

CHANGING PHILOSOPHIES IN A CHANGING WORLD: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF HERACLITUS AND MARX ON THE IDEA OF CHANGE

Adebayo A. Ogungbure
Department of Philosophy,
University of Ibadan,
Nigeria
philosopher.bayo@yahoo.com

*To understand an age or a nation, we must
understand its philosophy...the
circumstances of men's lives do much to
determine their philosophy...*

*Bertrand Russell,
1946.*

Abstract

Every philosophy is a product of an age and every age has its own philosophies which oftentimes spring forth from prevalent existential conditions. Heraclitus and Karl Marx are two philosophers that existed in different periods of philosophic history; but the ideas they expressed on the notion of change, have some kind of connection and distinction which is of interest to us in this paper. The importance of this discourse is that it shows the interconnectedness between these philosophers as an indication of the fact of historic development of ideas in philosophy or history of philosophy. It also shows that philosophy is not just a mere amassing of opinions, narration of isolated items of reflection that have no connection whatsoever. Thus, in this discourse, we shall attempt a comparative analysis of the philosophies of Heraclitus and Karl Marx showing their areas of convergence and divergence, with particular emphasis on their reflections on the notion of change. Following from this preoccupation, this paper concludes that the notion of change which underlies the philosophies of these two thinkers is very important to the history of philosophy because it ensures the development of ideas from one epoch to another.

Introduction

Through time, the philosophies of philosophers have continued to change depending on the inspiration propelling their speculation and the ideas which occupied their thoughts. The interesting thing about this development is that it opens door for the development of the history of ideas. Ideas are the mental projections of the forces that underlie man's mental apprehension of the universe and shape the reality of history. The pattern of ideas, like the pattern of various forces at work in history, is therefore constantly changing, passing from contrasts to identity, from identity to contrasts, like sand sieved by the sea. The changes on the plane of ideas are more of a question of emphasis according to historical time than a question of absolute transformations and total disappearances. Ideas, in fact, never disappear completely; they follow the patterns of nature, and like shells woven by years of silent life, their mysterious beauty emerges under a new shape and challenges the mind to probe depths which in turn opens new vistas of thinking (Chiari, 1975:9). Such is the beauty of the development of the history of philosophy.

In this regard, a good understanding of the history of western philosophy would reveal how diverse the preoccupations of philosophers were depending on what they consider as paramount to their subject of investigation. For instance, in the ancient period, philosophers concerned themselves with the cosmos in an attempt to understand nature and determine the primary stuff upon which the universe was made. These efforts were geared towards giving a reasoned explanation on the observable features of the universe. So their reflection on inanimate nature led them to postulate various materials like fire, air, and water, as the basic constituent of nature. The early Greek philosophers were struck by two factors as they observed the universe; that things were changing from one form to another and in the midst of

such changes; there is a basic unity in this plurality of things. While in the Socratic period, the concentration of philosophical speculation moved away from inanimate nature to human nature and the conditions of man within the natural world. There are also diverse views among the philosophers in this period as to how human nature is supposed to be conceived. The concerns in philosophy today are as diverse as it was in the past; philosophers worry about a lot of issues across broad lines of human endeavour in so far as it concerns ultimate reality. What this goes to show is the fact that change in the world has a way of positively affecting the flourishing of philosophical debates.

Changing Philosophies in a Changing World: Its relevance to the Study of History of Philosophy

It is often said that the only thing that is constant in life is change itself. Well, we can also say that the only thing that is constant in philosophy is change. Change is the very actor upon which philosophical ideas thrive. Philosophy changes as the world changes; since “change is the anchor on which any development can be propelled, hence, philosophical developments are the consequences of changes in social, historical, culture and even scientific facts” (Fadahunsi, 2002:164). The preoccupation of philosophers is as diverse as their inspiration, influences, persuasion, and intentions. There’s no doubt that philosophy, especially in the western tradition, has been greatly influenced by change both environmental, socio-economic, psychological and existential factors in the quest to understand ultimate reality has had a bearing on the changing philosophies that is evident in the history of philosophy. As the world changes, it opens up the need for philosophies that would suit its purpose and this is what gives birth to changing philosophies in the

history of philosophy. The history of philosophy is simply a documentation of the historic development of philosophical ideas which are in most cases occasioned by the prevalent existential conditions upon which the ideas were conceived and formulated.

The idea of change is relevant to study of the history of philosophy because it keeps those interested in philosophy, students, teachers and researchers abreast of past philosophies and how they are somewhat related to present discussions in philosophy. Philosophers have been talking about their predecessors since Plato and Aristotle. The history of philosophy as a sub discipline of philosophy has been recognized since the eighteenth century, when subdivisions beyond the traditional logic, metaphysics, natural philosophy and moral philosophy became generally established (Hatfield, 2011). Now, philosophers, students of philosophy and researchers in philosophy have further propagated the discipline to include other areas to be studied like axiology, process philosophy (philosophy of change), applied ethical thinking, environmental philosophy and so on. The relevance of studying the history of philosophy is stressed by Gisela Striker in the *Harvard Review of Philosophy* as a necessary part of the development of a student's philosophical skills and knowledge which is why students are required to take a few courses in the history of their chosen field-say a class on Plato or Aristotle, Rationalism or Empiricism, Kant or German Idealism (Striker, 1999:15). This type of study makes one fully appreciate the fact that philosophy continues to change inasmuch as change persists in the universe and the world continues to evolve. In addition to this, the idea of changing philosophies in a changing world attests to the fact that philosophy is society-oriented, contrary to the criticisms erroneously leveled against philosophy as utopian in nature.

Factually speaking, the history of philosophy offers a storehouse of information about how people and societies have responded to certain historical events through ideological projections. This is the import of our opening quote by Russell which holds that it is impossible to understand a society without fully understanding its motivating philosophies. From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that philosophy is not a stagnant or rigid field of inquiry; it is reflexive, self-critical and serves as a mirror of nature and society. With this explication, we shall proceed to underscore the notion of change in the ideological framework of the philosophers of interest to us here. Our considerations shall be focused at examining the notion of change as it was conceived in the rise of Greek civilization and the different way it was interpreted in the currents of thought in the nineteenth century in the history of Western philosophy.

Heraclitus and the Idea of Change

Heraclitus, an Ionian from the city of Ephesus who lived around 500BC, was popularly known for his view that change is the law of nature. The thought of Heraclitus of Ephesus is still often summarized as “all things are flowing”, by which it is inferred that everything is in constant change. For Heraclitus, everything is moving and everything stays still, and likening things to the flow just like a river, he says that you could not step twice into the same river (Kirk, 1951:350). In his philosophical speculation, Heraclitus stressed the fact that in nature there is the recurrent flux of all things such that reality consists of a unity that subsists in apparent opposites. That is, just as the water in a river is ceaselessly changing so are all things in the state of flux. It follows from this that nothing can be said to be permanent in this world, nothing is constant or stable, and everything is always in the process of change. It is however, important to note that Heraclitus regarded “fire” as the fundamental

substance; everything like flame in a fire is born by the death of something else. Mortals are immortals, and immortals are mortals, the one living the other's death and dying the other's life.

Heraclitus of Ephesus made fire arche (substance) and out of fire they produce existing things by thickening and thinning, and resolve them into fire again, on the assumption that fire is the one underlying physics; for Heraclitus says that all things are an exchange for fire (Guthrie, 1962:432).

In fact, Heraclitus considers the world itself as an everlasting fire, kindled in measures going in and in measures going out, it is neither made by man nor the gods. It is, and ever shall be an everlasting fire. Fire to him suggests a symbol of the nature of the universe. For Heraclitus, nature exists in two forms: everything is born of strife, and everything is in constant flux or change. This is because fire lives by consuming and constantly changing its material (Onigbinde, 1999:265).

He further maintained that there is unity in the world, but it is a unity formed by the combination of opposites. All things come out of the one, and the one out of all things, but the many have less reality than the one, which is God (Russell, 1996:49). At the apex of Heraclitus' metaphysical speculation is the idea of God who he considered as the ultimate reality from which everything subsists. Heraclitus stated that all are 'the same' by virtue of the fact that they are all modifications of fire. On this interpretation, the identity of opposites is to be closely connected with, and, in fact, explained by, Heraclitus' cosmological doctrine of fire. Related to this is the interpretation of the identity of opposites in terms of the doctrine of flux. Everything is both itself and its opposite because all things are in constant flux (Emyln-Jones, 1976: 92). Central to Heraclitus' notion of change is the idea of the *logos*. Heraclitus holds a firm belief in the *logos* which he describes as that which determines the

course of everything that comes to pass. He emphasized the *logos* as that which orders all things and can be likened to human thought, on the one hand which is the intuitive power behind ingenious creativity and as a governing principle of the universe in another sense. To Heraclitus;

The material aspect of the *logos* is fire. It follows that divine reason at its purest is hot and dry. Though not a mere symbol for an abstraction, 'fire' represents for Heraclitus the highest and purest form of matter, the vehicle for soul and mind, or rather soul and mind themselves, which in a more advanced thinker would be distinguished from any matter whatsoever (Guthrie, 1962).

This distinction of the *logos* is according to Heraclitus premised on the division between reason and the senses; that is, the senses are unreliable in discovering the true essences of the *logos* but it is through reason that one can grasp the real existence of the *logos*. In this regard, Heraclitus could be said to be the first philosopher to undermine the senses as a guide to the truth of the external world. It is through this idea of the *logos* that he attempted to substantiate his claim that all things happen by strife and necessity.

Heraclitus also emphasized his notion of change by putting forward the doctrine of harmony of opposites. His doctrine of harmony of opposites has three aspects; this includes the claim that everything is made of opposites and therefore subject to internal tension, the identity of opposites, and war as a struggle, tension which is a kind of force embedded in creative and ruling force. For Heraclitus, opposites live together in interactive continuity and harmony of these opposites is an attainment of opposite tension like it is in a bow and an arrow. For instance, if one takes a look at a stringed bow lying on the ground or leaning against a wall, no movement is visible. To the eyes it appears as a static object, completely at rest. But

in fact a continuous tug of war is going on within it as will become evident if the string is not strong enough, or is allowed to rust or perish. The bow will immediately take advantage, snap and leap to straighten itself, thus showing that each had been putting forth effort all the time. The doctrine of opposites also includes the notion of strife and war. War is common because the *logos* that is law of becoming is a law of strife, of simultaneous opposite tensions. For Heraclitus, life is an ideal struggle “war” which is the father of all justice. That strife is universal follows from the assumption that whatsoever exists is in change with the added assumption that all change is strife. It follows then that the doctrine of continuous change of physical changes noticed in nature are linked with that of the identity of opposites. Essentially, for Heraclitus, everything is in continuous motion and change. One of his most famous saying is: “you cannot step into the same river twice” (Reginald, 1966: 43). Having discussed Heraclitus notion of change, we shall now proceed to examine Karl Marx’s notion of change.

Karl Marx and the Idea of Change

Karl Marx’s notion of change is more sophisticated than that of Heraclitus because it presents an elaborate system of the material conditions of man and the stages of development of history. Central to Marxist idea of change is the concept of dialectics or dialectical materialism. For Marx, change means the emergence of new structures, novel forms. What causes change is simply the quantitative alteration of things, which leads to something qualitatively new. It does not mean the same thing as mere growth. For instance, a tree trunk may be processed to make writing paper. This type of change is thought to permeate all facets of life within a social framework. In fact, Marx thought that history displays this kind of change by which certain quantitative elements in the economic order finally force a qualitative change in the

arrangements of the society. This is the process that has moved history from the primitive communal to the slave, and in turn to the feudal and capitalist epochs (Stumpf, 1994:408). He used this distinction between qualitative and quantitative change to discuss the state of the economic order and the conditions of man within the society.

The core of Marxist thought consists in the analysis of three basic elements: the major epochs of history, the causal power of the material order, and the source and role of ideas. He used his dialectics to explain the epochs of history. In which the existence of classes is only bound up with particular historic phases in the development of production. In short, Marx believes that materialism is an economic law of motion which elicits change in the society.

Materialism meant to Marx that the world as we see it is all that there is, that the materialist outlook on the world is simply the conception of nature as it is, without any reservations. Moreover, with Engels he agreed that all of nature, from the smallest thing to the biggest, from a grain of sand to the sun, to man, is in a ceaseless state of movement and change. History is the process of change from one epoch to another in accordance with the rigorous and inexorable laws of historical motion (Stumpf, 1986:228).

To him, history consists of five epochs in which society moves from one stage to another in a gradual fashion: from the primitive communal, to the slave, the feudal, the capitalist, and the socialist and communist phases. The essence of Marx's interpretation of the epochs is such that he can underscore the idea of motion that drives history and to initiate a framework with which he could explain the past and predict the future.

There is also the idea of class struggle or clash of opposites in Marxist philosophy because history for Marx was to be seen as a movement caused by conflicts in the material order and the struggle between classes within various strata of the society. For instance, within the society, there are continuous struggles between the *haves* and the *have-nots* and between the bourgeois and the proletariat.

The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. They have nothing of their own to secure and fortify; their mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual property (Marx, 1846:5).

He also predicted that when inner contradictions between the classes were resolved, the principle cause of movement and change would disappear, a classless society would emerge where all the forces and interests would be in perfect balance, and this equilibrium would be perpetual. Marx thought that history displays this kind of change by which certain quantitative elements in the economic order finally force a qualitative change in the arrangements of the society. This is the process that has moved history from the primitive communal slave situation to the feudal and capitalist epochs. Indeed, Marx's prediction that the capitalist order would fall was based on this notion that changes in the quantitative factors in capitalism would inevitably destroy capitalism (Marx, 1848). Herein lays the crux of Marxist philosophy of revolution which he thinks is going to free man from all forms of oppression and alienation. Some scholars have summarized that there are two basic ideas in Marxism: materialism and class struggle. By materialism, Marx meant that the engine that drives society is the economy. Economic forces are more complex and pervasive than we think; such basis of consciousness is what regarded as the

beginning of social product in Karl Marx radical philosophy. Thus far, we have given a summary of Marx views on the notion of change; we shall now attempt a comparative analysis of both the philosophies of Heraclitus and that of Marx.

A Comparative Analysis of the Idea of Change in the Philosophies of Heraclitus and Karl Marx

The two philosophers whose philosophies we are considering have presented us with an interesting account of change even though they existed in different historic epochs. Our interest here is to show their areas of convergence and divergence on the idea of change and how it affects man in the society or nature. It is very obvious that there is a kind of similarity between Heraclitus idea of change and that of Marx, especially their emphasis on the reality of strife, doctrine of opposites which they regarded as constant factors in nature. In fact, for Marx, the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles which precipitates change within the economic order such that man must use his qualitative abilities to determine their economic future, according to Marx, the economic categories are but forms of existence, determinations of life (Marx, 1904:307). This determination of life was considered by Heraclitus as something embedded in perpetual strife between opposites such that in nature we find an endless string of opposites, like hot and cold, light and darkness, good or bad, healthy and unhealthy and so on. Heraclitus explains just how contraries are connected when he opines that as the same thing in us are living and dead, waking and sleeping, young and old. For these things having changed around are those and those in turn having changed around are these. Contrary qualities are found in us as the same thing. But they are the same by virtue of one thing changing around to another. We are asleep and we wake up; we are awake and we go to sleep. Thus sleep and waking are both found in us, but not at

the same time or in the same respect (Graham, 2007). But these differences or string of opposites are connected in some sort of symmetry manner.

From the foregoing, we see a kind of similitude between Heraclitus' and Marx's notion of change such that change is considered as something which is constant within the universe and they both conceive of it as a universal law which not only reveals the general but also the distinctive features of any given sphere of reality. The idea of conflict is a noticeable strand in their ideological framework. From Heraclitus' point of view, conflict is the very condition of life; it is through conflict that natural things come into being and remain in existence. A practical example of this is the serious struggle that occurs between sperm cells before an ovum could be fertilized for pregnancy to occur. He also considers conflict as a continuous movement to and fro in which all things pass successfully through their opposites. For instance, heat becomes cold; darkness becomes light and so on. This for him means that there is perpetual change in the world, and there is also perpetual conflict, perpetual strife, for the universe is a universe made up of conflicts and clash of opposites. While for Marx, it is through conflict and class struggle that social change can be ensured and the living conditions of man can be improved. Therefore, in living nature the law of the unity and struggle of opposites function differently when compared with its operation in inanimate nature, in society not quite the same way as nature, (Platonov, 1982:60) for instance, the way such dynamics of change operates in socialism will be different from how it operates in capitalism and so forth.

It is also worthy of note that Heraclitus considered his idea of change from a naturalistic viewpoint while Marx considered his from a socio-economic perspective. A distinction could also be made between the status they both ascribed to their

notion of change. Heraclitus' inspiration was the natural world which made him to postulate a naturalistic notion of change in the universe which he says stems from the primordial stuff "fire", which itself initiates the process of beingness and non-being. Marx on his own part, conferred an existential status on his idea of change rather than ontological as did Heraclitus. Marx used his dialectics to argue that society must change from the arrangement where the ownership of private property will be abolished to an egalitarian society where man will be free from all forms of alienation – there will then be the birth of a new man. There should be a socialization of consumption through the abolition of private property, of class society, this creation of aesthetic man, will be the realization of social nature, and the creation of human society. It will be as Marx thinks that union of man with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized naturalism of nature. This shows that Marx was very much concerned with the nature of man's socio-economic experience and the outcome of man's interface with nature, man's destiny in nature and how he can be free from every form of inhibitions and oppression that exist within the society.

Conclusion

Change is the spice of life and life is spiced by change. In the same way, change is also the spice of philosophy and its diverse concerns and formulations. One cannot fully comprehend the present flow of ideas without some degree of recourse to the reflections of the past; and the projection into the future is often a composite reflection on the past and the present circumstances and ideological preoccupations. This sort of connection between the spectrums of ideas in the history of philosophy is what has been brought to the fore in this paper. So far in this paper, we have examined the notion of change with respect to two important

philosophers in the history of western philosophy – Heraclitus and Marx. Although these two thinkers differ in areas of emphasis, one factor that is responsible for their variance at emphasis is change; philosophies will continue to change in a persistently changing world. The preoccupation of the past is not totally like that of the present, and that of the present may not be like that of the future. For instance, the object of philosophical speculation in the ancient period was aimed at the cosmos, a search for the ultimate nature of reality in naturalistic terms. But in the medieval period, the interest was different, philosophy was used to explain the basis of religious beliefs while in the modern period, there were attempts by numerous philosophers to provide a solid foundation for philosophical enterprise and other immanent concerns.

This implies that just as the society move from one period to another, philosophy also changes with it so as to soothe the social concerns; a philosophical idea cannot be fully understood outside the social context in which it was produced. However, we can trace similarities between these periods of philosophical transformation which shows a sort of cross-fertilization of ideas between philosophers and their changing philosophies. Heraclitus, in this sense, could be said to have anticipated Marx, in a way that he laid the foundation or provided the labyrinth upon which Karl Marx expounded his philosophy of change. The importance of our analysis on the notion of change is such that, philosophy is a living discipline that must continue to change as the world continues to change. In fact, it would be apt to end this essay with the words of Karl Marx: “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however, is to change it” (Allen, 1957: 155). Hence, as philosophers today, we must take heed to this declaration by Marx and change our world with our various philosophies.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, E.L. (1936). *From Plato to Nietzsche: An Introduction to the great thoughts and ideas of Western Minds*, London: Fawcett Premier Books.
- Allen, Reginald, E. (1966). *Greek Philosophy: Thales to Aristotle*. New York: Free Press.
- Chiari, Joseph (1975). *Twentieth Century French Thought: From Bergson to Lévi Strauss*, London: Elek Books Limited.
- Copleston, Fredrick (1962). *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, New York: Image Books, 1962) p.19.
- Emlyn-Jones, C.J. (1976). "Heraclitus and the Identity of Opposites", *Phronesis*, Vol. 21, No.2, pp.91-92.
- Fadahunsi, Ayo (2002). "The Social Foundation of Philosophical Development", *BJMASS*, Vol. 1, No.1, 2002, pp.164-168.
- Graham, Daniel (2007). "Heraclitus" in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, First Published Feb 8, 2007, Available online: [http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus pp.6-7](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heraclitus_pp.6-7), Accessed on 13th May, 2011.
- Guthrie, W.K.C. (1962). *A History of Greek Philosophy: The Earlier Pre-Socratics and the Pythagoreans*, Vol.1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hatfield, Gray (2011). "The History of Philosophy as Philosophy" Available online: <http://fds.oup.com/www.oup.co.uk/pdf/0-19-927899-7.pdf> Accessed on June 4, 2011.
- Kirk, G.S. (1951). "Natural Change in Heraclitus", *Mind: A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*, vol. LX, No. 237, pp. 35-45.
- Marx, Karl (1848). *Communist Manifesto*, Samuel Moore Trans., Moscow: Kohvov Books.
- Marx, Karl (1904), *A Contribution of the Critique of Political Economy*, Chicago: Charles H.Herr Books.
- Onigbinde, Akinyemi (1999), *What is Philosophy? A Reader's Digest in Philosophical Inquiry*, Ibadan: Frontline Resources Ltd.

Platonov, G.V. (1982). "The Role of Contradiction in the Development of Animate Nature" in *Soviet Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XXI, No.1, pp.60-79.

Russell, Bertrand (1996). *A History of Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge Classics; Taylor & Francis Group.

Striker, Gisela (1999). "Why Study the History of Philosophy?" *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Vol. VII, pp. 15-18.

Stumpf, Samuel (1986). *Elements of Philosophy: An Introduction*, New York: Mc Graw Hill Publishers.

_____, (1994). *Philosophy: History and Problems*, New York: Mc Graw Hill Inc.