

Heraclitus on Religion

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ABSTRACT

The article sets out to reinterpret Heraclitus's views on religion and, by implication, his position in the context of the Presocratic philosophers' relationship to the Greek cultural tradition. It does so by examining the fragments in which Heraclitus's attitude to the popular religion of his time is reflected. The analysis of the fragments 69, 68, 15, 14, 5, 96, 93 and 92 DK reveals that the target of Heraclitus's criticism is not the religious practices themselves but their popular interpretation. ()]TJ 1 0 0 1 1304 nt7 (.) -243 ()]TJ 1 0 0 1 65419622 Tm [(i)H -27 (r) -2

from insight into the essence of being. That is in spite of the explicit antagonism, on Heraclitus's part, to Xenophanes's intellectual enterprise (cf. fr. 40).

If we turn to Heraclitean scholarship, the dominating picture appears to be even more unequivocal. Heraclitus is credited with illuministic radicalism in matters of religion by Marcovich,³ whereas according to Kahn, "He is a radical, an uncompromising rationalist, whose negative critique of the tradition is more extreme than that of Plato a century later. [. . .] He denounces what is customary among men [. . .] as a tissue of folly and falsehood. Also, on this polemic Heraclitus precedes Xenophanes. . . Conche also sees in Heraclitus a thought continuation of Xenophanes's project: L'absurdité la raison des dieux de la religion populaire sont le reflet de la raison et de la raison, voire de la cruauté de l'homme, leur auteur. Cela avait déjà été indiqué avant Héraclite, par Xénophane dans ses Silles."⁵

Why should the way Heraclitus related to the practices and beliefs current in the popular religion of his time be so important? At stake is, I propose, the relationship between philosophy in statu nascendi and one of the more important aspects of the Greek cultural tradition. Were all the early philosophic attempts characterised by emancipation from traditional piety, as the conventional opinion of scholars would have us believe? Or was there a more complex pattern in the relationship to traditional religion, represented by one of the most prominent proponents of the enterprise that had yet to define itself as philosophy?

In what follows, I shall provide an alternative interpretation of the fragments dealing with the rituals and cults of traditional Greek religion.⁶

² W. Burkert. *Greek Religion Archaic and Classical* Transl. by J. Raffan. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985. P. 309.

³ Eraclito. *Frammenti* Introduzione, traduzione e commento a cura di M. Marcovich. Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1978. P. 284.

⁴ C.H. Kahn. *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* An edition of the fragments with translation and commentary Cambridge University Press, 1979. P. 263, 266.

⁵ Héraclite. *Fragments Texte établi, traduit, commenté* par M. Conche Paris: PUF, 1986. P. 173.

⁶ This intention, as well as certain features of exegesis notably of the fr. 5, are anticipated by Catherine Osborne's chapter on Heraclitus in the recent *Routledge History of Philosophy* (see *Routledge History of Philosophy* Vol. I. From the Beginning to Plato. Ed. by C.C.W. Taylor. London & New York: Routledge, 1997. P. 90-95). However, in a way that will become apparent in the course of the present analysis I disagree with her conclusion concerning the overall implications of Heraclitus's utterances on religion: "Heraclitus] argues that [religious practices] make sense only

Most of the extant fragments of Heraclitus dealing with the forms of traditional Greek piety were quoted during the religious controversies concerning pagan religion, from the 3rd century AD onwards. Curiously enough, the fragments of Heraclitus were employed by both the opponents and the apologists of paganism. The authors who sought Heraclitus's support in that debate were Christian writers – Clement, Arnobius, Origenes, Gregory of Nazianzus, the author of *Theosophia Tubingensis* and Elias of Crete – as well as pagans: Iamblichus, Celsus, Apollonius of Tyana.

Looking at the fragments themselves one cannot avoid realising how exhaustive they are in representing popular Greek religious practices, the list whereof reads not unlike an attempt at systematic classification: sacrifices (fr. 69), mystery cults and initiation rites (fr. 14), worship of ef

and Kahn

of medical activities: Doctors who cut and burn complain that they do not receive the reward they deserve.

The paradox that Heraclitus uncovers in medical activities is an instance of the governing structure of the unity of opposites. In medical activity appears as the paradoxical unity of both the disease and health; by inflicting pain (a characteristic of disease) it heals (i.e., removes pain). Similarly pain may be treated as a single phenomenon that extends over two contrary states: disease and health.

Exegesis of this fragment requires an answer to the following questions: Why is it the case that the actions which otherwise would be most shameless are not such if they are performed for Dionysus? What is the reason for the identification of Dionysus with Hades? What is the connection between the Dionysiac rituals referred to, and this identification?

An attempt may be made to explain the identification of Dionysus with Hades in terms of Greek mythological

saito oì tv poi j onta Ôhey purify

tūhewdç ošpalaioŪ

- parf †Eilhsi yeoŪkaŪtūhewoβnjoī; palaiou m̄ oī n oβperŪKrn̄noŋ njoī df
 ošžpf̄kelūvn, kaŪ¹ wmxri tç n s̄x̄ tvn ²rĀvn: μ palaioc̄ wmō l̄j geitoç wdç-
 deka katf̄ κελούωυ n̄jouwdç Diñnuson „Hrakl̄j a fAskhpiò n kaŪtoç wloi-
 5 poaw̄ oī wd̄ p̄ n̄taw sugxeŷ̄ ĒwprĀhn̄ protr̄j petai ò filñ̄ sofow,¹ kaŪtōē
 perŪtoævn̄ aβs̄rç̄ w̄muyeūm̄enatoç wžllokñ̄ touw̄; rvtaw̄ aétç̄n̄ kaŪtoç w̄t̄w̄poi-
 kŪā eāh̄ metasx̄h̄matismoç̄wdiç̄toç waβs̄roç̄ wkaŪ²mpayew̄; rvtaw̄, kaŪtōēw̄
 aβs̄xrot̄j raw̄ yusŷ̄aw̄ aāwyerapeǣin̄ toç waétç̄n̄ yeoçw̄an̄m̄izon̄ oī wd̄ia-
 paŪtvn̄ „Hr̄c̄ kleitow̄, KayaŪontaī d̄j, fhsŪn̄, aām̄atī miain̄m̄enōē̄sper
 10 ' n̄ eātiw̄ eŷ̄w̄phlò n̄ mb̄ōēphlò̄ ž̄ponŷ̄oito. tò gōē toŷ̄wtç̄n̄ ž̄lñ̄ gvn̄ zēvn̄
 sĀmasŷ̄ē kaŪaāmasin̄, “ toŷ̄w̄yeoŷ̄waétç̄n̄ pros̄j feron̄, oāsyaī kayaŷ̄ein̄
 tōēwtç̄n̄ d̄lŪn̄ sv̄m̄ tvn̄ ž̄kayarsŷ̄aw̄tōēw̄k̄ tç̄n̄ musarç̄n̄ kaŪž̄kaȳc̄ rtvn̄
 m̄jēvn̄ ḡkexrvsm̄; nawaétoŷ̄w̄ ÷moim̄ ge<kaŷ̄ tòn̄ k̄ toē phloē̄ m̄peplas-
 (fol. 90^o) m̄pon̄=apon̄ toŷ̄wsĀmasī phlò̄ peir̄• syaī ž̄pof̄=ap̄tein̄.

¹Scil. Hero ²kaŪins. Bywater

As this text shows, Elias assumes that Heraclitus speaks about the immolation of sacrificial animals for the atonement of one's sins. He has some difficulties in explaining how the reduplication of *ōnudōis* is to be understood— therefore he takes *ōnudō* to mean the impurity of the bodies polluted by sin in the first instance, and, somewhat allegorically, *ō* bodies and blood of irrational animals in the second instance. (It is also clear that he understands *miainōmenoi* in a half-participial sense: *ō* they purify themselves by defiling / as they defile themselves with blood— v. supra, n. 16.)

The author of *Theosophia*² also understands Heraclitus's fragment as a reference to sacrifice: †Oti „Hr̄c̄ kleitow̄ mem̄f̄m̄enow̄toç w̄yǣntaw̄ toŷ̄w̄ daŷ̄nos̄ī fh̄: (the text of the fragment follows).

If, as Fr̄škel maintains (op. cit., p. 451), the original fragment of Heraclitus had *kayaŷ̄ontaī df̄ • IIĀ* aām̄atī miain̄m̄enōj it explains the

difference between the versions given by Theosophia and by Elias of Crete. Although it was possible (as Elias did – v. supra) to explain away the double occurrence of ἄλλω, there is no sense, in the context of ordinary animal sacrifices, in which the reference to ἄλλω, ἄλλω (ἄλλω) blood could have been understood. Therefore, it is quite plausible to maintain that the word ἄλλω of the original text could be omitted by Elias (or his source) and corrupted into ἄλλω by the author of Theosophia (or his source). This corruption makes better and more obvious sense in terms of the project of that section of Theosophia (§§ 67-74): the author is attempting to show that the Greek gods were held in contempt by some of the Greeks. Thus, the pejorative ἄλλω ἄλλω would suit his purpose better. Besides, in some hands of the early Byzantine sloping uncial that would have been used for private notes the iota adscriptum in ἄλλω could easily have been mistaken (or corrected) into sigma (thus resulting in ἄλλωσ), quite

It is useful to recall, in this connection, fr. 61: $\hat{\text{O}}$ he sea is the purest
(kaya $\hat{\text{A}}$ taton) he

By saying that such a man would seem to be raving, if any among men should notice him doing it, Heraclitus postulates the difference between the perspective of men and that of gods, drawing attention to the different meaning the same action acquires in profane and in ritual contexts.²⁶ The ritual practice, characterised by the structure of the unity of opposites, from a secular perspective has as much (or rather, little) sense as the washing of mud with mud – in the religious context, however, it is the structure of the unity of opposites that prevails and makes sense.²⁷

²⁵ One could point, in this context, to fr. 150, *ἴσως ἔνυρ' ἄμ' [2fs ἔ*

(One should notice that in this fragment, as well as in fr. 15, Heraclitus repeatedly characterises the actions of the participants of the ritual as *manê*, thus drawing attention to the ambiguity inherent in the phenomenon. What appears to be *ômadnessô* from the secular perspective acquires meaning as the embodiment in the sphere of ritual, of the structure of the *ôunity of oppositesô*; and although those that take part in the Dionysiac processions are said to *ôaveô* (*maûesyai*), it is not, after all, *ômost shamelessô* action, which it would be, were it not performed in honour of Dionysus. I shall return to discussion of the significance of *manê* in connection with fragments 92 & 93.)

So, the main conceptual scheme of Heraclitus's philosophy – the unity of opposites – is shown not only to be present in the rituals, but, in fact, to constitute the essential structure of the ritual action.

Fr. 5b – *kaÛtoÿw žg lmasi dç touti oisin eëxontai, ôkoÿn eàtiw toÿw dñmoisi lesxhneaito, oë ti ginÅskvn yeoçwoéd f' rvaw oáini wesi* – closely resembles the critique of popular religion and the attack on the veneration of images. However, the qualifying clause at the end of the fragment – *ônot knowing what gods and heroes areô* – renders it unlikely that what is intended is unconditional censure.⁸

The conventional translation runs as follows: *ôAnd they pray to these images as if someone was chatting with houses, not knowing what gods and heroes are.ô* The very metaphor Heraclitus uses, likening images of gods to *ôhousesô* (*dñmo*), testifies that what he has in mind is slightly different from the classic criticisms of idolatry (one such example would be the interpretation of Clement, who says that in this fragment Heraclitus *ôapproaches statues for their insensitivityô* (*t n žnaisyhs Ûan ôneidÛontow toÿw žg lmasi*, protrept 50, 4)). Instead of likening the statues of gods to lifeless stones or pieces of wood (as was the habit of the Christian writer that drew on Isaiah 44, 9-20), Heraclitus speaks of *ôhousesô* – he seems to imply a distinction between the *ôhouseô* and the *ôinhabitantô* that is in a certain way related that

hoi polloi, then, seem to consist in the failure to distinguish gods that are in some – as yet unspecified – way related to, and accessible through, their images, from the images themselves. The ultimate qualifying clause confirms the suggestion that the object of Heraclitus' critique is some failure to recognise what gods and heroes are. Since, however, the fragment, apart from this negative observation, does not specify their nature (and there is no reason to suppose it ever did), the present reading seems to end in a certain hermeneutic impasse. Thus the hypothetical reader is referred back to the metaphorical comparison that occupies the central position in the fragment – ὁκοῦν ἐὰτιω τοῦδῆμοισι λῆσῆνεαιτο – for the explanation as to what gods and heroes are. Can this analogy shed any further light as to why prayer to statues are a sign of ignorance?

I suggest that it is at this stage, on a deeper scrutiny, that an alternative meaning of the phrase ὁκοῦν ἐὰτιω τοῦδῆμοισι λῆσῆνεαιτο is activated: it can also be plausibly translated as if someone was having a conversation at home.⁹ After all, τοῦδῆμοισι can quite naturally be read in a locative sense.

How plausible is this scenario of reading? The validity of the first way of reading is confirmed by the fact that it is adopted by the ancient authorities that are our sources of the fragment – by Celsus, Origenes, and, in all likelihood,¹⁰ 43 Tf 43 iv628 113m [(at)] TJ , 1367 Tm [(re) -23 (ading?)] -t

in terms of the opposition *junān* (*koinān*) vs. *àtion*, which is of cardinal importance for Heraclitus (see fr. 2, 89, 72, 1, 17, 113, 114), and which can be somewhat imprecisely translated as that of *Universal* vs. *Private*, when by *Private* is meant the privation of truth, the seclusion of ignorant humans from what is universal. (The particularity of their own illusory worlds is described as sleeping and having dreams in fr. 1, 89, 73 (and probably 26). The seclusion of the multitude from the universal truth of Logos is likened to the privation of the common world of experience caused by deafness (fr. 34) and (Homer's) blindness (fr. 56, by implication). It is probable that *Being at home* in fr. 5b is yet another—*political*—metaphor for seclusion from the *junān*.) On this reading, the prayer to the statue entails certain confusion between what is universal and what is *Private* or particular; apparently, it is a case when behaviour that is proper vis-à-vis what is universal is conducted in a situation that is

the rare word $\gamma\rho\acute{o}\mu\alpha\iota$ (cf. Philetas, fr. 14 ap. Athen. V, 192 e),³⁴ or, better still, of its Ionic form $\gamma\rho\acute{\eta}\mu\epsilon\nu\omicron\rho$)³⁵

To return to Heraclitus' discussion of the religious images, could the reason for the condemnation of the prayer to statues be that those who pray to statues address gods that are omnipresent $\chi\rho\nu\omicron\iota$, in a particular, $\tilde{\omega}$ in this-or-that statue, deeming it to be more privileged with access to the deity over other places or things, not realising that what they address in their prayers is but what an empty house is to someone who is looking for its inhabitant? In such cases they would indeed be like someone who tried to have a public conversation in the seclusion of their home.³⁶

In this fragment we get closest to what could be termed a critique of the religious practices. Yet failure to recognise, and seclusion from, the universal \logos that is always at hand is a common predicament of the ignorant multitude (cf. frs. 1, 72, 17, 2 et al.). Thus it would seem

a deeper meaning that can be described in terms of Heraclitus's own philosophy.

Fr. 96 – $\eta\kappa\upsilon\epsilon\omega\kappa\omicron\rho\upsilon\acute{\nu}\eta\kappa\beta\lambda\eta\tau\acute{\eta}\nu\ \tau\epsilon\rho\omicron\iota$ – has earned the title of *the studied insult to ordinary Greek sentiment* from Dodds,³⁷ and many an interpreter has wondered why the dead body should excite such a *Zeus* censure by

pelling reason to disbelieve him, in view of the consensus of other ancient authors quoting or alluding to this fragment (see fr. 75 a¹, b¹, c Marc.), in fr. 92 Heraclitus is contrasting the exterior aspect of Sibylline prophecies with the god-given truth they carry. Viewed from an everyday perspective the Sibyl

traditional forms of religion and the mythological representations that underlie them, Heraclitus treats religious practices as one of the human practices in which the structure of the Unity of opposites operates (other such practices are healing (fr. 58), value choices (fr. 110-111), and the begetting of children (fr. 20)). He supplies a

It is the presence (and recognition) of the structure of \hat{O} nity-in-opposites \hat{O} hat

life and death, and Apollo is a figure of the unity of truth (or prophetic insight) and madness (fr. 92), as well as of revelation and concealment (fr. 93). If we move to the higher order, the gods of the traditional world-view emerge as one of the elements of a more comprehensive opposition between gods and humans (fr. 53, 62; cf. fr. 30, 24). The opposition between gods and humans reaches its unity in the Parmenidean one of Heraclitus names for the ultimate reality that is described through employment of the traditional religious language (v. supra), and is apparently identified with the cosmic god. This ultimate unity of opposites unifies the most fundamental categories of existence (fr. 53) and of experience (fr. 67).⁴¹

Furthermore, if we accept the view that fr. 10 states the general principle of Heraclitus' theoretical procedure and that the first pair of terms – *ἄλλοτε καὶ οὐδέποτε ἄλλοτε* – could be interpreted as an attempt to describe the dialectical movement of thinking, whereby each newly comprehended unity-of-opposites constitutes simultaneously a whole (in the sense that it is internally complete structure) and a non-whole (in the sense that it can be assumed into further synthesis, the previous unity) (i) -25 (e) (C)

tices are continuous with the underlying theology. Heraclitus, on the contrary, is not a reformer or an Aufklärer, but an interpreter, who tries to discern the pattern inherent in the existing practices, and exploit it in the construction of his own philosophical theology.

Heraclitus finds in the traditional religious practices the expression of the logos, of the ontological and epistemological