

HERACLITUS CONCEPTION OF FLUX PHILOSOPHY AND ITS RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL CHANGE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETIES

Orji, Chidi Paul, Ph.D.

Department of Philosophy,

University of Agriculture and Environmental Sciences, Umuagwo, Imo State

paul.orji@uaes.edu.ng, hipaulco@gmail.com

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.26135.18082

Abstract

Heraclitus of Ephesus is renowned for his concept of flux philosophy, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of existence. His argument on the malleability of reality set off the ancient philosophers' debate over permanence versus change. Some philosophers believe that change is an inherent aspect of reality, whereas others believe that it is either nonexistent or illusory. The philosophy of social change put forth by later philosophers like G.W.F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, among others, who demonstrated through their writings that society, the individual, and social consciousness are dynamic aspects of reality, is presented in this paper as a basis for Heraclitean flux philosophy.

Keywords: Heraclitus, Flux Philosophy, Social Change

Introduction

Heraclitus of Ephesus is celebrated for his concept of flux philosophy, which emphasizes the dynamic nature of existence. His theory emerged during a period when the conventional wisdom held that reality was unchanging. This method of viewing reality as static had something to do with trying to cognize things by looking past the phenomenal world to their essence. Before the arrival of Heraclitus, little to no thought was paid to the idea that reality is malleable, despite the fact that the majority of the early Greek philosophers were cosmologists.

His assertion that reality is subject to change has been discussed from both positive and negative perspectives ever since Parmenides. Similarly, his thought has impacted other intellectuals, including those who disagree with his vision, like Plato. As a result, one of the first philosophical issues in western thought was the dilemma of change and permanence.

Heraclitus's contemporary Parmenides rejected the flux theory and maintained that all change is illusory; as a result, Parmenides and Heraclitus adopted opposing extreme stances that other philosophers attempted to balance. Heraclitus believed that the fundamental quality of the universe was change, but Parmenides disagreed, believing that the fundamental quality of the universe was permanence (Omoregbe, 2007:176).

Both support and opposition comments are still being made on these two perspectives. Several philosophers, like Democritus, Anaxagoras, and Empedocles, have made an effort to balance the two divergent viewpoints. This essay seeks to sort through the socio-political applicability of Heraclitus' flux theory. We use this as justification to introduce the flux philosophy as one of the pioneering theories of social transformation. By doing this, we acknowledge that Heraclitus never wrote expressly on politics—in fact, given that he

only authored one book that is lost, he never wrote on any subject at all. We must examine Heraclitus' worldview in order to accomplish our goal.

Heraclitus' Philosophy

The one book that Heraclitus wrote did not survive, as was previously reported. According to legend, he placed the Papyrus Roll book in the magnificent Artemis temple in Ephesus. It is likely that both the book and the temple were destroyed. As such, the philosophical postulations that have survived to us are quotations from other philosophers that are attributed to Heraclitus. Given that several philosophers have cited and interpreted Heraclitus in different ways, this likely explains part of the difficulty in understanding his theory. About Heraclitus's work, Graham states:

It is debatable how Heraclitus organized his text. The argument may have been rather coherent and sequential. That being said, even while the more than a hundred bits that have been passed down to us are likely a significant portion of the entire, they are not readily correlated with one another (Graham, 2007).

Graham's stance reinforces how challenging it is to both understand and put Heraclitus' work together. Notwithstanding, the challenge does not negate his philosophical significance, as the primary challenge is how to understand the remnants of his composition that have survived. Universal flux, unity of opposites, and Logos are the three main tenets of Heraclitus' philosophy. As a result, the work is separated into the following categories: Ontology, Universal Flux, the Unity of Opposites, Epistemology, and Ethics. We will address these in more detail later on. This method of presenting Heraclitus' philosophical project is comparable to that of Daniel Graham (Graham, 2007).

Heraclitus view on Cosmology

The Milesians conjectured or made assumptions about what they believed to be the fundamental elements of reality prior to Heraclitus. It was water to Thales; the infinite to Anaximander; and air to Anaximenes. Because of these hypotheses, Aristotle gave them the acronym "material monists." Regarding Heraclitus himself, fire is frequently depicted as the fundamental element that gives rise to all things and ultimately consumes them. This perspective might not hold water given the plethora of philosophical stances that aim to contextualize Heraclitus' reference to fire.

For instance, Magill, F.N., has maintained that it is incorrect to accept the adage "Fire for all things, and everything for fire" at face value. "All the statement means, in his opinion, is that nothing is absolutely and eternally distinct from anything else; the so-called elements merge into one another in the world process" (Magill, 1968).

In fact, he states at the end that "fire is chosen as symbolic of process, not as a "basic substance" put forward as an alternative to water or mist or whatnot" (Graham, 2006). Additionally, it has been stated that "the world is to be identified with an ongoing process governed by a law of change, rather than with any particular substance." (The Panta Group, 2007). There are many reasons to refute the idea that Heraclitus was a material monist who believed that fire was the fundamental element, but those are not relevant to our discussion at hand. Here, it will be sufficient to mention that Heraclitus has been regarded in many ways as a process philosopher, pluralist, and monist.

Heraclitus Position on Universal Flux

The most widely accepted and arguably the most contentious of Heraclitus' theories is the theory of universal flux. Numerous paradoxes by Heraclitus express the idea that everything is subject to change. The idea that reality is nothing more than a series of fleeting states is held by Heraclitus. Even if something is still referred to as an object, everything is subject to change and can never be in the same condition twice. There are components for change inherent in what exists at every given moment. Therefore, anything that is evident at first glance has the potential to become something else. Stated differently, the existence of a particular type of durable material reality is attributed to the continuous change in its constituent materials (Moreelse, 2007).

Heraclitus' philosophy, like all of his theories, becomes difficult to understand even for professional philosophers once one moves past the level of the layperson. It was stated that Heraclitus' text was difficult even for Socrates to understand. According to Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of Philosophers*, Euripides brought Socrates a copy of Heraclitus' book and inquired about his thoughts on it. It would take a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it, Socrates said, saying that what he understood was as magnificent as what he did not. However, we use a few cited passages from the extant work of Heraclitus to support the flux theory. The claim that is one of these is: Nothing is constant and nothing stays the same; everything is in perpetual movement. Nothing flows or remains stationary (Stoke, 1968). We tread into the same rivers, but we do not step into them is another. The waters scatter and reassemble, after all, and one does not tread into the same place twice. They continue to flow before disappearing (Norman & Sayers, 1980).

Heraclitus' philosophy has become contentious due to fragments such as the ones mentioned above. *Panta Rei*, which means "everything is changing," is how some have summed up his ideology (Graham, (2007) When Heraclitus is summarized in this way, the flux is frequently overstated. Plato and Aristotle were able to push Heraclitus' philosophy to the brink of asserting that it precludes knowledge because of this kind of hyperbole.

Heraclitus Unity of Opposites

The theory of universal flow could be said to be driven by Heraclitus' theory of the unity of opposites. If reality is dynamic, then there needs to be a reason for the ongoing changes. After introducing the concept of impermanence into Greek philosophy, Heraclitus says that change occurs because opposites depend on one another. He explains how things change over time and how they remain the same using the doctrine. He is therefore regarded as one of the first dialectical philosophers due to his recognition of the universality of development and change brought about by internal contradictions (Hegel, 1968:150).

Heraclitus did in fact criticize his forebears and contemporaries for their incapacity or unwillingness to acknowledge the oneness of experience. Heraclitus believed in the unity of opposites, which states that opposites cannot exist independently of one another. He concluded that it is prudent to acknowledge the unity of all things. It is in agreement with itself when it differs, a reverse turning relationship like to that of a lyre and a bow. There is just one path—up or down. Of course, the Unity of Opposites concept and its accompanying acceptance of contradiction in reality have infuriated other philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Karl Popper, and others, who charge Heraclitus with illogical

reasoning among several other things.

Rejecting Heraclitus' flux and unity of opposites is convenient for Plato, who comes from the background of the World of Forms, where reality has an eternal nature. Despite being the originator of formal logic, Aristotle was unable to understand the significance of contradictions or opposites in human experience. The law of contradiction in conventional logic is attacked, according to Karl Popper, by any claim that acknowledges that contradictions cannot be avoided.

:a rule that says that two contradicting truths can never be true together, or that a claim that combines two conflicting statements must always be rejected as wrong based alone on logic. Experts have contested these stances on Heraclitus and subsequent dialectic formulations. As stated by Stokes (Marx, 1986:29).

Heraclitus may have meant unity of opposites to be understood in three different ways. They are as follows:

1. In the phrase "The road up and down is one and the same," there is unity in opposition because two conflicting meanings of the same object are predictable.
2. Unity of antagonism arising from the opposing effects of one substance on distinct organisms, as in the statement, "The sea is both foulest and purest: it is drinkable and beneficial for fish but unbearable and toxic to humans." One cannot fully understand one opposite without experiencing the other, as in the case of the statement "Disease makes health pleasant and good, hunger satiety, weariness rest."
3. This leads to unity in opposition because it is possible for one opposite to be a necessary condition for the perception of another.
4. When interpreted as stated above, the Heraclitean unity of opposites would be partially liberated from its purported absurdity. Norman (Hegel, 1973).
5. Interdependence of notions that are at odds with one another,
6. A clash of opposing forces and,
7. Irrational finds that in the first two senses, which deal with human behavior and ideas, contradiction is acceptable. A person's beliefs are considered self-contradictory when they contradict each other. Accordingly, it would be reasonable to give Heraclitus credit for contradiction in the first two senses but not in the third. Sean Sayers has expressed his opinion in accordance with the aforementioned viewpoints on contradiction. He says that it is crucial to realize that formal contradiction and dialectical contradiction are two different things. Popper and other critics define formal contradiction as the self-annulling phenomenon that is described by the formal logical law of non-contradiction.

Sayers shows that the formal contradiction statement has an indeterminate being and is, thus, nothing at all. His understanding of dialectical contradiction or the unity of opposites, as a tangible contradiction inherent in concrete definable things is in line with Hegel's. Conclusion: The unity of opposites is not, and should not, be interpreted as endorsing a contemptuous attitude toward the fundamental rules of thought found in formal logic. A dialectical contradiction, or unity of opposites, regards mind and the natural world as both actuality and potentiality, being and becoming, even if it is inadmissible for any two contradictory propositions to be true at the same time. (Marx & Engels, 1977:40)

Heraclitus Notion on Epistemology

According to Heraclitus, there is some value to the evidence provided by the senses. Stated differently, the senses are essential to the understanding of reality. He declared, "I prefer the things that are observable, audible, and tactile." (Ogundowole, 2004:21-22)

Nevertheless cognition is more complex than just feeling. It is important to comprehend how the senses are perceived. Heraclitus said that understanding is a later development in humans. Many so-called sages analyze a great deal but have very little understanding. He views knowledge as something that extends beyond the collection and organization of data. Hum claims that acquiring a lot of knowledge does not equate to comprehension. Otherwise, Xenophanes, Hecataeus, Pythagoras, and Hesiod would have all learned from it (Marx et al, 1984:294).

Rather than referencing authority or going along with the crowd, Heraclitus has faith in his own ability to learn. In fact, he takes issue with some of his forebears' epistemic "playing to the gallery." He berates Pythagoras, Homer, Hesiod, and Archilochus for their shortcomings. "The teacher of the multitude is Hesiod; they believe he has the greatest knowledge - who did not comprehend day and night: since they are one," is what he has to say about Hesiod (Ogundowole, 1991:1).

Hesiod's transgression stemmed from his inability to recognize how day and night are interconnected, despite the fact that he portrays them as distinct realities. Heraclitus' theory of knowledge has been criticized for impeding understanding of the outside world on the grounds of the notion of universal flux. Nonetheless, the criticism's force must have sprung from a misunderstanding of the philosophy.

Heraclitus Notion on Ethics

From Heraclitus, the moral and intellectual core of the human experience is the soul. He advocates in rewards and punishments for human behavior and promotes moderation. Since excellent reasoning is the foundation for comprehending the essence of things, he views it as the highest virtue and knowledge. Similar to Socrates, Heraclitus equates ignorance with immoral behavior. He stated that "one should follow what is common." Nevertheless, despite the widespread reasoning, many people behave as though they had their own unique understanding (Graham, 2007).

Here, Heraclitus alludes to the appropriate code of conduct that ought to be understandable to everyone who is worthy of the title of adult. The aforementioned analysis of Heraclitus' philosophy has been conducted in an effort to summarize his contributions succinctly before understanding his universal flux doctrine as a social change philosophy. Therefore, in the sections that follow, we try to connect the flux concept to the political and social change-related passages in his writings.

Flux as a Principle of Social Change

The Greek cosmology held that reality was static until Heraclitus. His theory of universal flow was revolutionary as well as new. Revolutionary in the sense that by portraying reality as dynamic, it upended the basic premises of Greek thought. Since society is a subset of reality, it must also be dynamic if reality as a whole is dynamic. Similarly, man and his

social consciousness stem from his experiences in the socio-historical and economic domains.

Philosophical conjectures about the world and human habitat-society have both been influenced by the Heraclitean revolution. More than being viewed as a monist or pluralist, Heraclitus is now considered a process philosopher, thanks to Hegel. Hegel's and Friedrich Engels' materialism and Hegelian dialectics were greatly influenced by the theories of Universal Flux and Unity of Opposites. Hegel holds that reality is one, much like Heraclitus. In his opinion: It is possible to see everything around us as an example of dialectic. What we mean by the Dialectic of the Finite is that everything finite, as implicitly other than what it is, is forced beyond its own immediate or natural being to turn abruptly into its opposite. We are aware that everything finite is rather changeable and transient rather than being stable and ultimate.

The ideas of flux and unity of opposites were maintained in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' materialist formulation of dialectics, notwithstanding their rejection of philosophical idealism. Karl Marx publicly acknowledged being Hegel's disciple in his afterword to the second edition of *Capital* Volume 1, calling the philosopher a "mighty thinker." At the same time, he separates himself from what he terms the mystification of his dialectical approach. The confusion dialectic suffers in Hegel's hands, he claims, hinders him from being the first to describe its general method of working in a thorough and deliberate way. It is standing on its head with him. It needs to be flipped back around in order to reveal the logical core hidden behind the ethereal exterior (Marx, 1986).

It is clear that the aforementioned claims mostly concern dialectics. However, the only reason we bring them up is because dialectics is based on the Heraclitean ideas of flux and unity of opposites. Hegel contends that reality is one, the Absolute, and that all of its forms are expressions of the Absolute Spirit, with the State serving as its highest manifestation. This is his political application of his idealist dialectics to society. As per his statement: The essential evolution of the idea of mental freedom alone, of rational moments, and so on, from self-awareness and mental freedom, is world history. This evolution represents the understanding and realization of the universal mind (Marx, 1986).

Historical movement is structured by three aspects, in accordance with Hegel. They are Spirit as an idea, actualization as a means, and the State as the ultimate and ideal expression of Spirit. Four periods of world history are also identified by him. These are the civilizations of the East, Greece, Rome, and the Germans. Regarding Hegel's political philosophy, numerous interpretations have been offered. The Heraclitean ideas of flux and unity of opposites, however, are what we are concerned with here, as Hegel used them to develop his theory of society's dynamic. Because of Heraclitus's metaphysical framework, society is thus seen as a dynamic reality, regardless of the force that drives human society—even if we disagree with Hegel that it is the Absolute Spirit. Notably, Hegel's idealistic theory gave rise to both left- and right-wing Hegelians. Karl Marx falls within this category. Karl Marx never disguised the ultimate goal of developing his materialist dialectics, which later thinkers dubbed dialectical materialism. Marx aimed to transform the world through philosophy. Marx bemoaned the fact that philosophers had only ever attempted to interpret the world throughout history, arguing that instead of interpreting, philosophers had to try to alter it. Marx's ideas on dialectics (historical and dialectical materialism), political economics, and scientific communism were influenced by his desire to alter the world.

Marx's formulations heavily include the notions of universal flux and unity of opposites. In order to stay within the confines of this paper, we will only briefly touch on this impact on society as it is reflected in Marx's ideal structure for human organization. Scientific communism addresses the impending proletariat's seizure of political power from the bourgeoisie, who are the result of the unequal exchange of values within the capitalist system. Based on the central conflict between the two opposing classes that capitalism established, it discusses the shift from a capitalist to a socialist and then a communist society. The belief that "the history of hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles" is the root of this (Marx, 1986).

As a result of the fundamental societal contradiction, class struggle eventually takes on the form of a full-fledged social revolution, overthrowing the outdated capitalist order and installing a government made up of the formerly oppressed and impoverished proletariat. Philosophies like the one mentioned above that acknowledge the dynamic nature of reality have influenced politics in numerous places. Among them are the former Soviet Union, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. This makes sense because, in general, human activity and society cannot be separated from philosophy, nor can social issues in particular. One of these social concerns is politics.

Three themes emerge from Ogundowole's analysis of the evolution and development of philosophy in the contemporary day. These are the following:

1. Pure philosophy line, exemplified by the writings of thinkers such as A.N. Whitehead, Ludwig Feuerbach, Soren Kierkegaard, Rene Descartes, and Francis Bacon who shun political issues.
2. those whose writings are simultaneously political and philosophical, such as Immanuel Kant, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Hegel, and the host of the materialist philosophers of the French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, Diderot, Holbach, Voltaire, La Matie, etc.

Individuals whose writings are primarily political, such as Nichollo Machiavelli, Tommaso Campanella, Nicolas Malebranche, Edmund Burke, Charles Louis Montesquieu, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, St. Simon, Alexis Tocqueville, etc. (Ogundowole, 1991).

It is clear from the categories above that social issues and society are inextricably linked to philosophy. Hegel's claim that philosophy is its epoch understood in thoughts is reiterated in this. A philosopher's focus and scope are determined by the prevailing social issue of the day. The fact that a problem is not dominant in a particular philosophical work does not mean that it does not exist. In a letter sent to J. Block, Engels makes this claim (Stoke, 1968). to refute the myth that the focus on the economic side of reality is ridiculous. Prior to Engels' defense, Marx and he were charged with portraying the economic side of human existence as the exclusive one. The materialist philosophy of Engels was intended to address this long-neglected issue, as he makes quite apparent. The aforementioned summarizes philosophy as a discipline that is both comprehensive and intricate. As such, it ought to be directed at resolving the basic issues facing humanity. Human cohabitation is a major contributing factor to many of these basic issues. Since they coexist with other humans, all people desire to be as free as possible to do as they like. Society is a dynamic component of reality by definition, and this is true of reality in general. Social transformation becomes necessary in its dynamism.

Conclusion

The study of social philosophy is focused on society and its problems. Economic, political, class, national, and ideological tasks are among them (Ogundowole, 1991).

These tasks, which make up a portion of society, are dynamic, much like reality as a whole. Prior to Heraclitus' intellectual revolution introducing the ideas of Universal Flux and the union of opposites, reality was considered as static. Despite the fact that his philosophy was harshly condemned and painted as a philosophy of absurdity by later philosophers like Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle, among others, thinkers like Marx, Hegel, and Democritus eventually realized and acknowledged the significance of these doctrines to philosophy in general and social philosophy in particular. Acceptance of the teachings has influenced how society is perceived and made it clear that social change is required when society fails to uphold its obligations to its citizens.

References

- Graham, Daniel (2006). "Heraclitus" in Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>.
- _____. (2007). "Heraclitus" in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus>. Retrieved on
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1968). *The Logic of Hegel, translated from the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences by Williams Wallace*. Oxford University Press.
- _____. (1973). *Philosophy of Right translated by T.M. Knox*. Oxford University Press.
- Magill, F.N. (1968). "Heraclitus" in *Masterpieces of World Philosophy in Summary Form*. George Allen and Unwin Limited.
- Marx, Karl (1986). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy vol. 1 – The Process of Production of Capital*. Progress Publishers.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (1977). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Progress Publishers.
- Marx, Engels and Lenin (1984). *On Historical Materialism*. Progress Publishers.
- Moreelse, J o n a n n e s (2 0 0 7) . " H e r a c l i t u s " i n
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/heraclitus//searchinput>.
- Norman, R. and Sayers, S. (1980). *Hegel, Marx and Dialectics: A Debate*. Novosti Press
- Ogundowole, E.K. (1991). *Echoes of Social Change*. John West Publications Limited.
- _____. (2004). *Philosophy and Society*. Correct Counsels Limited.
- Omeregbe, J.I. (2007). *Knowing Philosophy: A General Introduction*. Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited.
- Stoke, Michaels (1968). "Heraclitus" in Edwards Paul, (ed.) *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy vol. I*. Macmillan and the Free Press.
- The Panta Group (2007). *Heraclitus – Panta Rei*. Available at
<http://optionality.net/heraclitus/>