

## Stephen Lumsden, essay for Units 4-6, Program C: The First Philosophers

(Essay for Question 2. '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?)

### Heraclitus and His River

Heraclitus, even for a pre-Socratic, is the most difficult philosopher of this period to interpret. It is no surprise that he was called 'the riddler', so cryptic were his texts. Examining the above quote is a case in point and provides a good example of what to be aware of in examining the *fragments*. Here we shall look at the man himself, discuss why he may sound particularly cryptic and note how his theories may show progress from those of the Ionians on the single substance. Then we shall examine the statement in depth, mention differing interpretations, then its arguments, implications and effects. We shall then conclude how we can best view this statement.

Working through the curmudgeonly and didactic tone of Heraclitus' writing, there are several themes in his work which should be emphasized in order to fully appreciate what he is trying to ask us in the quote above. Firstly, with his quest for the *Logos*, i.e. a proper account of things or a search for true knowledge, he does not automatically assume wisdom and foresight can be gained from learning (as Heraclitus points out this is the case with Hesiod, Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Hecataeus). We need to strive for knowledge and perspective and be judicious in what we find. Then with his theme of relativism, Heraclitus also warns us that some things which may be bad for us may be good for others as he points out that sea water is bad for men, but good for fish. We are also told that whether you are going up or down it, you will still be walking on the same road. In highlighting the oneness of certain opposing aspects in nature, we are reminded of Anaximenes' earlier theory of air being the primary substance, which can change in state through rarefaction and condensation. In this respect Heraclitus' relativism looks to be a progression on such earlier ideas of monism. His language and oracular delivery are not meant for mere oration. We can picture Heraclitus vying for attention in the *agora* (market place), deliberately provoking the audience into engaging with him, prompting them to question what he is saying, as he uses such ploys to attract his audience.

The prospect of not being able to step into the same river twice highlights two main areas in question – the river and ourselves. We can view a river as a very dynamic, changing entity. Its water continuously flowing, its river bed and banks constantly being eroded by the ongoing currents. Our own perspective, mental and physical state would alter on different occasions, and would do so also stepping back into any river we had just just been in. In lieu of such conditions, when we are confronted with a statement which tells us we cannot step into the same river twice, we are forced to think about the relentlessness of change in our lives and everything is in a state of flux. It could essentially be that the river as a whole stays the same. If we recognise that some parts and attributes of the river change over time, we could question how many of these have to change for the river as a whole to have changed. It may be that our own selves or perspective could have changed. In this respect the statement could be questioning the change in our own identity over time, from one moment to the next. In bringing these ambiguities above to the fore, Heraclitus emphasises the limits of ordinary language here in trying to explain the very basics of how we like to describe objects in the world around us.

It is worth mentioning other interpretations such as Cratylus', who posited that one cannot even step into the same river even once, such are the questions that the continuance of flux and identity over time pose. In this case the image of the river's rushing waters and ever changing properties provide

a good example for such a dynamic picture of the universe, but this argument smacks of one-upmanship to the author. As Heraclitus mentions the need for the *Logos*, he wants us to use all of our mental abilities and even warns against alcohol, most likely as it dulls the senses and curbs reason. In this respect warning that you cannot step into the same river twice may be a request or a warning to be careful, never take the everyday for granted, do not assume what you see is what you may want or expect to find. Such a request coheres well with Heraclitus' *Logos*.

Summing up we can see Heraclitus as a philosopher, who wants people to exert their own powers of reason and question the dynamic nature of the world around them. It is not surprising he used such cryptic language, most likely to get attention and prompt thought and discussion. In this regard the river image provides a good metaphor for the world in general. Does he refer to flux and the inevitability of change, or is he asking us to merely all our reason and be cautious, to look before we jump? Or is he showing up the limits of ordinary language in describing the universe's true state? We shall never know, but we can at least not take anything for granted, strive for some enlightenment through a quest for knowledge, and try to challenge such limits.

## References

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Angela Hobbes on Heraclitus (Youtube):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7RW93qP7po&index=4&list=PLjR0FTWIIUpmes\\_NXD0Dogkr4EL8sBRQ&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7RW93qP7po&index=4&list=PLjR0FTWIIUpmes_NXD0Dogkr4EL8sBRQ&t=0s)