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## **Heraclitus on *Thanatos*: A Philosophical Interpretation**

*Thanatos* (death) and related terms dominate the surviving fragments. The themes signified by this term, provide an essential key to understanding the philosophical project of Heraclitus.

I begin by reviewing three standard interpretations. These are the *logos* doctrine, the "flux doctrine," and finally the monistic-eschatological interpretation of Heraclitus. A central philosophical problem remains unanswered in these interpretations: How does he understand temporality, so that both the transcendent *logos* doctrine *and* the flux doctrine become possible in the first place? And can we ignore this temporal issue and justify a *monistic* interpretation? The problem is serious, as these models imply mutually exclusive accounts of time. I argue that Heraclitus uses *thanatos* to integrate two *different* temporalities: an unchanging one enshrined in *logos*, and another, manifest as flux.

A philological analysis of the texts demonstrates the significance of *thanatos* to Heraclitus. "*Thanatos*" (and its forms such as *thnesko*, *apothnesko*, *tethneotos*) is the most frequent term of philosophical importance, occurring twelve times (fragments 21, 26, 27, 36, 48, 62, 76, 77, 88). *Thanatos* is not only the most frequent theme (outnumbering *psuche*, *logos*, *hen*) in the writings of Heraclitus, but also the most philosophically *significant*. Heraclitus relates death to the life and degeneration of men (88), to souls (*psuchai*, 36), fate (*moira*, 25), to ever-flowing fame (*kleos aenaon thneton*, 29), to religious ritual, to sleep (*hupnos*, 21), and to the immortals (62). Yet there is nothing morbid or otherworldly about Heraclitus' extended meditation on death. Even though humans cannot anticipate or comprehend what awaits them after death, death is of deep philosophical significance (27). As mortals, our temporality is defined by the paradoxical presence of death in life.

*Thanatos* imbues the Heraclitean universe with a surprisingly complex temporality. His is not a simple universe of eternal being nor is it one of rapid flux. Instead, Heraclitus attempts to construct a *mortal* temporality, with mortal life as the basic temporal phenomenon. He then paradoxically unites life and death, flux and stable *logos*

Heraclitean meditations on time unfold a pan-mortal viewpoint that includes an account of both mortals and immortals, and thus flux and transcendence. *Thanatos* rather than *logos* defines and describes time as we mortals experience it, and by extension, the *kosmos* which we mortals inhabit. *Logos* serves as a counterpoint.

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