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Heraclitus on First (and Further) Hearings

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Abstract

The words τὸ πρῶτον in Heraclitus B1 have been subjected to competing construals, yet this dilemma, and its stakes, are almost never discussed. We argue that the common translation of ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον, ‘when once they have heard it’, faces insurmountable philosophical, stylistic, and linguistic objections. We make a new case for the alternative construal, ‘after they have heard it for the first time’. This yields a linguistically better account of the Greek, and a philosophically more satisfying one in the broader context of B1 and Heraclitus’ thought. Finally, we examine the larger programmatic implications of the small phrase τὸ πρῶτον for Heraclitus’ book.

Keywords

Heraclitus – B1 – Presocratics – book history – openings

The following appeared at, or at least very near, the start of Heraclitus’ book (DK22 B1):

(i) τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ’ ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· (ii) γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπειροσιν εἰκόασι, πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, ὁκοίων

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ἐγὼ διηγέυμαι κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅπως ἔχει. (iii) τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὀκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιούσιν, ὅκωσπερ ὀκόσα εὐδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται.

(i) Although this *logos* holds always people are uncomprehending, both before hearing it and after they have heard it for the first time [or: ‘after they have first heard it’]. (ii) For although all things come about in accordance with this *logos*, they are like the inexperienced even though they experience such words and deeds as I set forth in accordance with nature distinguishing each thing and showing how it is. (iii) But the other people do not notice what they do when they are awake, just as they forget what they do while they are asleep.¹

Almost every word of this programmatic passage has come in for detailed consideration, and for good reason. τὸ πρῶτον, by contrast, has attracted comparatively little attention. Widely used translations suggest why. Kirk, Marcovich, KRS, Kahn, Robinson, and Graham all agree in translating ‘[when] once they have heard [it]’.² This interpretation is evidently common enough that it is seldom felt to require argumentation, but it faces interrelated philosophical, stylistic, and linguistic objections.

A competing translation is available and is adopted by others: ‘for the first time’ (or ‘(at) first’).³ While neither the translation ‘once’ nor ‘for the first time’ is

- 1 We thus divide the fragment into sections in order to facilitate the discussion below. All fragments are cited according to DK. Translations are our own, but we draw freely on the translations of Heraclitus in Kahn 1979 and Laks and Most 2016. Aristotle (ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ αὐτῇ [Richards; αὐτοῦ MSS] τοῦ συγγράμματος, ‘in the very beginning of his book’, *Rhetoric* 1407^b16) and Sextus Empiricus (ἐναρχόμενος γούν τῶν Περὶ φύσεως, ‘beginning his *On Nature*, *Adversus mathematicos* 7.132) agree in placing B1 at—or, at a minimum, nearly at—the opening of Heraclitus’ book.
- 2 Kirk 1954, 33; Marcovich 1967, 6; KRS 1983, 187; Kahn 1979, 29; Robinson 1987, 11; Graham, 2010, 143; cf. ‘weder ehe sie ihn vernommen noch sobald sie ihn vernommen’ (DK 150; see further n. 7 below); ‘comme du jour qu’ils l’ont écouté’ (Conche 1987, 29, with 35–6). This construal continues to be widespread in the literature; by way of illustration, see e.g. West 1971, 116–17; Barnes 1982, 44; Most 1999, 358; Nightingale 2000, 163; Graham 2008, 176; Granger 2013 184; Hülsz 2013, 285; Gianvittorio 2013, 20 (‘sowohl bevor sie ihn gehört haben als auch danach’); Raaflaub 2017, 118; Hladký and Kratochvíl 2017, 281; Scapin 2020, 56 (‘both before and after they have heard it’); Moore 2020, 52 (‘and having heard it already’). Examples could easily be multiplied.
- 3 E.g. Capelle 1924, 197: ‘noch nachdem sie davon zum ersten Male vernommen’; Thomson 1961, 273–5; Gemelli Marciano 2007, 14–15: ‘pour la première fois’; Kurzová 2014, 27 with n. 40; Laks—Most 2016, Her. 9D1: ‘once they have first heard it’; Long 2009, 101; Johnstone 2020, 43. Kahn 1979 offers the translation ‘once’ (29) but also notes (97) the alternative: ‘once they

itself novel, this dilemma concerning the construal of τὸ πρῶτον—and what is at stake in this dilemma—are issues almost never discussed in the scholarship.⁴ We offer here what is, to our knowledge, a new case for the untenability of the rendering ‘once’ and for the preferability of the rendering ‘for the first time’ (or: ‘first’), and a fresh examination of the philosophical and programmatic consequences of the latter construal. Section I advocates this reading on linguistic and historical grounds. Section II in turn offers a philosophical defence of this reading. Section III concludes by considering the larger implications of the small phrase τὸ πρῶτον for the interpretation of Heraclitus’ book.

I

The common rendering ‘and when once they have heard’ in Heraclitus B1.(i) produces a peculiar and unproductive communicative situation: if human beings turn out to lack understanding both before and after they have heard the *logos*,⁵ then why should Heraclitus bother to go about his task of describing how the world is? If neither first-hand experience nor listening ever provides a path to understanding, why should his audience bother to keep listening to him?⁶ Indeed, if Heraclitus affirms here without qualification that we quite simply never acquire understanding, then it would be difficult not to come

have heard (or “when they hear it for the first time”). He does not, however, probe further the choice between these alternatives or its larger significance.

- 4 It is a telling illustration of the neglect in the scholarship of this interpretive question that Fronterotta 2013 can use the construal ‘for the first time’ in his translation (‘... sia dopo che lo hanno ascoltato una prima volta’, 13) but then assume the meaning ‘once/after they have heard’ in his commentary (‘gli uomini non comprendono il ragionamento proposto da Eraclito né prima di averlo ascoltato, riflettendovi perciò autonomamente, né dopo, dunque una volta ascoltato, e ciò spiega in che senso risultino *sempre* (appunto, *sia prima sia dopo averne ricevuto l’esposizione*) nell’ignoranza di esso’, 15).
- 5 Following a near consensus in the scholarship, we take Heraclitus’ *logos* to refer at once to his book and to a cosmic principle of balance and order, although our core arguments do not depend on this point. It is difficult to see otherwise why people could, in principle, succeed in understanding the *logos* before hearing (B1) or why the *logos* should be described as ‘common’ (B2); cf. Johnstone 2020, 43. On Heraclitus’ *logos*, see further Long 2009. For the view that the conception of *logos* in Heraclitus as a cosmic principle is an anachronistic Stoic retrojection, see (with references to earlier discussions) Sedley 1992, 31–2 n. 28; Sedley 2007, 226 n. 49.
- 6 The essential point stands whether one construes αἰί with ἐόντος or with ἀξύνετοι—or, as we prefer, if both meanings are simultaneously present; cf. Kahn 1979, 91 on the phenomenon of ‘meaningful ambiguity’ in Heraclitus (‘the use of lexical and syntactic indeterminacy as a device for saying several things at once’).

away with the impression that this is because understanding is altogether beyond our reach. At stake here, then, is how Heraclitus sees what people can achieve by engaging properly with his book.

On a stylistic level, Heraclitus is not one for superfluity or prolixity, but with the translation ‘once’ τὸ πρῶτον is otiose. The pairing of before and after hearing, clearly signalled by the correlative pairing of καί ... καί, could have been adequately expressed by the simple aorist participle ἀκούσαντες alone (cf. B34: ἀξύνετοι ἀκούσαντες κωφοῖσιν εἰόκασι, ‘people without understanding, after they have heard, resemble deaf people’). In effect, the rendering ‘once they have heard’ erases a qualification to the contrast that Heraclitus himself foregrounds in B1. Indeed, the placement of τὸ πρῶτον at the end of its sentence might suggest that these words carry a certain degree of emphasis. Idiom hardly demands that πρόσθεν ἢ ... τὸ πρῶτον be taken together to mean ‘before X and once X has occurred’; indeed, we are unable to offer a good linguistic parallel for such a construction.⁷

On a semantic level, it is very far from clear whether τὸ πρῶτον can have a sense so weak as it has in the translations quoted above. None of these scholars adduces specific parallels, but Kirk, one of the few to justify his choice, writes that this expression ‘means “once”, “at all”, as frequently in Homer’.⁸ He cites LSJ⁹ s.v. πρότερος B.III.3.e, which begins: ‘πρῶτον, πρῶτα are used after the relat[ive] Pron[oun] and after relat[ive] Adv[er]bs, like Engl[ish] *once* (= *at all*). In Heraclitus B1, however, the relative adverb πρόσθεν does not govern τὸ πρῶτον.⁹ In any event, the recent *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* s.v. πρῶτον, πρῶτα does not recognise any such sense, presumably subsuming the relevant cases under the heading of ‘in the first place, at the outset’ (3), and with reason.¹⁰ Markwald’s entry in the *Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos* s.v. πρῶτος, πρῶτιστος 3 systematically catalogues every adverbial occurrence in traditional epic (1599–1604). The basic meaning, according to Markwald, is ‘zuerst, am Anfang’ (1599). In conjunction with a subordinate clause, the adverb can mean ‘1a sobald, 1b seitdem, wenn erst einmal, 1c nachdem (wenn) erst einmal, da einmal, 1d bevor’ (1604). Cunliffe s.v. πρῶτος offers the most detailed analysis of adverbial Homeric usage, distinguishing no fewer than 12 distinct

7 Note DK 150: ‘Daß ἀεί Ζ. 4 durch πρόσθεν und τὸ πρῶτον zerlegt wird, scheint sicher’; cf. Busse 1926, 206–7.

8 Kirk 1954, 34; followed by Dilcher 1995, 11 n. 2.

9 On this syntactical point, cf. Mouraviev 2006, 2; Finkelberg 2017, 196.

10 Similarly the *Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek* s.v. πρῶτος F: ‘at first, in a former time, in the first place, initially’. As dictionaries observe, adverbial πρῶτον and πρῶτα, with or without the definite article, are used interchangeably.

senses; none of these correspond to the entry in LSJ⁹ quoted above.¹¹ The sort of usage that LSJ⁹ seem to have in mind is exemplified by passages like Hesiod, *Theogony* 740–1: χάσμα μέγ', οὐδέ κε πάντα τελεσφόρον εἰς ἐνιαυτὸν | οὐδ' αὖς ἴκοιτ', εἰ πρῶτα πυλέων ἔντοσθε γένοιτο, 'a great chasm, whose base a man could not reach even in a whole year if once he got inside the gates'. But here εἰ πρῶτα means "if once", literally "if he began by" entering' (West): as elsewhere in such cases, the adverb marks the beginning of a process that cannot be, or will not be, undone or reversed once it has begun.¹² Heraclitus B₁ is self-evidently different.

We advocate an alternative understanding of ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον in Heraclitus B₁ that affords these words due significance, obviates the peculiar communicative situation described above, and also produces a more plausible and interesting overall interpretation of the fragment: 'after they have heard it for the first time'.

At the outset it is worthwhile to disambiguate this rendering—(A)—from another variation of the alternative construal: 'after they first have heard it' (B). Reading (A) more strongly suggests subsequent discrete iterations of some process taken as a whole (as in: 'when I shaved my face for the first time'). Somewhat differently, reading (B) gestures towards the initial phase of some activity, process, event or sequence of events in a less determinate way that, depending on the context, could suggest subsequent discrete iterations (as in: 'when I first shaved my face') but need not do so (as in: 'when we first started painting this room').

It is a fine distinction between these two variations of the alternative construal of τὸ πρῶτον. Indeed, these two closely related senses of the same Greek words may in practice blend into each other, and there is no strong reason to suppose that Heraclitus sharply distinguished between them. Either variant avoids the difficulties with the rendering 'once/after they have heard'. Still, we submit that the sense 'for the first time' best captures the qualified warning that Heraclitus issues to us as we embark on our first reading of his book. The

11 Cunliffe 1924, s.v. (pp. 350–1).

12 West 1966, 364. Cf. Hesiod, *Theogony* 765–6 with West 1966, 369, *Od.* 3.320, 10.327–8, Cunliffe 1924, s.v. πρῶτος 6l: 'denoting inevitability of consequence or of the continuance of a state or condition on the doing or occurrence of something'. Fränkel 1975, 371 n. 1 (≈ 1962, 423 n. 1) takes τὸ πρῶτον in B₁ to be in line with this usage (comparing *Il.* 4.267, 6.489, 19.9 and 136) and comments: 'it denotes the deciding first event from which later things follow—or ought to follow, in this case, since surprisingly enough, no effect is produced' (cf. Fränkel 1975, 257 n. 9 ≈ 1962, 295 n. 9). Fränkel's own concluding remark betrays the fact that this usage is not actually comparable or appropriate to the statement that the attempt to impose it on B₁ would produce.

cultural practice of repeated reading (to which we relate Heraclitus below) suggests this. Furthermore, the idea of multiple readings of Heraclitus' book, and of the individual remarks of which this book is comprised, will pay interpretive dividends (as we will see in Section III below). Most likely, then, Heraclitus is telling us that we will not comprehend his book when we hear or read it 'for the first time'. To accept this is not, however, to exclude that, in line with sense (B), Heraclitus could also be conveying to us (perhaps as a secondary connotation) that things may be especially difficult in the early goings ('at first') but then get easier as we proceed.¹³

Both variations of the alternative construal are easy to parallel. Passages that are most plausibly rendered in line with sense (A) are common in Greek generally (LSJ⁹ s.v. πρότερος III.3.d), in Homer (Cunliffe 1924, s.v. πρώτος 6d), and in Herodotus, who is our best *comparandum* for Heraclitus' early Ionic prose.¹⁴ Consider, for example, *Odyssey* 4.158–9 (νεμεσσάται δ' ἐνὶ θυμῷ | ᾧδ' ἐλθῶν τὸ πρῶτον ἐπεσβολίας ἀναφαίνειν, 'he feels it wrong in his heart, thus having come before you for the first time, to bring forth uninvited words'), Pindar, *Pythian* 9.41 (ἀμφανδὸν ἀδείας τυχεῖν τὸ πρῶτον εὐνάς, 'to openly engage in sweet sex for the first time') or Herodotus 1.60.1 (οὕτω μὲν Πεισίστρατος ἔσχε τὸ πρῶτον Ἀθήνας, 'thus Peisistratus took Athens for the first time'). As these examples show, when τὸ πρῶτον means 'for the first time', there need not be any explicit indication of subsequent iterations; context is decisive in each case.

Passages that suggest sense (B) are also common in Greek generally (LSJ⁹ s.v. πρότερος BIII.3.a), in Homer (Cunliffe 1924, s.v. πρώτος 6b), and in Herodotus (Powell 1938, s.v. πρώτος 327). Consider, for example, the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 71 (ὁπότ' ἂν τὸ πρῶτον ἴδῃ φάος ἡέλιοιο, 'whenever he first sees the light of the sun'), Pindar, *Pythian* 4.29–31 (φιλίων δ' ἐπέων | ἄρχετο, ξείνοις ἄτ' ἐλθόντεσσιν εὐεργέται | δείπν' ἐπαγγέλλοντι πρῶτον, 'he made a beginning of friendly words, the sort which generous men first announce when offering dinner to strangers who have arrived') or Herodotus 2.125.2 (τοιαύτην τὸ πρῶτον ἐπέιτε ἐποίησαν αὐτήν, ἤειρον τοὺς ἐπιλοίπους λίθους μηχανῆσι ξύλων βραχέων πεποιημένησι, 'after they first made such a step [sc. as the first part in the process of building a

13 One way to think about this: if, as we maintain below, Heraclitus allows that at least some readers will be able to comprehend his book on a second (though not on a first) reading, then it is presumably not the case that such readers will be as far from developing the tools required to comprehend Heraclitus' book—and from comprehending it—by the time that they have finished the penultimate sentence on their first read-through as when they had just begun.

14 Powell 1938, s.v. πρώτος 327. On Herodotus as a *comparandum* for Heraclitus, see Kahn 1979, 92; Graham 2003, 175–6.

pyramid], they raised the rest of the stones with contrivances made of short wooden logs’).

Hereafter we give priority in our translations and glosses to our preferred variation, according to which Heraclitus is telling us that people ever fail to understand both before they hear and when they have heard ‘for the first time’ (A). But we take our suggestions to be also compatible with—even if, in some cases, not quite as sharply captured by—what is in the end a slightly different version of broadly the same construal, according to which people fail to understand both before they hear and when ‘first’ or ‘at first’ they have heard (B).

On the common interpretation ‘once’, Heraclitus’ book opens with a remarkable repudiation of its readership, which forecloses their efforts at understanding him as inevitably doomed to failure. On the alternative interpretation, his work begins with a more plausible and effective didactic gesture which is at once a warning, a challenge, and an invitation: readers are cautioned that they will not grasp this text (or its subject-matter, the cosmic *logos*) immediately or on their first hearing, but they are implicitly encouraged to keep trying to understand it. Compare, for example, Hesiod’s famous words to Perses (*Works and Days* 290–2): μακρὸς δὲ καὶ ὄρθιος οἶμος ἐς αὐτήν | καὶ τρηχὺς τὸ πρῶτον· ἐπὶν δ’ εἰς ἄκρον ἵκηται, | ῥηιδίη δὴ ἔπειτα πέλει, χαλεπή περ εὐούσα, ‘long and steep is the path to [*aretē*] and rough at first; but once one reaches the summit, the road becomes easy, difficult though it is’.

On this reading of B1, Heraclitus implicitly recommends a special sort of sustained engagement with his text. Compare Empedocles DK31 B110:

εἰ γὰρ κέν σφ’ ἀδινῆσιν ὑπὸ πραπίδεσσιν ἐρείσας
εὐμενέως καθαρῆσιν ἐποπτεύσης μελέτησιν,
ταυτά τέ σοι μάλα πάντα δι’ αἰῶνος παρέσσονται,
ἄλλα τε πόλλ’ ἀπὸ τῶνδ’ ἐκτήσεται·

If you firmly place these things beneath your crowded mind and behold them graciously with immaculate practice, all these things will be present to you throughout your life, and you will acquire many other things from these.

Pausanias should store up Empedocles’ teaching in his mind and then subsequently reflect upon it (ἐρείσας ... ἐποπτεύσης). As Wright notes, μελέτησιν connotes ‘constant practice and effort, as in athletic training, military duty, or rehearsing’.¹⁵ Despite the distinctive Empedoclean features of this passage, its

15 Wright 1995, 259.

basic message is not alien to quotidian, common-sense epistemology: repeated listening and sustained contemplation lead to better understanding.¹⁶

'In ancient Greek ἀκούειν commonly refers to reading';¹⁷ listening and reading are thus often hard to separate neatly. On our interpretation, Heraclitus implicitly enjoins his audience to pursue understanding by continued and repeated engagement with his book by explicitly saying that people fail to understand when they listen or read 'for the first time'. In the early Greek world, such re-reading was not the exception but the norm. The literate minority did not have access to extensive libraries, public or private; like readers in many other pre-modern cultures known to modern scholarship, they practised 'intensive' rather than 'extensive' reading, paying careful and sustained attention to a relatively small group of texts.¹⁸ In the eponymous Platonic dialogue, Theaetetus, for example, has read Protagoras' words often (ἀνέγνωκα καὶ πολλάκις, 152a5). Aristotle assumes that some people have engaged with their Empedocles intensively enough to have (some of) it memorised (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1147^a20, 1147^b12). Ancient readers generally practised intensive reading, and the same will have held all the more true in Heraclitus' time, when a culture of private literary reading was in its early days and the number of written texts in circulation was relatively low.

If Heraclitus implicitly recommends repeated and intensive engagement with his own *logos*, then this approach contrasts with the extensive and indiscriminating pursuit of wisdom that he elsewhere derides. B40 attacks four recognised panhellenic figures of wisdom: πολυμαθὴν νόον ἔχειν οὐ διδάσκει· Ἡσίοδον γὰρ ἂν ἐδίδαξε καὶ Πυθαγόρην αὐτίς τε Ξενοφάνεά τε καὶ Ἑκαταίον, 'much learning does not teach intelligence; for otherwise it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras and again Xenophanes and Hecataeus' (B40). Pythagoras in particular excelled all mankind in *historia* (ἱστορίην ἤσκησεν ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πάντων) and drew on many books (ταύτας τὰς συγγραφάς), only to produce

16 Demosthenes 20.94: τοῦτον δ' ἐν ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις ἀναγιγνώσκειν, ἵν' ἕκαστος ὑμῶν ἀκούσας πολλάκις καὶ κατὰ σχολὴν σκεψάμενος, ἂν ἦ καὶ δίκαια καὶ συμφέροντα, ταῦτα νομοθετῆ, 'to read this out in the assemblies, so that each of you, having heard it often and having reflected at your leisure, might legislate whatever is just and advantageous'; cf. e.g. Isocrates 4.159.

17 Rawlings 2016, 108; cf. Schenkeveld 1992, 129–41. The usage is already attested in Herodotus (1.48) and reflects the importance of reading aloud throughout antiquity. Heraclitus B108 may well implicate this commonplace sense of the verb: cf. B40, B129 (cited presently).

18 For the distinction, see Darnton 1982, 65–83; for an application to early Greek reading culture, see Spelman 2019, 150–72. 'Intensive' reading might adopt as its motto Pliny, *Epistles* 7.9.15: *aiunt enim multum legendum esse, non multa* ('they say indeed that one must read a lot, not a lot of things').

something pernicious: *ἑαυτοῦ σοφίην, πολυμαθίην, κακοτεχνίην*, ‘his own wisdom, much learning, evil artifice’ (B129).¹⁹

At least some people in antiquity did indeed take an intensive approach to Heraclitus’ book. The ancient reception provides abundant testimony to his famous, and even perhaps intentional, obscurity;²⁰ nonetheless, the extensive tradition of Heraclitean exegesis reflects the perception that careful engagement with his book has value.²¹ In the most optimistic expressions of this attitude, such engagement is the path to enlightenment. A case in point is *Anthologia Palatina* 9.540, which echoes the famous Hesiodic passage quoted above:

μη̄ ταχὺς Ἡρακλείτου ἐπ’ ὀμφαλὸν εἶλεε βύβλον
 τοῦφεσίου· μάλα τοι δὺσβατος ἀτραπιτός.
 ὄρφνη καὶ σκότος ἐστὶν ἀλάμπητον· ἦν δέ σε μύστης
 εἰσαγάγη, φανεροῦ λαμπρότερ’ ἡελίου.

Don’t quickly unroll to its end the book of Heraclitus the Ephesian. The path is very difficult, I tell you; it is darkness and lightless gloom. But if an initiate inducts you, things are brighter than the radiant sun.

Here understanding Heraclitus demands both careful reading and expert help, but understanding is both achievable and worth the considerable effort.

19 Remarks that reflect some extensive inquiry on Heraclitus’ own part place the emphasis on the rarity or even non-existence of valuable findings: *χρυσὸν γὰρ οἱ διζήμενοι γῆν πολλὴν ὀρύσσουσι καὶ εὐρίσκουσιν ὀλίγον*, ‘those who look for gold dig up much earth and find little’ (B22); *ὀκόσων λόγους ἤκουσα, οὐδεις ἀφικνεῖται ἐς τοῦτο, ὥστε γινώσκειν ὅτι σοφὸν ἐστὶ πάντων κεχωρισμένον*, ‘of all those whose accounts I heard, none arrived at the point of recognising that the wise is different from everything’ (B108; with Long 2007). Contrast the foolish man of B87, who indiscriminately ‘likes to get excited at every account’. See also Moore 2020, 37–65 on B35 as an attack against those whom Heraclitus disparagingly calls ‘philosophical men’ (perhaps Pythagoreans), who ‘must be inquirers into really very many things’ (*χρηὶ γὰρ εὖ μάλα πολλῶν ἱστορας φιλοσόφους ἀνδρας εἶναι*).

20 A1 = Diogenes Laertius 9.6: *ἐπιτηδεύσας ἀσαφέστερον γράψαι, ὅπως οἱ δυνάμενοι <μόνοι> προσίοιεν αὐτῷ καὶ μὴ ἐκ τοῦ δημῶδους εὐκαταφρόνητον ἦ*, ‘having written it rather unclearly on purpose, so that only those capable might approach it and lest it be readily despised by the rabble’; cf. e.g. *Anthologia Palatina* 7.128, quoted at Diogenes Laertius 9.16.

21 A1 = Diogenes Laertius 9.15: *πλείστοι τέ εἰσιν ὅσοι ἐξήγησται αὐτοῦ τὸ σύγγραμμα*, ‘most numerous are those who have explained his book’; cf. e.g. *Anthologia Palatina* 9.540, quoted at Diogenes Laertius 9.16 and in the main text that follows.

II

Tarán provides a rare argument against the reading advocated here and in favour of the translation ‘once’: ‘[t]his latter meaning [sc. ‘for the first time’] would leave open the possibility of men’s understanding the Logos when they hear it for the second or third time, etc., and such a meaning is precluded by the rest of this fragment as well as by the rest of the related evidence.’²² Tarán does not spell out his reasoning. In a footnote, though, he expands: ‘[b]oth in this fragment and elsewhere ... Heraclitus speaks of men’s failure to understand as characteristic of the human condition.’²³ It will be helpful to address Tarán’s objection to our reading of τὸ πρῶτον, not only in order to defuse his objection, but also because doing so will bring to light further, philosophical reasons to prefer this reading and help us to get clearer about the progression of thought within B1.

A key point to underline at the outset is that Tarán’s claim, in the footnote, that, according to Heraclitus, failure to understand is ‘characteristic’ of the human condition does not support his stronger, modal claim, in the main text, that there is no ‘possibility’ for humans to understand. It is only the modal claim that would pose a problem for our interpretation, but only the weaker one that B1 or other fragments support.

On our reading, when we reach the final two words of B1.(i), τὸ πρῶτον, we come upon a crucial qualification to Heraclitus’ initial assertion that people (ἄνθρωποι) ever (ἀεί) fail to understand. Once those final two words are read, Heraclitus’ claim becomes not the unqualified one, that people simply never succeed in acquiring understanding, but the importantly qualified one, that they never succeed before they hear or when they have heard for the first time (or: when they have first heard).²⁴ In (ii), Heraclitus then lends support to the claim he advanced in (i), or at least amplifies this claim (‘for’: γάρ), by observing how a person, despite having pertinent experiences of the account and realities in question (‘such words and deeds’: καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων), may still be equivalent for all intents and purposes to one who has not experienced them. In (ii), then, Heraclitus claims that, by failing to digest and reflect on their experiences properly, people are—as things currently stand—equivalent to agents who never had those experiences to begin with.²⁵ Importantly,

22 Tarán 1986, 8; similarly, Conche 1987, 35–6.

23 Tarán 1986, 8 n. 41; cf. 13–14.

24 Compare the unqualified assertion ‘nobody has ever passed this exam’ and the qualified one ‘nobody has ever passed this exam on the first go’.

25 The ‘they’ that is the implicit subject of εἰκόασι in B1.(ii) may refer *in primis* to the people referred to in B1.(i), who have only had an initial exposure to Heraclitus’ thought, but

however, Heraclitus does not thereby imply or even suggest the modal claim that people could not go on to cultivate a better and more illuminating mode of engagement with his text and (thereby) with their experiences. Instead, what emerges more and more clearly as we read through the passage is that people who acquiesce in that mode and level of engagement with their experiences are presented to us as a negative exemplar of the wrong ways to engage with this text (Heraclitus' *logos*) as well as with the world to which it relates (the cosmic *logos*). By the end of (ii), we also first encounter a contrary, positive exemplar: the authorial 'I' of Heraclitus himself, who delineates and shows things in accordance with nature. In (iii), finally, Heraclitus enriches his picture of the negative exemplar, likening the lack of awareness that characterises an uncritical engagement with one's experiences (and with his text) to dreaming and forgetting.

Our interpretation of this final component of B₁ is complicated by the question of precisely how to understand the contrast between Heraclitus ('I: ἐγώ) and 'the other people' (τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους). We will return to this question in a moment. For now, let us assume (with Tarán) the strongest possible interpretation of this contrast: Heraclitus pits himself on one side and the rest of humanity on the other; in other words, 'the other people' here means 'all other people'.²⁶ Even on this maximal interpretation, however, Heraclitus is still diagnosing in (iii) our current sorry state, using indicative verbs (λανθάνει ... ποιούσιν), and not our capacities and limitations. Put differently, Heraclitus is still discussing here only what we are and not what we could be. For us, as Heraclitus' auditors and readers, the force of this dramatic division of humanity is thus not despair but provocation: the message is not that in this sad state we must sadly remain, but that here is our chance to leave behind the benighted mass of humanity and join an enlightened minority.

At this point, however, Tarán might wish to press further the worry about the contrast between Heraclitus and 'the other people'. He might object that, if Heraclitus says in (i) that people always fail to understand when they have heard 'for the first time' (or: 'at first'), then he implicitly allows that people do, as things are, succeed in understanding later on, on the second (or third, etc.)

could include more broadly anyone who has had pertinent experiences (however extensive) of the cosmic *logos* (which would mean all human beings) or of Heraclitus' book, and who has not yet acquired understanding on the basis of such experiences.

26 Tarán 1986, 12: 'the rest of men'. We find a similar gesture (where one might also think that the definite article conveys a universalising flavour) in Xenophanes DK21 B14: 'but the mortals believe ...' (ἀλλ' οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι). Cf. also Parmenides' references to 'beliefs of mortals' (βροτῶν δόξας, DK28 B1.30, etc.).

go, thus contradicting his remark in (iii) that, as things are, all other people (τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους) lack awareness of what they do.

A first response to this worry is that, by saying that people always fail to understand both before they hear and when they hear for the first time, Heraclitus need not commit himself to any definite claims about the measure of understanding that, as things are, some people manage to acquire on further hearing. At least, Heraclitus need not be implying that, on further hearing, people do, as things currently are, manage to get as far as to acquire that kind and measure of understanding that ‘the other people’ of (iii) fail to exhibit.

A second response, however, is that Tarán’s initial assumption, that the expression ‘the other people’ in (iii) refers to all human beings bar Heraclitus, is far from obvious. It is indeed difficult to pin down the precise reference and scope of ‘the other people’, and the expectation that this expression has a precise remit may be misplaced. On reflection, however, it would be somewhat bizarre for Heraclitus to claim that all other human beings lack a type of awareness that he takes himself to exhibit, when he can only have subjected a small handful of other human beings to autopsy. It is no less intuitive, and it is on second thought more plausible, to approach the scope of the expression ‘the other people’ in the light of the content of the contrast that is being drawn (note the contrastive particle ‘but’ (δέ) with which Heraclitus introduces this expression and links it to his previous statement). On this approach, we will take ‘the other people’ to refer to all those people—whatever portion of humanity this group represents—that, by contrast with Heraclitus himself (ἐγώ, (ii)), cannot make proper critical use of their experiences (ii), and lack the requisite awareness of their actions (iii). Put differently, what defines this subset of humanity as ‘the other people’ is not simply that they are non-identical with Heraclitus, but more specifically that, unlike Heraclitus, they fail to exhibit the appropriate attitudes towards their experiences and their actions. In saying this we do not doubt that Heraclitus diagnoses in B₁ a general and widespread epistemic and exegetical failure among humans, and that he gives us to understand that ‘the other people’ in (iii) represent the great, unenlightened majority of humanity. We only insist that the interpretation of ‘the other people’ as referring to, literally, all human beings but Heraclitus is neither obvious nor even, on reflection, very plausible. If our alternative, context-sensitive interpretation of ‘the other people’ is on the right lines, however, then Heraclitus need not be affirming in (iii) that *all* human beings bar him lack understanding. If so, then the prospect of a possible conflict with (i) disappears. In (i), Heraclitus will be identifying what he takes to be a universal but qualified weakness in human beings: humans always fail to understand the *logos* before hearing it and when they hear it for the first time. The qualified nature of this diagnosis (‘for the

first time') may indeed create the impression that at least some persistent and critical-minded people succeed in acquiring at least some measure of understanding upon further (second, third, etc.) hearing of the *logos*. This impression, however, would be quite consistent with the contrast in (ii)–(iii) between Heraclitus and 'other' people, where this indicates not all other human beings bar Heraclitus, but rather those other human beings who, unlike Heraclitus, lack the proper engagement with their experiences and their actions.²⁷

When we look beyond B₁, we are left with the same impression: that the failure to understand is a widespread characteristic of humanity, but not that progress is hopeless or that knowledge and understanding are beyond our reach.²⁸ The most obvious instance of successful human understanding is none other than Heraclitus himself, who highlights his attempt to convey something worth listening to and so, by implication, capable of being understood. From B₁ onwards, Heraclitus makes himself familiar to us as a positive exemplar. In B₅₀, he envisions the possibility that after listening, not to him, but to the *logos* (οὐκ ἐμοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας) his auditors can come to a wise agreement (literally, to share in the same *logos*: ὁμολογεῖν) that all things are one. Again, by encouraging us to think about Delphic Apollo, who 'neither says nor conceals but gives a sign' (οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει, B₉₃), Heraclitus is, we take it, gesturing towards those positive exegetical attitudes that we should, and no doubt can, cultivate. And indeed, Heraclitus' deliberate style poses distinctive interpretive challenges that precisely impel us to develop and hone the exegetical skills required for hearkening in the right ways to those 'signs' that Heraclitus' text issues to us: with ears attuned towards nuances, unobvious meanings, and multiple, simultaneously available interpretations (we return to this point below). There is, then, much to be said for the familiar view in the scholarship that learning how to listen properly to Heraclitus' *logos* is a preparatory exercise for learning how to listen properly to the cosmic *logos*. In other words, proper, critical engagement with the challenges of interpreting Heraclitus' remarks is supposed to prepare and condition us for proper, critical engagement with our experiences and the insights that those experiences can afford us into the hidden nature (B₁₂₃) and unseen attunement (B₅₄) of things.²⁹ If, in B₅₀, *logos* refers to Heraclitus' book, then the fragment is telling us that a skilled auditor or reader of this book will ultimately agree with it, not

27 Note that, in Xenophanes, even the (as far as we can tell) unqualified expression 'the mortals believe ...' (οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι, B₁₄) cannot refer literally to all mortals, because it excludes, at least, Xenophanes himself.

28 For a recent statement of a similar view of Heraclitus' epistemology, see Moore 2020, 51–7 ('understanding is not impossible', 56).

29 See e.g. Graham 2008, 177–81.

because of Heraclitus' personal authority ('listening not to me'), but because of the 'account' or 'argument' (the *logos*) itself. If, alternatively, *logos* refers here to the cosmic principle, then B50 tells us that, in the end, our proper engagement with Heraclitus' book ('listening not to me', i.e. not to my book) is itself only a preparatory exercise for something else: our proper engagement with the cosmic *logos*. Both kinds of *logos* should be kept in view.³⁰ It might even be the case that, for those of us fortunate enough to have it, Heraclitus' book (his *logos*) represents our best chance of attaining understanding of the hidden nature and unseen attunement of things (of the cosmic *logos*). It would be going too far, however, to say that learning from Heraclitus' book is a necessary condition for attaining such understanding; Heraclitus' own example proves otherwise.

By the same token, we are not doomed to remain among those who 'do not know how to listen' (ἀκοῦσαι οὐκ ἐπιστάμενοι, B19; cf. B34), presumably both to the cosmic *logos* and to Heraclitus' own words.³¹ In general, Heraclitus' critical remarks about the failures of most humans to understand are not designed to depress us with the sad lot that we could never escape, but rather to provoke and orient us through negative exemplars. Thus, for example, the remark that 'many' people (πολλοί) fail to comprehend what they encounter and learn (B17) tellingly falls short of the claim that this is true of all people (compare B104: 'the many are bad, but few the good'; cf. also B2).³² Again, the qualified remark 'poor witnesses for people are the eyes and ears of those who have barbarian souls' (B107) suggests, by contrast, that, for those with the proper sort of souls, eyes and ears can be valuable witnesses.³³ Indeed, his general pessimism about people notwithstanding, Heraclitus also insists that there is a share for 'all people' (ἀνθρώποισι πᾶσι) in knowing themselves and being of sound mind (γινώσκειν ἑωυτοῦς καὶ σωφρονεῖν, B116; cf. B113).³⁴

30 It is well to remember, however, that λόγου is Bernays' emendation for the transmitted δόγματος. Though the emendation is widely accepted—and for good reason, not least given the resultant *figura etymologica* (λόγου ... ὁμολογεῖν)—certainty is not forthcoming.

31 Similarly, Moore 2020, 55: 'it is not that people *cannot* hear, but that they do not know how to listen'.

32 For whatever it is worth, Clement of Alexandria (*Stromateis* 2.24-5), our source for B19, states that Heraclitus' criticism targeted 'certain unbelieving people' (ἀπίστους εἶναι τινας ἐπιστύφω). B19 might suggest that people can learn to listen as children eventually learn to speak (cf. B79).

33 For negative exemplars in Heraclitus, see further B2, B40, B56, B57, B72, B89, B108; cf. Tor 2016, 112.

34 Other fragments praise intellectual achievement that elevates certain individuals above others: B22, B39, B121; cf. B28, B29, B33, B49. It is doubtful whether B83 ('the wisest among human beings will appear as a monkey compared to a god, in wisdom and in beauty and

In sum, in B₁ and elsewhere Heraclitus is telling us that acquiring at least some measure of understanding of his text and of the world would be an arduous and protracted affair for us, but not an impossible one. Once we appreciate this point, we see that the sequence of thought across the three components of B₁, and the force of the fragment in the broader context of the book as a whole, in fact present us with a further reason to avoid the common rendering ‘once’. After all, it would be, at a minimum, misleading for Heraclitus to affirm, quite generally and without qualification, that people always fail to understand, both before and after hearing the *logos*, if, in different fragments, he gives us to understand that it is not beyond the reach of humans—as, if nothing else, the case of Heraclitus himself proves—to gain at least some measure of understanding of his words and of the realities underpinning our experiences. Instead, the claim Heraclitus makes in (i) is the more restricted one, that people always fail to grasp this account both before they hear it and ‘after they have heard it for the first time’. To be sure, this claim grabs our attention and pulls us up short. But it leaves it quite open that at least some people will gain at least some measure of understanding of Heraclitus’ words and of their own experiences, if they apply themselves to the former and then to the latter with the requisite persistence and critical mindedness.

III

On our interpretation of B₁, when hearing or reading the opening of Heraclitus’ work, the audience at first learns that they will not at first understand; Heraclitus thus implicitly encourages his audience toward sustained, repeated engagement with his text. On the most fine-grained level, Heraclitus’

in all other things’) records Heraclitus’ own words; see Long 2007, 4–5. Even if it did, however, Heraclitus would not be denying that ‘the wisest human being’ possesses some measure of wisdom, just as humans may possess *some* measure of beauty and of other good qualities. Just how then the superior wisdom of god differed from that of the wisest human would be a question that, to judge by the extant evidence, Heraclitus left open. Conceivably, it might be the case, for example, that god’s wisdom differs in the level of fine-grained detail and comprehensiveness with which he can grasp unities of opposites. Alternatively, Long 2007, 5 (cf. 13–15) questions that Heraclitus even permitted a distinction between merely human wisdom and superior divine wisdom, on the grounds that wisdom is identified with achieving *one* insight, accessible also to human beings: understanding how all things are governed (B₄₁); Long too, though, allows that the attention of a wise human soul must at any one time be oriented towards some one aspect or part of the world, whereas at any one time ‘god will be considering and directing the entire world’ (15 n. 54).

syntax, which has long given readers pause, is itself a mechanism to provoke such engagement. Already Aristotle faults Heraclitus' writing in general, and in particular the programmatic first sentence of B1: it is neither easy to read nor easy to understand (εὐανάγνωστον ... εὐφραστον, *Rhetoric* 1407^b11–12) because it is unclear how αἴεῖ is to be construed (see note 6 above and cf. A4 = Demetrius, *De elocutione* 191–2). Such ambiguity—better perhaps 'linguistic density' (Kahn 1979, 91)—is manifestly a conscious stylistic trait assiduously cultivated across Heraclitus' book. One might interpret this deliberate strategy not as a barrier to understanding but rather as a spur to repeated engagement with the text in the light of its multiple possible interpretations.³⁵ Heraclitus' verbal style, in other words, seems calibrated to prevent his audience from supposing that they have understood him at first sight or on just one single hearing.

On our interpretation of τὸ πρῶτον, Heraclitus himself articulates something like the exegetical principle that Charles Kahn has convincingly and influentially identified: the same remark, read again and in the light of all the other ones, tells you something new. Our understanding of some particular Heraclitean remark is thus continually changed and deepened by our progressive encounter with the other Heraclitean remarks that surround it and by our reflections on all those remarks and on the interrelations between them.³⁶ We thus understand a given remark later on in a way that we could not understand it at first. On the view defended here, Heraclitus himself concisely and subtly conveys as much in the beginning of his book.

Indeed, the qualification τὸ πρῶτον may itself be one whose significance we can only grasp fully upon further and repeated reading: it will only be in retrospect that we can appreciate for ourselves why we indeed could not have understood on first reading. In these respects, our interpretation fits well with a pattern observed by Jaap Mansfeld in an article informatively entitled 'Insight by Hindsight: Intentional Unclarity in Presocratic Proems' (1995). Mansfeld reads Heraclitus' proem as 'what we may call a declaration of obscurity' and maintains that Heraclitus (like Parmenides and Empedocles) introduced his work 'in such a way that one can only understand, or hope to understand, what is meant after having studied the whole'.³⁷

35 Cf. on Pindar and Aeschylus Scodel 1996, 59–60, and Spelman 2018, 36–7.

36 This interpretive principle permeates Kahn 1979; he labels it 'resonance' (89–90). Although Kahn translates 'once' (29) and only records 'for the first time' in parenthesis as an alternative meaning without further comment (97), he also once briefly alludes in passing to a possible connection between Heraclitean resonance and this alternative meaning (112), although he does not discuss or elaborate this connection.

37 Mansfeld 1995, 226–7. Mansfeld glosses ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον as 'after they have heard it for the first time' (227) but does not unpack his reasons for this choice or its implications.

Heraclitus' very term in B1 for the failure of people to understand—ἀξύνετοι—is one particular word that will command renewed and newly informed attention on a second hearing or reading. At first, we might hear simply that people turn out not to understand. Subsequently, however, we will know to connect this particular term for incomprehension with Heraclitus' category of 'common' (inclusive, broad, synoptic) vs 'private' (selective, narrow, myopic) understanding (a very similar connection is drawn unmistakably in B114: ξὺν νόῳ ... τῷ ξυνῶ). We will know, also, to read this particular term in the light of Heraclitus' overarching preoccupation with the (as he sees it) literal and etymological meaning of words (e.g. B32, B48, B50, B114). Read in this light, ἀξύνετοι is, on our view of τὸ πρῶτον, a highly apposite term for Heraclitus to use at this programmatic juncture: what auditors and readers will indeed not be able to do on a first hearing or reading is to bring together (συνήμι) a term (such as, for example, ἀξύνετοι) or a statement (such as, for example, B1) with the terms and statements to which they will be exposed later on in the book. On subsequent hearing and reading, however, this possibility now opens up for the properly attuned and astute re-reader. In this respect, our newly informed and deeper understanding of Heraclitus' very term for incomprehension (ἀξύνετοι) itself exemplifies his programmatic point about what is possible on a further—but not on a first—hearing.³⁸

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38 If B2 (τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ...) followed closely on B1 (as Sextus Empiricus tells us: *Adversus mathematicos* 7.133), then the process of enriching our understanding of ἀξύνετοι in B1 begins promptly after our first reading of the opening of Heraclitus' book.

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