

The Political Philosophy of Heraclitus

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ABSTRACT

The pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus is reported to have published a book entitled *On Nature* which he divided into three parts: universe, theology, and politics. This paper aims to reconstruct Heraclitus' lost political philosophy by analyzing the fragments remaining from his work in a political context. First it provides an outline of key concepts in Heraclitean philosophy and expands on Martha Nussbaum's argument that linguistic philosophy is key to attaining political merit in a Heraclitean society. Then, the debate regarding Heraclitus' preference for either an aristocratic or democratic government is addressed. An examination of historical context, specifically Heraclitus' disappointment in his fellow Ephesians, which gained him the nickname "the weeping philosopher," and a study of his philosophy will lead to the conclusion that he would have favored aristocracy, only if political positions were assigned based on merit and if the politicians held the favor of the populace, which could have been attained through the construction of a social contract.

INTRODUCTION

Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic philosopher who lived around the late 6th century BCE. Also known as the "weeping philosopher," Heraclitus was distraught by the foolishness of his fellow Ephesians who never inquired into the state of reality as deeply as he did.¹ He sought to help them on their discovery of *logos* by recording his philosophy in cryptic messages that required the reader to spend much time and effort puzzling over his intended meaning, leading them to discover cosmic truths for themselves. Diogenes Laertius reported that Heraclitus wrote a book entitled *On Nature* which was divided into three parts: the universe, politics, and theology.² Many pre-Socratic philosophers, such as Thales and Anaximander, studied theology and the universe, but Heraclitus was unique for his engagement with political theory. What is left of Heraclitus' philosophy is simply scattered fragments from other sources reporting on his original material, and minimal explicitly political fragments remain, making pre-Socratic political thought difficult to render.³ During the 6th century BCE, Persia had started to conquer parts of Ionian Greece, placing tyrants as Persian-puppet rulers in conquered city-states.⁴ Heraclitus would have lived under these

¹ Daniel W. Graham, "Heraclitus," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed January 30, 2026, <https://iep.utm.edu/heraclit/>.

² Dennis Sweet, *Heraclitus: Translation and Analysis* (University Press of America, 1995), xii.

³ Patricia Curd, "Presocratic Philosophy," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed April 11, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/presocratics/#XenColHerEph>.

⁴ Thomas R. Martin, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times* (Yale University Press, 2013), 122. April 2026

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puppet-tyrants for the majority of his life in Ephesus.⁵ Ephesus was unique because, under this time of political chaos, their *polis* remained wealthy by being flexible to foreign rule.⁶ Diogenes Laertius wrote that Heraclitus denied a “kingship” and legislative position in the Persian-dominated government due to dissatisfaction with their governing constitution, hinting that he was likely directly involved with political life in Ephesus.⁷

This paper expands on Martha Nussbaum’s hypothesis that the Heraclitean definition of the *psyche* would have included its unique ability to quantify experience through language. After defining important concepts in Heraclitean thought, an analysis of Heraclitus’ fragments will lead to the conclusion that Heraclitus would have found a Greek meritocratic aristocracy to be an “ideal form” of government as long as the aristocracy’s power was limited by an agreement between the government and the populace, which modern scholars would define as a social contract. The limits of Heraclitus’ fragmented writing leaves scholars incapable of pinning down a precise governmental order which Heraclitus may have proposed, so this paper aims to consolidate various Heraclitean scholarships to propose a form of government which would satisfy the regulations of Heraclitean political thought rather than propose an exact government structure which may have been described in *On Nature*. Due to the importance Heraclitus assigned to his words, many different translations have attempted to keep the ambiguous nature of the original Greek; this paper uses Dr. Denis Sweet’s translation for all English references to Heraclitus’ fragments.

Logos, Psyche, and Nomos

At the center of Heraclitean philosophy is the concept of *logos*: an eternal commonality of reality which all individuals have the ability to rationally discern.⁸ The Greek word *logos* can be translated as reason, thought, formula, law, or plan. Most translators keep the Greek *logos* when discussing Heraclitus’ fragments. Heraclitus claimed that the “*logos* is common,”⁹ meaning everyone should be able to understand it, yet he noted that few were actually able to.¹⁰ Heraclitus highly praised those select few who could understand *logos*, or in other words who could “[detect] things according to their nature,” because “to be sound of mind is the greatest excellence and wisdom.”¹¹ He was also frequently critical of those who had not acquired this wisdom. He likened those who understood *logos* to people who were “awake,” since they could see the world clearly; accordingly, he likened those who were not able to as perpetually “sleeping.” A sleeper’s *psyche* would be as unaware of cosmic truths as the individual,¹² even though all

⁵ Thomas Joseph Wood, “Recovering Heraclitus: Neglected Religious, Ethical And Political Themes In The Work Of A Pre-Socratic Thinker,” dissertation (Wayne State University, 2019) https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/oa_dissertations/2232, 16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸ Fahd Husain, “The Obscure One: Understanding Unity in the Language of Heraclitus,” *The Yale Philosophy Review*, vol. 5 (2009): <https://doi.org/10.5840/ypr200952>, 37.

⁹ Sweet, *Heraclitus: Translation and Analysis*, 3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

psychai have the potential to interpret *logos* because it was “common.” It should be noted that, according to Heraclitus, once someone grasped *logos* they did not immediately become omniscient, they just became able to contemplate reality accurately in accordance with the state of the universe.¹³

Heraclitus asserted that the gap between mankind and *logos* was natural,¹⁴ and it could be bridged by the *psyche*, the Greek word for soul. In fragment 50 he stated, “listening (*akousantas*) not to me but rather to the *logos* it is wise to agree that all things are one.”¹⁵ The *psyche* could not be properly activated by passively taking in information about the state of the universe, it demanded personal discovery since the *psyche* is the root of subjective interpretations. Then, only after inquiry, could one clearly understand the commonality between everything, the *logos*. This fragment also hints at a linguistic element to discovering *logos* with the employment of the word *akousai* which means to hear or listen. The *logos* is therefore likely something that is attained through language. Fragment 19 degrades “sleepers” since, “they know neither how to listen (*akousai*) nor how to speak (*eipein*).”¹⁶ The same word for listening, *akousai*, is repeated here along with reference to speech (*eipein*) reinforcing the connection between language and *logos*. If the *logos* is attained through language, which these fragments strongly imply, “sleepers” could then be identified as people who can’t properly interpret their language. The vessel of this interpretation is commonly assumed to be the *psyche*, since the Greek perception of the soul attributes both a moral and rational capacity to it.¹⁷ Martha Nussbaum has contributed important arguments about the *psyche*’s linguistic capabilities. She stated that the better one understands their language and its connection to the way they perceive the world, the closer they are to understanding *logos*, especially the distinction that all is one.¹⁸ Children don’t naturally have socially constructed biases, so Heraclitus praised them for their creativity and curiosity, yet they could not be seen as *logos*-enlightened individuals because their underdeveloped linguistic expression made them incapable of fully conceiving of any image of the cosmos.¹⁹ Sense perception was also crucial for knowledge, after all “if all existing things were to become smoke, then the nostrils would discern them,”²⁰ but without the ability to decipher information through language one could not interpret the *logos*.²¹ Due to its cognitive ability, Martha Nussbaum argued that Heraclitus would have seen cognizance of the *psyche* as the ground of an individual’s political merit.²²

Heraclitus would have followed other pre-Socratics in his belief that the “socio-political sphere is not understood as distinct from the sphere of cosmological happenings; it is governed by the very same normative principles.”²³ In fragment 114, Heraclitus used the word *nomos*, Greek for law or custom, to

¹³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴ C.J. Emlyn-Jones, “Heraclitus and the Identity of Opposites,” *Phronesis*, vol. 21, no. 2 (1976): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4181981>, 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Ibid., 9.

¹⁷ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 58.

¹⁸ Martha C. Nussbaum, “ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I,” *Phronesis*, vol. 17, no. 1 (1972): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4181870>, 11.

¹⁹ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 70.

²⁰ Ibid., 5.

²¹ Daniel W. Graham, “Heraclitus,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed January 18, 2026, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus/>.

²² Burman and Myrebøe, *Martha Nussbaum: Ancient Philosophy, Civic Education and Liberal Humanism*, 22.

²³ Jan Maximilian Robitzsch, “Heraclitus’ Political Thought,” *Apeiron*, vol. 51, no. 4 (2018): <https://doi.org/10.1515/apeiron-2017-0009>, 408.

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describe both the laws that regulate a socio-political sphere and the laws which govern the order of the universe. Jan Robitzsch proposed a translation that reflects those parallels: “Those who speak with understanding must rely on what is common to all, just as the city [must rely] on the law and even more strongly. For all human laws and customs [that is, forms of political order] are nourished by one divine [law or form of political order]; for it rules insofar as it wants and is a match for all and prevails.”²⁴ Fragment 114 reveals Heraclitus’ belief that the order and customs of society, the human *nomos*, should reflect the order of nature, the divine *nomos*. The lawgivers of society who “speak with understanding,” in other words who understand *logos* and *nomos*, must actively establish and enforce this order in society, else the system would be vulnerable to corruption. The choice of the word “speak” here also implies a link between linguistic understanding and *logos*. Additionally, Heraclitus believed “the city [must rely] on the law” to govern its social and political spheres because human behaviors should reflect the order of the greater divine behaviors, so he supposed law to be the best method for effectively regulating societal behavior. “Sleepers” would be incapable of enacting laws in accordance with the divine *nomoi*, for they could not understand the true order of the cosmic realm without first understanding *logos*.

Heraclitus believed people to be “misled by their atomistic conception of language,”²⁵ because the atomistic world does not express the contradictions and conflicts which Heraclitus believed made up the universe.²⁶ He maintained that people needed to understand the distinction between language and objects: people must not trust objects before understanding how they are linguistically able to conceive of the object’s presence, and thus the lack of its presence, in reality. He discussed this belief more in his river-image theory, but scholars have had lengthy arguments about the meaning of those fragments, so this paper will not fully explore its complexities. In short, Heraclitus believed that flux was present in the universe, and humans were not completely able to grasp this idea of constant change. Whether he believed there were persisting things that allowed people to at least grasp that something is changing, or if he believed that since the flux was infinite there are no things at all, we cannot be fully certain.²⁷ However, scholars have been able to discern that Heraclitus distrusted the atomistic realm and, even though reality inevitably exceeded our linguistic capabilities, language had a special ability to be contradictory or ambiguous, and it was that feature which made the *nomos* of reality intelligible to humanity through language.²⁸ To the ancient Greeks, the distinguishing factor between a civilized culture and an uncivilized one was simply language, making linguistics both a philosophical and political matter. Heraclitus likely trusted linguistics to best represent the *nomos*, thus philosophical inquiry regarding linguistics should be adopted by politicians in order to accurately conceive of the divine *nomos* which society must be fashioned after in order to reach a level of perfect most attainable to humans.

²⁴ Ibid., 411.

²⁵ Nussbaum, “ΨΥΧΗ in Heraclitus, I,” 10.

²⁶ Emlyn-Jones, “Heraclitus and the Identity of Opposites,” 101.

²⁷ David G. Stern, “Heraclitus’ and Wittgenstein’s River Images: Stepping Twice Into The Same River,” *The Monist* 74, no. 4 (1991): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27903264>, 583.

²⁸ Husain, “The Obscure One: Understanding Unity in the Language of Heraclitus,” 24.

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EPHESIANS AND LANGUAGE

Heraclitus was not fond of his fellow Ephesians as seen in fragment 121: “the Ephesians deserve, from the young men to the old, to be hanged, and to leave the city to the beardless youths...” Additionally, in fragment 125a he wrote: “may wealth never fail you, people of Ephesus, in order that you may be convicted of your wickedness.”²⁹ In regards to fragment 125a, Heraclitus thought the Ephesians were obsessed with wealth over ethical reasoning, a common Greek conception of barbarian behavior, specifically regarding the Persians.³⁰ Heraclitus is believed to have denied a job in the Persian court and persuaded Melankomas, a Persian puppet tyrant, to abdicate.³¹ Therefore, Heraclitus’ criticisms could have stemmed from frustrations about the Ephesian’s compliance with having a Persian puppet tyrant ruling Ephesus. He also could have simply thought that the tyrant of Ephesus at the time was not capable of creating a common law reflecting the cosmic order of nature, but it seems more likely that his hatred was more broad due to his repeated protests against the Ephesian government and his connections between corrupt virtues and Ephesian society. Mantas Adoménas argued that Heraclitus was not a philosopher who wanted to break away from the traditional Greek institutions and cultural practices, he simply wanted to reform them from within because he saw inaccuracy in their alignment with the divine *nomos*.³² Considering that he complied with standard Greek cultural perceptions, Heraclitus would agree with the common Greek narrative that the Persians were rapacious and materialistic.³³ The Persians, being engrossed with material wealth, would have neglected their philosophical pursuits, leaving them confined to the illusions created by the atomistic world, thus rendering them incompetent rulers. Heraclitus could not communicate with the Persians nor did he understand the intricacies of the Persian language and how to overcome its facade of reality to get to the philosophical realm, but he did know how to guide his *psyche* with the Greek language to achieve *nomos*, yet his fellow Greeks ignored his teachings for the short-term stability promised by compliance with the Persians.

It should be noted that, to Heraclitus’ judgment, what remained central to people’s character was whether they were “awake” or “asleep.” In fragment 34, Heraclitus claimed “those listening without understanding are like the deaf. The saying bears witness to them: absent while being present.” Nussbaum interpreted this fragment to mean “as long as a person has not understood what he says, he is still a barbarian, that is to say, a stranger to what is said and even to his own speech.”³⁴ In fragment 107, Heraclitus claimed “eyes and ears are bad witnesses for people who have barbarian souls.”³⁵ In these fragments, Heraclitus expanded upon the typical Greek definition of barbarian; he felt that Greeks who did not have understanding of the *logos* may as well be barbarians. References to listening and speaking again characterize the pursuit of *logos*, further proving that the *logos* required overcoming the atomistic realms through language. It makes sense that Heraclitus wouldn’t have explicitly made this connection but hidden it in his language like this because he wanted his audience to discover the path to *logos* for themselves. Additionally, fragment 107 mentions the *psyche* as the point of failure for interpreting the

²⁹ Sweet, *Heraclitus: Translation and Analysis*, 51.

³⁰ Martin, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, 122.

³¹ Wood, “Recovering Heraclitus,” 26.

³² *Ibid.*, 38.

³³ Martin, *Ancient Greece*, 85.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 47.

senses (eyes) and language (ears). The Ephesians “fail to utilize their capacity for rational discernment,”³⁶ which is also likely why they became greedy for wealth like the Persians who they were blindly submitting to, so they too had “barbarian souls” according to Heraclitus. Unlike the Persians the Ephesians had someone, Heraclitus himself, who could easily communicate with them and teach them to overcome the confines of the Greek language, but they turned a blind eye. Heraclitus became so frustrated with the Ephesian’s incompetence because he knew they had the potential to learn how to create a sound society in accordance with the cosmic *nomos* but they were too involved in their selfish desires to “awaken” themselves and overthrow the Persian-puppet government. Having established that linguistic barriers led to Heraclitus’ faith that a philosophical pursuit of language would lead to an individual’s understanding of the divine realm in which political decisions should be based, this paper will now identify the complexities of a Heraclitean society and government.

HERACLITEAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

In regards to societal customs, Heraclitus would have wanted religion to be present in society because he recognized the Greek divine world as perfection due to the gods’ complete comprehension of *logos*. Heraclitus’ concept of *nomos* addressed his perspective that the divine world and human world were simultaneously present and aligned with one another. However, in fragment 83, he attributed an even higher praise to the divine than to human-discovered *logos*, because “the wisest person seems like an ape when compared with God; both in wisdom and beauty, and in all other things as well.”³⁷ Combining this statement with Heraclitus’ concept of *nomos*, the divine world seems to be similar to human society, except the idealized versions of human virtues have been actualized. In other words, the human realm is simply the potential of the divine world; moreover, human society may never be able to attain this state of perfection since even the best of humanity is uncivilized compared to the ideal civilization of the divine realm. Additionally, in fragment 102 Heraclitus asserted, “for God all things are beautiful and good and just, but humans have supposed some things to be unjust, other things to be just.”³⁸ This divine perfection seems to have eliminated conflict because the gods have obtained perfect wisdom and are thus not led astray by selfish desires. This might imply that a perfect human society would reflect this eternal harmony, but that claim is contradicted by fragment 83 which showed that ideal harmony would actually be unattainable for humanity since even the wisest person could not reach the level of wisdom that God has. As established by the concept of *logos*, wisdom is the exact opposite of selfish desires and therefore cannot coexist with conflict, so anything but perfect wisdom in society would entail the presence of conflict. Mantas Adoménas argued that Heraclitus saw an “expression of *logos*” in traditional Greek religious rituals due to their connection with nature and separation from unenlightened individuals,³⁹ so having such rituals flourish in society would have seemed favorable in ensuring that the human *nomos* reflected the divine *nomos*. The exact extent which Heraclitus would have wanted religion in society is indiscernible from his remaining fragments, but it is highly plausible that he would have wanted some sort

³⁶ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 65.

³⁷ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 35.

³⁸ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 43.

³⁹ Mantas Adoménas, “Heraclitus on Religion,” *Phronesis*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1999): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4182610>, 113.

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of rituals or appreciations for the gods because he grew up in a highly religious society, he believed the gods to have an infallible understanding of *logos* and, as Adoménas had established, Heraclitean philosophy seemed to simply modify the Greek society he grew up in, not disregard Greek tradition especially seeing as he followed a traditional Greek appraising of divine perfection.

Fragment 14, “nighthroamers, wizards, Bacchantes, revelers, mystics (these [Heraclitus] threatened with death...) for the customs into which people are initiated are unholy mysteries,”⁴⁰ detailed activities and lifestyles that Heraclitus would deem improper for citizens. He claimed them to be “unholy” because they turned people reckless and selfish, which were not characteristics found in the divine world, thus are characteristics people should disdain. He specifically disliked alcohol for distorting reality and inhibiting one’s self control,⁴¹ so it seems reasonable to assume these were also his reasons for disapproving of the lifestyles mentioned above, since those people were often seen as deluded, insane, or reckless in antiquity. However, he may have felt that these people’s presence in society was necessary and natural. To understand why, Heraclitus’ “unity of opposites” theory must be explored. Heraclitus believed opposition was a fundamental process of the universe.⁴² He did not attempt to solve paradoxes, because he believed the world was inherently paradoxical.⁴³ Returning back to his river images, everything was both itself and not itself because of an inherent cosmic flux making everything interrelated, or “common.” Thus, once one grasped the *logos* they understood the unity between all opposing things. Fragment 8 puts this most bluntly: “what is in opposition is in agreement, and the most beautiful harmony comes out of things in conflict.” If opposition was a part of the universal order, then it must also somehow be represented in human society. Aristotle’s reading of fragment 68 might reveal how Heraclitus viewed the necessity of opposition in society. Fragment 68 states, “[Heraclitus called the perceptions of shameful things as holy] ‘remedies.’” Aristotle analyzed the fragment to mean perceiving shameful things leads to an understanding of the holy, like how Greek tragedies were cathartic for the audience while also reminding them of the importance of virtuous actions and self-control.⁴⁴ Although Heraclitus thought people ought not to behave as reckless drunks, he could have also thought it necessary for society to have displays of life out of accordance with *logos* in order to teach people the importance of behaving properly. Additionally, there can be no “ideal” human society since harmony cannot exist without conflict, and the search for wisdom is infinite due to humanity’s struggle with language, so conflicting personalities would naturally be present in society. Although human lives and decisions would be placed on a hierarchy, all ranks would be represented in Heraclitus’ ideal society with *logos*-enlightened individuals being placed in the highest ranks and slaves, drunks, Bacchics, etc... being placed lowest. His hatred for the Ephesians can then be read as a hatred for an unnecessary abundance of ignorance and social impropriety in the *polis*, as well as his grappling with the necessity of such revolting behaviors in society.

Shifting focus to the political sphere, Heraclitus’ high praise of those who understand *logos* implies that he would have wanted those select few to have the highest power in society and government. Jan M. Robitzsch’s reading of fragment 110, “it is not better for people to obtain all that they want”⁴⁵ proposed

⁴⁰ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 7.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴² Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 59.

⁴³ Emlyn-Jones, “Heraclitus and the Identity of Opposites,” 101.

⁴⁴ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 68.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 47.

that if everyone had an equal say in political affairs chaos would ensue due to people overestimating their capabilities and acting on selfish impulses. Only people who had advantage wisdom were required in politics.⁴⁶ In fragment 104, Heraclitus claimed "...‘the many are worthless,’ good people are few.”⁴⁷ Similarly, in fragment 49 he maintained “(for me) one person is [worth] ten thousand, if that person is the best;”⁴⁸ therefore, a direct democracy would not have been the political structure Heraclitus had envisioned; only certain individuals could qualify for an office in the governing body. Fragment 33 states, “it is law to obey the will of one.”⁴⁹ Gregory Vlastos argued that this “one” means both *logos* awakened individuals and the *logos* itself.⁵⁰ A Heraclitean society would ideally obey the will of those awakened by *logos*; correspondingly, we can infer that the government would be made up of *logos*-enlightened individuals whose authority was derived from their ability to enforce laws in accordance with the *nomos*. The worth of a politician would be determined by their gift for being able to comprehend the *logos*. If their children, relatives, or friends did not share this wisdom, they would not qualify to be involved in political decisions. A Heraclitean aristocracy would not follow the tradition of inheritable social and political status which would be expected in modern politics, it would champion assigning political offices based solely on merit.

Heraclitus likely would have wanted critical legislative decisions to be made by a council of *logos*-enlightened individuals who could act as if they were “one” fashion their society’s *nomos* to be in accordance with the divine *nomos*; however, he would have also implemented a democratic aspect to society to prevent the state from being vulnerable to corruption from the actual will of “one” whose tyrannical power could rule unchecked, like Ephesus may have been. Charles Kahn noted that Heraclitus had “a lucid, almost Hobbesian appreciation of the fact that civilized life and communal survival depend upon loyalty to the *nomos*, the law in which all citizens have a share but which may be realized in the leadership of a single outstanding man.”⁵¹ The public’s strict adherence to laws seems to best come about through one of two opposite approaches: rule by fear or rule by consent. Gregory Vlastos argued Heraclitus would have wanted the former, rule by fear, because he believed that if “the many are bad,” unity under a common law would entail “submission of all powers to a single law.”⁵² However, this interpretation seems flawed because Heraclitus repeatedly promoted free-thinking inquiry, specifically in pursuit of the *logos*, and he looked down on drunks because they blindly submitted to their selfish instincts. Additionally, Heraclitus criticized the Ephesians for being passive to foreign influence in their government, so it appears Heraclitus would have wanted the public to have some involvement in the political sphere. A rule by consent would be a much more Heraclitean solution to uniting the public to follow laws because Heraclitus believed “the people must fight for the law just as for the city wall.”⁵³ The

⁴⁶ Robitzsch, “Heraclitus’ Political Thought,” 415.

⁴⁷ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 45.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁰ Robitzsch, “Heraclitus’ Political Thought,” 419.

⁵¹ Heraclitus, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: A New Arrangement and Translation of the Fragments with Literary and Philosophical Commentary*, edited by Charles H. Kahn (Cambridge University Press, 1979): 3.

⁵² Gregory Vlastos, “Equality and Justice in Early Greek Cosmologies,” *Classical Philology*, vol. 42, no. 3 (1947): <https://www.jstor.org/stable/265987>, 167.

⁵³ Sweet, *Heraclitus*, 37.

people would not fight for the law, which is also representing *nomos* here,⁵⁴ as if it were a city wall, representing physical security, if they did not understand why they should fight for it. Moreover, they would not fight for the *nomos*-inspired constitution if they disliked and feared the government that was implementing it. Therefore, Heraclitus' ideal society would have an aspect of democracy in it. A social contract seems to be a plausible solution in getting the public's consent to being governed by a set of laws they were told reflect the *logos*, even if most of them were not actually clear on what this *logos* was. The social-contract theory is the result of modern political philosophy, so Heraclitus would have had no conception of a society which rested upon this constitution, but since it solves the question of creating civil unity while maintaining a hierarchy this paper maintains that a social-contract would have likely been approved by Heraclitus as a modern method to inspire the people to "fight for the law just as for the city wall." According to the Hobbesian definition of a social contract, the citizens agree to oblige to authority only if it is in their best interest to.⁵⁵ Heraclitus, believing the *logos* was the absolute truth of reality, likely thought that having a society reflecting the natural harmony of the world would cause its citizens to be content, causing all social ranks to consent to this agreement being made with the aristocracy. Moreover, if the social contract was broken the people would have the power to elect new leaders. Seeing as they were content with a *logos*-derived constitution and societal order, the citizens would simply replace the corrupt politicians with *logos*-enlightened politicians. This way the meritocracy was upheld not only by the aristocracy but by the entire public as well. Thomas Hobbes thought that the sovereign should have absolute power,⁵⁶ but Konstantin Boudouris believed that the Heraclitean political system would involve the citizens in the lawmaking too. He proposed that the "common," in other words what customs would be best for all citizens, would be determined by the community who would obey the final decisions of the governing council. The council would guide them to the best results, keeping the people's will from being led astray by deceitful proposals made by self-interested individuals. Once the laws were established, the citizens would then conform to their laws which, because the people were involved in the decision making, got majority support, prompting obedience to these laws.⁵⁷ Heraclitus maintained that selfishness was a virtue only found in "sleepers" so the people should not worry about the council being corrupt. If the council was somehow corrupted, the sentiments of fragment 44 should echo in the people's minds and they must fight the tricksters if the rest of the council had not already done so themselves. It seems Heraclitus would not have wanted all those who understood *logos* to be in the governing council, but they should be dispersed throughout society, spreading wisdom, helping the public, and ensuring the aristocracy remained uncorrupted. The exact methods which Heraclitus would have wanted the government to operate under are unknown, but Boudouris seems to have a good proposal for a method of balancing the democratic and aristocratic aspects of society which Heraclitus would have approved of.

⁵⁴ Wood, "Recovering Heraclitus," 119.

⁵⁵ Celeste Friend, "Social Contract Theory," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed January 30, 2026. <https://iep.utm.edu/soc-cont/>.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Robitzsch, "Heraclitus' Political Thought," 414.

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CONCLUSION

This paper has brought together various scholarships about Heraclitus' philosophy and Heraclitus' own fragments to argue that Heraclitus would have favored an aristocratic government where political offices were gained by intellectual merit and where the general populace would have held limited yet active political power. Heraclitus' distaste for his fellow Ephesians came from a dissatisfaction with Persian rule and his frustrations that, although he could not convince the Persians to seek divine truths because his *psyche* could not bridge the gap between the divine realm and human rationality using the Persian language, he could teach his fellow Greeks to understand the *nomos*, but they remained obedient to the barbarian Persians. Heraclitus did not seem to imagine there would be an "ideal" human society which could reflect a greater cosmic world, his political theory just attempted to reform Greek society, bringing it to a point where the individualized pursuit of knowledge was a prominent aspect of a citizen's life and the laws reflected the cosmic *nomos*, as the *nomos* of divinity and humanity were naturally homologous. His fear that society would be led astray if governed by incompetent politicians led him to prefer an aristocratic government where positions of power were not inherited yet given to those who understood *logos*, thus establishing a meritocracy. He believed that if a tyranny tried to establish a rule of order antithetical with the divine *nomos*, the citizens must fight for their laws. In order to accomplish this, they must have motivation to chase a *logos*-derived constitution, implying that Heraclitean "ideal" society would not have the praise of *logos* forced upon the citizens as a virtue, but even those who were not enlightened by *logos* should have individual reasons for respecting it as the best political order. Perhaps there would have been a social contract in the *logos*-derived society, making the citizens feel secure that their politicians were supporting their best interests, and it would motivate them to fight against attempts at tyranny. Although Heraclitus' fragments are cryptic and scarce, his political philosophy is discernible to a certain degree, and therefore should not be neglected when considering the breadth of pre-Socratic philosophy.

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