

How, if at all, is knowledge possible in the light of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux?

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64% .

This is a well written essay that focuses on the task set & which reveals a very good grasp of argument, ideas & facts. There is a clear structure that allows you to develop your discussions in a clear manner, but in places some points could be further explored & developed via the reading material (see the places in your essay where you talk about language, for example). Also, there is some need for further evaluation in the section 'My views' in order to support the conclusion.

But, overall, this is a good piece of work.

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Abstract

In order to truly understand whether knowledge is possible in the light of the Heraclitean Doctrine of Flux, it must first be made clear what conclusions can be drawn from the Doctrine of Flux and what exactly is meant by the term 'knowledge'. In doing so, I will look at the concept of constant change and the identity of opposites within the Doctrine of Flux, and I will turn to the works of Plato when discussing the capacities of knowledge. I will conclude by directly addressing the question "How, if at all, is knowledge possible in the light of the Heraclitean Doctrine of Flux?" from my perspective.

How, if at all, is knowledge possible in the light of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux?

Heraclitus

Heraclitus suggested that all objects within reality, and reality itself, are subject to constant change. Ideas related to this suggestion were put forward in his doctrine of flux, described as “the thesis that everything flows and nothing stays still” (Humphreys, R. 2022). In this doctrine, Heraclitus suggests that everything is in a state of constant movement and change, and therefore nothing is ever still, un-changing, or permanent. One of Heraclitus’ fragments that best displays his ideas behind the doctrine of flux is the river fragment: “We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are and we are not” (2022). Firstly, how is it that we do step into the same river twice? If we refer to the geographical river itself, say on a map, we do indeed step into the same river (location) today as we would tomorrow. Or perhaps if we look at language, say the name of the river is ‘River X’, we will step into ‘River X’ today and tomorrow so long as the name doesn’t change. However, what does Heraclitus mean when he says that we do not step into the same river twice? Firstly, although the location on a map remains the same, and the name of the river doesn’t change, we will see by looking closely that everything is in fact different. As the water in the river is in constant movement, we are never in contact with the same water each time we step into the river. Furthermore, the rocks at the bottom of the river are in the same constant movement. We could even say that our skin cells change over a period of time and so the same body is never making contact with the same water. Humphreys, R. (2022) suggests that “The river here could be seen as a metaphor to describe the nature of things: a river may appear to be a permanent and stable entity, but closer inspection reveals that it continuously changes”. So perhaps what Heraclitus suggests is that when we look closely we can see that everything is in fact constantly changing, that stillness and permanence is a false appearance, and perhaps

an illusion. "The doctrine of flux is probably not that ultimate reality *is* change, but that change is the manner in which ultimate reality...manifests itself" (2022)

A key element of the doctrine of flux is Heraclitus' repeated use of opposites and their ultimate unity, as can be seen in one of his fragments; "An object may with equal validity be described as large and small, or heavy and light" (Emlyn-Jones, 1976). This suggests that the object is both large and small, and so the object has unity in "being" large or small; it is essentially one object that can either be large or small. I must suggest that this could perhaps be related to the matter of perspective. An object can take the form of large or small depending on the observer and how the object itself is observed. For example, a dog may seem large from the perspective of a baby, yet small from the perspective of a fully grown adult and so the object can be said to be both large and small. Perhaps objects can take the form of their opposite by being witnessed from a different perspective. Another fragment that reveals Heraclitus' thoughts on opposites goes as follows; "there is present at the same thing living and dead, walking and sleeping, and young and old" (1976). Ultimately, Heraclitus suggests that one thing cannot exist, or cannot be known, without its opposite. For example, there can be no concept of young without the concept of old, and there can be no life without death. This would lead us to assume; If one can't exist without the other, then one must in some way, essentially, be of the other. If hot cannot be without cold, then they must be of the same thing. However, this could be down to the use of language and it's given meaning. Words and descriptions must inherently be relative to hold meaning. The very idea of using the word "tall" to describe someone is to suggest that that person is tall in comparison to something (either someone else or the norm). Although, Emlyn-Jones (1976) suggests "a belief that words have fixed meaning is characteristic of certain early periods of thought, and especially Archaic Greece". So, perhaps we cannot conclude that Heraclitus is referring to the use of words when speaking of the co-existence of opposites.

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It is clear then that Heraclitus shows all within reality is in a constant state of change between itself and its opposite. That which is cold will always become hot, and vice versa. Thus, how can we look at knowledge from this perspective? Firstly, it may seem rather impossible to hold any kind of 'permanent' knowledge about a reality that is never permanent and constantly changing. Although Heraclitus' doctrine of flux heavily influenced Plato's theory of forms, Plato criticized the doctrine because, to him, it suggested that knowledge would not be possible in an ever-changing reality. Catherine Osborne (1997) comments on one of Heraclitus' fragments that reveals his belief that man cannot fully comprehend "the logos"; "The fragment suggests that ordinary people are unaware of what's going on, or indeed of what they themselves are doing, as if they are going through life 'in a sleep'". This imagery is likened to the imagery of Plato's 'Allegory of The Cave', in which he describes the everyday man as someone who is living in an illusion. Plato suggests that most people are stuck in this illusion until they can be freed, and have the truth be revealed to them. However, he also suggests that there would be an adjustment period for one that is freed from the illusion until he can fully comprehend the truth. Heraclitus mentions that for those that do hear the truth, they still cannot comprehend it; "What they are missing out on is 'this logos'... We are told that it 'is forever', and that all things take place in accordance with it, but it is also something that people hear, yet fail to appreciate it when they have heard it" (Osborne, C. 1997) Perhaps the logos is that 'ever-changing' which we cannot hold knowledge of. However, knowledge does not necessarily have to be constant either. I certainly do not hold the same beliefs or ideas today as I did when I was a child. On a larger scale, humanity certainly does not hold the same knowledge that it did in generations past; knowledge is clearly in constant change too. Furthermore, in order to say that everything is always changing, it must also be said that change is therefore constant. Thus, even if knowledge had to be constant, we could therefore hold constant knowledge of the constant of

change. Our knowledge of the changing things themselves will always change with them (as we see in humanity and society) but our knowledge of the existence of constant change itself will always remain constant and present with it.

Plato

In the light of the doctrine of flux, what place then does knowledge have in our lives and in metaphysics? Plato placed importance on knowledge in developing his theory of forms. "This theory holds that all particular things have something in common, and they have something in common because they are all instances of a universal idea". (Humphreys, R. 2022) This seems to align with Heraclitus' thoughts on opposites having ultimate unity. Plato also suggests that absolute objective truth (the Universal) is not available to sensory perception, however he believes it available only through reasoning and true knowledge. It is interesting then to see what Plato thinks of knowledge in a reality of forms. "Plato is effectively examining some of the conditions that distinguish knowledge from belief (or opinion). To have knowledge of something, it is not enough for one to believe that something is the case. Having knowledge involves much more than this. Having knowledge of X entitles us to say that X is true." (2022) I agree with Humphreys. Plato makes a clear separation between belief or opinion, and truth or knowledge. He seems to suggest that belief and opinion are inherently subjective whereas truth and knowledge are objective. They are true no matter what one believes. However, based on Heraclitus' doctrine of flux, this would have to mean that whatever the objective truth entails, it must be constant. For if it were constant, it would always be there for one to achieve. For one to achieve ultimate knowledge through rational thinking and reasoning. If it were constantly changing too, one would never be able to reach it. Plato suggested that "it is not possible to truly know that which is in constant change." (Copleston, F. 1946) Thus, all the things available to us through sensory perceptions are in constant change (and so things appear to be in a state of constant flux). However, Plato states there is a universal truth beyond these that is constant, that is not available to our sensory perceptions, but that can be achieved through reasoning.

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here.

This image is further created by Plato in his 'Allegory of the Cave'. This was a metaphor that Plato used to describe the state that most common people live in, and how a common person may be able to reach ultimate truth beyond the illusions of his sensory perception. He describes the common people as follows; "Picture men dwelling in a sort of sub-terranean cavern with a long entrance open to the light on its entire width. Conceive them as having their legs and necks fettered from childhood, so that they remain in the same spot, able to look forward only, and prevented by the fetters from turning their heads." (Shorey, P. 1963, pp. 747) "Picture further the light from a fire burning higher up and at a distance behind them, and between the fire and the prisoners and above them a road along which a low wall has been built, as the exhibitors of puppet shows have partitions before the men themselves; above which they show the puppets." (1963, pp. 747). This imagery already creates the idea of power and control by some entity over another. The fact that he compares the illusions of many people and the enlightenment of others to the partition the exhibitors of a puppet show have between them and the men themselves. So, this suggests to me that the universal truth is only available to some. "See also, then, men carrying past the wall implements of all kinds that rise above the wall, and human images and shapes of animals as well, wrought in stone and wood and every material, some of those bearers speaking and others silent." (1963, pp. 747)

Plato therefore states that the ultimate reality for those that are trapped in the cave are the shadows of the truth and yet they have no way of witnessing the truth from their positions. In this way they could be described as 'prisoners', or in our world; 'common people'. To Plato, these 'common people' may have been the uneducated. Plato then suggests that if one of these prisoners were to be freed he would face immense pain, he would be blinded by the light, and he would not believe what he was being told. This phase could be described as the initial phase of the 'awakening' process. Plato seems to describe the

‘awakening’ process in a way similar to many enlightenment thinkers and some eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. For Plato, it is the first witness of the fact that there is more to the illusionary reality the prisoners were experiencing before. The prisoners would then move further toward enlightenment (or toward the knowledge of truth for Plato) if they were pulled further out of the cave and towards the truth. They would feel even more pain, and so they would need a period of habituation, in which reality slowly reveals itself one part at a time.

Plato also suggests that once a man has witnessed complete truth, he would see himself as privileged and pity those who have not been freed. Therefore, one would of course do anything to avoid going back to the cave. If he were to go back to the cave (the illusion) he would be overthrown by the darkness. And, if he tried to explain to the remaining prisoners that they were being illuded, they would laugh at him, call him crazy, and banish him. This idea is where I see that Plato’s idea of truth deviates from the concept of enlightenment in eastern philosophies, especially Buddhism.

In Plato’s ‘Allegory of The Cave’ the image that most people live in illusion, limited to what they believe from their subjective and sensory perception. Although, one can be exposed to ultimate truth and choose that path. Once that path is taken, one would slowly become enlightened to ultimate truth and knowledge, which Plato describes as ‘light’ and ‘goodness’. However, it is clear to me that this presents the issue of some being ‘better’ than others. A concept we certainly would not see in eastern philosophies such as Buddhism. For them, enlightenment is not “gaining knowledge” but rather losing the illusions. This, in society, could lead to large forms of discrimination between those that are illuded and those who ‘know’ ultimate truth. And thus, by knowledge being this universal ultimate available to some, it becomes a tool for power, control and segregation. In addition to this, Plato often refers to true knowledge being objective, and that subjective knowledge can only be beliefs



or opinions. I challenge this because I don't see how one could ever come to the knowledge of anything objective, from a limited (by Plato) sensory and subjective perspective. Plato seems to think that this can be achieved through mental knowledge; through using reasoning to go beyond the senses. For this, we must question how reasoning itself can be beyond the senses, which I do not believe is possible.

Rephrase Plato. I think you would agree. I think you want to say here that sensory awareness — is not limited in the way Plato thinks it is.

My Views

Firstly, I question the likelihood of Plato's 'universal truth' as well as the possibility that we would ever be able to fully grasp it. A study conducted in 1974 found that there is significant bias in the predictions the human brain makes about future probabilities (Tversky, A., Kahneman, D.). Essentially, all predictions and probabilities are inherently subjective in nature. This raises some serious philosophical concerns in the area of metaphysics. Firstly, just as a prediction, judgement, or probability can only be from a subjective nature, we ourselves can only be subjective in nature. Ultimately, there is no way for us to escape our subjective perspective. Therefore, it would not be possible to make any objective statement when we cannot possibly escape from our subjective perspective. There is no way for me to make any statement that is not attached to the subjective perspective/experience of 'Tiago'. Even if I were to claim to make an objective statement such as 'rabbits have four legs', I am still making this statement based on my perspective/experience of reality. For example, I have experienced receiving the various information that tells me most rabbits have four legs at some point in my past, and so I make this statement now. Therefore, it can only be a subjective statement, even though it may appear to be an objective one. In addition to this concern, if there were any objective or universal truth, such as Plato's, it would not be at all knowable from our subjective perspective. If there were an objective truth, it would have to be inherently greater than and beyond what we experience subjectively. Therefore, any objective truth could only be witnessed from some objective perspective, which we cannot have access to. Finally, if all of us are susceptible to this way of thinking and predicting, one cannot claim to know more than a) what he/she perceives and b) what any other person claims to perceive. And so, this is why any prediction, judgement, or probability can only be evaluated in terms of internal consistency.

Evaluate here —
Something could be
coherent but wrong.

If we assume that any knowledge could only ever be subjective in nature, we must question the use of knowledge itself and what place it has in metaphysics. Knowledge is a subjective accumulation of information that can be recalled using memory. Therefore, it is incredibly useful for many societal tasks as well as for survival itself. However, when it concerns metaphysics, it can only be described as an attempt for the subjective perspective to attain the objective perspective. Knowledge is a tool; therefore, it alone could not ever explain the entirety of the universe. Knowledge will continue in an un-ending pursuit for subjective means to describe an objective perspective.

However, I suggest that the very notion of the subjective and the objective perspective being two separate entities must be questioned too. If we assume the conditions of Heraclitus' doctrine of flux, we must assume that there is one constant, that being change itself. In any example, or any fragment, it is not possible to have change without a constant present. "We step and do not step into the same rivers, we are, and we are not" (Humphreys, R., 2022) In order for the change to occur, there must be a constant present to witness it. So, for example, we can assume that the subjective and the objective are two opposites, just as in the unity of opposites proposed by Heraclitus. I can say that the subjective cannot be without the objective, and so the subjective must be of the objective and vice versa. Just as cold cannot be without hot, the subjective cannot be without the objective. Therefore, if they are both of the same thing, they are the constant. Heraclitus suggested that this constant, what everything essentially consisted of, was fire. "Heraclitus related the substance of the *kosmos* to that of the individual *psychê*, but as ever-living and all-controlling fire: 'This *kosmos*, the same for all, no one of men or gods has made, but it ever was and is and will be ever-living fire, kindling in measures and being quenched in measures'" (Wright M. R., 2008) Heraclitus states that what is of the 'kosmos' is also of the human psyche, likewise then what is of the objective must also be of the subjective. Of course, we must question and be very skeptic of

the notion that this substance could be fire. I state that we can never truly know what it is. We are of it; therefore, we cannot ever truly look at it. Our subjective perspective cannot ever become an objective perspective and so we are limited to our experience of reality. This experience of reality can be deemed as both subjective and objective, as it is all that there is. Unlike Plato, who suggests the enlightened one is he who has climbed the ladder of knowledge, I suggest that enlightenment drops the illusion and the need to attain ultimate knowledge.

We also tend to relate knowledge very closely to language. We explain something within our experience of existence by means of language, and we assume that we have then discovered it. Knowledge is therefore information that has been passed on through communication and remembered. Knowledge is information that comes from the direct experience of reality. Knowledge cannot therefore explain that very experience of reality, however it can describe it. The knowledge I hold suggests the experiences that I have had with reality as well as the information passed to me genetically. That very knowledge cannot comprehend what the experience of reality is of, but it can confirm that it is there.

↑ could you develop this point? It's interesting & relevant

In order to understand the role knowledge plays in a reality that abides by the doctrine of flux, we have to take into account what we truly mean by knowledge and what it is really meant by a reality in a constant state of flux. When we speak of a constant state of flux there is a constant state of change in reality. However, for the state of change to be constant we require a constant. This objective constant, which we do not understand, was suggested to be fire by Heraclitus, 'goodness' by Plato, and essentially 'God' by many others. As knowledge itself is limited to our subjective perspective, I do not believe that we can ever attain the universal or objective truth that Plato speaks of both in 'The Allegory of The Cave' and in his theory of forms. Therefore, Knowledge is not a particularly useful tool to be used as a means

to metaphysics. In order to truly hold 'knowledge' of metaphysics and reality itself we would need to experience the objective perspective. Furthermore, knowledge itself is simply that, a tool. It is particularly useful for survival within our human society as well as the ability to accumulate wisdom and grow as intelligent organisms. In conclusion, knowledge is certainly possible in the conditions of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux, however it is a limited tool, which is not sufficient for understanding the experience of existence itself, or for understanding metaphysics.

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