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On Heraclitus and Knowing God

Though scripture and theology are indispensable in relating with God and one another, all credible religious study is grounded in philosophy. By the term “philosophy,” I mean everything from Platonic thought to all subsequent developments that are reconcilable with Catholicism. I have always loved philosophy, and Plato and his successors played no small role in leading me to the Roman Catholic Church as an adult convert. Yet Plato did not descend from the heavens in a vacuum, but existed within an intellectual context that history refers to as *Pre-Socratic*, or “before Socrates.” Plato himself learned from Socrates, but what can we know about his predecessors? We know they believed in motion and change, that understanding motion and change meant understanding how the world works, and in the *arché* (a fundamental principle that explains why things move and change the way they do). In order to arrive at a more specific and even applicable understanding from within this very broad ideology, we will briefly analyze three points attributed to Heraclitus, arguably the most famous of the Pre-Socratic philosophers.

Nicknamed “the Dark” or “the Riddler,” Heraclitus is known for making obscure pronouncements from which wisdom is to be derived. For example, consider the following metaphorically related statements:¹

“Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow.”

“Even the posset separates if it is not being stirred.”

“Changing, it rests.”

Why did Heraclitus think these were meaningful observations? As to the first quote, while bordered by shores, a river is defined by constant movement. Were it to cease moving, it would not be itself. Dealing with motion and change, a river is a useful metaphor for the philosophical context in which Heraclitus lived, for motion and change were prominent themes in early philosophy. A river metaphor is also cosmological, for it shows that change is inseparable from Heraclitus’ view of how the universe is ordered. As a river continuously flows, change is constant.

The second quote relates to a “posset,” which is a Greek dish consisting of wine, barley, and cheese. Heraclitus’ metaphorical claim that the three elements will separate unless stirred relates to embodied experience. That is, while a river is a naturally occurring phenomenon, wine, barley, and cheese all represent nature as manipulated by humans. These elements are all the more relatable and embodied when we ingest them into our very beings, where for a time they become *us*. Conglomerated into a consumable singularity, a posset is only capable of existing as such due to the constant stirring that maintains its existence *as it is*. Change is essential, for it makes us who we are.

¹ C.D.C. Reeve and Patrick Lee Miller, eds. *Introductory Readings in Ancient Greek and Roman Philosophy* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 21, 29, 28.

The previous examples show his understanding of the universal and human, the macrocosm and microcosm, as inextricably related. As above, so below. They also contextualize his claim that, “Changing, it rests.” This third quote further drives home the point that change is essential to universal order, and must be embraced accordingly. At a human level, we learn to “rest” not in an illusion of unchanging permanence, for there is no such thing as far as Heraclitus is concerned. We remain open and find our peace by wholeheartedly engaging the flow of life.

Though Heraclitus insists on using metaphors instead of speaking plainly, it is because of his belief in the *logos*, or “word.” Logos can generally stand in for arché in that it is a root principal governing everything. For Heraclitus, the logos *is* change, and learning the word, or language, of the universe is the key to understanding it. The great mysteries of the universe cannot always be plainly spoken about, and through meditation and study we learn to interactively dwell in the logos and speak its language by cultivating virtue and loving wisdom as philosophers. For Christians, the most complete understanding of the logos is fulfilled through Jesus Christ, the Logos (Word) of God.

Whether philosophers *per se* or otherwise, Heraclitus understood that we all need philosophy, for it teaches us to ongoingly pursue and be changed by wisdom. We do this by meditating on and applying valid philosophical principles to everything that can be contemplated, from the vastness of interstellar space to our innermost personal depths. For people of faith, however, philosophy bears the most fruit when God gets involved and guides us to theology, gradually perfecting our conscience and teaching us to pray. Yet to attain the highest ideal and become saints, we must combine and allow philosophy and theology to lead into a love of scripture, through which God can be directly encountered in contemplative union

through prayer. Scripture tells us truths about God and how to be in a relationship with him, which is the ultimate goal of philosophy and theology in this context. Animated by the Logos, with philosophy we think, with theology we pray, and with scripture we know God. Changing, we rest.