

What does Heraclitus mean we never step into the same river twice?

In the present day, the phrase that 'we never step into the same river twice' and the idea of constant change are well known and accepted. However, this idea was originally developed by the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Heraclitus' theory of constant change is now regarded as an important stage within Philosophy and can be seen as one of the foundation stones within early Philosophy.¹ Firstly, this essay is going to try to interpret what Heraclitus means when he says that we never step into the same river twice. Then it is going to explore later philosophers' opinions on Heraclitus and his ideas about change. Finally this essay is going to examine Heraclitus' ideas and different interpretations of the quote.

Heraclitus believed that the equilibrium state was a state of constant flux. This can be shown through the river quote because the water is constantly changing. Therefore one never steps into the exact same river twice because the water will have changed, but it is the same river, just different water.² The way in which it is the same river bed but different water, might have been intended to show the regularity and order which Heraclitus believed to underlie and control natural change.³ What he means by this is that the water is constantly changing in the river through a natural process and therefore it is not physically possible to step into the same river twice because even though the river looks exactly the same, the water is constantly changing.

¹ Jaeger 1936: 110

² Guthrie 1974: 190

³ Guthrie 1974: 191

The main problem with most of the ancient philosophers' is that their work only survives in fragments so therefore there is not much known about the majority of what they thought. This is also true of Heraclitus work for it is very hard to reconstruct the remaining fragments because what there is left of Heraclitus' works are mainly other Philosophers' opinions of what Heraclitus wrote and the quotes they extracted from Heraclitus' own work.⁴ This leads to problems of interpretation because one cannot be sure that the interpretations that were given by the other philosophers reflected Heraclitus' own opinions. Additionally, because Heraclitus' work survives mainly in quote form the question arises as to whether the disconnected brevity seen in Heraclitus' work is the way in which it was originally written or whether it is the result of the extraction of memorable quotations made by later generations.⁵

Plutarch's views on Heraclitus' idea that 'we do not step into the same river twice' might have been that Heraclitus meant that the world is constantly changing, but this might not have been what Heraclitus originally intended people to think. Plutarch's own belief in constant change can be shown when he writes 'for fresh waters are flowing on'.⁶ It is clear from this quote that Plutarch is aware of Heraclitus' own works because the idea mirrors that of 'we do not step into the same river twice'. It is obvious from this that Plutarch already had his own ideas regarding constant change and therefore may have made his interpretation of Heraclitus fit his own views. It is either this, or Plutarch was inspired after reading Heraclitus and developed his own ideas on how the world is constantly changing.

⁴ Guthrie 1962: 80

⁵ Guthrie 1963: 81

⁶Plut. Qu, Nat. 912 c

Plato develops the idea of constant change and flux in his work *Theaetetus* which is expressed in the words 'everything moves and nothing is at rest'.⁷ This idea was possibly not based on Heraclitus' own views but this does not mean that there is nothing Heraclitan behind the idea that there is a constant flux.⁸ Thus there is the possibility that even though Plato did not have the intention to write about Heraclitus' views, he may have been expanding on Heraclitus' original ideas. Furthermore, even though Heraclitus and Plutarch may not have shared the exact same ideas on constant change, Heraclitus might have inspired Plutarch. This is because even though they might have had different interpretations of the quote 'we never step into the same river twice' Plutarch's ideas on constant change might have stemmed from this quote.

Heraclitus' own intention when writing that 'we never step into the same river twice' might have been different from the interpretations of later philosophers. He might have been making the point that the world is constantly changing because even though the river looks the same from day to day, it is entirely different water that flows through it at any given time.⁹ However, Guthrie believes that Heraclitus was trying to comment on the human soul.¹⁰ According to Guthrie, Heraclitus might have been trying to point out that if you meet the same person twice they will have changed because of their experiences and physical development. Therefore, if the person has changed, what is making them the same person?¹¹ The same thing can be said of the river because if what is inside the river is

⁷ Plato Crat. 402 a

⁸ Guthrie 1962: 89-90

⁹ Guthrie 1974: 211

¹⁰ Guthrie 1962: 90

¹¹ Guthrie 1962: 90

different, what makes it the same river? This shows that even though Heraclitus may have been writing about change and he was obviously using the river as a metaphor, he may have been trying to comment on the human soul and how it also changes.

To conclude, with the quote Heraclitus was trying to imply that world does change. He believed in a natural change such as the water flowing on to a different river. Heraclitus' ideas on change inspired other philosophers such as Plato and Plutarch to later expand on his ideas of change. I personally agree with Guthrie in thinking that Heraclitus only uses the river as a metaphor for the change within humans. This is because we are constantly changing. Therefore, if one meets a person twice that person will have changed both emotionally and physically. Thus what makes this the same person just like what makes this the same river.

Bibliography-

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