

# Flux and Eternity - The Mutual Interpretation of Heraclitus and Laozi's Ontological Thought

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**Abstract:** Heraclitus and Lao Tzu were important representatives of Eastern and Western civilisations in the Axial Age, and they had a number of unique insights and fits on the issue of ontology. Both Heraclitus and Laozi noted the irreversible role of laws, the former taking the Logos as the basis for the existence of all things, the latter considering the Tao as the root of all things in the universe; both Heraclitus and Laozi saw that things are always in constant change, the former taking fire as the origin of the world and the cause of all changes, the latter pointing out that the Tao itself is in movement and change along with all human beings; both Heraclitus and Laozi Both Heraclitus and Laozi acknowledge the eternal nature of all things, the former focusing on the living fire and the Logos, the latter on the apprehension of and conformity to the Tao.

**Keywords:** Heraclitus; Laozi; Ontology; Logos; Tao

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Ontology stems from the contemplation and pursuit of the essence and origin of all things in the world. Both the East and the West of the Axial Age gave birth to brilliant and immortal cultures, and the sages have left us many spiritual treasures. Heraclitus and Lao Tzu were important figures in the civilisations of the East and West during the Axial Age, and these two great philosophers had unique insights into ontology and many similarities that shone through the light of human wisdom.

## 1. The Ground of All Things: Logos and Tao

Heraclitus says: "But the Logos, which is constantly valid, always proves incomprehensible, whether before it is heard or after it is heard. For, although the occurrence of all things coincides with this Logos, one is still as inexperienced as one who experiences the words and actions I have provided - identifying each thing as I have done, according to its actual constitution, that is, showing how it came to be what it is. But the rest of mankind does not know what it does when it wakes up, just as it does not remember what it does when it sleeps." <sup>[1] 11</sup> For Heraclitus, the existence and extinction of all things in the world has its measure and norm, and what comes into play afterwards is the Logos, which is a law of reason. The harmony and opposition emphasized by Heraclitus is not a natural and inactive order; he believes that 'change and development' lies at the root of struggle and conflict, and it is with this opposition and conflict that the world is possible; in other words, the world is governed by struggle. <sup>[2] 38</sup> The development of things arises from struggle and conflict, from which the world arises, and it is therefore on this aspect of antagonism and conflict that the Logos focuses more. Heraclitus saw the positive influence of struggle and conflict in a state of hostility on the development of all things, "The opposite must be united, the ultimate harmony comes from things that are in opposite directions, and everything comes out of strife." <sup>[1] 18</sup>. Thus, Heraclitus revered war, saying, "Ares, who took his life, was honoured by the gods and by men." <sup>[1] 34</sup> And again, "War is the father of all and king of all. He makes some gods and some men; he makes some slaves and some free." <sup>[1] 66</sup> This Logos with its strong connotation of conflict makes all things come into being, develop and then perish.

For Laozi, the Tao is the natural origin of all things in the universe, the root of their existence, and at the same time plays a role similar to that of the Logos in regulating all things. Ontological Taoism is the foundation of the entire Taoist system of thought, from which Taoist doctrine unfolds. <sup>[3] 32</sup> "There are things that are mixed and formed before heaven and earth are born. Silent and few, independent and unchanging, circumscribed and unperturbed, it can be the mother of the world." <sup>[4] 151</sup> The Tao is the creator of all things, invisible and silent, yet not void and of a metaphysical nature. "The Tao gives birth to one, one to

two, two to three, and three to all things. " <sup>[4]216</sup> This is the process by which the Tao creates all things; the Tao generates the two qi of yin and yang, and the two qi stir to produce harmony, from which all things are born. As Laozi says, "The Tao gives birth to all things, the virtue of the animal, the form of the thing, and the potential of the thing. That is why all things respect the Tao and value virtue. " <sup>[4]243</sup> The Tao gives all things the bud of life, and all things follow the laws of nature to reproduce and grow. Tangible things coalesce into their concrete forms, and all things mature according to the environment they are in. Laozi also says: "Man follows the laws of earth, earth follows the laws of heaven, heaven follows the laws of the Tao, and the Tao follows the laws of nature. " <sup>[4]151</sup> The Tao is vast and boundless, and is nature as it was originally intended to be.

Both Heraclitus and Lao Tzu, the two seers, saw the laws behind all things and emphasised the decisive role played by the laws. However, Heraclitus focused more on struggle and conflict, whereas Lao Tzu opposed head-on conflict, preferring to overcome strength with softness, and his Tao was also inclusive and harmonious.

## **2. The Flux of All Things: Continuous Burning and Perpetual Action**

Heraclitus said: "It is impossible to step into the same river twice, nor is it possible for a thing that is bound to perish to be touched twice when it concerns its state. " <sup>[1]102</sup> He saw keenly the flux and movement of all things, with the implication of a simple dialectic. Heraclitus argued that the world was not created by God or man; it was, is and will always be a living fire that burns continuously. <sup>[1]41</sup> In Heraclitus, fire is a primordial sensible being that can be transformed into other substances in the process of constant combustion, which is itself a kind of flux. Guan Ziyin points out that "there are two uses of 'fire' in the remnants of Heraclitus: on the one hand, fire can be referred to alongside water, earth, air, etc. , as one of the plurality of qualities in the natural world; on the other hand, fire can be singled out to represent a constantly changing universe, as Hegel says of Her 'fire' reflects the 'abstract course' of the universe as a constant change, and even says that 'fire' is the 'Logos ', which is what is meant. " <sup>[5]134</sup> Heraclitus' living fire may paint a picture of the cosmos in its action.

Laozi's Tao is vast and boundless, but also fluid, "independent and unchanging, circumscribed and unchanging. " <sup>[4]151</sup> Laozi says: "The Tao is only a trance. In a trance, there is an image; in a trance, there is a thing. Mythic and meditative, in which there is essence; its essence is very true, in which there is faith. " <sup>[4]138</sup> Although the Way of Laozi may likewise be called an entity, it differs from the solid substance, fire, that Heraclitus found in nature to describe the original, but is an invisible, elusive Way that needs to be embodied by intuition. Since the Tao, which is the basis of all things, is fluid, everything in heaven and earth must also be in flux, and these movements arise naturally and spontaneously. The Tao is both the process of creation and change of things and the universal law that the whole process needs to follow, so it is the cause and the end of movement.

Both Heraclitus and Lao Tzu acknowledge the constant movement of things and the fluidity of all things. For Laozi, the origin of the world is the Tao, which circumvents itself and governs the movement and flux of all things, while Heraclitus places more emphasis on the flux of things themselves, the origin of the world being fire, while the Logos as law is not as fluid as the Tao.

## **3. The Eternity of All Things: Valley God and Living Fire**

Heraclitus uses the example of the sun, saying that it is "new every day, and will always be new"<sup>[1]</sup>. In addition, Heraclitus has a very graphic illustration: "If everything that exists will become smoke, the nostrils will still be able to discern them. " <sup>[1]17</sup> Fire, the essence of all things, is not only eternal and fluid, but also inevitable and regular. In other words, the so-called extinction to a certain extent is only a state of affairs in a certain situation, and not the extinction of the flame, whose existence has not been erased by the world, nor can anyone erase it. Unlike Thales' "water" and Anaximene's "air", "fire" here is a metaphorical, symbolic thing, not used to denote a concrete, objective entity, but The emphasis is on the expression of material movement, change, order, law, process and other characteristics. <sup>[2]36</sup>

The Tao of Laozi is circumscribed, the living organism under the Tao is in flux, and the fact that the individual will eventually go into decline does not mean that the Tao will decline; the Tao is eternal, and so is the world as a whole. The eternal nature of the Tao lies in its beginninglessness and endlessness, its immortality, while concrete things are born and die. Laozi's eternity and flux are often placed together in speech, e. g. , "The god of the valley is immortal, and is called the xuanma. The gate of the mysterious mare is called the root of heaven and earth. If it is continuous, it is used diligently. " <sup>[7]77</sup> If the gods of the valley do not die, are they not like the eternal living fire that lasts forever?

Both Heraclitus and Laozi saw the eternal nature of things as a whole, and both emphasised the changing development of things, and their dialectical ideas have deeply influenced later generations and contributed to the development and progress of philosophy. However, while Heraclitus' eternity stems from the action and transformation of the Living Fire and the Logos,

Laozi's is more concerned with the comprehension of and compliance with the Tao, hoping that man becomes one with the Tao.

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Both Heraclitus and Laozi contemplate the basis of the existence of all things, and both note the irreversible role of laws; the former takes the Logos as the basis of the existence of all things, while the latter sees the Tao as the root of all things in the universe, a struggle and a reconciliation, complementing each other; both Heraclitus and Laozi see that things are always in constant flux; the former takes fire as the origin of the world and the cause of the change of all things, while the latter points out that the Tao itself and Both Heraclitus and Laozi acknowledge the eternity of all things, the former focusing on the living fire and the Logos, the latter on the comprehension of and conformity to the Tao, the wisdom of both sages having the power of eternity.

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