

# The Experience Dilemma in Heraclitus' Dialectical Thought

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**Abstract:** Heraclitus' flux doctrine has been criticized for its unilateral emphasis on absolute motion while neglecting relative stability, which leads to a lack of clear positioning and evaluation of experience in his theory of the unity of opposites. This confusion is evident in various descriptions found in the surviving fragments of Heraclitus and has also sparked debates among subsequent scholars researching Heraclitus' theory of knowledge.

**Keywords:** Heraclitus; Unity of Opposites; Experience; Dialectic.

## 1. Introduction

The main objective of this article is to explore the nature of Heraclitus's philosophy and its influence on later generations. Heraclitus undoubtedly addresses epistemological issues. One piece of evidence is that in Ancient Greek, the word γινώσκω (to know) encompasses various meanings such as "knowledge," "understanding," and "perception," which are extensively used in Heraclitus' surviving fragments. In the usage of this word, we can understand that Heraclitus clearly distinguishes the object of knowledge from the subject of knowledge. For instance, Heraclitus states, "Dogs bark at a person whom they do not know (γινώσκω)" (Heraclitus, fr. 90)[1].

Heraclitus demonstrated a remarkable skill in employing metaphors, with "the dog" and "the person it barks" as the two key components of the cognitive process, which parallels the distinction between subject and object in cognitive activities. The purpose behind establishing this duality is clearly driven by the need to clarify and explain the process of cognition. Paradoxically, within Heraclitus' own philosophical framework, this duality carries the risk of obfuscating his theory of experience[2]. The key issue is that the seemingly straightforward dialectical thinking of the unity of opposites, as a principle for general phenomena, undermines the distinction between the knowing subject and the known object, leaving it in a realm of ambiguous absolute contingency. Heraclitus' overall judgment of the world of phenomena can be found in his famous doctrine of "everything flows":

"They do not step into the same rivers. It is other and still other waters that are flowing." (Heraclitus, fr. 20). "The sun is, as H. states, not only new each day, but forever continually new." (Heraclitus, fr. 36).

## 2. Epistemological Challenge Caused by Experience Dilemma

In Heraclitus' perspective, rivers, the sun, and other objects or phenomena are perceived as constantly changing and never ceasing to exist, revealing the essential characteristic of absolute motion in the world. However, in the process of human cognitive activity, these constantly changing things take on the role of cognitive objects. Consequently, even the most familiar objects become completely new entities in the pursuit of genuine understanding, and the notion of

"familiarity" can only be characterized as an illusion or misjudgment[3]. So, are the terms "river" and "sun" merely meaningless symbols? Or, whenever we mention these words, do their meanings urgently require our immediate interpretation? Using terminology from semantics, these difficulties can be expressed in the following question: How does a singular signifier match with polysemous signifieds? In summary, "everything flows" poses significant challenges to Heraclitus' theory of knowledge. It places the knowing subject (who is also a part of the constantly changing world) and the object in a state of absolute contingency and perpetual motion, signifying that any act of cognition can only be a retrospective reflection on past experiences[4]. This suspicious attitude toward sense experience can also be found in the surviving fragments of Heraclitus. The ancient Greek historian Plutarch once stated, "According to Heraclitus, people cannot step twice into the same river, for other waters and yet others go ever flowing on. They go forward and back again." (Heraclitus, fr. 21)[5].

## 3. The Debate and Criticism to Heraclitus's Epistemological Views

### 3.1. Aristotle's Criticism Based on Formal Logic and Concerns about The Conceptualization of Cognitive Objects

When Heraclitus employs the categories of opposition to determine the forms of existence and directions of change in things, the representation of "everything flows" becomes a fierce struggle between the opposing forces of "creation and destruction" (as described in Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's *On Equalizing Things* 《庄子齐物论》). Heraclitus utilizes the term "strife" to signify the intense state of opposition between the two sides, which is universally present. In Fragment 44, he states, "War is both father and king of all [6]." (Heraclitus, fr. 25). Essentially, the categories of opposition merely replace the phenomenon of constant flux with a collection composed of pairs or contradictions that contain differences and varying degrees [7]. Consequently, this gives rise to Heraclitus' unique "counter-intuitive" propositions, such as, "Into the same rivers we step and do not step. We exist and we do not exist." (Heraclitus, fr. 110). This ambivalent viewpoint regarding sensible objects and phenomena attracted criticism from Aristotle:

(1) The doctrine of Heraclitus, that all things are and are not, seems to make everything true. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1012a18-1012a28)

(2) For it is impossible for anyone to believe the same thing to be and not to be, as some think Heraclitus says; (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1005b9-1005b33)

(3) And perhaps if we had questioned Heraclitus himself in this way we might have forced him to confess that opposite statements can never be true of the same subjects. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1062b12-1678).

Although Aristotle employs formal logic, particularly the law of contradiction, as a tool to criticize Heraclitus, his intention is not limited to accusing a specific violation of the law of contradiction. Instead, Aristotle conveys underlying concerns about the potential subversion of knowledge in Heraclitus' theory [8]. This is because the three laws of formal logic play a significant role in addressing the problem of knowledge by maintaining stability or consistency in both the intention and extension of objects, thus preparing for the introduction of concepts. However, Heraclitus' theory of opposition renders attempts to conceptualize objects completely futile. The cognitive objects constantly fluctuate between contraries, always existing in a state of uncertain change. It can be seen that the things in experience, within the fundamental principle of "everything flows," and the derived theory of "strife," remain unconfirmed and inadequately expressed (Chang, 2017).

### **3.2. The Risk of Circular Reasoning Might Existing in Heraclitus's Dialectical Logic of Moving from Opposition to Unity**

However, can we categorize Heraclitus as a skeptic based on this? The answer is negative. Heraclitus acknowledges the existence of a unifying principle of opposites, and things or phenomena can still manifest in a "harmonious" rather than fragmented manner under this principle. This "harmony" is not a mere state where all differences have been eradicated, but a wholeness characterized by "being together while being different." Heraclitus states, "Opposition brings concord. Out of discord comes the

fairest harmony." (Heraclitus, fr. 98). The principle of unity seemingly ensures that things appear as wholes in experience, but upon closer examination, this may not always be the case. The key lies in the argument itself that elevates opposition to unity: "People do not understand how that which is at variance with itself agrees with itself. There is a harmony in the bending back, as in the cases of the bow and the lyre." (Heraclitus, fr. 117).

Both the bow and the seven-stringed lyre were common items in ancient Greece, and both required tightened strings to create the tension of opposition before they could be used. Their situations serve as suitable metaphors for illustrating the principle of unity of opposites. In this analogical reasoning, the establishment of cognitive unity still requires experience accumulation, as in the case of using a bow and a seven-stringed lyre; it is a precondition for this analogy to hold. However, the principle of opposition or strife has already indicated that direct experience of things is in a state of infinite change. Under such assumptions, the concept of a unified whole like the bow and the seven-stringed lyre cannot be established. Thus, due to a lack of careful examination of experience, the dialectical logic that moves from opposition to unity also carries the risk of falling into circular reasoning. This risk extends all the way to Heraclitus' exploration of the

"unity that manifests itself in the structure between the larger cosmic order and the inner personal soul"—the process of logos (Kahn, 1962, p.9) [9].

## **4. Conclusion**

According to the refined dialectical method by Hegel and others, it is not difficult to see that the root of Heraclitus' imbalance in addressing the problem of experience lies in his overemphasis on the constantly changing nature of things and his neglect of relative stability. This causes things and phenomena to lose their potential as stable objects of experience and reduces the knowing subject to a constantly shifting symbol. The problem of experience within Heraclitus' philosophical system always remains ambiguous and obscure. On the one hand, from the perspective of the significance of experience in the cognitive sequence, Heraclitus believes that sense experiences and other fundamental experiences hold foundational importance. They reflect external objects within the soul, giving rise to diverse thought activities based on the transformation of perceivable objects and the soul itself, as if experience is considered as a solid foundation upon which all cognition can be established. On the other hand, from the perspective of knowledge hierarchy, Heraclitus exhibits a distrustful attitude toward sense experiences and other perceptual knowledge. He even views general knowledge based on experience as merely a surface-level understanding of individual phenomena in the complex world, far from reaching the truth of objects. The highest level of knowledge is the unified principle perceived by individuals at the cosmic scale of generation, known as logos, which Heraclitus refers to as "Of those whose discourses I have heard there is not one who attains to the realization that wisdom stands apart from all else" (Heraclitus, fr. 7). Logos displays qualities that surpass general experience. Experience is devalued within Heraclitus' framework of knowledge. This depreciation of experience is intricately entangled with his exaltation of the principle of reason. If knowledge of logos, the highest form, depends on the cognitive capacity of reason, then why use tangible objects like a bow and a seven-stringed lyre as a starting point for inference? This is an unforeseen challenge for Heraclitus.

Nietzsche perhaps recognized the theoretical difficulties of Heraclitus, but he transformed the problem into a choice between the dialectical logic of unity of opposites and the eternal flux, firmly believing that the latter is Heraclitus' original intention and true theoretical contribution (Geng and Fu, 2013). However, this is only Nietzsche's Interpretation. Hindered by the ambiguity and obscurity with which Heraclitus approaches the experience issues, subsequent researchers studying Heraclitus' epistemology have divergent views regarding the inclination of his doctrines. For example, Celer sees Heraclitus as valuing reason and considers him a rationalist (Eduard, 1881, pp.88–93), while Barnes evaluates Heraclitus as not only an empiricist but also a sensationalist (Barnes, 1982, p.416). Guthrie, on the other hand, notices Heraclitus' quest for the transcendent and further suggests that "rather than calling Heraclitus a rationalist, it is more accurate to describe him as a religious prophet." (Guthrie, 1962, p.431). These studies, including the one I am currently writing, may be somewhat anachronistic and lacking in sympathy. However, for original thinkers like Heraclitus, each interpretation and critique can be understood as an extension and reinventing of his ideas, as Martin Heidegger put it:

"...Who Heraclitus entirely depends on... what Heraclitus

has contemplated...” (Heidegger, 1979, p. 5).

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