

HERACLITUS, MARCUS, NIETZSCHE

Eternal Return of the Self, or, Epics of the Soul, or, Becoming Oneself

PHIL 603-01, M 12:15–2:55

Dr. Miller

“The world forever needs the truth, hence the world forever needs Heraclitus.” Thus spoke Nietzsche in one of his first books. One of his last books shows his admiration undiminished: “I set apart with high reverence the name of Heraclitus...Heraclitus will always be right.” What was the perennial truth that this iconoclastic German found in the aphorisms of this obscure Greek? To discover it for ourselves, we shall become students of Zarathustra, who preaches several Heraclitean doctrines: that everything flows in time, that no self is ever itself, and thus that each self must become itself. “Become who you are!” is his paradoxical lesson; his tale is accordingly an epic of the soul. Aiming our course toward understanding this recent interpretation of Zarathustra (Seung’s), we shall begin with a study of Heraclitus himself.

Zarathustra also preached the eternal return, which Nietzsche later said “could possibly have been taught by Heraclitus.” Whether or not it was—an exegetical question we shall consider alongside many others, helped by Kahn’s masterpiece of philosophical scholarship—many other Greeks thought his aphorisms preached a cosmic cycle. Of the Stoics, who revered Heraclitus as a founder, and adopted the eternal return as their creed, none was more devoted than Marcus Aurelius. He likewise thought himself immersed in a flowing world, struggling to love his fate rather than change it, believing in a god whose only salvation would be the rough justice of time itself, namely death. This melancholic Roman wrote an intimate meditation, never intended for publication, which his best interpreter (Hadot) has shown to be a compendium of spiritual exercises. Marcus thus anticipates the discipline of Zarathustra, which has the same goal: to return to the *logos* of Heraclitus, the eternal striving of self-becoming.

But who returned more faithfully, Nietzsche or Marcus? If equally so, was Nietzsche thus a Stoic, despite the scorn he elsewhere pours on that ancient school? These questions are more than historical curiosities. On the contrary, they are of the utmost importance for contemporary continental philosophy. Nietzsche was not alone in his reverence for Heraclitus; in this matter, if in none other, he followed Hegel; in this matter, as in others, he was followed by Heidegger. All three wrote reverential studies of the Obscure, which makes his present neglect seem all the more peculiar. Has Heraclitus been surpassed by his German disciples, obviating all future returns to his aphorisms? Or should we return to them afresh in order to perpetuate his eternal revolution in logic, ontology, epistemology, psychology, theology, ethics, and aesthetics? Only so, he would argue, can you become yourself. Only so, we shall add, can he become himself.

Evaluation:

Greek Alphabet Quiz.....5%
Midterm Exam.....25%
Paper.....45%
Final Exam.....25%

Texts:

The Art and Thought of Heraclitus, C. H. Kahn
(Cambridge)
Meditations of Marcus Aurelius, tr. Grube
(Hackett)
The Inner Citadel, P. Hadot, tr. Chase
(Harvard)
Thus Spoke Zarathustra, tr. A. Del Caro, ed. R.
Pippin (Cambridge).
Nietzsche’s Epic of The Soul, T. K. Seung
(Lexington)