

Chapter 7

Herakleitos

1. Life and book

We have very little reliable information about the life of Herakleitos son of Blosson, of Ephesos. It is clear from the biographical accounts that survive, that the Alexandrian scholars could find little, even though they were not fussy about reliability. They made up anecdotes to fit some of the more striking sayings of this paradox-loving writer; and as a result, “Herakleitos the Dark” became even more obscure.

We have to guess, first, at his dates. He knows something about Pythagoras and Xenophanes; and Parmenides seems to know something about *him*. We can hazard the conjecture that his book was written by 500 BCE (when Xenophanes had still the last quarter of his long life to live, and Pythagoras was in his last years). This would make 545 BCE a reasonable guess for his birth date. He probably died before 480.ⁱ

Herakleitos belonged to the ancient royal clan of Ephesos. He is said to have deposited his book in the great temple of Artemis for which his native city was famous (22 A 1).ⁱⁱ We can fairly suppose that it was in his eyes the worthy trophy of a greater victory than any triumph in arms. Whether he was actually melancholic (“the weeping philosopher” as he came to be called)ⁱⁱⁱ we cannot say. He was certainly both an angry man, and an intellectual aristocrat. There are some

“sayings” of his that were not in the book. In one plausible story, he “upbraids the Ephesians . . . for expelling his friend Hermodoros, with the words: “The adult Ephesians all deserve to be hanged, leaving the city to adolescents. For they threw out Hermodoros, the most valuable man among them, saying ‘Let there be no one who is the most valuable among us. If such there be, let him be so elsewhere and with others’” (A 1, B 121).^{iv} He also admired Bias of Priene — long dead but, like Thales, a locally recognized member of the Seven Wise Men (B 39). (The record of some local Boswell could have preserved these comments, but not most of the distinctive fragments that have come down to us.)

Herakleitos was proud of being an independent thinker. “I searched myself,” he said (22 B 101). He probably learned some vital lessons from his older contemporaries. But he pretends to despise them. He knew of Pythagoras as the one who “trained himself most of all men in inquiry, and having made a selection of these writings constructed a wisdom of his own, of much learning but of evil craft” (B 129). “Much learning,” he says elsewhere, “does not teach *nous*; for then it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, or again Xenophanes and Hekataeos” (B 40).^v Certainly he knew of the focal importance of *fire* in the Pythagorean cosmology; whether he took the hint from there himself, or came to his own view independently before he discovered that Pythagoras had anticipated him, his angry contempt for the “harmony” maintained by the Pythagorean One is easy to understand. For the most part, he seems to regard Pythagoras as a student of books (especially of the poets) and a collector of traditions and secret lore about the Gods — that is why he is paired with Hesiod — and this love of myth (and of political authority) turns Pythagoras’ outstanding achievements in “inquiry” into an “evil craft.” Pythagoras controlled and directed the minds of his followers with his religious teaching about transmigration; and this made him (in some conversational context) “the great captain of swindlers” (B 81a). He thoroughly deserved to be driven out of Croton. Herakleitos himself was no democrat; but he despised religious obscurantism.

Herakleitos couples Pythagoras with Hesiod; Xenophanes, on the other hand, is paired with Hekataeos, the great early geographer. His is a polymathy like that of Odysseus; he knows what the world is like in many places, and he has made many observations. But the stay-at-home Herakleitos

is certain that he has himself understood the unity of things much better than this much-travelled believer in the One God. We shall see, however, that he has taken over some important views from Xenophanes, too — especially about the Sun. A fairer comment on both Pythagoras and Xenophanes is found in: “Those who seek gold, dig up a lot of earth and find a little” (22 B 22).

No harsh criticisms of the Milesians are recorded. Herakleitos is said to have acknowledged that Thales was the pioneer of astronomy; but he is also reported to have said that Homer was an astronomer; so the significance of the testimony about Thales is ambiguous (B 38, B 105).^{vi} We can agree with Gregory Vlastos that Herakleitos owed many things to the Milesians;^{vii} but he is conscious of his debt to Pythagoras and Xenophanes also. His angry criticism of them is aimed at their *moral* errors. Pythagoras is a religious charlatan; and Xenophanes is a peace-lover. But from a strictly intellectual point of view, Anaximander is just as badly mistaken about the “justice” and “harmony” of the *kosmos* as they are.

2. The *Logos*

Herakleitos wrote a book full of pithy aphorisms; and because he was not easy to interpret, the scholars often resorted to direct quotation. Some of them had rather peculiar axes of their own to grind. So Herakleitos is a case that illustrates Miss Osborn’s thesis that we must study our evidence about the Presocratics in the full context of the source very clearly.^{viii}

Aristotle quoted the beginning of the book (which he unhesitatingly regarded as Herakleitos’ own work):

But of this *Logos* that is forever, men become forever uncomprehending both before they have heard it, and when they have heard it for the first time. For although all things come to be according to this *Logos*, they are like the inexperienced, when they

experience words and deeds such as I set forth (distinguishing each thing according to <its> nature, and expressing how it stands. But the rest of mankind are unaware of what they do when they wake up, just as they are forgetfully unaware of what they do when asleep (B 1 — Sextus).^{ix}

If these were actually the first sentences, the beginning was paradoxically abrupt. It would be stylistically more natural to begin with something like fragment 50: “After listening not to me, but to the *Logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one” (B 50).^x This is just as mysterious, but at least we know that the “account” that the book will give does not belong to Herakleitos personally; and the “this” of fragment 1 gets something to refer to.

Whose “account” is this “*Logos* that is forever”? Since it abides forever, although most of us will never understand it, even if we read the book; and since the wise conclusion after reading the book is to agree that “all things are one,” we can hardly hesitate to affirm that the everlasting account belongs to the One God of Pythagoras and Xenophanes. It is the “account” of the divine life that Herakleitos has grasped after long meditation, an account in which he sets forth the “deeds” of God in words that come from God. No one can grasp it at once, or on the first hearing. Herakleitos got there gradually, and only a few of us will be able to follow his lead. Most of us are “like the deaf — they comprehend not, when they have heard, and ‘present, they have gone away’ as the proverb witnesses for them” (B 34 — cf. B 17). They listen to the poets — especially to Homer, who was deceived by a children’s riddle (B 56), and to Hesiod, who did not understand the difference between waking and sleeping, or the identity of day and night (B 57; cf. B 106).^{xi} Homer and most of the traditional poets are bad *ethical* guides, as well as being “asleep” (B 42).^{xii} To be “asleep” is not to be able to think properly about the one common world in which we live — not to be able to grasp the divine “account” of it. Ordinary folk (who are “asleep” as far as the voice of God’s account is concerned) are “workers and contributors” to the world; and even philosophers must inquire widely, and collect ordinary observations (B 75, B 35; cf. B 28a). But philosophical reflection makes us *conscious* of what is “common.” We must not act and speak like the “children of our

parents”; we must not “differ from that with which we are most continuously in contact” (B 74, B 72). Thinking is the “sacred disease” that makes us *aware* of our contact with God’s Logos. We must grow up, and follow the understanding that is common to all of us; for we can all think. Our life (as rational souls) is continuous with the divine life; and for that reason we shall never get to the bottom of it (B 45).^{xiii} Thoughtful comprehension of our “common” world is something that increases continually. Real understanding becomes ever deeper; but there is no *completion* for it.

In the fragment that gives the clearest explanation of the metaphorical contrast between ordinary waking sleepers, and the rational listeners to the divine account, the scepticism of Protagoras and the Sophists is at the point of birth: “For those who are awake,” says Herakleitos, “there is one common *kosmos*, whereas in sleep each turns away into his private [*kosmos*]” (B 89).^{xiv} Ordinary folk live in the world of their senses; and we philosophers must build our comprehension of the divine account upon our sensory experience (B 55, B 35). The continuum of human and divine knowledge goes all the way down to the senses (B 28a); but there is a great revolution in the middle of our progress from sense-experience to intellectual comprehension (B 88).^{xv} Simple acceptance of sense experience links us to the brutes, and makes us apes in comparison with God (B 83) — or barbarians in comparison with true philosophers (B 107). When we get through the revolution, we are still only children, but no ape can compare with a proper child (B 82).^{xvi} The difference is in our potential. We must distinguish between the “children of our parents” (B 75) who are going to be “apes” and the mature philosophical “children,” who are better than the human apes. (Even they cannot ever be grown-up to the level of God, because they cannot get to the bottom of “soul.”)

Thus eyes and ears are good witnesses for us, if we have passed the point of “comprehension”; and eyes are better than ears — which will mainly bring us the witness of the human apes around us (B 55, B 101a; cf. B 113). But we have to discover what is “common,” not to us as animals, but to us and God — otherwise our senses will be bad witnesses (B 107). Pythagoras is right about the possibility of divine inspiration (B 92).^{xvii} Herakleitos himself has to use the language of the human apes (since that is what is “common” to us mortals). But he wants us to

attend to connections that are not visible or sensible, but concealed and only discoverable by thought (B 123, B 54).^{xviii} What is sensibly obvious is misleading; we ought to get over onto the divine side of the revolutionary shift, and not be content with guesses (B 56, B 47) — even the guesses of inspired prophets. We must recognize the One (B 29).

Because most of us are “asleep” we do need a civil theology, like that which has been proposed by Xenophanes. In spite of his intellectual monism, Herakleitos approved of Thales’ claim that “All things are full of Gods” (A 9).^{xix} His One true God is “willing to be called Zeus”; but he is not the Zeus of Hesiod (B 32). Ordinary folk are quite stupid about the Gods, who are not lumps of stone in the temples (22 B 5); and, of course, — just as Xenophanes himself holds — the One God is not really Zeus, since he has no other gods beside him. Xenophanes himself is quite wrong (if I have divined his ideal of civil life correctly) about human strife; for human conflict is an element of “the common.” It is rational and necessary (B 24, B 25, B 53, B 80). Indeed War is a better name for Zeus himself, the divinely destructive “thunderbolt that steers all things” (B 64, B 41); the harmony of the One is a harmony of opposites — that is what Pythagoras did not understand about the divine Fire (B 8, B 51).^{xx} Life and death are one; there is only a difference of accent, as in the words for “life” and “bow” (B 48).^{xxi}

The human community needs its *ethical* Gods. But the philosophical (or scientific) theology of Herakleitos transcends the human ethical standpoint quite explicitly. “For God all things are fair and just” (B 102).^{xxii} He is the “unity of opposites” in the sense that both sides are equally necessary to the divine judgment (*gnōme*) that “steers all things through all things.” God’s *gnōme* makes the circle in which end and beginning are common. The divine unity is a circle of conflict (B 103, B 53).^{xxiii} Even in the finite perspective, what is good (or bad) for us is not good (or bad) for other forms of life (B 61).^{xxiv} (Here Herakleitos builds on the work of Xenophanes.)

But Herakleitos is not really interested in the distinction between civil and philosophical theology (which he certainly grasped clearly enough). Even in his philosophical theology he needs the language of “cosmic justice” that we met in the fragment of Anaximander. He creates an intellectual problem for us when he says that the Furies as ministers of justice will fall upon the Sun,

if he “oversteps his measures” (B 94). We might take him to be using the language of civil theology, in order to lead us philosophers beyond it, by setting up this paradox of the Furies turning upon Apollo, the Sun god. But (as we shall soon see) Herakleitos operated with a very “chancy” conception of the Sun. He *needed* the hypothesis of “cosmic justice” because, although God’s Logos abides for ever, the present *kosmos* does not. For God, even the end of the world is “just.” The day is coming when the divine thunderbolt will fall upon the Sun itself, and our whole world will be consumed by fire. (At least, this is one plausible hypothesis about the *kosmos* and the *Logos*. Nothing is quite certain about Herakleitos’ view at this cosmic level — and that may be because Herakleitos himself was not certain about it. He was only a “child” after all.)

3. The *kosmos*

God is in the *kosmos* in the visible shape of fire. But, for the most part, he is a hidden presence. “God is Day <i.e. waking>, the Kindly Time <i.e. Night and Sleep>, Winter, Summer, War, Peace, Full Stomach, Hunger [all the opposites, says Hippolytos; this *Nous*] is changed just as <Fire> when it is mixed with the kinds of incense is named according to the pleasure of each” (B 67).^{xxv}

Even if we had only our noses to go by, the thoughtful seeker could discover God. The private world that faces each of us with our full complement of five senses is just a “random heap of sweepings”; but thought can reveal the absolute beauty of the *kosmos* (B 124). The *kosmos* of thought, which is the same for all thinkers, is “an everliving Fire kindled in measures, and extinguished in measures.” This always was; and it always will be (B 30).^{xxvi}

Herakleitos cannot speak of the divine Fire as “deathless” — as Anaximander did of the Boundless, and Anaximenes (probably) of the Air. Death is a necessary moment of the divine life; and the visible element of fire in the world “dies” into other forms of being. The “everliving fire” — being identically the same whether hidden or explicit — becomes a metaphor for universal life (or in terms that are more familiar to us, a metaphor for an immortal cycle of change). There are some

fragments in which “fire” seems to be meant more literally: “All things are an exchange for fire and fire for all things, just as goods <are exchanged> for gold and gold for goods” (B 90).^{xxvii} Here the analogy with money makes the identity of visible fire with the invisible divine Fire explicit. The divine Fire (when it becomes visible) is the gold of cosmic commerce. Herakleitos thinks we can recognize the pattern of this commercial exchange: “Fire’s turnings: first, sea, and of sea, half is earth and half ‘burner’ [i.e. lightning-bolt?].” But then: “Sea is poured forth and measured in the same proportion that was there before it became earth” (B 31).^{xxviii} (The *logos* — or ratio — of the divine energy remains constant in sea and earth.)

In this account of the cyclic progression Air does not appear. It seems clear that Herakleitos (like Xenophanes) began from the cosmology of Anaximenes. The report of Sextus that (according to Herakleitos) our lives are sustained by breathing, and we have our own intelligible world in dreams because our breathing continues when we are asleep, should be accepted as valid (A 16, 129-30).^{xxix} The Air is an *invisible* form of the divine Fire. But rational community begins with the use of the senses in sensibly-waking consciousness. Even the common world of the senses (in full sunlight) is better than the sleeping consciousness sustained by the Air. Philosophical reason is a conscious *return* from the (strictly private) dreams generated by the Air, to the level of the invisible Fire.

How Herakleitos envisaged the origin of the Air is not very clear in our sources. He seems to have identified the invisible “Air or Breath” of Anaximenes with the *animal* soul. For he says that “water comes to be out of earth, and soul out of water” (B 36).^{xxx} Here we are looking at the cosmic process that goes “upwards” towards the divine fire, whereas the “turnings” of fire were necessarily moving downwards. When Herakleitos said, “the way up and down is the same” (B 60) he was using a mountain path to represent the order of the *kosmos*; and this implies that “Air” has to come between Fire and Sea in the “turnings.” The first “defeat” (or “rout”) of Fire produces both Air and Water; the second produces both Earth and Fire once more. Going the opposite way, water pours out of the Earth (as in springs and the steady increase of rivers); and then water gives birth both to Air and to Soul.^{xxxi}

For one of the elements to “give birth” to another is the same as for that element itself “to die”: “Fire lives the death of earth, and air lives the death of fire; water lives the death of air, earth that of water” (B 76).^{xxxii} This gives a much simpler version of the “way up and down”; and we can understand why Anaximenes’ theory of condensation and rarefaction was imposed on it by the doxographers. But in its completely general form this imposition was certainly a mistake; Herakleitos did not think in the proto-mechanical terms of Anaximenes. With respect to Fire, Air and Water, however, it may not be quite wrong. For visible Air we have *smoke* (on the way down from Fire); and *clouds* (on the way up from Water). This gives us the Herakleitean “identity” of condensation and rarefaction. As Herakleitos saw it, Anaximenes made two mistakes. First, he thought that Air was the engine of the whole cycle; and secondly he thought that rarefaction and condensation were the whole story of the process. Reading Herakleitos, the doxographers understood the first “correction”; but they fell (hesitantly) into the second mistake themselves (A 1, 87-9; A 5). Once we recognize their mistake, we simply reject the reports. Herakleitos would say that on both sides there has been an equal failure to grasp that “Nature loves to hide” (B 123).

In general, Herakleitos was much closer to Xenophanes regarding physical transformation than he was to Anaximenes; and his theory of the Sun’s life and death confirms this affinity.^{xxxiii} He is supposed to have said that the Sun is small; specifically that it has “the breadth of a human foot” (B 3).^{xxxiv} He may have been speaking from the ordinary point of view here (i.e., from the standpoint that makes Homer as much of an astronomer as Thales).^{xxxv} But the doctrine is also a convenient “truth” for Herakleitos, since his Sun was a “bowl” which has to be refilled with the bright and fiery exhalations from the sea every day. “The sun is new every day” (B 6) in this sense. The Moon is a bowl also. Eclipses are caused by the turning of the bowls (A 1, 9).^{xxxvi} The Sun (through the kindling and extinction of its fire according to its “measures”) is the equal cause of the “difference” within the identity of Day and Night (B 99).^{xxxvii} But how the Sun-bowl gets from its western setting to its eastern rising, Herakleitos apparently did not explain.^{xxxviii}

Herakleitos was certainly more concerned to establish the general thesis that the order of Nature is a balance of tensions (B 84a, B 51, B 30, B 8, etc.) than to explain any particular natural phenomena. The doctrine of his that became most famous was that “All things flow and nothing abides.” It is still part of the proverbial stock of the educated that “You cannot step in the same river twice.” It seems that Herakleitos himself did not quite say either of these things. But there is enough in our record for us to see why they became proverbially his.^{xxxix} What interested him in the river metaphor was precisely that it is identically one river that is constituted by the ever-different waters. It is only with respect to *human* life that the “difference” becomes important. We shall come to that soon. For the moment, what matters is that everything does (and must) flow, because to be *alive* is to move and to change. Fire is the “first principle” because it is the immortal engine of the world’s life. But the structured *kosmos* is a river that abides.

One of the most difficult (and controversial) questions about Herakleitos concerns whether the *kosmos* that abides is *this sensibly present kosmos* (in which “the way up and down is the same” because there is a perfect balance of earth, water, air and fire); or whether there is an *absolute* “way up” in which everything else becomes *fire*. Zeno of Citium (founder of the Stoic school) studied his Herakleitos long and carefully; and he concluded that there is a universal conflagration. But in that case, the *kosmos* that “was and is and will be” in fragment 30 is a cycle that goes to universal life and reason in the divine fire (*Aether*); and it must go from there to universal death (as Earth). This may seem implausible, but we shall find something like it in Empedokles.

Without wanting to *decide* the question definitely — since beginners should certainly leave it open — we may note the following indications: For God, everything, good and evil, in our *kosmos* is equally justified (B 102; cf. B 67); conflict and opposition (and consequently “difference”) is absolutely necessary. Yet Herakleitos finds it necessary to speak of cosmic vengeance on the Sun if it “oversteps its measures” (B 94). This is not an isolated lapse into civil theology (for which traditional poetic images can quite properly be borrowed). For “thunderbolt steers all things” (B 64); and “Fire, having come suddenly upon all things, will judge, and convict them” (B 66)^{xl} The Sun, in particular, is a vital part of the *kosmos*. But it is small; and its immortality is founded on a

rather fragile process.^{xli} The commercial balance of exchange in our *kosmos* may be strictly temporary — and never really perfect (B 90).^{xlii} So perhaps the properly eternal *kosmos* is a Great Year at one end of which God banks all of the fiery gold in his own account; while at the other end it is all expended for finite goods.

The “measures” of the great *kosmos* are mainly time-intervals. But the equal exchange of Earth, Air, Water and Fire is spatial — and the “measures” of the Sun are probably spatial too. But the limits of the soul cannot be found, because its *logos* is so deep (B 45). It stretches from the life and death of Air and Water (which is perhaps almost mechanical) through the smelling souls in Hades, to human apes and philosopher-children, and so at last to God — and then, perhaps (finally), to the swallowing of the differentiated *kosmos* in God). (But in view of the bottomless depth of soul, Herakleitos *may* simply have held that we *cannot know* whether there is a universal conflagration [*ekpyrosis*] or not. This is the most appropriate conclusion, for the rationalist critic who jeered at Pythagoras.)

4. Human Life

Human life begins at the unconscious level as a consuming drive of self-assertion; and it traverses much of the cosmic path, but it does not make a proper circle — and so arrive at the divine level (B 78). Our lives do not have an intelligent divine plan (*gnōme*) (B 41). Human time is chancy; it is only a game with counters (B 52).^{xliii} The counters may be removed from the board at any moment; and if they get “home,” the victory is only a childish one (B 79, B 83). We cannot do more than reach the threshold of the divine life.

The advent of sense-awareness does not affect the blind drive of self-assertion; but at this conscious level we can make the distinction between “heart” (*thymos*) — the seat of the primitive drive of life — and “soul,” with which the heart “buys” its desire. To buy something external with “soul” is to go downwards from fire to water.^{xliv} So the paradigm case of “heart’s desire” is

drunkenness. “It is delight not death, for souls to become wet”; and “a fiery spark is the dry soul, wisest and best” (B 77, B 118).^{xlv} The soul has a *logos* (a *ratio* we might say here) that “increases itself” (B 115).^{xlvi} We ought, of course, to go upwards towards the transformation of our souls into the bright gleam of thought; and then we ought to go over the bridge to the *common* thought of God’s own “account.”

We cannot help our lack of learning (others must help us with it). But we ought to hide the soul-condition as well as we can (B 95).^{xlvii} We ought not to get drunk (so that we have to depend on a child (B 117), who has not yet lived long enough to learn anything). But there is also a way of becoming fiery that must be “quenched” (by the consciousness of our own childish immaturity?). We must become ever more conscious of our absolute dependence on what is (intellectually) “common.” For “*hybris* must be put out even more than a <physical> blaze” (B 43).

Hybris — the violent self-assertion that threatens (or denies) community — must be quenched by obedience to the common law. The law is the *invisible* wall of the City; and just as *hybris* should be put out faster than a house on fire (which may burn down the whole neighborhood), so the City must defend its law even more vigorously than its outer wall (B 44).

Against *hybris* the social use of force is necessary and justified. Physical violence is the “water” that extinguishes intellectual violence. Thus, the Crotoniates were justified in mounting a revolution against the Pythagoreans. At the bottom end of the scale, “beasts are driven to pasture by a blow” (B 11); so it is fairly clear that Herakleitos held that sparing the rod spoils the child. This has authoritarian implications for the great middle range of human life, since the majority of us remain “apelike” in our dependence on the senses — or even “donkeylike” in our restriction to sensual desires. Some of the “animal relativism” in Herakleitos (“Pigs love mud,” “hens wash in dust and ashes,” etc. — B 13, B 37, etc.) has an evident ethical significance that is made explicit by the comment: “The best choose one thing rather than all else — everflowing glory among mortals; but the many glut themselves like cattle” (B 29). We must not *imitate* the other animals; we should *avoid* what they choose, because there is a higher way of life that is naturally right for us (cf. B 5).

So the best should rule; the democratic principle that everyone counts equally is wrong, because “One man is a myriad, if he be the best” (B 49). (Hermodoros was such a one; and his expulsion was a case of *communal hybris* — B 121.)^{xlviii} The moment of transition between the “water” of the lower desires, and the “fire” of divine community is the love of honor. This will not become *hybris* if it is directed towards the preservation of our political community. The foundation of civil piety, therefore, is that “Greater dooms win greater destinies”; and “the gods” (as well as men) “honor those slain by Ares [i.e. in battle]” (B 24, B 25).^{xlix} Devotion to the City forms the good character (*ethos*). But the good *ethos* can never become equal to the divine *gnōme*. It is not a plan of life that secures its own fulfilment; it is only the *daimōn* [guardian spirit] of human happiness (B 119).¹ The good *ethos* is a dedication to what is “common” — and in the ideal case to what is *intellectually* common. Civic obedience is *ethically* common, because it remains at the level of belief (or insight) and does not become actual *identity* with the divine life. That *identity* is the “wisdom” that the philosopher distantly perceives.ⁱⁱ

There is no doubt that Herakleitos himself — being an “aristocrat” in the most traditional sense — was a rational oligarch in politics. He believed that the “best people” should maintain power over “the many” by using whatever legally compulsive means they could establish and reliably maintain. “The many” had no wisdom; and a democratic constitution and ideology led to wisdom being despised. The gut-feeling of distrust that democrats feel about intellectual superiority is a kind of *hybris*.ⁱⁱⁱ But we should not confuse the reactive gut-feeling on the part of Herakleitos himself, with the truly necessary consequences of his philosophy of conflict. In a world of universal literacy, one can be both a Herakleitean and a “utilitarian democrat.” The duty of a rational human is to get everyone as far on the “upward path” as they are able to go; and (except in dealing with the extreme of arrogantly violent *hybris*) persuasion is the necessary means for that. So a Herakleitean may adopt the democratic principle as the best social foundation for educational persuasion (just as Archytas did, within the similar intellectual perspective of the Pythagoreans). We shall still use compulsion when persuasion fails; but Herakleiteans may actually become better at avoiding (or minimizing) compulsion than the *ideological* democrats. The “logic” of Herakleitos only tells us that we are bound to have policy disagreements about the proper “measures” when conflicts arise.

Perikles was a good paradigm of the Herakleitean statesman; and Herakleitos would not blame him — as Plato probably did — for the Peloponnesian War.

Even when we have established a good *ethos* (socially and individually) we cannot make a self-sufficient circle of our lives. Eventually we must die; but a *chosen* death that brings fame is better than leaving children to carry on our name in the city (B 20).^{liii} This survival in fame is probably what is referred to in the mysterious fragment 63: “<The golden souls (?)> in <God’s> presence, rise up and become wakeful watchers of living men and corpses.”^{liv} But we may here be passing out of “civil theology,” and into the sphere of philosophical truth (or at least of *rational faith*).

The “corpses” that have died without any possibility of this resurrection, are blind souls in Hades, who have only the sense of smell. Apart from the literal meaning here (that “death” *cannot* be absolute extinction) this refers metaphorically to the life of the “pig-humans” who can sort out what they “like,” from what they “don’t like.” The “civil God” of life at this level is Dionysos: “Hades and Dionysos are the same” (B 15) (because of the “identity” of life and death — and the identity of all life with the *invisible* Fire). We can philosophically understand and politically accept much that is shameful in civil religion^{lv} because we understand how these “shameful” things belong to the total (conflicting) harmony of human existence. But we should not tolerate (either socially or intellectually) the wandering prophets and sorcerers, who trade upon the superstitious aspects of popular religion (B 14).

When Herakleitos called Pythagoras “the captain of swindlers” (B 81a) he meant to put him at the top of this category.^{lvi} Herakleitos himself certainly believed in the immortality of “soul” (speaking generally); and he *may* have believed in the immortality of individual soul-substances (though it may also be the case that the language which suggests this was “civil theology” only).^{lvii} Herakleitos himself seems to admit that he does not know whether his civil piety is a rationally justified faith. He is quite explicit that we do not know what to expect after death (B 27); and if our souls are reincarnated, they must go down to the watery level, and mature again gradually from

there. So it is axiomatically obvious that the “memory” (either of a previous life, or of the state of being dead) is not possible.

“Death” is mainly a metaphor in Herakleitos. The world of sense-experience is in a state of death, because all of the tension — and perhaps much of the motion — of Nature is hidden and becomes invisible. We seem to live in a stable environment, with stable “things”; but this is an illusion. Natural death is like sleep; and if we think of our natural death as *real* (or lasting) sleep, then ordinary sleep becomes an enlightening metaphor for the sensory-waking state.^{lviii} We must kindle the light of reason in the dark night of our sensory existence, by getting our thought into conscious contact with the divine “account.”

If we can do that, does the fiery spark of our souls become united with God? Is this how and why Herakleitos expected the universal conflagration? (Or did he not expect it at all, and was any talk of it just the “civil theology” of the philosophic life?) This is the right way to formulate T.M. Robinson’s question “how much of ‘Heraclitus’ did Heraclitus himself believe?”^{lix} His philosophy was not *all* of it an ideology of the good life. He believed (tentatively, but not nearly as tentatively as Xenophanes) in a lot of his own insights into the divine eternal order. But did he believe in the *real* existence of a “cosmic justice” beyond the level of the divine indifference to *human* values? Did he really believe that God’s plan is to bring all things to himself?

About the historical thinker, I am more inclined to say “yes” than “no.” Herakleitos was not an instinctive sceptic. He believed in his own divine inspiration almost as arrogantly as Pythagoras. But his was the inspiration of Reason in which all could share; and logically he ought to have adopted Xenophanes’ more critical faith in scientific progress. That certainly implies that he should have said that about any plan of God in which this present *kosmos* is only one element, we simply do not — and we simply *cannot* — know.

5. Kratylos

Vlastos remarks that Herakleitos was “ignored in Ionia.”^{lx} His cyclic theory of the elements certainly had some influence on Empedokles in Italy; and I think that (in Ionia) his probable influence on Protagoras should not be overlooked. But his most important impact upon his successors can probably be seen in the violent reaction of Parmenides against the “backward turning *harmonia*.”^{lxi}

Herakleitos did have some “followers,” however, both at home and abroad — and especially in Athens, when Plato was growing up (and after Anaxagoras had been expelled?). In Ephesos itself, we hear of a certain Antisthenes;^{lxii} and the Platonic Sokrates speaks humorously of the Ephesian “companions of Herakleitos” who cannot be argued with because their very thoughts are in perpetual motion (*Theaetetus* 179de).^{lxiii} But these “companions” were actually in Athens; Aristotle speaks, more soberly, of “those who said they were Herakleitizing”; and the leader among them was Kratylos (65 A 4; *Metaphysics* 1010 a 7).^{lxiv}

Kratylos was certainly not older than Sokrates; and he may have been quite a bit younger. He is principally famous as the first teacher of Plato. Aristotle says that “in his youth” (and, by implication, before he came under the influence of Sokrates) Plato “first became familiar with Kratylos, and with the Herakleitean opinions that all sensible things are forever flowing, and that there is no scientific knowledge of them” (65 A 3; *Metaphysics* 987 a 29).

This is the only doctrine that Aristotle definitely ascribes to Kratylos. He apparently pushed the Herakleitean doctrine that sense-consciousness is a falsification of the tensely dynamic reality of nature, to the limit of absolute scepticism. Aristotle’s Kratylos is more like a Herakleitean apologist for Gorgias, than a man who has listened to the “Logos.” Herakleitos said that we cannot step into the same river twice — or, at least, that is how he came to be quoted. Kratylos dramatized his own view by saying that we cannot step into the same river *even once*. If one wants to avoid falsehood, one must not speak at all, but simply point at what is there to be perceived. To name it, would be to give it a truth-status that does not properly belong to it (65 A 4 — *Metaphysics* 1010 a 7).

But in Plato's *Kratylos*, this same man is credited with the belief that there is a *natural* language of the names that truly belong to things. Everything has a *correct* name, which is the same for Greeks and for barbarians (65 A 5 — *Cratylus* 383a). The only sign of this doctrine in Aristotle's reports might perhaps be found in the *Rhetoric*, where Aeschines is said to have described Kratylos as "hissing with fury and shaking his fists" (65 A 2 — *Rhetoric* 1417 b 1). Aristotle offers this simply as an example of how to describe your opponent's rage; but, quite possibly, Kratylos was not himself in a rage — he was only demonstrating that there is a universal language of gestures.

According to Plato's image of him, however, Kratylos also maintained that it is impossible to say anything false (65 A 1 — *Cratylus* 429de). Thus, if Hermogenes, the other participant in the dialogue, has nothing of the nature of Hermes in him, then to call him by that name is not to talk about him at all, but to make meaningless noises about nothing. This essentially Eleatic doctrine is at the opposite extreme from the "Herakleitizing" that Aristotle tells us about. According to the Kratylos of Aristotle it is impossible to say anything *true*. Plato's Parmenidean Kratylos cannot say "what is not."

These two positions are actually quite compatible. We can formulate them together in one proposition thus: "You cannot say what is true about the objects of immediate sense-experience; and unless you say what is true, you say nothing (in the proper sense of the verb to say)." The "natural language" of gesture — pointing, hissing, and fist-shaking — is all that is left to the would-be truth-sayer. Human experience really is reduced to "a heap of sweepings."

Perhaps all of this was only a dialectical attack on the sense-based empiricism of the Ionian tradition. The Kratylos of Plato's dialogue has not only read Parmenides, he has thought hard about the Herakleitian Logos. His view that everything has a "correct name" points toward the view that every name ought to refer univocally to a stable moment of that universal Logos which is the same for us all; it ought to express the formula (the *particular* "logos") of some cycle of change. One

cannot name that which “both is and is not” at the same time; so one must understand that that sensible phenomenon is not what the stable and constant names of all natural languages refer to. “True” names refer to realities that are non-sensible.

Whether this Kratylos was the historical person, or only a Platonic fiction cannot now be decided; and it does not matter. Plato uses the historical Kratylos, to make due acknowledgement of his own debt to Herakleitos. The radicalization of the thesis that life and death are identical, and that “war is the father and king of all” enabled Plato to find his way out of the impasse created by Parmenides on one side, and Gorgias on the other. He avoided the Protagorean expedient of substituting the *useful* for the “true,” by adopting the view that names properly refer to intellectual things that are true “beings” according to the Eleatic standard. His Kratylos is really a Pythagorean; for by Plato’s time the Pythagoreans were saying that the right answer to the question “What is the wisest?” is “Number, but second he that has assigned names to things” (58 C 4).^{lxv} Plato’s first teacher probably did not know *that*; for if he had known it Plato would have stayed with him. But he did set the problem of how the use of names could possibly be justified, firmly in the central spotlight of Plato’s mind.

In the same generation (of Kratylos and Sokrates) the influence of Herakleitos is evident in the Orphic religious author of the text that has come down to us (partially) in the Derveni Papyrus. This eclectic thinker is influenced by Diogenes of Apollonia and the Atomists, as well as by Herakleitos. But he understands the Logos and the Common/Private distinction; and Herakleitos is the author whom he cites by name. He quotes B3 and B94 (both of them about the Sun) but it seems to be the role of the Erinyes (as the powers that maintain the order of Nature) that interests him most. (The Papyrus is too fragmentary for us to be sure of much more.)

Notes

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- i. Apollodoros apparently placed his *akme* in 504-501 BCE (22 A 1 — Diogenes Laertios). But considering his probable influence of Herakleitos on Parmenides, he may have been as much as ten years older than that. Diogenes says that he died at the age of sixty. (All of the testimonies and fragments are translated in T.M. Robinson, 1987.)
 - ii. One leading expert (G.S. Kirk, 1954, 7) doubts whether he wrote a book at all. Probably what he dedicated to the Goddess — if he *did* that — was not a connected argument (like the books of Anaximander and Anaximenes) but a collection of sayings intended for thoughtful meditation. Fragment 1 certainly looks like the opening of a written work; and the hypothesis of a younger Boswell who wrote down his “sayings,” is not at all plausible. Herakleitos definitely wanted *his own words* to be heard. He knew they would not often be understood. But that did not trouble him.
 - iii. For references see Guthrie, I, 409 n1 — but all are late. The “melancholia” of Theophrastos (22 A 1, 6) may refer to Herakleitos’ quick temper; it is not our “melancholy.”
 - iv. The story has been inflated under the influence of Plato’s Philosopher-King. I doubt if Herakleitos said anything about adults and adolescents (and I am quite sure that the City did not ask him to make laws for them, as the biographer here goes on to say). But I expect he did say “They all deserve to be hanged for they have thrown out the most valuable man among them” (and what follows).

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- v. What Herakleitos knows about Pythagoras collecting “writings” suggests that someone — Brontinos? (cf. 17 A 4) — may have published parts of Pythagoras’ “collection.” (But compare the alternative suggestion in note 18 below.)
- vi. Both of these are *testimonies*, and should not be classed as fragments. Herakleitos may, very probably, have contrasted “ordinary” astronomy with the quest for — or contact with — the divine Logos — see the next section of this chapter.
- vii. G. Vlastos (1955) in Furley and Allen, 1970, 416-9. Vlastos agrees with G.S. Kirk that B 80 is a criticism of Anaximander, and he interprets it much more convincingly than Kirk.
- viii. C. Osborn, 19 . Mis Osborn deals, in particular, with the use of Herakleitos by the early Christian bishop, Hippolytus of Rome.
- ix. For Aristotle’s (briefer) quotation see A 4 (*Rhetoric* 1907b 11).
- x. From Hippolytos; C. Osborne (1987) suggests more economically “<One thing is common,> but of this *logos* etc.”
- xi. Fragment 57 speaks of the “identity,” whereas Hesiod (*Theogony*, 744-57) speaks of Day and Night as separate beings who meet and greet one another as they take their turn. Actually they are opposites, which make up one and the same day through their absolute incompatibility and opposition (cf. C. Osborne, 1987, 166). But this *natural* “identity” is not all that Hesiod misleads people about (cf. B 106). It is the identity of our ordinary experience in our private darkness, with the truth of God’s “account” in the common light of

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- thought, that we must comprehend (by understanding the difference between *philosophical* sleeping and waking).
- xii. I am assuming an implicit *contrast* between Homer (or Archilochos) and Hesiod here.
- xiii. See further B 46 and B 113; then B 115, B 78, B 79, B 2; and finally B 116.
- xiv. This is from Pseudo-Plutarch — the “fragment” has been paraphrased in the reporter’s own words, but the content is clearly genuine. Compare B 2.
- xv. This is the most important meaning of the fragment. It may also be *one* of the meanings of the puzzling B 62. (But for that, see further below).
- xvi. Compare especially B 78. We have to distinguish between those who have *ordinary* wisdom, and those who share in God’s wisdom.
- xvii. Compare also B 93, but that remark is directed at those who are philosophically “awake.” Compare further A 20.
- xviii. Notice the use of *harmonia*. In the opinion of Herakleitos, Pythagoras was seeking a *visible* “harmony” (cf. B 40). One could hardly say this about the astronomy and music theory of the later Pythagoreans. We must not forget that Herakleitos had only limited evidence to go on (possibly only hearsay); but he has not heard anything about “musical numbers” in the *kosmos*. He probably *has* heard about the Heavens being a *harmonia*.

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- xix. This is a story told by Aristotle of how Herakleitos greeted his visitors when he was sitting by his own fire: “Here, too, there are Gods” (*Parts of Animals* 645a 17).
- xx. See also B 30 and B 54 — I am assuming that the word *harmonia* actually occurred in the original which Aristotle paraphrases in fragment 8. Cf. 22 A 22.
- xxi. Greek, in the time of Herakleitos, did not yet *have* written accents.
- xxii. To say (as Vlastos does, for instance — 1955, in Furley and Allen, 1970, 428) that this is “fatal for all morality, not excepting his own,” is quite mistaken. Herakleitos only means that the absolutely philosophical point of view is not that of mortal human purposes (see further note 24 below).
- xxiii. Is there an implicit bow to Alkmaeon here? Or does the debt perhaps go the other way?
- xxiv. Compare B 9 and B 13 — but these remarks are metaphorically *ethical* — i.e., they are really concerned with *human* relations. The literal sense is important, because it shows that the Divine transcendence of human ethics is not at all “fatal” to moral judgment in its proper context. Is it “fatal for all morality” that it does not apply to the animals any more than it does to God?
- xxv. For the <inserted> choice of *fire* as God’s presence here see B 65. But if we prefer a properly hidden god, we can insert “olive oil” instead of <fire> [as H. Fränkel suggested]

and interpret *thuōma* as “spice.” Either way Herakleitos was imagining the universe of smells — see B 7. He implied that our experience will be reduced to that when we die — B 98. Those in Hades [“the invisible”] cannot have *sight*. But they can still *think* if they will do it. (All this about Hades may very probably be *mythical*. Herakleitos may only have meant to characterize the life of sensual pleasure pursued by the ignorant as a “living death.”)

- xxvi. It seems to be clearly implied that the fiery energy of the *kosmos* is a measurable finite quantity. But whether Herakleitos thought about this, and whether he believed in a surrounding “Infinite” (as in Anaximander and Anaximenes) is not clear. Vlastos argues that he did not (1955, in Furley and Allen, 1970, 426). But see the judiciously hesitant note of Guthrie (I, 469n).

If we accept the identification of the alternation of kindling and extinction with the Logos it may seem that the Furies waiting for the Sun to exceed his measures is just an image from civil theology. But perhaps the divine life itself is an alternation of life and death. Our phase of the cosmic order may be moving either towards *absolute* kindling or *absolute* extinction. (Each of these could have its “measure.” Compare Aristotle and Simplicios in A 10.)

- xxvii. R. McKirahan, 1994, 124 and 140, points out that an alternative interpretation is “gold for money” — i.e. for gold that has been stamped and certified as coinage for circulation.
- xxviii. B 31 is two separate fragments that occur together in a continuous explanation given by Clement of Alexandria.
- xxix. But when we find the reporters imposing “condensation and rarefaction” upon the

Herakleitean theory of nature — compare A 5 — we must regard that with grave suspicion. The reporters were probably right in thinking that there was a debt to Anaximenes. But they misunderstood it, and probably made it more *literal* than it really was.

- xxx. Compare 22 A 16 (end) — Sextus, *Against the Mathematicians* 8.286. The quotation there ought to be accepted as a genuine fragment.
- xxxi. We may notice that this was probably a conscious inheritance from Thales (compare A 9).
- xxxii. None of the three reporters is giving the actual words of Herakleitos but there is a saying other than B 36 behind what they are paraphrasing. Compare B 62 in which the “mortality” of each primary form is identified as the “immortality” of the others.
- xxxiii. Because of Xenophanes’ long life, and our uncertainty about the dates of Herakleitos, we cannot say how this affinity originated (i.e. which of them was “influenced” by the other).
- xxxiv. This claim seems to mean that the only standpoint from which the physical size of the Sun can be measured is that of sense-perception. *That* constitutes a severe criticism of speculations like those of Anaximander.
- xxxv. The author of the Derveni Papyrus text was impressed by the Herakleitean theory of the sun. D. Sider (Laks and Most, 1997, 439-45) has put Herakleitos’ remarks together in a thought-sequence. (But what was attractive to an Orphic thinker may not have been important for Herakleitos himself.)

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- xxxvi. It is surely the *phases* of the Moon that are at the origin of the bowl-theory?
- xxxvii. Diogenes Laertios (A 1) reports that according to Herakleitos Night is caused by the filling of the Sun-bowl with a dark exhalation from the Earth. But that seems to be a misunderstanding.
- xxxviii. There are explanations in the reports — see Guthrie, I, 484. But they look like guesses made by the reporters. (I would hazard the guess myself that Herakleitos accepted Anaximenes' view — see above, Chapter 4, p. 000 [67?]; and further Guthrie, I, 485.)
- xxxix. For the River see B 12, B 49a, B 91a,b. That “all things flow, nothing abides” may have been coined by Plato (*Cratylus* 402a); or (more probably) it was already current in Plato's youth. (It should perhaps be regarded as a “fragment” of *Kratylos*.)
- xl. Hippolytos took B 66 as a clear anticipation of the Christian belief in the Last Judgment. But we must allow for his own dogmatic concerns. He was using Herakleitos to demonstrate the *pagan* inspiration of the heresy of Noetos.
- xli. Plutarch's report (22 B 100) that the Sun collaborates with the first and greatest God as overseer for defining the seasons, is indirectly significant in this connection. The Sun can only govern the time-measures of *our kosmos*; but if the thunderbolt struck it, our whole *kosmos* would be dissolved.
- xlii. The view of Xenophanes — and perhaps of Anaximander before him — that our world is drying up should not be forgotten.

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- xliii. Hippolytos took *aion* here as a name for the divine life itself. Because “the kingship is a child’s,” the general consensus now is that Herakleitos means “*human* life-time.” But he may mean “universal time” — or the lifetime of *this kosmos* until the conflagration when God takes over the “kingship” properly.
- xliv. Clearly Herakleitos thought “water” was the “mother” of life. This was *his* interpretation of what Thales meant.
- xlv. “Dry” is placed ambiguously between “spark” (or “gleam”) and “soul” in B 118. I have therefore applied it to both.
- xlvi. The “difference” between “up” and “down” is “the same” for God but not for us. Even if there is no *cosmic* conflagration, *we* must strive to become absorbed into the divine Fire.
- xlvii. What is to be *hidden*, I take it, is one’s desire for the pleasure of the ignorant. We must not be afraid to reveal the intellectual ignorance itself to those who can cure it.
- xlviii. Compare also B 39 on Bias of Priene.
- xlix. It is very obvious that this talk of “the Gods” is part of “civil theology,” and not of the philosophical theory of the One True God.
- l. The Greek word for “happiness” (*eudaimonia*) literally means “being fortunate in one’s *daimon*.”

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- li. It was probably the *ethical* distinction between the “common” and the “private” (===== and =====) that attracted the author of the Derveni Papyrus text. (Laks and Most misunderstand ===== in their translation — 1997, 11 — and everyone else seems to agree with them. It means “private to *any* individual,” not “private to Herakleitos.”)
- lii. Compare the Hermodoros anecdote in B 121.
- liii. Herakleitos was apparently a bachelor. But he dedicated his book in his City’s greatest temple, because it was a guarantee of the very highest kind of fame. (If this is perchance not true, it is certainly a happier fiction than most of the others suggested by his “sayings.”)
- liv. Hippolytos thought that Herakleitos had anticipated both the Crucifixion and the Christian mystery of the Resurrection. He was actually echoing Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 121-123. For the Hippolytan interpretation, which helps us to interpret the corrupt text at the beginning of the fragment, see C. Osborne, 1987, 170-9.
- lv. See B 15 again. Herakleitos, like Plato after him, was clearly a rational puritan — much more puritanical than Xenophanes. He thought that the philosophical life was strengthened by turning one’s back on the things of the body (cf B 9, B 13). (Like his antipathy to democracy, this is not a strictly logical consequence of his “strife-philosophy.” Herakleiteans can — and should — be on both sides of the issue.)
- lvi. That this was how the remark should be taken follows fairly safely from the sort of knowledge of Pythagoras that we can securely ascribe to Herakleitos. He would have known about “the community of all life” from Xenophanes. By his own testimony, he knew about Pythagoras’ general reputation for learning. I take his repeated use of *harmonia* (as hidden

under conflict) as safe evidence that he knew that the Pythagorean *kosmos* was a *harmonia* — and he *thought* that Pythagoras recognized only a visible one. (My hypothesis is that — quite apart from the hypothetical Pythagorean book of Brontinos — he could have learned this too from Xenophanes.)

None of this justifies the epithet “swindler.” What does justify it is the public reputation (which Pythagoras clearly cultivated) for *remembering* his previous lives. The fact that Herakleitos himself believed (necessarily) in the immortality of soul-in-general made him all the angrier about that. He is emphatic that we *cannot* (personally) know what happens to our souls after death. W. Burbank (1972, 161) points out that *kakotechnie* — in 22 B — was used for the suborning of perjury; and further that the Zalmoxis story, together with the “Golden Thigh” claim are part of a pretence to have returned from the dead. (I am also assuming that Herakleitos obtained Alkmaeon’s book.)

- lvii. The metaphor of the river (since it refers to the river of human life, rather than to the circular flowing of the primary bodies) *could* be part of a theory of “reincarnation.”
- lviii. B 21 tells us that the waking world is death. In B 26 we learn that the waking sense-world is a world of things that have gone to sleep.
- lix. Robinson, 1987, 191. (He cites B 124 in support of his doubt. But he has certainly misunderstood *that* fragment! It is “the most beautiful order” of *any* sensory existence that is “a heap of sweepings” — cf. B . . .)
- lx. Vlastos, 1955 (in Furley and Allen, 1970, 429); for the influence of Herakleitos on Empedokles see Vlastos, 1947 (in Furley and Allen, 1970, 67-69).

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- lxi. 22 B 51; cf. Parmenides, 28 B 6: 8-9.
- lxii. Diogenes Laertios lists him first — 22 A 1(15) — among the commentators on Herakleitos. Elsewhere he occurs only as someone to be distinguished from Antisthenes the Socratic (66 A 1, Diogenes Laertios VI, 19). The list of commentators continues with Herakleides Pontikos — and not all who follow after him are Stoics.
- lxiii. Notice that Plato brings these Herakleiteans into connection with Protagoras.
- lxiv. We meet the “Herakleitizers” again in the (non-Aristotelian, but still Peripatetic) *Problems*, 934b 33. Here they are doing natural philosophy in a Herakleitean vein, and they may really *be* Ephesians. (Kratylos does not seem to have been interested in the theory of nature as such.)
- lxv. No doubt the Master himself gave the answer “Number”; but was it Plato who added the supplement? (Notice that the question “What is the wisest *in our power*?” is quite distinct; and the answer is “Healing.” Plato’s struggle for a “Theory of Forms” continues the quest of Sokrates for a “medicine of the soul.”)