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Life as The Exercise of Will in Greek Philosophy

One may consider Metaphysics to be the highest of all philosophies in various regards, from a teleological view to a simpler sense of importance. Many philosophers who are given to such a view tend to hold a rather dismissive attitude towards anything that is not in-being, including the philosophy of subjects of becoming. The deeper implications of their approach to philosophy with a distinct appreciation of “first-philosophy” are extensive and worth studying, and it is worth further note that such implications can reveal the perceived relationship between the bodily world and that of a higher one, or between matter and spirit, for such philosophers as well as anyone who may inquire into this study. What we can most generally see is a view of life as the thriving of a divine soul as a virtue in itself within the Greek philosophical tradition most formalized by Plato. The Socratic must uphold that material life is necessary and not to be discarded, and the general view of life must be of one in which the soul endures as an end in itself.

Greek philosophy after Socrates generally developed into something more proto-rationalistic. However, there were contemporaries given to a more material view respecting of the world of becoming, and Plato himself seemed to be equally influenced by the likes of Heraclitus as well as Parmenides. Of course, we couldn’t fully comprehend the value of the human experience without going beyond one tradition. It would be wise to then understand the

world through the lens of those before Socrates, and compare them to non-western philosophical traditions.

A natural place to begin in understanding the dynamic between being and becoming would be through the aphorisms of Heraclitus. When we reflect upon the Heraclitean view of a world as becoming, we can begin to analyze the ethical beliefs Heraclitus seemed to hold. A degree of familiarity gives an impression of an anti-hedonist, who holds a belief in happiness as something beyond an emotional evocation of pleasure. The fourth aphorism (Hyland 160) speaks most revealingly as such: “If happiness lay in bodily pleasures, we would call oxen happy when they find vetch to eat.” There is little room for multiple interpretations here. Heraclitus distinctly outlines a belief that happiness is beyond simple pleasures felt by our biology, for if we were happy when such pleasures were satisfied, happiness would begin and end at something as simple as a nice meal or a pleasurable walk on a cool evening. This aphorism also betrays a belief in something greater, or beyond us and beyond the purely physical world. For if happiness exists and is something we can make distinct, is it something attainable, and if so how, and by what faculty of us is it grasped?

The answer to Heraclitus’ cause of happiness is in his belief of the universe as fire. This can be seen in aphorisms sixty-four and twenty-four. The former quite literally states that the universe is steered by fire (Hyland 165) and the latter a mention of gods (divinity) honoring the dead of war (Hyland 162). In regard to the death that takes place in war, it is not an implicit glorification of war (though this may be found in other aphorisms), but rather an implicit glorification of the personal act of a soldier. Heraclitus sees value in the hero’s death, and the elemental fire of a personal conflict and the intimacy of the death following further elucidates the importance of fire – it is not merely an abstract quality that drives the universe and manifests

itself in all things, but it is something deeply personal and strikes towards our core in our own purpose. Life for Heraclitus is meant to be lived with fire, to be lived as an ever-striving and thriving being of fire that seeks to exert its will upon the world whenever appropriate, and this fiery will may be precisely what Heraclitus would deem to give us happiness through its higher purpose.

The concept of the classical elements served as a sort of proto-metaphysical understanding of the world as philosophers departed from a sense of the universe "as the universe" and into understanding the world as a composite whole, where to truly have knowledge of it we must know its parts. This would later be formalized by Aristotle in his theory of causes, but it can be recognized earlier, and according to Paul Cheshire in The Wordsworth Circle, "the system as a whole gave a unified coherent view of the world at the center of a universe created for the benefit of man" (Cheshire 2), in reference to the elemental system originally determined by Empedocles. Cheshire naturally describes the literary qualities of the elements in this way, but also highlights that this emotional and seemingly illogical approach is the world in which such elemental philosophies were created. It was not necessarily superstition, but rather an approach to life alien to the post-enlightenment developments that demanded "a disinterested and objective experiment" over something impassioned by the supposed superstitions of classical elements. Even during the enlightenment, the experiments carried out to prove occult practices were done for the observation alone rather than expecting anything to be proven or disproven, because the experimentalists (such as Isaac Newton) thought of it as a matter of intrinsically worthwhile speculation (Monod, 105). Eventually, the intrinsic value of speculation and knowledge for its own sake died and in came the purely empirical age of the post-enlightenment of which we can still feel the effects of today. However, this sentiment

towards the occult just mentioned mirrors that of the classical elements in the time of their formulation, for Empedocles may have started in a direction towards the natural sciences by proving air to be distinct from water by leaving an inverted bucket floating with a pocket of air, the system would ultimately be understood as spiritual elements of which the modern concept of "matter" could not apply, and the pursuit would become a quasi-religious exercise worthwhile as an end towards the highest principles.

The elements came to be descriptions of the basest sensible qualities that could be seen in all things. Aristotle's outline of the elements in *On Generation and Corruption* are an example of this, with fire being an example where it is both hot and dry. However, the essence of what an element is remained something inherently unknowable and played a crucial role in metaphysical inquiries into understanding all that is as what it is. Thought is not something sensible, but is it of one particular element and can it be understood as its composites? If we remain in the purely sensible world for too long, such an inquiry can become confusing. It is best, rather, to understand the elements as symbolic of higher notions.

Symbols are powerful and serve the same function as any other aspect of language. Letters and words are symbols that represent actions and ideas, or anything else humans may impart on them. When elements are named and described with qualities such as "chaos", "vigor", or "cold" the physical manifestation of these ideas bare little meaning in their relationship to what is being symbolized by an element. Rather they serve as a language to speak of realities beyond anything knowable through experience, they speak in artistic terms and are taught to us by poetry and music because it is all that can know it. Plato was noted saying in the *Republic* that arts like music could penetrate the inmost soul (Republic 3.401d) and a parallel to Chinese philosophy can be found in the namelessness of Daoism. Putting way-making into words

removes the Dao from the eventful nature of life (Ames 77) A more contemporary expression of this notion can be found in Nietzsche, for in *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense* he describes man alone only holding his truth while his language holds only the simplest representation of it (Carman 24), language and symbol are essentially an illusion of an illusion forming a sequence of distortion upon whatever "truth" could be. One may speak of the crude necessity of symbol and that it allows for the discussion of truth and a possible starting position for the soul or truth-finding faculty of the human, like that of Parmenides speaking with deception to lead us to truth.

A stricter definition of symbolism by Carl Jung may be more accurate to what the Greeks could have considered the elements. In *Man and His Symbols* Jung differentiates symbolism from signs: "A symbol is a term, name, or picture that may be familiar in daily life yet possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious meaning. It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us." (Jung 3) and the significance of such symbols are further explained in the rest of the book, notably with the unconscious aspects of our perception of reality where our minds offload real perception to the mind for processing (Jung, 4). Indeed, the power of symbolism to the human mind can manifest itself in disorders that physically manifest themselves as an expression of our unconscious (Jung 9). In this sense, the elements, like that of fire, may have been something of far greater complexity than a superstition based upon a misconception of physics.

More culturally known are all the connotations attributed to fire. Fire is the sun and all of its powers of creation, Yahweh manifested himself as fire – either as lightning with Moses on the mount, a pillar of Fire in the Tabernacle, or a burning bush. Zeus was a god of thunder and lightning, and his powers were foremost. Fire is associated with purification (where fire was purity itself), the hospitality of the hearth, and death or destruction (Ad de Vries, 187). It leaves

little doubt then that to many cultures, including those formulating the classical elements, saw fire as a creative and good force, one of righteous fury and willful power.

Parmenides describes reality as a subset of being (My week 4 essay, page 4), meaning that if we derive a sense of will from reality, it is going to be something muted and less of a necessity in our action. It follows then that Parmenides may recognize the importance of the world, but all that needs to be already is, and so the necessity of constantly actualizing our will and exerting our influence upon the world is not there. While the potential of change is within us and we lay in wait of a passionate response to fight against the world, it is not something we have to do – and it may indeed reflect something like an ascetic approach to life, like that of a Christian who may believe that all are saved regardless of their sins – yet still choose to live an ascetic life for God while others receive the same benefit of salvation while living a life of bodily pleasures. Parmenides' approach may have been that while we can live towards a good end that is higher than other ways of living, it does not carry a sense of necessity by virtue of the underlying nature of reality.

To say that Heraclitus and those of a similar fire-philosophy saw an exertion of will and the crafting of a higher world from the ashes of one lower will always border on speculation, for obscurity is inherent to virtually all philosophers before the time of Plato, but further analysis of his predecessors reveals an influence of such thinking. It is evident that other Greeks did not share this view, like those of the Epicureans and their avoidance for the maximalization of pleasure. Some disagreement over the importance of any aspect of "fire" could be disputed, but the influence on the primary Socratic philosophers can still be discussed, and the world in which more "passive" philosophers lived still lived in the same symbolic sphere of influence.

Notable above all, the core concept to be understood is the understanding of composites, and this arose from the initial theories of the universe as one element. Heraclitus considered such an element to be fire, and all that is associated with fire brings us to an understanding of the human function as a willful spirit living in spite of its nature, transcending itself for a super-nature. This concept of the true human function being an act of transcending the world through change and will in spite of adversity forms the core of Greek thought that led to the likes of Socrates.

Socrates is mostly known from Plato, but we can still understand his attitude towards life through reasonable assumption of whether his words in some dialogues were his own. Despite having written the Phaedo, Plato evidently was not there when the events took place, which would be an odd thing to lie about. This provides us with additional sources of what Socrates' true opinions may have been without the filter of Plato. If we assume the Phaedo to be a genuine account of Socrates' beliefs, which would naturally align with the tendency to uphold truth above all else amongst him and his followers, it is clear that Socrates thought of material life as more than just a means to an end where life remained like a training ground for the afterlife, but rather that life was meant to be lived for its own sake even if it was inferior to the realm of truth.

Socrates considered mastering the body to be a divine thing (Phaedo 94e) and the education during life serves as the beginning of the journey in the afterlife (Phaedo 107d) which would adequately explain Socrates' position on why one must adhere to a more ascetic life that pursues truth and eternality over what is only becoming in this life. However, certain concessions were made by Socrates and other philosophers of his time to this life in spite of this training for death – for instance, Socrates was a father and seemingly a natalist, something which may not necessarily follow from a belief that life is meant to be lived in preparation for dying and death

as mentioned in 64a. Rather, such training was intrinsically worthwhile in itself because it served as a connection to divinity on this earth through its symbolic force. Such thinking can be found in a preference for some forms over others, and as seen with Plato later on – the form of the Good and all things which manifest it are good in themselves, and so are the pursuits of fostering them.

It is certainly natural for the body to die, but not the soul (Phaedo 80b) and if we consider that the soul is what grants us faculties of reason and perception (consider here the process of recollection described in the Meno) then we can know that every activity of the soul on earth is itself a divine act. Every experience and every action greatly alters the soul by virtue of the nature of perception and allows the soul to exercise itself. This lends itself to theories of philosophy as the highest of all pursuits for it is the closest to a true form, or something with less material influence. Thought without any empirical distortions would then be the highest of all pursuits for it is the most divine and pure activity of the soul; rivaled only by such ideas like thought thinking of itself or Aristotle's first-mover.

David Krell of DePaul University mentions how Nietzsche's task was to overcome Christian-Platonism and its life-denying philosophy (Krell 2). Krell goes on to outline three different readings of the Phaedo, and the third bears the most interest to our study. Socrates may have meant that the practice for death truly signified life as recuperation, philosophy as convalescence (Krell 16). Krell mentions that Plato wrote of a man who greatly enjoyed a life of virility and health, happiness and admiration. Socrates ended his life through myth and art, and ultimately died in celebration of fellowship with others (Krell 18). A literal reading of the Phaedo may bring one to a hatred of life, but the life of Socrates would disagree with such interpretations and leaves us knowing life was more than what it seemed; life was the symbolic

force of fire and change, a medium for our souls to express themselves and fulfill their most divine qualities. While death signaled the end of the corruption of the soul, it merely served as a source of fulfilment, not to mean that life was truly a disease of which intrinsic worth could not be found.

Such an approach of life as a necessary and worthy medium for the practice of our nature can be found in the writings of Aristotle. His treatment of the elements signifies a departure from the more unified elemental theories of his predecessors with a focus on their physical qualities and the distinction of physics and metaphysics, but the general life approach remains strikingly similar. Aristotle believes that if the function of man is an activity of soul which follows a rational principle, human good is an activity of the soul in accordance with the best and most complete virtue (Ethics 1098a). In a section about the happiness we have in this life, Aristotle confirms that no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities (Ethics 1100b) describing happiness as a constant thing beyond death. It is then that activities are what give life its character, and no happy man can become miserable for he will never commit actions that deprive him of happiness like those of hate (Ethics 1101a). Aristotle believes that virtue makes you a good function of yourself and as a human being. Life is a continuous striving towards happiness and the highest principles and is something that is worthwhile for us to do in spite of the seemingly useless tool of our material lives as an end for death.

A further subject of research could be of Plotinus and the culmination of all of Socratic thought in regard to the purpose of life. Most important would be a study of *The Enneads* and *On Free Will and The Will of The One* to determine what degree of necessity life holds in reverence to the One. Even without significant depth into Plotinus, the western tradition of philosophy inherited from the Greeks is doubtlessly rooted in a value of life that is due to the will

of mankind as its own virtue, for the world may be of an inherent underlying principle of such will.

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