

‘Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow... they scatter and... gather... come together and flow away... approach and depart’. – What did Heraclitus mean by his famous assertion that we never step into the same river twice?

There are different interpretations of Heraclitus’ famous assertion that ‘we never step into the same river twice’. Two interpretations have generally dominated the discussion, one focusing on the fact that every object is like a river, continuously changing, and a second stating that truth lies in the commonality of continuous change, a commonality permeated by opposites, which maintain a balance through continuous strife.

This paper will argue that the latter interpretation is more plausible as it is more in line with Heraclitus’ overall philosophy, mainly due to the fact that the fragment infers an underlying unity represented by the sameness of the river.

To accomplish this task Heraclitus’ assertion must be unpacked. The river remains the same, flowing in unison. Its waters flowing in unperturbed unity, yet those waters are never the same. They are different, relentlessly changing and riddled with opposing characteristics. They scatter and gather, come together and flow away, and approach and depart. Thus there is an apparent link between sameness and difference. In a sense sameness is difference and difference is sameness.

Firstly, to better understand the underlying unity, which the river presents, a close look at Heraclitus’ Logos is warranted. The Logos is the underlying unity and that which regulates change in a systematically reasoned manner. Secondly, the continually changing waters are not in contradiction to the universal laws governing change, but are in tune with the logic of the Logos. Thirdly, the interplay of opposites cannot be overlooked as it is an essential part of Heraclitus’ philosophy and is also consistent with the logic of the Logos, which constitutes opposition and ensures overall balance. Finally, the obscure manner in which Heraclitus of Ephesus presents his thoughts is integral to understanding his famous assertion. Language, to the late 6th century BCE philosopher, is imperfect and thus brings about a metaphysical illusion by attributing thinghood to changing objects. Heraclitus believed language needed to be relaxed in order for humanity (those that are properly trained and willing) to glimpse the truth of the Logos. In order to do this, Heraclitus used metaphors, analogies and paradoxes. In a sense the fragment referred to as Heraclitus’ famous assertion, presents the world with the essence of his philosophy and a glimpse of how to achieve an understanding of it.

In a manner similar to the Milesians, Heraclitus distinguished the world of appearances from an underlying reality, but to Heraclitus that underlying reality was not a substance. To Heraclitus nothing subsists and therefore, the underlying reality should not be a ‘thing’. Heraclitus termed this reality the Logos. The Logos has been interpreted in *The Presocratic Philosophers* by Kirk, Raven and Schofield as a, “unifying formula or proportionate method of arrangement of things, what might almost be termed their structural plan both individual and in sum.”

In other words, without the Logos the world of incessant flux and plurality would not be coherent. The Logos arranges things and represents an underlying unity in which the world remains the same while its constituent parts continually change. Furthermore, the sign or symbol of the Logos is fire. Fire is always changing and always the same, but fire differs from the Milesians’ basic stuff as

constancy does not lie in fire, but in the process of change. Thus multiplicity and continuous change are simultaneously perfect unity.

This complex unity is based on some sort of process or method. Incessant flux is inherent in the stability of the Logos, but incessant flux is not a random phenomenon emanating from the Logos. It is due to the dialectical interplay of opposites.

To Heraclitus opposites are real. They are constantly attempting to dominate one another. Heraclitus refers to this as strife. Strife is an essential component of stability because without strife the world would drastically change, but opposites should not be understood as being on a continuum as Anaximenes posited. On the contrary, they are interchangeable and replace one another in a transformational manner, for example, a change from earth to water is countered by another from water to earth. Consequently, for the river to continue flowing and changing a balance between opposites is necessary, a balance that is inherent in the Logos.

Heraclitus chose to present his thought to the world, including his famous assertion that 'we never step into the same river twice' in paradoxical fashion. Did he do this simply to be obscure? According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, such a claim would be shallow. To Hegel, Heraclitus' obscurity was a result of 'imperfect language'. What did Hegel mean by this?

He answers this question by quoting Aristotle, "We do not know whether a word belongs to what precedes or what succeeds."

In other words, Heraclitus is implying that humanity may be able to understand the truth of the Logos, but such a truth cannot be gleaned or arrived at through ordinary language. Naming objects results in a metaphysical illusion. Relations are spoken of as things. Heraclitus did not find a way around language and thus used metaphors, analogies, and paradoxes in an attempt to unreify what humanity had mistakenly attributed 'thinghood' to. To him, this approach was much better than providing misleading statements that may send seekers of truth astray. In a sense he was mirroring the complexity of the world through analogies and aphorisms.

Many of Heraclitus' ideas and philosophical precedents, which are inherent in his famous assertion, were taken forward by other philosophers. For example, Plato built upon Heraclitus' Logos and incessant flux through his world of Forms, which is separate from his world of phenomena, characterized by constant flux. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel associated the Logos with the dialectic to which a significant portion of his philosophy is based upon. He also stated, in his Lectures on the History of Philosophy, "There is no proposition of Heraclitus which I have not adopted in my Logic."

In conclusion, the river analogy presents the world with Heraclitus' philosophy of universal laws governing change. Change is inherent to the a-temporality of the Logos which constitutes incessant flux, resulting from a balanced interplay of opposites. A complex reality that cannot be conveyed through ordinary language due to its tendency to attribute thinghood to relations, but since Heraclitus was unable to find an alternative he used analogies, paradoxes and metaphors in an attempt to temper the metaphysical illusion brought about by language.