

The philosophy of Heraclitus today

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Summary

Heraclitus is one of the greatest Ionian thinkers, who lived and flourished around the beginning of the fifth century BC, in Ephesus. His style of life has had an obvious melancholic character and his personality was characterized by honesty, gentleness, broadmind, strength and magnanimity. Although Heraclitus has been one of the most creative and influential pre-Socratic philosophers, his surviving work consists of more than hundred twenty epigrammatic authentic fragments, in Ionic dialect, mentioned by his successors, philosophers and early Christian authors. Heraclitus' thoughts and doctrines have a multidimensionality, since he does not know a fixed level, working in a broad spectrum of subjects, in reference to everyday. Heraclitus has been influencing the philosophy and the literature for ages, from Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Sextus Empiricus, Porphyrius to Hölderlin, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Whitehead, Jung, Eliot, Ibsen and Kafka. Heraclitus as an author is among the greatest writers. His fragments have a distinctive, compact, solemn and powerful style, characterized by linguistic density, liveness, resonance, metaphor, symbolism, aphorism and opacity. Heraclitus as philosopher presents himself as the delivered of Logos (Word), which holds for ever and is accessible to thought because it is common, universal. All things happened in accordance with this account. Logos covers both the phenomena and the ideas. He implored to listen the Word and to know, as real wisdom, that "all is one". Heraclitus rejected the cosmological and cosmogonical myths of Hesiodus and insisted that the universe as well as everything has been created by Logos. Logos is a central idea of fundamental importance for the uncovering of the Being.. On the human soul Heraclitus claims that it is immense, possessing a deep and inaccessible measure and no one would ever discover the limits of psyche, should one transverse every road. Psyche itself is the source not only of life, but also of reason and rational control. The psyche should be purified from passions, vices and particularly from hybris, but it is always difficult to fight passion. An excellent man is equivalent of ten thousand. The character of a person plays a determining role on his fate. The souls of the best, the honest the righteous, the virtuous seem to be assured of deification and immortality. Heraclitus frequently asserts the unity of opposites, thus the road up and down is one and the same road and in the circumference of the circle beginning and end are the same. The entire lifetime is

confined by death, but life and death are a continuation and not an opposition, like any point of the circle's circumference, where beginning and end are common, depending on the perspectives from which it is viewed. The main issue is the quality of life and the immortality in death. Heraclitus claims that everything is in flux, like the constant flow of a river and he insists that nobody can step twice into the same river, because different waters flow perpetually. The universe is a continuous state of dynamic equilibrium, whereas at the same time all things are one. The immortal fire is the underlying principle of all things, the productive power of generating everything. The heavenly fire nourishes growth and maintains everything. Thus energy in flux is the essence of matter. Energy is always regenerated since the sun is new again all day. The sun is the timekeeper of the day and oversees everything. Likewise if the man can not see the spiritual sun, he would live in darkness. The transformations of fire means that everything may go over into everything in a steered movement. The fire or light converts like an original element over into other elements in a precise order. Learning is not a path of wisdom. The profound knowledge based on experience and gained by enquiry in to a wide spectrum of things may help in uncovering the reality and truth which mostly lie concealed. Mindfulness of all things is the ground of being. Thinking is a common property to all men. Wisdom is the oneness of mind that guides and permeates all things. The world is an everlastingly repeated sequence of cycles, each of which emerges out of fire and ends in fire. All things change and there is a continuous repetition of all the physical phenomena. Energy becomes matter and matter energy. According to Heraclitus Logos-Truth-Nature-Eternity are the crucial existential principles for the Being. The influence of Heraclitus' doctrines on other philosophers was extensive. Heraclitus could be characterized as the first existential philosopher, whose ideas have been revitalized in a more systematic and acceptable way in the fields of the modern existential philosophy. The message of Heraclitus to our suffering society is that prosperity is not synonymous with income or wealth, since it has primarily vital personal, existential, psychological and social dimensions. Whatever the state of the economy, the prosperity of the society is mainly based on spiritual values, the wisdom, the truth, the illumination of the mind, brightness of the soul, the capacity to self-knowing and sound thinking, the honesty, the unapparent harmony of the interior life. The message of Heraclitus is that fixing the economy is only part of the problem of the contemporary social suffering. Much more important is the purification of the human being from the passions, the ambition and particularly from insolence, since there is greatest need to extinguish insolence from the society than a blazing fire. Heraclitus

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emphasizes the necessity for interior culture and spiritual elevation, underlining that an excellent man is equivalent of ten thousand. A prosperous society can only be conceived as one in which people have the capability to live in noble simplicity, in honesty, in purity, in light overpassing the crisis by the strength of the mind. In the suffering human being of our era in the twilight of values of a society in decay, the solemn, concrete and penetrating message of Heraclitus would be referring from the depth of the ages to St. John's unique words that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.

Key words: Heraclitus, philosophy, sociology, moral values

Introduction

Heraclitus son of Blosson is one of the greatest Ionian thinkers, who lived and flourished around the beginning of the fifth century BC, in the 69th Olympiad¹, in Ephesus, the second important Ionian city and one of the most powerful cities in that era. His style of life has had an obvious melancholic character² and his personality was characterized by honesty, gentleness, broadminded, strength and magnanimity. He has spent much of his time, leading a hesychastic life in the mountains, living off herbs³ and investigating and analyzing himself continuously⁴. He was the disciple of none of the philosophers. His death was tragic, he contracted dropsy and deceased isolated and helpless, at the age of sixty.

Although Heraclitus has been one of the most creative and influential pre-Socratic philosophers, his surviving work consists of more than hundred twenty epigrammatic authentic fragments⁵, in Ionic dialect, mentioned by his successors, philosophers and early Christian authors, that scholars have been able to identify and extract them from their manuscripts. According to Diogenes Laertius, Heraclitus wrote a single treatise entitled "On Nature", divided in to three sections, on the universe, politics and theology respectively⁷. For his doctrines he became famous after his death, winning a high reputation for himself, which induced philosophical and ethical inspiration in many young philosophers, arising a school of disciples, known as Heraclitians.

Heraclitus' thoughts and doctrines have a multidimensionality, since he does not know a fixed level, working in a broad spectrum of subjects, in reference to everyday. Heraclitus has been influencing the philosophy and the literature for ages, from Plato, Aristotle, Stoics, Sextus Empiricus, Porphyrius to St. Augustine, Shakespeare, Hölderlin, Hegel, Nietzsche⁸, Kirkegaard⁹, Heidegger¹⁰, Whitehead, Jung, Eliot, Ibsen and Kafka¹¹. The Stoics¹² considered Heraclitus as their precursor, quoting him with much respect¹³ and Neoplatonics, such as Plotinus and Proclus, incorporated some of his fragments in their writings. Heraclitus has a strong appeal for writers, artists, scientists and psychologists giving them a message for centuries.

Heraclitus as an author is among the greatest writers¹⁴. His fragments have a distinctive, compact, solemn and powerful style, characterized by linguistic density, liveness, resonance, metaphor, symbolism, aphorism and opacity, thus

most of his statements might be translated in many ways and for this reason he was nicknamed "the obscure philosopher"¹⁵.

Heraclitus' principles and doctrines

The Logos (the Word)

Heraclitus as a philosopher presents himself as the delivered of Logos (Word)^{16,17}, which holds forever and is accessible to thought because it is "common", universal¹⁸. All things happened in accordance with this account¹⁹ and we need Logos to keep things known in common²⁰. Logos governs both the phenomena and the ideas. All human legislations and rules have one celestial source the Logos (the Word). Heraclitus implored that every human being should listen the Word and know, as real wisdom, that "all is one", but he regrets since some men lack the skill to listen²¹ and they don't know how to speak²².

Heraclitus rejected the cosmological and cosmogonical myths of Hesiodus and insisted that the universe as well as everything has been created by Logos and for humans it is wise to know the plan which steers all things through all things²³. Logos is a central idea of fundamental importance for the uncovering of the Being.

The soul

On the human soul Heraclitus claims that it is immense, possessing a deep and inaccessible measure and no one would ever discover the limits of psyche, should one transverse every road²⁴. In addition he insists that psyche possesses logos, which increases itself and "a dry psyche, a soul liberated from passions, is wiser and best". According to Heraclitus, psyche understanding the truths has unlimited resources²⁵. Psyche itself is the source not only of life, but also of reason and rational control. The psyche should be purified from passions, vices and particularly from insolence (hybris) since there is greatest need to extinguish insolence (hybris) than a blazing fire²⁶, but we must admit that it is always difficult for humans to fight passions. An excellent man is equivalent of ten thousand²⁷. The best men chose the path of wisdom and desire a name honored for ever. The comportment of the noble minded is opposite to that of the many. He focuses himself on everlasting values rather than transient things, in silence²⁸. The character of a person plays a determining role on his fate. The souls of the best, the honest the righteous, the virtuous seem to be assured of deification and immortality.

The unity of opposites

From the strain of binding opposites comes harmony and change gives rest. Heraclitus frequently asserts the unity of opposites²⁹, thus "the road up and down is one and the same road" and "in the circumference of the circle beginning and end are the same". Even good and ill are one. Every day seems equal to the rest. Cold things become warm and warm become cold³⁰. Everything is generated from the opposite,

such as the dead from the living, the old from the young and the ill from the healthy. Thus, in a symbolic way Heraclitus states that fire's death is birth for air and air's death is birth for water³¹. Death for earth is to become water and water's death is birth of air³². The natural reality is a continuous circle of transformations and energy exchange in life and death. Coming into existence is basically coupled with passing away.

Heraclitus believes that an unapparent connection links many things more firmly than an apparent and concrete one. A hidden and even secret harmony exists, which is more precious than an obvious one³³ and an unapparent harmony is stronger than an apparent one³⁴. A harmony exists even if there is an apparent competition between the opposites³⁵, since any competition conceals the attraction and attraction induces union. The nature likes to hold its secrets³⁶.

Sometimes Heraclitus expresses an obvious mysticism stating that "nature loves to hide"³⁷ and even more that "immortals are mortals, mortals are immortals, living their death, dying their life". The entire lifetime is confined by death, but life and death are a continuation and not an opposition. The beginning is also the end, like any point of the circle's circumference, where beginning and end are common³⁸, depending on the perspectives from which it is viewed.

The main issue is the quality of life and the immortality in death. The postmortal life is different than the premortal terrestrial one, for the righteous is a real life, a perpetual and constant being, though the premortal life for a multitude of men is like death, a transient and temporal being. The majority of men understand being only in a finite way.

The relativity

Heraclitus claims that relativity dominates on every phenomenon, since everything is in flux³⁹, like the constant flow of a river and he insists that "nobody can step twice into the same river"⁴⁰, because different waters flow perpetually. Things are whole and not whole, being brought together and been separated. Some are consonant and some dissonant.

The universe is a continuous state of dynamic equilibrium, whereas at the same time "all things are one"^{41,42}. The immobility, even the stability is stagnation⁴³. In reality stability does not exist in nature, since everything is in motion, the universe, the cell, the atom. Motion, transformation, alteration and energy exchange are all under an universal law which dominates on everything, in relativity⁴⁴.

The fire, the light and the time

The immortal fire is the underlying principle of all things, the productive power of generating everything. The heavenly fire nourishes growth and maintains everything. The conflagration of fire is not a process in time. The eternal living fire (αείζων) is itself the time allowing time. Thus energy in flux is the essence of matter. The totality of things is an exchange for fire and fire an exchange for all things⁴⁵. Fire of all things is the judge and ravisher.

According to Heraclitus there is a strong connection between fire, sun and time. The sun, which is an everlasting

fire, a long enduring lightning illuminating the entirety, which travels the heaven continuously and never oversteps his measures in its course, plays a fundamental role in timing, setting the boundaries of morning and evening⁴⁶. If the sun, as source of the light did not exist it would be an endless continuous and timeless night.

Thus the sun is the timekeeper⁴⁷ of the day, the clock of the world, since timing is a function of lightning. The personal time or the interior aspect of time is a changeable parameter which depends upon the mental or psychological condition of the person⁴⁸. The lack of consciousness entails lack of personal time and profound dementia entails timeless time⁴⁹.

The spiritual light⁵⁰ illuminates the mind and decides on the rhythms of the personal internal life. Likewise if the man cannot see the spiritual sun, he would live in darkness.

Energy is always regenerated since the sun is new again all the days⁵¹. and oversees everything. The transformations of fire means that everything may go over into everything in a steered movement⁵². The thunder as a maximal expression of fire and energy steers the totality of things⁵³.

The fire or light converts like an original element over other elements in a precise order. The fire, the light and the truth are always unchanged since they are original and genuine in their existence. The brightness of the sun light, like the truth, surrounds everything. Seeing is a grasping in light and spiritual seeing is a grasping in truth⁵⁴. Spiritual or celestial light never extinguishes^{55,56}.

Eyes are more accurate witness of the reality than are the ears, however both of them are poor witnesses for men who possess uncomprehending souls⁵⁷. Human being is the one who can kindle fire, who understands the power of light and who is able to touch the truth and be illuminated by divine light⁵⁸.

The wisdom

Learning is not a path of wisdom⁵⁹, but he who desires wisdom and seeks it needs sound intelligence. The profound knowledge based on experience and gained by enquiry in to a wide spectrum of things may help in uncovering the reality and truth which mostly lie concealed⁶⁰. It is reasonable that wisdom is apart from the mediocrity, it is isolated from the exterior influences, is a unique experience^{61,62}. However, the real knowledge, the absolute truth is not human but divine, since human wisdom is inefficient even primitive in comparison with the divine one⁶³.

Mindfulness of all things is the ground of being. Thinking is a common property to all men. Those who speak with insight should base themselves firmly on that which is common to all. Sound thinking is a great and essential virtue and wisdom consists in telling the truth⁶⁴, as well as behaving and acting in accordance with the real constitution of things⁶⁵. Wisdom is the oneness of mind that guides and permeates all things⁶⁶, it is the action of the mind beyond all things that may be said. All people ought to know themselves, being even-minded, since all humans have the capacity to self-knowing and sound thinking. Otherwise, it is prudential and rational for

men to conceal their ignorance.

The repetition

The world as a whole is an everlastingly repeated sequence of cycles, each of which emerges out of fire and ends in fire. By Cosmic rule, a day yields night and a night yields day. The summer yields winter and the winter yields summer. What was cold it becomes warm and the warm soon cools. All things change and there is a continuous repetition of all the physical phenomena. Energy becomes matter and matter yields energy⁶⁷.

Existential principles

According to Heraclitus Logos-Truth-Nature-Eternity are the crucial existential principles for the Being and the "Wise is one thing, to be acquainted with true judgment, how all things are steered through all". The influence of Heraclitus= doctrines on other philosophers was extensive. Heraclitus could be characterized as the first existential philosopher, whose ideas have been revitalized in a more systematic and acceptable way in the field of the modern existential philosophy.

The message of Heraclitus today

What is the value of the message of Heraclitus today in a dynamic world, a world that is continually changing? What is the value of his message in a society oriented for years to a materialistic eudemonism, a prosperity of material dimensions, based on the fragile myth of economic growth. In a society, that deviating from the spiritual values gradually, is depressed and trembling now, facing the forthcoming financial crisis.

What is the message of Heraclitus in a society, where the quality of life is based mostly on financial parameters, on a prosperity based on the flourishing material condi-

tions and not on the meaningful life of the human being, who retaining his interior peace and harmony of the soul, has the ability to give and receive love and compassion, to respect his peers and enjoy the respect of them. In a society, where the education and the scientific knowledge are pathways leading to financial evolution and wealth, almost exclusively, and even to a struggle for financial domination, sacrificing the self-respect and the dignity of the human person, whereas they would have to contribute fundamentally in the amelioration of the human life and in the strengthening of the social stability. In a society, where people losing their jobs and properties live the annihilation of their dignity, in misery and sadness, without vision and perspectives. The message of Heraclitus to our suffering society is that prosperity is not synonymous with income or wealth, since it has primarily vital personal, existential, psychological and social dimensions. Whatever the state of the economy, the prosperity of the society is mainly based on spiritual values, the wisdom, the truth, the illumination of the mind, brightness of the soul, the capacity to self-knowing and sound thinking, the honesty, the unapparent harmony of the interior life. The message of Heraclitus is that fixing the economy is only part of the problem of the contemporary social suffering. Much more important is the purification of the human being from the passions, the ambition and particularly from insolence, since there is greatest need to extinguish insolence from the society than a blazing fire. Heraclitus emphasizes the necessity for interior culture and spiritual elevation, underlining that an excellent man is equivalent of ten thousand.

A prosperous society can only be conceived as one in which people have the capability to live in noble simplicity, in honesty, in purity, in light overpassing the crisis by the strength of the mind. In the suffering human being of our era in the twilight of values of a society in decay, the solemn, concrete and penetrating message of Heraclitus would be referring from the depth of the ages to St. John's unique words that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not comprehend it.

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62. See also Prov.2,10-12: "When wisdom entereth into thine heart and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee to deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh forward things'
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67. In a space-time continuum.

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