

C. Ancient Philosophy; 4<sup>th</sup> Student Essay

Abazie Enyinna

Write an imaginary dialogue between Empedocles and Heraclitus on the physical and logical problems of change.

Empedocles: Good day dear sir, I hope I am not interrupting.

Heraclitus: Not at all my good man.

Empedocles: It's just that I have always seen you sitting on this log of decaying wood every evening beside this river. Also you always have this parchment and pen with you, and you are always writing. May I enquire the nature of the writing which has your mind completely engaged?

Heraclitus: I am reflecting on the nature of change.

Empedocles: I too in recent times have been actively engaged in thinking about such matters. Can you please tell me some of the things you have been thinking about?

Heraclitus: Okay. What do you see before us?

Empedocles: A river.

Heraclitus: Yes, but the river flows. If I were to be a bird very high up in the sky, the waters of the river would look stationary to me. Likewise the senses are too feeble, they do not see things as they are and thereby trick us into thinking that some things do not move. But in reality all things flow. All things are in constant flux or change. Again consider this river before us. No man can ever step twice into this river. For the second time he tried new waters would have flowed from upstream. Not only that, the banks and the river bed would have changed as well due to constant erosion. Since the river is the water, the bed and the banks, it follows it is not the same river he stepped into the first time. Hence the popular saying "the only constant thing in life is change" is true in its absolute sense for all things are like the river.

Empedocles: You have given me much food for thought. I do agree that change is possible. I also agree that things change, but where I have a problem is when you say "all things are in constant flux or change." Have you considered the possibility that there are some things which do not change? Let us continue with your analogy of the river. New waters flow in and flow out, but does the water in itself change? Is there at any time the river is flowing with something that is not water?

Heraclitus: No, there isn't a time in which the river is flowing with something that is not water.

Empedocles: Since you agree that the water does not change, I don't think it's much of a leap to agree that there are some things that do not change. Going further, we can say those things that do not

change are 'roots' or 'elements.' These remain constant while everything else is derivative by virtue of mixing these elements in various proportions and/or combinations. These fundamental elements are earth, air, fire and water. So what we see as change is just the mixing or the reversal of the immixture of these elements. Hence nothing is really created or destroyed, what we have are just transformations.

Heraclitus: Interesting. Now my question is why four 'elements', why not just one element? Also why must there be an underlying substance that undergoes mixing or combination? Furthermore why even posit transformations? Who's to say that there is not a coming to be and ceasing to be of elements or the birth and death of these elements?

Empedocles: Why four elements instead of one? That's because reality is multifaceted. How can one hope to explain the plethora of experiences and objects based on one single underlying substance? Such an explanation would hardly do justice to what we commonly experience. As an illustration, think of the artist who lives down the street. He produces beautiful paintings containing a wide range of colors. But on his pallet he starts with three colors, red, blue and green, and by mixing generates different types of colors. If he had just one color it wouldn't be possible for him to generate various types of colors. Likewise if you start with one single substance, you'll end with one substance and not more than one. Hence one underlying substance is not sufficient to account for our phenomenological experiences. As to why there must be an underlying substance that is simply because nothing can come from nothing or be destroyed into nothing. Since that's the case there must always be something. But this something cannot be a single entity for reasons I have already mentioned. So we have our four elements, each eternal and unchanging.

Heraclitus: You say that nothing can come from nothing or be destroyed into nothing. But 'change' is not 'nothing' for there is no time at which nothing is being changed, change always involves something or some things. But more importantly change is continuous and without end. There is no time at which the something is not changing. You seem to think that something is first static, then it is acted upon and a change occurs. This is not the case for there is no time in which something is not being changed; hence there can be no nothing. I do agree there is something which does not change, but that thing is the law of change. Now as long as this law exists there is no need to posit underlying substances. For just as in the instance of river, the images derived via our senses do not relate to any particular object. For what makes up the river is always changing. Likewise the objects that one perceives are made up of momentary events, fluxes on a microscopic scale which are brief and characterized by the power of self-determination. So there needn't be any elements or underlying substances. Even if for the sake of argument I accept there are primary elements, how are we to understand how they make up substances? Since you say they are eternal and unchanging then how do they combine to form compounds or new substances? In the coming to be of a new substance or compound is there not a change in which the constituent elements undergo? I think there has to be if not what we would have is an aggregation of eternal unchanging things and not a compound. Furthermore, change also has to do with motion. If your elements are unchanging this also means they do not move. But if they do not move how do they combine?

Empedocles: They do not move on their own or have the power of motion but are moved. These elements are moved by two forces. The first is love which is a force of combination or attraction and strife, a force of repulsion or separation. These two forces are in eternal conflict and cause the combination or separation of these elements at different times.

Heraclitus: Why are these two forces in eternal conflict? Why does one not get the upper hand and end the eternal succession? On your view might it not be better to suggest that there is a law to which love and strife conforms to or is governed by? For that would make the action of these forces intelligible. If that is the case, we are back to positing a law as an explanation for the changes we see. So you see, the concept of the law of change is inescapable. Thank you for your time, but I am running late, can we continue tomorrow?

Empedocles: No problem, I will be here tomorrow so we can continue our discussion.