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Nietzsche, Heraclitus, and Interpretation

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> IN [his] proximity I feel altogether warmer and better than anywhere else. The affirmation of passing away *and destroying*, which is the decisive feature of a Dionysian philosophy; saying Yes to opposition and war; *becoming*, along with a radical repudiation of the very concept of being—all this is clearly more closely related to me than anything else thought to date. The doctrine of the "eternal recurrence," that is, of the unconditional and infinitely repeated circular course of all things—this doctrine of Zarathustra *might* in the end have been taught already by Heraclitus.[1]

So Nietzsche praised Heraclitus in his work *Ecce Homo*. Additionally, in a lecture first given in 1872, Nietzsche refers to Heraclitus' self-glorification as "*übermenschlich*,"[2] and in *Twilight of the Idols* he speaks of his Greek predecessor "with the highest respect."[3]

Clearly, Nietzsche felt a strong affinity for Heraclitus. Recently, though, Gareth B. Matthews has argued that, with the exception of

[1] *Ecce Homo* 729–30.

[2] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 55.

[3] *Twilight of the Idols* 480.

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Parmenides, Nietzsche treats the Presocratic philosophers "primarily as personalities," and "discourages us from trying to discover what they found philosophically perplexing."[4] If this were correct, Nietzsche's feelings toward Heraclitus would be based on the latter's force of personality rather than on any similarity in philosophy. However, in addition to the above-quoted statement from *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche discusses Heraclitus' philosophical ideas in several passages, often shedding great light on his own philosophy.

One of the most interesting of such passages is found in *Twilight of the Idols*. After caustically mocking philosophers who have rejected the senses in hopes of arriving at "being," he says:

> With the highest respect, I except the name of *Heraclitus*. When the rest of the philosophic folk rejected the testimony of the senses because they showed multiplicity and change, he rejected their testimony because they showed things as if they had permanence and unity. Heraclitus too did the senses an injustice. They lie neither in the way the Eleatics believed, nor as he believed—they do not lie at all. What we *make* of their testimony, that alone introduces lies . . . But Heraclitus will remain eternally right with his assertion that being is an empty fiction. The "apparent" world is the only one: the "true" world is merely added by a lie.[5]

This passage presents a number of difficulties that I will discuss in this paper—difficulties that are enlightening in terms of Nietzsche's own philosophy. I will discuss these difficulties by examining Nietzsche's interpretation of Heraclitus in light of the passage in question (Section 1), showing that this interpretation leads to seeming contradictions with ideas that Nietzsche professes elsewhere (Section 2), and suggesting how these contradictions might be resolved (Section 3). This resolution will allow me to draw conclusions about Nietzsche's philosophy. Specifically, I will conclude that Nietzsche rejects any interpretation of the world that professes to be absolutely true or does not allow for new experiences. I will also conclude that Matthews' claim that Nietzsche

[4] Matthews 59.

[5] *Twilight of the Idols* 480–81.

does not encourage us to engage the Presocratics philosophically is demonstrably incorrect.

1. A Nietzschean Reading of Heraclitus

In the above-quoted passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, Nietzsche hints at what a consistent interpretation of Heraclitus might look like, including a list of three key features that such an interpretation must include:

(1) That Heraclitus rejects the testimony of the senses rather than rejecting, as Nietzsche suggests he should, the interpretation that individuals place on such testimony ("What we *make* of their testimony");

(2) That this rejection of the senses was a result of rejecting "being";

(3) That Heraclitus maintains that the apparent world is the only world.

These three assertions serve as criteria in establishing a more detailed Nietzschean interpretation of Heraclitus. It will be convenient to refer to them as Nietzsche's Criteria (NC). Each of the three points of (NC) will be discussed in order.

(NC1) That Heraclitus Rejects the Testimony of the Senses

Several of the extant Heraclitean fragments concern the testimony of the senses. Perhaps the most direct is fragment 5 M which simply states "The things of which there is seeing, hearing, and perception, these do I prefer."[6] This fragment seems devastating to (NC1); Heraclitus' endorsement of the testimony of the senses is unambiguous. Indeed, if this were all that Heraclitus gave us, we would be forced to conclude

[6] Marcovich 21.

that Nietzsche so badly misread him as to remove all reasonable hope of profitably studying Nietzsche's views on the matter. Fortunately though, there are other fragments.

At first glance, the fragment that seems most promising is 13 M: "Eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men if they have barbarian souls."[7] If this statement is taken as limiting the previous fragment, there may be room for Nietzsche's interpretation. The senses are not always reliable witnesses; they are reliable only to those who possess the correct kind of soul. This view, however, is problematic in its own right, since the word translated as *barbarian* is misleading. Strabo, the ancient Greek writer, gives us the following explanation:

> The word *barbaros* was at first spoken onomatopoeically, with reference to people whose pronunciations of words was difficult, harsh and rough—just as one speaks of stammering, lisping or faltering . . . It became clear that the way they speak arises . . . from the peculiarities of their various languages.[8]

Thus a barbarian is one who is difficult for Greeks to understand because of a difference in language—one who does not speak Greek. For this reason, fragment 13 M is not generally translated as I have translated it. Marcovich renders the fragment as "Evil witnesses are eyes and ears for men, if they have souls that do not understand their language."[9] Kahn translates it as "Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language."[10] Given this reading, the senses are only bad witnesses to those who misinterpret what they are saying; more precisely, the problem lies not in the senses, but in the interpretation of them. This, however, directly contradicts the view that Nietzsche ascribes to Heraclitus.

Nietzsche, though, translates the fragment very differently. In his 1872 lecture he gives it as "Eyes and ears are bad witnesses to men

[7] Ibid. 45, my translation.

[8] Crawford and Whitehead 31.

[9] Marcovich 47.

[10] Kahn 35.

having muddied souls,"[11] and in the subsequent *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* he paraphrases it with "their eyes and ears and their intellect in general is a poor witness when 'moist slime fills their souls.'"[12] This reading, which offers the first clue to a consistent Nietzschean interpretation, seems to be based on a suggestion Jacob Bernays first published in 1854, eighteen years before Nietzsche's lectures on the Presocratics.

Bernays suggested that in place of *barbarous psychas echonton* ("if they have barbarian souls"), the fragment should read *borborou psychas echontos* ("if mud clings to their souls").[13] Making this change, the whole fragment becomes "Eyes and ears are bad witnesses for men if mud takes up their souls."[14] In this modified reading, Nietzsche sees a great harmony with other fragments of Heraclitus, specifically those that mention *wet* souls or *mire.* He develops the following idea about the significance of a soul's being muddy or wet:

> Insofar as [man] shares, of necessity, in fire [humans are warm-blooded], he has a plus of rationality; insofar as he consists of water and earth [human bodies contain both water and dry matter], his reason is in a bad way.[15]

Since "'souls take pleasure in becoming moist'" and "to rejoice at mire . . . is the essence of humanity,"[16] "man, generally speaking, is . . . an irrational creature;"[17] he is considered "as contrary to the Logos."[18]

In contrast to mud or water, on Nietzsche's interpretation, the "loftiest phenomenon" in nature "is fire,"[19] and fiery souls are the most rational and most nearly divine—the most able to comprehend

[11] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 73.

[12] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 63.

[13] Bernays 95, my translation.

[14] Ibid., my translation.

[15] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 63.

[16] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 73.

[17] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 63.

[18] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 73.

[19] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 63.

the Logos.[20] It should not be unexpected, then, that fiery souls and gods see the world from a different perspective than muddy souls. "To God all things appear as good while to mankind much appears as bad. The entire wealth of contradiction and sorrow that Heraclitus affirms disappears for God contemplating unseen harmony."[21]

To emphasize the amount of difference that a new perspective can make, Nietzsche recalls a thought experiment of Karl Ernst. Suppose that the rate of human perception should increase by a factor of one hundred thousand, and that the life expectancy should decrease proportionately.

> Then we would consider the grass and flowers to be something just as absolute and persistent as we now consider the mountains; we would perceive in the growth of a bud as much and as little as a lifetime, like when we think of the geological periods of the earth. We would be totally unable to observe the voluntary movements of animals, for they would be far too slow; at best we could conceive of them as we (in our time frame) think of the heavenly bodies.[22]

On the other hand, if our rate of perception should decrease, and our life expectancy increase, by one hundred thousand times, "Every shape appearing to us as persistent would vanish in the superhaste of events and would be devoured by the wild storm of Becoming."[23]

This ceaseless becoming must be what "the eternally living fire, (Aeon, boy-god of the zodiac),"[24] in whose eyes the lifespan of a mountain is but an infinitesimal fraction of life, perceives.[25] In

[20] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 74.

[21] Ibid. 70.

[22] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 61.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid. 70. Dr. Daniel Graham has pointed out that Nietzsche is likely equating *aeon* ("age") with *aeizoon* ("ever-living"), the adjective used to describe fire in fragment 51 M, on the basis of a superficial similarity.

[25] Ibid. Cf. fragment 93 M.

Nietzsche's view, Heraclitus attributes to the gods a sort of privileged perspective. They are the closest to eternal fire; they, unlike human beings, are able to fully comprehend the Logos.

It is with this in mind that one must understand Nietzsche's assertion about the deceptive nature of the senses. According to Nietzsche's interpretation of Heraclitus, the senses *do* deceive us. They deceive us because, as a result of our inherently muddy nature, we are unable to fully gain the perspective from which they might show us the true nature of the cosmos—becoming.

(NC2) That Heraclitus' Rejection of the Senses was motivated by a Rejection of Being

Nietzsche articulately describes the type of being that he believes Heraclitus rejects when, in speaking of other philosophers, Nietzsche says "They think that they show their *respect* for a subject when they de-historicize it, *sub specie aeterni*—when they turn it into a mummy." These philosophers lack "historical sense" and hate "the very idea of becoming."[26] What Heraclitus rejects, then, is the idea of permanence, the idea that some things remain the same eternally, regardless of history—like a mummy. This leads to two immediate questions concerning Nietzsche's view: to what extent is the lack of permanence universal, and why, exactly, does Heraclitus reject permanence?

Even in Nietzsche's interpretation, it seems difficult to exclude all permanence from Heraclitus' philosophy. In the thought experiment discussed above certain features of the cosmos appear to remain the same, even when our perceptions are distorted in the extreme. For example, "the solar ecliptic would appear as a luminous bow across the sky."[27]

A more interesting case of permanence becomes apparent when Nietzsche considers Heraclitus' doctrine of opposites. He says, "light and dark, bitter and sweet are attached to each other and interlocked

[26] *Twilight of the Idols* 479.

[27] *The Pre-Platonic Philosophers* 61.

at any given moment like wrestlers of whom sometimes the one, sometimes the other is on top."[28] The objects and qualities we observe in the world are "but the momentary ascendancy of one partner. But this by no means signifies the end of the war; the contest endures in all eternity."[29] This insight leads Nietzsche to ask:

> Does it now look as though "becoming" were but the coming-to-be-visible of the struggle between eternal qualities? Should our talk of coming-to-be perhaps be derived from the peculiar weakness of human insight, whereas in the true nature of things there is no coming-to-be at all, but only a synchronicity of many true realities which were not born and will not die?[30]

It is a *permanent* struggle between *permanent* opposing forces that creates the transient world. For Nietzsche, this struggle is the Heraclitean Logos—"the continuous working out of a unified, lawful, reasonable" world.[31] Change, then, is not the sole feature of the cosmos; there is, however, no permanence of objects or properties, only of *struggle*.

Why, though, does Heraclitus reject permanence on such a large scale if our senses show us "permanence and unity?" According to Nietzsche, it is because of his view of struggling opposites. To make this point, Nietzsche draws a parallel to modern scientists. "For them, 'All things flow' . . . is a main proposition. Nowhere does an absolute persistence exist, because we always come in the final analysis to forces."[32] Just as forces are logically prior to observable properties for physicists, struggle and opposition are logically prior to objects and properties for Heraclitus. For Nietzsche, then, the foundation of Heraclitean philosophy is this: Heraclitus saw struggle and lawful order throughout the cosmos; he then realized that universal struggle was incompatible with

[28] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 54.

[29] Ibid. 55.

[30] Ibid. 58.

[31] Ibid. 64.

[32] Ibid. 60.

permanence of objects and properties.[33] Since the senses, from our perspective, perceive permanence, they must be giving us misinformation.

(NC3) That the Apparent World is the Only World

The claim that the apparent world is the only world can be understood in several different ways. The strongest understanding of this claim is that an object or property exists in the world if and only if we perceive it; perception is reality. We have already seen, though, that perception is only reality from a particular perspective—a perspective that humans do not enjoy. Thus our perceptions deceive us in showing us permanence.

A weaker reading can be obtained by placing Heraclitus in the historical context in which Nietzsche places him, as a response to Anaximander. According to Nietzsche, Anaximander's *apeiron* was an attempt to explain becoming. "That which truly *is*, concludes Anaximander, cannot possess definite characteristics." It can "be designated by human speech only as a negative, as something to which the existent world . . . can give no predicate."[34] Heraclitus, though, does not need an *apeiron* to explain the changing nature of the world—he can explain it entirely in terms of the struggle between opposing forces. Although the objects and properties that appear as a result of this struggle are temporary, they are also *positive*. Heraclitus thus rejects the idea that there is a reality that *defies* perception, a reality that possesses only negative qualities.

[33] Of course, the universal nature of struggle does not logically entail the transience of objects and properties. When two perfectly balanced opposing forces meet, the object on which they are acting does not move at all. When a strong force meets a weaker opposing one, the object on which they are acting moves only in the direction in which the stronger force is pushing it. For Heraclitus, though, objects are constantly being moved back and forth between the same opposing forces. This implies a concept of force that is much more similar to what is encountered on a battlefield than in a physics textbook.

[34] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 47.

More fully developed, *Nietzsche's Heraclitus Interpretation* (NHI) is now:

(1) No unperceivable reality is necessary to explain the world of experience.

(2) The world consists of positive qualities, and is the result of an eternal struggle between opposing forces in which neither contender can gain a permanent victory.

(3) There is a preferred perspective that humans do not generally enjoy, but from which (2) can be verified by the senses.

Comparing (NHI) to (NC), a few observations are in order. (NHI1) is an explanation of (NC3); Heraclitus rejects any "other world" as unnecessary to explain the world of human experience. (NHI2) is an explanation of (NC2); Heraclitus rejects the permanence ("being") of objects and properties, preferring an eternal struggle between opposing forces as an explanation for the world that we perceive. Since the senses show permanence, they must, to some degree, be rejected. (NHI3) is an explanation of (NC1); the senses are rejected to the extent that they do not show us the world from the proper perspective.

2. Some Paradoxes Arising from (NC) and (NHI)

It is worthwhile to notice to what extent Nietzsche agrees or disagrees with Heraclitean philosophy as expressed in (NC) and (NHI). Returning to the above quoted passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, it is apparent that Nietzsche disagrees with Heraclitus in one very important respect: "Heraclitus too did the senses an injustice . . . they do not lie at all."[35] Insofar as (NC1) is an accurate representation of Heraclitus' ideas, Nietzsche rejects him. Therefore, Nietzsche does not believe (NHI3). On the other hand, there is an equally important point on which he agrees with the Presocratic: "Heraclitus will remain eternally

[35] *Twilight of the Idols* 480.

right with his assertion that being is an empty fiction. The 'apparent' world is the only one: the 'true' world is merely added by a lie."[36] As far as (NC3) is concerned, Nietzsche agrees with Heraclitus; he accepts (NHI1).

Nietzsche's disagreement with Heraclitus concerning (NC1) is problematic. Consider the following passage from *Daybreak*:

> My eyes, however strong or weak they may be, can see only a certain distance, and it is within the space encompassed by this distance that I live and move, the line of this horizon constitutes my immediate fate, in great things and small, from which I cannot escape . . . Our ears enclose us within a comparable circle, and so does our sense of touch. Now, it is by these horizons . . . that we *measure* the world, we say that this is near and that far, this is big and that small, this is hard and that soft: this measuring we call sensation: and it is all of it an error![37]

Here Nietzsche states plainly that *sensation* is an error, although he does not limit sensation to sensory perception. Sensation is the "measuring" that comes from our senses, the combination of perception and interpretation. If Nietzsche is opposed to rejecting sensory perception, he must, as he indicates Heraclitus should, reject the interpretation that we make of our perceptions. This, however, is rather paradoxical. According to Nietzsche, there is no "true world," only an "apparent" one.[38] If there is no true world against which to compare the interpretation of our perceptions, in what sense can they be incorrect?

This problem is reminiscent of one that was considered above: if Heraclitus denies the existence of a true world, in what sense can our perceptions be wrong? The solution was provided by (NHI3). All of our perceptions are false to the extent that they fail to square with what we would perceive if we had the proper perspective. This eliminates the need to posit any other world, and at the same time allows our perceptions to be false. Perhaps an analogous model—one that will allow us to reject interpretations rather than perceptions—is in order; Nietzsche

[36] Ibid. 481.

[37] *Daybreak* 73.

[38] See note 36 above.

could say that there is a preferred interpretation, and that any other interpretation is undesirable to the extent that it fails to correspond to the preferred one. This would allow him to accept the testimony of the senses, reject bad interpretations, and not posit a "true" world.

Unfortunately, this suggestion leads to other problems. Since Nietzsche rejects (NHI3), the only logically consistent way for him to accept the testimony of the senses is to reject the idea of a preferred perspective. This means that a preferred interpretation cannot be the result of seeing things in a particular way. Furthermore, since the senses do not lie, every interpretation that we give to our perceptions should serve to explain the same set of phenomena—the set that we experience. This suggests that perhaps the preferred interpretation is the one that adequately explains what is perceived. However, Nietzsche thinks that many interpretations are always available for explaining any one thing. He states this well when, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, he says that "somebody might come along who, with opposite intentions and modes of interpretation, could . . . end by asserting the same about this world as you do."[39] If there is a preferred interpretation, there must be a way to distinguish it from others that end up "asserting the same about this world."

One suggestion that comes to mind is the will to power—the greater the will to power that an explanatory interpretation demonstrates, the better the interpretation. Assuming that this is correct, Heraclitus' interpretation of the world can be faulted only to the extent that it does not exhibit will to power. This, though, raises several issues of its own. If (NHI2) is correct, Heraclitus explains the entire cosmos in terms of *struggle*. To complicate matters even further, Nietzsche identifies the Heraclitean cosmic struggle with *will*.[40] (NHI2), then, affirms that the seemingly lawful behavior of nature is the result of struggling wills. This sounds strikingly like Nietzsche's claims about the will to power. Not only does he say that will to power can explain "*all* efficient force," he says that a physical theory based on will to power would assert the

[39] *Beyond Good and Evil* 220.

[40] *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* 56. Nietzsche actually associates the cosmic struggle with Schopenhauer's concept of will, pointing out only that it

same things about the world that a theory based on natural laws does.[41] If Heraclitus' theory does not exhibit will to power, it is difficult to see why.

Any consistent reading of Nietzsche must take into account all of his ideas. As far as the present subject is concerned, a consistent reading must explain how Nietzsche can reject certain interpretations that people impose on their perceptions without doing any of the following: positing a true world, positing a preferred perspective, rejecting the senses, or preferring one interpretation over another because of explanatory value or exhibition of will to power. It may be tempting to say that Nietzsche is inconsistent on this point or that he changed his views relevant to Heraclitus throughout the course of his life. I believe, however, that a more charitable reading is possible.

3. Toward a Resolution

One of the reasons that Nietzsche gives for rejecting sensation (perception plus interpretation) is that this rejection provides "absolutely no escape, no backway or bypath into the *real world*."[42] Since there is no real world, though, this seems like a strange reason to reject anything. Nietzsche offers a small clue about his reasoning when, speaking of sensation, he says that "We sit within our net . . . and whatever we may catch in it, we can catch nothing at all except that which allows itself to be caught in precisely *our* net."[43] At least part of the problem with sensation, then, is that it does not afford us any understanding of things that fit entirely outside of it. Since the only world is

is not as "gloomy" and is more "blessed." In *Beyond Good and Evil*, though, he highlights a more relevant difference: Schopenhauer's will cannot explain the "mechanistic" world, which is the express purpose of the Heraclitean cosmic struggle. Nietzsche identifies the will to power as a will similar to Schopenhauer's but capable of explaining the material world (*Beyond Good and Evil* 237–38).

[41] *Beyond Good and Evil* 238, 220.

[42] *Daybreak* 73.

[43] Ibid.

the apparent one, there should not be anything that cannot be perceived in some sense. Whatever fits outside of sensation, therefore, must be something that either is not allowed by our interpretation of the world or simply does not exist. On this view, an interpretation is inadequate if it does not allow room for understanding whatever is perceived.

At first, this appears to be equivalent to saying that interpretations are only as good as their explanatory value—an idea that has already been shown to be unacceptable. There is an important distinction, though. The claim that an interpretation *explains* phenomena is much stronger than the claim that it does not *contradict* them. Nietzsche does not claim that sensation needs to explain anything; he only claims that interpretation needs to allow for whatever is perceived. The value of an interpretation lies in its openness to new experiences.

What, then, of interpretations that do not allow for other interpretations? Clearly, they must be rejected. There is always the possibility of a new experience that is completely foreign to one's interpretation of the world. A thoughtful person who has such an experience can either reject the experience or find a new interpretation. Rejecting the experience necessarily involves rejecting perception to some degree. For a philosopher who values the senses, finding a new interpretation is the only option. This, however, is impossible if one's previous interpretation of the world does not allow for competitors. Any interpretation that claims to have a monopoly on truth must therefore be rejected.

The only acceptable interpretations of the world are those that are open to new experiences and do not profess to be absolutely true. This basic insight clarifies Nietzsche's denunciation of sensation and causes all of the seeming contradictions that arise from his reading of Heraclitus to disappear. It allows him to reject many of the interpretations that people impose on their perceptions without positing a true world or a preferred perspective, rejecting the senses, or using explanatory value or will to power as criteria for preferring one interpretation over another.

Conclusion

Nietzsche is a thinker who presented much of his own philosophy as a response to other's ideas, as exemplified by his interpretation of and commentary on Heraclitus. Consequently, an examination of that interpretation provides us with insights into his own views. One such view, that interpretations are only acceptable if they are open to new experiences and do not profess to be absolutely true, has been addressed in this paper. It is likely, though, that Nietzsche's understanding of Heraclitean philosophy could also shed light on such ideas as the will to power, the eternal recurrence, and the overman—all ideas that Nietzsche attributes to, or mentions in conjunction with, Heraclitus.

Matthews's claim that Nietzsche discourages us from engaging with the Presocratics on a philosophical level is simply false. Nietzsche himself engages with them philosophically. He explains their ideas, responds to their ideas, and occasionally criticizes their ideas. In addition to clarifying his own views, his comments portray the Presocratics as profoundly interesting and relevant philosophers.

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