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HERACLITUS AND FIRE

By Constance I. Smith

Bertram Helm, in *Social Roots of Heracliteanism* (this Journal, XXV [1964] 565–571) puts forward the interesting theory that Heraclitus' doctrine of Fire should be read in terms of the "hearth-fire," that is, in terms of "the private religion of the aristocratic household which centers around the hearth" (565). I should like to comment very briefly on this.

In Helm's exposition the hearth-fire, conceived as a personal being, was invoked at all personal and family crises. It accepted or rejected the newborn child, the novitiate; at marriage and death as well as at birth, invoked by ritual, it assured safe transition from one stage of existence to the next; the periodicity underlying human life found expression in its waxing and waning; it was a moral agent directing and correcting, criticizing, teaching, and deciding (568). These were the main features of the Greek patriarchal family religion, and from a consideration of the rites and beliefs centered round the hearth-fire Helm is led to the conclusion that they provide "the explicit interior relations of his (Heraclitus') philosophy. . . . the cosmos is the hearth-fire writ large. Just as the fire mediated within the family, so too does it allow of the transitions of some things into other things in the universe. Heraclitus took all the moral, religious and spiritual relations which permeate the aristocratic religious rites and formed the rest of reality after their image. For him the physical world was seen *qua* world, as ordered, insofar as the relations which give it the quality of wholeness were conceived along the lines of a familial, moral corporation" (569–570).

This (to repeat) is interesting; but I find a difficulty in accepting it, for the following reasons.

Heraclitus' philosophy is that of change, of universal flux; nothing is at rest. That is to say, against the earlier Greek philosophers' idea of the world as an edifice, Heraclitus propounds the idea of the world as a process. But the process is an ordered one, it is governed by law; there is a world-reason, Logos, which determines all things and regulates all things. So the apprehension of universal flux is accompanied by the apprehension of an eternal ordering principle, which does not change, which, on the contrary, is forever permanent. This eternal Being in all its changeability Heraclitus symbolized by fire.

We have now to consider the questions: (1) what brought Heraclitus to the idea of universal change? and (2) why did he choose fire as its symbol? I would answer to (1): the transitions from one state to another state —from childhood to youth, from virginity to marriage, from life to death— wherein the domestic fire mediated or interceded are not sufficient to account for Heraclitus' discovery of change, a discovery which has been de-

scribed as "terrifying." [1] I would submit that the changes of birth, marriage, and death which Heraclitus saw in human life and knew to be the climaxes with which the domestic religion of the aristocrats was concerned were too normal, or, in other words, were not sufficiently catastrophic to make such impact upon his mind that they brought about a discovery which may be called great, original, and terrifying. I would put forward the view [2] that Heraclitus' philosophy of change arose out of personal experiences which were themselves terrifying: heir to the royal family of the priest-kings of Ephesus, he lived in a time of social revolution; there was an upsurge of new democratic forces and to these forces the Greek tribal aristocrats were beginning to yield. Heraclitus witnessed their yielding, and out of the suffering of this social experience was born the idea of the transitoriness of all things; everything is in continual motion and flux.

I turn now to the second question: Why did Heraclitus choose fire as the fundamental principle of the universe? I would answer: While Heraclitus held that we live in a world which is continually in flux, a world which is process, we nevertheless seem to live in a world of things: flames then were chosen because they could be seen as things, that is, they had stability, and yet they could be reconciled with the doctrine of flux, since they flared up and died down.[3] In a word, flames were well fitted to symbolize a theory of Being, ("the world ever was and is, and will be an ever-living Fire") and Becoming (the Fire has "measures of its kindling and measures of its going out").[4]

This explanation is plausible, and, further—I consider the fact to be important—it is without a disadvantage which is to be found in Helm's explanation in terms of the hearth-fire. The disadvantage is this: the hearth-fire is said to be a moral agent. Now, Heraclitus, in company with other pre-Socratics, certainly found a moral meaning in nature, but as G. Vlastos has said, surely rightly, "To *moralize* divinity [they, Heraclitus included, held nature to be divine as well as natural] was not their main, and certainly not their unique contribution." [5] Neither was Heraclitus primarily concerned with religious *practices,* although he discussed religious concepts and his outlook was religious as well as "scientific." [6] In view of these two facts he would not, I hold, have formed reality after the image of a moral corporation or a moral agent or the religious practices focused around the hearth.

[1] W. Nestle, *Die Vorsokratiker* (1905), 35. Quoted by Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (2 vols., London, 1962), I, 12.

[2] See Popper *op. cit.*, I, 13, 204, 205. [3] Popper, *op. cit.*, I, 206.

[4] Frag. 30: Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla* (Oxford, 1948).

[5] See G. Vlastos, "Theology and Philosophy in Early Greek Thought," *Philosophical Quarterly,* II, 7 (1952) 116. Italics Vlastos.

[6] *Ibid.*, 98.

To summarize: my conclusion, therefore, is (1) that the concept of change was impressed with tremendous force upon Heraclitus' mind not by the rites of normal human passage, "the crises of personal and familial life," the kind of "strife" displayed in the opposing arguments of the family council, but by terrifying personal suffering brought about by revolutionary social and political upheaval. The philosophy and the experience from which it arose must, one would say, be in some measure commensurate, and this similarity of dimension is provided if the philosophy which has been compared with that of "an earthquake, in which everything . . . seems to sway" [7] is postulated to have been born out of the experience of the earthquake sway of a jeopardized social order; (2) Heraclitus, having put forth a doctrine of universal flux, had to account for the apparent stability of the things in this world, and for other regularities. He saw in fire something which we experience as a thing and which is yet a process having its own measure, its own law of motion. Everything, therefore, could be seen as a transformation of fire; fire is flux and at the same time it is the law, the fixed measure, the *logos,* which governs the world.

These characteristics of the "empirical" fire fully qualify it, I contend, to stand as the symbol for Heraclitus' ordered universe, and there is no need to go to the hearth-fire for the key to his metaphysics, particularly in view of the fact that the theory of the hearth-fire brings into the foreground the moral and the ritual and Heraclitus himself did not.

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[7] Nestle, *op. cit.,* 35, quoted by Popper, *op. cit.,* 12.