

3. Three Variations on a Heraclitean Theme: Tennyson, Collier, and Pacheco

In June of 1830 Alfred Tennyson published his second volume of verse, *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*. Included in that collection was a poem with the unusual title “*Hoi rheontes*” (“The men of flux” or more literally “The flowing ones”):

I

All thoughts, all creeds, all dreams are true,
 All visions wild and strange;
 Man is the measure of all truth
 Unto himself. All truth is change.

All men do walk in sleep, and all
 Have faith in that they dream:
 For all things are as they seem to all,
 And all things flow like a stream.

II

There is no rest, no calm, no pause,
 Nor good nor ill, nor light nor shade,
 Nor essence nor eternal laws:
 For nothing is, but all is made.
 But if I dream that all these are,
 They are to me for that I dream;
 For all things are as they seem to all,
 And all things flow like a stream.

Argal—this very opinion is only true relatively to the flowing philosophers.¹

“*Hoi rheontes*” affirms essentially three propositions: (1) that all beliefs are true (“beliefs” serving for “thoughts,” “creeds,” “dreams,” “visions,” “having faith,” and “as things seem”); (2) that strictly speaking, nothing is, but is only in the process of appearing to be in some way to a human observer (i.e. “Nothing is, but all is made,” “Man is the measure of all truth unto

¹ “*Hoi rheontes*” was not reprinted during Tennyson’s lifetime but it appears as poem number 122 in Ricks 1987, 1, 281. Writing in the *Westminster Review* of January 1831, W. Fox took Tennyson to task for “disporting himself among ‘mystics’ and flowing ‘philosophers.’” This, along with other criticisms, may have led Tennyson to decide not to reprint the poem (see further Shannon 1943, 181-94).

himself” and “For all things are as they seem to all”); and (3) that all things are changing (i.e. “All truth is change,” “And all things flow like a stream,” and “There is no rest, no calm, no pause”). Logically speaking, the argument proceeds in the reverse order: (3) all things are changing; therefore (2) strictly speaking, nothing is, but is only in the process of appearing to be in some way to a human observer; therefore (1) all beliefs (dreams, visions, etc.) are true. The poem asserts the philosophical doctrine known as relativism, a doctrine associated in antiquity with the saying of Protagoras of Abdera that “man is the measure of all things.” The first premise is the doctrine of flux or universal change associated, from the time of Plato forward, with Heraclitus: “all things flow like a stream” (or as Plato states the thesis at *Cratylus* 402a: “all things give way and nothing remains”).

In his unusual footnote Tennyson raises a classic objection to relativism, more precisely to the second premise just presented: since, according to relativism, nothing can be more than in the process of appearing to be in some way to some observer, then the doctrine of relativism itself can only be in the process of appearing to be true to some observer—in this case appearing to those “flowing philosophers” who believe it. “Argal” (a corruption of Latin *ergo*—”therefore”) appears to have the meaning of “therefore, according to this absurd way of thinking.”² The footnote provides a forceful riposte to relativism by pointing out that the doctrine itself can never be true, but only appear to be true to some perceiver or believer. It is just the clever sort of comment one would expect from a member of the Cambridge debating

² Paul Turner 1976, 52 notes the occurrence of “argal” in “the clownish logic” used by the gravedigger in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* V, scene 1, 45.

society known as “The Apostles”³, and “argal” is just the clever sort of word one would expect him to use.⁴

The poem and accompanying footnote provide four indications of its provenance:

(1) The phrase “*Hoi rheontes*” occurs nowhere in any surviving Heraclitus fragment, but a grammatical variant of the phrase does occur in Plato’s *Theaetetus* when (at 181a4) Socrates identifies the authors of the first of two rival views of the nature of reality as “the flowing ones” (*tous rheontas*)—“those who teach that everything is in motion” (*panta kineitai*, 180d7).

(2) The statement “all things flow like a stream” echoes Plato’s statement of Heraclitus’ doctrine in both the *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*. At *Cratylus* 402a8-10: “Heraclitus says somewhere that all things give way and nothing remains, and likening all things to the flow of a stream, he says that you cannot step into the same river twice.” In the *Theaetetus* Socrates ascribes the same doctrine to the ancient poets who taught that the flowing streams Oceanus and Tethys were “the sources of all things and that nothing is at rest” (180d1-3).

(3) Both Tennyson and Plato link the doctrine of flux with Protagorean relativism—in Plato’s case, during a critical examination of the view that “knowledge is perception” (179d-183c).

Socrates, *Theaetetus*, and Theodorus conclude that since the doctrine of flux reduces to a vanishing point of meaningfulness (in so far as the truth of the thesis and the meaning of the

³ Tennyson was elected to the Apostles in October, 1829, but resigned in February, 1830. For an account of the “metaphysical” discussions that took place among The Apostles, see Beer 2003, especially Ch. 6: “Tennyson, the Cambridge Apostles and the Nature of “Reality.”“ One of Tennyson’s fellow Apostles, Charles Merivale, wrote to his mother, “for conversation I fly to Birkbeck or Tennyson at Trinity, with the latter of whom especially I exercise dialectics by constant argument” (Shannon and Lang 1981, 1, 39n).

⁴ Tennyson’s friend and fellow Apostle Arthur Hallam once wrote: “It may be as well to apprise you that the Poet swears no being, existent or possible, can read this but himself: argal, if you light upon a fault you are to presume it only subjective, in yourself” (letter to W. Donne of November 3, 1830, in Kolb, published on line).

words in which is stated must themselves be constantly changing), one cannot establish Protagorean relativism on the basis of the doctrine of flux (183c).

(4) Both Tennyson and Plato argue that relativism undermines its own credibility, although they give different reasons for thinking so. At *Theaetetus* 170e-171a Socrates explains that since the relativist is committed to holding that every opinion is true (since things are only as they appear to be to each observer), the relativist must accept that the opinions of his opponents—those who believe that relativism is mistaken—are in fact correct. “*Hoi rheontes*,” therefore, appears to have been the work of a poet who, either through personal study⁵ or discussions with others⁶, had become familiar with the philosophical doctrines of relativism and flux, how the latter might be thought to support the former, and how relativism might be thought to undermine its own credibility⁷—all matters explored at some length in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

It would be a mistake, however, to regard Plato as wholly unsympathetic to Heraclitus’ philosophy. At *Phaedo* 65a and *Republic* VI 508, Socrates issues a broad indictment of our faculties of sense perception as unsuitable means for acquiring knowledge, much as Heraclitus had railed against “eyes and ears” as “bad witnesses” (B 107) and set perceptual acquaintance with individuals in contrast with having an understanding of their true nature. The contrast of sleeping with waking, a central Heraclitean theme, became a leitmotif in Plato’s thought. The

⁵ In his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* William Whewell (Tennyson’s tutor) lists Plato’s *Theaetetus* as required reading for the old moral sciences Tripos.

⁶ Tennyson’s fellow Apostles Arthur Hallam and Richard Monckton Milnes were both avid students of Greek thought. Milnes proposed as the topic for his Latin declamation: “The Truth of the Essential Dualism of Heraclitus” (Allen 1978, 490).

⁷ Not all readers of the poem take the footnote to reflect Tennyson’s own view. Ricks 1989, 50 characterizes “*Hoi rheontes*” as “baffled scepticism”, which fails to do justice to the message conveyed in the footnote: relativism cannot be credibly asserted (therefore there are objective truths we can hope to know). Similarly, E. D. H. Johnson states that the poem “ascribes equal authority to the revelations of the individual imagination” which is true for the two stanzas of the poem, but not for the footnote.

standard format of the Platonic dialogue—in which incompatible views are put forward and discussed, with reason given to accept both sides—may also owe something to Heraclitus’ use of the paradoxical aphorism to provoke reflection. And when Plato refers to “all those earlier thinkers” who held that “reason and a marvelous organizing intelligence steers (*diakubernan*) the whole universe” (*Philebus* 28d7-8), he might well have considered Heraclitus one of this group.

Tennyson’s assertion and subsequent critique of Heraclitean relativism has sparked a critical response from the American poet Michael Collier, in his “In May”:

In May the paths into the dunes
are roped off from foot traffic
because the birds amass to breed.

You can watch them through binoculars
from the edge of a parking lot,
white invisible deltas that drop

and glint, cataractous floaters
against the sun, rising from the sea
or fluttering midday from nests

spiked inside the broken clumps
of compass grass. Or on a plaque
read about a lighthouse stretched
like bones beneath the waves.

When Heraclitus observed,
“You can’t step into the same river twice,”
did he mean you couldn’t trust
experience or thought to illustrate
how “nature loves to hide” beneath

its own swift surface? Did he mean
there’s pleasure in deception,
not despair, delight when we recognize
a tern’s or plover’s flash and glitter,
silhouettes that navigate thermal rivers,
declare themselves like scraps of paper,
then disappear?⁸

⁸ *From Dark Wild Realm* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 53-54.

These lines, Collier has explained⁹, were inspired by a trip to an Atlantic beach. Each year in early May the National Park Service cordons off a stretch of beach just north of the town of Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, to protect the sea birds that arrive there each spring to build nests and raise their young. The same stretch of beach features a pair of World War II watchtowers and the remains of a wooden pier which stretches out into the Atlantic, looking rather like the spine of some half-buried giant (the physical reference point for Collier's "lighthouse stretched like bones beneath the waves").

Collier expresses the pleasure he felt when watching terns and plovers rise and fall in the sky: "white invisible deltas [i.e. triangles] that drop and glint", "cataractous floaters¹⁰ against the sun", shapes that "flash and glitter", "silhouettes that navigate thermal rivers", and "scraps of paper" that reveal their presence then disappear. The line "You can watch them...from the edge of a parking lot" serves as a reminder that the ordinary and extraordinary often lie close together. Collier's poem poses two questions relating to Heraclitus' philosophy: (1) When Heraclitus declared that you cannot step twice into the same river, did he mean to impugn sense experience or merely to remind us "how nature loves to hide beneath its own swift surface?" and (2) Did Heraclitus mean that there is pleasure in deception, rather than despair, when we recognize the realities?

We should admit that Heraclitus did sometimes denigrate the senses:

Bad witnesses for men are eyes and ears of those with uncomprehending souls. (B 107)

⁹ In an e-mail to the author. Collier stated that he was led to create the poem to offer an alternative to the view of Heraclitus as a relativist and skeptic with regard to sense experience.

¹⁰ I take this to be a reference to the "floaters" that appear in one's visual field as a consequence of a disturbance in the vitreous fluid in the eyeball. Collier's point would appear to be that, like eye-floaters, the birds are no sooner spotted than they change direction and disappear from view.

Sextus Empiricus, to whom we are indebted for the quotation, drew what he thought was the logical conclusion:

[Heraclitus held] that of these two organs [viz. sensation and reason] sensation is untrustworthy, and he posited reason as the standard of judgment. The claim of sensation he expressly refutes with the words “Bad witnesses, etc.” which is equivalent to saying “To trust in the non-rational senses is a mark of uncomprehending souls.

Fortunately, Sextus quotes enough of Heraclitus’ words to enable us to see that Sextus has misunderstood him. Heraclitus’ indictment of “eyes and ears” is conditional: “Bad witnesses are eyes and ears for those with “barbarian” or uncomprehending souls” (*barbarous psuchas echontôn*). How good or bad the testimony of the senses might be for those with non-barbarian souls Heraclitus does not say. But there is no reason to think that the senses would be equally “bad witnesses” for those who understand the *logos*. In fact, B 55 strikes a more positive note: “The things of which there is seeing, hearing, and learning (alternatively: the things of which the seeing and hearing is learning), these I prefer.” It is also at least suggested by B 93 that the real nature of things is not entirely hidden: “The lord [Apollo] whose oracle is in Delphi neither indicates clearly nor conceals, but gives a sign.” It would be a mistake, then, to infer from Heraclitus’ assertion that “nature loves to hide” that the real nature of things forever escapes human understanding. Rather, as Kahn 1979, 107 puts it, “The world order speaks to men as a kind of language they must learn to comprehend.”

Collier’s second question, “Did Heraclitus mean that there could be pleasure in deception when we recognize the realities?” gains at least a partial answer from a pair of Heraclitean comments on natural beauty:

What opposes unites and the most beautiful arrangement comes from things bearing in opposite directions. (B 8)

To god all things are beautiful and just whereas human beings suppose that some things are unjust, other things just. (B 102)

The idea of the beauty of nature is also implicit in Heraclitus' references to the physical universe as a *kosmos* (in B 30 and 124).¹¹ Heraclitus' *kosmos*, then, was not just a "world" and not even just an "ordered world"; it was rather "an elegantly ordered world, an ornament." Heraclitus B 54 points in the same direction: "an unapparent attunement (*harmoniê*) is stronger or better (*kreittôn*) than an obvious one." In short, we also have good reason to give an affirmative answer to Collier's second question: Heraclitus probably did believe that the perception of natural phenomena could afford pleasure to the observer, at least to those able to grasp the hidden connections.

In his 1984 poem, "Gift of Heraclitus," the Mexican poet José Emilio Pacheco draws on a number of Heraclitean ideas to express a view of change as endemic to human existence and, under some circumstances, a blessing:

Because the water runs down the windows like moss:
It doesn't know that everything changes outside the dream.

And the repose of the fire is to take a form
With its full power of transforming itself.
Fire of the air and the solitude of fire
To ignite the air that is of fire.
Fire is the world that is extinguished and kindled
In order to last (it was always so) forever.

Everything scattered yesterday today comes together.
Everything united has now been divided.

¹¹ Heraclitus also observed that: "The most beautiful order (*kosmos*) is a heap of sweepings, piled up at random" (B 124). But this is probably best understood (as in B 107): for those who fail to grasp the *logos* the "beautiful order" will appear to be "a mere heap of sweepings."

I am and am not the one who waited for you
 One morning in the deserted park
 Near the river that never returns, where entered
 October's light destroyed in the thicket
 (and it will never happen again, never twice).

And there was the smell of ocean. A dove
 Like an arc of salt burning in the air.

You weren't there, you won't be.
 But the wave of a distant foam was extinguished
 On my deeds and among my words.
 (only mine because they are another's):

The sea that is pure water for fish
 Will never satisfy human thirst.¹²

The poem contains at least a dozen Heraclitean echoes—beginning with the “water that runs down” in line one and concluding with “the sea which is pure water to the fish” in the penultimate line.¹³ From these Heraclitean elements Pacheco fashions what might fairly be termed an existential reflection on the human condition: unlike natural substances incapable of self-reflection and change, human reality is characterized by reflection, change, loss, absence, and unfulfilled desire. We defy essentialist definition, or as Sartre once put it: man is not what he is, but what he is not (or as Sartre also stated, in more Pacheco-like language): “Man is... a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss...”¹⁴

¹² From *El Reposo del Fuego* (1984, 30-31), translation mine.

¹³ Specifically: B 1, 10, 12, 30, 31a, 49a, 61, 76a, 76b, 76c, 90, and 91a.

¹⁴ From Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism” in Kaufman (1956, 345-69). I suspect that Pacheco acquired his existentialism not from Sartre but from Ortega y Gasset (see the

Pacheco develops the natural substance-human contrast over the course of seven stanzas. In the first, water unthinkingly follows its natural downward path; in the second, fire endures through a series of transformations (its permanence emphasized through the tripling of temporal markers—“to last”, “it was always so”, and “forever”: *para durar (fue siempre) eternamente*). The third stanza reminds us of cycles of unification and dissolution. But from the fourth to the seventh stanza we have a first-person expression of disappointment and consolation: “I am and I am not the one who waited for you.” In contrast with the enduring natures of water and fire, the river by which the speaker stands is ever changing and unrepeatable. Here, personal experience becomes chaotic and fragmentary—a shaft of sunlight, the smell of ocean, the glimpse of a dove’s flight, and words from an ancient source (perhaps Heraclitus’ words). George McWhirter (1987, viii) comments:

[Pacheco] writes frequently and powerfully of the sea at Veracruz where he spent a large part of his childhood. This sense of the ocean breaking inland makes his poetry unique, and his anxiety, or terrible glory, is created by this sense of himself at the center of seismic forces of earth and water.

Pacheco emphasizes the theme of unfulfilled desire when he replaces Heraclitus’ conclusion “sea water is undrinkable and deadly for human beings” (B 61) with his: “will never satisfy human thirst.” The “gift” of Heraclitus is the recognition that in good times and bad, we human beings are never fully and permanently what we are at any given moment.¹⁵

The moral of Pacheco’s poem is not wholly alien to Heraclitus’ philosophy. It is true that in most of the surviving fragments Heraclitus is concerned with more cosmic matters, seeking to explain, through a series of paradoxical aphorisms, the nature of “all things”—specifically, how

latter’s *Toward a Philosophy of History* (2002), and Pacheco’s “*José Ortega y Gasset contempla la viento*” (in *Don’t Ask Me How the Time Goes By* (1978, 118-21).

¹⁵ A darker reading of Pacheco’s poem is defended in Rubman (1972, 432-40).

“all things happen in accordance with the *logos*” (B 1), how “all things come about through strife” (B 8 and 80), “how all things are steered through all” (B 41), and “how all things are one” (B 50). But on three occasions Heraclitus requires not only that his listeners comprehend his (as well as the) *logos*, but also act in accordance with that insight: B 1 alludes to the ‘words and deeds such as I set forth,’ B 73 proclaims that “we should not speak and act like people who are asleep,” and B 112 affirms that “wisdom consists in saying what is true and acting while paying attention to nature.”

Two conditions seem especially relevant to this achievement. First, we must grasp the principles that hold sway throughout the cosmos. So much is evident from B 41; “Wisdom is one thing: mastering the intelligence by which all things are steered through all” and B 114: “Those who would speak with intelligence must base themselves firmly on that which is common to all, as a city does upon its law.” Second, we must act so as to protect and enhance the well being of our soul. This would appear to require, at a minimum: (a) avoiding drunkenness (B117) “Whenever a man is drunk, he is led along, stumbling, by a beardless boy; he does not perceive where he is going, because his soul is wet”; (b) minimizing our expenditure of emotion: (B 85) “It is difficult to fight against passion, for whatever it wishes it buys at the cost of soul”; and (c) “keeping a dry soul”: (B 36) “For souls it is death to become water...” (B 118): “a flash of light is a dry soul, wisest and best.” Since the drying agent *par excellence* is fire, Heraclitus’ point would appear to be that we will not improve the condition of our soul until we bring our thoughts into alignment with the intelligent fiery power that orders the cosmos. Finally, in two cryptic remarks Heraclitus assigns a special nature to the soul: (B 45): “One could never discover the limits of soul, should one traverse every road, so deep a *logos* does it possess” and (B 115) “Soul possesses a *logos* which increases itself.”

One plausible interpretation of these remarks is that Heraclitus embraced an “intellectualist ethic”—that is, he held that living well required aligning one’s thinking with the Zeus-like power which oversees the operations of the cosmos, and acting in accordance with that understanding. And he at least suggests that we are able to achieve this good result because the human soul has the capacity to expand its powers of understanding, “to increase its *logos*.” In one respect, there is nothing especially existential about this view; indeed, unlike Sartre and other existentialist thinkers, Heraclitus does not hesitate to identify a way of life that is best for all human beings. But in his conviction that we human beings possess a capacity for self-direction and an improved understanding, Heraclitus provides a model for Pacheco’s contrast between the fixity of natural substances and the capacity of human beings to experience failure, and to move beyond it.