Heraclitus

All the philosophers we have studied focused on the problem of substance and assumed that nothing could absolutely originate or be lost. Namely, nothing could originate from nothing or turn to nothing. Besides, they also implicate that substance, or substances, could transform into other objects of different qualities. None of them think about change itself. It would be natural that the following philosophers start to think about change itself and put it the centre of their theories. In the next two chapters, we are going to study Heraclitus(535 BC-475 BC) and the Eleatic school, which is represented by Parmenides. In their theories, change is explicit and is speculated as an important problem. The former, holds the view that all things are in a state of ceaseless change, while the latter, on the contrary, insists that change is impossible.

**Fire and Universal Flux**

To emphasize the importance of change, Heraclitus chooses the most mobile element he knows, fire, as the first principle of objects. Fire is undergoing continual qualitative transformation. From it all things originate and to it all things return:

*All things are exchanged for fire, and fire for all things; as wares are exchanged for gold and gold for wares.*

Things seem to be permanent because what they lose in one way they gain in another. Or in other words, things reach a balance between loss and gain, and we do not perceive such change, so things seem to be permanent.

**Opposites and Their Union**

Everything is changing into its opposite and everything, therefore, is a union of opposite qualities. Such opposites result in harmony of objects. So harmony is the union of opposites. Ultimately, every opposition in objects will be reconciled. Without oppositions, everything will not exist and return to fire, in which oppositions are reproduced. Thus, everything originates again.

The two aspects of opposite are the same, for one could transform into another. They are the same in this sense. Hot and cold, justice and injustice, the long and the short, the light and the dark, the good and the bad, life and death, are essencially the same. So, all things are good, fair and just as they ought to be, because they are in harmony resulted from the oppositions in them, also because all the opposite qualities in them are the same and thus, are equally good. We, human, mistakenly suppose some to be just and others unjust, or some are better than others.

Here we could have a glance at the largeness of Heraclitus’ mind and the depth of his thought. He is thinking as one part of the whole universe and have surpassed the boundary of human. Some people may have thought about similar ideas but seldom of them dare to speak them out, and some may even deny themselves. It takes amazing width and depth of thought and insight to escape from the inherent narrowness of human and see the big picture. It takes great courage and toughness to accept such views without self-denying, speak them out and stand the misunderstanding, criticizing and ridicule of others. We define that some things are good while others are bad mainly because, in most cases, we only think about ourselves: those that are good for ourselves are defined as good and those that are bad for ourselves are defined as bad. But in fact, they are just what they ought to be and they are all good. Some insects may be classified as pests simply because they eat crops we grow and others may be called “friends of uncle farmers” simply because they eat pests. But they are just insects. Without the consideration of human’s own profits, like agriculture or the problem of beauty(some may find aphids ugly while ladybirds are of nice appearance in beautiful red), what could make aphids worse than ladybirds, or make ladybirds better than aphids? Nothing. They are all parts of the universe and play different, but both important roles in the ecosystem. We simply think about our own profit. I have no interest in criticizing such narrowness and I do not think it is of low grade. Of course the survival of ourselves is important and it is great to make contributions that may benefit all human beings. Or in other words, I do not deny the importance of value. It is important to tell right from wrong, good from bad, just from injust, but this importance is limited to human.

**The Law of Reason**

Change is not haphazard, but in accordance with “fixed measure”. Namely, it is governed by law:

*This is one order of things neither any one of the gods nor of men has made, but it always is, was, and ever shall be, an ever-living fire, kindling according to fixed measure and extinguished according to fixed measure.*

In the midst of all change, it is the only thing that persists, the law that underlies all movement, change and opposition. It is the rational reason in things, the *logos*. It is something higher than the objective world and plays a role of model to everything. It is the essencial order followed by all change. We cannot make sure that whether the *logos* of Heraclitus is impersonal rationality or personal intelligence. The following scholars interpreted it in both two ways and the latter seemed to be more of influence.

**Psychology and Ethics**

The controlling element in a man is the soul, which is composed of fire. So the driest and warmest soul is the best. The soul is akin to divine reasoning. So man must subordinate himself to the universal reason. To be ethical is to live a rational life, to obey the dictates of reason. Morality means respect for law, self-discipline and control of the passions. To be moral is to govern oneself by rational principles. Sense knowledge is inferior to reason. Perception does not reveal to us the hidden truth, which is discernible to reason.

**Heraclitus and Taoism**

Heraclitus’ theories seems to be similar with Taoists’, by which I mean the thoughts of Lao-tzu and Zhuang Zhou. Taoism is misunderstood to a great extend after Qin dynasty and the rise of the religious form of Taoism provides evidence for it. The development of Taoism in different dynasties would be an interesting topic, but it is not the point here. In order to make it clear, the word “Taoism” here is limited to the doctrines of Lao-tzu and Zhuang Zhou, and their pupils of latter times are not included.

The ideas of Taoists and Heraclitus are similar in some aspects. They agree that things of the objective world are always in a ceaseless of change. Similar expressions about oppositions could be found in both Heraclitus’ works and the doctrines of Taoism, although the former is more explicated while the latter is more implicated. And parallels could be drawn between the *logos* of Heraclitus and the *Tao* of Taoists, for they are all be described as the law of all change.

However, it shall be emphasized that the two systems of philosophy are essencially different even though they share similarity in some aspects. An analogy may help make it clear. The two systems are like two trees with leaves and branches of similar shape, colour and so on, but such similarities have no influence on the fact that the two trees are from different species. Heraclitus essencially focuses on the problem of universe and agrees with the value of knowledge. Thus, his attitude to the universe is to know it, to learn how the universe runs, to conquer the world. However, in Taoism, the value of knowledge is denied. Thus, Taoists’ attitude to the universe is to surpass it, to avoid being bound by objects, to enjoy the running of the universe. In conclusion, Heraclitus represents the spirit of science, while Taoists represent the spirit of art.