

Heraclitus and Socrates on Wise Humans and Their Ignorance

Tonguç Seferoğlu¹

ORCID: 0000-0001-8604-7851

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Abstract

Various studies have suggested that both Socrates and Heraclitus distinguish between human and divine knowledge. However, researchers have not thoroughly examined the connection between their views. The aim of this paper is to explore the relationship between the perspectives of Heraclitus and Socrates on wisdom, knowledge, and epistemic authority. This will be done by analysing Heraclitus' fragments concerning the nature of knowledge-acquisition, the epistemic authority of his predecessors and the nature of human wisdom, and Plato's *Apology*, where Socrates disavows certain knowledge and refutes others' claims to wisdom. The findings reveal a close relationship between Heraclitus' and Socrates' reasons for criticizing those considered wise by many people. Both philosophers think that without employing the correct method of inquiry, people will attain neither wisdom nor understanding. While Heraclitus provides a metaphysical foundation for his claim why people fail to attain knowledge—they do not understand the *logos* that governs everything—Socrates does not have any explicit metaphysical commitments but thinks that people do not know what human wisdom amounts to. However, both emphasize the practice of self-inquiry, the value of self-knowledge, and the distinction between human and divine wisdom.

Keywords: Heraclitus, Socrates, *Apology*, Divine, Human, Wisdom, Authority.

Öz

Herakleitos ve Sokrates'te Bilge İnsanlar ve Cehaletleri

Hem Sokrates'in hem de Herakleitos'un insan bilgisi ile tanrısal bilgi arasında ayırım yaptığı çeşitli çalışmalar tarafından ortaya koyulmuştur. Ne var ki, araştırmacılar bu iki düşünürün görüşleri arasındaki bağlantıyı ayrıntılı bir şekilde incelememiştir. Bu makalenin amacı, Herakleitos ve Sokrates'in bilgelik, bilgi ve epistemik otorite hakkındaki görüşleri arasındaki ilişkiyi araştırmaktır. Bunu yapmak adına, Herakleitos'un bilgi edinme sürecinin doğasına, seleflerinin epistemik otoritesine ve insan bilgeliğinin doğasına dair fragmanları ve Sokrates'in kesin bilgiye sahip olmadığını ancak başkalarının bilgelik iddiasını çürüttüğünü iddia ettiği Platon'un *Savunma* diyalogu karşılaştırılacaktır. Sonuçta, Herakleitos ve Sokrates'in pekçok kişi tarafından bilge kabul edilenleri eleştirme nedenlerin birbirine benzer olduğunu gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır. Her iki filozof da doğru araştırma yöntemi kullanılmadığı takdirde, insanların ne bilgelik ne de anlayışa ulaşamayacaklarını düşünmektedir. Herakleitos, insanların her şeyi yöneten *logos*'u anlamadıkları için bilgiye ulaşamadığını söyleyerek, bu fikri için metafizik bir temel sunar. Sokrates ise açıkça herhangi bir metafizik temellendirme yapmasa bile, insanların insan bilgeliğinin ne olduğunu bilmediklerini savunur. Ancak, her ikisi de kendini inceleme-sorgulama pratiğinin, kendinin-bilgisinin değerinin ve insan ile tanrı bilgeliği arasındaki ayırımın önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Herakleitos, Sokrates, *Savunma*, Tanrı, İnsan, Bilgelik, Otorite.

¹ Assist. Prof. Dr., Ardahan University, Department of Philosophy. tongucseferoglu@gmail.com

Introduction

Heraclitus and Socrates both hold a scornful attitude toward the self-proclaimed wisdom of so-called “wise men”. Heraclitus derided his predecessors’ presumed knowledge by labelling them as frauds and impostors, while Socrates, in the *Apology*, declared that none of these so-called wise men truly possessed wisdom, as none withstood the scrutiny of his cross-examination—what we now call the Socratic elenchus. In addition, both Heraclitus and Socrates distinguish between human and divine wisdom, regarding the latter as far more valuable and superior to the former. In this paper, I critically examine the similarities and differences between Heraclitus’ fragments and Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* regarding their views on knowledge, wisdom, and epistemic authority. The first section of the paper explores the relevant fragments of Heraclitus to present his perspectives on human knowledge and wisdom and the challenges faced by those searching wisdom. In the second section, I examine why Heraclitus criticizes his predecessors, whom many people considered wise, and considers them frauds, then I connect this criticism to Heraclitus’ epistemological views. The third section analyses Heraclitus’ distinction between human and divine wisdom, and the scale of wisdom. The last section provides an analysis of Socrates’s divine mission, his disavowal of knowledge, and his evaluation of the so-called wise men. This paper concludes that Socrates’ defence speech in the *Apology* and Heraclitus’ fragments reveal shared views on human cognition and epistemic authority.

1. Heraclitus on Knowledge-Acquisition

Heraclitus is one of the earliest Presocratic thinkers to comment on the nature of human wisdom and understanding.² Beyond his objective of explaining the cosmos and that which governs everything, Heraclitus also theorizes about human cognition. His interest in epistemology goes beyond the theoretical exploration of knowledge and understanding, he also makes personal and polemical remarks about the wisdom of his predecessors, such as Pythagoras, Homer and Hesiod. On the one hand, Heraclitus sees himself as exposing the superficiality of his predecessors’ wisdom, revealing their ignorance to the reader. On the other hand, he acknowledges the profound difficulty of attaining wisdom and knowledge, hence he believes that while many will fail in this endeavour, only a few people will succeed.

Let me now turn to the relevant fragments of Heraclitus to explore, firstly, his epistemological views and find out why, secondly, he held such contempt for his predecessors’ wisdom. I will begin by discussing his fragments on knowledge-acquisition.

(DK22B17) οὐ γὰρ φρονέουσι τοιαῦτα πολλοί, ὀκόσοις ἐγκυρεῦσιν, οὐδὲ μαθόντες γινώσκουσιν, ἑωυτοῖσι δὲ δοκέουσι.

Many do not understand such things as they encounter, nor do they know when they learn, but they think they do.³

This fragment highlights a key aspect of Heraclitus’ perspective on the epistemic capacity and success of the majority of human beings, as well as the nature of understanding and knowledge. Here, Heraclitus appears to make a statistical observation by suggesting that the number of ignorant people far exceeds that of the knowledgeable.⁴ For Heraclitus, only a tiny fraction of people is truly wise, and those considered wise by many does not have understanding and wisdom. Although Heraclitus does not provide a specific ratio of wise to ignorant people in the general population, he emphasizes that πολλοί (many) neither gain understanding through acquaintance (i.e., a subject, S,

² Around the same time as Heraclitus, whose work can be dated to 500–490 BCE, Xenophanes (570–475 BCE) also offered insights on epistemology. However, his views on the source and acquisition of knowledge are relatively naive. What can be stated with confidence about Xenophanes’ epistemic position is that certain knowledge is reserved for the divine while mortals can only have opinion (see DK21B34, DK21B35). As we shall see, Heraclitus aimed to develop a theory of knowledge acquisition in addition to an analysis on the distinction between human and divine wisdom.

³ All translations of Heraclitus are from Daniel W. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). The original Greek texts are from Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (Zürich: Weidmann, 1951).

⁴ It is important to note that Heraclitus does not refer to οἱ πολλοί — “the many” in the sense of ordinary people or the plebs. In the fragments I will discuss below, Heraclitus includes figures like Hesiod, Pythagoras, and other so-called wise men among the ignorant.

does not know that P is the case when S has direct access to P) nor know through learning (i.e., S does not know that P is the case when S learns P). However, it is not clear what Heraclitus means by this distinction. We cannot with certainty say that Heraclitus deliberately differentiates between φρονεῖν (used in the former part of the fragment related direct acquaintance) and γινώσκειν (used in the latter part of the fragment related to learning). Nor is it obvious whether Heraclitus uses γινώσκειν in a particular sense that implies something more than mere learning.⁵

I will turn Heraclitus on the method of knowledge acquisition in more detail later, but first I will offer some additional comments on the difficulty of attaining knowledge.

(DK22B22) χρυσὸν γὰρ οἱ διζήμενοι γῆν πολλὴν ὀρύσσοσι καὶ εὐρίσκουσιν ὀλίγον

Those seeking gold dig much earth and find little.⁶

In this fragment, Heraclitus uses “gold” as a metaphor for knowledge or understanding, in line with his typical style of metaphorical language.⁷ He seems to be making another statistical claim: gold hunters conduct numerous excavations, investing significant time and effort, but find only small amounts of gold. Heraclitus is referring to a specific group—those engaged in the pursuit of gold—just as researchers are engaged in the pursuit of knowledge. In a similar manner, researchers, including some of his predecessor thinkers like Pythagoras and poets like Homer and Hesiod, had explored the nature of reality but failed to understand it. This is because knowledge is not easily obtained for Heraclitus. By implication, while it may seem easy for those who do manage to acquire knowledge, most researchers fail to find even a small portion, just as many gold hunters do not find gold, and only a few uncover even a little. In other words, Heraclitus suggests that many who claim to have found knowledge are, in fact, deceivers or frauds.

For Heraclitus, however, no matter how challenging the pursuit of knowledge may be, it remains essential that we continue searching:

(DK22B18) ἐὰν μὴ ἔλπηται, ἀνέλπιστον οὐκ ἐξευρήσει, ἀνεξερεύνητον ἐὼν καὶ ἄπορον.

If one does not hope for the unhoped for, one will not discover it, since it is undiscoverable and inaccessible.

This fragment, again as usual, is cryptical. Heraclitus appears to say that (a) one must be hopeful to discover the unhoped for, and (b) the unhoped for cannot be discovered or accessed. But then, why should we hope that we will discover the unhoped for if it is undiscoverable and inaccessible? To unravel this riddle, we first need to decide what ‘the unhoped for’ refers to. Let’s look at two other fragments:

(DK22B123) φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ.

A nature is hidden.⁸

⁵ James Lesher, “Heraclitus’ Epistemological Vocabulary,” *Hermes* 111, 2 (1983): 159-163 points out although for Heraclitus γινώσκειν involves difficulty and demands effort, he does not specify particular objects that we can only γινώσκειν, such as knowing cosmos as it really is. In other words, γινώσκειν still pertains to knowledge of things in general.

⁶ As Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 287 notes this fragment can also be read “those seeking earth dig much and find little gold”. The philosophical meaning does not change.

⁷ Heraclitus is referred to as αἰνικτῆς, the “riddler” by Timon in Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Heraclitus*, 9.6. However, although Heraclitus intentionally employs riddles, his aim is not to confuse or mislead his readers. Rather, in line with his belief that nature is concealed (as in DK22B123), his cryptic fragments invite the reader to look beyond the surface to uncover deeper meaning. This likely explains why Heraclitus probably sees himself as imitating the oracle at Delphi (as in DK22B93). I will provide further analysis on these fragments below. On the connection between Heraclitus’ riddles and their philosophical role see Ava Chitwood, “Heraclitus αἰνικτῆς Heraclitus and the Riddle,” *Studi Classici e Orientali* 43, (1995): 50-52.

⁸ For a linguistic and philosophical analysis behind this translation instead “Nature loves to hide” see Daniel W. Graham, “Does Nature Love to Hide? Heraclitus B123 DK,” *Classical Philology* 98, 2, (2003): 175-179 who claims that φιλεῖν is used to express general feature of something without any personification

(DK22B1) τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον [...]

Of this Word's being forever do men prove to be uncomprehending, both before they hear and once they have heard it. For although all things happen according to this Word [...]

These two fragments suggest that the “unhoped for” represents the underlying structure or universal laws governing the cosmos—its *logos*—which people fail to comprehend even after encountering it. However, the idea of a stable *logos* seems to contradict the received view that Heraclitus is a radical fluxist who believes that everything is in constant change.⁹ This radical flux reading traces back to Plato, who attributed to Heraclitus the idea that “everything is in motion and nothing stands still (*Cratylus* 402a8-9, πάντα χωρεῖ καὶ οὐδὲν μένει)”. Plato’s reading is probably influenced by the interpretation of Cratylus, with whom Plato have studied (see Aristotle *Metaphysics* 987a32-b1).¹⁰

Relativity recently, scholars have proposed a new interpretation of Heraclitus’s views on change, stability, and flux by arguing that for Heraclitus things remain the same by changing. They claim that only DK22B12 can be accepted as genuinely belonging to Heraclitus while the other fragments, DK22B49a and DK22B91, which supports the radical flux reading, are derivations of it.¹¹ For Heraclitus, there is a stable *logos* that governs everything, probably both in cosmic and individual level, by bringing opposites together.¹² Nevertheless, people are unable to grasp this *logos*. The connection between DK22B1 and DK22B17 becomes more evident here: those who fail to understand after learning in DK22B17 are the same people who are “uncomprehending” both before and after they hear. If we interpret “hearing” as learning from a lecturer, the phrase “before they hear” could refer to a time when people observe nature but fail to recognize its true being, while “once they have heard it” might signify the moment after they have gained information through teaching.¹³

In this respect, Heraclitus asserts that knowledge is attainable, but only if one understands the nature of reality:

(DK22B2) διὸ δεῖ ἔπεσθαι τῷ <ξυνῶνι, (τουτέστι τῷ) κοινῶνι· ξυνὸς γὰρ ὁ κοινός). τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζῶουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν>.

“That is why one must follow to <*xunon*>” (that is, “the common”. For the *xunos* is the common). Although this Word is common, the many live as if they had a private understanding.

(DK22B34) ἀξύνετοι ἀκούσαντες κωφοῖσιν εἰόκασιν· φάτις αὐτοῖσιν μαρτυρεῖ παρεόντας ἀπεινῶναι.

⁹ For further discussion, see Daniel W. Graham, “Heraclitus: Flux, Order, and Knowledge” in *The Oxford Handbook of Presocratic Philosophy*, ed. Patricia Curd and Daniel W. Graham (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 171-173.

¹⁰ See Matthew Colvin, “Heraclitean Flux and Unity of Opposites in Plato’s Theaetetus and Cratylus,” *Classical Quarterly* 57, 2, (2007): 767-769 on the difference between Heraclitus’s idea of flux and Plato’s version of it, and why Plato chose Heraclitus as a representor of the theory of flux he criticized.

¹¹ See Geoffrey S. Kirk, *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 367-380. DK22B12: On those stepping into rivers staying the same other and other waters flow (ποταμοῖσι τοῖσιν αὐτοῖσιν ἐμβαίνουσιν ἕτερα καὶ ἕτερα ὕδατα ἐπιρρεῖ).

¹² DK22B125, “the barley drink stands still by moving (καὶ ὁ κικεὼν δίσταται κινούμενος)” also supports this recent interpretation. On this fragment and how it supports the view that stability through change see Mary Margaret Mackenzie, “The Moving Posset Stands Still: Heraclitus fr. 125,” *American Journal of Philology* 107, (1986): 542-51. According to this perspective, the famous river fragment, which Plato and post-Platonic philosophers have derived the radical flux reading, demonstrates that Heraclitus’s world is stable and permanent. This stability is achieved through the orderly transformation of its parts according to certain principles. See Julius M. Moravcsik, “Appearance and Reality in Heraclitus’ Philosophy,” *The Monist* 74, 4, (1991): 564-565.

¹³ Recently, it has been argued that translating ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον as “after they heard it for the first time” provides a reading that is both philosophically and linguistically appealing. See Spelman, Henry and Shaul Tor, “Heraclitus on First (and Further) Hearings,” *Phronesis* 69, 4, (2024): 384-385. This novel interpretation suggests that Heraclitus’s point is that true understanding of the *logos*—which encompasses both the words in his text and the Word—emerges only after multiple readings, as the book teaches readers how to comprehend. My argument that Heraclitus proposes two possible methods of knowledge acquisition—direct acquaintance or sense perception and learning by instruction—aligns with this new perspective. For Heraclitus, comprehension of the *logos* is unattainable after countless readings unless one adheres to the correct method of acquiring knowledge.

Having heard without comprehension they are like the deaf; this saying bears witness to them: present they are absent.

(DK22B101) ἐδιζήσάμην ἑμεωυτόν.

I inquired myself.

According to these fragments, the underlying structure we discussed is discoverable if we employ the appropriate cognitive capacities and the correct method. Fragment DK22B2 indicates what we should seek: the Word, or *logos*, which is common.¹⁴ This suggests that the *logos* is common to all beings in that it governs everything. Understanding this *logos* allows us to comprehend all aspects of being. However, if we attempt to discern this common pattern or structure solely through our own interpretations, we will ultimately fail to grasp the truth about the world. In other words, since we, as humans, share *logos*—which is inherent to all beings, including ourselves—we have the potential to understand this *logos* and attain “objective truth” about nature, rather than being confined to our “subjective interpretations” of it.¹⁵ Similarly, Pritz argues that “eyes and ears, as witnesses, provide a shared and common awareness, rather than one that is private and subject to personal whim”.¹⁶ Therefore, while knowledge acquisition begins with sense perception, it is also necessary to uncover the hidden nature behind all sensory data. But how are we going to achieve this?

Firstly, we should probably inquire ourselves, as suggested in DK22B101, because we can find this common *logos* in us too. Secondly, consider the fragments below on knowledge-acquisition:

(DK22B107) κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὤτα βαρβάρους ψυχὰς ἐχόντων.

Poor witnesses for men are the eyes and ears of those who have barbarian souls.

(DK22B113) ξυνόν ἐστι πᾶσι τὸ φρονέειν.

Thinking is common to all.

(DK22B116) ἀνθρώποισι πᾶσι μέτεστι γινώσκειν ἑωυτοὺς καὶ σωφρονεῖν.

All men have a share in self-knowledge and sound thinking.

The fragments DK22B34 and DK22B107 appear to distinguish between two processes, which we can label as sense perception and understanding. In DK22B107, it is suggested that those who do not know what the nature of knowledge and the correct method of knowledge cannot adequately process sense data to achieve understanding. Here, we need to note Heraclitus does not make an epistemologically racist claim that non-Greeks lack the ability to attain knowledge.¹⁷ Rather, we must interpret his words carefully. Barbarians, for instance, may hear Greek spoken but fail to comprehend it. Thus, Vlastos argues the philosophical implication of this fragment is “ears and eyes are only witnesses; mind must be the judge”.¹⁸

Similarly, individuals who do not follow the correct method of knowledge acquisition to process sense data may receive the information but fail to understand it. In other words, as DK22B113 and DK22B116 suggest, all humans possess the capacity for inquiry and understanding; however, many do not know how to utilize this capacity effectively. Thus, while all humans have the potential to know, they must actively engage this potential to achieve understanding. In DK22B34, Heraclitus again refers to a group of people who gather sense data but do not

¹⁴ *Logos*, the Word, is connected with (divine) will that is mentioned in DK22B41: “Wisdom is one thing: to know the will that steers all things through all (ἐν τὸ σοφόν, ἐπίστασθαι γνώμην, ὅτι ἐκυβέρνησε πάντα διὰ πάντων)”. We can say that Heraclitus’s book contains several *logoi*, statements, or a *logos*, a discourse, that explain *logos*, the Word.

¹⁵ Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 187.

¹⁶ Kurt Pritzl, “On the Way to Wisdom in Heraclitus,” *Phoenix* 39, 4, (1985): 307.

¹⁷ Cf. Aristotle, *Politics* I.5-7 on the lack of cognitive capacity of non-Greeks.

¹⁸ Gregory Vlastos, “Parmenides’ Theory of Knowledge,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 77, (1946): 69.

understand it. Much like the deaf people, who perceive sound waves but cannot hear, these individuals may receive sensory information without comprehending it. This results in their being both present and absent: as epistemic agents, they are present to receive sense data but absent in their ability to understand it.

Consider a simple example: a child who has no prior knowledge of geometry might see a triangle on paper, gathers its sensory information, but fails to recognize it as a triangle—a polygon with three straight sides and three angles. In this case, the child has sense data but lacks understanding. For Heraclitus, this understanding must refer to something specific; these individuals can perceive and understand nature to some extent. They do not completely lack the ability to process their sensory experiences; rather, they lack the correct type of understanding. What these people hear but do not comprehend is likely the *logos*, as suggested by similar wording in DK22B1, where Heraclitus states that they fail to grasp the *logos* both before and after they hear it.

2. Heraclitus' Criticism of the So-called Wise Men

The referent of “they” we have seen in both DK22B34 and DK22B1 likely includes the wise men whom Heraclitus criticize in the subsequent fragments.

(DK22B40) πολυμαθίη νόον ἔχειν οὐ διδάσκει· Ἡσίοδον γὰρ ἂν ἐδίδαξε καὶ Πυθαγόρην, αὐτίς τε Ξενοφάνεά τε καὶ Ἑκαταῖον.

Learning many things does not teach understanding. Else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, as well as Xenophanes and Hecataeus.

(DK22B129) Pythagoras, son of Mnesarchus, practiced inquiry more than all men, and making a selection of others' writings, he invented his own brand of wisdom: information-gathering, fraud!

Πυθαγόρης Μνησάρχου ἱστορίην ἤσκησεν ἀνθρώπων μάλιστα πάντων καὶ ἐκλεξάμενος ταύτας τὰς συγγραφαὶς ἐποίησατο ἑαυτοῦ σοφίην, πολυμαθίην, κακοτεχνίην.

(DK22B81) [Pythagoras] is the chief of all impostors.

κοπίδων ἐστὶν ἀρχηγός.

In DK22B40, Heraclitus distinguishes between “learning” and “understanding” and claims that his predecessors only have the former. In DK22B129, Heraclitus accuses Pythagoras of being a copyist who did examination (*historia*) of other's works. The relation between DK22B40 and DK22B129 to what I have argued above is clear: learning and information-gathering are not the same as understanding. Indeed, Pythagoras seems to be an imposter for two reasons: he did not present any original view and the views he proposes are probably belonging to those who did not understand *logos*. But Heraclitus's particular rage towards Pythagoras mainly stems for the latter's selling of information, which he gathered by studying others' works, as wisdom. This makes him an imposter, otherwise Heraclitus might just call him “uncomprehending”.

The problem with these “wise men” is that they did not comprehend the structure underlying what we experience. Consider the following fragment:

(DK22B57) διδάσκαλος δὲ πλείστων Ἡσίοδος· τοῦτον ἐπίστανται πλεῖστα εἰδέναι, ὅστις ἡμέρην καὶ εὐφρόνην οὐκ ἐγίνωσκεν· ἔστι γὰρ ἓν.

The teacher of the multitude is Hesiod; they believe he has the greatest knowledge - who did not comprehend day and night: for they are one.

Hesiod, who taught the multitude, was not able to teach himself understanding since he did not comprehend the most fundamental feature of the nature. This feature, for Heraclitus, is the unity of opposites (in this case the

unity of day and night), on which Heraclitus writes a lot. Here, I am not going to discuss Heraclitus's thought on the unity of opposites since it does not come to bear on my comparison of Heraclitus and Socrates of the *Apology*.¹⁹ Heraclitus, again, makes a similar comment on another poet, Homer:

(DK22B56) ἐξηπάτηνται οἱ ἄνθρωποι πρὸς τὴν γνῶσιν τῶν φανερῶν παραπλησίως Ὀμήρωι, ὃς ἐγένετο τῶν Ἑλλήνων σοφώτερος πάντων.

Men are deceived in the knowledge of appearances like Homer, who was considered the wisest of all Greeks.

For Heraclitus, Homer only has the knowledge of appearances. Men did not realize that Homer's knowledge was about appearances, and thus wrongly believed that Homer was the wisest: Homer did not understand that “the invisible structure is greater than the visible (DKB54, ἀρμονίη ἀφανῆς φανερῆς κρείττων)”. Thus, Homer failed to recognize the true reality behind appearances (*phanera*), which is invisible (*aphanês*). Again, this invisible structure of nature or being can be understood by listening to *logos*.²⁰ Men were deceived about the wisdom of Homer because they too did not comprehend the truth about reality. As we have seen above in B113 and 116, Heraclitus thinks that all humans have the ability to think learn, according to B113 and B116. Therefore, everyone can grasp the truth about reality if they give an ear to *logos*: “Having harkened not to me but to the Word, you should agree that wisdom is knowing that all things are one (DKB50, οὐκ ἔμοῦ, ἀλλὰ τοῦ λόγου ἀκούσαντας ὁμολογεῖν σοφόν ἐστὶν ἐν πάντα εἶναι)”. However, it is not easy to understand this *logos*:

(DK22B93) ὁ ἄναξ, οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει.

The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi neither reveals nor conceals, but gives a sign.

The neutral translation of “οὔτε λέγει” is “does not say” seems paradoxical because the oracle definitely says something. The motivation behind the translators' over-translation (such as “‘indicate clearly’, ‘clarify’, ‘reveal’, ‘assert’, ‘declare’, ‘speak out’”) is to save Heraclitus from an “obvious falsehood”.²¹ At any rate, scholars in general agree that “the utterances of oracles provide an apt symbol for the everlasting Word” because an utterance of the oracle “admits of multiple interpretations and dimensions of meaning; his [Heraclitus'] own sayings are built on this model”.²² And we should add that only one of these interpretations is true, just like there is a single true understanding of Heraclitus' divine *logos* that corresponds to reality. Nonetheless, Heraclitus' utterances do not provide this, we should discover it ourselves.²³

3. Heraclitus on Human and Divine Wisdom

Now, let's consider Heraclitus's fragments regarding the comparison between divine and human wisdom. According to Heraclitus, there are at least three distinct epistemic states: ignorance (a lack of comprehension), human wisdom (understanding of the *logos*), and divine wisdom (whatever that may entail). Heraclitus clearly believes

¹⁹ See DK22B48, DK22B51, DK22B59, DK22B60, DK22B103. On an overview of unity-in-opposites and its role in cosmic processes see Edward Hussey, “Heraclitus” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A. A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 93-101.

²⁰ Heraclitus's *logos* has a couple of interrelated meanings: his discourse, universal law, and objective cosmic principle. On this Enrique Hülsz, “Heraclitus on Logos: Language, Rationality and the Real” in *Doctrine and Doxography: Studies on Heraclitus and Pythagoras*, ed. David Sider and Dirk Obbink (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), 287-292.

²¹ Shaul Tor, “Heraclitus on Apollo's Signs and His Own: Contemplating Oracles and Philosophical Inquiry” in *Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion*, ed. Esther Eidinow, Julia Kindt and Robin Osborne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 91-92.

²² Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 194.; Tor, *Heraclitus on Apollo's Signs and His Own*, 106 underlines that “the language he [Heraclitus] uses (his *logos*, his sayings) itself formulates, or somehow coincides or is identical with, those unseen structures of reality (the cosmic *logos*)”, he just gives “signs”. Therefore, we should search for *logos* by following Heraclitus' signs, i.e., his method of knowledge-acquisition.

²³ As we have seen, for Heraclitus it is difficult to discover what there really is. And Heraclitus does not tell his readers the “hidden nature” and “unseen attunement” are in his book directly and readily, rather “Heraclitus guides and places the attuned inquirer in a position to arrive at insights into the measures and structures of balance and unity which underlie and frame the phenomena we encounter” (Tor, *Heraclitus on Apollo's Signs and His Own*, 101.)

that human wisdom is inferior to divine wisdom.²⁴ However, he cannot be suggesting that human wisdom is entirely worthless, as fragments DK22B113 and DK22B116 indicate that humans possess the ability to think and understand, and DK22B1 emphasizes that humans can know the *logos*, albeit with difficulty.

(DK22B78) ἦθος γὰρ ἀνθρώπειον μὲν οὐκ ἔχει γνώμας, θεῖον δὲ ἔχει.

Human nature does not have insight, while divine nature does.

(DK22B79) ἀνὴρ νήπιος ἤκουσε πρὸς δαίμονος ὄκωσπερ παῖς πρὸς ἀνδρός.

A man is called childish by a deity, just as a child by a man.

From the perspective of the gods, human opinions are weak and feeble.²⁵ That said, given Heraclitus's limited elaboration on the distinction between human and divine wisdom, it is difficult to fully appreciate why humans lack insight and why divine wisdom is superior.

(DK22B82, DK22B83) Α πιθήκων ὁ κάλλιστος αἰσχροὺς ἀνθρώπων γένει συμβάλλειν [...] ἀνθρώπων ὁ σοφώτατος πρὸς θεὸν πίθηκος φανεῖται καὶ σοφίαι καὶ κάλλει καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις πᾶσιν.

The fairest of apes is ugly in comparison with the human race [...] The wisest of men will appear like an ape compared to a god, in wisdom, in beauty, and in every other respect.

(DK22B70) <παίδων ἀθύρματα> νενόμικεν εἶναι <τὰ ἀνθρώπινα> δοξάσματα.

Heraclitus thought “human opinions” to be “children’s toys”.

These fragments implies tha for Heraclitus there is a hierarchy of wisdom and understanding where non-human animals at the bottom, (adult) humans in the middle, and gods at the top. Presumably, Heraclitus envisions something like this: non-human animals lack understanding, whereas humans, though limited as suggested by DK22B18 and DK22B22, have the capacity for understanding. The God, finally, surpasses human knowledge because (i) his wisdom is unified and complete²⁶ and (ii) he is beyond human conventions as he views things as they truly are.²⁷

Before turning to Socrates' views, let's take stock. First, Heraclitus believes that acquiring wisdom is difficult and that most people who appear wise are merely imposters. For him, the source of knowledge lies in both sensory experience and understanding, but most people do not attain the latter. Second, Wisdom, according to Heraclitus, is knowing the *logos*, the principle that governs everything.²⁸ While all humans possess the potential to know, only a few manage to realize it, as most people fail to listen to the *logos*. Ultimately, Heraclitus views human wisdom as

²⁴ On the contrary, Alex G. Long, “Wisdom in Heraclitus,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 33, 1, (2007): 13 claims that Heraclitus does not distinguish human and divine wisdom.

²⁵ Compare DK22B70 with the following passage from Homer's *Iliad*: “And very easily did he [Apollo] cast down the wall of the Achaeans, just as a child scatters sand by the sea, first building structures of sand in his childish play (ἀθύρματα), then destroying them with his hands and feet: so did you, archer Phoebus, destroy the long toil and labor of the Achaeans, and send defeat upon them” (*Iliad* XV.361-366). Just as children effortlessly demolish their sandcastles, so too did Apollo destroy the Achaeans' wall. For Apollo, human-made walls are as fragile as children's sandcastles. Turning to DK22B70, human opinions, described as ἀθύρματα (playthings), are similarly fragile and weak from the perspective of the gods.

²⁶ DK22B32: “One being, the only wise one, would and would not be called by the name of Zeus [life] (ἐν τὸ σοφὸν μούνον λέγεσθαι οὐκ ἐθέλει καὶ ἐθέλει Ζηνὸς ὄνομα)”. Long, *Wisdom in Heraclitus*, 6-7 offers an alternative interpretation by suggesting that μούνον does not limit the attribution of wisdom solely to the subject, i.e., God, but rather restricts the predicate attributed to God. According to this reading, the phrase should be understood as “God is only wise” meaning that God cannot admit the opposite predicate, being foolish. While this interpretation is possible, I find the traditional reading—restricting full wisdom to God—more convincing, as it aligns with the hierarchy of wisdom present in the other fragments discussed earlier.

²⁷ DK22B102: “To God all things are fair, good and just, but men suppose some things are unjust, some just (τῶι μὲν θεῶι καλὰ πάντα καὶ ἀγαθὰ καὶ δίκαια, ἀνθρώποι δὲ ἅ μὲν ἄδικα ὑπειλήφασιν ἅ δὲ δίκαια)”. If we generalize this notion and relate it to Heraclitus's emphasis on opposites, we can say that the God's vision is beyond this complexity.

²⁸ Aylin Cankaya, “What is the Source of Knowledge in Heraclitus?” in *Heraklit Im Kontext*, ed. Enrica Fantino et. al. (Boston: De Gruyter, 2017), 306-307.

insignificant when compared to divine wisdom. Now, with these points in mind, I will now examine the philosophy of Socrates in the *Apology* and highlight the similarities between his views and those of Heraclitus.

4. The Defence of Socrates

One of the central themes of Socrates' speech in the *Apology* is his disavowal of knowledge. In his defence, Socrates draws a distinction between divine and human wisdom, claiming that he possesses only the latter. As a result of his divine mission to interpret the oracle at Delphi, which proclaimed no one was wiser than Socrates, he realizes that this proclamation is true once he had examined the so-called wise men. Socrates discovered that those often regarded as wise—politicians, poets, and craftsmen—were actually ignorant. By unravelling the oracle's meaning, Socrates concluded that he was the wisest precisely because he understood that his wisdom was insignificant compared to divine wisdom (*Apology* 20d-e).

The nature of Socratic ignorance is a longstanding issue in the study of Socrates' philosophy. One of most influential interpretations was put forward by Gregory Vlastos, who argued that human wisdom for Socrates is not “infallible and unrevisable” but “provisional”.²⁹ The debate surrounding the nature of Socrates' disavowal continues today.³⁰ However, in this section, I am not going to discuss the extensive literature on Socratic ignorance and wisdom. Rather, I will focus on showing how Socrates' ideas align with those of Heraclitus, particularly regarding the distinction between human and divine wisdom, as well as the false wisdom of authority figures. If my interpretation of the philosophical connection between these two thinkers is plausible, we can arrive at a more positive view of Socratic ignorance: like Heraclitus, Socrates criticizes the so-called wise men as frauds and sees human wisdom as insignificant when compared to divine wisdom. However, Socrates also presents a kind of wisdom that is attainable by humans.

I will begin with a general overview of Socrates' divine mission to uncover the hidden meaning behind the Delphic oracle's proclamation that “no one is wiser than Socrates,” despite Socrates' firm belief that he is not wise. The story unfolds as follows: Socrates' friend Chaerophon asked the oracle at Delphi if anyone was “wiser (σοφώτερος)” than Socrates, and the oracle responded, “no one is wiser (μηδένα σοφώτερον εἶναι)» (*Apology* 21a6-7). Perplexed by this statement, Socrates questioned himself: “What could the god mean? What is his riddle? I am fully aware that I am not wise at all, so why does he say that I am the wisest? Surely, the god does not lie, as it is not his nature to do so”.³¹ In his efforts to understand the oracle's message by searching for someone wiser than himself, Socrates eventually realized that he possessed a “certain kind of wisdom (σοφίαν τινά),” specifically “human wisdom (ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία)” (*Apology* 20d7-8), while those who claimed to be wise were not wise at all. Socrates said:

I am wiser than this man; it is likely that neither of us knows anything worthwhile, but he thinks he knows something when he does not, whereas when I do not know, neither do I think I know; so I am likely to be wiser than he to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know (*trans.* Grube in Cooper 1997).³²

This is what Socrates concluded after examining a man—whose identity remains unknown—³³, before deciding to investigate others who were reputed to be wise, “one after another” (*Apology* 21e3, ἐφεξῆς). From this, we

²⁹ Gregory Vlastos, “Socrates' Disavowal of Knowledge,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 35, 138, (1985): 28.

³⁰ See Dylan Futter, “Socrates' Human Wisdom,” *Dialogue* 52, 1, (2013): 63-65 for a brief overview of the most prominent interpretations.

³¹ “Τί ποτε λέγει ὁ θεός, καὶ τί ποτε αἰνίττεται; ἐγὼ γὰρ δὴ οὔτε μέγα οὔτε σμικρὸν σύννοϊδα ἑμαυτῷ σοφὸς ὦν· τί οὖν ποτε λέγει φάσκων ἔμὲ σοφώτατον εἶναι; οὐ γὰρ δήπου ψεύδεταί γε· οὐ γὰρ θέμις αὐτῷ” (*Ap.* 21b3-7).

³² τούτου μὲν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἐγὼ σοφώτερός εἰμι· κινδυνεύει μὲν γὰρ ἡμῶν οὐδέτερος οὐδὲν καλὸν κάγαθὸν εἰδέναι, ἀλλ' οὔτος μὲν οἶεται τι εἰδέναι οὐκ εἰδώς, ἐγὼ δέ, ὥσπερ οὖν οὐκ οἶδα, οὐδὲ οἶομαι· ἔοικα γοῦν τούτου γε σμικρῷ τινι αὐτῷ τούτῳ σοφώτερος εἶναι, ὅτι ἂ μὴ οἶδα οὐδὲ οἶομαι εἰδέναι (*Ap.* 21d3-d7).

³³ Paul Allen Miller and Charles Platter, *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Commentary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010), 45 notes that “Burnet thought this refers to Anytus, one of Socrates' accusers whom Socrates examined in the *Meno*, but we do not have direct evidence”.

can infer that Socrates already had a sense of the nature of his own wisdom and what those thought to be wise were lacking since he could not have come to this significant realization after one conversation. In any case, Socrates proceeded to examine politicians, poets, and craftsmen in turn, discovering that although poets and craftsmen knew much about their respective crafts, they were not truly wise because they do not know what virtue is (*Apology* 22a-23b).³⁴ Ultimately, Socrates understood that:

What is probable, gentlemen, is that in fact the god is wise and that his oracular response meant that human wisdom is worth little or nothing, and that when he says this man, Socrates, he is using my name as an example, as if he said: “This man among you, mortals, is wisest who, like Socrates, understands that his wisdom is worthless” (*trans.* Grube in Cooper 1997).³⁵

In this regard, Socrates realized that he was the wisest precisely because he knew that he did not know, and his wisdom was insignificant compared to that of the gods. This seemingly pessimistic conclusion, however, did not make Socrates idle or sceptical. On the contrary, he persisted in the pursuit of philosophy.³⁶ This distinction, and its significance, echoes ideas we find in the fragments of Heraclitus. As we have seen, Heraclitus believes that understanding the *logos*—which culminates in divine wisdom according to fragments DK22B32 and DK22B78—is difficult because it is “undiscoverable” and “inaccessible” (see DK22B18). Moreover, most of our investigations will end in failure (see DK22B22). Yet, as Socrates might argue, this does not mean that we cannot achieve “epistemic progress”.³⁷

I do not claim, however, that Socrates, like Heraclitus, believes in a divine *logos* that governs everything. In neither the *Apology* nor the other Socratic dialogues of Plato does Socrates make metaphysical or cosmological assumptions. However, both Socrates and Heraclitus share the following beliefs: (i) human wisdom is difficult to achieve, (ii) human wisdom is insignificant compared to divine wisdom, and (iii) those who are reputed to be wise are, in fact, not wise. While Heraclitus sees his wisdom as culminating in the understanding of *logos* as much as is humanly possible, Socrates’ wisdom lies in recognizing that his wisdom culminates in his disavowal of knowledge—what we call Socratic ignorance—which drives him to continuously seek wisdom.

Conclusion

Despite their differences, Heraclitus and Socrates assume the mission of exposing the false wisdom of others: Heraclitus does so by writing a book that explains what wisdom is (DKB41, DKB50) and how it can be attained (DKB2, DKB17, DKB34, DKB101, DKB113, DKB116), while Socrates examines individuals to make them aware of their ignorance (*Apology* 23b4-7). Now, I would like to conclude with a final but an important resemblance between Socrates and Heraclitus:

(DK22B112) σωφρονεῖν ἀρετὴ μέγιστη, καὶ σοφίη ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαίοντας

Sound thinking is the greatest virtue and wisdom: to speak the truth and to act on the basis of an understanding of the nature of things.

³⁴ Socrates famously believed that virtue is a form of knowledge, and in some ways, it is akin to craft knowledge or knowing how. Recently, it has been argued that Socratic virtue-knowledge comes in degrees. Unlike factual knowledge, it is not something one either fully possesses or lacks entirely. This perspective allows for the idea that we can possess virtue to a certain extent—as Socrates himself did—yet it may still be worthless when compared to the perfect virtue of the gods. See Nicholas D. Smith, *Socrates on Self-Improvement: Knowledge, Virtue, and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 20-28.

³⁵ τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὧ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφὸς εἶναι, καὶ ἐν τῷ χρησμῷ τούτῳ τοῦτο λέγειν, ὅτι ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός. καὶ φαίνεται τοῦτον λέγειν τὸν Σωκράτη, προσκεχρηῆσθαι δὲ τῷ ἐμῷ ὀνόματι, ἐμὲ παράδειγμα ποιούμενος, ὥσπερ ἄν <εἰ> εἴποι ὅτι “Οὗτος ὑμῶν, ὧ ἄνθρωποι, σοφώτατός ἐστιν, ὅστις ὥσπερ Σωκράτης ἔγνωκεν ὅτι οὐδενὸς ἀξίός ἐστι τῆ ἀληθείᾳ πρὸς σοφίαν” (*Ap.* 23a5-b4).

³⁶ Futter, *Socrates’ Human Wisdom*, 66-68 claims that Socrates’ human wisdom can be identified with *philosophia* since “*philosophen* and cognates are used to express the love or desire for wisdom and not the actual possession of it (e.g. *Phaed.* 61d ff; *Rep.* 485a; *Theat.* 174b)”.
³⁷ Futter, “Socrates’ Human Wisdom,” 70-71.

For Heraclitus, the highest virtue and wisdom are inseparable from knowledge of the world, as discussed in DKB1, where he explains that wisdom involves “distinguishing each thing according to its nature and showing how it is (κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅπως ἔχει)” in accordance with the *logos*.³⁸ Heraclitus refers to human wisdom and virtue, particularly *sôphrosunê* (moderation or self-control), which is linked to knowledge and probably to self-knowledge, as suggested in DK22B116, where he asserts that self-knowledge and *sôphronein* (sound thinking) belong to all humans. Moreover, according to DK22B101, the inner world reflects the outer world, implying that knowledge arises from internal inquiry.³⁹

Turning to Socrates, *sôphrosunê* is connected to self-knowledge and it is the source of rational action.⁴⁰ It is also something according to which a person should act on the basis of knowledge. In the *Charmides*, Socrates says:

Then only the temperate man will know himself and will be able to examine what he knows and does not know, and in the same way he will be able to inspect other people to see when a man does in fact know what he knows and thinks he knows, and when again he does not know what he thinks he knows, and no one else will be able to do this. And being temperate and temperance and knowing oneself amount to this, to knowing what one knows and does not know (*trans.* Spargue in Cooper 1997).⁴¹

This passage is clearly related to Socrates’ ability to recognize knowledge and ignorance of others in the *Apology*.⁴² This recognition, however, is not connected to an understanding of the nature of things, unlike in Heraclitus’ philosophy. On the one hand, Heraclitus and Socrates emphasize the connection between knowledge, virtue, and wisdom. If we examine and recognize what we know and do not know—or what we can and cannot know—we become virtuous and wise. Yet, many people only possess a façade of wisdom. Furthermore, in contrast to those who pretend to have wisdom, acknowledging the distinction between human and divine knowledge enables us to better understand what we should seek and how to conduct our search. On the other hand, while Heraclitus believes that knowledge stems from understanding the *logos*, Plato’s Socrates does not provide a clear method of acquiring knowledge beyond the practice of cross-examining ourselves and others. It is Plato himself who would go on to develop methods of knowledge acquisition and establish a metaphysical foundation for the possibility of knowledge.

³⁸ Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy*, 193.

³⁹ Christopher Moore, *The Virtue of Agency: Sôphrosunê and Self-Constitution in Classical Greece* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 72-73 argues that “*sôphronein* could be imagined the affective correlate of the epistemic *ginôskein heautôn*, where both amount to founding one’s commitment to some action-guiding element—a desire or a belief—on good reasons” and “those reasons are to be referred to the *logos*, some universal intelligible structure or account of the cosmos”.

⁴⁰ Moore, *The Virtue of Agency*, 225.

⁴¹ Ὅ ἄρα σώφρων μόνος αὐτός τε ἑαυτὸν γινώσκει καὶ οἶός τε ἔσται ἐξετάσαι τί τε τυγχάνει εἰδῶς καὶ τί μή, καὶ τοὺς ἄλλους ὡσαύτως δυνατὸς ἔσται ἐπισκοπεῖν τί τις οἶδεν καὶ οἶεται, εἴπερ οἶδεν, καὶ τί αὖ οἶεται μὲν εἰδέναί, οἶδεν δ’ οὐ, τῶν δὲ ἄλλων οὐδεὶς· καὶ ἔστιν δὴ τοῦτο τὸ σωφρονεῖν τε καὶ σωφροσύνη καὶ τὸ ἑαυτὸν αὐτὸν γινώσκειν, τὸ εἰδέναί ἃ τε οἶδεν καὶ ἃ μὴ οἶδεν.

⁴² Walter T. Schmid, “Socratic Moderation and Self-knowledge,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 21, 3, (1983), 342 claims that “the Greek of [Charmides] 167a3-4, in particular, is very similar to the Greek of *Apology* 21d4-6”.

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