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| Autor: | O'Meara, Dominic J. |
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On the Source and Authenticity of Heraclitus Fragment 4 (DK)

Dominic J. O'Meara, Fribourg

Abstract: In this paper I show that Heraclitus Fragment 4 (DK), which is found only in Albert the Great, derives from truncated excerpts taken by Albert from Michael of Ephesus' *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics* in Grosseteste's Latin translation, to which Albert has added further elements derived from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. There is consequently no mysterious lost Greek source behind the “fragment” in Albert and it is not authentic.

Heraclitus Fragment 4, as printed in Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, reads as follows:

H[eraclitus] dixit quod *Si felicitas esset in delectationibus corporis, boves felices diceremus, cum inveniant orobum ad comedendum.*

This passage is to be found in Albert the Great's *De vegetabilibus*, in a section (VI, 401) which treats of the *orobus* (bitter vetch). Diels-Kranz express doubts as to whether the first part of this passage can be considered to be authentic. Bywater, already in 1880,¹ conceded that the hypothetical clause “*si felicitas ... corporis*” may be a later addition. Yet he argued that the end of the passage in Albert is authentic and echoes a Greek original. “Incredible” as it seems, Bywater remarks, the thirteenth-century German Dominican has preserved, in the last phrase of the passage, a saying of Heraclitus which is found nowhere else in Greek or Latin literature. Bywater noted in particular the use of the word *orobus*, a Greek word (ὄποβος), rather than the more familiar Latin term *ervum*. Bywater supposed that Albert must have had access to a translation of a lost Greek work where Heraclitus' words were to be found. Some more recent editors of Heraclitus' fragments² have accepted, with varying degrees of confidence, the idea that part of the passage in Albert, or some words in it, could derive from

* I am grateful to Marianne Garin for her helpful comments on this paper.

1 I. Bywater, “Heraclitus and Albertus Magnus”, *Journal of Philology* 9 (1880) 230–234.

2 M. Marcovich, *Heraclitus* (Merida 1967) 188–189 (no. 38); C. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* (Cambridge 1979) 288; M. Conche, *Héraclite Fragments* (Paris 1986) 345–347 (no. 98). S. Mouraviev, *Héraclite d’Éphèse. Les Vestiges* (Sankt Augustin 2006) prints the whole passage as a fragment (F4), as does D. Graham, *The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy I* (Cambridge 2010) 170 (no. 124). A. Lebedev, in his Russian edition of Heraclitus (Moscow 2014), describes the passage (no. 92) as a “paraphrase” (I have consulted this edition in the English selection from it available on internet at www.academia.edu/8188629/Andrei_Lebedev_New_Edition_of_Heraclitus).

Heraclitus. Others have rejected the fragment, even if its inauthenticity yet remains to be demonstrated.³

The crux of the problem is the riddle as to Albert's Greek source. The key to this riddle, I believe, was provided by K. Biewer in 1992, in his commentary on Albert's *De vegetabilibus*. Speaking of the Heraclitus passage, Biewer says: “vermutlich hat Albert das Heraklit-Zitat in seiner Vorlage (dem Ethik-Kommentar des Michael von Ephesus) mit nachfolgendem Text kontaminiert und ist so zu seinem (falschen) Heraklit-Zitat gekommen.”⁴ Biewer refers in this connection to Michael of Ephesus' commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.5 (which I quote below).⁵ Biewer's remark may escape students of Heraclitus. More importantly, his suggestion requires a fuller explanation in order to convince. This is what I propose to undertake in the following pages.

We may start, then, with the passage in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.5):

Each kind of creature seems to have its own kind of pleasure, just as it has its own function; for the pleasure corresponding to its activity will be its own. But this will also be evident in each case, if one goes through them: a horse's pleasure, a dog's, and a man's are different, and, as Heraclitus says, donkeys will choose sweepings to gold [Heraclitus fr. 9]; something to eat is more pleasant than gold, for donkeys.⁶

Commenting on this passage in the early twelfth century, the Byzantine scholar Michael of Ephesus provides the following explanation of it:

καὶ ἡ μὲν τῶν προκειμένων διάνοια αὕτη, τὸ δὲ λεγόμενον ὑπὸ τῆς λέξεως Ἡρακλείτου τοῦ Ἐφεσίου καὶ ἐμοῦ πολίτου τὸ ‘ὄνον σύρματ’ ἀν ἐλέσθαι <μᾶλλον> ἢ χρυσόν.’ σύρματα τὸν χόρτον Ἡράκλειτος λέγει, ὃς κατὰ φύσιν ἡδύς ἐστι τῷ ὄνῳ. οἱ μὲν τῶν ἐτέρων τῷ εἴδει διαφέρουσιν εἴδει. ἔτερα τῷ εἴδει ἄνθρωπος ἵππος βοῦς κύων. τούτων τῶν ἐτέρων τῷ εἴδει διαφέρουσιν, ὡς εἴρηται, καὶ αἱ κατὰ φύσιν ἐνέργειαι τῷ εἴδει καὶ οἱ ἐπ’ αὐταῖς γινόμεναι ἡδοναί. τὰς δὲ τῶν αὐτῶν τῷ εἴδει ἐπὶ τῶν ἀλόγων ζῷων εὐλογον εἶναι τὰς αὐτὰς τῷ εἴδει. πᾶσι γὰρ τοῖς ἵπποις, τοῖς αὐτοῖς οὖσι τῷ εἴδει, τὰ αὐτά ἐστιν ἡδεά, οἷον χόρτος καὶ κριθή, καὶ τοῖς κυσὶν πᾶσιν ὁμοειδέσιν οὖσι ὀστέα καὶ κρέα, τοῖς δὲ βουσὶ πᾶσιν ὅροβοι.⁷

And this is the meaning of the present text; as for what the words of Heraclitus of Ephesus, my compatriot, say, that “donkeys choose sweepings to gold”, by “sweepings” Heraclitus means fodder, which is naturally pleasant to the donkey. For the pleasures of different species are different in kind. Man, horse, cow and dog are different species. The pleasures of these different species, as Aristotle says, are different, as differ in kind the natural activities and the pleasures that arise from these activities. Among irrational animals it seems clear that in the case of those

3 T. Vítek, “False Heraclitus: Heraclitean *dubia* and their typology”, *La Parola del Passato* 67 (2012) 179 lists scholars who reject or omit the fragment; he includes it, in his classification of *dubia*, in the group of “meaning duplications”.

4 K. Biewer, *Albertus Magnus De vegetabilibus VI*, 2 (Stuttgart 1992) 203.

5 Bywater had referred in his article (232 n. 2) in general terms to Michael of Ephesus' commentary, but unfortunately did not pursue this further.

6 1176a3–8, translated by S. Broadie and C. Rowe (Oxford 2002).

7 *In Ethica Nicomachea commentaria*, ed. G. Heylbut, CAG XX (Berlin 1892) 570,20–30.

of the same species, their pleasures are the same in kind. For the same things are pleasant for all horses, as being of the same species – things such as fodder and barley – and for all dogs, being of the same species, it is bones and meat, and for all cattle it is vetch. (My trans.)

Michael thus explains that the pleasures of animals of different species are different and that the pleasures of animals of the same species are the same. He repeats the words of his “compatriot”, Heraclitus of Ephesus, as quoted by Aristotle, to this effect: donkeys prefer “sweepings”, i.e. fodder. Aristotle indicates that this can be observed in other cases, e.g. in the cases of horses and dogs, but he does not spell out what the particular pleasures of these species might be. Michael does this for us: horses take pleasure in fodder and barley, dogs in bones and meat. Michael adds, furthermore, another case, another animal species not mentioned by Aristotle, that of cows. He seems to be inspired in this by earlier passages of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle criticizes the opinion of the crude mass that happiness is pleasure, preferring the life of cattle (1.6, 1095b16–22), and where Aristotle discussed the attribution of happiness to horses and cattle (1.9, 1099b32–33). The idea that it is bitter vetch (ὄποβος) which makes the pleasure of cattle is added by Michael, not, I think, by looking out of the window, but by looking in Aristotle’s *Historia animalium* (3.21, 522b29; 8.7, 595b6). Michael took considerable interest in Aristotle’s treatises on animals, on which he commented.

The commentaries on Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* produced by Michael of Ephesus and by Eustratius of Nicaea (they seemed to have collaborated in this work under the patronage of Anna Comnena⁸) were compiled, with further commentaries, to form a *corpus ethicum* which was translated into Latin by Robert Grosseteste in the 1240’s. I quote here part of Grosseteste’s Latin version of Michael of Ephesus’ comment on *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.5:

Et propositorum quidem mens haec; quod autem dicitur a dictione Heracleiti Ephesii et mei civis hoc scilicet “asinum faenum utique eligere quam aurum”. Faenum herbam Heracleitus dicit, quae secundum naturam delectabilis est asino. Quae quidem igitur diversorum specie differunt specie. Diversa specie homo, equus, bos, canis [...] omnibus enim equis, eisdem existentibus specie, eadem sunt delectabilia, puta faenum et ordeum, et canibus, existentibus omnibus unius speciei, ossa et carnes, bobus autem omnibus orobus.⁹

Albert the Great made good use of Grosseteste’s Latin translation of the *corpus ethicum*, less than a decade later, when he taught, paraphrased and commented on Aristotle in Cologne. So we find, for example, the following extract from Grosseteste’s translation in Albert’s *Super ethica commentaria et quaestiones*, with respect to the passage in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* (10.5):

8 See R. Browning, “An Unpublished Funeral Oration of Anna Comnena”, *Proceedings Cambridge Philological Society* 188 (1962) 1–12.

9 H. Mercken, *The Greek Commentators on the Nicomachean Ethics of Aristotle in the Latin Translation of Robert Grosseteste III* (Leuven 1991) 394.

Primo ostendit, quod in aliis animalibus quodlibet animal propriam delectationem habet et proprium opus et diversorum sunt diversae delectationes et unius una, sicut dixit Heraclitus quod fenum est delectabilius asino quam aurum et bovi orobus et diversis diversa.¹⁰

If we compare this extract with the original (Michael's Greek commentary and Grosseteste's Latin translation), we observe (1) that if Heraclitus' saying concerning donkeys (as quoted by Aristotle) is retained, yet the pleasures of other animal species are omitted, with the exception, however, of that of cattle, and (2) that the pleasure of cattle, through this omission, comes across as being part of Heraclitus' saying. All that we need is a further omission, that of the donkey, in order to reach the attribution of cattle's vetch to Heraclitus, which is what we find in the passage in Albert's *De vegetabilibus*, a text written in the same period of Albert's teaching career.¹¹

There is no need, therefore, to postulate some lost Greek source which Albert would have used in order to find vetch-eating cows in Heraclitus. By truncating his excerpts from Grosseteste's translation of Michael of Ephesus, Albert has replaced Heraclitus' original donkeys with Michael's cows.

The passage in the *De vegetabilibus* requires, however, one last comment. Albert refers to the thesis that happiness consists in bodily pleasures, citing the pleasure of cattle as an example, which would show, following this thesis, that cows could be said to be happy. The simplest explanation of Albert's statement is that he is inspired, like Michael, by an earlier passage in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, not only in 1.6, where Aristotle denounces the identification of happiness with bovine pleasure, but also in 1.9 (1099b32–33) where Aristotle says, in Grosseteste's translation: *decenter igitur neque bovem neque equum neque aliud animalium aliquid felix esse dicimus*. Finding bovine pleasure in Heraclitus, on the basis of truncated excerpts from Michael, and assuming that Aristotle's denial of happiness to animals is part of Heraclitus' position, Albert ends up, through these associations, with what we now have as Heraclitus fragment 4 (DK).

The conclusion may be brief. (1) Albert the Great's source is not a lost Greek text which would have preserved an otherwise unknown fragment of Heraclitus. Albert is using, as Biewer has suggested, Michael of Ephesus' commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Grosseteste's translation. By a process of truncating excerpts, Michael's vetch-eating cows end up replacing Heraclitus' straw-eating

10 Ed. W. Kübel, *Alberti magni Super ethica commentum et quaestiones* (Münster 1987) 742,48–53. This passage is quoted by Biewer, *loc. cit.* (n. 4) 204. On Albert's use of Grosseteste's translation of Michael, see Mercken, *loc. cit.* (n. 9) 46*–49*. Biewer also quotes a similar passage to be found in Albert's *Ethica*, a later work (c. 1262): *Heraclitus dixit asinum faenum et ordeum secundum naturae suaे convenientiam plus eligere quam aurum. Est enim tale faenum delectabilius nutrimentum asinis quam aurum. Et secundum hunc modum plus eligitur a bove orobum, et a cane ossa.* (*Ethica* X.1.11.21, ed. A. Borgnet, *B. Alberti Magni Opera omnia* VII, Paris 1891, 619; I have corrected the nonsensical word *iringorum*, as printed in the edition, to *et ordeum*).

11 Biewer, *loc. cit.* (n. 4) 11, dates the *De vegetabilibus* to 1256–1257.

donkeys, serving to illustrate the Aristotelian rejection of bodily pleasure as happiness. (2) Heraclitus fragment 4 (DK), therefore, is authentic neither in part nor as a whole: it should be removed from our collections of the fragments of Heraclitus.

Correspondence:

Dominic J. O'Meara
Université de Fribourg
Département de Philosophie
Avenue de l'Europe
CH-1700 Fribourg
dominic.omeara@unifr.ch