Heraclitus Tells Us What He's Doing

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Among the many joys of working with Heraclitus in Greek are the opportunities it affords for profitting from his counsel in Fragment 18 (VII Kahn) to "expect the unexpected." The interpretation of what all editions agree to count as Fragment 1, for example, would seem to be immune to surprises. This turns out, however, not to be the case.

Not only the longest of surviving texts from Heraclitus, Charles H. Kahn points out that Fr. 1 "is probably the longest piece of surviving Greek prose before the *Histories* of Herodotus."[1] It is so well suited to the role attributed to it—to serve as introduction to the collection of his sayings produced as a book *On Nature*—that I believe we can feel confident it was written for that purpose specifically, whether or not we accept Kahn's supposition that all of the sayings were so composed. Certainly it has received the concerted scrutiny of those who have worked with Heraclitus in any comprehensive way, and while consensus is still elusive about some of the themes or topics that are named in it (e.g. the λόγος), or on how to handle a well-noted ambiguity in its first line, there is all but complete uniformity in construal of the text itself. Let me place it before us, with an interlinear translation intended to leave one other important ambiguity about construing it unresolved.[2]

Fragment 1 (I Kahn)

1 τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος αεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι
of the Logos though being always uncomprehending become humans

2 καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον·
both before hearing it and hearing it the first (time)

3 γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπείροισιν ἐοίκασι
for although all things happen according to the Logos they seem untried/untested

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[1] *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (1979), p. 96.

[2] Greek text from Diels/Kranz 6th edition (1951ff); line numbers are *ad hoc* for convenience of reference within this discussion.

4 πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων ὁκοίων ἐγω διηγεῦμαι
(when) tried/tested by both words and works such as these that I expound

5 κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔκει·
according to nature distinguishing each and showing how it holds/tends;

6 τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσιν
the other humans let slip away what they do awake

7 ὅκωσπερ ὁκόσα εὕδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται.
just as what they do asleep escapes them.

The most famous ambiguity in this text is easily that of the adverb αεὶ, "always," in line 1, which can be taken with the preceding participle ἐόντος, yielding a claim that the Logos is "always being," or with the subsequent verb γίνονται, producing the statement that humans "always become uncomprehending" of it. Already Aristotle complained that this line is "not easy to punctuate," (μὴ ῥᾴδιον διαστίξαι, *Rhet.* Γ 5, 1407b) and he includes it in his list of affronts to Greek style (τὸ ἑλληνίζειν). And sure enough, translators in the main join Aristotle in assuming that the line *must* be punctuated one way or the other. I am convinced that the ambiguity is intended by Heraclitus. It can be reproduced in English,[3] and I will argue below that it should be. But at least the issue in this line is very well known and amply discussed. In the line on which I wish to focus, it has not even been seen that there is an ambiguity.

In line 5, what is the antecedent of ἕκαστον, "each"?

I know of no discussion in English, at least, in which the antecedent is not assumed to be line 3's πάντων, "everything." This in turn interacts with the way the phrase κατὰ φύσιν, "according to nature," is understood. Here Aristotelian assumptions come into play that are far more insidious than his constraints on punctuation: It is assumed that πάντων is everything in the sense of every *thing*, and that ἕκαστον is each in the sense of each *thing*. Hence, no matter which of the several verbs in the passage (expouding, distinguishing, showing) is qualified as being car-

[3]As Jonathan Barnes, alone to my discovery, makes clear; *Early Greek Philosophy* (1987), p. 101.

ried out κατὰ φύσιν, the translation is expect to read "according to *its* nature," with the focus being on individual things.

Consider a few of the most influential translations:

> Such words and works as I set forth, distinguishing each according to its nature and telling how it is.[4]
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> such words and deeds as I explain, when I distinguish each thing according to its constitution and declare how it is.[5]
>
> the words and deeds which I expound as I divide up each thing according to its nature and say how it is.[6]
>
> at least if they are judged in the light of such words and deeds as I am here setting forth. My own method is to distinguish each thing according to its nature, and to specify how it behaves.[7]

The assumpton that the "all" are all *things*, so that it is "each" *of them* about which Heraclitus is speaking, is yet again the influence of the position Aristotle takes toward his predecessor *physikoi* in *Metaphysics* A, 3. He surveys them with respect to their employment of the four 'causes' or patterns of explanation that together account for the being of the *thing:* the τόδε τι or ἑκάστον of book Zeta. The effect of this is to attribute to them the same interest in particulars that founds his physics. And in that connection, φύσις or 'nature' "in the primary and chief sense is the οὐσία of those things which have in them their own source of movement" (*Met.* Δ, 4, 1015a13-14) —which is precisely how the Heraclitan κατὰ φύσιν is being taken in the translation, "according to *its* nature."

Charles Kahn is so committed to the notion that Heraclitus inspects 'each thing' according to 'its nature' that it shapes his construal and translation of a related fragment:[8]

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[4]Kahn, p. 29.
[5]Kirk, Raven, Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Second edition, 1983), **194**
[6]Barnes (1987), p. 101.
[7]Philip Wheelwright, *The Presocratics* (1960), p. 69.

Fr. 112 (XXXII Kahn)[9]

σωφρονεῖν ἀρετὴ μεγίστη καὶ σοφίη ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαΐοντας

Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature.

There are many difficulties with this saying, but I am content with Kahn's account of it—except for the final phrase, κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαΐοντας. Nothing in the Greek corresponds to the "things" that he supplies, and nothing other than a presupposition that 'nature' in Heraclitus means the nature of things suggests that the simple phrase "according to nature" should be read as "according to *their* nature."

The verb ἐπα□ω means 'give ear to', 'hear', in the sense of perceive, understand. It is idiomatic for 'hear or follow with understanding' in a phrase like "not understand a barbarian language" (τὴν βάρβαρον γὰρ γλῶσσαν οὐκ ἐπα□ω, Sophocles, *Ajax* 1263), and also comes to mean the 'hearer' of a discipline as designating someone well acquainted with or expert in it (pervasive in Plato, cf. LSJ entry 4). By analogy, the phrase in Heraclitus should have the sense, "giving ear or paying attention according to nature," where nature should be understood globally, as the 'language' of the cosmos, so to speak—an intelligibility for which Heraclitus has trained his attention, but which "other humans" miss in their preoccupation with the obvious.

Let us return to the lines in Fragment 1, about which I raised the question of antecedent for the word "each". Not only on grounds of grammatical proximity, but from precisely the movement of thought itself within the text, it is far more natural to take line 5's "each" to refer to the "words and works" just mentioned than to the "all" in line 3. But now the whole sense of the passage is transformed! Instead of referring to "all that happens in accordance with the Logos," the phrase "according to nature" now qualifies Heraclitus' own practice in his "words and works." Here is the passage again, with the translation I propose:

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[8]As he makes explicit, p. 121.
[9]DK punctuates with a comma after μεγίστη; Kahn reads it after σοφίη.

4 πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων ὁκοίων ἐγω διηγεῦμαι
(though they are) tried/tested by both words and works such as these that I elaborate

5 κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔκει·
in accordance with nature, choosing each with discrimination and exhibiting its tendencies.

Suddenly we hear Heraclitus describing the very features of his "words and works" with which the student of his Greek is massively familiar: the extreme deliberation and precision of his choice of words (διαιρέων ἕκαστον), and the craft and cunning of his play and maneuver with syntactical and semantical relations among them, forcing them to our attention (φράζων ὅκως ἔκει).

The syntactical ambiguity with which this very fragment opens is a telling illustration of this practice. In the cited passage where Aristotle complains about the line, he correctly points out that the ambiguity about which way the "always" 'tends' (ἔκει) makes it hard to read aloud. And this is true: it has to be read one way or the other. But in writing, it provides exactly the kind of 'test' that Heraclitus likes to contrive:

"Of this Logos though being always uncomprehending become humans..."

The sentence is a kind of linguistic Nekker cube. This is the famous optical illusion, much discussed in the psychology of perception, in which a wire-figure cube can be seen alternately with one face forward, or with that same face to the rear—but not both at once. By intentionally making a sentence that forces a 'double-take' upon us, Heraclitus launches our reading onto a meta-level. The effect is much like that of fragment 60, "The way: there and back, one and the same."[10] I make my way from home to school; I make my way from school back home. There

[10]ὁδὸς ἄνω κάτω μία καὶ ὠυτή (CIII Kahn). Standard translations use "up, down" for ἄνω κάτω, which is literally correct, but plays into a traditional assumption that the context of the statement is "the cyclical destiny of the soul" (Kahn, p. 240). I prefer to take ἄνω κάτω more idiomatically, meaning "back and forth," as in someone pacing "up and down."

are two drives, which present themselves differently. But by shifting the level on which I consider 'the way' in each case, I discover that it is one and the same.

At the start of fragment 1, Heraclitus' sentence *performs*, at the meta-level, the very double-dynamic that the text goes on to introduce, and that pervades his whole thought. Tilted toward what "ever happens" with men, the "always" evokes the pervasive λανθάνειν, slipping off into the obliviousness of the obvious and everyday, which is the dynamic Heraclitus wishes to counter by startling us awake through "words and works" that cannot be taken at face value, that confuse or irritate us if we do. Tilted toward the ever-being of the Logos, on the other hand, the "always" evokes the ἀληθέα, truth as the *un*-slipped-away, the *Unverborgenheit* that Heidegger so stresses as fruit of a counter-exertion against the subsidence into oblivion.[11]

It is the force and character of that counter-exertion that Heraclitus evokes with his phrase, "according to nature." Notice that in both fragments 1 and 112, in the construals I am proposing for them, it is *Heraclitus' philosophical practice* that is so qualified—not 'things of nature'. In Fr. 112, the accordance with nature qualifies the 'attentiveness' he brings to speaking and doing (λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν). In Fr. 1, it qualifies more directly his philosophical productions themselves—the "words and works"—which he chooses to characterize with the phrase, ἐγω διηγεῦμαι, "I elaborate, expound." What is 'expounding', and how is it done "in accordance with nature"?

He uses here the verb διηγέομαι, 'set out in detail, describe', but in the middle voice, διηγεῦμαι. In Plato and Aristotle, the related noun διήγησις is usually translated 'narrative', though with a strong sense of spelling out or exposition. Hence in *Phaedrus* (246a), a full account of the soul's immortality would require "an entirely divine and lengthy διήγησις." In Aristotle (*Rhet.* 1416b29), it refers to the 'statement of the case' that one works into a speech. Turning to our place in Heraclitus, we note first the emphatic self-assertion produced by the use of the

[11]It can be noted that Heraclitus' use of *two* words from λανθάνω in his description of how "other men" conduct themselves, at the end of fragment 1, together with the ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαΐοντας, all but conclusively corroborates Heidegger's insistence on the alpha-privative sense of the word ἀληθής, 'true' in early Greek writing. (Here and throughout I adopt the archaic spelling of the noun ἀληθέα that we find in Heraclitus.)

pronoun "I," which does not need to be supplied because of the first-person inflection of the verb. Heraclitus is introducing himself, placing himself in person, along with his words and works, into the context of his exposition. And in this explicitly self-referential way, he is *telling us what he is doing*. He is "elaborating," "expounding," or "propounding," and doing so "in accordance with nature."

Looking at the result, the διήγησις that we call Fragment 1, what in it *as writing,* as exposition, might mark it as according with nature? Precisely the trademark Heraclitan move with which it begins—the performative ambivalence of the "always" as described above! There is another Platonic use of διήγησις that is directly suggestive about this technique. In Book III of *Republic*, Socrates inventories and analyzes various modes of discourse, and at 392d turns to the διήγησεις, 'narrations', of mythologists and poets. He goes on to argue that διήγησις amounts to mimêsis. Mimêsis, I would suggest (though in a different sense and context), is exactly what Heraclitus is trying for with his art, is how he seeks to put his words and works in service to the Logos and its Truth.

To be sure, he has nearly as many mimetic 'gimmicks' up his sleeve as he has formulations. Some, like the one that introduces and previews his Prologue (fr. 1), are syntactical; others are semantical in various ways (like the contrast between φύσις and κρύπτεσθαι in fr. 123 [X, Kahn], "emerging/unfolding likes to be cryptic/to withdraw"); others are determined by allusions that we are often likely to miss. The suggestion that in a sense, his work seeks to be transparent to the Logos by 'pantomime' of nature solves nothing with regard to the interpretation of any particular Heraclitan saying. But it does imply that there is a 'method to his madness', a considered strategy if not yet a formal 'logic', in the way he constructs his 'expoundings'. And at the start of his book, he tells us what it is!

Against this background, one final text:

Fr. 50 (XXXVI Kahn)

> οὐκ ἐμοῦ ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφόν ἐστιν □ν πάντα εἶναι

Not to me but to the Logos listening, what is wise is to acknowledge (say along with it, *homo-logize*) All to be One.

Heraclitus comes before us making statements. It is his words and works that we confront. However, we are not to listen *to him* but rather to hear *through him*, so that we might waken to join in saying (what Parmenides hears from a goddess): All to be One. To call for such listening is not the demand of a cranky misanthrope, but the request of a serious philosopher, that we on our part bring to the consideration of his efforts some counterpart to the craft he has invested in them.

And it isn't all that hard: Heraclitus himself tells us what he's doing!

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