

Heraclitus the Jock

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Abstract: The ancient Ephesian thinker Heraclitus, in his aphoristic writings, described the dynamic coming-to-be of things according to a number of obscure metaphors. In this essay, Hyland ponders whether there is a paradigmatic experience according to which a number of these metaphors can best be understood. Gathering together and thoughtfully retranslating a number of Greek terms including *polemos* (often translated as “war”), *eris* (“strife”), *agon* (“contest”), and *paidia* (“play”), Hyland argues that Heraclitus’s metaphors can be understood as referring to an experience of athletic play. Hyland explores the significance of athletic play, with its stance of responsive openness, as a paradigm for thinking and living.

In light of my title, I must begin with a perhaps disappointing admission. I have not discovered a heretofore unknown manuscript testifying that Heraclitus won Olympic gold for his native Ephesus in the pankration. There is next to no historical evidence that this great Pre-Socratic thinker was in fact an accomplished athlete, unless one wants to cite the extremely weak evidence that he supposedly played games with the children of Ephesus in the temple of Artemis. Nevertheless, I want to suggest in this paper that at the core of his thinking is a series of key words and thought connections that point toward athletic play as a paradigm of thinking and living for Heraclitus.

One of the many wondrous things about the sayings of Heraclitus is how certain words, inserted into his sayings just a few times or even in some cases only once, can become established as at the very core of his thought, thereby making his words akin to poetic words. Such is the power of the extraordinary choice of his writing format, and such is the case with the words I wish to address in this paper: *polemos*, *eris*, *agon*, *maxesthai*, and *paidia*. *Polemos* occurs just three times in Heraclitus’s extant fragments; *eris*

three times as well; *agon* just once; *maxesthai* twice, and *paidia* again just once. Yet thought together, they constitute at once one of the core thematics of the extant fragments, and yet also one of the many apparent tensions in Heraclitus's corpus. Was Heraclitus the great thinker of the foundational character of war, strife, and fighting, as is so often claimed? Or, as the famous fragment 52 that begins "Lifetime is a child playing" suggests, does Heraclitus have in mind a less warlike vision of the nature of human life and indeed the happening of the world? Or, as is so often the case with Heraclitus, is it somehow both?

Before beginning this brief study of the Heraclitean sentences in which these few words are contained, I want to make clear that throughout I shall be engaging the two principles of Heraclitean interpretation which Charles Kahn calls "linguistic density" and "resonance." As Kahn puts it, "By *linguistic density* I mean the phenomenon by which a multiplicity of ideas is expressed in a single word or phrase. By *resonance* I mean a relationship between fragments by which a single verbal theme or image is echoed from one text to another in such a way that the meaning of each is enriched when they are understood together."¹ In other words, we should resist formulating our interpretive questions in the form—which I first intimated above—"which of these two possible meanings (or three, or four) did Heraclitus intend?" and allow instead that Heraclitus may well have had in mind the *multiple* possible meanings of a given word or phrase—and even if he did not necessarily "have them in mind," a consideration of them may enrich our understanding of the implications of his thought. Second, that we should allow that those multiple meanings might well be *echoed* in other sentences that do not necessarily contain a given word or phrase. Indeed, I shall argue in this study that Heraclitus simply cannot be adequately appreciated without engaging these interpretive strategies.²

I begin with Heraclitus's word *polemos*, which occurs in three of Heraclitus's sentences. I list them in the order in which I shall address them, using the Diels-Kranz numbering, and with standard translations that I shall in each case want to complicate.

1. Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 89.

2. Martin Heidegger broaches the notion of linguistic density as an interpretive principle early in his 1943 lecture course, "The Inception of Occidental Thinking." See Martin Heidegger, *Heraclitus: The Inception of Occidental Thinking and Logic: Heraclitus's Doctrine of the Logos*, trans. Julia Goesser Assaiante and S. Montgomery Ewegen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 55, 58.

D-K 53: πόλεμος πάντων μὲν πατήρ ἐστι, πάντων δὲ βασιλεὺς, καὶ τοὺς μὲν θεοὺς ἔδειξε τοὺς δὲ ἀνθρώπους, τοὺς μὲν δούλους ἐποίησε τοὺς δὲ ἐλευθέρους.

War is father of all and king of all; and some he has shown as gods, others men; some he has made slaves, others free.³

D-K 80: εἰδέ (ναι) χρῆ τὸν πόλεμον ἐόντα ζῶντα καὶ δίκην ἔριν καὶ γινόμενα πάντα κατ' ἔριν καὶ χρεώμενα.

One must realize that war is shared and conflict is justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained) in accordance with conflict.⁴

D-K 67: ὁ θεὸς ἡμέρη εὐφρόνη, χειμῶν θέρος, πόλεμος εἰρήνη, κόρος λιμός, ἀλλοιοῦται δὲ ὅκωσπερ ὀκόταν συμμαγιῆ θυώμασιν ὀνομάζεται καθ' ἡδονὴν ἑκάστου.

The god: day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger. It alters, as when mingled with perfumes, it gets named according to the pleasure of each one.⁵

I begin with D-K 53, the famous—or infamous—fragment in which *polemos* is almost always translated as it is by Kahn above as “war”: “War is the father of all,” etc. Now, “war” is certainly a possible translation of *polemos*, both in Heraclitus and more generally in Heraclitus’s time in Ancient Greece. But I want to raise the question whether it is the best translation to capture Heraclitus’s complex meaning. *Polemos* can also mean—and note that this is the broader and more inclusive meaning—something more like “struggle”⁶ or “opposition.” It could be said that “war” is an extreme instance of “struggle,” or even, borrowing a phrase from Martin Heidegger, a “defective mode” of struggle, one in which the alienation that is often a risk in any struggle reaches its peak in an “extremism” that one should avoid. To be sure, war is *one way* in which, as Heraclitus puts it, some can be “shown” as gods, others as men—presumably in that the “men” might die in battle whereas the gods will not. Similarly, war is *one way* in which some are “shown” as freemen, others as slaves, particularly in ancient Greece, where slavery was often the fate of those who were defeated but not killed in war.

3. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 67.

4. Ibid. (trans. modified).

5. Ibid., 85.

6. Kahn recognizes this problem, commenting on this fragment that *polemos* is for Heraclitus “the term for a universal principle of opposition,” in *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 208. Similarly with his comment on D-K 80: “warfare has become a figure for opposition in general” (206).

But is war the only theater in which these phenomena are “shown”? Is not Greek tragedy—and for that matter Greek comedy as well—full of struggles other than actual war where some are shown as mortals (think of Antigone, Oedipus, or Pentheus; or in comedy Socrates, Pisathetaerus, or even Euripides), some as gods? Or where some are shown as freemen, others as slaves? Think of all those instances in Greek literature where one person or another becomes a slave of his or her passions, or the case of the modern United States, where it took a war to *end* slavery, not to first show it. I want to suggest, then, that we give much too narrow a meaning to Heraclitean *polemos* if we translate it—and more importantly if we *think* it—simply and only as “war.”

My suggestion is even stronger, I want to argue, in the case of D-K 80, where *polemos* is joined with *eris*, “conflict,” “rivalry,” or “striving.” “One must realize that war (*polemos*) is shared and conflict (rivalry, striving: *erin*) is justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained) in accordance with conflict (*erin*).” Even if we were to construe “war” as the definitive meaning of *polemos*, *eris*, is a much broader term, especially when the claim is made by Heraclitus that *eris* is justice and that *all* things come to pass through *eris*. Who would want to claim that *all things* came to pass through that single mode of struggle and rivalry that constitutes war? Clearly Heraclitus had in mind a much broader array of struggles and rivalries that might constitute “justice” and through which *all things* come to pass. Moreover, if we do construe *polemos* narrowly as war, how could we make the claim that it is “shared” or is “common,” as the rest of the saying intimates, by *all*? Once again, war *can be*, on occasion, shared or common, but to limit this to war would be to fail to appreciate the almost universal significance of the many other forms of struggle and striving that constitute our world.

Finally on *polemos*, D-K 67 reads “The god: day and night, winter and summer, war and peace, satiety and hunger. It alters, as when mingled with perfumes, it gets named according to the pleasure of each one.” Once again, *polemos can* be construed in the narrow sense of “war,” as in the familiar opposition, already obviously operative in Heraclitus’s time, “war and peace.” But if we do so, then that particular opposition becomes strikingly more narrow than the others in the list of fundamental oppositions that Heraclitus asserts constitute “the god.” Day and night, winter and summer, satiety and hunger, these are, we might say, universal conditions that go on constantly and with regularity, with what Heraclitus will say is a certain *logos*. In order to raise *polemos* and *eirene* to a corresponding level of universality

and constancy, it would be much more appropriate to translate the phrase as something like “struggle and reconciliation” or even “struggle and rest.”

The upshot of my argument here, then, is that Heraclitus’s language calls for a much broader reading of *polemos* than the more limited “war,” something more like “struggle” or “opposition.” Again, this is not to *reject* war as *one instance* of *polemos*. It is rather to suggest that as a fundamental statement of an important Heraclitean contention, the word would better be translated as something like “Struggle is the father and king of all”; better because more inclusive of the broad range of experiences that Heraclitus seems to want to include as “showing” us how some emerge as gods, some as men, some as slaves, some as freemen. This raises a further question toward which we must ultimately move: if “war” is better understood as an extreme case of the broader phenomenon Heraclitus wants to point to, if it even might best be considered as a defective mode of the broader phenomenon, is there some other phenomenon, some experience more common, more “shared” by us all, that would serve better than war as a kind of paradigm of the sort of struggle that Heraclitus sees as so foundational to the happening of things? I leave that question in the air for the moment.

The second key and related word of Heraclitus on this complex of issues has already been introduced in D-K 80: *Eris*. We saw that *eris* too has a broad range of meanings that Heraclitus might have wanted to engage, perhaps even broader than *polemos*: among them striving, quarrel, conflict, rivalry, contention, disputation. Indeed, the second major meaning introduced in Liddell and Scott is “wordy wrangling.”⁷ Clearly, then, the invocation of this basic Heraclitean word goes far beyond the particular instance of conflict embodied in war. When Heraclitus says that “*erin* is justice, and that all things come to pass (and are ordained) in accordance with *erin*,” he is clearly pointing to a broad array of both human and non-human experiences, much broader than simply war, though again, war remains one extreme possibility of the broader experience of *eris*.⁸ If we think of the wide variety of experiences that could fall under the headings of strife, quarrel, conflict, rivalry, contention, disputation, and wordy wrangling, we can begin to see the plausibility of the claim that this wide array of experiences is that out of which justice, and for that matter, “all things” arise. Again the

7. Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 689.

8. Indeed, Heidegger goes so far as to speak of “Heraclitus, who thinks strife as the essence of being.” See Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 15. See also page 21: “Neither ‘battle’ nor ‘war’ attain to the richness of the essence of what is here called ‘strife,’ *Eris*.”

question is raised, is there a particular experience that could be understood as paradigmatic of what Heraclitus is getting at here?

D-K A22 reads:

ὡς ἔρις ἔκ τε θεῶν καὶ ἀνθρώπων ἀπόλοιτο» οὐ γὰρ ἂν εἶναι ἀρμονίαν μὴ ὄντος ὀξέος καὶ βαρέος, οὐδὲ τὰ ζῶα ἄνευ θήλεος καὶ ἄρρενος ἐναντίων ὄντων.

[Homer was wrong when he said] “Would that Conflict might vanish from among gods and men!” For there would be no attunement without high and low notes nor any animals without male and female, both of which are opposites.⁹

Here we get a glimpse of just how broadly Heraclitus is conceiving *eris*: high and low musical notes count, as do male and female, “because both are opposites.” The simple fact of two phenomena being “opposite,” such as high and low notes, puts them under the rubric of *eris* as he understands it. To say the least, high and low notes are hardly “at war” in any real sense. Finally regarding this fragment, Heraclitus hints at the crucial fragment D-K 8 when he asserts just why it is so important, against Homer’s lament, to preserve *eris*: without *eris*, what we might call the tension between high and low notes, there would be no *attunement*, no *harmony*.

That brings us to fragment D-K 8, a crucial fragment for our purposes. It reads:

Τὸ ἀντίξουν συμφέρον καὶ ἐκ τῶν διαφερόντων καλλίστην ἀρμονίαν καὶ πάντα κατ’ ἔριν γίνεσθαι.

The counter-thrust brings together, and from tones at variance comes the most beautiful harmony, and all things come to pass through striving.¹⁰

The last phrase of this fragment reiterates almost exactly the almost universal generalization articulated in fragment 80 discussed above, that *all things* come to be through *eris*. To say the least, it would be a stretch to suppose that Heraclitus means to say that *all things* come to be through *war*, even if we agree that *some things* do indeed come about due to that extreme instance of *polemos* and *eris* which is war. As Heraclitus’s own examples of day and night, winter and summer, and here the high and low tones of music out of which harmony arises show clearly enough, he has a much broader phenomenon in mind. Perhaps we could say that “all things” arise through

9. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 67.

10. *Ibid.*, 63 (trans. modified). For Heidegger’s unusual translation and reading of the fragment, see Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 110ff.

a certain tension, a certain striving, a tension and striving that might vary in quality between the “peaceful” tensions of phenomena like day and night, winter and summer, or high and low notes, and the much more violent tensions and striving that constitute that mode of *polemos* and *eris* which is war.

Heraclitus had ample basis for including such a variety of senses of *eris*, for one such distinction is explicitly made by Hesiod at the very beginning of his *Works and Days*. After a brief, ten-line invocation to Zeus, Hesiod begins his book with a decisive discussion of *eris*. He says:

It was never true that there was only one kind of strife [*eris*] There have always been two on earth. There is one you could like when you understand her. The other is hateful. The two Strifes have separate natures. There is one Strife who builds up evil war [*polemos*], and slaughter. She is harsh; no man loves her [. . .] But the other one [. . .] is far kinder. She pushes the shiftless man to work, for all his laziness. A man looks at his neighbor, who is rich; then he too wants work; [. . .] So the neighbor envies the neighbor who presses on toward wealth. Such strife is good for mortals. And potter is rival with potter, and craftsman with craftsman, and beggar is jealous of beggar and minstrel of minstrel. So you, Perseus, put all this firmly in your heart, nor let that Strife who loves mischief keep you from working as you listen at the meeting place to see what you can make of the disputes.¹¹

This passage gives Heraclitus clear warrant for engaging multiple meanings of *eris*, including, decisively as we shall see, distinctions between “good” (*agathon*) and “evil” (*kakon*) instances of the same word. I want to argue yet again that we need not and should not *choose* between these senses, claiming that Heraclitus means one but not the other. As he himself strikingly puts it elsewhere, “For the god all things are beautiful and good and just, but men have taken some things as unjust, others as just” (D-K 102). Heraclitus is a man, but one who daringly speaks from both the human and the divine perspective. And from the human perspective, *eris* has multiple senses to which we must try to be attuned.

But it is the first part of the D-K 8 fragment that introduces a crucial new point. “The counter-thrust brings together,” and, as Kahn translates it,

11. Richmond Lattimore (trans.), *Hesiod* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1959), 19–21 (trans. modified). In the introduction to his *Philosophy as Agon: A Study of Plato’s Gorgias and Related Texts* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2018), Robert Metcalf presents important remarks on this passage from Hesiod, as well as, more generally, the historical context for such key words as *eris* and *agon*. See especially pages 14–17.

“from tones at variance” comes the most beautiful harmony or attunement. Kahn’s “tones at variance,” however, captures only an extremely narrow range of meaning of *diapheronton*, and I think much hangs on the alternative, or rather the additional, possible meanings. *Diaphero*, in fact, has a very large range of meanings, covering almost a full page of the larger Liddell and Scott.¹² Its literal meaning is to carry over or across, and so to carry away from, or in turn, to *differ*, an English word clearly derivative from the Greek. It can mean just to *live*, to continue, or bear through, and hence to endure. More negatively it can mean to disjoin, tear asunder, and so to dispute or quarrel. Perhaps most positively, it can mean to differ in the sense of to *excel*, especially in virtue. Most predominantly according to Liddell and Scott, however, the word carries various inflections of *difference*. So we would need to think the Heraclitean phrase in a much broader sense than differences in musical tone. “Out of differences” or “Out of things that differ” comes the most beautiful attunements or harmony. Differences in musical tones, yes, but also differences between male and female, day and night, the seasons of the year, responsiveness and receptivity, conservative and liberal, all the myriad *differences* in manners of striving that constitute our world, and especially the human world. Should we try to determine *which one* of the multiple meanings of *diaphero* are in play here? Or, following Kahn’s own principle of “linguistic density,” should we try to hear at least as many of the possible meanings of *diaphero* as seem plausible and fruitful? I suggest the latter. Surely, as the possible meanings such as dispute, quarrel, or even tear asunder attest, “things differing” can have the strongly negative meanings consistent with the narrower meanings of *polemos* and *eris* as something like “war” and “conflict.” But we need also to hear other possible meanings: “Out of things that endure, things that strive with each other” come the most beautiful harmonies. “Out of things that excel” come the most beautiful harmonies. Perhaps most broadly, “Out of difference” comes the most beautiful harmony. Conjoined as it is in this sentence with the claim that it is *eris* out of which all things come to be, perhaps we should think the first clause as something like “out of things that strive together come the fairest harmony.” Then once again we would have to think what kinds of experience might be paradigmatic for this phenomenon.

The third key word requiring discussion is *agon*. Given the importance of *polemos and eris* to Heraclitus’s thought generally, one might expect his fragments to be peppered with references to *agon*. Yet the word occurs only once, and that in an apparently unremarkable context. D-K 42 reads:

12. Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 417–418.

Τόν τε Ὀμηρον ἔφασκεν ἄξιον ἐκ τῶν ἀγώνων ἐκβάλλεσθαι καὶ ῥαπίζεσθαι,
καὶ Ἀρχίλοχον ὁμοίως.

Homer deserves to be thrown out of the competitions and beaten—and Archilochus too!¹³

In this sentence *agon* seems to refer straightforwardly to the well-known “competitions,” where both athletes and poets vied for respective victories. Yet the apparently simple word *agon* is also rich with meanings. Its original meaning was “gathering,” as in the word “agora,” or market-place, or the imperative *age*, “gather together!,” later taking on the more specific connotation of those gatherings that constituted athletic and theatrical competitions. Robert Metcalf, in the introduction to his *Philosophy as Agon: A Study of Plato’s Gorgias and Related Texts*, documents numerous uses of the original meaning of *agon* as gathering in Homer and Hesiod, and comments insightfully on its development into the primarily “competitive” meaning.¹⁴ Of particular importance is the significance of these “gatherings,” both competitive and non-competitive, as the loci of *community* in the literal sense of that word, as those gatherings together that constituted and sustained the *unity* of the group, even if—and perhaps especially if—those gatherings involved the potentially alienating element of competition. It is worth noting in this context that the Latin word “*competitio*” means literally “questioning or striving together.” The very word connotes the apparently paradoxical phenomenon that a striving *against* each other could in fact be a striving *together*, hence a source in the end not of discord but of unity. “Out of *eris* comes the most beautiful harmony.” Strange as it may seem, then, as Metcalf makes clear, the *agones*, the gatherings together for various modes of competition, became a most important cultural source of unity for the Greeks. Nothing could be more Heraclitean! For that reason, to recommend “throwing Homer out” of the competitions may be a more serious charge than we, in a different culture, might think. For to throw him out of the competitions—not to mention giving him a beating—implied removing him from the unity of the community of Greeks. Homer, the almost universally regarded founding father of Greek culture, deserves to be removed from that culture! A hard charge indeed!

The fourth word, *maxesthai*, might seem to most narrowly refer to that “fighting” which is war. And indeed, one of the two fragments in which

13. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 37 (trans. modified).

14. See Metcalf, *Philosophy as Agon*.

Heraclitus employs the word seems clearly to refer primarily if not exclusively to “battle.” D-K 44 reads,

μάχεσθαι χρῆ τὸν δῆμον ὑπὲρ τοῦ νόμου ὅκως ὑπὲρ τείχεος.

The people must fight for the law as for their city wall.¹⁵

Even here, however, the very meaning of the sentence potentially extends the sense beyond literal physical battle. “Fighting for the law” could, of course, mean actually waging war against an invading enemy. But it could also mean “fighting” to preserve the law in the face of political forces that try to change, even pervert it. And this wider meaning is extended even further by the second instance in which *maxesthai* is employed, D-K 85:

θυμῷ μάχεσθαι χαλεπόν; ὃ γὰρ ἂν θέληι, ψυχῆς ὠνεῖται.

It is hard to fight passion; whatever it wants it buys at the expense of the soul.¹⁶

Here clearly *maxesthai* has the broader sense of “resist,” “not give in to.” Once again, to hear Heraclitus is to listen to the many senses in play in his deliberate use of “linguistically dense” words and phrases.

So far, then, I have been arguing, following Kahn’s principle of “linguistic density,” that the key words in Heraclitus under discussion, *polemos*, *eris*, *agon*, and *maxesthai*, each have multiple meanings *all* of which must be heard in Heraclitus’s sentences. In particular, I have been arguing that the rather narrow—and extreme—readings of these words widely chosen as the definitive translations—war, conflict, competition, and battle—generate an impoverished sense of just what phenomena Heraclitus is getting at. By opening up other possibilities of translation that connote more broadly conceived meanings, words such as struggle, striving, and the broader senses of competition and resisting, I hope to have pointed in the direction of some of the much broader phenomena towards which these Heraclitean sentences, I think, are pointing. In so doing, several times the question has been intimated, if war and conflict are not the definitive or paradigmatic meanings of these key terms, are there other phenomena of our experience which we can point to that might better capture these broader phenomena?

We might get a clue to a response from a sentence of Heraclitus comparably broad in scope, but with an apparently significantly different theme. D-K 52 reads:

15. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 59.

16. *Ibid.*, 77.

Αἰὼν παῖς ἐστὶ παίζων, πεσσεύων; παιδὸς ἢ βασιλῆϊ.

Lifetime is a child playing, playing at a board game. Kingship belongs to the child.¹⁷

The breadth in scope begins with the first word, *aion*. Most translators translate the word as “lifetime,” which is appropriate so long as one hears in this word its kinship with *aei*, “always,” or “forever.” “Lifetime,” then, signals the *entirety* of the span of life, and moreover, the entirety of the span of life not just of humans (though perhaps paradigmatically for us) but of *anything that comes to be*, which for Heraclitus is virtually everything. So, “the span of life in its entirety” is a child playing a board game, and kingship belongs to the child. In the earlier sentences discussed, we learned that “struggle is the father and king of all,” and that “all things” come to be from striving. Here we see that phenomenon from a somewhat different viewpoint. The lifespan of anything that comes to be is a child playing, playing at a board game. And kingship—perhaps the same kingship as is referred to as *polemos* in fragment 53 above—belongs to a child, presumably the one playing.

Could the image of a child playing a game be pointing in a somewhat different register to the same phenomenon as was limned in the earlier fragments on *polemos*, *eris*, and *agon*? Martin Heidegger, in his 1943 lecture course, “Heraclitus: the Inception of Occidental Thinking,” says in his introduction, “In what follows, we must be attentive to whether, and in what way, the thinking of Heraclitus is always determined from out of the nearness to a game, and whether even the to-be-thought of thoughtful thinking is revealed to him to be something like a game.”¹⁸ I want to suggest that there is a clear resonance here, and with potentially important consequences. For now that struggle, that striving that was “father and king” of all and from which “all things” arise, is reconceived as the *play* of a child, a child playing a rule-governed game.

But first it may be worthwhile to consider the reaction to this fragment of Friedrich Nietzsche, who gives us one pole of the “linguistic density” contained in this Heraclitean sentence. For it is as if Nietzsche’s reading of the sentence passes over the *pesseuon*—the rule-governed board game that the child plays—and hears only that “*Aion* is a child playing.” That is, Nietzsche construes the *aion*, the temporal happening of things in its entirety, as a child playing in the sense of the purposeless, goalless, innocent playing

17. *Ibid.*, 71 (trans. modified).

18. Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 12.

of a child, the sort that we might gloss as “playing around.” Here is the way Nietzsche presents his reading:

In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming to be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence. And as children and artists play, so plays the ever-living fire. It constructs and destroys, all in innocence. Such is the game that the aeon plays with itself. Transforming itself into water and earth, it builds towers of sand like a child at the seashore, piles them up and tramples them down [. . .] The child throws its toys away from time to time—and starts again, in innocent caprice.¹⁹

The sense of play expressed here seems to be that of child’s play construed as the kind of innocent, purposeless, rule-less child’s play whose appropriate image is that of a child building and then whimsically destroying sandcastles at the seashore. This understanding of the happening of the world as a “play” of chance reverberates throughout Nietzsche’s thought. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in the section of Part III entitled “Before Sunrise,” he has Zarathustra say this:

Verily, it is a blessing and not a blasphemy when I teach: “Over all things stand the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the heaven Chance, the heaven Prankishness.” “By Chance”—that is the most ancient nobility of the world, and this I restored to all things: I delivered them from their bondage under Purpose [. . .] A little wisdom is possible indeed; but this blessed certainty I found in all things: that they would rather *dance* on the feet of Chance [. . .] That is what your purity is to me now, that there is no eternal spider or spider web of reason [the image Nietzsche had earlier used to prefigure his invocation of Eternal Recurrence]; that you are to me a dance floor for divine accidents.²⁰

And later, in *Twilight of the Idols*, in the section entitled “The ‘Improvers’ of Mankind,” he reiterates this sentiment: “Nature, estimated artistically, is no model. It exaggerates, it distorts, it leaves gaps. Nature is *chance*.”²¹

Such may be one version of the play of the *aion*, particularly for those who, to use a Heraclitean phrase, fail to “listen to the *logos*.” Heraclitus may indeed have had in mind something of this notion of child’s play here.

19. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1962), 62.

20. Friedrich Nietzsche, “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 278.

21. Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Twilight of the Idols,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 517.

Child's play, yes, but not just this sort of child's play! For we must not forget, as Nietzsche risks having forgotten, the *pesseuon*. For Heraclitus, the child *aion* is playing a rule-governed game, a board game of some sort, perhaps akin to backgammon or draughts. This introduces several important elements. First, the rules of the game the *aion* plays introduce the element of a *logos*, that what may look like chance to the players immersed in the game in fact, from a larger perspective, has a *logos* to it, and to say the least, the notion of this larger *logos* to the happening of things is a crucial element in Heraclitus's thought. As he says elsewhere,

ἐν τῷ σοφῶν· ἐπιστασθαι γνῶμην ὅκη κυβερνήσαι πάντα διὰ πάντων.

The wise is one, knowing the plan by which it steers all things through all.²²

Second and decisively, the board game is played *with* someone. Hence the "com" of "competition." Thus is preserved the element so important for Heraclitus of striving, of struggle, of *eris* and *polemos*. Out of *eris*, out of *polemos* in the larger sense of struggle that I have been advocating, comes the fairest harmony.

This crucial second element is underlined by the *pesseuon*, by the playing by the *aion* of this rule-governed game. This play in which the *aion* engages is *competitive* play. Hence the striving, hence the struggle. Perhaps, then, the best model for the activity of striving and struggle through which *all things* come to be, the playful activity in which the child-king *aion*, lifetime, is engaged, is most like an activity as important culturally to the world in which Heraclitus lived as it is to ours. Perhaps the best model, or at very least a second model that we must include along with the image of the child building and destroying sandcastles, is the competitive play that constitutes athletics. Perhaps, then, the best image of the *eris*, the *polemos*, out of which the beautiful harmonies of "all things" arise is the competitive struggle of athletes, the struggles which so often make, as we still say today, "beautiful games." For it is instructive that, in the excitement and passion of a competitive game, for the players themselves, and perhaps especially for the team that is losing, the game will hardly seem "beautiful." Yet the spectators in the stands, and perhaps the players after the game is over, might acknowledge that "it was a beautiful game." "Out of strife comes the most beautiful harmony." Let us turn briefly, then, to a consideration of competitive play.

22. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, 55.

Both Heraclitus and Nietzsche seem attuned to the notion that something extraordinary is occurring when we play. Indeed, Heidegger, in his 1943 lecture course on Heraclitus, suggests that “in play, the essence of the human shows itself transparently,”²³ and, in the introduction to that course, he even says “In what follows, we must be attentive to whether, and in what way, the thinking of Heraclitus is always determined from out of the nearness to a game.”²⁴ There is a kind of enhancement, a kind of intensification of the quality of our lives that occurs in play. I have said, and I have heard others say, that when we are playing we feel like we are *really living*. In other writings I have tried to understand this intensification of life in play in terms of what I call the “stance” of play, the enhanced orientation toward the world and towards other people that we take in play.²⁵ On the one hand, in play it seems that we become, we must become in order to play the game well, more open to possibilities that the game presents us than we usually are in our everyday lives. If I am playing basketball, I must be much more open to the location of the other players, to the direction of their movements, and to the possibilities and limits opened up by those players and movements. If I am skiing, I must be more open than I usually am to the location of the trees, of the other skiers, of the moguls I must confront, and what possibilities and limitations those factors present me. An enhanced openness toward my world, then, whether it be the world of the basketball court or the world of the ski slope, is the first element in what I call the stance of play.

But play cannot be just enhanced openness. If I am on the basketball court and am exquisitely open to the movements of the other players and the possibilities opened up by them, but I do nothing in response, if I just notice those possibilities with enhanced sensitivity but fail to respond, I will hardly play well, indeed, I will hardly be *playing* at all. Similarly with the skier and any other play environment. The second element, then, in the stance of play is that I must *respond* to the possibilities my openness reveals, respond instantaneously and appropriately. In play, then, I must also be much more *responsive* to my appropriate environment than I usually am. So the stance of play seems to be characterized by an enhanced openness

23. Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 67.

24. *Ibid.*, 12.

25. See for example Drew A. Hyland, “The Stance of Play,” in *The Journal of the Philosophy of Sport*, Vol VII, 1980; Drew A. Hyland, *The Question of Play* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984); and Drew A. Hyland, *The Philosophy of Sport* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1990).

toward my world joined with an enhanced responsiveness toward what my openness reveals. I have named the stance of play, then, responsive openness.

Much is happening in this stance of play as responsive openness. We can note, for example, that if we for the moment entertain the societal understanding both of the Greeks and us of openness or receptivity as a primary characteristic of the feminine, and responsiveness as characteristic of the masculine, then we would say that the stance of play seeks to combine the masculine and feminine elements of our natures. In another register, if our stance becomes one of exclusive openness, even an exquisitely sensitive openness, but with little or no responsiveness, we become merely passive, even submissive. If on the other hand we become extremely responsive and cease being open, we risk becoming excessively demanding, even tyrannical. As we say, we become “close minded.” Responsive openness, then, the stance of play, attempts to hold a precarious balance between excessive openness without responsiveness, and excessive responsiveness without openness, between a stance of submissiveness and a stance of mastery. Indeed, it is when the element of responsiveness becomes too dominant and the openness insufficient that our play becomes alienated. Arguments ensue, fights may even break out. Play devolves into alienation. *Paidia* then verges on *polemos* as war. *Polemos*, then, in its extreme sense as war, can be understood as the radical breakdown of the stance of play, a situation in which responsiveness becomes something more like domination, without openness, without receptivity. Perhaps this is why Plato has his Athenian Stranger, discussing the role of play in the proper education of the young in the *Laws*, tell us that the real opposite of play is neither work nor seriousness, but war.²⁶

Heraclitus has said that “*polemos* is father and king of all,” meaning *polemos* in its multiple manifestations, all our struggles, including our athletic games, and yes, including war. Yet he also says that *aion* is a child playing a board game, and that kingship is in the hands of the child. He might seem, then, to broach implying that war and play are somehow and to some extent akin. Many a modern coach and much of our modern sport vocabulary would seem to agree with him. One hears from sportscasters of “blitzes,” of “bombs,” the football coaches’ room at Trinity College where I taught for many years is called “the war room.” One need only think of the famous remark of General Douglas MacArthur that “on the friendly fields of

26. Plato, “Laws,” in *Plato: The Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997), 803d–e.

strife”—he’s speaking of sports—“are sown the seeds which, in other times, on other fields, will reap the fruits of victory.” Yet Plato, or rather Plato’s Athenian Stranger, has said that war is the *opposite* of play, and my discussion of play as responsive openness has pointed to a similar conclusion, that war is the radical breakdown of the stance of play. Can the two be reconciled? Perhaps by joining them together we can bring ourselves to see yet another mode of *eris*, of striving: the necessity, in those myriad activities that call for responsive openness, to keep our striving, our modes of *eris*, in the manner of com-petition, of that striving together that is or can be a mode of friendship. We hearken back to the passage from Hesiod discussed earlier: there is a “good” *eris* and an “evil” *eris*. Perhaps Heraclitus and Plato could agree that we should *strive* to preserve the “good” *eris*, the good *polemos*, the good *agon*, and avoid the bad. Out of *that* striving might come the most beautiful harmonies.