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from Thales to Aristotle

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8. EMPEDOCLES OF ACRAGAS

Born in Acragas, in Sicily, around 492 BCE, Empedocles belongs to the generation of Presocratics who come after Parmenides. He is known to have visited the southern Italian mainland, and while his work shows his familiarity with Parmenides, there are also signs of the influence of Pythagoreanism, the other great southern Italian philosophical movement. At home in Acragas, he seems to have been an active politician, supporting democracy against oligarchy, even though his own aristocratic family connections might have made that support unexpected. Empedocles was a philosopher, a medical man, and a truly flamboyant figure. According to ancient reports, he dressed ostentatiously (there are stories of rich purple robes, a golden diadem, and bronze sandals), he claimed remarkable powers for himself, and in fragment B112 (no. 1 below) he says of himself, "I go about among you, an immortal god, no longer mortal, / honored among all, as it seems, / wreathed with headbands and blooming garlands." There are many stories of his fantastic activities: reportedly a woman with no pulse who had stopped breathing was kept alive by him for a month; he diverted two streams in the city of Selinus (on the south coast of Sicily) in order to rid the city of a plague (and was said to have been honored as a god as a result). Empedocles was exiled from his home and was said to have died in the Peloponnese, although, given his character, it is not surprising that more exciting tales were told about his death. Diogenes Laertius reports that Empedocles, desiring to demonstrate that he was indeed a god, leapt into the crater of Mount Aetna.

Although these stories suggest a flashy and eccentric figure, we should not lose sight of the fact that Empedocles constructed a serious and complicated theory of the cosmos and the place of human beings in it. Like Parmenides, he wrote in verse; his subjects included both natural philosophy (physics and the development of the cosmos) and inquiry into how human beings ought to live (ethical and religious topics). For a long time scholars debated how, if at all, these two main areas of interest were related. New study, and the discovery of some new texts, now show without a doubt that Empedocles regarded these questions as connected, and that the material from the two was thoroughly integrated. There remains the question of how many different works Empedocles composed; traditionally there have been thought to be at least two separate poems, usually called Physics *and* Purifications. *Although we now know that the physical and purificatory material were not viewed by Empedocles as entirely distinct, the question of how many poems Empedocles wrote remains open.*

Empedocles claimed that the numerous basic realities of the cosmos are entities with the features of basic reality for which Parmenides had argued. Although these basic entities are eternally real and unchanging in their natures, their mixture and separation cause the world of the senses.

Empedocles says that there are six such basic things in the cosmos, each a genuine being in the Parmenidean sense: the roots (as Empedocles refers to them) Earth, Water, Air, and Fire (later called "elements" by Aristotle), and two forces, Love and Strife. The roots are mixed and separated (by Love and Strife) to produce the world that we sense and are a part of; this mixture and separation take the place of coming-to-be and passing-away, since the ingredients remain all through the changes. In selections 87 (B96) and 88 (B98) Empedocles provides "recipes" for such phenomenal things as bone and blood. At the same time, under the waxing and waning of the comparative strengths of the forces of Love and Strife the cosmos undergoes cycles from complete mixture of the roots to their complete separation: how many cycles there are, and the events within those cycles are subjects of controversy among commentators. Within the cycles, living things come to be and pass away; Empedocles' system includes daimones *(singular,* daimōn*) which are divinities of some sort. These* daimones *undergo many lives, apparently because of some transgression. Although they, like the gods, are called "long-lived" by Empedocles, they are not immortal, for they, like the roots of which they are made, are all absorbed into the complete mixture of the roots at the height of Love's power. Only the roots and Love and Strife are genuinely immortal, subject neither to coming-to-be or passing-away. The destiny of the* daimones *is connected with the sorts of lives they lead, and it is in the nature, behavior, and fates of the* daimones *that Empedocles' natural and religious views come together.*

Note on the text and the order of the fragments: In the 1990s scholars discovered that previously unexamined papyrus fragments contained some seventy-four lines of poetry (in varying states of completeness). Because the papyrus contained previously known lines as well as new, previously unknown material, the editors were able to identify the author as Empedocles. The Strasbourg Papyrus (so named because it has been in the collections of the Strasbourg library since the early part of the twentieth century), reconstructed and translated, provided important new material for Empedocles studies, and that material is included here. The ordering of the fragments of Empedocles is controversial; scholars have strong views and serious disagreements about the proper order. Here, the order is that of the translator, Richard McKirahan.[30]

1. (31B112) Friends who dwell in the great city on the yellow
Acragas
on the heights of the citadel, you whose care is good deeds,
respectful havens for strangers, untouched by evil,

30. There are a few exceptions and omissions in the texts given here. For a discussion of McKirahan's ordering principles, see his *Philosophy Before Socrates,* 2nd edition, p. 230 n. 1.

and whenever they are separated, that <is what they call>
the ill-starred fate of death.
They do not call it as is right, but I myself too assent to
their convention. 5

(Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1113D)

42. (B15) A man who is wise in his thoughts (*phrēn*) would not
divine such things as this—
that as long as they live what they in fact call life
they are, and have things wretched and good,
but before they took on the fixed form of mortals and after
they have
dissolved, they are then nothing.

(Plutarch, *Against Colotes* 1113D)

43. (B12) For it is impossible to come to be from what in no
way is,
and it is not to be accomplished and is unheard of that
what is perishes absolutely.
For it will always be where a person thrusts it each time.

([Aristotle], *Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias* 2 975b1–4)

44. (B13) None of the whole is either empty or overfull.

(Aëtius 1.18.2)

45. (B14) Of the whole, nothing is empty; from where, then,
could anything come to be added to it?

([Aristotle], *Melissus, Xenophanes, Gorgias* 2 976b23)

46. (B16) For they are as they were previously and will be, and
never, I think,
will endless time be empty of both of these.

(Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.29.9)

47. (B17 + Strasbourg Papyrus, *ensemble* a) I will tell a double
story. For
at one time they grew to be only one (*232*)[32]
out of many, but at another they grew apart to be many out
of one.
Double is the generation of mortal things, and double their
decline.

32. Translator's note: The line numbers in parentheses are given as Empedocles' text is reconstructed by Primavesi (2008). This numbering is based on the identification of the three hundredth line in the poem by a mark in the margin of the last line in *ensemble a* of the Strasbourg Papyrus.

For the coming together of all things gives birth to one [namely,
generation and decline] and destroys it, (*235*)
and the other is nurtured and flies away when they grow apart again. 5
And these never cease continually interchanging,
at one time all coming together into one by Love
and at another each being borne apart by the hatred of Strife.
Thus in that they have learned to grow to be one out of many (*240*)
and in that they again spring apart as many when the one grows apart, 10
in that way they come to be, and their life is not lasting,
but in that they never cease interchanging continually,
in this way they are always unchanging in a cycle.
But come, listen to my words, for learning increases wisdom. (*245*)
For as I previously said, while declaring the bounds of my words, 15
I will tell a double story. For at one time they grew to be only one
out of many, but at another they grew apart to be many out of one:
fire and water and earth and the immense height of air,
and deadly Strife apart from them, equal in all directions (*250*)
and Love among them, equal in length and breadth. 20
Behold her with your mind, and do not sit with your eyes staring in amazement.
She is also recognized as innate in mortal limbs.
Through her they have kindly thoughts and do peaceful deeds,
calling her by the appellation Joy and also Aphrodite. (*255*)
No mortal man has seen her spinning 25
among them. But listen to the undeceitful course of my account.
For these [the four elements] are all equal and of the same age,
but each rules in its own province and possesses its own individual character,
but they dominate in their turn as time revolves. (*260*)
And nothing is added to them or subtracted, 30
for if they were perishing continuously, they would no longer be.
But what could increase this totality? And where would it come from?
And how could it perish, since nothing is empty of these?

But there are just these very things, and running through one another (*265*)
at different times they come to be different things and yet are always and continuously the same. 35
{But under Love}[33] we come together into one *kosmos,*
{whereas under Strife it [that is, the ordered whole] grew apart, so as} to be many from one,
from which [that is, many things] all things that were and are and will be in the future
have sprouted: trees and men and women, (*270*)
and beasts and birds and fishes nurtured in water, 40
and long-lived gods highest in honors.
{Under her [that is, Strife]} they never cease, continually darting in dense whirls . . .
without pausing, and never . . . (*275*)
but {many} lifetimes before . . . 45
before passing from them . . .
{and never cease} continually darting {in all directions}
for neither the sun . . .
{the onrush full of this} . . . (*280*)
nor any of the others . . . 50
but interchanging in a circle {they dart in all directions}
for at that time the impassable earth runs, and the sun as well
{and the sphere [that is, the celestial sphere]} as large as even now {it is judged} by men {to be}
in the same way all these things {were running} through one another (*285*)
{and having been driven away, each of them reached} different {and peculiar} places 55
{self-willed}; and we were coming together in the mid-most places to be only one.

33. Translator's note: At this point begins the section for which the papyrus is our only evidence. There are numerous gaps in the preserved text, some of which can be restored with a good degree of confidence from other Empedoclean verses. For the rest, the choice is either to stay close to what the papyrus contains or to fill in the gaps by conjecture informed by one's knowledge of the author's vocabulary, style, and views. The translation provided is based on two versions of the Greek text and the accompanying translations: the original publication by Martin and Primavesi (1999), and the text printed in Inwood (2001). Inwood is more conservative, staying closer to the papyrus text, while Martin and Primavesi are more willing to propose ways to restore missing material. The words enclosed in curly brackets translate supplements of Martin and Primavesi that Inwood does not include. The purpose has been to offer a readable translation while marking places where there is a good chance that the text translated is not what Empedocles wrote.

But when indeed Strife passed through {and reached} the depths
{of the swirl,} and Love {comes to be} in the midst of the vortex,
{then} indeed all these things come together to be only one. (*290*)
{Strive eagerly} so that {my account may arrive} not only through ears,
{and behold} the unerring truths that are around while you listen to me.
I shall show you also through your eyes {where they [that is, the elements] find} a larger body:
first, the coming together and development {of the offspring}
. . . and all that now still remain of this {generation} (*295*)
both among the {wild species} of mountain-roaming beasts
and among the twofold offspring of men, {and also among}
the offspring of root-bearing {fields} and vine-mounting {clusters of grapes}.
From these stories bring back to your mind undeceiving evidence,
for you will see the coming together and development of the offspring. (*300*)
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 158.1–159.4 [lines 1–35] + Strasbourg Papyrus *ensemble* a [lines 26–69])

48. (B20 + Strasbourg Papyrus, *ensemble* c) {Where Love and Strife have} their guiding {counsels} (*301*)
This is very clear in the mass of mortal limbs:
sometimes we come together through Love into one, all the limbs that have obtained a body, at the peak of flourishing life,
while at other times, split apart through evil quarrels (*305*)
they wander each kind separately on the furthest shore of life.
And it happens the same way for bushes and water-homed fishes
and mountain-dwelling beasts and wing-propelled birds.
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 1124.7–18 + Strasbourg Papyrus *ensemble* c)

49. (B21) But come, behold this witness of my previous discourse, (*309*)
if anything in the foregoing was feeble in form:
the sun, brilliant to see and hot everywhere,
all the immortal things that are drenched in the heat and shining light,

and rain, in all things dark and cold,
and from earth stream forth things rooted and solid.
In Anger they are all apart and have separate forms, (*315*)
but they come together in Love and yearn for one another.
From these all things that were and are and will be in the future
have sprouted: trees and men and women,
and beasts and birds and fishes nurtured in water,
and long-lived gods highest in honors. (*320*)
For there are just these things, and running through one another
they come to have different appearances, for mixture changes them.
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 159.13–26)

50. (B76 + Strasbourg Papyrus, *ensemble* b)
This [i.e., fire] is found in the case of heavy-backed shells of sea-dwelling creatures. (*324*)
. . . (*325*)
There you will see earth {dwelling} in the uppermost parts of the flesh . . . (*327*)
and indeed truly [in the flesh] of stony-skinned tritons and turtles
. . . of horned stags
. . . saying (*330*)
(Plutarch, *The Face in the Moon* 14 927F–928A and *Table Talk* 1.2.5 618B + Strasbourg Papyrus, *ensemble* b)

51. (B23) As when painters decorate votive offerings—
men through cunning well taught in their skill—
who when they take the many-colored pigments in their hands,
mixing in harmony more of these and less of those,
out of them they produce shapes similar to all things,
creating trees and men and women
and beasts and birds and fishes nurtured in water
and long-lived gods highest in honors.
So let not deception compel your mind (*phrēn*) to believe that there is from anywhere else
a source of mortal things, all the endless numbers of
things that have come to be manifest,
but know these things distinctly, having heard the story from a god.
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 160.1–11)

52. (B26) They dominate in turn as the cycle evolves,
and they decrease into one another and grow in their turn,
as destined.
For there are just these things, and running through one
another
they come to be both humans and the tribes of other beasts,
at one time coming together into a single *kosmos* by Love
and at another each being borne apart again by the hatred
of Strife,
until they grow together into one, the whole, and become
subordinate.
Thus in that they have learned to grow to be one out of
many
and in that they again spring apart as many when the one
grows apart,
in that way they come to be and their life is not lasting,
but in that these never cease interchanging continually,
in this way they are always unchanging in a cycle.
(Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* 33.19–34.3)

53. (B139 + Strasbourg Papyrus, *ensemble* d)
. . . to fall apart from one another and encounter their fate
very much against their will, rotting through mournful
necessity;
But for those who now have Love . . .
the Harpies will be present with the tokens {in the lottery}
of death.
Alas that the pitiless day did not destroy me
before I devised with my claws wicked deeds for the sake
of eating flesh.
{But now} in vain in this {storm} I wet my cheeks
{for we are approaching} a very deep {whirl,} I think,
{and} although they do not wish it, {tens of thousands of}
pains will be present in their mind
{to humans,} but we will again mount {you} on {that} account:
{when} an untiring flame happened to meet
. . . bringing on a woeful mixture
. . . things that could produce offspring were born
. . . I entered the final place
. . . with a scream and a cry
. . . having obtained {the meadow of Disaster}
. . . around . . . earth.
(Strasbourg Papyrus *ensemble* d + Porphyry
On Abstinence 2.31 [lines 5–6])