for Heraclitus, "death" in work 62 must mean something like it did for Empedocles and Plato—not utter destruction, but the ceasing of one's proper activity and the enactment of its opposite. Again, this is confirmed by the way he talks of the "deaths" of the elemental cycle as the successive "turnings round" of "fire ever-living."

The great gods of Olympus and the underworld are, once more, described in terms of perpetual wakefulness—this is, perhaps, along with wisdom, the key feature of a divinity for Heraclitus.

Thus nothing could be more natural than to understand that Heraclitus words, "immortals are mortals," represent a transition from the alert, watchful, waking state that is heart of the divine life to its opposite: the oblivious slumber of mortality—what we call human existence. In turn, "mortal are immortals" is the same process in reverse. The way up and down is one and the same.

Finally, it is unclear whether the divine and waking state is to be understood as somehow "more original" than the mortal state of sleep. Waking is clearly described as good and desirable, while sleep is seen as something contemptible. But one could well imagine the alternation of *daimones* falling asleep into the mortal dream and mortals waking up into the divine life as an eternal cycle with no beginning and no end. This can seem surprising, and in this light, all of existence, including the spiritual journey that culminates in an awakened and divine state, could seem rather pointless.

But perhaps this is to project the forced, self-obsessed seriousness of some supposed adulthood onto the creative exuberance of the divine. As Heraclitus said:

52 *aiôn pais esti paidzôn, pesseuôn. paidos hê basilêiê.*

52 Lifetime is a child at play, moving pieces in a game. Kingship belongs to the child.

Perhaps the eternal drama of life, or of an endless cycle of many lives, is a great game. The workings of divine providence pour forth from a lightness and joy seldom suspected of the gods. The point behind the pointlessness, then, is to join in the great game and to see it for what it is.

This can be a frustrating and maddening realization. One may well ask: why should I play; in fact, why should I do anything at all? Yet maybe this question is a last resort: mortality obstinately clinging to its mortality, ego refusing to die. Perhaps it is the case that should one ever truly wake up into the divine life and find herself an immortal, she will cast off the stubborn seriousness of justification and the selfishness of so-called “meaning” as a snake sheds its skin. In the end, one will play for the same reason a child plays, or a bird sings. Her divine nature is such that she will not be able to help it.

**Chapter 3: The Thunderbolt,
the Lord of Delphi, and the Man of Light**

Zeus and Apollo

In the preceding chapters we have examined the human condition, the status of Heraclitus' words, the nature of wisdom and virtue and how to attain them, and the major themes of sleep, death, and finally divinization. We have found that the human condition is one of utter obliviousness akin to sleep. Heraclitus' words are eternal and have a divine source. Wisdom and virtue are characterized as the activities and states of a very practical Gnosticism. Though our normal state is one of sleep, there is also the possibility of waking up to discover the esoteric secret of human existence: we are already in the underworld. Finally, we have established our identity as the sleeping immortals who are dead in the mortal life. Let us now turn our attention to those beings who surpass even our own immortal divinity by several orders of magnitude.

Heraclitus talks about Zeus, Apollo, Dike, Helios the sun, the Erinyes, Dionysus, Hades, and unnamed gods and divine beings. There is so much to be said about Heraclitus' work on the gods and religion that a whole book could be written. It is for this reason that I am going to have to focus on certain aspects of Heraclitus' theology to the exclusion of others. In so doing, I am certainly not implying that there is nothing to be said about the issues that I do not treat: indeed, I affirm that there is much fruitful ground yet to be covered.

That said, I am going to focus on Zeus and Apollo, and only on those aspects of the gods that have to do with the process of human realization that has been the theme of the preceding chapters.

In part, of course, this selective focus is necessarily determined by the selective focus of this project. Again, I am not attempting to provide an exhaustive account of Heraclitus' philosophy. Rather, I am attempting to clear a path to understanding him as a mystic, and I do this by focusing on the aspects of his philosophy that have to do with human awakening. Of course there is much more that could be said about Heraclitus. In terms of Heraclitus as he is of broad philosophical interest, one might, for instance, approach his views on the cosmos at large as it relates to the human microcosm, his pronouncements on the nature of time, and his

exploration of language and naming. Even in terms of his theology, there is much work to be done; we could examine the relationship between Zeus and fire, or we might attempt to understand his subtle hints that all the various gods are somehow but aspects of one divine reality. Thus, to reiterate, there is a lot of work to do, it will not be easy, and this project does not attempt to complete it: that is simply not my aim.

However, my approach is also partially justified by the way in which Heraclitus himself talks about the divine. For instance, there are around 130 fragments of Heraclitus (provided one does not consider the authenticity of the text too carefully); the exact number varies according to what each editor decides counts as a fragment—for instance, Kahn counts 125 fragments; Robinson, 129. Out of this total, I can find 27 instances of a clear reference to a god, gods, a divinity, or the divine—though I exclude references to religious practice alone without the mention of a god.¹⁴⁰ As far as I can tell, 23 of these instances describe the gods or divine beings precisely in terms of their relationship to human life and human concerns.¹⁴¹ Only 4 fragments seem to have no direct connection to human experience or concerns: these describe either relationships between the gods without reference to human beings or astronomical principles.¹⁴² Thus it is safe to say that Heraclitus is, for the most part, concerned to explicate a theology of the gods only insofar as it has a direct bearing on human existence. Thus, although the gods' influence on human life certainly covers more than the “spiritual awakening” aspects of our experience that will be my focus throughout this section, the general trend of Heraclitus' theology *is* an explication of the divine in terms of its effect on and relationship to the human.

¹⁴⁰ The 27 fragments that make explicit reference to a god or divinity are: 3, 5, 6, 15, 16, 23, 24, 28B, 32, 41, 51, 53, 64, 67, 78, 79, 80, 83, 92, 93, 94, 99, 100, 102, 114, 119, and 120. The ways in which the gods are referenced take 3 basic forms. First, there are direct references to a specific god or gods (including Helios, the sun, as a god, who is clearly personified in 94, and perhaps also in 100). Secondly, there are indirect references that we can say with fair certainty were made with some quite specific god or gods in mind, whether or not we can make a definite identification of the divinity referenced. Finally, there are mentions of clearly unspecified divinities such as “the god” or “the divinity.”

¹⁴¹ The 23 fragments that describe gods or divine beings precisely in terms of their relationship to human experience are 3, 5, 15, 16, 23, 24, 28B, 32, 41, 51, 53, 64, 67, 78, 79, 80, 83, 92, 93, 100, 102, 114, and 119.

¹⁴² The 4 fragments that mention gods but seem to have nothing to do with humanity are: 6, 94, 99, and 120.

Therefore, his theology was not speculative or doctrinal, it was practical and, given what we know about who Heraclitus was from the rest of his work, it was quite likely experiential.

Finally, I want to explain my decision to focus solely on Zeus and Apollo. To begin with, I take these two gods to be especially important to Heraclitus given the way he refers to them. That is to say, he only refers to these two gods using indirect language. The other gods are mentioned quite openly by name: Dikê or Justice, Dionysus, Helios the sun, and also the chthonic powers whose names one is generally advised *not* to pronounce—the avenging Erinyes and dread Hades, king of the underworld. On the other hand, Apollo is only ever spoken of as “the lord whose oracle is at Delphi” or “the bow and the lyre,” but never mentioned by name.¹⁴³ Zeus is “the wise one,” “the thunderbolt,” “father and king of all,” “that which never sets,” and, perhaps, “the god.” Yet he is only called by his name in one place: and then only to say that he is both willing and unwilling to be called by this name.¹⁴⁴ This reluctance to speak openly of Zeus and Apollo seems to indicate a special reverence for these two gods: in the ancient world, one was especially careful not to invoke the greatest powers lightly. Beyond the indirect language that Heraclitus uses to refer to Zeus and Apollo, there is also the fact that both gods play very special roles in his philosophy. Zeus, as we will see, is the supreme power in Heraclitus’ universe: the cosmic helmsman who directs absolutely everything in existence, the father and king of all. Apollo, on the other hand, will be shown to be a kind of divine model for Heraclitus and his work.

Having thus delineated and justified the scope of our inquiry, it is now time to move on to our exposition. We begin with Zeus.

¹⁴³ It is possible that Apollo is also indirectly referenced elsewhere: as “the bow” whose “name is life” but whose “work is death” in work 48, and as “the god” who speaks through the Sibyl in work 92.

¹⁴⁴ In work 32: “The wise is one, alone willing and unwilling to be spoken of by the name of Zeus.” While I am aware of the mention of Zeus in 120, I do not think it constitutes a reference to the god himself; rather, the god’s name is part of the single expression “*ouros aithriou Dios*,” or “the watcher of shining Zeus,” which, as it is also described as being “opposite the Bear (*arktou*),” seems to be a formulaic reference to the star Arcturus, or *arkt-ouros*, “the Bear watcher.”

Zeus

- 16 *to mê dunon pote pôs an tis lathoi;*
- 16 How will one hide from that which never sets?¹⁴⁵
- 32 *hen to sophon mounon legesthai ouk ethelei kai ethelei Dzênos onoma.*
- 32 The wise is one, alone unwilling and willing to be spoken of by the name of Zeus.¹⁴⁶
- 41 *hen to sophon epistasthai gnômên hokê kubernêsai panta dia pantôn.*
- 41 The wise is one knowing the plan by which it steers all things through all.
- 64 *tade panta oiakidzei keraunos.*
- 64 Thunderbolt pilots everything.¹⁴⁷
- 67 *ho theos êmerê euphronê, cheimôn theros, polemos eirênê, koros limnos. alloioutai de hokôsper <elaion> hokotan summigê thuômasin onomadzetai kath' hêdonên hekastou.*
- 67 The god: day/night, winter/summer, war/peace, satiety/hunger. It alters, as when oil is mingled with perfumes and gets named according to the fragrance of each.

¹⁴⁵ West unequivocally takes this work to refer to Heraclitus' wise god; Kahn and others see it as an extension of the traditional notion of Zeus that grants the divinity even more power and reach by equating him with the omnipresent cosmic fire. In part because of Zeus's strong associations in Heraclitus and Greek mythology with the wide-awake faculty of *mêtis*, and in part because of the striking parallels to Persian and Indian traditions noted by West, I am inclined to simply identify this work as referring to Zeus. There may well be something to be made of Zeus' relation to the cosmic fire, however, this issue I leave aside for a fuller treatment in a future project. See the discussion of West's work below.

¹⁴⁶ Punctuating, with Dilcher and West, after *mounon*. See Dilcher, *Studies in Heraclitus*, 126; West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 140 n. 3.

¹⁴⁷ I do assume that this work refers to Zeus through metonymy—the purest fire of the thunderbolt being, of course, Zeus's famous weapon of will and war. Most commentators seem to agree in principle, but prefer to focus on the pure and fiery nature of the armament, or the phenomenological significance of lightning as a natural occurrence. While there is probably much that can be made of all this, I will focus on the choice of the word *oiakidzei*, as this aspect of 64 has been particularly (and inexcusably) neglected.

I want to begin my explication of this suite of passages by drawing on West's important work on the parallels to be found between Heraclitus' descriptions of Zeus and the strikingly similar characterizations of the divine in Persian and Indian religious traditions. These parallels offer a wonderful way to place Heraclitus' theology into the wider context of his work as we now understand it, because they align Heraclitean theology with the theologies of the Vedic and Zoroastrian traditions—traditions that were deeply rooted in living spiritual practices with certain mystic sympathies and influences. Such affinities and parallels demand that we allow for a reading of Heraclitus' writings on the divine as not merely speculative theology, but rather the product of spiritual experience.

To begin with, we note that “the wise” is described in 32 and 41 as “one” and “alone.”¹⁴⁸ The phrase “the wise,” of course, refers to Zeus; in 32, “the wise” is identified as Zeus quite openly (though ambivalently).

An immediately interesting thing about Zeus as the “one, wise god” is the connection that can be found between Heraclitus and the Persian and Indian religions. As M.L. West informs us, in the Persian religion, Ahura Mazda had attributes that make him a clear parallel to Heraclitus' Zeus. Of the similarity between the Persian god and Heraclitus' “wise one,” he writes, “...Ahura Mazda...was identified by the Greeks with Zeus, but his name means simply the Wise God.”¹⁴⁹

Then, West notes that though Heraclitus admits the existence of the other gods, his Zeus is the greatest: “one” and “alone,” the undisputed master of the cosmic order. Similarly, he tells us, the Persians had other gods besides Ahura Mazda, but Zoroaster said, “I know none other but you” and the Yasna liturgies begin with the following words:

¹⁴⁸ In 108 Heraclitus says: “Of all those whose accounts I have heard, none has gone so far as this: to recognize what is wise, set apart from all.” The expression “*ho ti sophon*,” “what is wise,” is evocative of Heraclitus' other mentions of Zeus; thus, it may well be that here “the one, wise god” is also described as “*pantôn kechôrismenon*,” or “set apart from all.”

¹⁴⁹ M.L. West, *Early Greek Philosophy and the Orient*, 180.

I offer, I fulfill for the creator Ahura Mazda, the mighty and exalted, the greatest and best and finest and firmest and wisest and comeliest and highest in Righteousness.¹⁵⁰

When we consider work 16, which speaks of Zeus as a star that never sets, who cannot be escaped, we find that there is a striking parallel here as well. As West writes:

Heraclitus' god watches men the whole time, not only by day...the emphasis on the sleepless, unrelenting watchfulness of the divine power is something new in Greece...Ahura Mazda sees all that men do, and is not to be deceived. He is never asleep, and never dulled by narcotics.¹⁵¹

In India, West reports, another clear parallel to 16 is found in the description of Prāna:

Erect, he stays awake when others sleep,
He never falls down prone:
That he should sleep while others sleep,
None has ever heard.¹⁵²

The similarities seem to continue in 67. That the traditional Zeus is “the god” is not entirely clear, but from the series of parallels drawn by Heraclitus it is surely some great being, and indeed, as noted earlier, there is hardly a better candidate in the pantheon than Zeus. As West notes, this is not just any random series of opposites, but pairs of tremendously important opposites that affect the world order and human existence in fundamental ways: they determine our most basic experiences. Day and night govern our experience of time, waking, and sleeping. Winter and summer dictate the seasons and thus our work, our sustenance, and our rituals—our harvests and our travels, our times of plenty and scarcity, and the ancient rites which we celebrate to mark the turning of the cycle. War and peace determine our relationships

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 180.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 180-181.

¹⁵² Ibid., 181.

to other human beings, the activities of the polis, are the background against which we struggle for honor and glory or fall into shame, and ultimately make us slaves or free people. Satiety and hunger, which can also be read as “fulfillment and lack” or “fullness and emptiness,” are the very engines of desire and action. As West notes, this proposition, that the god is a series of unified opposites, “is without parallel in Greek.” Not so in India. In the Prasna Upanishad it is written, “The year too is Prajapati: it has a southern and northern path.” As West succinctly observes, “God is summer and winter, in other words.” The parallels do not stop there; they become even more explicit. The Upanishad says, “Day and night too are Prajapati.”¹⁵³

Thus there are several meaningful parallels to Eastern religion to be found in Heraclitus: the notion of the oneness and supremacy of Zeus over and against other gods, the perpetual wakefulness of such a being, the idea of this deity somehow containing within himself the opposites that make up the world as we experience it. Again, the fact that the parallels that we find in the East spring from religious sources, along with everything else we know about Heraclitus, encourages us to understand Heraclitus’ theology in this light as well. However, there is also much independent statement of the nature of the divine, and it is in view of this that I now wish to discuss 16, 41, and 64.

Let us begin by turning to works 41 and 64. Zeus is described as he who “pilots” everything, “steers” all things. The language of piloting and steering in 41 and 64 is extraordinarily important. It has often been supposed that this manner of speaking is an explicit confirmation of the rational governance of the universe. Such a supposition tells us much about our own expectations, but little about what Heraclitus is actually saying. It would be wise to be more cautious, lest we impute our own system of references, metaphors, symbols, and assumptions to Heraclitus.

It is well known to anyone who looks at the ancient sources, and, I suppose, to anyone who has ever had to pilot uncharted and rough waters in a small vessel or race a chariot, that the faculty by which one pilots a ship on the open sea or steers a team of horses in a race is not, principally, rational calculation, but rather *mêtis*. The words

¹⁵³ Ibid., 182-183.

of the Iliad make this clear. There is even a short hymn to *mêtis* that takes place before the famous chariot race, in Nestor's speech to Antilokhos, which runs:

The woodsman does more by *mêtis* than by brute force,
by *mêtis* the pilot guides his storm-tossed ship over the sea;
and so by *mêtis* one driver can beat another.¹⁵⁴

Peter Kingsley's comments on the nature of *mêtis* can be useful here. Kingsley writes that in Greek *mêtis* meant

...much more than "intelligence" or "wit," which is the sort of translation usually offered for it...as a matter of fact the term belonged to, and conjured up, a whole world of mysterious cunning and craftiness. *Mêtis* represents the element of surprise, the magical factor of right timing; is the uncanny ability that makes brilliant strategists brilliant, faultless craftsmen faultless, superb charioteers or pilots superb, successful cheats and liars successful. Certainly it means intelligence, but an intelligence or alertness of an extremely particular and skillful kind: a kind so subtle and so ambiguous that it was constantly associated with what, to an external observer, would seem trickery or outright deception. And above all, it implies a type of intense and yet flexible awareness which is always firmly rooted in the present moment—focused not on generalities and theoretical ideas but on what happens to be taking place right now, on discovering how to master difficult or even impossible situations that would leave anyone else quite clueless and helpless.¹⁵⁵

Zeus's associations with *mêtis* do not end with his being described as piloting and steering all things. Hesiod, for instance, describes him as "Zeus, whose wisdom is everlasting" and whom "it is not possible to deceive." This description makes the point that Zeus is not only all-wise, but impossible to outwit as well. This is because he is the supreme example of a being who both embodies cunning intelligence and has utterly mastered outright trickery.¹⁵⁶ The possession of sharp, alert intelligence

¹⁵⁴ *Iliad*, Book XXIII, 315-318, Samuel Butler edition.

¹⁵⁵ Kingsley, "NM," 362 with n. 66.

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 465, 470ff, 545ff, 585ff, 613-14.

and the ability both to see through and create good tricks were key abilities associated with *mêtis*.

Additionally, in mythology, the goddess *Mêtis* was the first wife of Zeus, whom he “craftily deceived” with “cunning words” and swallowed for two very specific reasons: that her children might not usurp him and that “the goddess might devise for him both good and evil.”¹⁵⁷ Thus even in early myth (and thus on a deep and symbolic level for the Greeks) Zeus is the union of power and *mêtis*. Heraclitus’ invocation of Zeus as the thunderbolt who steers confirms this mythological background. Zeus is evoked by means of his fiery weapon that no one can resist, the very instrument of warlike might that, in myth and poetry, insures his supremacy as king over gods and human beings—he is an unstoppable power that brings order to the cosmos. But the exercise of this power is described by a word that connotes a clever, alert pilot who holds the right course on changing and dangerous seas. Zeus is power, but not blind power and not purely rational power either. Zeus is the supreme power who governs everything, but by a force associated with wakeful alertness, cunning, and trickery.

Further evidence of Zeus’s associations with *mêtis* is found in 16. Zeus is seen here as the perpetually awake watcher of everything that happens. *Mêtis* was certainly the power of cunning practical intelligence and trickery, but it was also the power of wide-awake alertness. The connection between these two facets of *mêtis* makes perfect sense: the practical cunning needed, for instance, to pilot a trackless sea or win a chariot race is attained by virtue of being totally present and aware of what is going on in the moment. A lapse of attention can be disastrous in such situations. Similarly, the power to trick others and to see through others’ tricks requires that one be perfectly poised and alert, sensitive to what is going on at the moment without losing one’s focus or concentration.

In summary, then, we may say that for Heraclitus, the universe and all the beings in it are directed by a supreme power who is wise beyond description. Yet this being, and the manner in which he creates the cosmic order, have deep associations with trickery, cunning, and deception.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., lines 886ff.

Now we must look at this characterization of Zeus as it relates to human existence, and, specifically, to the spiritual work of awakening that is at the heart of Heraclitus' philosophy.

I see Heraclitus' characterization of Zeus as a kind of revelation, and this revelation is in some way the foundation upon which the heart of Heraclitus' philosophy of awakening rests. It is what helps us to make sense of everything else he says, and it is the divine truth that stands behind and justifies his philosophy. This is true in two ways.

First, as we have seen, the dominant metaphor in Heraclitus' philosophy of human ignorance and wisdom, mortality and immortality, is the metaphor of sleep and waking. Zeus is the ever-awake consciousness behind the whole of existence. There is a connection between these two ideas. When human beings are "asleep" and ignorant, they are in some way out of harmony with the waking power that drives the cosmos. What they need to attain wisdom and immortality is the awakened consciousness that always watches, always stays awake, and is thus able to learn from the language of the senses, the divine source of wisdom deep within the soul, and the words of someone like Heraclitus. When human beings, in the words of work 63, "rise up," then they become "wakeful watchers" of the living and the dead.¹⁵⁸ The process of becoming wise, then, as well as the activity of a wise human being who has reclaimed her immortality, are in harmony with the waking consciousness that creates and maintains the world order: the Heraclitean saint, to borrow a phrase from a later religious tradition, "puts on Zeus" in order to become divine and do her work. Thus, the description of Zeus as a force of unthinkable wakefulness both clarifies and justifies Heraclitus' characterization of wisdom and ignorance as sleeping and waking. It also places the human quest for wisdom and immortality within the larger world order, thus lending a sort of "cosmic logic" to Heraclitean spirituality.

Secondly, as we have seen, Heraclitus' writing evinces at every turn a profound mysticism and esoteric sensibility: the great truths of human existence are hidden from view and are only available to the awakened. His explicit relation of

¹⁵⁸ Work 63 will be discussed in more detail below.

Zeus to a power of cunning and trickery is what underlies this. Far from being, as it is sometimes characterized, evidence of willful obscurantism or aristocratic elitism, Heraclitus' mystical esotericism is a natural expression of wisdom in a fundamentally deceptive and cryptic universe. Because Zeus is a being of *mêtis*, indeed, the Supreme Being of *mêtis*, the world is such that "the real nature loves to hide."¹⁵⁹ Nowhere is this more apparent than in the area of human self-knowledge. We think we are awake, but we are not. We think we live in the world of the living, and that the underworld is somewhere else, but this is not so. We think we are mere mortals, but we are in fact much more than that. The truth is hidden, and even if it is stated openly by one who has seen through the illusion, it is still not understandable to anyone who is not awake. This is the world we live in.

Heraclitus' theology explains why the world is the way it is—and, by extension, why the human spiritual path and Heraclitus' own philosophy are the way they are.

¹⁵⁹ Work 123.

Apollo

- 93 *ho anaks ou to manteion esti to en Delphois oute legei oute kruptei alla sêmainei.*
- 93 The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither declares nor conceals, but gives a sign.

The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi is, of course, Apollo. It is said of Apollo that he neither declares, nor conceals, but *sêmainei*, he gives a sign. There are really two issues to be dealt with here.

First, what, if anything, can this work tell us about Heraclitus' own writing?

Second, who, really, is Apollo?

Taking a look at the first question, Dilcher finds this work blasphemous if we read it as an allusion to Heraclitus' own style. This is not necessarily so. Heraclitus is very clear in distinguishing his words, his *logos*, from himself. Again, as he says in work 50: "Listening not to me, but to the *logos* [my words], it is wise to agree that all things are one."

If we do take 93 to refer to Heraclitus' writing, this means several things.

In the first place, he is positioning himself vis-à-vis Apollo in a very particular way. Specifically, Heraclitus is setting Apollo up as a sort of divine role model for himself: the god is the Olympian prototype after which the human oracle patterns himself. Thus, Apollo is shown to us in this work primarily as an oracle god, and indeed, this is perhaps unsurprising; as Burkert writes, "In Archaic times the oracles contributed to Apollo's fame more than anything else."¹⁶⁰ We must also remember the specific nature of Apollo himself, not just as giver of oracles to human beings, but as himself an oracle and prophet; as a line of tragedy reminds us: "Loksias [Apollo] is prophet of his father Zeus."¹⁶¹ Heraclitus, expounding as he does the truth of the

¹⁶⁰ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 147, trans. John Raffan.

¹⁶¹ Aeschylus, *Eum.*, 19. Quoted in Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 148.

human and cosmic order as determined by Zeus, and doing so in oracular language, is thus emulating his divine parent Apollo to perfection.

In the second place, by setting up this relationship between himself and Apollo, Heraclitus is here formally identifying his manner of speech as oracular. In talking of his words as oracular, he is indicating, first, that they have a divine source. This should not surprise us. But secondly, Heraclitus is also saying that his words are not at all easy to interpret—oracles, especially oracles of Apollo, were well-known as being very hard to understand. As Burkert writes:

...it is the indirect and veiled revelation which belongs especially to Apollo; for this reason he is called *Loksias*, the Oblique; the obscure utterances of a medium possessed by the god are formulated in verses which are often intentionally ambiguous and indeterminate; often the just interpretation emerges only the second or third time as a result of painful experience.¹⁶²

The parallelism between Heraclitus, or *Skoteinos*, the Obscure, as he was called by later Greek writers, and Apollo, *Loksias*, the Oblique, is quite telling. Again, this is far from shocking, though it implies several things.

To being with, it is important to note that there was always a misunderstanding almost “built in” to the language of the oracle; one was practically invited to get it wrong—at one’s own expense. As Burkert hints, the cost could be heavy. If understood correctly, oracles were the greatest of blessings. If misunderstood, they were, alas, not merely neutral—they led one on to catastrophe. One might well die, or one’s life might become not worth living. Heraclitus is, then, telling us that his philosophy is a very tricky and deadly serious affair—deceptive by nature and perhaps even a matter of life and death.

Additionally, he is giving a definition of oracular speech as giving a sign, in contrast to declaring or concealing. We must not, under any circumstances, understand “giving a sign” as some kind of intermediary or midway point between declaring and concealing. Heraclitus is fond of opposites, but not of lukewarm compromises. He evokes opposing forces either to contrast them or to declare their

¹⁶² Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 148.

absolute underlying unity, but never to average them out into a midway point: he will contrast, for instance, waking and sleeping, or unify day and night—but there is no mention of slight drowsiness or twilight. It is therefore prudent to understand “giving a sign” as the total union of declaring and concealing, and not some friendly middle ground. Of course, this is a very accurate definition of oracular speech.

In oracular speech, there is an obvious, superficial interpretation, a quick and easy answer that is almost always wrong. There is the correct interpretation that is concealed. Yet the manner of concealment and declaration is such that “to give a sign” or “to speak as an oracle” must be understood as their union.

In one sense, the truth is openly declared—it is like the simple elegance of some mathematical theorems: when one knows the correct solution, it seems amazing that one did not see it all along. But the truth is also concealed: right out in the open and in that very kind of declaring which is so easy to misinterpret.

In terms of the opposite of truth, the “wrong answer,” it too is declared openly—it is the supposedly obvious interpretation, the first thing that comes to mind when faced with an oracular utterance. Yet of course there is also a strong element of concealment to it—it cannot be seen for the impending doom that it is, usually due to some failing on the part of the interpreter: hubris, greed, or simply the inability to see beyond one’s expectations.

The specific use of the word “sign” is especially meaningful. Heraclitus is describing both the language of Apollo’s oracles and his own language as “giving a sign.” A certain poised, open, wakeful alertness was the implicit requirement for understanding an oracle of Apollo correctly. It was the explicit requirement for understanding Heraclitus’ words, according to Heraclitus. The kind of wide-awake, subtle awareness that I am referring to was commonly called *mêtis* in Greek. Unsurprisingly, we find that *mêtis* was widely associated with “signs” and the reading of signs in ancient Greece.¹⁶³ Oracular signs, of course, also had the deepest of associations with useful guidance and help, particularly in a dangerous or desperate

¹⁶³ *Mêtis* and signs: Kingsley, *Reality*, 90-91, 161-162, and notes on 565. On *mêtis*, signs, and pathlessness or *aporia*, see *ibid.*, 248-251.

situation: one would naturally seek help from an oracle in such a situation.¹⁶⁴ Thus, Heraclitus is both evoking the faculty of *mêtis* and also hinting that he, like Apollo, is a source of help and useful guidance in a tricky and potentially dangerous situation.

Turning, then, to this work as a statement about the god Apollo, we must consider the particulars of the historical background to Heraclitus' writings.

Heraclitus came from the coastal city of Ephesus on the western edge of Anatolia. The Apollo of Anatolia was sometimes referred to as Apollo *Oulios*. As Kingsley tells us:

Apollo *Oulios* had his own special areas of worship, mainly in the western coastal regions of Anatolia. And as for the title *Oulios*, it contains a delightful ambiguity. Originally it meant "deadly," "destructive," "cruel": every god has his destructive side. But Greeks also explained it another way, as meaning "he who makes whole." That, in a word, is Apollo—the destroyer who heals, the healer who destroys.¹⁶⁵

Once we can make the connection between Heraclitus' historical background and Apollo *Oulios*, things begin to fall into place. For further confirmation that Heraclitus is referring to the Apollo *Oulios* of his native country, we are able to turn to the following work:

51 *ou ksuniasin hokôs diapheromenon heôutô homologeei palintropos harmoniê hokôsper toksou kai lures.*

51 They do not comprehend how a thing agrees at variance with itself; it is an attunement turning back on itself, like that of the bow and the lyre.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ The case of the citizens of Phocaea, who were cast out by Persian invaders and forced to wander far from their Anatolian home, and who sought guidance from the Delphic oracle, is both a beautiful story and a splendid example of the use of oracles in desperate times—as well as the inherent danger in seeking out such divine help. For a fine account of the Phocaeans' tale, see Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 19-32.

¹⁶⁵ Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 57. See also Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 145-146.

¹⁶⁶ That this work refers to Apollo was hinted at by Burkert. See Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 146.

The meanings of “agrees at variance with itself” and “an attunement turning back on itself” have been much debated. But it is actually fairly easy to understand.

If we interpret 51 on a literal level, these expressions refer to the elements and tensions that make up a physical bow or lyre. Thus when Heraclitus says “the bow and the lyre” he is referring to two objects, and each contains within itself the same pattern of elements and tensions. Specifically, the strings and the wood of both bows and lyres are “at variance.” They are literally pulling in opposite directions. But they agree and they are an attunement in the sense that it is precisely this contrary motion, the pulling in opposite directions, that creates the tension in the strings of a musical instrument or a weapon—indeed, that makes the instrument or weapon function, and thus be what it is. They must agree and be attuned: too taut, and the apparatus will snap. Too slack, and it will not be able to do its job.

That the attunement itself is said to “turn back on itself” merely indicates the nature of this attunement in contrast to other possible sorts of attunement. There are several conceivable kinds of attunement, but this particular one is a union of contrary and opposing forces. It is not, for instance, a harmonization of two already more-or-less complimentary things. Nor is it the reconciliation of opposites—bows and lyres both depend on the fact that the wood and the strings are pulling in opposite directions, and, more precisely, on the fact that the wood and the strings *continue* to oppose one another: there is no happy reconciliation; the continued strife is necessary and good.

This is the literal level. Read on a more metaphorical or mythical level, the phrase “the bow and the lyre” refers to Apollo *Oulios*. Instead of being given two physical objects that share the same properties, now we are given two aspects of one god. But the literal interpretation bears on the metaphorical interpretation; is our guide for understanding the nature of this contrary Apollo. For he is a very paradoxical god, “the destroyer who heals, the healer who destroys.” He is the bow: the bringer of plague, death, and utter destruction. He is also the lyre: bringer of the healing incantation.

His two natures constitute an attunement precisely because these two opposing aspects of Apollo go together, work together, make Apollo who he is.

Neither can be done away with, because healing and death belong together. Other Greek mythological traditions understood this. As Kingsley writes:

According to an Orphic poem Apollo and Persephone went to bed together, made love. The tradition makes perfect sense in every possible way. For something that's hardly ever noticed is how the healing powers of Apollo and his son Asclepius brought them into an intimate relationship with death. To heal is to know the limits of healing and also what lies beyond. Ultimately there's no real healing without the ability to face death itself. Apollo is the god of healing but he's also deadly. The queen of the dead is the embodiment of death; and yet it was said that the touch of her hand is healing.¹⁶⁷

In this brilliant use of metaphor and metonymy, Heraclitus is actually showing us how Apollo the Healer and the Destroyer did his work. He was one Apollo who was intimately familiar with both healing and death.

In one sense, this is what Kingsley has already explained. To know how to heal is to know the limits of healing and to know and face death as well. Similarly, the best way to know how to destroy someone or something is to understand exactly how that being is put together in a state of health.

But there is also the very Heraclitean suggestion that healing is death, and death is healing. We can understand this in terms we have already discussed, those of sleeping immortals who “die” into the mortal life, and mortals who wake up into the divine life and must face the “death” of their mortality. To truly heal—to restore human beings to their divine status, is to completely destroy them as mortals. But to destroy them as mortals is really to heal them of ignorance and delusion, is to destroy the sleep that was costing them their divinity. Rūmī speaks of the divine in similar terms:

He alone has the right to break,
for He alone has the power to mend.
He that knows how to sew together
knows how to tear apart:
whatever He sells,

¹⁶⁷ Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 87.

He buys something better in exchange.
He lays the house in ruins;
then in a moment He makes it more livable than before.¹⁶⁸

Now we are in a position to understand the full meaning of the parallelism between Heraclitus and Apollo *Oulios*. Heraclitus' own vision of himself and his work was such that he saw himself as an oracle and a giver of signs in the manner of the god who heals and destroys, who heals by destroying. That Heraclitus saw himself as an oracle implies that he saw his words as having a divine status and origin, as demanding a very awake consciousness to be understood. That Heraclitus saw himself as a giver of signs implies that he saw his words as offering real, though perilously tricky guidance to those awake enough to be able to make use of them. Finally, that Heraclitus saw himself as parallel to the Apollo who heals and destroys, who heals by destroying, implies that the help and guidance that he offers carry a high price: in order to do his healing work, Heraclitus, like Apollo, will have to destroy.

Thus, in explicating the nature of Apollo and in suggesting that there is a parallel between the god and himself, Heraclitus is showing us that he conceived of Apollo as a kind of divine archetype or model after which Heraclitus and others like him might pattern their lives and their work. This is brought out more clearly in works 17, 26, and 63, as we will now see.

¹⁶⁸ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, I, 3882, trans. Kabir Helminski. Quoted in Helminski, *The Knowing Heart*, 43-44.

The Man of Light

63 *entha d'eonti epanistasthai kai phulakas ginesthai egerti dzôntôn kai nekrôn.*

63 ...they rise up and become wakeful watchers of living people and corpses.

The beginning of this work is corrupt. We may, however, safely say that Heraclitus here said something about beings who rise up and become wakeful watchers of living people and corpses.

This work is commonly taken as a reference to Hesiod's "golden race" mentioned in the *Works and Days*, and thus is interpreted as referring to the departed souls of human beings who, after death, act as guardians.

The problem with this interpretation is Heraclitus' demonstrable contempt for the poets, and for Hesiod in particular (40, 42, 56, 57). We cannot accept that Heraclitus would have parroted Hesiod here. On the contrary, we must expect that he is modifying or refining Hesiod's idea. Hesiod's specific failing, according to Heraclitus, was that he did not recognize the oneness of day and night. We might, then, understand Heraclitus as saying something like: "Yes, they rise up and become the guardians of the living and the dead, but you are mistaken if you think they only do this after what you call death. As day and night are one, so are life and death. The true watchers do not do their work at some later time, after some imagined 'death' and departure from this 'life.' They do it right now. For the life of heroic immortality is not for the dead, but the awakened."

Heraclitus here is describing a kind of role that closely parallels that of the shaman. On the one hand, the shaman is quite obviously, as physician and religious functionary, a caretaker, a guardian, a "watcher" of the living. Just as essential, however, is his role as caretaker and guardian of departed souls. In fact, the shaman's basic technique is that of ecstatic journeying between the world of the living and the world of the dead—made possible by this deep understanding of both. His basic

function, really, is mediation between the two worlds, for the sake of both worlds. In this sense, his method and his work can be understood as a kind of stewardship of those who are alive and those who have departed—he is a guardian and knower of and in both worlds—a watcher of the living and the dead.

Thus we have Heraclitus presenting us with a portrait of what the awakened life is: it is work—spiritual work. The awakened, knowing human being who has realized and regained her divinity does not merely spend the remainder of her life on some mountaintop, immersed in bliss. She has work to do. She must keep watch over the living and the dead.

The nature of the spiritual work of the watcher is, I think, spelled out more clearly in the following work:

26 *anthrôpos en euphronê phaos haptetai heautô aposbestheis opseis, dzôn de haptetai tethneôtos heudôn, egrêgorôs haptetai heudontos.*

26 A human being touches/kindles a light for himself in the night, when his sight is quenched. Living, he touches the dead in his sleep; waking, he touches the sleeper.¹⁶⁹

The interpretation of the first line is difficult, but not impossible. Our best clue is that in form and content it bears comparison to this work:

117 *anêr hokotan methusthêi, agetai hupo paidos anêbou sphallomenos, ouk epaiôn hoke bainei, hugrên tèn psuchên echôn.*

117 A man when drunk is led by a beardless boy, stumbling, not perceiving where he is going, having his soul moist.

In 117, we are presented with a homey scene—a man in his cups led home through the streets of Ephesus by a young boy. But as is so frequently the case in Heraclitus, there is a second meaning waiting to be uncovered.

The second interpretation of the work is that the man drunk is the spiritually ignorant man, unable to make intelligent use of his senses: not perceiving, *ouk*

¹⁶⁹ My rendering of work 26 is based on Kahn's, but as the ambiguity of *haptetai* is significant, it is carried over into the translation.

epaiôn, suggests a sensory dimension to what Heraclitus is getting at here, especially as the word *epaiôn* comes from the verb *epaiô*, which literally means “to have an ear for.”¹⁷⁰ This work is also, of course, evocative of the person with a “barbarian soul” of work 107, who is similarly unable to make good use of his senses: his eyes and ears are “bad witnesses,” do not deliver evidence of the truth, because he cannot grasp the language that they are speaking. Such a person must be led out of his ignorance and confusion by the initiate. The initiate was often portrayed as a youth, and it is this interpretation of *paidos anêbou*, “a beardless boy,” that I suggest here.

There are significant parallels in Greek philosophy. For instance, the goddess addresses Parmenides as *kouros*, “young lad,” but he is also “the man who knows.” This seeming contradiction is resolved by understanding *kouros* not as a literal young man, but as the initiate. Additionally, the prophet, healer, and lawgiver Epimenides of Crete was also referred to, in the Cretan dialect, as a *kouros*, a young lad or initiate.

Interestingly, we are also told in Parmenides’ poem that *kourai*, “young girls,” “led the way” to the goddess. The verb for “to lead the way” is a variant of the same verb Heraclitus uses here.

Additionally, the metaphor of ignorance as drunkenness that requires a guide to lead the way would reappear in the *Hermetica* some centuries later:

Where are you heading in your drunkenness, you people? Have you
swallowed the doctrine of ignorance undiluted, vomiting it up already
because you cannot hold it?

Stop and sober yourselves up!

...Seek a guide to take you by the hand and lead you to the portals of
knowledge.¹⁷¹

Thus, we are presented with a double meaning in work, a very quotidian scene that is a metaphor for the spiritual life—in this case the drunkenness of a soul in ignorance that requires the guidance of an initiate to lead the way home.

¹⁷⁰ For another parallel see Empedocles fragment B2 and the chaos described as “wretched things crash in” and human beings “bump into” little parts of existence while being “driven...all over the place.”

¹⁷¹ *Hermetica*, Libellus VII, trans. Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica*, 24.

I suggest that something very similar is going on in work 26. Again we are presented with a very mundane scene—the lighting of a lamp to see at night. But there is a second, spiritual interpretation waiting to be discovered. I would suggest that the interpretation hinges on the ambiguity of the verb *haptetai*. *Haptetai* can certainly mean “kindles,” and is the obvious translation of the word here, at least on a superficial level. However, I think Heraclitus here is playing with a second meaning, indeed more basic meaning of the word: “contacts” or “touches.”¹⁷² Thus interpreted, work 26 reads: “A man in the night contacts a light (*phaos*) for himself, when his sight is quenched.”

To make sense of this, we must remember the play on the word for light as found in Parmenides and Empedocles that would be so important to the later esoteric writings of the Gnostics: *phôs*, “light,” sounds just like a Homeric word for “human being”: *phôs*. In Greek, the words differ only slightly in pronunciation. Parmenides and Empedocles, and certainly the Gnostics, would very consciously play on this word to evoke the idea that the human being was a being of light.¹⁷³ The word used by Heraclitus here is *phaos*, the uncontracted, Ionian form of *phôs*, and is close enough in sound to the Homeric word for “human being” to evoke the same parallel. It seems to me, then, that in 26 Heraclitus is using this play on words to evoke the idea of the spiritual teacher as “man of light”—an image found in many, many spiritual traditions. Thus the sentence reads: “A human being in the night contacts a light-man for himself, when his sight is quenched.

Finally, we can understand “in the night” and “his sight is quenched” as referring to the darkness of ignorance and the spiritual or philosophical blindness that is the lot of most people.

Thus, this work describes the unfortunate human being, blind in the night of ignorance, coming into contact with the spiritual guide—the light-man who illuminates the night of ignorance with the divine light of understanding. When we

¹⁷² *LSJ*.

¹⁷³ Kingsley, *Reality*, 213 and notes on 577; and Kingsley, “Empedocles for the New Millennium,” 383-384 and n. 118.

read the first line of 26 in this way, the work as a whole becomes intelligible: it is a description of enlightenment.

We are now in a position to make sense of the phrase “living, he touches the dead in his sleep.” These lines describe the existence of a human being while he is still “in the night.” His existence in this state is characterized by two things: contact with the dead and sleep. This accords quite naturally with what Heraclitus says about human existence elsewhere. On the one hand, human life is consistently described as a state of sleep. On the other hand, as we saw in work 21, the secret of human existence is that we are already in the world of the dead, though we do not realize it in our state of sleep. Thus, “living, he touches the dead in his sleep” must mean that in what appears to be the ordinary waking state that we think of as “life,” but what for Heraclitus is nothing more than sleep and ignorance, a human being is in contact with the dead because he is already in the underworld, but does not realize it—thus, “in his sleep.”

The best a person can do in this situation is to seek a guide, contact a light-man for himself: and here the form of the Greek implies that this contacting is done for the benefit of the “man in the night.”

We then have the final words of 26: “waking, he touches the sleeper.” The “man in the night” who was in contact with the dead, but was unable to realize it because of his sleep, is, of course, “the sleeper.” Thus we are faced with a paradox: if “the man in the night” is also “the sleeper,” then how can he be said to “make contact” with himself upon awakening? How can one not be in contact with oneself?

This paradox is interesting and beautiful, but unsurprising and not at all impossible to understand: it makes the most perfect sense within the framework of Heraclitus’ philosophy.

We already know that perhaps the most important knowledge for Heraclitus was self-knowledge. Human beings, as a rule, are so asleep that they have absolutely no understanding of who or what they are. They are, as Heraclitus says, “absent while present,” and thus, completely “out of touch” with themselves as they really are. Upon awakening, however, they finally see the truth: they had been asleep, they are in the underworld, they are immortals. This truth is quite accurately characterized as a

kind of self-knowledge. Thus, Heraclitus is describing what happens in the awakened state as the experience of making contact with the truth of oneself for the first time, which fits perfectly with the rest of Heraclitus' philosophy.

We have, then, interpreted Heraclitus' words here in a way that does justice to his concerns, the characteristic subtlety of his expression, and the larger scheme of his philosophy.

However, there is one thing left to notice. Just as we did when Heraclitus spoke of the god of Delphi who gives a sign, we can read his words here as self-referential. Heraclitus is presenting himself to us as the man of light who is able to lead a person out of the blindness of the night of ignorance into the light of true understanding that is, ultimately, self-knowledge—the return of oneself to oneself, the end of the bitter estrangement from and ignorance of one's true nature.

We are being shown the nature of the spiritual work talked about above. A watcher or a guardian does not merely sit by as an objective, detached observer. To truly keep watch over people, to guard them, is to be a guide. The watcher leads the blind by the hand. He presents them with their own immortal natures for the first time.

Epilogue

This, then, was the work of Heraclitus: he was a watcher and a guide. It is often asserted that we know very little of the details of his life. I have attempted to restore an understanding of the essence of that life. In closing, it is time to return to one detail in order to understand something about who Heraclitus was, and is.

The one thing that is perhaps most surprising about Heraclitus is that he seems to have had no public life: no real influence on his hometown of Ephesus and no students of note. Parmenides, of course, taught his adopted son and successor Zeno, and was actively involved in the life of Velia: as a priest, a lawmaker, a diplomat, and a healer. Empedocles instructed his student Pausanias and worked as a doctor and a prophet in Sicily. There is even a report that he defended democratic freedom there by single-handedly destroying a sinister, despotic organization known as “the Thousand.” If Heraclitus was a prophet, a watcher and guide, a known wise man, then where was his influence?

There are a few stories that come down to us about Heraclitus. Many of them are clearly outright fabrications—jokes by later writers at his expense. But some seem to contain some original grain of truth, and a few are even quite likely and tell us something about his nature.

One famous story tells us that for a period of Heraclitus’ later life he left the city and lived in the wilderness, eating only plants. Others have noted the similarities here to the figure of the ascetic hermit that that has almost archetypal status due to its prevalence across so many cultures. More specifically, comparisons have been made to the Indian forest yogis and to Lao Tzu. I think the comparison with Lao Tzu may be the most instructive: the old master left civilization because he was saddened by human evil. His book was all he left behind. Like Lao Tzu, Heraclitus lived in what he saw as an evil and corrupt state. There was nothing he could do. He delivered his last testament to the temple of Artemis and left, to do whatever it is that holy men do in the solitude of the wilderness.

This, perhaps, is the historical reality of Heraclitus. He lived in a time and place where he could not do all that he was meant to do. He lived in exile in his own city. But Heraclitus was not one to surrender that easily. Thwarted and cast out, he improvised.

At some point in his life, Heraclitus had fallen back into the depths of himself. What he found was the god inside—the divine source of his divine words. At the beginning of what he wrote, he formally describes those words as “being forever.” Heraclitus is often presented as someone working at the dawn of literacy, taken and perhaps even a bit flustered by the new form of communication. But it may be that this is to misunderstand him. Perhaps in writing his book, Heraclitus knew exactly what he was doing.

He knew that circumstances prevented him from fully doing his work at Ephesus. He also knew that he had a divine source of eternal wisdom within himself capable of reaching over the vastness of time. Lastly, he knew of a fascinating and highly useful new tool: the written word. It is probably fair to say that more than any other Presocratic, Heraclitus was quite consciously writing for us.

Heraclitus’ writing, we must remember, was the work of an awakened master who had realized his immortality and divinity. It is worth noting that such great spiritual beings never consider themselves subject to what most people take to be the insurmountable finality of death and the unbridgeable vastness of time.

Through his words, Heraclitus offers himself to us, today, as a man of light—a guide. It is my hope that this project has helped the reader to see this offer for what it is. In closing I will only say that the essential requirements for understanding his words and receiving his help are still the same as they were in his day: stay awake at every moment in order to attend consciously to the language of the senses; seek out and inquire of the divine source of wisdom concealed deep in the depths of our own souls.

This may seem to us to be too much to ask: impossible to do however hard we try. One can feel quite alone and not at all up to the task. I know the feeling, and I want to close with this story from my own life. As we have seen, Heraclitus hinted that he meant for his words to carry across the ages. He also implied that he was immortal, a guide, and a watcher. To put these two things together and see the implication seems simple. Perhaps the reader can do it for herself; I confess it had not occurred to me and had to be pointed out by someone else.

Some time ago, I was sitting on a bench in a little park with two friends: a man and a woman who are both very intelligent and deeply spiritual people. I was in the middle of writing this dissertation and intensely immersed in my attempts to understand Heraclitus' philosophy. I was telling them both about my struggle to understand what Heraclitus was saying on a particular point, though I forget now what that was. What I do remember is that I was expressing some frustration over my failure to grasp his meaning. They listened politely for a while, until finally one of my friends smiled and said what had never occurred to me: "Well, why don't you just ask Heraclitus?"

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Appendix I: The Idea of Greek “Religion”

Throughout this dissertation, I have spoken rather freely of Greek “religion” and of Heraclitus as a “religious” figure. As some readers may find such terms overly loose, I wish to offer a few clarifications and reflections on the idea of religion in a Greek context and on Heraclitus as a religious figure in a religious milieu.¹⁷⁴

To begin with, it is quite right to point out that many contemporary western notions of what religion is are heavily influenced by 2000 years of Christianity. When talking about Greek religion, then, one must bear in mind that there are major and important differences between the spirituality of the Greeks and Christian and post-Christian spiritualities. It does not, however, follow from this that we must never talk of Greek religion; we may, but we must always remind ourselves that we are using the term “religion” in a broad, anthropological sense, and that the “religion” of the Greeks was not the “religion” of our own world.

Obviously, it is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and certainly this appendix, to provide an exhaustive survey of the key features of Greek religion. But there are several aspects of Greek religion bearing on our concerns that may be mentioned here.

First, perhaps the most basic notion of the Greek exoteric religious experience was *eusebia*. As Burkert notes, the word derives from the root *-seb*, with its connotations of “danger and flight,” but above all, “reverence and admiration.” Awe, however, does not automatically equal “meritorious piety,” but rather, “it only becomes such when subjected to the criterion of the good; this is *eu-sebia*.”¹⁷⁵ This central emphasis on proper awe and reverence for the gods, on piety *as* the human being’s respectful wonder at the divine presence, is, it is safe to say, quite different from many orthodox Christian notions of piety.

Now, this rather exoteric notion of *eusebia*, which found its chief expression in the customs and practices of the various cults, finds its esoteric counterpart in the mysteries. Of these mysteries, the esoteric double of the public religion, Burkert writes, “Greek religion, bound to the polis, is public religion to an extreme degree...yet at the same time there were always secret cults, accessible only through some special, individual initiation, the mysteries.”¹⁷⁶ Just as the various civic cults would be too numerous to treat here, so too even a broad survey of the Greek mysteries is far beyond the scope of this work, but again, a general consideration may

¹⁷⁴ I am especially indebted here to Dr. Eduardo Mendieta’s thoughtful critique of my work that inspired me to think through the issues treated in this appendix.

¹⁷⁵ Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 273.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.

be brought out that will enable us to understand something of the unique nature of Greek religion. As Burkert states in another work, “Mystery festivals should be unforgettable events, casting their shadows over the whole of one’s future life, creating experiences that transform existence. That participation in mysteries was a special form of experience, a *pathos* in the soul, or *psuchê*, of the candidate, is clearly stated in several ancient texts...”¹⁷⁷ The focus is on a transformative experience of the presence of divinity—“an immediate encounter with the divine” so powerful that a key promise of many mysteries was that “death would lose its terror” for the initiate.¹⁷⁸ Thus again, Greek religion emphasizes awe in the face of divinity—but here, in the esoteric sphere of Greek religious life, that awe is not merely the respect due the gods that is necessary to avert catastrophe, but rather, a transformative experience for the human subject and a way of knowing.

Where, then, does Heraclitus fit in this context? He is clearly critical of both the purification and prayer rites of the popular religion, but also of the mysteries.¹⁷⁹ Yet the terms in which he puts his criticism are telling: the mysteries initiate into “impiety” (*anierôsti*); the procession of the Dionysian revelers barely escapes being “most shameful” (*anaidestata*); the purification rites and prayers of the pious are performed “without any recognition of who gods and heroes are” (*ou ti ginôskôn theous oud’ hêrôas hoitines eisi*). I do not think that Heraclitus is being ironic here—he takes piety, reverence, and intimacy with the divine very seriously. His works, as we have seen, proceed from a fundamentally spiritual worldview. Thus, what we see in Heraclitus is a very practical mysticism that springs from his own cultural context. Heraclitus, like any Greek, is concerned with issues of proper reverence, closeness to the gods, purity and prayers. But the forms of traditional exoteric and esoteric religion are not enough to mediate *effectively* between the divine and human realm—and this emphasis on the efficacy of religious practice is why I call Heraclitus a *practical* mystic. Heraclitus, mystic that he was, sees the solution to this dilemma in gnosis, true knowledge of the divine. Historically, Heraclitus has been viewed as a philosopher, and it has long been accepted that Heraclitus contrasted true philosophical insight (*noos*) with pedantic, encyclopedic learning (*polumathiê*) and inquiry (*historiê*). Considered as a mystic, however, we may also say that Heraclitus contrasts gnosis with unthinking and ineffective rites, on the one hand, and on the other hand, with initiatory mysteries and festivals performed without real understanding. Just what it means to call Heraclitus a “mystic” will be treated in the next appendix.

¹⁷⁷ Walter Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 89.

¹⁷⁸ Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 90; Burkert, *Greek Religion*, 277.

¹⁷⁹ Heraclitus works 5, 14, and 15.

Appendix II: The Anthropology of Archaic Religious Life

Throughout this dissertation, I have spoken of early Greek philosophers and religious figures as magicians or sorcerers, shamans, initiates, and mystics. I am aware that the unrestricted use of such terms, without further explanation, can leave a perceptive reader with many legitimate questions that might be placed under the broad heading of the anthropology of religion. Perhaps of greatest concern is what, precisely, I mean when I say, as I have throughout this work, that Heraclitus was a “mystic.”¹⁸⁰ Thus, I would like to offer some clarifications and definitions in this appendix.

A good place to begin is with a definition of magic. As Faraone notes, the term “magic,” as “a category distinct from ‘religion’ or ‘science’” has been hotly contested in the fields of anthropology and religious studies.¹⁸¹ Attempting a “definition” of magic, therefore, is a daunting task—and in addition to this, one would be wise to heed the warning of Empedocles regarding the magical power of words, that “all things have intelligence and a share of awareness.”¹⁸² Our very definitions of magic, ironically, run the risk of acting as a magical cloak of invisibility that will obscure from our vision the reality of magic.

Nevertheless, we may begin by rejecting some basic and common misconceptions regarding the nature of magic. In the first place, the view that magic is somehow by nature anti-religious and anti-social, shared even by such illustrious students of the subject as Durkheim and Mauss, is surely overstated and unhelpful.¹⁸³ As the case of no less famous an ancient Greek magician than Empedocles demonstrates, the idea that magic is hostile to religion and individualistic is simply untrue. Empedocles is clearly a deeply magical writer. For instance, to mention just two of the more important examples, he promises his disciple control over the weather and the power to fetch dead souls from Hades; he makes Love and Strife, the powers of binding and releasing (the two most basic magical operations of Greek

¹⁸⁰ Many thanks are due here to Dr. David Allison, who posed important questions regarding these very anthropological concerns and offered helpful suggestions for sources that would help to answer them. Thanks also to Dr. Eduardo Mendieta, who urged me to explain, in terms of Heraclitus’ own time and place, what it means to say that Heraclitus was a mystic.

¹⁸¹ Christopher A. Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 17.

¹⁸² Empedocles B110.

¹⁸³ See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 39-44; Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, 24, 86-90.

goteia or sorcery), the central forces in his model of the cosmos.¹⁸⁴ But this magician does not seem particularly hostile to religion: Empedocles consistently uses reverential and prayerful language, encourages religious constraints on behavior, speaks in admiring tones of as religious a figure as Pythagoras, and employs, time and again, the language of the great public mysteries of Greek religion.¹⁸⁵ The Sicilian's magic also has an undeniably social and altruistic function: Empedocles presents himself as an eminently public figure—specifically, as a divine oracle and healer who travels about in service to his people.¹⁸⁶

A second misconception about magic, as common as the first, is that magic is somehow by its nature a distinct category diametrically opposed to science. One common result of this misconception is that magic is seen, at best, as something of a rude proto-science—a significant, but ultimately inferior, precursor to proper empirical science. But as Faraone notes, given the historical and cultural context, “modern notions of magic as ‘bad science’ or ‘quackery’ are at best unhelpful in understanding ancient Greek beliefs...”¹⁸⁷ Again, behind such views of magic stands the more fundamental assumption that somehow magic and science are mutually incompatible, which is why scholarship has had so much trouble coming to terms with a figure like Empedocles, whose “scientific side” is routinely emphasized while his “magical side” is downplayed or made to disappear entirely. Yet this talk of “sides” is clearly an anachronism when dealing with an age when magic and science were not yet distinct enterprises. The real trouble, one suspects, stems from the fact that Empedocles is clearly a brilliant cosmologist *and also* a sorcerer, and no one can quite accept that both of these things were fundamental aspects of the man. The sense, however, of some need to reconcile Empedocles’ “two sides” as incompatible betrays a fundamental bias: as Kingsley writes, “To suppose that a magician is someone incapable of devising coherent theories about the structure and working of the universe is in the last resort sheer prejudice, denied by all the evidence.”¹⁸⁸

That Empedocles was not an anomaly in his world, but rather part of a much larger and older tradition of magico-religious healing, science, and mysticism, has now been convincingly demonstrated by Kingsley's work. The case of Empedocles, then, allows us to see that whatever else magic was in the Greek context, it was not simply the furtive, selfish, and profane practice of a few individuals, nor the mere irrational predecessor of some “high Hellenic science.” Rather, magic was an important, living, and fascinatingly paradoxical feature of that vanished world: esoteric and yet oriented towards service and healing; unfettered by mere religious

¹⁸⁴ See Empedocles B111 (control of the elements, power over souls), B17 and B26 (Love and Strife as cosmic principles).

¹⁸⁵ See Empedocles B3, B131, B132, B140, B141, B144 (reverence, prayer, restraint); B129 (Pythagoras); B110 (language of the mysteries).

¹⁸⁶ See Empedocles B112. On the issue of the relationship between Greek philosophy, magic, and public healing, see Kingsley, *APMM*, chapter 21 (“Not to Teach but to Heal”).

¹⁸⁷ Faraone, *Ancient Greek Love Magic*, 17-18.

¹⁸⁸ Kingsley, *APMM*, 231-232.

formalism but also reverential and rooted in the mysteries; a staggeringly complex union of phenomena that many of us would be more comfortable distinguishing as belonging to the disparate fields of art, science, and mysticism.

What, then, of those two terms I have used almost as unsparingly as “magicians” and “magic”: “shamans” and “shamanism”? Eliade offers remarkable clarity on the distinctions between shamans, magicians, and other religious figures. He begins by noting the confusion caused by the wide variety of terms used to describe “certain individuals possessing magico-religious powers and found in all ‘primitive’ societies.” He points out that “if the word ‘shaman’ is taken to mean any magician, sorcerer, medicine man, or ecstatic throughout the history of religions and religious ethnology, we arrive at a notion at once extremely complex and extremely vague.”¹⁸⁹ The matter is complicated by the fact that there is much in common between the “shaman” proper and other figures: “Of course, the shaman is also a magician and medicine man; he is believed to cure, like all doctors, and to perform miracles of the fakir type, like all magicians...beyond this, he is a psychopomp, and he may also be priest, mystic, and poet.”¹⁹⁰

What then, is shamanism, and who is the shaman? Eliade points out that although there are many religious roles in the preeminently shamanic region of Central and North Asia, the shaman there is distinguished by being “the great master of ecstasy.” Shamanism, therefore, may be provisionally defined as a “technique of ecstasy.” This is not to say that every form of ecstasy is shamanism, or that every ecstatic is a shaman; to the contrary, as Eliade writes, “the shaman specializes in a trance during which his soul is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld.”¹⁹¹ Similarly, though the magic is to be found in shamanism, not all kinds of magic are shamanic, while certain magical processes are highly characteristic of shamanism. As Eliade writes, “shamanism exhibits a particular magical specialty...‘mastery over fire,’ ‘magical flight,’ and so on.” Similarly, although the shaman is a healer, his method of healing is “his and his alone”: in cases where sickness is attributable to “loss of soul,” the shaman, as psychopomp and ecstatic voyager to other realms, uses his trance to heal by recovering the soul.¹⁹²

Next, I wish to say a brief word about “the initiate” in the Greek context, in final preparation for clarifying what I mean when I say Heraclitus was a “mystic.” The initiate, or *mustês*, is simply a person who is initiated into and participates in any one of the many mysteries of ancient Greece. For the purposes of this discussion, what is most salient about the *mustês* is the fact that his transformation and way of knowing centered on an extraordinary, non-rational, religious experience. Even so, there are enough complicating factors surrounding the mysteries—for instance, their ritual and social aspects; their basic and earthy practicality—to make it difficult to

¹⁸⁹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, 3.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

equate them wholesale with more contemporary notions of mysticism. Burkert, for instance, speaking of the greatest of all the ancient mysteries, writes that, “No ecstasy in the full sense can be credited to Eleusis” and claims that “to think of mysticism in the true sense” would be “misleading.”¹⁹³ While I am unsure exactly what Burkert means by “mysticism in the true sense,” his reluctance to call the Eleusinian mysteries “truly mystical” serves as a reminder that defining mysticism is no easier than defining magic.

Thus we arrive at the most important consideration in our present discussion: When I say that Heraclitus was a “mystic,” what do I mean? To begin with, I am *not* attempting to distinguish Heraclitus as mystic from other recognizable religious roles in his milieu. That is to say, in calling Heraclitus a mystic, I am not suggesting that he was not a magician, or shaman, or initiate; nor am I suggesting that Greek magicians, shamans, or initiates were not mystics. Rather, my aim in calling Heraclitus a mystic is to situate him in a much wider matrix of philosophy as a path of life leading to divinization, which itself existed in a world whose mystical life included and at times blended magic, shamanism, initiation and mysteries. I am not, therefore, placing Heraclitus qua mystic in opposition to some legitimate category or categories that really existed in ancient Greece; rather, I am quite consciously placing him in opposition to a highly dubious modern and contemporary category: “the Presocratic philosopher.” In calling Heraclitus a mystic, I am not attempting an anthropology of archaic religious life, but rather, taking a stand against a general way of reading Heraclitus that leads to such fabrications as Heraclitus the early rationalist, the proto-scientist, the first phenomenologist or dialectician.

But apart from my own heuristic or rhetorical aims vis-à-vis the scholarly literature, can we not also attempt to say what it means to situate Heraclitus as a mystic in a very religious, and indeed very mystical, society? I think that this question misses the point, and would have seemed strange to Heraclitus himself. Despite what some scholars would have us believe, in Greece, spiritual practices of non-rational/intuitive knowing that we might broadly term “mysticism” would have been taken for granted as a natural part of religious, medical, scientific, and artistic life. I think that the issue cannot be framed in terms of how was Heraclitus, in his own context, a mystic as opposed to other forms of knowing and religiosity. As Heraclitus seemed to have seen it, there were all sorts of ways to attempt wisdom and a good life: the rational and empirical approaches of polymathy and inquiry; orthodox religiosity in the form of prayer and purification; and mystical attempts such as ecstatic procession, ritual chanting, and initiation into the mysteries. But these things all, in Heraclitus’ critique, lacked real insight and understanding. Heraclitus—with his repeated attacks on theory, inquiry, and pedantry; his demands for an awake awareness and an oracular interiority; and his reverence for and imitation of the gods—was certainly a mystic, and would never have argued that point. He would merely have reminded you that he, unlike many other mystics of his day, knew what he was saying and doing.

¹⁹³ Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults*, 113.