

HERACLITUS AND DEMOCRITUS

THE WEeping AND LAUGHING

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS

From a Rosicrucian manuscript



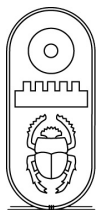
HERACLITUS

(ca. 576–480 BCE)

Heraclitus of Ephesus, son of Blyson, was born around the time of the Sixty-ninth Olympiad. He was usually called “the dark philosopher,” for he spoke very little, and when he did speak, it was always in riddles. When people asked him the reason for his silence, he would reply sorrowfully, “It is to make you speak.” It is thought that he never had a teacher, and that it is because of his profound meditations that he became so learned. He grieved at human wickedness, and was saddened by humanity’s blindness. Human wrongdoing made him so sorrowful that he was continually in tears. The poet Juvenal contrasted this philosopher with Democritus who was always laughing. It was said that anyone can learn to tolerate the folly and corruption of the times by laughing, but there were no springs containing enough

water to supply the tears which flowed continually from the eyes of Heraclitus.

The philosopher’s manner had not always been thus; when he was young, he said that he knew everything and that nothing was unknown to him. Yet this statement did not reveal all of his thinking. In reality, he disliked most people and shunned their company, preferring to play games with the village children in front of the Temple of Diana. To the Ephesians who would gather to stand and stare at him, he would say, “Poor wretches, why does it surprise you to see me play with these little children? Is it not more worthwhile for me to do this, than to be a party to your mismanagement of the affairs of the Republic?” The Ephesians once asked Heraclitus to give them some laws but he declined to do so; the morals of the people were already too corrupt and he saw no means by which he could make them change their ways. He said that



citizens should struggle with as much zeal to preserve their laws as they would to defend their city walls.

He also said that people should act more swiftly to quell resentment than to put out a house fire, for the consequences of the one were infinitely more dangerous than the consequences of the other. A fire, in fact, seldom spread to involve more than a few houses, whereas resentment could cause cruel wars leading to the ruin and sometimes total destruction of the people.

One day an insurrection broke out in the city of Ephesus. Certain individuals entreated Heraclitus to speak to the people to tell them ways in which such revolts might be avoided. Heraclitus climbed upon a raised platform and asked for a drinking glass which he proceeded to fill with water. He then added to the water a few wild greens which were growing nearby. He drank this mixture and went away without saying a word. By doing this he wanted to make the people understand that to ward off revolts, luxury and indulgence should be banished from the Republic, thereby making the citizens learn to be content with only a few things.

Heraclitus wrote a book on the subject of Nature and had it deposited in the Temple of Diana. This book was written in a very obscure style, so that no one but those initiated into the mysteries could read and understand it. His fear was that if the general populace found the book interesting it would become too commonplace and hence

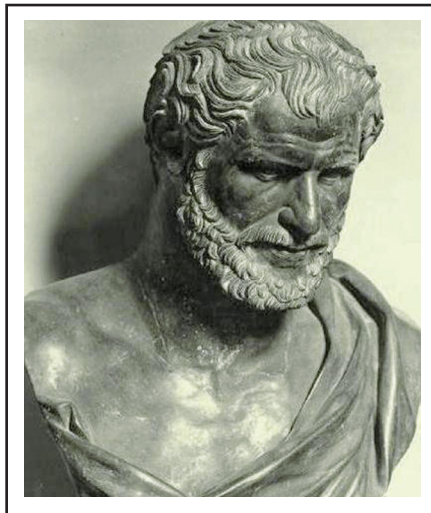
quickly forgotten by everyone. The book, in fact, gained an extraordinary reputation, for as Lucretius tells us, no one could understand its true meaning. King Darius of Persia, upon hearing of the book, wrote to Heraclitus and asked him to come to Persia so that the book

might be explained to him. Darius offered a considerable recompense and quarters in his palace if he would agree to this proposition. Heraclitus, however, refused.

Heraclitus believed that fire, drawn from out of the Ether, was the First Principle of all things. He thought that as this first element condensed, it was

changed into air; that as air condensed, it changed to water; and that water in turn, as it condensed, changed into earth. He added that in moving backward through these same steps, becoming more rarefied with each change, earth changed to water, water to air, and air to fire – the First Principle – which returned to the Ether. He said also that Earth was saturated with a divine Fire, and that at the end of time, it would perish by fire. According to him, everything which took place in the universe could be ascribed to the workings of fate, rather than to the gods and goddesses.

One of the truly great philosophers, he compared the behavior of matter to human nature. As is true of both, he said that all is forever changing and on the verge of becoming something else. Only the law underlying all things is immutable and eternal. He asserted that all death is



HERACLITUS

a birth into a new form, and that all birth is the death of the previous form. In his opinion, that which is dead is the same as that which is living, that which is asleep is the same as that which is awake, that which is old is the same as that which is young, because through change, “this” is “that,” and “that” in turn is “this.” He said, “We never touch the same thing twice, just as we never step twice in the same river, for in the moment of reaching out our hand to touch something, it has already ceased to be what it was.” And he added, “Strife is the father of all things, the ruler of all beings. No deity made this world of ours, since it has always been, is, and will always be, like an ever-living fire, kindling in measures and being extinguished in measures.”

In speaking of the nature of the soul, he said that it is eternal and that it is futile for us to try to look for it as it is impossible to find, so deeply is it hidden

within us. Unable to cease his weeping at human weaknesses, and finding no pleasure in life because of the ignorance he saw all around him, he decided one day to separate himself completely from the world. He withdrew into the hills where he saw no one, to spend the remainder of his life meditating and lamenting the state of humanity, eating what he could find of the herbs and vegetables growing there.

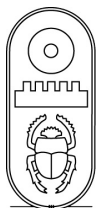
The rigors of such a life caused Heraclitus to become ill with dropsy. He returned to Ephesus to seek help from doctors there. Since it was his manner to speak only in riddles, he said to them when referring to his illness, “Could you change the rain to fair weather?” As the doctors did not understand what he meant, Heraclitus left them, found refuge in a stable with cattle, and attempted to treat his illness himself. It is related by some that he died there.

DEMOCRITUS

(ca. 460–370 BCE)

It is generally thought that the philosopher Democritus was born at Abdera. However, others believe that Miletus was his birthplace and that he was considered an Abderite only because he later withdrew to Abdera. His love for learning became apparent early in his life when he began studying the science of those Magians and Chaldeans whom King Xerxes had given as servants to his father, in whose house the king had stayed when he came to make war on the Greeks. From them Democritus learned theology and astronomy. Later he studied with the philosopher Leucippus who taught him physics. His passion for study was so great that he could remain occupied for entire days shut away in a little shed in the middle of his garden.

After spending a considerable length of time under the tutelage of Leucippus, Democritus decided that he would travel to study with sages of other countries in order to broaden his knowledge. He was to share with his brothers the inheritance of his father’s estate, and he took his part in cash. It was the smallest share, but it would be the most valuable to him in meeting the expenses he would incur in his philosophical studies and travels. He went to Egypt where he learned geometry, and from there he journeyed to Ethiopia, Persia, and Chaldea. His curiosity led him finally to India to be instructed in the science of the Gymnosophists. While he delighted to be in the company of sages and initiates, he desired anonymity for himself. It is said that he visited Athens for several days, where he saw Socrates, but never met him. Such was



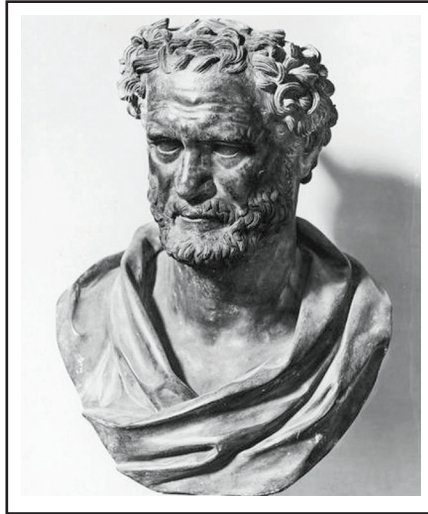
the extent of his desire for privacy.

Sometimes Democritus would even dwell for periods of time in caverns or crypts so that no one would know where he was. He did, however, appear at the court of King Darius and was present at the time of the death of the most beloved of Darius's wives. In an effort to console the broken-hearted king, Democritus promised that he would bring his wife back to life if Darius could bring to him three people who had never in their life known any sadness. In all of Asia, no one could be found who met the requirements set forth by Democritus. Thus, the philosopher tried to make Darius understand that it would be a mistake to let himself be overwhelmed by his grief, as no one in all the world is spared sadness.

Upon his return to Abdera, Democritus lived a very secluded life in great poverty, as he had by this time exhausted his funds. His brother, Damascus, felt obliged to come to his aid to keep him from perishing. There was a law in those days which stated that anyone who had become penniless could not be buried in the tomb of his father. This was indeed the circumstance in which Democritus found himself, but since he was loath to have his enemies reproach him for his poverty, he recited one of his works, called *Diacosme*, in front of a crowd in the city. His listeners were so impressed with the beauty of this work that Democritus was declared

exempt from the law and worthy of his forefathers. He was presented with 500 talents, and statues honoring him were erected in the public squares.

In contrast to Heraclitus, Democritus seemed to be always laughing. His laughter was based on his profound insight into the weaknesses of humanity and it prompted him to hold up to ridicule the ignorance and vanities of his fellow citizens. Juvenal, alluding to the city of Abdera where Democritus was born, and whose inhabitants were reputed to be very ignorant, said that the wisdom of this



DEMOCRITUS

philosopher proved that great people can come forth from places known for the coarseness and ignorance of their citizenry. This same poet said that Democritus laughed at our sorrows as well as at our joys, that he possessed a strength of spirit which nothing could shake, and that good fortune followed him wherever he went.

The Abderites, seeing him always laughing, thought him to be insane, and called upon Hippocrates to come so as to cure him of his madness. Hippocrates came to Abdera bringing remedies with him. First he gave some milk to Democritus and asked him to drink it. Democritus looked at the milk and said, "This is milk from a black goat, one who has borne young only once." This was, in fact, true.

Hippocrates was impressed with this response and asked himself how it could be that Democritus had knowledge of this. He stayed to converse with him and

became increasingly amazed at the great wisdom and extraordinary knowledge of this man. Hippocrates returned home full of admiration, having sealed a great friendship which was to last until his death.

Democritus, like his teacher Leucippus, thought that the first of all the elements were the atoms, which existed in a void and were continually uniting and separating. He also thought that it was impossible for something to arise from nothing, and that no created thing could ever be reduced to nothingness, for the atoms of which it was composed were incorruptible and unchangeable, their invincibility protecting them from any form of alteration or destruction. He said that these atoms formed themselves into an endless number of worlds, all subject to decay after a certain length of time, but from whose remains would be formed other worlds. Thus, to his mind, nothing could be destroyed, as the essence of all things was immortal.

He explained that atoms are perpetually spinning and that this motion is responsible for the generation of all beings. And as this spinning motion was always regular, Democritus believed in fate, since all things and events arose from necessity. Epicurus was to base his philosophy on the same foundation as that of Democritus, without admitting however to this idea of necessity, and having to invent the movement of declination with which he became associated during his life.

Democritus declared that the human soul, which he believed to be the same as consciousness, was also composed of

atoms, as were the Sun, Earth, Moon, and all other heavenly bodies. In addition, he believed that the soul was distributed throughout the whole body and that we experience sensation in all the parts of our body because each atom of which it is composed has its corresponding atom of soul. As for the heavenly bodies, Democritus believed that they moved skillfully through the infinite reaches of space and always unerringly toward the West. For him, everything was being swept along by the speed of an all-absorbing rotary motion or vortex of fluid substance which emanated from the Ether.

Democritus distinguished two forms of knowledge – the genuine and the false. The first comes from the interior of our being, and the second corresponds to the illusions born of sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch.

The time came when Democritus, infirm with old age, sensed that his death was near. He was aware, however, of his sister's fond wish to participate in the festival of Ceres, which was about to take place. Yet if she were in mourning, she would not take part. Hence the philosopher requested that loaves of fresh bread be brought to him and placed nearby so that their aroma might invigorate him and their natural warmth might maintain his body temperature. When the three days of celebration in honor of the goddess Ceres had passed and his sister had attended the festivities, he requested that no more bread be brought to him, and he died shortly thereafter.

