

Empedocles's metaphysics

Anna Marmodoro

Anna Marmodoro, Corpus Christi College, Oxford OX1 4JF, United Kingdom:
anna.marmodoro@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

This issue of *Rhizomata* comprises a collection of essays with special focus on Empedocles' metaphysics, authored by international leading experts in the field. The topics investigated include Empedocles's views on composition, structure, causation, creation, change, causal powers, and the nature of divinity and of divine agency. There is no comprehensive study of such topics in the existing literature on Empedocles.

The field of Empedoclean scholarship is at present divided, because of disagreements regarding textual issues: the question debated is, in a nutshell, whether the extant fragments belong to one or two poems by Empedocles. These disagreements will not be rehearsed in detail here. Suffice it to briefly summarise the main positions on the map: a traditionally mainstream view has it that Empedocles wrote two unrelated poems (see the work of e.g. D. Sedley, H. Diels, R. Wright); those opposing this view argue that he wrote only a one poem to which all the extant fragments belong (see the work of e.g. B. Inwood, R. Janko, O. Primavesi, C. Rowett, S. Trépanier). A third view that has been proposed (e.g. by P. Curd) is that while the new finds cannot tell us whether there was one poem or two, they do show decisively that Empedocles did not keep sharply separated the two types of subject-matter he wrote about, physics and theology.

A second often-discussed interpretative issue in Empedocles studies is how many cosmologies and zoologies Empedocles posited within one complete cosmic cycle. Some defend two cosmologies (e.g. S. Trépanier), some just one (e.g. D. O' Brien). Among those defending two cosmologies, one may further find supporters of either one (e.g. M. Schofield) or of two zoologies (e.g. B. Inwood).

This special issue of *Rhizomata* aims to bring about a shift in the study of Empedocles's philosophy, by making his metaphysical views the focus of the investigation, and by generating constructive discussion even among scholars who hold different (even opposing) views regarding the textual issues. This is not to say that the essays in this issue pay no attention to the linguistic, historical, and other aspects of Empedocles's thought. On the contrary, the essays are firmly rooted in scholarship of the highest level. By defining specifically philosophical directions of inquiry into Empedocles's views, and presenting how five leading Empedocles experts address them, this special issue aims to place Empedocles more prominently within the history of philosophy. His metaphysical views, once investigated and clarified, will lend themselves more easily to be compared and contrasted with his philosophical predecessors and successors.

The essays of this special issue are revised and expanded versions of papers that were presented at an international conference held in Oxford in 2013, as part of my research project *Power Structuralism in Ancient Ontologies*, funded by a starting investigator award from the European Research Council.¹ The project provided not only the financial and organizational resources for the conference to take place, but most importantly the framework for a fresh investigation of Empedocles in the light of the project's research hypotheses.

The core question the project investigates is this: what are for the ancients the fundamental building blocks of reality, out of which everything is constituted? The project's hypothesis is that all ancient thinkers (or most of them) accounted for the constitution of all there is with *powers* as the sole elementary building block in ontology. Powers are instantiated physical properties that dispose their possessor to be or act in a certain way, which is manifested in appropriate circumstances (e.g. something with the power to heat is disposed to heat something cooler in proximity). Powers are directed towards an end (e.g. the power to heat); reaching the end realizes the power and changes the causal profile of the world into a different set of powers (e.g. the realization of the power to heat results in a change of temperature of the object heated).

'Power Structuralism' is an expression I introduced (in 2010) and used for two distinct purposes: as a new approach to the study and understanding of ancient Greek philosophy; and as a novel neo-Aristotelian metaphysical system. In its first use, it refers to a method of studying, in the first instance, the metaphysical systems of the main ancient thinkers of the first millennium of Western thought. The method consists in exploring such systems as power ontologies, namely as ontologies whose most fundamental building blocks are powers. This is the relevant sense of power structuralism as backdrop to the present special issue of *Rhizomata*. (In its second use, the expression 'Power Structuralism' refers to my own power ontology. This ontology leans on Aristotle's own power ontology with respect to its essential metaphysical intuitions, but is developed in new directions within the context of contemporary metaphysical questions and debates.)

Ancient ontological systems, over a period of roughly nine centuries, from 600 BC to 300 AD, have so far been understood and classified on the basis of the derivative items, rather than the basic items that the systems employ for accounting for what there is – i.e. in terms of objects and processes, rather than the powers from which both objects and processes metaphysically derive. For instance, is Heraclitean flux a chain of interacting powers, or a succession of inert categorical properties? Saying that it is a process does not give us an account of what it is. Additionally, one might ask: is

¹ In this connection, thanks are due to Brian Prince, David Yates, and Giorgia Carta, who assisted with the organization of the conference.

Parmenidean immutability inertness, or eternal dynamic equilibrium? And if it is inertness, are the immutables disjoint or thoroughly relational, interdependent on, and interwoven with, one another? Are Democritean atoms inert, or bundles of powers which enable them to 'struggle', and 'collide' to 'bind together' to form what there is in nature? Generalizing from these examples: can it be that the ancients thought that the roots of nature are powers, or did they think that non-powers, i.e. inert entities divested of any active or passive power, were also needed to build the world? Empedocles figures prominently among the thinkers with respect to whom the question needs to be asked. The contributors to this special issue explore Empedocles' thought, from different angles and with different conclusions, in the light of my power structuralism interpretative proposal.

Primavesi, in his essay on 'Powers and Numbers in Empedocles' *Physics*', argues that the six fundamental principles that Empedocles posited to account for reality (Love, Strife and the four elements) are *all* causally efficacious. Love and Strife are efficient causes; but the elements too are causally active, changing their own state (towards homogeneous concentration, by the attraction of like to like). Additionally, Primavesi argues for the significance of the Pythagorean *Tetractys* on Empedocles thought, which is expressed in the numerical ratios that regulate the cosmic cycle.

In his essay on 'Elemental Change in Empedocles', John Palmer argues that Empedocles envisages the elemental roots too as having their own life cycles and undergoing their own (but not self-caused) transformations, like virtually everything else in his system, except Love and Strife. Empedocles conceives of the elements' destruction and generation in terms of their losing and recovering their distinctive qualitative identities as they intermingle with one another through Love's agency and grow apart through Strife's. Palmer argues that this result makes it possible to understand the crucial verses *Physika* I 234-6 as Empedocles' general description of the dual processes involved in the generation and destruction of all specimen compounds.

In her essay on 'Powers, Structure, and Thought in Empedocles', Patricia Curd raises the question of how it is that Empedocles' world is an organized system of diverse entities maintaining regularity over long periods of time. She argues that it is the impulses and thoughts of the roots (qua agents in the system) and of Love and Strife that answer these questions. Love and Strife, working within the laws of nature, provide the major structural aspects of the cosmos: the circular motion of the whirl created by the opposing forces produces the masses of roots that are worked up into the heavenly bodies and the living things that populate the cosmos. Curd argues for reading Empedocles as a proto-power-structuralist, by which she means that for Empedocles the basic ingredients of the world (the roots and Love and Strife) are ontologically prior to the medium sized objects of sensible experience.

Catherine Rowett's essay is titled 'Love, sex and the gods: why things have divine names in Empedocles' poem, and why they come in pairs'. She addresses the question of

whether, when Empedocles uses a divine name for one of the items in his ontology, this serves merely as a poetic metaphor, or it means that the item in question is a god, with personal agency and intentions. In Empedocles' poem, most things are described as if they were intentional agents and seem to function as such. Rowett argues that Empedocles was talking of a universe in which *all* the components, without exception, are living beings with mental capacities and that their power is the power of agents, acting voluntarily, not of inanimate forces acting mechanically. There is nothing in Empedocles' ontology that could be described as inert matter, and there are no inanimate things.

Concluding this special issue, in his 'Empedoclean superorganisms' David Sedley looks at Empedocles' zoogony, where an original set of single-specialism organisms – solitary hands, eyes, etc. – combine into complex organisms, of which the fittest survive. What the fittest is naturally selected for is not the individual and/or its kin, but, as most manifestly in insect colonies, the cooperative group. Empedocles' Love likewise works by promoting co-operation, whose emergence in complex organisms reflects her growing power, and the periodic world-organism, Sphairos, her ultimate triumph. This latter divinity is not a homogeneous blend of the elements, but a single self-sufficient superorganism. In this appeal to superorganism theory, Sedley sees in Empedocles a less recognized anticipation of (one strand of) the Darwinian tradition.