Weaving the Fish Basket:
Heraclitus on Riddles and
the Relation of Word and World

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Abstract: Heraclitus stands in opposition to the general systematic tendency of philosophy in that he insisted that the contents of philosophy are such as to require expository strategies whose goal it is to do something with and to the reader rather than merely say something. For him, the questions of philosophy and, indeed, the matters of the world such questions take up are not best approached by means of discursive propositions. His view of the relation of the structures of reality to the structures of language requires procedures for understanding the world and talking about it that recognize and exploit the essentially riddle-like nature of both things and words.

Words and Deeds

But one must not think ill of the paradox, for the paradox is the passion of thought, and the thinker without the paradox is like the lover without passion: a mediocre fellow. . . . This, then, is the ultimate paradox of thought: to want to discover something that thought itself cannot think.

—Søren Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments

Many scholars have noted the central role gnomic utterance and riddles play in Heraclitus’s thinking.¹ Such utterances serve as the primary means by which he conducts and articulates his inquiry. Kahn has noted that although Heraclitus adopts an oracular form, unlike oracles, which admit of only a single correct interpretation, Heraclitus’s meaning is intentionally multi-layered and complex.² Hussey has noted four categories of utterance in Heraclitus (while admitting the
difficulty of making clear distinctions between categories and examples): (a) the plain style in which he describes and denounces human lack of understanding, and in which the language is straightforward, ordinary and syntactically simple; (b) aphorisms in ordinary language, tersely phrased but immediately intelligible in ordinary terms; (c) ‘parables’ or images drawn from ordinary life, again economically phrased, in ordinary language, but with a significance not necessarily even partly obvious; and (d) a cryptic style in which deliberate formulations of important truths utilize unusual words and elaborate syntax, often intending several meanings, some of which, Hussey believes, may be concealed. He finds parallels for all these forms of expression in the language of prophets, seers and oracles, especially in Pindar and Aeschylus, connections that Kahn also finds to be particularly strong. Hölscher has argued that the fragments which formulate doctrine are different from what he labels Heraclitus’s “image statements,” which he takes to be more on the order of examples than metaphors, in that they do not explain and they do not argue, but they, instead, seek paradox. Yet, even in those fragments that Hölscher takes as formulating doctrine, he finds almost every sentence to be a gnomic utterance and the general thrust of the language to be towards gnomic utterance.

Heraclitus makes clear in the opening passage of his work that he sees his task as at the least difficult, if not unprecedented:

Although this account holds forever, people always prove uncomprehending, both before hearing it and once they have heard it. Although all things come to be in accordance with this logos, people are like the inexperienced when they experience such words and deeds as I set forth, distinguishing each thing according to its nature and explaining how it is.

The logos that Heraclitus relates, in words and deeds, is an articulation, as he claims, of the way the cosmos is articulated, i.e., organized, by being an expression of the logos that organizes the cosmos. Many other fragments make it clear, as Sextus Empiricus noted, that Heraclitus proposed logos, not experience or sense perception, as the criterion for truth, as the vehicle for coming to understand the world and oneself. It is important to note that Heraclitus claims that when one experiences his logos, one experiences more than words, one experiences deeds. He is explicitly claiming that his logos does something to and with those who read it. This assertion by itself, and there are other fragments which echo and support this claim, shows that Heraclitus felt that he had access to an important truth about the way the world is and works, and tried to communicate that truth to those who have the ears to hear through a particular logos that may illuminate the way things are, that is, through riddles.

However, solving Heraclitus’s riddles should not rank as a priority in analysis; and Heraclitus himself makes no attempt to explain or otherwise resolve his paradoxes and riddles. I believe he encourages us instead to examine the relation
of his expositional strategies and the content matter which he engages—which
is primarily the ordered and ordering unity of oppositions which constitute the
nature of reality and goes, for Heraclitus, by the name of *Logos*.

**Heraclitus, the Obscure**

I will speak in riddles, so as to be understood.—Sophocles

Kahn noted that “the paradoxical conception of the human condition as a state
deepest ignorance in the face of an immediately accessible truth serves to
define the basic framework with which [Heraclitus’s] specific doctrines must be
understood.” One of the places where Heraclitus gave explicit expression to such
a conception is in fragment B56: “People are deceived in the recognition of what
is obvious.” A careful look at Heraclitus’s fragments suggests that the failure on
the part of most people to recognize the obvious is not from lack of ability, but
due rather to some aspect of the nature of the obvious itself, or of the nature of
recognition, or both. In his fragments we have carefully worded descriptions of
the riddle-like state of things, and equally careful prescriptions for addressing
the difficulties which stand in the way of understanding.

The whole of B56 offers such a lesson: “People are deceived in the recogni-
tion of what is obvious, in every way as was Homer, who was the wisest of all the
Greeks. For he was deceived by boys killing lice, who said: ‘what we see and catch
we leave behind; what we neither see nor catch, we carry away.’” Here we are told
that people encounter appearance—that which is *fanerō*—manifest, visible—but fail to recognize it, to know it for what it is, and they fail
in a particular way: they fail “in every way,” Heraclitus tells us, as does Homer, in
that they are somehow deceived by a riddle.

The riddle in this fragment, a bit of folksy entertainment drawn from the
popular *Lives* of Homer in circulation at the time, is offered as instructive. In it,
as is common with riddles in general, Homer lacks a crucial piece of information,
provided for us by Heraclitus, that will make sense of the boys’ words. Homer en-
counters the boys coming back from fishing and asks after their catch, to receive
only the enigmatic report from the boys that they left behind what they caught, but
brought along what they did not catch. When one knows that it is lice the boys are
talking about, there is no puzzle. But we are cautioned by this very fragment not
to be deceived by such a straightforward resolution, advised to uncover another,
perhaps more powerful significance in what is apparent.

Homer, as the stories relate, is fooled primarily in that he does not know
what the boys are talking about, he fails to grasp their *logos*. His failure to catch
the significance of the boys’ words is a failure to comprehend (*noeiv*) the mean-
ing and significance of what he hears or otherwise recognizes (*gignwskheiv*) as
a straightforward reporting on a matter that is directly manifest to perception in the appearances of the boys’ activity. He perceives quite clearly that the boys were fishing, that they have fishing gear and are in surroundings that accord with fishing, and that they must, therefore, be reporting about their success at fishing. But the boys are not reporting about fishing, except in the sense that they have been ‘fishing’ for lice, and so the appearances that occur directly and manifestly to Homer’s sense perceptions lead him into deception. In that deception, he is like the boys themselves, in that he is held by an understanding that he neither found nor caught, but brought along with him, and in that understanding, finds himself deeply puzzled and without a way to make sense of what is truly a simple, even trivial report. He is Ἀπορος.

The riddle itself is couched as a piece of analogical evidence for Heraclitus’s primary observation concerning human understanding: that people are deceived concerning what is manifest as by a riddle. In our failure to recognize the obvious, we may indeed be missing some piece of information concerning the apparent, but that information is not some further appearance; it is, instead, as the fragment clearly depicts, a way of ordering the appearances in what we do encounter, and encounter correctly for the most part. Of course, had Homer known in some way that the boys were picking at lice, he would not have been puzzled by their statement. I do not believe, however, that Heraclitus merely wished to make a point concerning the clear fact that we are often not in possession of all the relevant details. If his dictum merely states the banal truth that people are often deceived as a result of what they do not know or experience, it is not worth our attention. Instead, the analogy insists that people are deceived by what is manifestly present to their sense and noetic perceptions.

There are three points, at least, embedded in this fragment concerning the riddle-like nature of appearance and the relation of sense and noetic perceptions. First, nothing much hinges upon the solution of a riddle. Riddles, once solved, are often trivial and obvious, and, in so being, thereby take their place among the ranks of all obvious and apparent things, that is, among those things that are in some sense thoroughly deceptive still.

Second, all that is manifest presents at the same time a less obvious and perhaps even paradoxical pattern of relations that would, if grasped, alter our sense of things, indeed, reorder the relations of sense and appearance. At times, such a reordering produces merely different interpretations, which, whether harmonizing with previous perceptions, or at odds with them, may enrich our understanding, perhaps even lead to a recognition and appreciation of a deeper significance in what has been experienced. At other times, such a reordering can be so striking and profound that it leaves the world and us changed. The example of Homer is not, of course, such an instance, but in the fragments as a whole, there is much to indicate that Heraclitus seeks just such an outcome for his auditors.
Third, and most important, I believe, Heraclitus depicts Homer as being fooled, not so much about what the boys were doing, since, regardless of how they spent their time delousing themselves rather than catching fish, they also had been fishing. Nor is he deceived solely by what the boys say, either by failing to grasp their meaning, or by being ignorant of some crucial detail and so erroneously interpreting their report. Mistakes of that sort happen often enough to all of us, but are not the real difficulty. What is of primary importance is that Heraclitus depicts Homer as foundering in his encounter with a basic structure of things.

Visible things, Heraclitus tells us in this fragment, are like riddles, and recognizing fully the world of visible things parallels the dynamic of interpreting riddles, in that grasping the world involves grasping that things exhibit a plurality of relations which may shift from manifest to concealed and back depending upon how we take them up. Riddles, we are being shown, are not presented solely in speech, nor solely, according to the analogy, in appearances. The riddle is a product of the relation of speech and appearance, and in particular, the relation between what speech itself causes to appear for us and appearances perceived by means of the senses. For us, appearances of both sorts, like riddles, seem clear, all the parts fitting together; but a deeper or richer sense of the world eludes us, unless we are open to an inherent ambiguity in both.

Heraclitus seems to want to show us how our fundamental processes of perception—our impulses toward clarity, toward grasping pattern and order—can flatten the world and bring about important omissions that preclude, or at least, occlude a deeper insight into the nature of things. However, even to become aware that the clarity that appears manifest in what is obvious is woven together with, at the same time, another and less obvious, perhaps more intricate ordering, requires that the appearance of what is obvious be problematized for us in some way. What appears to sense perception is almost never problematized for us except in its relation to the sense that logos constructs of those appearances, such as is the case with Homer’s troubling experience with the boys. What appears to noetic perception in logos, however, may be shown to be problematic, if we are attentive, as Heraclitus would say, to the very logos which is its medium. For when we are attentive, we will see that logos, like riddles, presents a thing and conceals a thing at the same time.

Homer goes wrong not least of all in that he supposes the boys to be riddling him when they are merely recounting their acts, albeit tersely and with an economy of detail not wholly forthcoming; but things also recount themselves, in a sense, tersely and with an economy of detail. The message Heraclitus seems to be communicating by offering this story of riddle as an analogue for his general and provocative claim that people usually fail to recognize what is manifest is that things primarily and perhaps simply recount themselves, but we fail to
understand, to recognize the riddling, multivalent manner in which they are accurately representing themselves.

A significant issue in our failure to recognize what is manifest is our desire for resolution, for seeing things in one way, the “right” way. Heraclitus asserts in his proem that Logos, taken in its fullest sense, simply is the ordering principle of the kosmos; but so many of his fragments emphasize the sometimes paradoxical plurality of both the world and logos wherein the way up is the way down (B60), God is simultaneously day/night, winter/summer, and many other apparent oppositions (B67) and is both willing and unwilling to be called by a single name (B32). In a half dozen fragments (B8, B50, B51, B54 and B114), Heraclitus explicitly states that logos shares this multivalency, that logos, like the oracle of Apollo in B93, neither precisely speaks out, nor precisely conceals. Rather, he says there, it gives a sign (σημαίνω). An inescapable aspect of signification is plurality. Heraclitus asserts that what Logos/logos orders, what we sometimes like to think of as “reality,” standing apart from logos as its object, also exhibits an essentially pluralistic and relational character. Reality, the things of our experience, the manifest world, B123 tells us, loves to lie concealed, but still, it “gives” itself to us, both speaking and concealing, and in so doing, giving a sign: in other words, riddling.

B123 states: “Nature, it hides” (φύσις, κρύπτεις θεᾶ). The verb, when intransitive, means “to hide oneself,” or “to conceal.” The middle form intensifies the reflexivity. This same term, κρύπτω, the origin for our cognate ‘cryptic,’ is used in B93 to label one half of what the deity refrains from doing by means of its oracle: neither speaking (λέγει) nor concealing (κρύπτειν). At first blush, then, these two fragments seem in tension. The god, Apollo, refrains from hiding, whereas nature loves to conceal herself. But regardless of how much nature may indeed love to conceal herself, she may not wholly do so. The term φύσις, like φυή, “form” or “stature,” often meant, simply, ‘outward form.’12 “Nature” is the face the kosmos presents to us, and in Plato and Aristotle is often used as a synonym for the universe or kosmos. “Nature,” like the god, fails to accomplish her complete concealment, while stopping short of complete revelation. As we have been told, what we fail most often to recognize is what is manifest. Of course, we may fail to recognize many other things in addition to what is obvious; but given that in no other fragment does Heraclitus spend any time discussing the inability to recognize what we do not in any way encounter, I believe we may safely regard these fragments as speaking a common theme: that what is obvious deceives because it “gives” itself in signs that neither fully speak, nor fully conceal its nature, and so lead us, if only because of our own impulses to resolution, into deception.
Before we examine further fragments, it may help us to examine briefly the notion of riddle as it existed in early Greek thought. One of the primary terms for riddle was γρίφος. This term denoted a fishing basket or trap, woven of rushes, with which fish are caught, or held and carried. Metaphorically, it came to signify anything intricate, anything which, on account of its intricacy, is made difficult to perceive, and therefore a dark saying or riddle. However, in its original sense, which informs even its metaphorical use, the term denoted something whose main purpose was to catch and to hold, not to lose or to conceal. It is only incidentally the case that something woven intricately enough to capture and hold a fish will also serve to conceal it, or will, due to its intricacy, resist full and clear perception of its pattern or form. Taking the image seriously, we can see that such intricate weavings must throw into shadow what they catch and hold.

The other common term for riddle was αἰνίγμα. This term denoted more straightforwardly an obscure saying or riddle. However, it is interesting to note that here as well, the notion of weaving was strongly associated. Riddles, when labeled αἰνίγμα, were often expressed in Greek as προβόλλειν, put forward or proffered, but just as often they were expressed as συνθέναι, a difficult term to translate literally, generally denoting construction, and which, in its prefix, emphasizes the joining or gathering aspect of such construction. Further, and most importantly, riddles were often explicitly expressed in Greek as πλέκειν, to weave, a term which echoes Plato’s Sophist and its discussion of the συμπλοκή, the intertwining close engagement of words and forms such that they are able to make and reveal the world.

Both of these terms, γρίφος and αἰνίγμα πλέκειν, suggest that a riddle was understood by the Greeks to be carefully crafted with an intricate ordering of its elements, and that, moreover, its full intention is to catch or gather something, not mislay or obscure it. Riddles are dark because of their intricate weaving, as an inevitable aspect of that weaving, not as goal. They are not intended to defeat understanding. Their complex structure may instead, if engaged correctly, capture understanding, draw it in and hold it until realization dawns upon the one riddled. But to do this, they must be fashioned in such a way that most of what they encounter passes through them. That which is the vehicle and environment for what the riddle intends to capture, as is water for fish and sense perceptions for noiesis, must pass through in a particular way for the riddle to reveal what lies within what is manifest to the senses: a pattern or ordering that structures what
we perceive, that makes it what it is. The “correct engagement” or “particular process” of which I speak is precisely not the attempt to solve the riddle. We do not expect a “solution” from a fish trap; we expect an effect. This is what we must allow from the riddle. This is its work or “deed.”

The implication, in Heraclitus, is that the world is also like this: complex and intricately, even darkly, ordered, presenting its face as a riddle, catching and holding us, and in so doing, not in its solution but in its presentation, promising, as does the oracle, the possibility of profound understanding. Heraclitus employs such a notion in a number of fragments. Hippolytus associates the Homer fragment with B54: “The unapparent harmony is stronger [or better] than the visible one.” When we recall that Nature presents herself in such a way as to both conceal and reveal, we are urged to seek out how what is concealed may be present in what is revealed, producing a harmonious ordering not collapsible to a single perception. There is another fragment which also speaks of ‘harmony’ that may help us interpret the sense of hidden to which Heraclitus refers in B54. In B51, also reported by Hippolytus, we are told that humans “do not comprehend how a thing agrees while at variance with itself.” This fragment is important for understanding opposition, as it states most explicitly, albeit paradoxically, that all things differ with themselves, and, in so doing and at the same time, agree with themselves. Heraclitus perhaps understandably fears that we will fail to grasp the full meaning of this explicit statement and offers two analogues. He remarks that things differ and agree with themselves at the same time by being a harmony, either back-stretched or turning back on itself, as in a bow or lyre.

I believe these analogues serve well to gloss the meaning of the “unapparent harmony” which is “stronger.” The harmony of a bow or a lyre both is and is not hidden. In one sense, their harmony is out in the open, quite visible and obvious for the one who has eyes to see it. Certainly the appearance of a bow or lyre, lying around not in use, may lead one to interpret its ‘harmony’ or order as one of peaceful stasis, but the real tension that produces that stasis can be seen in such appearances, if one knows how to recognize it. Such tension is the cause and correct understanding of the manifest appearances. Pick up a bow or a lyre and pluck a string, and the tension through which the bow or the lyre are thereby a bow or lyre is there to perceive. Indeed, one may not need to pluck a string. The tension which holds the whole together is felt in the whole when it is held. An unstrung bow or lyre does not feel at all the same.

These objects further gloss Heraclitus’s claim because there are a plurality of tensions within them, each capable of foregrounding, but no single one rising to the level of complete explanation. In an important sense, the bow and lyre are in a state of peaceful stasis, and in an important sense, they are in violent tension at the same time. Further, the tension that holds the whole together in stasis does so by exerting pressure in opposite directions simultaneously. Were the tension to be
exerted in one direction only, the objects would be destroyed, or would certainly cease to be the useful things they are. Indeed, such an oppositional tension occurs naturally and inextricably whenever such objects are busy being what they are, for this is what it is to be strung in tension. When a bow or lyre is being used however, plucked or strummed, or drawn and released, there are other counter-tensions which come into play, which violate the stasis of the foundational tension and which themselves exert and exist as counterbalancing tensions.

The bow and lyre serve as wonderful models for a parallel feature of logos: amphilogy. Indeed, a bow and lyre can only be used, can only accomplish what is their natural function to accomplish, in the very process of balancing a multitude of potentially violent and counterbalancing tensions, tensions which may strike an observer as chaotic, due to their intricate and complex interactions, but which, nonetheless, exhibit perfect attunement and unity in a number of ways, even differently in different circumstances. If the analogy with logos is well taken, then the same would hold true for it. Logos must pull even against itself in order to accomplish its harmonious and ordered relating of the world.

I believe that we are explicitly invited to take this fragment as glossing logos, at least in part, because logos is one of those things, agreeing with itself in differing with itself, about which people prove uncomprehending as we see in the proem B1. The very thing that people always prove unable to comprehend (άει άξυνετός) is the logos that Heraclitus both presents and is the subject of that presentation. Heraclitus’s logos and logos itself exist in a harmony of opposing tensions. The only other use of this term, άξυνετός, in Heraclitus is in B34, where the perception specifically associated with the failure to comprehend is not sight but hearing. There we are told that because people are άξυνετοί, “they hear like the deaf,” and further, “there is a saying that bears witness to them: present yet absent.” People are unable to comprehend the logos that they both hear and do not hear, with the result that both they and the logos they do and do not recognize are both present, in some sense, yet also absent.

The term we are discussing, άξυνετοί, is a privative of οὐνέτος, which means intelligent, understanding, or wise, and which is formed from the verbal οὐνίημι, which means, etymologically, to bring or set together, but in common usage, to perceive or understand. Logos is the noun form of λέγειν, which, of course, means to say or to speak, but which also means to lay out before one, to pick out or to gather for oneself. The sense of both of these terms is that to understand and be intelligent, and to express that understanding in words, is to construct and reconstruct in one’s mind and speech the unity of things—existing as orderings of opposing tensions—and the unity of the world constituted of things in opposition. Logos can do this only because it also exists as an harmonious order of opposing tensions, in which the very violence of that opposition, even to the point
of threatening to pull or tear them apart, is the very thing which is the agreement
(ὁμολογεῖν), the saying the same with itself that sustains them.\(^{18}\)

For Heraclitus, as we have seen, harmony cannot be found apart from strife
and tension, indeed, consists precisely of strife and tension. Even the Greek term
στάσις, from which we derive our English cognate ‘stasis,’ denoted the kind
of balanced tension that Heraclitus notes as existing in all things as it does in
the bow or lyre. The term meant, as does ours, a condition of standing firm or
remaining stationed, but also civil war, sedition, rebellion and discord: that is,
the condition of violent opposition with one’s own state.\(^{19}\) The verb, στασιάζω,
meant primarily to rebel or revolt, to be at odds or quarrel, while the adjective,
στασιμός, meant primarily to be steadfast, steady, or solid.\(^{20}\) The term exhibited
the very tension it denoted.

**War Is Common and the Father of All**

Everything is pusher or pushed; and matter and mind are in perpetual
tilt and balance.—Emerson, *Conduct of Life*

Heraclitus’s proem has more to tell us regarding this tension if we attend to
his carefully selected vocabulary and how he plays with his terms. For the
back-stretched or back-turning harmony of things, the opposition which is the
unapparent order and the very nature of things, is what Heraclitus declares he will
analyze and reveal according to its nature: “For, although all things come to pass
in accordance with this particular logos, people are like those without experience
when they experience such words and works as I relate, distinguishing each ac-
ccording to its nature and explaining how it is.”\(^{21}\) It is important to attend to the
simultaneous distinction and relation Heraclitus emphasizes between words
and deeds.\(^{22}\) Heraclitus explicitly identifies both the words and the deeds he will
relate as products, in some sense, of his own discourse. Heraclitus identifies the
words and deeds he will set forth by means of both an indefinite demonstrative
pronoun, τὸ οὕτως, a pronoun which points to what precedes, i.e., the words
and deeds that people have already experienced, and also an indefinite relative
pronoun, ὁ κοίνος. While the demonstrative by itself, with the particular verb of
‘relating’ that he uses, διηγέωμαι, could be taken to refer only to those words and
deeds already encountered but not comprehended by his audience, which he will
now “go through,” showing each for what it is; the indefinite relative, along with the
emphatic first person, ἔγω, declares some significant degree of proprietorship.

We are led, by a typical Heraclitean calculated ambiguity, to take the referent
of these terms to be both those of the world of experience and of Heraclitus’s
discourse, a further indication of the degree to which those referents are not
clearly distinguished in Heraclitus’s thought or speech. They are the words and
works that he will set forth. I believe we would be exhibiting the tunnel vision of our own contemporary categories in uncritically supposing that while the words referred to in this clause may in some sense be those of Heraclitus, the works are only those which occur in the world, related to us in words by Heraclitus. Rather, we should, given his explicit construction, construe the term ‘works’ to bear some reference to the activity of Heraclitus’s telling, and specifically, I am arguing, to the particular communicative strategies that he practices.

The term he uses to label his ‘distinguishing’ of things according to their nature is διαφέρων. This is the same term Plato will use to label one constituent element of his dialectic, the element that divides things, splitting them into parts, and often into opposites. Heraclitus tells us that he will explain how things are by dividing them into their opposing tensions, that he will structure his own logos as the world of all words and deeds, i.e., reality (τὸ ὤν or τὸ πάντα), is itself structured, so as to faithfully reflect its ordering and invite aporia.

Heraclitus recognized that we must always fall short of grasping the full significance of particular words and formulas, due both to their obvious sense, which can deceive us because such sense depicts the world too straightforwardly and generatively, and due as well to the sometimes violent tensions of other senses which they contain, since such tensions make univocal sense elusive. By themselves, names, as Parmenides claimed in Fragment B8, must lead to error since whenever any single thing is named we nevertheless establish two poles in opposition, such as occurs when we name night or day. But when words, which can both mislead and illuminate are coupled with a form of expression that capitalizes upon this intrinsic ambiguity and upon the aporetic nature of things themselves, ambiguous and paradoxical, and so calls its own expression into question to be puzzled over in what Xenophanes called “long seeking,” then perhaps we can approach an understanding of the world that has been possible all along, there in our experience, common to all.

One of the sources and outlets for this paradoxical unity of oppositions in logos, is, for Heraclitus, as it is for Parmenides, the process and nature of naming. Fragment B51 has told us that we do not comprehend the variant agreement which is the nature of things, as exemplified in the static tension of the bow. Fragment B10 highlights enigmatically this feature of things and words: “Things taken together: whole, not whole; gathered together, torn apart; harmonious, dissonant. From many things, one; from one, all things.” In naming, things are “taken” (συλλαβεῖν), grasped together and collected in a way that necessarily and simultaneously involves separation and distinction and conceals a structural harmony, occludes the manner in which they are convergent and divergent, whole and not whole, consonant and dissonant. In naming, the unity of what is named, as distinguished from what it is separated off from, is “taken” as exhibiting discrete identity, and the contrary aspects our grasping leaves behind are labeled by us, as Heraclitus
says in B67, as is incense from the altar fire, according to each person’s pleasure.²⁵

Such a “grasping” then requires, in order to explain how it more fully is, something like Heraclitus’s distinguishing (διαλείπειν), which will confront us again with a paradoxical harmony of tensions, and perhaps even reveal to us the way in which the names we use, while marking off and separating the world into distinct and independent relations, like life and death, can also, because of their amphilogous nature, call us to recognize their essential paradoxical contrariety, the way they say the same while also speaking against themselves. As Heraclitus suggests in B50: “Listening not to me but to the Logos, it is wise to agree that all things are one.” In the inevitable ambiguity of words, logos “says the same” (ὁμολογεῖν) as reality, but its agreement that all things are one takes the form, paradoxically, of separating, and thereby establishing, the manifold of experience.

Fragment B8 not only stands as one of the more explicitly paradoxical expressions of this unity of opposition, but it also brings together several of the themes found in the other fragments we have discussed which seek to illuminate the nature of unity and opposition in logos and reality. It states: “What opposes brings together—from tones at variance comes perfect attunement—and all things come to pass through conflict.”²⁶ Aristotle, the source of this fragment, seems to be summing up what he takes to be the central import of Heraclitus’s teaching on the nature of reality and the nature of logos. Since the echoes of these fragments, as well as the explicit associations and paradoxical assertions within them, serve to present logos as a relation of violent but ordering opposition, we are led to understand the nature of logos, and therefore of understanding, whether in naming or more generally, as exhibiting the selfsame ordering principle as that which composes all stability in the nature of things and orders the kosmos. The very term kosmos often meant an ordering such as found in battle lines drawn up in opposition to each other.

These fragments express human logos as being itself a part of reality, as well as related to and reflective of its ordering principle, while at the same time a cause of human incomprehension. Human logos, like the Logos that orders all things, can reveal the world because it both reflects and comprises, in part, the world, isomorphic and mereological. Words, the components of one aspect of human logos, while also being themselves bits of the world, point at bits of the world that they themselves are not.²⁷ They point so as to mark off, divide, and gather together what is in its own nature a harmony of opposing tensions, and more problematically, they point so as to name and lead us to believe in an either/or that they inevitably and necessarily present to us in the course of the division and collection whereby all signification occurs and must occur. They seduce and lead astray, as Parmenides warns, in that they are able to make us see what is essentially a unity of pluralities in manifold tensions as disjunctive binaries.²⁸ In other words, words, like our larger discourse with ourselves and each other, present the world
LINGERING IN PARADOX

The contradictions the mind comes up against—these are the only realities: they are the criterion of the real. There is no contradiction in what is imaginary. Contradiction is the test of necessity... In the same way all truth contains a contradiction. The union of contradictories involves a wrenching apart... Simultaneous existence of incompatible things in the soul's bearing; balance which leans both ways at once: that is saintliness, the actual realization of the microcosm, the imitation of the order of the world.—Simone Weil

I have suggested repeatedly that it is not primarily through the content of the individual fragments that Heraclitus attempts to teach us about how to inquire into and articulate our understanding of the world, but in his “deeds,” understood as his communicative practice. We have seen that practice calling attention to the partiality of any articulation of reality as discrete things. The most paradoxical fragments—B10, B62, B51, B8—suggest, if nothing else, that seeing things as independent polarities is a partial seeing at best. That is why Heraclitus urges us to listen to the logos, as much to experience what it does as to hear what it says. His practice prompts us not so much to see unity in what is opposed, or, just as importantly, to see opposition in what is experienced as unity, but primarily to examine the way in which logos presents the world noetically so as to cause the partiality (in both senses) which falsifies what it represents. But it also urges us to continue seeking, to allow ourselves to be grasped by logos in ways that illuminate that very partiality and provide a fuller sense of the structure of things.

Because logos is the cause of our misunderstanding in the particular way that it is, it can also serve as the best correction. The either/or that logos produces is the key to the successful grasping of the world as well. It is because logos can structure the world for us, can identify and assign being, can make sense and create or uncover meaning, that it can also deceive us. In such an understanding of logos, wherein its power to reveal is the source of its power to conceal, and its power to mislead and falsify is the source of its power to create order and stability, we have another example of the relation of opposition that Heraclitus insists to us serves to produce the most perfect attunement. The dynamic tension created by the either/or, when it is kept alive, when resolution is resisted, in the sense that a choice is avoided concerning the contrariety, when its paradoxical oppositions are held in balance, offers an understanding that promises an important degree of faithfulness to things, and some assurance of correct understanding; less per-
haps than the gods may enjoy, but enough for hope in judgment, as Xenophanes suggests.

Such is the nature of *logos*. It makes partial perspectives on the world inevitable, but it also makes grasping its own partiality possible, and in so doing, makes possible as well an understanding of the relation of incomplete and partial perspectives to the whole of which they are an experience. In other words, we must understand that there is not properly a distinction between encountering the world and thinking, as if one happens and the other is merely a process that interprets what happens; but rather that encountering *is* itself a thinking, a way of addressing the world, and that way holds, within its own tensions, the key to holding fast to the world it articulates (in both senses). Therefore, in comprehending our own processes of comprehension we will properly understand the relation of experience to reality as a “making” which bears false witness, but which also seizes us and brings us into play again with what is witnessed, if we will allow it to, if we will “listen” rightly to the *logos* of its *logos*. We will hear the *logos* speaking with its studied ambiguity, in riddles that seek paradox and, in paradox, call us into play with the nature of reality. We need not self-consciously speak in the same fashion. If we really understand Heraclitus’s riddles, we will recognize that we always already are.

Riddles, for Heraclitus, illuminate the way in which we fail to comprehend our own comprehending, and so illuminate the way that understanding itself works. Heraclitean expositional strategy, in capitalizing on the structure of riddles, which is simply, in large part, the structure of *logos*, seeks to express a world that simply gives itself as a riddle. Heraclitus practices a deeply puzzling and paradoxical ambiguity himself as a strategy for bringing us back into play with the matter and form of our particular *logos*. He practices a distorting violence, just such as *logos* itself perpetrates, so as to lead us to grasp that structure and dynamic, both through and beyond our grasping of the nature of our articulation of reality. He tells us, in Heraclitean fashion, that is, paradoxically, that there is a way of being at odds with that which we most closely associate such that we fall into error; but he also tells us that there is a way which leads to insight, about ourselves, our worlds, and our ways of knowing. And the name of those two ways is the same: *logos*.

**Notes**

1. Cf., e.g., Hussey 1982, and Hölscher 1974. Wilcox 1994 argues, much like Hölscher, that Heraclitus thinks the world is a puzzle that must be properly interpreted to be understood and so presents his writing as illustrations both of puzzle and of interpretation. Diels, in the introduction to his *Herakleitos von Ephesos*, suggests that Heraclitus wrote in an oracular style because it was the fashion of his time. This
suggestion relies upon a very general sense of “his time” and ignores the important differences between Heraclitus’s style and those of his surviving contemporaries.

Ancient commentary also frequently emphasized the gnomic nature of Heraclitus’s writings. He was in later antiquity nicknamed “the obscure.” Timon of Phlius called him “the riddler” (DK 43). There is the famous anecdote in Diogenes Laertius in which Socrates was given the treatise of Heraclitus by Euripides and asked what he thought of it. His reply was supposed to have been: “The part I understand is excellent, and so too is, I dare say, the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it” (Lives, II.22). Theophrastus is the first to treat him in any sustained way, and he appears not to have had much of the text to work with and largely to have followed Aristotle’s summary interpretation. He complained that Heraclitus’s pronouncements were unfinished and inconsistent (Lives IX.6, and cf. Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983:185). As Kirk, Raven and Schofield 1983 point out, part of Aristotle’s complaint was that Heraclitus “did not use the categories of formal logic, but tended to describe the same thing (or roughly the same thing) now as a god, now as a form of matter, now as a rule of behavior or principle which was nevertheless a physical constituent of things” (186).

Diogenes Laertius records that some thought that Heraclitus made his work “deliberately obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it” (Lives IX.6). Clement of Alexandria relates a letter supposedly written by the king of Persia, Darius, to Heraclitus remarking the unusual nature of his work: “You are the author of the of a treatise On Nature which is hard to understand and hard to interpret. In certain parts, if it be interpreted word for word, it seems to contain a power of speculation on the whole universe and all that goes on within it . . . ; but for the most part judgment is suspended, so that even those who are the most conversant with literature are at a loss to know what is the right interpretation of your work” (Strom. i.65). Diogenes tells us that Heraclitus is the subject of many epigrams such as the following: “Do not be in too great a hurry to get to the end of Heraclitus the Ephesian’s book: the path is hard to travel. Gloom is there and darkness devoid of light. But if an initiate be your guide, the path shines brighter than sunlight” (Anth. Pal. Ix.540 quoted in Lives IX.16). There were many early commentators whose testimony is lost, but Diogenes records their names and remarks that they all seem to have had very different ideas about even what sort of treatise his work was, whether on nature or on politics or ethics, and which parts served as the main focus, which as illustrations (Lives IX.15). This circumstance alone indicates the difficulty even those closest to his era had in recognizing and determining the nature of his expositional strategies.

4. Fr. 1. All translations are mine.
5. Against the Mathematicians VII.126.
6. Emlyn-Jones 1976 has remarked that Heraclitus’s riddles, for those few who are able to listen to the logos, those who are not ἀξίωται, the riddle is exhaustive and self-explanatory. She states: “The assertion was, in a sense, its own explanation, since the relationship between opposites was displayed as self-evident in language, which,
Heraclitus believed, reflected the structure of reality. Explanation was neither necessary nor even possible” (100).


8. These may be found in the Lives, V and VI, and surveyed and discussed in Kirk, Raven, and Schofield 1983.

9. My use of these terms, and my understanding of them in this context, echoes the analysis of von Fritz 1974.

10. Homer is, of course, blind, and this fact is noted and even emphasized in several of the versions of the story. This fact renders the riddle more poignant and its use by Heraclitus more pointed. Homer’s blindness removes for him a primary vehicle of sense perception, but should not be taken to either benefit him with some superior state of understanding or unusually hinder his understanding, since Homer was fooled specifically because he was unable to accommodate his sense of the account the boys provided with his perception, however derived, of their activity.

11. Plato repeatedly laments this feature of human cognition when he has Socrates demonstrate or explicitly assert that the greatest danger for human understanding is to become convinced that the plain, manifest sense of our cognitions and perceptions exhaust their possible meanings and exhaustively relate the world. To inhabit such an interpretive stance with respect to logos and to perception is to fall prey to the belief that we know what we do not know, and, in our complacency, to cease searching for richer understanding.


13. Heraclitus, the speaker of dark sayings, was often labeled ὁ σκότεινος, the dark or the obscure. Interestingly, if not also ironically, when used of persons, the term often meant ‘blind.’

14. Jill Gordon offered this helpful insight about the way that fish traps are designed so as not to ensnare a great deal of what they encounter in comments to a presentation of a version of this paper at the Ancient Philosophy Society at the New School for Social Research, New York, April 12, 2008. There is much more to be explored in this insight that, unfortunately, I do not have room for in the present article.

15. William Koch offered this wonderful formulation in his response to my presentation at the APS, April 12, 2008.

16. A number of scholars have asserted something like this interpretation. Emlyn-Jones strongly holds that, for Heraclitus, “it is the paradox and not the resolution on a logical level which is important” (Emlyn-Jones 1976: 102). Hölscher (1974: 233) concludes that for Heraclitus, what one looks at is itself the riddle, that phenomena are understood by Heraclitus to be similes, presenting themselves in image, as does the Oracle at Delphi, in such a way that what is visible hides and reveals its true essence at once.

17. Cf. LSJ s.v: Heidegger 1968 makes a great deal of this conjunction of meanings, but he is not the only scholar to note these multiple meanings and to make use of them in interpreting Heraclitus or even Plato. The signification of gathering and picking out were more primitive, but these uses were still contemporary with the more common
signification of speaking, and are the source for several alternate meanings of the term *logos*, such as ‘account’ in the statistical or bookkeeping sense, and also ‘measure,’ ‘ratio,’ and ‘orderly relationship.’ It is quite interesting, of course, to note the conjunction of the sense of ‘gathering’ in *λέγειν* and the sense of gathering or collecting or joining in several of the terms for riddling or riddles: *αἰνίγμα συντιθέναι*, *αινίγμα πλέκειν*, and *γρίφος*.

18. In B51, the phrase *διαφέρομενον ἑωτῷ ὀμολογεῖς*, when read etymologically, can be rendered something like: borne apart with respect to itself in different directions it is gathered together with itself. Our term ‘differ’ is a fairly direct transmission of the Greek through the Latin transposition *differre*. The term means, in Greek, to be at variance or odds, but also to tear asunder. It also commonly meant to surpass or to excel, and Herodotus and Thucydides both used the term to speak of enduring or sustaining. Cf. LSJ s.v. It is perhaps illuminating to note the coincidence of the semi-homophones *διαφέρω*, to differ, and *διαφθείρω*, to destroy utterly or to corrupt, and which was used in an idiom, δ. *χέρα*, meaning to ruin by weakening or slackening one’s hand, as in, one may readily surmise, the destruction which follows upon the slackening of the tension in bow or lyre.

19. Cf. Plato’s *Sophist*, 228a-d, where the Stranger uses the term to mean discord and equates it with disease, and further defines both as the disagreement, *διαφορά*, of the naturally related brought about by some corruption, *διαφθορά*. In that discussion he offers that opinions and desires, reason and pain, anger and pleasure are opposed in the souls of worthless people, but must nevertheless be naturally related.

20. Cf. LSJ s.v. Given such close associations, echoes of the opposite meanings must have been heard in conjunction with the primary meanings of these terms.

21. Emphasis added to highlight features of expression engaged in the following analysis. Scholars have noted that Heraclitus, in this proem and in other fragments, identifies his own particular account with the *Logos* which serves as the ordering principle and source of all things. Verdenius 1948 has stated that for Heraclitus, “there is no fundamental difference between the meaning of his doctrine and the order in the real world” (277). Kahn 1989 has stated the same sentiment, with poetic flair, when he speaks of Heraclitus as a “prophet of the *logos*” who speaks not in his own name or voice, but such that the *Logos*, immanent in his utterances, can be recognized and understood through his utterances, the structure of which intends and points at the structure of the world itself and not the structure of his thought about the world.

22. This distinction and relation will play a tremendous role in the writings of later thinkers, especially Thucydides, Gorgias, and Plato. Solon is credited with originating the distinction.

23. Plato’s method of “dialectic,” as he articulates it in several dialogues (e.g., *Sophist* and *Philebus*), consists of two component methods: *διαίρεσις* and *συναγωγή*, division and collection.

24. Parmenides warns that both experience and names lead one astray and perplex, but that a “much-contested refutational logos” (B6) can reveal the truth about things. Xenophanes claims that the gods do not reveal all things to mortals, but, through sustained inquiry we can come to know more fully (B18).
25. B67: “God: day/night, winter/summer, war/peace, satiety/hunger. It alters, as when mingled with the smoke of incense, it gets named according to the pleasure of each one.”

26. The term here is ἀντίξοουν, a word with some phonetic echoes to ἔξων, common, and ἀξένετος, uncomprehending. It is an Ionic term meaning “opposition,” and in its verbal form, “to set against.” Kahn 1989 translates the term as “counter-thrust.” The sense is that opposition brings together, a sense which echoes both B51 and B10. The same term for “brings together,” συμφέρον, is used in all of these fragments. In this fragment the two—opposition and that which is at variance with itself, τὸ ἀντίξοον . . . καὶ ἐκ τῶν διαφερόντων—are explicitly associated, and the term Kahn also translates as “tones at variance” is also the same term used in B10 and B51. This fragment also echoes B80 on the ordering principle of strife, and B10, B51, and B54 on the nature of harmony and its analogical import with respect to the order of reality.

27. Frye 1957 asserts that words are in tension between being centripetal, in that they are something in themselves and point inwardly at themselves, and being centrifugal, in that they point outward at what they are not.

28. This was, largely, Parmenides’ complaint in B8.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


