

Empedocles of Acragas

Empedocles (c. 483 – 423) was a philosopher-poet who hailed from Acragas (modern day Agrigento in Sicily) which, in Empedocles' lifetime, went from being a tyranny to being a democracy. His life is shrouded in legend, but his philosophical poetry was highly influential. Aristotle credited him with the invention of rhetoric and he is especially well known for his account of the universe as being composed of four changeless elements and governed by two principle powers or forces: love (*philia*) and strife (*neikos*).

[54] That he belonged to Agrigentum in Sicily he himself testifies at the beginning of his *Purifications*:

My friends, who dwell in the great city sloping down to yellow Acragas, hard by the citadel.

So much for his family.

Timaeus in the ninth book of his *Histories* says he was a pupil of Pythagoras, adding that, having been convicted at that time of stealing his discourses, he was, like Plato, excluded from taking part in the discussions of the school; and further, that Empedocles himself mentions Pythagoras in the lines:

And there lived among them a man of superhuman knowledge, who verily possessed the greatest wealth of wisdom.

Others say that it is to Parmenides that he is here referring.

[55] Neanthes states that down to the time of Philolaus and Empedocles all Pythagoreans were admitted to the discussions. But when Empedocles himself made them public property by his poem, they made a law that they should not be imparted to any poet. He says the same thing also happened to Plato, for he too was excommunicated. But which of the Pythagoreans it was who had Empedocles for a pupil he did not say. For the epistle commonly attributed to Telauges and the statement that Empedocles was the pupil of both Hippasus and Brontinus he held to be unworthy of credence. Theophrastus affirms that he was an admirer of Parmenides and imitated him in his verses, for Parmenides too had published his treatise *On Nature* in verse.

[56] However, Hermippus's account is that he was an admirer not so much of Parmenides as of Xenophanes, with whom in fact he lived and whose writing of poetry he imitated, and that his meeting with the Pythagoreans was subsequent. Alcidamas tells us in his treatise on *Physics* that Zeno and Empedocles were pupils of Parmenides about the same time, that afterwards they left him, and that, while Zeno framed his own system, Empedocles became the pupil of Anaxagoras and Pythagoras, emulating the latter in dignity of life and bearing, and the former in his physical investigations.

[57] Aristotle in his *Sophist* calls Empedocles the inventor of rhetoric as Zeno of dialectic. In his treatise *On Poets* he says that Empedocles was of Homer's school and powerful in diction, being great in metaphors and in the use of all other poetical devices. He also says that he wrote other poems, in particular the invasion of Xerxes and a hymn to Apollo, which

a sister of his (or, according to Hieronymus, his daughter) afterwards burnt. The hymn she destroyed unintentionally, but the poem on the Persian war deliberately, because it was unfinished. And in general terms he says he wrote both tragedies and political discourses. ...

[67] Thus Heraclides, after telling the story of the woman in a trance, how that Empedocles became famous because he had sent away the dead woman alive, goes on to say that he was offering a sacrifice close to the field of Peisianax.

[68] Some of his friends had been invited to the sacrifice, including Pausanias. Then, after the feast, the remainder of the company dispersed and retired to rest, some under the trees in the adjoining field, others wherever they chose, while Empedocles himself remained on the spot where he had reclined at table. At daybreak all got up, and he was the only one missing. A search was made, and they questioned the servants, who said they did not know where he was. Thereupon someone said that in the middle of the night he heard an exceedingly loud voice calling Empedocles. Then he got up and beheld a light in the heavens and a glitter of lamps, but nothing else. His hearers were amazed at what had occurred, and Pausanias came down and sent people to search for him. But later he bade them take no further trouble, for things beyond expectation had happened to him, and it was their duty to sacrifice to him since he was now a god.

[69] Hermippus tells us that Empedocles cured Panthea, a woman of Agrigentum, who had been given up by the physicians, and this was why he was offering sacrifice, and that those invited were about eighty in number. Hippobotus, again, asserts that, when he got up, he set out on his way to Etna; then, when he had reached it, he plunged into the fiery craters and disappeared, his intention being to confirm the report that he had become a god. Afterwards the truth was known, because one of his slippers was thrown up in the flames; it had been his custom to wear slippers of bronze. To this story Pausanias is made (by Heraclides) to take exception. ...

[76] His doctrines were as follows, that there are four elements, fire, water, earth and air, besides friendship by which these are united, and strife by which they are separated. These are his words:

Shining Zeus and life-bringing Hera, Aidoneus and Nestis, who lets flow from her tears the source of mortal life

where by Zeus he means fire, by Hera earth, by Aidoneus air, and by Nestis water.

‘And their continuous change,’ he says, ‘never ceases,’ as if this ordering of things were eternal. At all events he goes on:

At one time all things uniting in one through Love, at another each carried in a different direction through the hatred born of strife.

[77] The sun he calls a vast collection of fire and larger than the moon; the moon, he says, is of the shape of a quoit, and the heaven itself crystalline. The soul, again, assumes all the various forms of animals and plants. At any rate he says:

Before now I was born a boy and a maid, a bush and a bird, and a dumb fish leaping out of the sea.

His poems *On Nature* and *Purifications* run to 5000 lines, his *Discourse on Medicine* to 600. Of the tragedies we have spoken above.

Diogenes Laertius 8.54–77, trans. R. D. Hicks

The following translations draw from B. Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles* (University of Toronto Press, 2001) and P. Curd and R. D. McKirahan, *A Presocratics Reader: Selected Fragments and Testimonia* (Hackett, 2011).

However, Empedocles posits four [things], positing earth as a fourth in addition to those already mentioned [water, air, fire] (for these always persist and do not come into being except with respect to quantity or fewness, combining into one and separating out from one).

Aristotle *Metaphysics* 984a8–11 = DK 31 A28

Empedocles came after them [the Pythagoreans] and wrote a great deal about the nature of daemons too, how they dwell in and administer affairs all over the earth, being very numerous. He said that the principle of the universe is strife and love and that god is the intelligent fire of the monad and that all things are constructed from fire and will be dissolved into fire. The Stoics too agree with roughly this doctrine, as they expect a conflagration. He assents to reincarnation more than anything else, speaking thus:

Before now I was born a boy and a maid, a bush and a bird, and a dumb fish leaping out of the sea.

He said that all souls transfer into all bodies. For Pythagoras who taught these doctrines said that he had been Euphorbus who campaigned against Troy, claiming that he could recognize his shield.

Hippolytus *Refutation* 1.3 = DK 31 A31, trans. B. Inwood adapted

Empedocles of Acragas, son of Meton, says that there are four elements (*stoicheia*), fire, air, water, earth, and two principle powers (*archikas dunameis*), love (*philia*) and strife (*neikos*), of which the former is inclined to unite and the latter to divide. He speaks thus:

First, hear of the four roots of all things, gleaming Zeus and life-bringing Hera and Aidoneus and Nestis, who moistens with tears the spring of mortals

For he calls the aether and the boiling 'Zeus', the air 'life-giving Hera', the earth 'Aidoneus', and 'Nestis' and 'the spring of mortals' are the seed (*to sperma*) and water.

Aëtius 1.3.20 = DK 31 A33, trans. B. Inwood adapted

Empedocles says that the boiling <and> aether is Zeus, the earth is life-giving Hera, Aidoneus is air (since it has no light of its own but is illuminated by the sun, moon, and stars), the seed and water is Nestis and the 'spring of mortals'. Out of these four elements, out of the combination of these opposite natures (dryness and wetness and hotness and coldness), the entirety (*to pan*) comes to be. Through their mutual proportion (*analogia*) and blending (*krasis*) they produce the universe and suffer partial changes but do not permit the dissolution of the universe.

For he speaks thus:

at one time all coming together by love into one, and at another time again all being borne apart separately by the hostility of strife

Stobaeus *Eclogae* 1.10.11b, p. 121 W = DK 31 A33, trans. B. Inwood adapted

Fire is Zeus; the earth which brings the fruits needed for life is Hera; air is Aidoneus, because although we look through it at everything, it alone is not seen; water is Nestis, for it alone is the bearer of nourishment for animals which are nourished, although it cannot nourish them by itself. For, he says, if it did nourish them, animals would never have died of starvation since there is always an abundance of water in the cosmos. That is why he calls water Nestis, because although it is a cause of nutrition it is not able to nourish those animals which are nourished

Hippolytus *Refutatio* 7.29.5-6 = DK 31 A33, trans. B. Inwood

As for Empedocles, although he uses these causes more extensively than Anaxagoras, he neither uses them adequately nor find any consistency in them. At any rate, love (*philia*) often disaggregates things for him while strife (*neikos*) aggregates them. For whenever the universe is divided up into its elements (*stoicheia*) because of strife, fire is combined into one, and so is each of the other elements, and whenever things come together into one again under the influence of love, it is necessary that the parts from each get separated again. Empedocles, then, going beyond his predecessors, was the first to introduce the division of this cause, not making the principle of change one thing, but distinct and contrary ones. Further, he was the first to say that the kinds of matter, the so-called elements, were four. Yet he does not use four but treats them as two only, fire by itself, on the one hand, and its opposites — earth, air, and water — taken as one nature, on the other (as we may gather from studying his verses). He, then, as we say, spoke about the principles in this way and as being many.

Aristotle *Metaphysics* 985a21–b4 = DK 31 A37, trans. Reeve adapted

He speaks in conflict with the phenomena, destroying alteration (*alloiōsis*), which is manifest; and in conflict with himself, because he says on the one hand that the elements are unchanging and do not come into being from each other but other things from them. Yet, on the other hand he says that while love is dominant all things become one and produce the Sphere which is qualityless (*apoion*), so that neither the peculiar quality (*idiotēs*) of fire nor of any of the others is preserved in it any longer, since each of the elements loses its proper form (*to oikeion eidos*).

Philoponus *De Generatione et Corruptione* 19.3 Vitelli = DK 31 A41, trans. B. Inwood adapted

Empedocles says that the first generations of animals and plants were not at all whole, but were disjointed with parts not grown together; and the second generations were like dream images, with the parts growing together; the third were whole-natured; the fourth were no longer [produced] from homoiomerous substances like earth and water, but at this stage they were produced by each other - [the cause being] the condensation of the nourishment for some, while for others the beauty of the women, which produced stimulation of the reproductive movement [lit. movement of the seed], also [functioned as a cause]. The species of all the animals were distinguished according to the character of the blends [of elements]; some are more properly inclined to the water, others (whichever ones have a predominance of the fiery element) fly into the air, the heavier ones go to the ground, while those equally balanced in their blend ...

Aëtius 5.19.5 = DK 31 A72, trans. B. Inwood

[1] On the topic of sense-perception, most opinions generally of two types: for some make it a result of the like, and others a result of the opposite. Parmenides, Empedocles, and Plato make perception the result of the like, and the Anaxagoreans and Heracliteans of the opposite. The former group was found plausible because most other things are understood by likeness and because it is natural for all animals to recognize what is akin to them; and again, since sense-perception occurs by effluence and since the like moves towards the like...

[7] Empedocles gives a similar account of all the senses and says that sense-perception occurs by means of [things] fitting into the pores of each sense. That is why they cannot discern each other's objects, because some senses happen to have pores which are somehow too wide for the object of perception, while others have pores which are too narrow, so that the objects which do not touch are able to go right through and the others are completely unable to get in. And he also tries to describe what [the organ of] vision is like. He says that the inside of it is fire and around this are earth and air, through which it passes, being fine like the light in lanterns. And the pores are alternately of fire and water; we recognize white things with the pores of fire and black things with those of water (for each sort fits into the respective pores). And the colours are brought to vision by the effluence.

[8] [Eyes] are not [all] constructed in like fashion, <but some are constructed from like [elements]> and others from the opposite things, and some have the fire in the middle, some on the outside. That is why some animals have sharper vision in the daytime, others at night — the ones with less fire by day (for their internal light is equalized by the external light), the ones [with less] of the opposite [see better] at night (for they too have their deficiency supplemented). And each kind [has the] opposite [characteristic] in the opposite conditions. For those who have too much fire have dim vision (for being further increased in the daytime it covers over and blocks up the pores of water), while for those [with too much] water this same occurs at night (for the fire is blocked by the water)... for the one group until the water is dissipated by the external fire, and for the other until the fire is dissipated by the air. For the opposite is the cure for each group. That which is constructed with an equal amount of both [fire and water] is optimally blended and best. And this is roughly what he says about vision.

[9] Hearing, [he says], occurs as a result of interior sound, for when it is moved by the voice, it echoes internally. For hearing (which he calls a 'fleshy shoot') is like a 'bell' for echoes equal to those it received. When set in motion it drives the air against the solid parts and makes an echo. Smell occurs by inhalation. That is why those in whom the movement of the breath is most vigorous smell most acutely. And the strongest odour comes as an effluence from fine, light objects. Concerning taste and touch he gives no individual account of either the manner or means of their operation, except the general point that sense-perception occurs by fitting into pores. And pleasure occurs by means of things which are like in both their parts and in their blend, and pain by the opposite. He speaks similarly of thought and ignorance.

Theophrastus *De Sensibus* 1, 7-9 = DK 31 A86, trans. B. Inwood adapted

Empedocles said that colour was that which fit into the pores of the eye ... And there are four colours, equal in number to the elements: white, black, red, yellow

Aëtius 1.15.3 = DK 31 A92, trans. B. Inwood

Hear first the four roots of all things: shining Zeus and life-bringing Hera and Aidoneus and Nestis, who with her tears gives moisture to the source of mortals.

Aëtius 1.3.20 = DK 31 B6, trans. R. McKirahan

I will tell you another thing. There is no *phusis* (nature?) of any mortal things,
Nor any end in destructive death

But there is only mixture and interchange of what is mixed,
And *phusis* is the name given to them by people.

Plutarch, *Adversus Colotem* 1111F–12A = DK 31 B8, trans. B. Inwood adapted

For it is impossible that there should be coming to be from what is not,
and that what is should be destroyed is unaccomplishable and unheard of;
for it will always be there, wherever one may push it on any occasion.

De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia 975b1–4 = DK 31 B12, trans. B. Inwood

None of the entirety is empty (*keneon*) or overfull (*perisson*).

Aëtius 1.18.2 = DK 31 B13, trans. McKirahan adapted

Of the entirety, nothing is empty; from where, then, could something be added to it?

De Melisso, Xenophane, Gorgia 976b23 = DK 31 B14, trans. McKirahan adapted

By her [Love] many neckless faces sprouted, and arms were wandering naked, bereft of
shoulders, and eyes were roaming alone, in need of foreheads.

Simplicius *In De Cael.* 586.12, 587.1–2 = DK 31 B57, trans. R. McKirahan

Many grew with faces and chests on both sides, man-faced ox-progeny, and some to the
contrary rose up as ox-headed things with the form of men, compounded partly
from men and partly from women, fitted with shadowy parts.

Aelian *De Natura Animalium* 16.29 = DK 31 B61, trans. R. McKirahan

Come now, hear how, as fire was being separated, it raised up the nocturnal shoots of
men and women, full of wailing. For the story is not off the point or ignorant. First the
whole-natured forms rose up out of the earth, having a portion of both water and heat.
These the fire sent up, desiring to come to its like, and they did not yet show at all the
lovely shape of limbs or a voice or the member native to men.

Simplicius *In Phys.* 381.29 = DK 31 B62, trans. R. McKirahan

For by earth we see earth, by water, water, by aether, divine aether, and by fire,
annihilating fire, yearning by yearning, and strife by mournful strife.

Aristotle *De Anima* 404b11–15 = DK 31 B109

A father lifts up his own dear son who has changed form, and, praying, slaughters him,
committing a great folly. And they are at a loss, sacrificing him as he entreats them. But
he, refusing to hear the cries, slaughters him and attends an evil feast in his halls. Likewise
a son seizes his father and children their mother, and tearing out their life, devour the
dear flesh.

Sextus Empiricus *Adversus Mathematicos* 9.129 = DK 31 B137, trans. McKirahan