

## AN INTRODUCTION TO PRE-SOCRATIC ETHICS: HERACLITUS AND DEMOCRITUS ON HUMAN NATURE AND CONDUCT (PART I: ON MOTION AND CHANGE)

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**ABSTRACT:** Both Heraclitus and Democritus, as the philosophers of *historia peri phuseôs*, consider nature and human character, habit, law and soul as interrelated, emphasizing the links between *phusis*, *kinesis*, *ethos*, *logos*, *kresis*, *nomos* and *daimon*. On the one hand, Heraclitus's principle of change (*panta rhei*) and his emphasis on the element of fire and cosmic motion ultimately dominate his ethics, reinforcing his ideas of change, moderation, balance and justice; on the other, Democritus's atomist description of *phusis* and motion underlies his principle of moderation and his ideas of health and measured life. In this series, particularly referring to the main principles of motion, moderation and justice, I attempt to describe a coherent pre-Socratic ethical perspective based on the Heraclitean and Democritean fragments. I explore the connections between their physics and ethics, also borrowing from Nietzsche's lectures and writings on the Pre-Socratics. I redefine such Heraclitean and Democritean concepts as harmony, order, perfection, health, self-control, contentment, cheerfulness, concord, sound judgment, wisdom, measure and balance and discuss them under the principles of motion (*phusis*), moderation (*sophrosyne*) and justice. In doing so, I also expose the relevance of the Heraclitean notion of *logos* (interpreting it as the underlying categorical principle of *transition* between *phusis* and *ethos*) in bringing together these ideas and principles. Finally, based on this pre-Socratic *Weltanschauung*, I assess the possibility of a coherent picture of humanity, its nature and conduct as extending from or fitting into or extending-from-when-fitting-into the cosmos of moving forces and atoms.

**KEYWORDS:** Heraclitus; Democritus; Pre-Socratics; Ethics; Change; Motion; Phusis; Ethos

### INTRODUCTION

Both Heraclitus and Democritus, as the philosophers of *historia peri phuseôs*,

consider nature and human character, habit, law and soul as interrelated emphasizing the links between *phusis*, *kinesis*, *ethos*, *logos*, *kresis*, *nomos* and *daimon*. On the one hand, Heraclitus's principle of change (*panta rhei*) and his emphasis on the element of fire and cosmic motion ultimately dominate his ethics reinforcing his ideas of change, moderation, balance and justice, on the other, Democritus's atomist description of *phusis* and motion underlies his principle of moderation and his ideas of health and measured life. In this series, particularly referring to the main principles of motion, moderation and justice, I attempt to describe a coherent pre-Socratic ethical perspective based on the Heraclitean and Democritean fragments. I explore the connections between their physics and ethics also borrowing from Nietzsche's lectures and writings on the Pre-Socratics. I redefine such Heraclitean and Democritean concepts as harmony, order, perfection, health, self-control, contentment, cheerfulness, concord, sound judgment, wisdom, measure and balance and discuss them under the principles of motion (*phusis*), moderation (*sophrosyne*) and justice. In doing so, I also expose the relevance of the Heraclitean notion of *logos* (interpreting it as the underlying categorical principle of *transition* between *phusis* and *ethos*) in bringing together these ideas and principles. Finally, based on this pre-Socratic *Weltanschauung*, I assess the possibility of a coherent picture of humanity, its nature and conduct as extending from or fitting into or extending-from-when-fitting-into the cosmos of moving forces and atoms.

Nevertheless, this is not a philological study on Heraclitus's and Democritus's fragments on nature and ethics. I do not aim to 'discover' the 'real' meaning of the fragments but rather, in these papers, I aim to show that, when coherently theorized, the pre-Socratic ethics can stand out as a pre-moral alternative to the still moralizing and dichotomous (though mostly exhausted) tendency in the field of ethics which came to be incorrectly considered synonymous with morality. The Pre-Socratic philosophers began to speculate from the level of *phusis* or *kosmos* and define the ethical, artistic and political concepts according to the dynamics and principles of the whole (*ta panta*). This was an attempt to explain the place and role of microcosmic human existence within a macrocosmic picture. In this first part of the series of three papers, I will attempt to demonstrate how Heraclitus's idea of nature (*phusis*), the element of fire and his principle of change (*panta rhei*) influenced his views on the ideal human constitution (nature or *phusis*) and character (*ethos*) as an extension of the constitution of the whole (Nature or *Phusis*).

In doing so, I will analyze and comment on some of the key fragments of Heraclitus that directly (logically) and indirectly (metaphorically or analogously) assert the inherent relation between *phusis* and *ethos*, and the central role the principle of motion plays in the formation and changes in human character and actions. Here I also attempt to demonstrate how human norms and laws are naturally moderated extensions of physical laws such as the law of circularity. I will then conclude this section by showing how Heraclitus (like Democritus) associates physical health with mental and ethical integrity.

Following a similar line of argumentation, I will then analyze and comment on the fragments of Democritus starting with the ones relating to his atomist understanding of *phusis* that ground his version of the principle of motion. This section will include his description of Nature as necessity, his critique of physical and ethical teleology as well as an exploration of his distinctive version of relativism. I will then focus on Democritus's fragments on the relationship between the motion in body and motion in soul, bodily health and mental health, and on how his principle of motion relates to his concepts of cheerfulness (*euthymia*) and balance (*kresis*). Then I will discuss Democritus's argument that instead of labeling experiences as good or bad, it is more appropriate to consider all experiences as additions to the person's character as, when possessed advantageously, they have the potential to improve his constitution and character. I will also argue that his principle of change requires a proper understanding and application of the principle of moderation for the formation of practical wisdom in a person's character which in turn assists him to resist great movements of nature and achieve cheerfulness and long-term happiness. I will show how, according to Democritus, the principle of motion and change fuels aesthetic self-creation or character building and makes a person more ethical by way of giving him strength and integrity and making his character more defined while, at the same time, fitting or 'becoming' for his environment.

#### *PHUSIS* AS THE FOUNDATION OF HERACLITUS'S ETHICS

Like most pre-Socratic philosophers, Heraclitus also thinks that *phusis* encompasses not only the forces of nature as a whole or the macrocosmic dynamics of the universe but also the microcosmic human concepts from which these senseless forces acquire their meaning. In *Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, Nietzsche

claims that the unifying notion in Heraclitean philosophy was *phusis* as it is presented in his *Peri Phuseôs* (*On Nature*), which he sees as the most correct form of universalism, fittingly representing “the oneness and eternal lawfulness of nature’s processes.”<sup>1</sup> *Phusis* in the Heraclitean sense refers to the dynamic, irrational, amoral cosmic moving whole. In other words, it is purely cosmological as it is capable to resist any teleological, theological and ontological interpretations that define nature as an entirely supersensible notion reducing it to *telos* (purpose), *theos* (god) and *ta onta* (static being) respectively. *Phusis* never simply refers to some static being or thing but always to a process or a temporary result of an on-going process. In his famous fragments 12 (“Upon those who step into the same rivers different and again different waters flow.”<sup>2</sup>) and 40 (“panta rhei” or “all things flow”), it is evident that for Heraclitus, nature is always an on-going process, and that change is the key ingredient of constancy, and things in nature are constant only insofar as they are changing. Heraclitus conceives nature or *phusis* as a cosmological idea that “scatters and again gathers, comes together and flows away, and approaches and departs”<sup>3</sup> and that “rests by changing.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans., ed. Whitlock, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 58. Similarly, in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche writes, “the total character of the world is for all eternity chaos, not in the sense of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order, organization, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever else our aesthetic anthropomorphisms are called...it is neither perfect, nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it want to become any of these things; in no way does it strive to imitate man! In no way do our aesthetic and moral judgments apply to it...Let us beware of saying there are laws in nature. There are only necessities... Once you know that there are no purposes, you also know that there is no accident; ... Let us beware of thinking that the world eternally creates new things. There are no eternally enduring substances; matter is as much of an error as the god of the Eleatics (unchanging being)...When will all these shadows of god no longer darken us? When will we have completely de-deified nature? When may we begin to naturalize humanity with a pure, newly discovered, newly redeemed nature?” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Williams, Bernard, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 109. We can relate this passage to the primary passage on the necessity of the discovery of new worlds which Nietzsche sets as a task for the new philosophers. For the naturalization of *ethos* can only be achieved by addressing the necessity of the principle of motion and the principle of transition (*logos*) in any ethical judgment and concept. How does Nietzsche avoid the teleological and moral characteristics of *ethos*? The answer is that he associates *ethos* directly to *phusis*, by this way, he shows, how *ethos* becomes purified from the “ancient error” (namely the error committed by Plato, Aristotle and all the moralists coming after them). In other words, *ethos* becomes moral once it is interpreted teleologically, once a direction or a goal is devised for it. According to the principle of motion, the movement is prior to the direction, goal, purpose, and it determines them.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Stephen Kirk, *The Cosmic Fragments*, (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge: 1954), 367.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Charles Henry Kahn, *The art and thought of Heraclitus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 53.

Fire is one of the few elements in universe that both embodies and symbolizes such characteristics of nature as change, flow, fluidity, formlessness and relativity. Fire as the natural force that regulates both *phusis* and *ethos* through the links between the constitution of the whole and the constitution of the individuals, cultures and societies. Fire or heat moves all living things by imparting in them the motion they need forming their constitution or nature. Similarly, I argue that Heraclitus considered fire as the formative elemental force that shapes human nature and life that has significant influence on human character formation, person's relations with others as well as his social and natural environment, in short on human ethics. *Phusis* (nature) as *kinesis* (motion) is the dynamic principle without which *kosmos* would not hold together and would eventually disintegrate into a chaotic self-destructive state. Human cultures would disintegrate if they stop changing, and individual characters would become stagnant and eventually lose their integrity if they do not undertake new experiences. Therefore, principle of change can be established as the primary natural and ethical principle and other ethical principles and laws that govern the lives of people must be subject to change, for otherwise, lack of mobility may corrupt and undermine their constitution. There are several historical evidences in support of this argument. From ancient Egypt to the Roman Empire, many states and societies primarily went through cultural and ethical corruption due to the leaders not being able to uphold change and failing to create new purposes and values to spearhead cultural change and maintain the culture's links to *phusis* or the underlying flow. They failed to respond to economic and political challenges and eventually disintegrated or failed to counter their enemies which in most cases were new emerging forces in their regions with momentum on their side.

Heraclitus considers that this principle of motion and change also applies to the realm of ethics. The key fragment that evidently shows the relationship between Heraclitus's cosmology/physics and ethics is Fragment 112:

σωφρονεῖν ἀρετὴ μέγιστη καὶ σοφίη ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν  
κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαίοντας

“Sound thinking (is) a very great virtue, and (practical) wisdom (consists in our) saying what is true and acting in accordance with (the) real constitution (of things),

(by) paying heed (to it)."<sup>5</sup> (Robinson)

"Thinking well is the greatest excellence; and wisdom is to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature."<sup>6</sup> (Kahn)

"Self-control is the highest virtue, and wisdom is to speak truth and consciously to act according to nature."<sup>7</sup> (Patrick)

"Sound thinking is the greatest virtue and wisdom: to speak the truth and to act on the basis of an understanding of the nature of things."<sup>8</sup> (Graham)

Heraclitus argues that one can only be virtuous, practically wise, truthful and thereby ethical by acting in accordance with *phusis* or nature or the real constitution of things. If one acts against his *phusis*, which is an extension of the *phusis* of the whole, then one's actions and speech is unethical or unfitting. Sound thinking and acting requires one to know one's self (one's constitution) as well as the real constitution of things (the idea of nature). And people who can establish and strengthen the link between their character (*ethos*) and the real constitution of things (*phusis*) can manage to attach themselves onto the flow and are both natural (cosmologically or metaphysically attached to *phusis* and *aletheia*) in their ideas and speech, and ethical (practically attached to *phusis* and *aletheia*) in their actions and decisions. In other words, our actions are 'becoming' if they conform and reaffirm not only our character (*ethos*) as a particular but genuine extension of the real constitution (*phusis*) of things but also the transition between the general *Phusis* and our individual *phusis* (which shapes and is shaped by our *ethos*) or namely nature and human nature. And our actions are 'unbecoming' if they excessively neglect or disregard these necessities. This usually happens when a person acts immoderately because of his lack of practical wisdom. Practical wisdom provides the person with the essential knowledge of this moderation which makes her adapt her own constitution or character to the general flow by moderating her behaviour in accordance with the temporal, spatial and social context. This sometimes conscious sometimes unconscious act of moderation makes the action fit into the general *phusis*. This also goes to show why an

<sup>5</sup> Thomas M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 65.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Henry Kahn, *The art and thought of Heraclitus*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 43.

<sup>7</sup> George Thomas White Patrick, *The Fragments of the Work of Heraclitus of Ephesus on Nature*, (Franklin Classics, 1889), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Watkins Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy (Part I)*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 171

unnatural action *looks unbecoming* to the eye. An unbecoming action is the one that is not moderated by the doer based on her constitution (*phusis*) as part of the general constitution or nature (*Phusis*). This is precisely why Heraclitus defines moderation (*sophrosyne*) or self-control as the greatest virtue that leads people moderate their words and behaviours to avoid excess or deficiency in speech and action, paying heed to the abundant forces of nature while not entirely being engulfed by them. And like all other skills, this virtue is also acquired through practical wisdom. This I argue is the way Heraclitus has envisaged the reciprocity and natural connection between the concepts of *Phusis* (nature) and *sophrosyne* moderation.

Being unnatural for humans does not mean to overstep the laws of nature or laws of reason but rather being and acting contrary to the course of human nature as an extension of nature or *phusis*, i.e. by lacking feelings of kindness and sympathy considered natural for humans or by disrespecting nature and recklessly polluting their environment considering themselves detached from it. To achieve these straightforward ethical conclusions, I argue, one does not need to assume the authority of the laws of reason. The law of moderation, for instance, is already one of the key elements of human nature. By “acting on the basis of an understanding of their nature”, human beings should be able to find it natural to show sympathy towards all beings and respect their environment<sup>9</sup>. In other words, this does not have to do with the overused simplistic alleged contradiction between the natural and the rational. Heraclitus and Democritus, as natural philosophers of *historia peri phuseôs*, would not pose reason against nature but rather consider the former an extension of the latter. Similarly, it could be argued that human nature/reason is closely associated with such feelings as empathy, cheerfulness, justice, self-control and moderation that are *natural* to humans but not to many other species. It would be absurd to expect such feelings from most animals. But some species like dolphins surely possess some level and form of cheerfulness and empathy for instance. What is natural to humans may not be so to many other species. It is clear that some form of rationality exists in social

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<sup>9</sup> As Graham notes, “such an understanding can result only from an ability to interpret the language of nature. The proper understanding allows one to act in a harmonious way.” (Daniel Watkins Graham, “Heraclitus” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, last modified 2019, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>)

animals that can empathize with others. A wisely moderated action is harmonious with one's own nature and Nature as a whole, and thereby becoming and ethical. A person who is able to moderate the excessive life-force through sound thinking is natural, becoming and ethical. Their character (*ethos*) is *becoming* and compatible with their nature (*phusis*) as an extension of nature as a whole. Their well-moderated actions and words are aesthetically pleasing, dynamically exalting, naturally fitting, logically sound, practically wise and therefore ethically becoming.

Among others, the following two fragments accentuate the prevalence of the principle of motion and change in Heraclitean thought:

F125: "Even the barley-drink separates if it is not stirred"<sup>10</sup>

F91: "a) [For, according to Heraclitus, it is not possible to step twice into the same river, nor is it possible to touch a mortal substance twice in so far as its state (*hexis*) is concerned. But, thanks to (the) swiftness and speed of change,] b) it scatters (things?) and brings (them?) together again, [(or rather it brings together and lets go neither again nor later but *simultaneously*)], (it) forms and (it) dissolves, and (it) approaches and departs."<sup>11</sup> Plutarch: "It is not possible to step twice into the same river according to Heraclitus, or to come into contact twice with a mortal being in the same state"<sup>12</sup>

Applying these two fragments into human ethics, it is necessary first to define it as change-centred ethics which prioritises the new over the old, the future over the past, the movement over the stasis. Change-centred ethics would consider an action ethical insofar as it is linked or complies with the essential and constant movement of the substratum. But how are we going to know whether we can classify an action as "becoming"? Actions can be taken to halt or alter the present situation. Actions that attempt to halt the underlying change of the status quo are not becoming and therefore unethical. Actions that attempt to affirm the underlying change are considered "new" and "original" as they reject to imitate the present status quo. These actions try to affirm and create a new transition from the movement of the substratum. An action/judgment/decision that contributes to the acceleration of change is an ethical action. This is partly due to the unrelenting human curiosity and human beings' desire to see more and

<sup>10</sup> Thomas M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 71.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*.

further. Human beings have evolved so quickly and only an ethics of change can ensure us about the constancy of that evolution. In other words, it is in our constitution (*phusis*) to like and promote change. Therefore, we also need politics and legal systems that make sure the people (their valuations and consciousness) are in constant change. Becoming action is the one that does not hinder change or the constant and necessary flow of *phusis*. When a conduct attempts to hinder this flow, this conduct is, by its very nature, unethical. When a conduct follows, strengthens or adds to the change, it succeeds to join the main river of *phusis*, and thus is ethical and change-affirming. As a result, a person who is always reluctant to change is like stagnant water. One's character becomes more beautiful if it manages to change by following one's very own constitution/nature as a part of the constitution of the whole. Therefore, a person has to be always open to new experiences (new waters) and moderate them to fit them into his character (*ethos*) in order to strengthen the connection between the general flow (*phusis*) and his own becoming constitution (*phusis*).

Another crucial fragment that shows the applicability of laws of *phusis* to the realm of ethics and politics is Fragment 114. The three different translations of it are as follows:

ξὺν νόῳ λέγοντας ἰσχυρίζεσθαι χρῆ τῷ ξυνῶ πάντων, ὅκωσπερ νόμῳ πόλις καὶ πολὺ ἰσχυροτέρως· τρέφονται γὰρ πάντες οἱ ἀνθρώπειοι νόμοι ὑπὸ ἐνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ· κρατεῖ γὰρ τοσοῦτον ὀκόσον ἐθέλει καὶ ἐξαρκεῖ πᾶσι καὶ περιγίνεται

“Speaking with sense we must fortify ourselves in the common sense of all, as a city is fortified by its law, and even more forcefully. For all human laws are nourished by the one divine law. For it prevails as far as it will and suffices for all and is superabundant.”<sup>13</sup>

“Those who speak with understanding must hold fast to what is common to all as a city holds fast to its law, and even more strongly. For all human laws are fed by the *divine one*. It prevails as much as it will, and suffices for all things with something to spare.”<sup>14</sup>

“Those who (would) speak with insight must base themselves firmly on that which is common to all, as a city does upon (its) law – and much *more* firmly! For all human

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Watkins Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy (Part I)*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 175.

<sup>14</sup> John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, third ed., (London: A & C Black, 1920), 103.

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laws are nourished by one (law), the divine (law). For it holds sway to the extent that it wishes, and suffices for all, and is still left over.”<sup>15</sup>

The law that is common to all human beings, namely the one based on their *phusis* or the law of their real constitution (considering fragment 112), is the one to be held much more firmly than a city should on its laws. Why does a city need laws? For order, for justice, for fairness, for moderation, for mutual trust and respect among citizens, for the healthy functioning and continuity of the state, for the well-being and happiness of everyone. Similarly, for Heraclitus, the wise and ethical person would follow the divine law (which in Heraclitean sense refers to *logos*<sup>16</sup>) while he speaks and acts if he wants to be moderate, respectable, just, fair and happy. Since (law) *nomos* that is common to all is *logos* – or namely the moderated link between ‘the constitution of the whole’ (*phusis*) and individual’s own constitution (*ethos*), “it is wise to follow the *logos*” to have a well-functioning, happy, moderate, just, fair and ordered character that branches out from the ordered whole (*kosmos*). As a species, human beings, thanks to their peculiar constitution, have the potential to become wise by embracing the very law of the transition between their nature and nature as a whole. Failing to do so would not only make them unnatural but more importantly potentially immoderate, unhappy, unjust, unfair and unethical. Referring back to our key example of climate change, from the point of view of this new ethical principle, we can deduce that human beings who ignore or trivialize the damage humanity induces on its planet fail to see this link between *ethos* and *phusis* as well as the fragile balance that keeps all natural things alive and in order. They lack wisdom for they prioritize their short-term gains and purposefully misinterpret the laws of nature accordingly (as they do with their own laws). In this case, their actions are immoderate, unwise and unethical because they transgress the laws of their constitution (*phusis*) and the constitution of the whole (*Phusis*). But here, one could argue that it could be considered natural for all species to multiply and exploit the natural resources according to their benefit. My response to this would be that it cannot possibly be seen natural for any species to knowingly and consciously (if and when they possess advanced faculties) act in such a damaging

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 67.

<sup>16</sup> see DK1, DK2 and DK50 (ibid, 11, 37.)

manner towards its own environment and therefore towards its very constitution (i.e. water and air pollution that causes several short-term and long-term illnesses). Covid-19 painfully exposed this ignorance of humanity of its environment as well as of the links between its character (*ethos*), constitution (*phusis*) and the constitution of the whole (*Phusis*). This fragment also demonstrates the necessary relationship between the cosmic (divine) law (or namely *logos*) and human law (or *nomos*) as well as divine justice and human justice. The former guiding the latter, and once the latter stops following the former, then it becomes obsolete or unbecoming with divine justice (or necessity) moderating the human justice. This is the only way human justice/law can remain flowing and thereby naturally and ethically valid strengthening the relation between *ethos* and *phusis*. Similarly, F101, “I investigated myself” or “I made enquiry of myself”, can also be articulated as “I made enquiry of my real constitution as part of the real constitution of all things”. One’s *ethos* (character) is one’s real constitution as one of the extensions (branches or leaves on these branches) of the main *phusis*. And this attachment is maintained by natural, ethical or ethically natural actions. But for this, one first has to know one’s self as a changing being, as well as the way one’s self attaches on the main flow of nature (*phusis*) to make sure that the changes in one’s character are naturally oriented and not imposed by some unnatural contextual, spatial or temporal factors such as religious and cultural norms and values.

F83: “...In the matter of wisdom, beauty, and every other thing, in contrast with God the wisest of mankind will appear an ape”<sup>17</sup>

F124: “The most beautiful order (in the universe)...is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random”<sup>18</sup>

These fragments argue for the inherent superiority of cosmic wisdom over the temporal and spatial wisdom. Both ethical and aesthetic norms of humanity will always be limited by their spatial and temporal contexts. However, a cosmological understanding (the God’s eye view) all these contextually-oriented ethical and aesthetic values/judgments/norms are just primitive, simple, narrow-minded, and limited. So, this fragment also brings to attention the importance of

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 51.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, 71.

one's ability to transcend the contextual, namely cultural and social boundaries of his society. According to Heraclitus, to acquire true wisdom, one has to first identify these ethical and aesthetic boundaries that limit one's understanding of the world and question them to overcome their dominance. A philosopher or the lover of wisdom is the one who identifies these boundaries and questions them to accomplish this transcendence and climbs high enough to see humanity from the God's eye view. From this height humans would lose their distinguishing aesthetic and ethical features and appear to the philosopher alike and primitive in their ways. Their cultural values, social norms and belief systems appear simplistic, limited and shallow. Therefore, it would not be wrong to assume that Heraclitus would subscribe to universal or cosmological ethical principles and such principles can only be derived from nature or *phusis*. This is because *phusis* as the real constitution of all things underlie all spatial, temporal, cultural, social and ethical contexts, and only the principles derived from human nature as an extension of nature are able to transcend such boundaries and claim universal relevance. This is why both Heraclitus and Democritus, as the philosophers of *phusis* or natural philosophers, understood human ethics as founded on the principles that govern nature.

Another important principle of nature that can be applied to ethics is the principle of circularity. In Fragment 88, Heraclitus says, "...there is present (in us) living and dead and the waking and the sleeping and young and old. For the latter, having changed around, are the former, and the former, having changed around, are (back) again (to being) the latter."<sup>19</sup> According to Heraclitus, opposites belong to each other and cannot exist without each other as they are interdependent. But how does the circularity of the mode of *phusis* affect *ethos*? The circularity in nature is evident in seasons, i.e. winter - summer (the effect of the gradual increase or decrease in the level of heat), or tree – fruit – seed – seedling – tree, mother – calf – mother. Since a person's character is an extension of his nature or constitution, then this circularity must also apply to the ethical norms the person lives by and by which he makes decisions/judgments on life matters. For example, when a man understands that death (thus circularity) is an essential characteristic of life itself and lives his life accordingly, he displays

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<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, 53.

wisdom in his choices, decisions, judgments and actions. His wisdom is both theoretical and practical as he correctly intuits the flow (and posits it as the primary principle of life), accepts and affirms the all-moving and all-encompassing motion of *phusis* and understands all things in accordance with the flow. He makes his choices and performs his actions based on this natural law that also governs human *ethos*. He embraces change and motion, always tries to enhance his character with new experiences, and exposes himself to the environment and makes his own constitution fit into *phusis*. He gladly lets his character float on the river of becoming instead of taking refuge in teleological linearity and does not live his life based on a social, cultural or religious purpose. For instance, the belief in afterlife in monotheistic religions makes some of their subjects less mature as they live their life to prepare for the afterlife and refrain from committing unethical actions and *try* to be ethical, good and cheerful in order to avoid punishment and enjoy the rewards after death. But their version of good, ethical and cheerful character is not grounded on the constitution of the whole (*phusis*) but rather on a culturally or religiously imposed teleological idea and thereby it lacks substance. Such belief in the eternal life and an all-overseeing and all-encompassing benevolent god makes people childish (lacking wisdom) as they fail to embrace the principle of circularity of life, the flow and the tragic essence of human *ethos*. They simply choose to turn their gaze away from the motion that generates their very own constitution due to its possibly tragic consequences. However, this neglect further weakens their character (*ethos*) and constitution (*phusis*) thereby making them unnatural and indirectly unethical.

Such natural principles as circularity are regularly reminded to humans by transitions between Nature (*Phusis*) and human cultures in many different forms like natural disasters and pandemics. This is why Heraclitus says, “Every four-footed beast is driven to pasture by blows.”<sup>20</sup> It is common knowledge that to better one’s character, one needs to have had challenging and trying experiences or adverse conditions as this could be the only way one can understand the value of order, happiness, moderation and eventually form a balanced character. But the key point here is that the blow needs to be something external and

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Watkins Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy (Part I)*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 173

unpredictable to challenge and potentially strengthen the person's character. The moving experiences of nature, i.e. disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes or pandemics have the potential to put one's character in the general order thereby moderating and regulating their *ethos* which comes to fit into the general flow. The experience (or the *blow*) of Covid-19 that affected everyone in the world showed once more the all-encompassing force of *phusis*. These blows of *phusis* have always been capable to put human *ethos* to test and potentially alter its character. Covid-19, defined by many leaders as the 'invisible enemy', actually represents the destructive (yet rejuvenating) character of *phusis*. It revealed once more the necessity of change in humanity's perspective of its own place in nature. The humanity's realization of its grounding has the potential to moderate its future actions thereby altering its future character. In other words, the blow of Covid-19 can also be interpreted as a positive blow that forced humanity into embracing a more balanced, natural and ethical way of being. By "pasture" Heraclitus means the ultimate contentment of a person who has managed to discover his natural talent or powers and use them to lead a good and cheerful life (like oxen on pasture). Humanity could potentially turn such disasters as pandemics into an opportunity to discover or rediscover how its character is grounded on the essential motion and character of *phusis*<sup>21</sup>.

Another interesting Heraclitean fragment that relate directly to ethics reads: F111: "Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest".<sup>22</sup> One has to go through different life experiences and hardships to appreciate the value of health, satiety and peace. A pandemic is again a good example to support this argument. The presence of disease in society makes health more precious and makes people understand the essential value of it. Similarly, someone who grew up in luxury cannot possibly value satiety as much as someone who had a deprived upbringing. People who lived through the World Wars know much better the value of calm and peace. The common point in all these examples is the principle of motion or change. Sudden and dramatic changes in one's environment tests one's strength and resolution. These changes potentially

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<sup>21</sup> Alternatively (though not very relevantly), this fragment can also be interpreted as Heraclitus's support for a strong leader – a wily and fearful shepherd (similar to the Hobbesian sovereign) who can both impress and guide his people.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas M. Robinson, *Heraclitus: Fragments*, (University of Toronto Press, 1987), 65.

improve their character and indirectly assist them to overcome possible future challenges. The experience of suffering that derives from man's exposure to the blind forces of nature or *phusis* alters his perception of the conditions in which he finds himself. Such change in perception can also trigger a complete transformation of a person's character (*ethos*). Another point we can derive from this passage is that health, satiety and peace are not good in themselves but they become good relative to one's life experiences. For instance, someone who has lived a very healthy, rich and luxurious life from childhood till adulthood may not identify satiety or health as good or pleasant. It would just be normal to them to enjoy a healthy and rich life full of pleasures and devoid of suffering. Therefore, for Heraclitus, the good-in-itself (or the beautiful-in-itself) is just an invention that fails to represent the reality of human experience. This is why Heraclitus goes on to say, "the most beautiful order (in the universe)...is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random."<sup>23</sup> Since we established that perceptions of good and beauty are contextual and depends on a person's life experiences, we can also argue that person's conceptions of such ideas depend on the temporal and spatial changes that have affected his character.

A seemingly unrelated set of fragments on death and heroism could work to substantiate the link between *phusis* and *ethos*: "To die in battle is a superior kind of death" (B24). Or, F24: "Those slain by Ares, gods and mankind honour."<sup>24</sup> Or, "Those who experience better deaths attain better rewards" (B25) Or, F25: Greater (better) deaths win (for themselves) greater (better) destinies."<sup>25</sup> How do these fragments relate to Heraclitus's naturalist ethics? Based on this fragment we can argue that according to Heraclitus a warrior fighting in battle dies a superior death. A fighter or soldier in a war becomes an opposing force to counter the enemy or the opposing force (i.e. Achilles's death in Troy) In other words, the more an individual becomes one with *phusis*, the more he will be remembered by other mortals or achieves an immortal fame. The closer the resemblance of one's character and actions to the moving forces inherent in *phusis*, the purer and better that person becomes both in life and in death. The transition between *ethos* and *phusis* is most apparent when a man exhibits a deed of courage. In all societies

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid*, 71.

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*, 23.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid*.

from the Ancient Greek cities to modern Western countries, such deeds are always considered ethically sublime and this is not only because fighting and dying for your countrymen is one of the most altruistic actions but also heroism or the show of strength for a noble cause is one of the most naturally-oriented deeds and remains a measure of the goodness and nobility of one's character. Contrarily, according to Heraclitus, alcoholism makes one's constitution and character weak: "Those who drink to excess make their souls wet, and accordingly harm them (B117), for a healthy soul is dry (B118)." Getting drunk causes one to lose one's self for a period of time and when this becomes a habit, according to Heraclitus, it completely corrupts one's character. A wet soul cannot distinguish right from wrong and eventually loses its strength as it fails to find firm grounding that can maintain the integrity of one's character. A dry soul, in contrast, is healthy as it can always see things clearly and does not lose the integrity of its character. Therefore, a person with dry soul can always search for himself and see how his character is grounded on *phusis* and still manages to float on it as a distinguishable being that can maintain its integrity. And this ability to see clearly how one's *ethos* is linked to *phusis* (which requires a proper understanding of *logos*), for Heraclitus, is wisdom.

#### PHUSIS AS THE FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRITUS'S ETHICS

Democritus in his theory of atoms considered human life (as well as other forms of life) as futile and argued that all life is driven by series of chance-events constituted by the movements and interactions of atoms<sup>26</sup>. Unlike Aristotle and Plato, Democritus and Leucippus tried to explain the world without reasoning as to purpose, prime mover, or final cause. Therefore, like Heraclitus we can

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<sup>26</sup> Waterfield puts this point as follows: "It is a fascinating question whether there was any explicit connection between Democritus' atomic theory and his ethics. It is relatively easy to suggest that, because the soul is atomic, and because the soul-atoms are spread evenly throughout the body, major disturbances in the soul are to be avoided, as injurious both psychologically and constitutionally. It is also easy to see that in both fields, ethics and physics, Democritus would recommend critical examination of the evidence of the senses, so that (in ethics) one does not necessarily follow an immediate whim, without first seeing whether or not where it leads is truly conducive to one's long-term pleasure. Moreover, in T22 Hippolytus reports, in effect, that Democritus saw the whole of human life as futile. Since he believed in the chance concatenation of atoms, and may be destroyed at any moment by collusion with another world, and which is subject to bombardment by alien diseases" (Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Pre-Socratics and Sophists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 171)

categorize Democritus as a non-teleological thinker. Instead of thinking through the ‘purposes’ of events he focused rather on the causes and provided a mechanistic understanding of nature and human nature. Nietzsche, in his Pre-Platonic Philosophers lecture series, suggests,

“Concerning the formation of the world, Democritus thought that atoms hover in eternal motion within infinite space...The world is moved and arises out of ‘chance’, accidental colliding ... we should instead call it ‘purposeless causality’, ‘necessity’ (*anagke* or *ananke*) without purposive intentions: precisely here is there no chance whatsoever but rather the most rigorous lawfulness, only not according to laws of reason”<sup>27</sup>

The type of lawfulness and necessity Nietzsche has in mind is natural necessity which does not rely on reasons and purposes or which is not rational or teleological. According to Heraclitus and Democritus, *ananke* governs all things in nature and in human nature. To be ethical in his bearing, actions, habits and character traits, a person needs to understand this non-teleological, *a*-rational and amoral necessity and follow it through in moderation. For if he fails to understand and follow it, his individual constitution would be detached from the general flow of events (this is similar to trying to swim up river), eventually loses his strength and dissipate into nothingness. On the other hand, if he just lets the abundant natural forces take over his body and mind, then this liquefies his being into the river of becoming and potentially corrupts his character beyond recognition. Therefore, he has to follow necessity through moderation because only then he can deal with the abundance of nature’s moving forces and constant interactions of atoms that trigger and maintain change and channel them to build a healthy, fit body and strong and cheerful character. This also requires an unreserved and wholehearted acceptance and affirmation of the mode of the river of becoming or namely the principle of change. Following this, we can also argue that every change brings with itself a novel version of justice, a justice based on necessity, a justice constantly revised by the changing circumstances<sup>28</sup>.

Moreover, Vlastos contends that Democritus advances and concludes the Ionian ethical position he inherited from Heraclitus and other Ionian thinkers

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<sup>27</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans., ed. Whitlock, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 126.

<sup>28</sup> I will expand on this argument in the final part of the series on the principle of justice

like Anaxagoras. Linking human culture to the operation of nature through necessity, Democritus seems to advance the non-teleological and mechanistic understanding of *phusis* and *ethos* developed by the other Ionian philosophers. A river has first to be flowing before it flows towards a certain destination. According to Heraclitean and Democritean cosmology, change-in-itself is the core of being. Similarly, one should not shy away from new experiences (learning a new language, living in a foreign country, working/studying in a different field, doing a new and challenging sport). These new experiences, once attached to the character of the person, expand his character adding a new layer of being that challenges and hardens the character. The person willingly submits himself to the flow of the river (floating on it but not submerging in it) and becomes more recognizable and defined, more aesthetic and ethical through this very process. Change links a person's individual *phusis* to the general *phusis* and is therefore the natural and ethical necessity. The action first takes place with natural necessity but then if moderated wisely it becomes ethical, if the person fails to moderate it, then it becomes unethical. For instance, raising your child is instinctive and natural but raising her well and providing her with diverse opportunities to enhance her character is ethical, whereas careless attitude (ignoring the child's needs) or extreme care (spoiling the child with excessive servile attention) would be immoderate therefore unethical. A person needs to moderate the great movements of nature's forces that reveal themselves in various ways (from an excessive motherhood instinct to heroics, from extreme greed for money to excessive sex drive). Through moderation a person can manage and control his soul-atoms and become an aesthetic (through the fitness and health of his body and appearance) and ethical (through the fitness of his character and habits) extension of the all-encompassing natural necessity.

When we apply this argument on the intimate connection and constant transition between natural necessity and individual human actions on human cultures, it is also possible to derive that all human cultures are extensions of *phusis*. They were born out of the distinct spatial and temporal moderations of the great movements of the flow (this argument could be used to explain the similarity of the characters of gods in different polytheisms). For both Heraclitus and Democritus, each human culture (at least the ones that survive the test of time) has a direct link to nature mostly through *logos* or moderation (which also

derives from nature). As Vlastos puts, “In Heraclitus nature consciously takes the place of Olympus as the matrix of law, justice, measure, and *logos*. It is itself the ‘nutriment’, the ‘common’ basis and guide of all human action, public and private. Nature so regarded is more than nature”<sup>29</sup>. *Phusis* according to Heraclitus is the tree from which different human cultures branch out in different years and seasons and under different external conditions. But this very activity or movement of branching out is itself guided by nature out of necessity and not from moderation. *Sophrosyne* itself cannot initiate the movement but only allows for the branching out to last longer by rendering the branches stronger. Moreover, the moderation that rests on balanced and just behaviour in humans is already inherent in nature as *logos* or measure, which balances the moving forces in nature. Vlastos calls this view an early Greek venture in romantic naturalism and continues,

...The atoms and the void destroy forever this Greek venture in romantic naturalism. Nature is now de-humanized, de-moralized as never before in Greek imagination. Is there room for the law of the measure in the world such as this? It was the genius of Democritus to define an ethics that meets the conditions so fixed by Leucippean physics. Nature is ‘necessity’, not ‘justice’; neither good nor evil in itself; not intelligent, though intelligible. Yet its intelligibility alone, divested of any moral quality whatsoever, yields sufficient ground for the law of the measure. The good is not given to man; it is not ‘chance’. It must be created by man; it is ‘art’. Yet art is itself the child of necessity<sup>30</sup>.

Here, Vlastos clearly distinguishes Democritean ethics from a morality based on cultural human values and customs. Good is not given to men, it is not a moral, transcendent or religious concept (as often understood by modern philosophers) but the person who uses his experiences to better his character and strengthen his constitution creates it through measure or moderation. Nevertheless, I do not agree with Vlastos’ labelling of Heraclitus as a romantic naturalist. I think this would be a rather Platonic understanding or misunderstanding of the pre-Socratic *historia peri phuseôs*. Heraclitean ideas of the measure and justice should not be understood as moralized or humanized versions of *logos* inherent in nature. As I have argued earlier, the motion and

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory Vlastos, “Ethics and Physics in Democritus (Part II),” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.55, No. 1, (1946): 64

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

change inherent in *phusis* also applies to human character and culture. Heraclitus contends that this principle of motion or change is the measure of all things including aesthetic and ethical human values as it determines what is moving, as well as beautiful, good and just when coupled with the principle of moderation (*sophrosyne*). There is nothing romantic or idealist in this train of argumentation. However, I agree with Vlastos's argument on Democritus. Democritus does find a new way to connect *phusis* with *ethos*. The aesthetic intelligibility of nature and its primary principles of motion and necessity that are devoid of any moral quality supports and in fact strengthens the law of the measure. It is true that according to Democritus man aesthetically creates the good<sup>31</sup> (i.e. learning to swim or sail makes being in the middle of the sea a good experience or learning to act or sing well makes being on stage a good experience or learning to use sword well may make battle a good experience or learning to adapt to diverse social contexts improves a person and makes his character wiser and stronger). So, it is possible to conclude that every ethical action has an aesthetic understanding and creation in its root and this aesthetic creation inherits its motion and ability to move from natural necessity or the moving forces in nature. In other words, successful aesthetic creation serves as a transition between the forces (some extreme and some moderate) in nature and human *ethos*. This includes creation of one's character through artistic habituation or self-making by putting one's self through diverse experiences and changing circumstances. This idea of the possibility of reforming one's nature or constitution through active learning and life-experiences lies in the idea that change is the paramount principle in life and that change cannot be stopped but, through wisdom, can be positively directed by a person to improve his character and constitution. The idea of change applies both to physics (*phusis*) and ethics (*ethos*) and, by stimulating the aesthetic creation and habituation, it establishes a two-way transition between them.

Nietzsche, in his lectures on the *Pre-Platonic Philosophers* clearly draws a connection between Heraclitus and Democritus in regards to the applicability of the principle of motion when he highlights the Democritean worldview that spirit

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<sup>31</sup> Vlastos puts this as follows: "As Plato would note with extreme displeasure, (the good) is a late-comer in nature. But it advances nonetheless man's self-sufficiency in nature, and this not only by mechanical invention, but also by the power of the 'teaching that makes nature' to transform chance pleasure into cheerful well-being." (ibid)

(*anima*) as well as human thought was formed by continually moving atoms<sup>32</sup>. According to Democritus, as Nietzsche interprets, “soul and mind are mechanical alterations of spirited matter”<sup>33</sup> and the health of the spirit depends on its motion and the heat of the atoms that constitute it. Its heat should be moderate as excessive heat or complete lack of it can make the mind unhealthy and think improperly<sup>34</sup>. The moderate heat that allows diverse forms of life on our planet also applies to human body, soul and thought. The measure or *logos* embedded in all moving things and beings also underlie human thought and ethics. Motion brings excellence and evolution to natural beings as it brings health to their body and soul. While mastering a new sport teaches new motions to body’s muscles and betters a person’s general balance and stamina, similarly, motion in character that a person acquires by exposing himself to new and different experiences makes him test his limits and strengthen his constitution and *ethos*. It hardens his character and tests and improves his integrity.

There are several Democritean fragments that strongly affirm the link between *phusis* and *ethos*. Among them are D30, D34 and D52:

D30: Medicine heals the diseases of the body, while wisdom frees the soul from passions<sup>35</sup>.

D34: If the body brought a suit against it [i.e., the soul] for all the sufferings and ills it had endured throughout its whole life, and one had oneself to judge the case, one would gladly condemn the soul for having ruined certain features of the body through carelessness and made it soft through drink and brought it to rack and ruin through love of pleasure, just as if a tool or a utensil were in a bad state one would

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<sup>32</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans., ed. Whitlock, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 128. Waterfield, in his *The First Philosophers*, confirms this view as follows: “Leucippus and Democritus were thoroughgoing materialist scientists. Even things that we might think of as immaterial are for them no more than conglomerations of atoms...they regarded soul or mind as atomic, made up of spherical, fiery atoms, because they are the most mobile, and the soul is what imparts movement to living creatures; Democritus also held that soul atoms were distributed evenly throughout the body, with one soul-atom adjoining each body-atom” (Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Pre-Socratics and Sophists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 169.)

<sup>33</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers*, trans., ed. Whitlock, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 129.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Christopher Charles Whiston Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 15.

blame the person who used it carelessly<sup>36</sup>.

D52: It is fitting for people to take account of the soul rather than the body. For perfection of the soul puts right the bad state of the dwelling [i.e., the body, the dwelling-place of the soul], but strength of the dwelling without thought does not make the soul any better<sup>37</sup>.

Medicine, also a product of human science or wisdom, uses natural or chemical substances to cure bodily diseases. Wisdom, understood as both practical (a posteriori) and theoretical (a priori), potentially better human beings improving their experiences of life and giving them long-term thinking skills to overcome short-term passions. It is necessary for someone to have a mind or soul free from the short-term ambitions and passions (i.e. becoming rich, famous). Someone who is truly able to apply wisdom in his actions, decisions and choices rarely has psychological problems resulting from passions, emotions or addictions. Though this aphorism sounds like a simple analogy, it also shows how, according to Democritus, ethics (*ethos*) is linked to physics (*phusis*) both analogously and logically<sup>38</sup>. It is logical to expect that acquiring wise habits that train both body and mind (i.e. doing an enjoyable sport that has an element of play in it, travelling, working or living in a foreign country) potentially improves the person's life and character. It is also logical to expect that reading about philosophical ideas can make a person a long-term thinker who can improve his *ethos* (character) which in turn strengthens his *phusis* (constitution). While wisdom acts like medicine or prime mover that regulates, moderates and firms up a person's constitution, which includes his physical and mental abilities, the lack of it, according to Democritus, brings ruin to his body and spoils his character. Here Democritus once more argues that a person's individual constitution (*phusis*) grounds both his physical and mental being, and to consider them separate would not only be erroneous but also unnatural and unhealthy for the person.

On the other hand, as stated in D52, the perfection of a person's character (*ethos*) can have positive influence on his bodily health and therefore his

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<sup>36</sup> *ibid*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*, 23.

<sup>38</sup> "Democritus lets the physical and moral facts speak for themselves. Yet both appeal to the same earthly logic" (Gregory Vlastos, "Ethics and Physics in Democritus (Part I)," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.54, No. 6, (1945): 580.)

constitution (*phusis*). Once a person has a healthy mind, he can always act in a way that improves his body (i.e. a person who decides to quit smoking or alcohol and has the mental strength to do so). This is because, the will and strength to accomplish a purpose such as getting fit and healthy requires both theoretical wisdom and practical wisdom. Theoretical wisdom helps a person set long-term goals that improve his character (i.e. having a healthy, balanced and strong character and body) while practical wisdom provides the knowledge of acquiring correct habits to achieve these goals (i.e. engaging in intellectually and physically challenging activities). Contrarily, having a healthy body does not necessarily lead someone to improve his mind and character. Without the theoretical and practical wisdom, a person cannot set long-term goals or acquire a good balance between his intellectual and physical state. A very improved physical state (i.e. an athlete, sportsman or soldier) does not lead to the betterment of the person's intellectual capacity. According to Democritus, one cannot expect to improve his intellect or wisdom by eating well and living a healthy life and doing sports. However, one could argue that having a healthy and fit body can improve a person's psychological state and make him confident. This feeling of relaxed cheerfulness can potentially motivate him to engage in intellectual activities which in turn make him wiser. But this link between a healthy body and stronger intellect is very indirect, and there are several examples of physically fit people who lack wisdom and moderation.

Likewise, referring to fragments 33 and 61, Vlastos highlights that according to Democritus the soul and body are intimately connected<sup>39</sup> and cannot be considered separately, and that one can change and improve their nature or constitution (*phusis*) by improving their character:

“Democritus thinks of ‘life’ as dependent upon the form of the soul (B.61), the change goes further still: it is tantamount to a transformation of the soul. The nature

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<sup>39</sup> Vlastos puts this as follows: “The first axiom of this *logos* of the soul is the ethical corollary of a proposition established in the physics, that the soul moves the body: soul, not body, is the responsible agent. This is not in any sense an assertion of dualism. For though the body is simply the soul's “instrument” or “tent”, it is nonetheless absolutely essential to the integrity of the soul. Unlike Aristotle's active *nous* ‘which is itself only when separated’, or Plato's soul, for which the bodily partner is a moral nuisance, the Democritean soul-cluster would dissolve if deprived of the body. And there is no hint in Democritus, as in Plato, that the soul is in danger of corruption or distraction through the body's needs and appetites” (Gregory Vlastos, “Ethics and Physics in Democritus (Part I),” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.54, No. 6, (1945): 579)

of the soul is not fixed by the original pattern of the soul-atoms. This pattern itself can be changed: “Teaching re-forms a man, and by re-forming, makes his nature (*physiopoiei*)” (B.33)...*physiopoiei*, unique in Greek literature, suggests the force with which Democritus grasped the idea of ‘human nature in the making’”<sup>40</sup>

The originality of Democritus’ position does not lie in its novelty as this was a common understanding in Ionian and other pre-Socratic as well as Platonic philosophy. But rather it lies in the fact that Democritus tries to prove this point by showing the “interconnection between physics and ethics: ‘teaching’ frees man not from necessity (which is absolutely impossible) but from chance (which is largely possible)”<sup>41</sup> and equips him to govern and direct his sensations and pleasures. This is why Vlastos calls the Democritean account of human nature and action “the first rigorously naturalistic ethics in Greek thought” noting that it is “soul-centered, but free from dualism”, that the soul is mortal but divine, that the healthful balance brings physical and moral cheerfulness, that pleasure should be pursued only if it agrees with the soul’s well-being. Human art as the soul’s power to change nature operates within the limits fixed by necessity to advance man’s power and self-sufficiency, and through teaching or learning one can alter the pattern of his soul-cluster thus his moral improvement can also improve his physical state. Wisdom as the insight into the order of nature enables the soul to affect external forces as well as its inner motions of desire<sup>42</sup>. This is why Democritus says, “Nature and teaching are similar. For teaching reshapes the man, and in reshaping makes his nature.”<sup>43</sup> (D28) While the experience depends on the character and practical wisdom of the individual, the very nature (*phusis*) or constitution of the individual depends on the temporal, spatial and contextual changes in his environment. Through all these experiences, the individual must try to strengthen and perfect his soul in order to grow resistant against the desires, align his character (*ethos*) with nature (*phusis*), acquire healthy habits and moderate himself in deed and thought<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>40</sup> Gregory Vlastos, “Ethics and Physics in Democritus (Part II),” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.55, No. 1, (1946): 55.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 62-63.

<sup>43</sup> Christopher Charles Whiston Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>44</sup> This argument on the principle of moderation will be explored in the second part of the series

As aforementioned, Democritean atomism entails the dependency of the character and constitution of the person on the temporal, spatial and contextual changes in his environment. This argument founds Democritus's skepticism and relativism based on his distinctive principle of motion<sup>45</sup>. Nevertheless, this account does not lead to moral relativism as he does provide a quasi-systematic and coherent ethical theory grounded on such principles as moderation but it is rather physical or natural relativity based on atomism and the principle of motion and change. This natural relativity also applies to the realm of human affairs or ethics but not in the form of moral relativism. Such ethical principles as change, moderation and balance are inherited from nature and are therefore transcultural and universally applicable. Through the principle of motion and appropriate understanding of the transition from *phusis*, ethics can be universal while accommodating physical relativity, can be based on transcultural principles while accommodating cultural specificity. Some good examples that apply universally are those that relate directly to nature such as importance of change (while keeping the essential constitution intact) for the survival of the culture, moderation in using natural resources for the healthy survival of the people in a healthy environment, achieving a healthy balance between production and consumption of resources. Due to their inherent connection to nature, these ethically good habits would apply to all human cultures while taking different forms relative to the space and time in which the culture is constituted.

There are three other very crucial fragments that evidently support Democritus's ethical scepticism and relativism as well as the intimate connection

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<sup>45</sup> Commenting on Democritus's fragments on the topic (F17-20), Taylor writes: "In fact we know nothing firm...in reality we do not know what kind of thing each thing is or is not...By this principle man must know that he is removed from reality. This argument too shows that in reality we know nothing about anything, but each person's opinion is something which flows in." (Christopher Charles Whiston Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 11.) Waterfield explains how Democritus's skepticism relates to his relativism with reference to sense-impressions: "...Democritus' reasons for this skepticism went further than just the contrast between the evidence of the senses and what reason tells us about the realities of the world. He also...pointed to the relativity of sense-impressions to justify his doubts about the senses; however whereas Protagoras adopted the relativist position that, in cases of clashing perceptions, all perceptions are true, Democritus concluded that none of them is true. And from this it follows that to attribute any quality to anything is more than a convenience and a convention...however, he believed that we could reach the truth by means of our intellect." (Robin Waterfield, *The First Philosophers: The Pre-Socratics and Sophists*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167)

between his physics and ethics:

D37: From the very same things that benefit us we may also get evils, and escape from evils. For example, deep water is useful for many things, and then again bad; for there is danger of drowning. So a remedy has been discovered, teaching people to swim<sup>46</sup>.

D38: Evils accrue to people from good things, when one does not know how to direct the good things or possess them advantageously. So it is not right to judge such things as evils, but as goods; and being able to make use of good things is also a protection against evils, if one so chooses<sup>47</sup>.

D40: The gods give all good things to men both old and now. But such things as are bad and harmful and useless, neither of old nor now do the gods bestow those things on men, but they run into them themselves through blindness of mind and lack of judgment<sup>48</sup>.

Good and evil are relative conceptions and each and every thing has the potential to lead to good and bad consequences. One has to learn how to face evils (how to swim) in order to cope with the consequences of one's experiences. In other words, while every experience has the potential to be good and bad, if one knows how to deal with potential problems, any experience in fact can become ethically rewarding and hence good<sup>49</sup>. Or every experience is potentially good and evil at the very same time. It completely depends on the person who experiences it to "possess them advantageously". Even seemingly good experiences can lead to bad results if the person does not deal with them wisely and associate himself with the experience appropriately (i.e. winning quick money in stock market may first be considered a good experience but if this turns into an addiction like gambling it can potentially lead to waste of time and effort and eventual corruption of one's character). So, the way the person lives the experience (which is by no means separate from the person experiencing it)

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<sup>46</sup> Christopher Charles Whiston Taylor, *The Atomists, Leucippus and Democritus: Fragments: A Text and Translation with a Commentary*, (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 19.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Vlastos confirms this view as follows: "the gods give men all good things', so long as men remember that 'sharp-eyed intelligence direct most things in life' so that if, for example, it is health men want, they will have to get it by intelligent self-control" (Gregory Vlastos, "Ethics and Physics in Democritus (Part I)," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.54, No. 6, (1945): 582.)

actually determines whether the experience is good or bad for the person. For instance, while most people consider Covid-19 pandemic a horrible experience, if possessed advantageously, the experience can motivate people to become fitter and healthier, and live more conscious and responsible lives. Becoming fit, healthy and more balanced potentially improves a person's constitution by strengthening its connection to the constitution of the whole or Nature.

This also shows us that according to Democritus, it is not correct to judge an experience as bad. And this is how he relates the principle of change (or embracing change) with practical wisdom. Even the experiences that initially appear to be bad can be made good. Therefore, I argue that, this can be used to link the principle of change in physics to the principle of moderation in ethics. Regardless of its nature and outcomes, any kind of change can be or become good for the character of the person experiencing it if and when the person can acquire it wisely through moderation as a life-experience. Any positive or negative experience of Nature (*phusis* as the constitution of all things) can be interpreted as ethically valuable when the person makes it his own or uses it to strengthen his own constitution (*phusis*) and thereby at the same time improving his character. An improved *ethos* in turn will make the person stronger and more courageous to take on new challenges and make difficult decisions with confidence and determination. This is why I argue that once the connection between a person's *phusis* and the general *phusis* is properly established, the transition between nature and his character begins flowing both ways. The decisions and choices he makes, actions he does and judgments he makes become both naturally and ethically becoming. The constant flow or change inherent in nature challenges, forces and thereby endows his character with strength and flexibility. And this is how, according to Democritus, a person can achieve, through creative formation and transformation of his character, truly cheerful wellbeing.

Here I would like to argue that *euthymia* or cheerfulness is a result of the fittingness of a person's character and individual constitution to the constitution of the whole (*phusis*). According to Democritus, the healthful balance brings physical and moral cheerfulness, that pleasure should be pursued only if it agrees

with the soul's well-being<sup>50</sup>. As Vlastos puts, "...stability of soul appears not as a passive state but as a dynamic quality, able to withstand external shock without losing its inner balance"<sup>51</sup> and "the opposite of 'great movements' of B.191 (that prevent one from being cheerful and steadfast) would therefore be a dynamic equilibrium – which is conveyed by *kresis* (balance). This *kresis*, however, is not merely a balance within the bodily microcosm. It is also a dynamic relation between microcosm and the surrounding portion of the macrocosm"<sup>52</sup>. Once a person acquires a balanced character by aligning his being with the Being of the whole or Nature, or once his individual constitution dynamically relates to the macrocosm, he feels cheerful. This is because the person feels connected to his environment and therefore relevant to his natural and social context. However, according to Democritus, this does not mean that a person should blindly go with the flow (which may guarantee short-term pleasures but may ruin his constitution in the long-run). Short-term pleasures, when uncontrolled, can seriously consume a person's natural resources and energy and corrupt his character. *Ethos* needs to be regulated according to measure and measured enjoyment, pleasure, success or happiness is better than excessive happiness because it lasts longer and because it is much less likely to corrupt one's character thereby making it easier for one to maintain integrity. According to Democritus, therefore, moderation or measured enjoyment (or enjoyment regulated by *logos*), which also requires one to know his own nature and capacity, generates long-term and better happiness and lead to cheerfulness or *euthymia*. In other words, a measured pleasure (or moderated actions) attaches one better to the general flow of things (*phusis*) but at the same time stabilizes one's *ethos* thereby leading to cheerfulness. One feels cheerful when one safely floats on the river of becoming.

## CONCLUSION

In brief, both Heraclitus and Democritus would agree that life-experiences can be understood as the experience of *phusis* or Nature. A person is exposed to natural necessity and experiences Nature which, regardless of the ethical nature

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<sup>50</sup> I will expand on this argument in the second part of the series

<sup>51</sup> Gregory Vlastos, "Ethics and Physics in Democritus (Part I)," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.54, No. 6, (1945): 583.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid*, 585.

of the experience, strengthens and improves his constitution (*phusis*) and his character (*ethos*). This improvement in character in turn provides him with the wisdom to govern his passions and desires which actively reforms his constitution and affirms his attachment to nature. For both thinkers, this is the bidirectional process whereby the character of the person, through the changes in his constitution (both body and mind), gradually fits into or diverges from the nature of the whole (*phusis*). I argue that if a character trait or habit or conduct strengthens the person's constitution and overall character (regardless of the positivity or negativity of the change), we can call it an ethical trait, habit or conduct. Contrarily, if a character trait or habit or conduct weakens the person's constitution and overall character (again regardless of the short-term positivity or negativity of the experience), we can call this trait, habit or conduct unethical. In other words, both philosophers clearly highlight the inherent relationship between *Phusis* understood as Nature or principle of motion and human character (*ethos*) by way of the changes that take place in the *phusis* (constitution) of the person. Both of them agree that while an improvement in the constitution of the person through valuable and diverse life-experiences strengthen the connection between the person's character and *Phusis*, lack of improvement (or lack of motion/change) in person's constitution due to lack of new experiences weakens his connection to *Phusis*. Following these arguments, I propose that 'change' needs to be understood as an important ethical criterion which determines whether a habit, a character trait, a value-judgment or an action is good and 'becoming'.

There are several other similarities between their accounts on the relationship between *phusis* and *ethos*. Heraclitus's use of the element of fire and Democritus's atomism resemble in the way they represent the principle of motion. Their accounts of *phusis* is very similar as they both reach the same conclusion: the fragility of human nature and existence in the face of the underlying moving forces that constantly alter their environment and indirectly the human understanding and judgment. Due to this indirect relation between *phusis* and *ethos*, it is important to acknowledge the principle of change as an indirect outcome of the principle of motion. Furthermore, both of these physical theories lead to a level of ethical scepticism on human understanding and judgment as they are very critical of teleological thinking. This is why some of their fragments on ethics sound relativist. However, the very facts that they also identify universal

or general principles like moderation and circularity, it would not be correct to label their ethics as relativist. Moreover, both philosophers argue that human ideas and values are not only transitory but also governed by necessity and indirectly (through the inherent connection between mind and body) determined by physical laws such as the law of circularity. Last but not the least, both philosophers emphasize the importance of self-control and moderation for the health and strength of the person's constitution. They both attempt to ground the principle of moderation on their respective physical theories<sup>53</sup>.

Although their accounts of *phusis* and *ethos* are very similar, Democritus makes very important additions on the relationship between *phusis* and *ethos* particularly on human nature and conduct. The most important of these is Democritus's emphasis on aesthetic self-creation or character-building through the application of moderation (*sophrosyne*) and balance (*kresis*) on person's individual constitution. The successful application of these principles makes his *phusis* and indirectly his *ethos* extend from or fit into the cosmos of moving forces and atoms while making him feel good and cheerful (*euthymia*) as a result. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the Heraclitean *logos* as an aesthetic principle that links *ethos* to *phusis* and thereby argue that in Democritus *kresis* and *sophrosyne* function like *logos*. Another minor discrepancy in their accounts is the famous albeit simplified contradiction between the so-called Heraclitean pessimism and Democritean cheerfulness. It may be true that Heraclitean element of fire and his principles of nature such as circularity as well as his fragments on human nature do portray a grim picture when applied to humanity. However, it is also important to remember that he conceives *logos* as a principle that rests partly on human intuition and apprehension of the forces in nature. This alone would disprove any attribution of Heraclitean philosophy as nihilistic. Moreover, similar to Heraclitus, Democritus describes existence as a "chance concatenation of atoms" which is subject to destructive forces and events. When applied to the human realm, this idea would inevitably make human life futile (as Hippolytus notes) which is surely not conducive to cheerfulness. I argue that Democritus's idea of *euthymia*, with the assistance of human ability to self-control, balance (*kresis*) and moderate natural instincts and appetite, functions as a sort of shield or buffer

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<sup>53</sup> I will expand on this argument in the second paper

between human *ethos* and this destructive force-idea of nature<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> I will expand on this crucial function of *sophrosyne* and its resemblance to the Heraclitean *logos* in the second paper on the principle of moderation

