

Heraclitean Flux as a Philosophy of Social Change

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ABSTRACT : *Heraclitus of Ephesus is famous for his flux philosophy because he, through this philosophy, lays emphasis on the dynamism of reality. His insistence that reality is mutable triggered off the problem of change and permanence in classical philosophy. While some philosophers see change as part of the being of reality, others see it as illusory or non-existent. This paper presents Heraclitean flux Philosophy as a foundation for philosophy of social change, as enunciated by latter philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, among others, who showed through their works that society, man, social consciousness, being some of the aspects of reality, are dynamic.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Heraclitus of Ephesus is famous for his flux philosophy basically because he, through this philosophy, lays emphasis on the dynamism of reality. His doctrine came at a time when the tradition was to view reality as static. This approach (of seeing reality as static) was not unconnected with going beyond the phenomenal world to the essence of things in the effort to cognize them. Although the early Greek philosophers were, in the main, cosmologists, not much attention, if any, was given to the mutability of reality before the advent of Heraclitus. His insistence that reality changes has since attracted favourable and unfavourable commentaries since Parmenides. In the same vein, his philosophy has influenced other thinkers, including those opposed to his worldview, e.g. Plato. Thus, the problem of change and permanence became one of the earliest problems in western philosophy.

Parmenides, a contemporary of Heraclitus, refuted the flux philosophy and insisted that all change is illusory, hence:

Heraclitus and Parmenides took two extreme positions which subsequent philosophers tried to reconcile. While Heraclitus held that change was the basic feature of the universe, Parmenides denied this and held that permanence was the primary feature.¹

These two positions continue to attract comments for and against. Some thinkers, e.g. Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Democritus have attempted to reconcile the two opposing views. The aim of this paper is to sift the socio-political relevance of Heraclitus' flux philosophy. This propels us to present the flux philosophy as one of the earliest philosophies of social change. In doing this, we are not unaware that Heraclitus did not write explicitly on politics – he never on any subject anyway, if we take into account that he wrote only one book which did not survive. To be able to achieve our aim, a look at Heraclitus' worldview becomes necessary.

II. HERACLITUS' PHILOSOPHY

As earlier mentioned, the only book written by Heraclitus did not survive. He was said to have deposited the book *Papyrus Roll* in the great temple of Artemis in Ephesus. The book must have been destroyed together with the temple. Consequently, what has come down to us as Heraclitus' philosophical postulations are quotes from subsequent philosophers which are credited to him. This probably accounts for one of the reasons Heraclitus' philosophy is difficult to understand, as different thinkers quote and interpret him from their differing perspectives. Graham says of Heraclitus' work:

The structure of Heraclitus' book is controversial. It could have consisted of a relatively coherent and consecutive argument. On the other hand, the numerous fragments (over one hundred) that have come down to us do not easily connect with each other, even though they probably constitute a sizable fraction of the whole.²

Graham's position buttresses the difficulty in putting Heraclitus' work together as well as interpreting it. Nevertheless, this difficulty does not obscure his philosophical relevance as the difficulty lies, in the main, in the interpretation of the surviving fragments of his work.

Heraclitus' philosophy centres broadly around the doctrines of *universal flux*, *unity of opposites* and *Logos*. These we shall discuss presently but with additional headings, hence the work is divided into: Ontology, Universal Flux, the Unity of Opposites, Epistemology and Ethics. This is similar to Daniel Graham's approach³ to the exposition of Heraclitus' philosophical enterprise.

2.1 Ontology/Cosmology

Before, Heraclitus, the Milesians postulated or speculated on what they thought were the basic constituents of reality. To Thales it was water; Anaximander, the boundless; Anaximenes, air. These postulations merited them the acronym of material monists by Aristotle. In his own case, Heraclitus is often presented as adopting fire as the primary substance from which everything comes into existence and to which everything shall disappear. This view may not be valid as there is a cacophony of philosophical positions which seek to put Heraclitus' allusion to fire in perspective.

Magill, F.N. for example, has argued that the statement "All things are exchange for fire, and fire for all things" is not to be taken on the surface value. According to him, "All the statement means is that the so called elements merge into one another in the world process, that nothing is absolutely and eternally distinct from anything else".⁴

Indeed he concludes: "Fire is chosen as symbolic of process, not as a "basic stuff" put forward as an alternative to water or mist or what not".⁵

It has also been argued that "... the world is not to be identified with any particular substance, but rather with an on-going process governed by a law of change".⁶ More arguments abound against the presentation of Heraclitus as a material monist of fire as the primary element but this is not our concern here. It suffices here to say that Heraclitus has been variously interpreted as a monist, pluralist and a process philosopher.

2.2 Universal Flux

The doctrine of universal flux is the most interpreted and probably the most controversial of Heraclitus' doctrines. The view that everything changes is contained in many of Heraclitus' paradoxes. In simple language, Heraclitus is of the view that reality is merely a succession of transitory states. Everything changes such that a thing cannot be in the same state twice even though it is still referred to as the same object. What *is* at a particular time contains within itself elements for its transformation. All reality, therefore, is capable of becoming what is not apparent immediately. In other words, "One kind of long-lasting material reality exists by virtue of constant turnover in its constituent matters".⁷ Characteristic of all his doctrines, Heraclitus' philosophy becomes complex even for the professional philosophers the moment it is taken beyond the layman's interpretation. Even Socrates was said to have found Heraclitus' book difficult to understand. Diogenes Laertius, in his *Lives of Philosophers*, says that Euripides gave Socrates a copy of Heraclitus' book and asked him what he thought of it. Socrates replied that what he understood was as splendid as what he did not and that it would take a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it.

Nonetheless, we take some quoted fragments of Heraclitus' extant book to buttress the flux doctrine. One of these is the assertion that:

*Everything is in flux and nothing abides everything flows and nothing stays fixed everything is constantly changing and nothing stays the same.*⁸

Another is:

Into the same rivers we step and yet we do not step ... after all, one does not step into the same water twice, waters disperse and come together again ... they keep flowing on and flowing away.⁹

Fragments like the above have made Heraclitus' philosophy controversial. Some have summarised his philosophy as *Panta Rei* – Everything is changing.¹⁰ Summarizing Heraclitus this way often leads to exaggeration of the flux. It was such exaggeration that enabled Plato and Aristotle to push Heraclitus' philosophy to the point of alleging it of making knowledge impossible.

2.3 The Unity of Opposites

Heraclitus' doctrine of the Unity of Opposites could be said to be the engine for the doctrine of universal flux. If reality is in flux, then there must be an explanation for the cause of the constant changes. Having planted the idea of impermanence into Greek thought, Heraclitus explains that change takes place as a

result of the interdependence of opposites. He uses the doctrine to explain in what ways things are both the same and not the same over time. Accordingly, he is recognised as one of the earliest dialectical philosophers with his acknowledgment of the universality of change and development through internal contradictions”.¹¹ Heraclitus indeed criticised his predecessors and contemporaries for their inability or failure to recognise the unity in experience.

For Heraclitus the Unity of opposites means that opposites cannot exist without each other. By his reckoning, it is wise to agree that all things are one. In differing it agrees with itself, a backward turning connection, like that of a bow and a lyre. The path up and down is the same. Of course, the doctrine of the Unity of Opposites and its concomitant allowance of contradiction in reality have drawn the ire of subsequent thinkers including Plato, Aristotle, Karl Popper, etc., who accuse Heraclitus of logical absurdity, among others.

Coming from the background of the *World of Forms* where reality has an unchanging essence, Plato finds it convenient to refute Heraclitus’ flux and unity of opposites. Aristotle, being the father of formal logic, could not see the relevance of opposites or contradiction to reality. Karl Popper insists that any assertion which admits that contradiction cannot be avoided amounts to an attack on the law of contradiction of traditional logic: a law that asserts that two contradictory statements can never be true together, or that a statement consisting of the conjunction of two contradictory statements must always be rejected as false on purely logical grounds. These positions on Heraclitus and later formulations of dialectics have been challenged by scholars.

According to Stokes¹², there are three senses in which Heraclitus might have meant unity of opposites to be taken. They are:

- [1] Unity in opposition resulting from the predictability of two opposing terms of one and the same object as in the sentence “The road up and down is one and the same”.
- [2] Unity of opposition resulting from the opposite effects of one thing on different creatures such as in the assertion “The sea is both purest and foulest: drinkable and salutary for fish, to men undrinkable and poisonous”.
- [3] unity in opposition resulting from the possibility of one opposite being a necessary condition for the perception of another i.e., the impossibility of fully grasping what one opposite is without experiencing the other such as in the statement “Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest.
- [4] Viewed as above, the Heraclitean unity of opposites would be freed of its alleged absurdity, to a certain extent. Norman¹³, on his part, categorises contradiction as:
- [5] Interdependence of opposed concepts
- [6] conflict of opposed forces, and
- [7] irrationality

and concludes that contradiction is admissible in the first two senses, which relate to human behaviour and beliefs. When one person holds beliefs that are in conflict with one another, we say the person’s beliefs are self-contradictory. It would, therefore, be fair to credit contradiction to Heraclitus in the first two senses but not in the third sense.

In line with the above positions on contradiction, Sean Sayers has offered his view. According to him, it is vital to understand that there is a distinction between formal contradiction and what he calls dialectical contradiction. What critics such as Popper describe, according to him, is formal contradiction (as defined by the formal logical law of non-contradiction), which is indeed self-annulling. Sayers goes further to show that the assertion of formal contradiction has an indeterminate being and is, therefore, pure nothingness. He aligns with Hegel in seeing unity of opposites (dialectical contradiction) as a concrete contradiction, a feature of concrete determinate things. The upshot of the above positions is that unity of opposites does not advocate disregard for the fundamental laws of thought as contained in formal logic, and should not be so treated. While it is inadmissible that any two contradictory statements can both be true, unity of opposites or dialectical contradiction considers both thought and the natural world as both reality and potentiality, being and becoming.

2.4 Epistemology

Heraclitus holds that the evidence of the senses is in some way valuable. In other words, sense perception plays a vital role in the cognition of reality. According to him “The things of which there is sight, hearing, experience, I prefer”.¹⁵ However, there is more to cognition than mere sensation. There is need for the understanding of what is sensually perceived. Understanding, according to Heraclitus, is rare among men. Many of the so-called sages analyse so much but understand very little. To him, knowledge goes beyond the gathering and accumulation of information. According to him, learning many things does not teach understanding. Else it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, as well as Xenophanes and Hecataeus¹⁶.

Heraclitus has confidence in self-learning rather than citing authorities or following the crowd. Indeed, he criticises some of his predecessors for epistemologically playing to the gallery. He criticises Hesiod, Homer, Pythagoras and Archilochus for their inadequacies. On Hesiod he has this to say “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”.¹⁷ Hesiod’s offence was his failure to understand the inter-connectedness of day and night by virtue of which he presents them as different realities. On the basis of the doctrine of universal flux, Heraclitus’ theory of knowledge has been criticised as making knowledge of the world impossible. However, the criticism must have drawn its strength from an exaggeration of the doctrine.

2.5 Ethics

Heraclitus views the soul as the moral and cognitive centre of human experience. He preaches moderation and believes in rewards and punishment for human conduct. He sees sound thinking as the greatest virtue and wisdom, for this serves as the basis of an understanding of the nature of things. Like Socrates, Heraclitus associates immoral behaviour with lack of understanding. According to him “... one ought to follow what is common. But although the rationale is common, the many live as if they possessed private understanding”.¹⁸ Heraclitus’ reference here is to the acceptable standard of behaviour which should be decipherable to all who qualify to be called adults. We have undertaken the above insight into Heraclitus’ philosophy with a view to presenting his work as briefly as possible before interpreting his universal flux doctrine as a philosophy of social change. In what follows, therefore, we attempt to relate the flux doctrine to fragments of his work that deal with politics, as well as social change.

III. FLUX AS A PRINCIPLE OF SOCIAL CHANGE

Prior to Heraclitus, Greek cosmology considered reality as static. His doctrine of universal flux was not only novel, but also revolutionary. Revolutionary in the sense that it shook the foundation of Greek thought by presenting reality as dynamic. If reality as a whole is dynamic, then society, which is a fragment of reality, must be dynamic. The same goes for man and his social consciousness which is a product of his socio-historical and economic experiences.

The Heraclitean revolution in philosophy has been applied not only to speculations about the world, but also to man’s habitat-society. Since Hegel, Heraclitus has been seen more as a process philosopher than the monist or pluralist he had hitherto been interpreted to be. The doctrine of Universal Flux and Unity of Opposites had a tremendous influence in the formulation of Hegelian and the materialist dialectics of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Like Heraclitus, Hegel maintains that reality is one. According to him:

*Everything that surrounds us may be viewed as an instance of Dialectic. We are aware that everything finite, instead of being stable and ultimate, is rather changeable and transient and this is what we mean by that Dialectic of the finite by which the finite, as implicitly other than what it is, is forced beyond its own immediate or natural being to turn suddenly into its opposite.*¹⁹

Although Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels refuted philosophical idealism, they retained the doctrines of flux and unity of opposites in their materialist formulation of dialectics.

In his afterward to the second edition of Capital Volume 1, Karl Marx openly avowed himself the pupil of Hegel whom he refers to as a mighty thinker, and at the same time, distances himself from what he calls the mystification of his dialectical method. He says:

*The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.*²⁰

It is obvious that the above assertions are primarily on dialectics. But our reference to them is purely on the basis of the foundational role of the Heraclitean doctrines of flux and unity of opposites to dialectics. In the political application of his idealist dialectics to society, Hegel maintains that reality is one – the Absolute – and its various forms manifestations of the Absolute Spirit, with the State as its highest manifestation. According to him:

*World history is the necessary development, out of the concept of mind's freedom alone, of the moments of reason and so on of the self-consciousness and freedom of mind. This development is the interpretation and actualisation of the universal mind.*²¹

Hegel identifies three elements which structure historical movement. These are the idea of Spirit, the means of actualisation, and the State as the final and perfect embodiment of Spirit. He also identifies four phases of world history. They are the oriental civilization, Greek civilization, Roman civilization and Germanic civilization. Lots of interpretations have been made of Hegel's political philosophy. However, our concern, here, is Hegel's use of the Heraclitean doctrines of flux and unity of opposites to formulate the theory of dynamism of society. Thus, whatever the force that moves human society, even if we do not agree with Hegel that it is the Absolute Spirit, society is viewed as a dynamic reality, thanks to the metaphysical foundation laid by Heraclitus. It is noteworthy that Hegel's idealist philosophy produced both right wing and left wing Hegelians. Karl Marx belongs to the latter. Karl Marx's ultimate aim of formulating his materialist dialectics – christened dialectical materialism by later philosophers – was never hidden. Marx's intention was to use philosophy to change the world. Marx lamented that all that philosophers had done through the ages was to interpret the world and maintained that rather than interpret, philosophers should aim at changing the world. The urge to change the world led Marx to his formulations on dialectics (dialectical and historical materialism), political economy and scientific communism.

The role of the doctrines of universal flux and unity of opposites is enormous in Marx's formulations. To remain within the domains of this paper, we discuss, albeit briefly, this influence on society as contained in Marx's ideal form of human organization. Scientific communism deals with the imminent take-over of political power from the bourgeoisie by the proletariat who are the end product of the inequitable exchange of value in the capitalist society. It deals with the transition from the capitalist to, first socialist and eventually communist society, based on the essential contradiction between the two antagonistic classes created by capitalism. This is borne out of the conviction that "The history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles".²² Class struggle, which is a product of the essential societal contradiction, ultimately assumes the status of a full blown social revolution by which the obsolescent capitalist order is swept away and is replaced by a regime of the hitherto pauperised, subjugated proletariat. Philosophies which pay attention to the dynamism of reality such as the above have impacted on many states politically. These include France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Germany, and the former Soviet Union, among others. The reason for this is not far-fetched: philosophy cannot be divorced from society and human activity in general and social issues in particular. Politics is one of such social issues. Ogundowole, E.K.²³ identifies three trends in the history of the development and elaboration of philosophy in modern times. These are:

- [1] Pure philosophy line which is represented by the works of those who ignore political problems, e.g. Francis Bacon, Rene Descartes, Soren Kierkegaard, Ludwig Feuerbach, A.N. Whitehead.
- [2] those whose works are at once philosophical and political in character, e.g. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant, Hegel, the host of the 18th Century French enlightenment materialist philosophers: Diderot, Holbach, Voltaire, La Matie, etc.
- [3] those whose works bear predominantly political character, e.g. Nichollo Machiavelli, Tommaso Campanalla, Nicolas Malebranche, Charles Louis Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Edmund Burke, St. Simon, Alexis Tocqueville, etc.

From the above classification, it is, obvious that philosophy cannot be divorced from society and social issues. This re-echoes Hegel's assertion that philosophy is its epoch apprehended in thoughts. A philosopher's enterprise and emphasis are influenced by the dominant societal task of his time. That an issue does not enjoy dominance in a given philosophic work does not amount to the non- existence of such an issue. Engels asserts this much in a letter to J. Block²⁴ to dispel the absurdity credited to the emphasis laid on the economic aspect of reality. Before Engels' defence, he and Marx had been accused of presenting the economic aspect as if it were the only side of human existence. Engels makes it categorically clear that their materialist philosophy was meant to redress this long neglected aspect. What the above sums up to is that philosophy is both a complex and an all-embracing discipline. Thus, it should aim at solving the fundamental problems of human existence. Many of such fundamental problems arise as a result of cohabitation among humans. While all humans want to be free as they can, to do as they wish, they cannot, because they live among other humans. And, since reality in general is dynamic, society, an aspect of reality cannot but be dynamic. In its dynamism, social change becomes imperative.

IV. CONCLUSION

Social philosophy is concerned with society and societal tasks. Such tasks include economic, political, class, national and ideological.²⁵ Just as reality in general is dynamic, these tasks too, which, in part, constitute the components of society, are dynamic. Reality as a whole was viewed as static before Heraclitus' philosophical revolution of the doctrines of Universal Flux and unity of opposites. Although his philosophy was roundly condemned and coloured as a philosophy of absurdity, by subsequent philosophers such as Parmenides, Plato, Aristotle among others, thinkers like Democritus, Hegel, Marx, etc. later realised, and recognised the import of these doctrines to philosophy in general and social philosophy in particular. The acceptance of the doctrines has shaped the perception of society and revealed the necessity of social change when society fails in its responsibility to its citizens.

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