

LOVE, SEX AND THE GODS: WHY THINGS HAVE DIVINE
NAMES IN EMPEDOCLES' POEM, AND WHY THEY COME IN
PAIRS.

Abstract: When Empedocles uses a divine name for one of the items in his ontology, does this serve merely as a poetic metaphor or does it mean 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. Is there anything in the universe that does not have a mind or does not engage in intentional action? In this paper I argue 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.

My aim in this paper is to investigate (i) which of the terms in Empedocles' poem are meant to be the names of gods, and (ii) whether his use of a divine name to refer to some item in the cosmos carries any significance.¹ In the course of this

¹ In this paper, fragments of the Presocratics are cited by their numbers in Diels and Kranz (1951) except where some other collection is cited. I have received helpful comments and advice from many collaborators and colleagues, including particularly Jean-Claude Picot who has supplied me with items from the bibliography as well as timely criticisms and corrections. I am also grateful to Peter Kingsley, David Sedley, Michael Pakaluk, Carol Atack and Dafydd Bates, among others, for

investigation, I shall propose the following thesis, which I believe is supported by the findings in this paper: that when Empedocles uses a personal name, and particularly when he uses a divine name, this indicates that the item in question is not inert matter, or an impersonal force. It indicates, rather, that the item in question is a personal agent with mental capacities and purposes, including the ability to alter its behaviour and attitudes at will—for instance, by becoming more affectionate or less affectionate. My hypothesis is that the changes that characterise the world and the components of the world in Empedocles' cosmos are voluntary changes, adopted by personal agents in the cosmos who have a personal reason to act one way or another. If this is right, then Empedocles does not have an ontology of things or stuffs, but of spirits or agents.

I also think that it is a mistake to think of any of these cosmic components as impersonal powers, or forces, that automatically tend one way or another. The cosmos is, I suggest, much more of a living being, inhabited by—or perhaps rather comprised of—living agents and spirits, with dispositions and inclinations to act in one way or another, but not constrained by mechanistic forces or impulses to do so. It is not a mechanical system.

Nor, however, is it a random or capricious system. When I speak of agency and minds, of gods and personal beings, I mean beings with desires and purposes and

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plans, whose main role is to pursue projects that are valuable and meaningful. To do things at will, or voluntarily, is not to do them under compulsion, nor randomly without purpose, but to do what one wants and plans to do, because it seems good. The actions of things in Empedocles' world are the actions of intelligent and rational agents.

Besides this inquiry into whether the components of the world act in certain ways for a reason and voluntarily, I shall also explore the motifs of marriage, love and gender that evidently play some kind of explanatory role in some, at least, of the interactions between these intelligent components of the world. So insofar as their identity as personal agents is not a metaphor, I suggest that their identity as marital partners, alternately drawn to each other and at odds with each other, is also not simply a metaphor. We are dealing, here, with explanations in terms of the dispositions of intelligent agents, and their attitudes towards one another. If we try to eliminate this kind of causation from the Empedoclean cosmos we shall not understand it. This is my claim.

So first we must adjust the title of this paper, to cancel the reference to "things". If I am right, there are virtually no things in Empedocles' ontology, if the word "things" implies medium-sized inanimate objects. Empedocles' universe contains no inanimate objects, except perhaps some artefacts such as a lantern (B84) and a clepsydra (water-thief, B100).²

² Both of these serve as illustrations for physiological structures in a living body, and both are pictured as tools used by a human being. They illustrate how some natural body-part—viz the eyes or lungs respectively—functions like an artificial tool, but for the fact that the bodily organ is not artificial nor designed but natural and spontaneous, and is integral to the agent who uses it, not an external instrument. It is not clear how far an artefact would still be a daimon or agent, since

Second we must ask this: “Does Empedocles’ universe primarily contain divinities, with decision-making powers and affections? Or does it contain stuffs that can be poetically *likened* to divinities, but which are not really agents of that kind? Or does it contain some of each?”. I shall argue that all or most of the players in his cosmos are divine agents, with the capacity to make decisions and act on them.³

This leads, thirdly, to further questions. When Empedocles explains the development of mortal animals, plants, and other temporary compounds, does he think of them as mixtures of *inanimate stuffs*, or as combinations of *divinities*? If they are composed of divinities, are the powers and tendencies of such gods determinate and fixed—as in chemically stable and inalterable elements—so that the behaviour of the mixture is determined by unchanging behavioural patterns in the components? Or can the divine components alter their behaviour, voluntarily? I shall argue for the latter position.

The paper investigates what we can discover about Empedocles’ ontology from looking at his use of divine names in the poem. First I investigate the so-called “roots”—the four elements— and argue that they are literally divine agents. Secondly, I examine the names that he uses for harmonious and hostile motivations (that is, love and strife), and argue that love and strife are both external beings (deities who serve as agents and causes and are the recipients of cult), and also the

its structure is made by an external craftsman, not internal inclinations within its components to combine voluntarily into a new whole.

³ In this paper I shall not address the question of why they are *divine*, since all Empedocles’ agents seem to be *daimones*, and it is therefore not clear what is added by calling something divine. Perhaps there are mortal compounds that are too temporary to qualify as divine, but even these are composed of divinities. So my focus in this paper is on whether there is anything that is not an intelligent agent, not whether there is anything that is not a divine agent.

effects brought about in other beings, by those causes—that is, the resulting attitudes and dispositions of other players in the drama. Thirdly, I investigate the role of gender and marital relations in the cosmos, given that the elements appear to be pairs of male and female divinities, and that, in describing how they mingle in love, Empedocles uses an expression used by Homer for describing sexual relations.

Finally, I look briefly at some other divinities that get an occasional mention in the poem, and (in Section IV) at the god called “Sphairos”.

I The roots or elements

Traditional two-poems readings of Empedocles used to think of the four elements as four kinds of inert material stuff—earth, air, fire, and water—which are shoved about by two moving causes, which are respectively responsible for gathering and scattering the stuff. On this picture the elements are conceived as lifeless matter, each one characterised by permanent physical qualities, but with no mental or intentional character. This reading assumes that Empedocles had an ontology of stuff, and that he conceived of four basic stuffs with fixed properties, which have certain set dispositions resulting from their permanent properties, but no capacity to change their dispositions of their own accord, nor to move of their own accord, other than in the way that is natural to them perhaps.⁴ Movement of these stuffs—either all movement, or movement that is contrary to their fixed dispositions— has to be forced movement that comes from some motive cause outside them.

⁴ There is much debate as to whether the elements naturally tend “like to like” and whether assembling elemental masses at their natural locations requires an external force or is achieved just by letting the elements behave according to their own tendencies. I shall not enter these debates, since they belong to the ontology that I am disputing, and make no material difference to my case.

For such readings, Empedocles' habit of describing these elements as gods or *daimones* would have to be a kind of poetic fancy, metaphorical at best, confusing at worst. For, surely, they would say, these stuffs would be the least alive things in the entire cosmos.

But should we attribute this post-Aristotelian, or post-Cartesian, ontology of inert elemental stuffs to the pre-Aristotelian Empedocles, without considering whether he might have meant something else? What alternatives are there? My thesis is that Empedocles' cosmos is not like that at all, but is composed entirely of personal beings with intelligence and desires, who change their dispositions at will, and have no fixed character that is immune to change. In fact I shall suggest that it is not enough to replace the ontology of inert stuff, or inanimate things, with an ontology of powers and permanent forces, because that still fails to capture the way in which the Empedoclean cosmos is characterised by beings whose dispositions spontaneously change and periodically reverse altogether.

My suggestion is that Empedocles thinks of the components of the cosmos as personal beings with their own voluntary plans and motives—and he thinks that they can change their moral intentions and redirect their efforts voluntarily, in response to their appreciation of the power and influence of the divine beings that rule the world. This is a primitive and basic feature of these beings, and is part of their conscious motivation, not the result of external causes operating on impersonal stuff. Empedoclean beings do not have fixed patterns of behaviour. They have the capacity to change their ways voluntarily. The patterns of change in the world can be traced ultimately to the moral choices of agents, at every level of being. This is the key message of the Empedoclean doctrine, I suggest. This is also how Love and Strife gain and lose their influence, because under their influence, the beings in the world,

all of which are moral agents, can respond to each other in friendly or unfriendly ways, and in different ways at different times.⁵

I.i Fragment 6

The three verses of fragment B6 are the most famous lines concerning earth, air, fire and water. Here Empedocles announces his “four roots” (apparently mentioning them for the first time). The lines are quoted in various forms by Sextus Empiricus, Stobaeus, Hippolytus, Eusebius, Probus, Tzetzes, Clement, Philoponus, Diogenes Laertius, Athenagoras, Heraclitus Homericus, as well as the work known as Pseudo-Plutarch’s *Placita*, which (together with Stobaeus) forms the main basis for Diels’ reconstruction of the doxography attributed to Aetius (Diels 1879).

τέσσαρα γὰρ πάντων ριζώματα πρῶτον ἄκουε·
Ζεὺς ἀργῆς Ἥρη τε φερέσβιος ἠδ' Αἰδωνεύς
Νῆστις θ', ἣ δακρύοις τέγγει κρούνωμα βρότειον.

Hear first the four roots of all,
Zeus the bright, Hera the life-bringer, Aidoneus,
and Nestis who wets the fountain of mortal life with tears.

DK31B6

To the puzzlement of all subsequent readers, instead of saying that the four roots of all things are “earth, air, fire, water”, Empedocles gives the names of four gods: Zeus, Hera, Aidoneus and Nestis.

In antiquity, as in modern times, interpreters tried to decode the names, so as to obtain a plausible one-to-one correlation between the names listed in B6 and the four elements that the doxographical tradition attributed to Empedocles.

Somehow, everyone supposed, the four names in B6 must stand for those four

⁵ For a fuller exposition of how this reading of Empedocles plays out in the cosmic cycle see my definitive treatment in Osborne (2005).

elements. Yet the correlation was hard to discern, since some of these gods are not obviously associated with any of these elements in the mythology. So what was Empedocles trying to do and why?

The interpretations from antiquity are clearly mostly guesswork, based on total bafflement. Their main technique for decoding the text is etymology. So for instance, the *Placita* (Ps-Plutarch) appeals to the word for boiling, *zesis*, in its attempt to link the name “Zeus” to heat, so as to make “Zeus” mean elemental fire:

Δία μὲν γὰρ λέγει τὴν ζέσιν καὶ τὸν αἰθέρα, Ἥρην τε φερέσβιον τὸν ἄερα, τὴν δὲ γῆν τὸν Ἄιδωνέα, Νῆστιν δὲ καὶ κροῦνωμα βρότειον οἰονεὶ τὸ σπέρμα καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ.

For when he says “Zeus”, that means the boiling and the aether; “life-giving Hera” means the air; “Aidoneus” means the earth, and “Nestis” and “fountain of mortal life” are as it were sperm and water.⁶

Notice how the *Placita* uses the term *aither* to mean “fire”. As Peter Kingsley has shown, the term *aither* seems to have changed its meaning over time. Probably it meant ‘fire’ when this author was writing. Yet, as we know from other fragments, in Empedocles, *aither* is a term for air, not fire.⁷ Meanwhile, it is almost certain, as we shall see, that “Zeus” in B6 is really a name for air (which Empedocles would call *aither*). So perhaps Ps.-Plutarch or Aetius, or whoever wrote this passage first, had some older source, which correlated Zeus with *aither* and because by this stage *aither* had come to mean fire, this led the author to this mistaken suggestion that

⁶ Ps Plutarch *Placita* 878A, often referenced as Aetius I.3.20; cf Sextus Empiricus *Adv Math* 10.315. See also Philodemus *De Pietate* 2, p.63 Gomperz.

⁷ B22, B109. See Kingsley (1995) Chapter 2 and the table of terms used by Empedocles for his four roots, in Wright (1981) p. 23.

Zeus is *aither*/fire, which he then tried to support by way of an etymological speculation.⁸

Having mis-assigned Zeus to fire, the author must then find another candidate in B6 to fit the element “air”. He needs to distribute what he takes to be the remaining three elements (air, earth, water) to the remaining three deities; and so the rumours start.

All this is carefully traced by Peter Kingsley, in his *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic*. Kingsley rightly urges the importance of understanding B6 correctly, taking the divine names seriously, and diagnosing why Empedocles chooses these names and epithets. His results have far-reaching consequences,⁹ which he explores over five chapters of his book.¹⁰ By examining the use of the homeric epithets, particularly φερέσβιος (applied to Hera in B6), and νηφεληγερότης (recorded by Plutarch as an epithet for air),¹¹ he shows that “Hera” in B6 must be earth, and “Zeus” must be *aither/air* (also known as *ouranos*).¹² The equation of “Hera” with “earth” is supported by evidence from both Hippolytus and Stobaeus.

This leaves “Nestis” meaning “water” and “Aidoneus” meaning fire. Nestis is not familiar to most of us; but Kingsley convincingly confirms the hypothesis that this

⁸ My reasoning here largely follows that of Kingsley (1995). See note 9 for counter arguments.

⁹ Kingsley (1995) p. 14. Many of his conclusions are revivals of hypotheses tried earlier, but his treatment of the grounding for these motifs is much more extensive. There have been reactionary responses in e.g. Picot (2000); Mansfeld (1995) but these do nothing to destroy the impression that Kingsley’s account makes more sense of the whole Empedoclean project, and the list of gods in particular, regardless of any minor or irrelevant details that might be shown to be insecure.

¹⁰ See also Kingsley (1994).

¹¹ Plutarch *Quaestiones Conviviales* 683e. See Kingsley (1995) pp. 28, 44.

¹² Kingsley (1995) Chapter 2.

is the Sicilian Persephone,¹³ and that her tears (mentioned in B6.3) relate to the myths of her annual winter visit to Hades, and the springs that flow only in some seasons.¹⁴

The fourth in the list of “roots” is Aidoneus, about which the ancient interpreters were unsure. Some identified it as earth and others as air.¹⁵ All we really know is that Aidoneus is a name for the god Hades. As we have seen, Hades must be the fire god.

But now, if we take the Hades name seriously, and remind ourselves that “roots” are very likely not the kind of thing that the later Greeks meant by “elements”, things begin to fall into place. If Nestis is Persephone and Aidoneus is Hades, Persephone’s chthonic spouse, we should surely think of these gods more as pairs of male and female divinities, and less as a list of four single elements. B6 is not a list of four co-equal elemental gods. It mentions *two marital couples*.

Zeus and Hera are husband and wife, king and queen among the Olympian gods of the upper world; Hades and Persephone are husband and wife, king and queen among the Chthonic gods of the underworld and mystery religion. This suggests that Empedocles’ four-element system is not just about chemical composition. Indeed, describing it as a “four element system” may be rather misleading. It is a story about two pairs of male and female gods.

¹³ Kingsley (1995) Chapter 22. See also earlier suggestions on these lines in Sturz (1805) pp. 213, 550; Bollack (1970) p. 175. More recent work confirms this hypothesis: see, among others, Picot (2008); Rashed (2008); Rashed (2007).

¹⁴ He also suggests that Hippolytus (Ref. 7.29.4) may be right to suggest an etymological connection with fasting, but this is relatively unimportant to the broader case for equating Nestis with Persephone and with winter streams. Other writers who accept the link with Persephone include Saetta Cottone (2013) p. 79.

¹⁵ Earth: Ps Plutarch; Air: Hippolytus Ref. 7.29.5-6; Stobaeus Ecl. 1.10.11b.

According to Empedocles, then, what we experience as elemental fire and water are chthonic gods, which would doubtless seem plausible for someone living in Sicily, where the mountains are liable to spill out fire, as well as water. While these two elements can be in competition (water quenches fire, fire evaporates water), there are periods of calm when they seem to preserve an uneasy harmony under the volcanic surface of Sicily. The well-known story of Hades and Persephone is periodic in just the way Empedocles' cosmos is: it is a story of a couple alternately coming together and going apart, seasonally, over and over, year in year out. The myth of the seasonal return of Persephone provides a clue as to what Empedocles has in mind when he sings of the gods or elements alternately coming together in love and moving apart in hostility. This is not just chemistry or physics. It is also a kind of agency. And it has something to do with marriage and sex.

If the marriage of Hades and Persephone underpins the seasonal association and dissociation of fire and water, what about Zeus and Hera? Again the solution to the riddle of why Zeus is *aither* and Hera is earth is probably not to be found in chemistry or physics. Any satisfactory explanation should also appeal to the stories associated with Zeus and Hera—for instance, their notorious marital strife. Sometimes Zeus and Hera quarrel and deceive each other; sometimes their marriage is harmonious. Perhaps this too provides an allegory for seasonal cycles in the region where air and earth meet—for the productivity in crops and husbandry during the fruitful seasons of the year and for the violent storms in winter. Or perhaps it is more than allegory: for it may reflect the authentic anthropological origins of the very idea of marital harmony and disharmony among the gods. These myths may well have originated, and indeed survived, as tales about the predictable or unpredictable seasonal behaviour of the gods of sky and earth. Empedocles need not be making it

up, as a new theory, so much as reclaiming some traditional wisdom built into the mythology.

Probably some readers would reject Kingsley's approach, which I have been following closely in this section. Yet even if he is wrong about which god is which element, my point about married couples survives. Whichever element is at issue in each case, B6 clearly provides the basis of a narrative. It does not list chemical components, but mentions pairs of male and female divinities in marital relationships. While it does not itself tell us about the periodicity in their conflicts, we are surely expected to know about those things: they are evidently significant for understanding the periodicity in Empedocles' cosmos (which, I suggest, is also trying to attribute natural periodicity to the voluntary agency of the chief actors in the drama under the influence of Love and Strife alternately).

These reflections should remove the temptation to think of B6 as a list of four elemental stuffs, curiously encoded with the names of random gods. We shall no longer complain that Empedocles has wrapped something simple and scientific in a garment of misleading poetic metaphor. It is better to start from the assumption that he is talking about something for which these are the *right* terms, and that he has chosen them because they provide a fuller causal account of the phenomena that he is trying to explain.

What I am suggesting, then, is that Empedocles is not saying that the four elements are *aither*-air, earth, fire and water, or giving us what Aristotle thought of as the material causes. He is talking about some quite different causal factors: the ebb and flow of discordant and dysfunctional marital partnerships, the periodicity of the seasons, the reasons why productivity occurs in periods of harmonious collaboration, when the elements are not at war but cohabiting in good order. Love

and strife are not so much *external* to this picture as *part of it*. Sexual attraction and repulsion is *part of the story* of these pairs of gods: they are agents who sometimes love each other and sometimes don't. The influence of Love and Strife is manifest in their choices and desires. So they are not just stuff.

I.ii Organic compounds: B96, B98

While we are considering the marital pairs in B6, we should look at other places where Empedocles mentions these gods again, and at other lines where Empedocles speaks of the elements as gods.

The name Nestis recurs, again naming a root or element, in B96. Empedocles seems to be explaining the composition of bone:

ἡ δὲ Χθὼν ἐπίηρος ἐν εὐστέροισι χοάνοισι
τῷ δύο τῶν ὀκτῶ μερέων λάχε Νήσιδος αἴγλης,
τέσσαρα δ' Ἡφαίστοιο· τὰ δ' ὅστέα λευκὰ γέγοντο
Ἄρμονίης κόλλησιν ἀρηρότα θεσπεσίηθεν.

But of the eight parts, the kindly Earth
took into her broad melting pots two parts of Nestis' glimmer,
and four parts of Hephaestos; these become white bones,
held together by way of Harmony's awesome gluing.

Empedocles B96

In this passage, we seem to be doing biochemistry. Assuming that Chthon is earth, and that to speak of her "melting pots" is not merely to make her an external vessel in which other things combine, but to speak of some structure that allows her to mingle with other types of stuff—perhaps some pores into which fire and water can be absorbed— then we see that a quantity of Chthon-earth (two parts out of eight) is being combined with a similar quantity of Nestis-water, also two parts, and

twice that quantity of Hephaestus-fire, four parts out of eight. As a result, we get bones, once the compound is glued by harmony.¹⁶

As in B6, Nestis is apparently water here;¹⁷ but everyone else seems to have a different name from what they had in B6. Earth was apparently “Hera” in B6, but she must be the one called Chthon in B96. And whereas fire was “Aidoneus” in B6, he is almost certainly called “Hephaestus” in this case.

We may presume that “Harmony” in B96.4 is a reference to Love, given that Empedocles sometimes attributes the unity of compounds and organisms to love. Here the “gluing” should presumably not involve adding further sticky stuff, over and above the eight parts to be joined. Harmony surely uses emotive glue.

We might wonder why bone is made out of eight parts, since all the elements come in multiples of two. The proportions would clearly stay the same if all the numbers were halved—unless we accept Picot’s suggestion that Nestis’s glimmer is not pure water, but a mixture of one part water one part air.¹⁸ If we do not accept that suggestion, bone is made from only three elements (with no aether/air). But notice that, in that case, bones contain equal numbers of male parts to female. Four of the eight parts are Hephaestus, who is male, and four are feminine, two of them being Nestis and two of them Chthon. This seems to me an attractive and significant

¹⁶ I am taking the simplest interpretation of what the text quoted seems to say, on the assumption that “Nestis’ glimmer” is one component, not two. In his *De anima commentary*, Simplicius refers to one part air and one part water (rather than two of water), Simplicius *In De an.* 68.2-14. This forms part of the basis for Picot’s claim that Nestis’s glimmer is not pure water, but a mixture. See note 17.

¹⁷ The idea that *Nestis* is water is universally accepted, and the idea that “Nestis’ glimmer” just means water is almost universally accepted, but is disputed by Picot (2008) who argues—following Simplicius, or, as he thinks, Ps-Simplicius (see above note 16)—that it is a mixture of water and air. Picot cites one predecessor who endorses this view, namely Gallavotti (1975).

¹⁸ See above, note 17.

result, and might account for the duplication of components in some way, though the process of assembly doesn't obviously involve a process of pairing up male and female at each step.

Here too, then, harmony's awesome bonding may be a reference to male bonding with female. We should perhaps imagine that as they enter the melting pots, each component is paired with a corresponding component, of another root of the other gender, so that a set of divine marriages of god with goddess is achieved. Four such marriages would be involved in making bone, that being composed of eight parts, four male and four female.

By contrast with B96, fragment B98 about the composition of blood and flesh does not give precise numbers of parts. In fact it implies that blood and various kinds of flesh are all slight variations ("a little bit more here, a bit less there" B98.4) on a mixture of roughly equal parts of all four elements. Plainly, then, not all compounds are made of eight parts, as bone is in B96. All types of blood and flesh are made of the two male and two female roots.

Someone might be inclined to say that the variation in the divine names used for the roots shows that Empedocles is not really thinking of them as gods, nor as personalities at all. This objection is weakened if (with Kingsley) we accept that Empedocles would have considered the god Hephaestus and the god Hades to be much the same, both gods of fire, both underground, both associated with the volcanic Etna.¹⁹ He may be treating these as alternative names for the same god, not randomly different gods. "Chthon" and "Hephaistos", in B96 and B98, are evidently names for earth and fire respectively, and must be variants on the names used in B6.

¹⁹ Kingsley (1995) p. 76.

So it seems that Empedocles chooses which names to use in any given context, in the light of some significance that those gods held in the religious cult of Empedocles' environment. We know well that gods in antiquity were known by various names, and that the believer often expressed a desire to use a name that was appropriate, or to use many alternative names, in order to address the god in the best possible way.²⁰

I.iii The union of *daimon* and *daimon*, fragment 59

In commenting on Aristotle's *De caelo*, and responding to some questions previously raised by Alexander, Simplicius puzzles over why Aristotle describes the period in which dismembered body parts run into each other and form monsters as happening "in the period of Love" (ἐπὶ τῆς Φιλότητος), as though this occurred when Love was in control.²¹ Simplicius suggests that the expression ἐπὶ τῆς Φιλότητος might be a period of returning Love, not total Love. In the early stages of Love's return, Simplicius says, dismembered parts still wandered alone, due to Strife's disruption, but because of the returning influence of Love they were now pining for union:

ἐν ταύτῃ οὖν τῇ καταστάσει "μονομελῆ" ἔτι τὰ γυῖα ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ Νείκους διακρίσεως ὄντα ἐπλανάτο τῆς πρὸς ἄλληλα μίξεως ἐφιέμενα.

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ (φησί) κατὰ μείζον ἐμίσγετο δαίμονι δαίμων,

ὅτε τοῦ Νείκους ἐπεκράτει λοιπὸν ἡ Φιλότης,

ταῦτά τε συμπίπτεσκον, ὅπῃ συνέκυρσεν ἕκαστα,

ἄλλα τε πρὸς τοῖς πολλὰ διηνεκῆ ἐξεγένοντο.

So in this set-up the limbs, which were still "one-limbed beings" as a result of Strife's division, wandered around pining for intercourse with each other.

"But (says Empedocles) when divinity mingled more with divinity..."
when Love was finally getting a hold over Strife

²⁰ For my own recent discussion of this issue, see Rowett (2013).

²¹ Simplicius *In De caelo* 586-7.

“These things fell together, just however they ran into each other,
And besides these lots of other joined up things emerged.”

Simplicius *In De caelo* 7.587.18-23, with DK B59.

Simplicius’s claim that the one-limbed organisms were pining for union (μίξεως ἐφιέμενα) looks to be another sexual metaphor like the ones that we have found earlier. But what interests me here is the expression in the line quoted directly from Empedocles: “when divinity mingled more with divinity”. Simplicius seems to suggest that this expression (which, again, has sexual overtones) does not describe the one-limbed organisms pining for union, but describes Love and Strife communing in some way. Perhaps he reads ἐμίσητο in a hostile sense (meaning “competing” or “battling”), on the assumption that the two become more combative, as Love evicts Strife.²²

Empedocles, however, may have meant something else.²³ The *daimones* mentioned there could be the one-limbed organisms, for instance. It is striking that Simplicius quotes this line about *daimon* mingling with *daimon* as if it were the evidence for his claim that the one-limbed organisms were “yearning for intercourse”. So his own context invites the thought that those *daimones* are not the

²² For the hostile sense of μίγνυμι see Homer *Iliad* 4.456 (and other occasions, but in those cases with some specification to deliver the hostile meaning).

²³ For a brief survey of the options, and adherents of each, see Martin and Primavesi (1999) pp. 85-6. There is a surprising predominance of support for the suggestion that Empedocles’ *daimones* are fragments of Love (an idea first mooted by Cornford (1912) pp. 238-9 and then followed by Kahn (1960) p. 22, O’Brien (1969) and others). It appears to me that the very idea of “fragments of love” is incoherent, in the Empedoclean ontology of divine elements affected by competing emotions. There is no suggestion that *love* gets divided or scattered in the dispersing of elemental deities, for love is not dispersed among things except as the power of affection that individuals experience that drives them to seek each other. My own view is that the *daimones* are fragments of the Sphairos which is broken into a plurality of pieces at the outbreak of strife. See Osborne (1987) and Osborne (2005).

supergods Love and Strife but the little divided daimones, the one-limbed organisms, and that their mingling is not hostility but unification, whether sexual or organic or both. We might well think of the divided beings, yearning for reunification, in Aristophanes' myth in Plato's *Symposium*.²⁴

Alternatively, the *daimones* who mingle may be neither Love and Strife, nor the one-limbed organisms, but the roots, whom we already know as pairs of male and female gods.²⁵ In that case Empedocles would be saying that inasmuch as these root gods strive for union with their respective partners, under the influence of returning Love, the unification of the one-limbed organisms occurs accidentally. The limbs run into each other, because their elemental components, the root gods, are intensely drawn to each other and are trying to combine; so the one-limbed organisms also stick together, and then continue to combine into larger conglomerations of limbs. This would be the effect of Love "growing in the limbs",²⁶ which makes the elements self-adhesive. The increasing forces of attraction felt by the root gods (the divine pairs of lovers), when their season of yearning to be together in marital harmony is upon them, causes everything (starting with the loose limbs) to rush into each other's arms, legs, necks etc.

Which of these three interpretations should we adopt? My own view is that all these components of the cosmos—Love and Strife, one-limbed organisms,

²⁴ The resemblance is noted by O'Brien (2007).

²⁵ See above, Section I.i.

²⁶ I am borrowing this expression from B30, which speaks of Strife "growing in the limbs". Notice the "limbs" of the god Sphairos in B31, which tremble at the point of Strife's return. Sphairos had no limbs when he was wholly united under love (B29), so the limbs are evidently generated in the first breaking apart of the divine sphere, and they form the basis of the Strife-driven world. Cf B20.2-3, where what come together into one are all the "limbs".

roots— can be called “*daimones*”, and all such *daimones* manifest the transforming effects of Love and Strife. The desire for intercourse is felt everywhere, by the divine roots, single-limbed organisms, and complex organisms. Given that the verb ἐμίσγετο is standard vocabulary for sexual union, and given how Simplicius juxtaposes this line (B59.1) with the line about things falling together randomly (B59.2) and the material on the loose limbs that he had discussed on the previous page (*In de caelo* 586-7), and the way that he relates this to those one-limbed organisms yearning for intercourse, I think it is preferable to give ἐμίσγετο its more natural sense of mixture and sexual union, not hostility. Empedocles should be saying that as love increases her power, the beings in the world are drawn to embrace one another ever more amorously. So the second or third interpretations are preferable to the first, even though the first is Simplicius’s own reading.

I.iv Roots and gods: summary

I suggest that, for Empedocles, the roots really are pairs of gods, and the gods really are the roots of all things, and that the things that result from the marital union of these gods are also themselves gods and agents. So every god and *daimon* in Empedocles’ universe is an agent, with attitudes that affect its behaviour. The elemental divinities come together in love and sexual union, to generate compound wholes, when they are affected by Love, and the effect of Love is to create this kind of bonding and creative generation of new beings. Alternatively, they can diversify and fall apart, into discreet and hostile pieces, solitary limbs and disgruntled organisms with no desire to cohabit, when the effect of Strife creates a reluctance to bond. All the divinities created by the mingling of elemental divinities can alter their behaviour at will, within certain limits.

So I would argue that we should not impose a reductive materialist analysis on this poem, as though Empedocles were trying to talk about inert matter being shoved together and fixed by an external force. A more appropriate model might be magnetic forces, or the powers of attraction or repelling that form the bonds in current physics. But I think we should probably not assimilate Empedocles' ideas to that model either. It is more authentic to keep his idea of intelligent agency clearly before us, and preserve the sense that the power of Love and Strife is manifest in their ability to elicit certain amiable or hostile attitudes in others, so that the roots and components show these attitudes periodically, under the influence of those supergods, and reflect those influences in their choices and desires: they are drawn together or apart by their own volition. They literally come to enjoy each other's company, when under the influence of Love. They literally come to hate and despise each other, and to decline into chaos, when under the influence of Strife. But being under the influence of a divinity, and displaying various dominant attitudes, does not make your choices any less voluntary. It just makes them predictably more or less violent, depending on which mood is dominant.

The roots have divine names, then, because they are gods, *daimones*. They are motivated to combine, because they are attracted to each other. It is not that they could not come apart (for they will one day come apart), but when they come apart, it will be because, at that stage, they want to.

II Are the things called 'Love' and 'Strife' also gods?

Who, or what, are Love and Strife, in Empedocles' ontology? Everyone knows that Empedocles speaks of things periodically coming together in love, and falling apart in the hatred of strife, but to what kind of things is he referring, when he

speaks of “love” and “strife”? Are they personal beings with wills and plans, or are they just the emotions or attitudes that we call ‘love’ and ‘strife’?

To answer this question, we should first look at the language that Empedocles uses to describe love and strife, and explain their effects. The most frequent terms for love and strife seem to be φιλότις and νείκος. In the known fragments, excluding supplements, the noun φιλότις occurs nine times, and νείκος occurs 12 times. So these seem to be what Empedocles uses as terms that are neither figurative, nor metaphorical, nor a nickname.

Are φιλότις and νείκος the *proper names* of two divinities? Or are they *technical terms* for two attitudes or dispositions? I shall argue that this is a false choice. Even if they are divinities (as they clearly are, I think), their influence causes other creatures display distinctive attitudes which also go by those names (‘love’ and ‘strife’). That is, there is both an agent-cause, and an effect in the patient. The agent is a divine cause, a god or goddess, and the effect is a disposition, in the patient, who is also a personal agent and motivated in various ways as a result of the action of Love or Strife upon him or her. So φιλότις is both a god (Love), and a disposition (love) manifested in those under the influence of Love; and similarly for Strife. What there is not, in this ontology, is any mechanical force of unification imposed by impersonal powers on impersonal stuff. Both the cause and the effect will be in personal beings with minds and intentions.

When the term “Love” or “Strife” refers to the deity in question, it seems appropriate to use a capital letter. When, on the other hand, love and strife are used not to refer to the cosmic super-gods that cause the attitudes, but to the attitudes that characterise someone under their influence, then we should not personify them with a capital letter or the pronoun “she”.

II.i Gender in the cosmic super-gods?

The basic term for Love (φιλότης) is feminine, and she has a range of alternative feminine names. Alternative constructions using the feminine pronoun “she” are common.²⁷

The basic name for Strife, νεῖκος, is neuter. Although Strife’s pronoun would be “it”, Empedocles never actually uses any construction that requires the name Strife to be replaced with a pronoun (except in lines where Strife is re-described under an alternative name, in ways that we shall consider in Section II.ii).

Furthermore, aside from certain modes of expression using the dative, which we shall examine in Section II.ii, Strife usually appears in the grammatical subject position, as an agent, actively keeping things apart for instance (B35.9).²⁸

Empedocles explicitly equates his cosmic Love with the familiar goddess Aphrodite, and he also calls to mind a number of other names by which she is already familiar to his readers.²⁹ This Love goddess is apparently their favourite female divinity. They think of her as the source of all that they enjoy in this world.

So, for instance, at B17.21-24, Empedocles says:

τὴν σὺ νόωι δέοκευ, μηδ' ὄμμασιν ἦσο τεθηπώς·
ἦτις καὶ θνητοῖσι νομίζεται ἔμφυτος ἄρθροις,
τῆι τε φίλα φρονέουσι καὶ ἄρθμα ἔργα τελούσι,
Γηθοσύνην καλέοντες ἐπώνυμον ἠδ' Ἀφροδίτην·

²⁷ B17.21,22,23,25.

²⁸ The use of a neuter noun, and the avoidance of the personal pronoun in any gender, could support the idea that Strife’s desired effect is not intelligent order, as we would expect of a rational purposive agent, but irrational disorder—that strife does not *design* a nicely ordered plural world, but rather just breaks up every kind of unity that there is and thereby renders things chaotic and disrupted. For this view, see further in my other treatments of Empedocles’ cosmic cycle, such as Osborne (1987); Osborne (2005).

²⁹ B17.21-24, quoted below.

Her do thou consider in thought; sit not with thine eyes amazed.
Among mortals, she is believed to be born into their very joints,
And thereby they think friendly thoughts and do joined up deeds,
Giving her the name “Joy”, and “Aphrodite”.

Evidently, then, the Love super-god is identical, in some sense, with
Aphrodite, the familiar goddess of love, as known to the ordinary Greek listener.

Does the Strife super-god feature in our existing devotions during the
current age? In extant lines of the text, we do not find Empedocles explicitly inviting
his readers to recognise Strife among their current gods, but in B128 he describes
what we call the “age of Cypris”, when “Love was queen”. At that time, he says,
there was no Ares, Cydoimos, Zeus, Cronos or Poseidon:

οὐδέ τις ἦν κείνοισιν Ἄρης θεὸς οὐδὲ Κυδοιμός
οὐδὲ Ζεὺς βασιλεὺς οὐδὲ Κρόνος οὐδὲ Ποσειδῶν,
ἀλλὰ Κύπρις βασίλεια.

There was no God Ares for them, nor Cydoimos,
Nor was Zeus king, nor Cronos, nor Poseidon,
But Cypris was queen.

B128.1-3, quoted by Porphyry *De abstinentia* II.20.

Ares, Cydoimos, Zeus, Cronos and Poseidon seem to be the male gods of
successive generations of mortals living under periods predominantly governed by
Strife, so arguably we should understand these very familiar gods to be
manifestations of the cosmic super-god Strife, just as the ones mentioned in B17 are
alternative manifestations of the cosmic super-god Love. Evidently, when Empedocles
says that they were not there in the reign of Cypris, this is because they are the male
gods of a polemical kingdom in which rule is by force and rivalry, not by desire and
peaceful harmony. “Not being there” means no longer having any influence or
receiving any cult.

Cydoimos (battle-clamour) is not a standard Olympian god, but it is
personified in the *Iliad* (along with *eris*, contention) at *Iliad* 18.535, and (with Ares and

Enyo) at *Iliad* 5.592. When Empedocles says that Ares and Cydoimos were absent from this age of Cypris, this seems to mean that if and when they feature in people's devotions, whether now or in some past heroic age, that indicates that Strife has some power over the period in question. The dominant powers of the day are reflected in the gods that people worship. Performing rituals in honour of a certain deity indicates the power of his influence over worshippers of that time.

Next we should note that “neither Zeus nor Cronos nor Poseidon was king”, but “Cypris was queen”.³⁰ Notice the gender difference again: it is not just that we have a god of *love* in place of gods associated with *conflict and strife*, but that we have a *queen* instead of a *king*. All the strife gods are masculine. The Olympian dynasties —and the Hesiodic ages—seem always to be ruled by a male god, until that male god is toppled by another male god. Such masculine competitive events are, it seems, characteristic of a world of strife.

By contrast in the inverted world of love, which Empedocles is describing and perhaps promoting, the rules of the power-game are quite different. The overthrow of strife is not achieved by way of strife; it is not a battle for power. The reign of Cypris illustrates a feminist model of power, and a feminist mode of regime-change. Love's velvet revolution is engineered by the subtle infiltration of harmony among the inhabitants of the world. Strife is pushed out, and the gods of strife are eliminated, because people no longer want them here, not because we have defeated them in a struggle. Or, if you like, that is how love defeats strife. Love becomes

³⁰ The mention of Zeus is odd since Zeus appeared as the element *aither* in B6 (above, section I.i), but I think that we can take the myth-making context to be quite different in the two cases. Here I do not follow Picot (2012a) pp. 347-52, who is assuming that Zeus is fire (a view that he defends in Picot (2000)).

queen because people choose to exclude the warrior gods and to live in peace. They have chosen to abolish animal sacrifice and to worship only Cypris.

It seems clear, then, that Empedocles systematically identifies Love as a female power. The alternative familiar love gods are all feminine. Strife, by contrast, has a neuter name, but the strife gods listed in B128 are all male. However, there is no reference to any marital connection between the two super-gods. Far from it: they principally exclude each other systematically. If I am right, the gender difference here is not about sexual relations or marriage, but has to do with the stereotypical feminine or masculine behaviour and methods of each of the two cosmic super-gods (or indeed the irrational and senseless behaviour of the neuter Strife).³¹

II.ii Love and strife in the dative case.

In the previous section we have reviewed the evidence supporting the idea that Love and Strife are personal agents, cosmic super-gods with stereotypical masculine and feminine approaches to how they control and establish themselves as chief power over the daimones. Now we turn to the uses of the terms “love” and “strife” to refer to the attitudes or behaviours engendered in the daimones who are affected by Love and Strife. Here we should give the terms love and strife lower case letters. The relevant passages typically use terms for love and strife in the dative case, sometimes with “in”, so as to refer to things (daimones, living creatures, compounds of root-gods) coming together in love or moving apart in strife. Although the term *νεῖκος* itself is never used like this, other words for hostility are

³¹ See above, note 28.

frequent (as we shall see), and words for love or friendship occur in the dative in great abundance.

In most of the cases where he talks about “all coming together in love”, Empedocles uses the expression φιλότητι (at B17.7, 20.2, 26.5) or ἐν φιλότητι (B21.8). These expressions suggests that the participants who come together are in love, or are motivated by love: it describes their attitude or disposition, in virtue of which they draw close to one another and mingle.

There are interesting parallels for these expressions in Homeric usage, where descriptions of sexual intercourse frequently use one or other of these formulae.

For instance, at *Iliad* 2.232-3, Thersites, railing against Agamemnon, asks

ἦὲ γυναῖκα νέην, ἵνα μίσγεται ἐν φιλότητι,

ἦν τ' αὐτὸς ἀπονόσφι κατίσχει;

Or is it that you want some new woman, to have sex with her,

One you can keep separately for yourself?

Thersites asks Agamemnon whether he wants a woman, so as to “mingle with her in love” (ἐν φιλότητι).³² So perhaps Empedocles, too, means us to think of things coming together for sex, or something similar, in which case the mention of love or desire does not refer to something else over and above the two partners engaged in their sexual relations. “In love”, in such phrases, is just a description of what they are doing and how they feel about it.

Having spoken each time, in one verse, of how the participants were coming together in love, Empedocles usually provides, in the next verse, an answering

³² See also Homer *Iliad* 24.131, Hesiod *Theogony* 944 and passim. In other passages, φιλότητι frequently appears, without ἐν. See above, section I.iii on the sexual connotations of the verb “mingle”, *misgesthai*.

formula, describing the counter-effects, when the participants are going apart in strife or hostility. In these answering formulae, Empedocles never uses the dative of *νεῖκος*, as we might expect. Instead he typically uses an alternative word for strife or hostility, again in the dative. For instance, in the example below, *ἔχθει*, is used. He then typically adds the genitive of *νεῖκος* (i.e. *νεΐκεος*, meaning “of strife”). For instance, this line, which Empedocles uses twice (at least):

ἄλλοτε δ' αὖ δίχ' ἕκαστα φορεύμενα νεΐκεος ἔχθει

At other times severally carried apart in the hatred of strife.

B17.8; B26.6

Here too, we need not understand the references to hatred and strife to be alluding to external agents or gods. The phrase is describing attitudes or dispositions of those who are moving apart in virtue of their own hostility toward each other. Perhaps *ἔχθος* is a subspecies of the generic hostility that is *νεΐκος*.

It is not clear to me why the poet never uses the dative of *νεΐκος* in these formulaic pairs of lines. Is it for poetic style or to mark a doctrinal disanalogy between love and strife? If the latter, what disanalogy? Although no clear answer is available, I doubt that there is any intended doctrinal disanalogy, because in some of these pairs of formulae, Empedocles puts another word in the dative, apparently as a synonym for *νεΐκος*. For example, he uses *κότος* in the dative with *ἐν*, at B21.7:

ἐν δὲ κότῳ διάμορφα καὶ ἄνδιχα πάντα πέλονται.

Similarly, in B20.4, he uses the plural *ἔριδες* (this time in the dative, but without *ἐν*) as if that were another way of saying “in strife”:

ἄλλοτε δ' αὖτε κακῆισι διατμηθέντ' ἐρίδεσσι.

These examples suggest that Empedocles is trying to express the matching response, corresponding to “in love”, but is using alternative synonyms in place of

νεῖκος. His purpose in avoiding νεῖκος in the dative is unclear, but arguably we should take it as merely stylistic.

In the Strasbourg Papyrus, part of a line is missing at Ensemble a(i)7, where one of these answering formulae is required to describe the dispersal “in strife”. In their pioneering edition, Martin and Primavesi (1999) pp. 180-82 supplemented the line with a synonym for νεῖκος, as in the examples just examined. They chose, ἔχθρα, meaning ‘hatred’, on the basis that the feminine pronoun that they found at the beginning of line 3 of ensemble a(ii) requires a feminine noun as antecedent.³³ So according to their reconstruction the line would read

ἐν δ’ Ἐχθρῆ γε πάλιν διέφυ πλέον’ ἐξ ἑνὸς εἶναι.

I am not alone in finding their reconstruction somewhat insecure, but howsoever the lines are completed, we should agree that a synonym for strife is expected at a(i)7. This is clearly another of these mirror couplets describing the contrasting effects of love and strife. The use of a feminine synonym for strife is not in itself implausible; for ἐρίδεσσι (in B20.4, quoted above) is both feminine and plural, which supports my claim that the semantic role of these love and strife words in couplets of this type is not to refer to a deity or personification, but to describe the emotional and causal effects in the agents that are affected by strife.

³³ In this line they read ἐν τῆι. There is a question as to whether the reading should really be παντῆι, to match what the editors have suggested in the otherwise identical line five lines later at ensemble a(ii)8. See Trépanier (2003), and Trépanier (2004) p. 253). Graham (2010) adjusts the opening of a(ii)8, to match a(ii)3, reading ἐν τῆι in both. Note that Ensemble a(ii)20 (= B35.5) is poor support for reading ἐν τῆι in a(ii)3, since the feminine pronoun in a(ii)20 evidently refers to Love, not Strife. In support of ἔχθρα the editors cite the proverbial expression ἡ Ἐμπεδοκλέους ἔχθρα found in the fragments of Lysias.

Just once in the extant fragments the word *νεῖκος* itself occurs in the dative, namely in the famous last half line of B1 I 5:

νεῖκεῖ μαινομένοι πίσυνοσ.³⁴
Relying on raging strife.

We should not regard this as a counter-example to what we just noticed, the systematic avoidance of *νεῖκεῖ* in mirroring clauses about cosmic love and strife. This is not one of those pairs of lines, and its grammar is different—not a dative of circumstance, but of the *recipient of trust*, following the adjective *pisunos* (trusting).

Since one places one's trust, typically, in a being who has power and agency, it makes sense to take this as a case belonging to our first kind (see Section II.i) where Strife is a cosmic super-god. I think the more natural interpretation of this line is to think of it as expressing a personal allegiance to an external influence ("Strife") conceived as a person.³⁵

Why does Empedocles habitually avoid the dative of *νεῖκος* in all the other passages, but place it right there, startlingly up front, as the first emphatic word of this devastating line at B1 I 5.14? If we thought the avoidance was stylistic, we should suppose that the placing of this word too is stylistic, I guess. Perhaps Empedocles uses it, in B1 I 5, to emphasise the harsh and unpoetic character of Strife, and the disorientation of the fugitive when his allegiance is to that vicious master.

³⁴ The text as given is from Hippolytus *Ref.* 7.29. Plotinus, by contrast, reverses the places of *πίσυνοσ* and *νεῖκεῖ*. The word is also editorially placed at the start of line 4 of the same fragment by Diels-Kranz, but this practice has not been followed by more recent editions.

³⁵ It could (at a pinch) describe the craziness of one's behaviour or attitude, so that one could, read it as "because I placed my trust in my crazy violence". I am grateful to Dafydd Bates for suggestions along these lines, but I am no longer persuaded that we need to argue against taking Strife as a personal agent here.

Clearly the Strife named in line 14 is not to be equated with the being named “God” in the previous line (B1 I5.13), from whom the narrator finds himself in exile.³⁶ So here, if, as I suppose, Strife is a god, it is not the “God”, and it is not one of the blessed ones mentioned by the narrator in those lines.³⁷

II.iii Love and Strife: summary

Several aspects of Empedocles’ poetry suggest that Love and Strife do figure as personal deities, both as agents who cause effects in the components, making them come together or fall apart, and as the recipients of cult in various ages and periods of the world when they are recognised and worshipped under various guises. There is another use of the words love and strife, when they appear in oblique cases, mainly the dative, with or without “in”, where the reference is not to the causal agent (the goddess Love or the deity Strife) but to the effect that appears in things as they display the emotions and attitudes that we call “love” and “strife”, that is amity and hostility. We should not infer from the fact that gods are the causes, and are sometimes mentioned, that the effects are also gods, or that every mention of love or strife is a reference to a personal agent or cause. From the context it is apparent whether the causal agent or the effect in the patient is being described.

³⁶ The god of B1 I5.13 is probably to be identified with the Sphairos, on which see Section II below. I do not have space in this paper to explore all the issues that arise in relation to the Sphairos.

³⁷ On the “Blessed Gods” see below, Section III.

III Other divinities

Divine names occur in three other areas of Empedocles' discourse. One is where he speaks of the traditional Olympian gods. We have already discussed the idea that Love and Strife are personified in some of the well-known divinities of the regular pantheon.

Secondly long lists of strange and unfamiliar divinities occur in some peculiar fragments, mostly very hard to place because they are preserved without context. B121, for instance, is a list of evils (murder, diseases and the like), which are perhaps not meant to be the names of gods. But in B122 and I23 there are lists of female divinities which seem to be personifications: in B122, Earth and Sun, bloody Battle and solemn Harmony, Beauty and Ugliness, Speed and Delay, delightful Truth and dark-haired Unclarity; and in B123, Birth, Decay, Sleep and Waking, Motion and Rest, many-wreathed Magnitude, —and some others which are hard to be sure about in the text.³⁸ It remains unclear what exactly is going on here.

One striking feature is the pairing of opposite qualities, including some that anticipate Plato's "greatest kinds". For several of these pairs, Picot identifies negative and positive evaluations assigned to the respective members.³⁹ For my own part, I see no evidence that any of them are paired as positive and negative. I rather doubt that they are supposed to be either good or bad in themselves. Perhaps it is better

³⁸ Picot (2012b) has recently made some progress in this area, reinstating the presence of "Wisdom" (Sophê) in B123.

³⁹ E.g. Ὀμφάη, Speech, being opposed to Wisdom which is supposed to be good, must be a negative kind of speech, characteristic of the god Zeus. Picot (2012b) pp. 49-54.

to think of them as the many features responsible for diversity and difference, exemplifying the oppositions that characterise the world of increasing strife.

It is not clear why all these divinities are female, despite being opposites. But even while some questions remain unanswered, they support my general claim that more or less everything in Empedocles is an agent, even things that we think of as abstract or inanimate.

Thirdly there is a Muse. Empedocles calls upon an unnamed Muse in B3 and B4. In B131 his muse has a name, Calliopeia. He asks Calliopeia for assistance in singing a good discourse about the gods.

Arguably such an invocation of the Muse requires no special comment, since it is standard practice for poets. Perhaps we should not ask where this muse fits within Empedocles' ontology.⁴⁰

But B131 deserves further exploration, because the remaining lines indicate what Empedocles' song is supposed to be about. At B131.4, Empedocles mentions that the song, with which the Muse is to assist, is "about the blessed gods":

ἀμφὶ θεῶν μακάρων ἀγαθὸν λόγον ἐμφαίνοντι.

To someone who is expressing a good discourse about the blessed gods.

Doubtless this was one reason why Hermann Diels and others used to place B131 in the *Katharmoi*, which they took to be a religious poem, in which a discourse about the gods would be fitting, while the *Physics* was not, as they thought, "about the gods" at all. Some editors also took the third line ("Now once again, Calliopeia,

⁴⁰ Hippolytus insists on asking it, and finds it theologically interesting (Ref. 7.31). Although he mentions this as part of an attempt to align Empedocles with Marcion, it does not really fit very well, so it may be that he is also reflecting some previous discussion of the puzzle in the existing scholarship of his day.

come stand beside the one who prays”) to indicate that this was not the first time that Empedocles had received assistance from Calliopeia, so this should be the poet’s second or later work. Many took the *Katharmoi* to be a later work than the *Physics*.

Despite these considerations most recent editors, even those who still maintain that the *Physics* and the *Katharmoi* are different works, or different parts of one work, have almost without exception moved this fragment to the poem or part of the poem that is about physics—ie, whichever poem or part of a poem contains fragment B17.⁴¹

In my view this is quite right, even on the hypothesis (which I do not share) that *Physics* and *Katharmoi* were different works. For in my view, the poem about the elements is indeed a poem about the gods. In my view the whole of Empedocles’ discourse is about gods and divinities of some kind.

But is it about *the blessed gods*? Perhaps not every part of the poem is about the “blessed gods” (θεῶν μακάρων), if the “blessed gods” means the ones who are called μάκαροι in B115.6. For those were the ones who were at home in the long-lost paradise from which the *daimon* is now in exile. If Empedocles means those gods when he says “the blessed gods”, then some parts of his poem are evidently about them specifically, while other parts are about the unhappy exiled gods, and the gods who cause their unhappy exile. Some parts are very definitely about the miseries of the ones torn apart by strife, or born into a world of grief.⁴²

⁴¹ Wright (1981) Fr. no. 3 and page 159; Graham (2010) F6; Mansfeld and Primavesi (2012) Fr. no. 187. Also (less surprisingly) Inwood (2001) Fr. no. 10. Wright argues that the back reference is to poets in general, not an earlier work of Empedocles.

⁴² I am thinking of, say, B121, 124, 127, Strasbourg Papyrus d.

Perhaps only the solitary Sphairos himself can strictly count as a “blessed god”. But Empedocles mentions “blessed gods” in the plural in B131. So the topic is not just one splendid isolated god, but a plurality of blessed gods. These might arguably include (i) the *daimones* of B115, and (ii) the *daimones* and elements of B6 and 59. These could all count as blessed gods in the plural, once they are restored to a sufficiently harmonious condition (but not yet a total undifferentiated unity with singular nouns) in the age of Cypris.⁴³ Perhaps there are times, the age of Cypris being one such, when these divinities remain plural, not yet absorbed into the one altogether, and yet they are already in a state of “blessedness”.

On the other hand, as we see elsewhere, the relation of singular to plural in Empedocles tends to be a bit shifty.⁴⁴ Things that were once singular suddenly become plural; what was once plural can become singular. The shift in number in the poetic words mirrors the shift in number in the real world they describe, so that as the world swings from plurality to unity and back again, so also the grammatical constructions in the poem switch from singular to plural or vice versa, sometimes within a single sentence or within a few lines of poetic description. These abrupt changes in number are surely not accidental. They are part of a great poet’s telling of a great cosmic story. So the mention of a plurality of blessed gods should be viewed in this light: it is surely not accidental, but what is plural at one time can also be singular at another.

⁴³ See above, Section II.i.

⁴⁴ For instance, in B115. On the change from singular to plural at the break-up of the sphere, see Osborne (2005) p. 294 and n. 23. On the structural parallel between Empedocles’ poetic discourse and the world described see Osborne (1997).

IV The Sphairos

While the divinities considered so far are, apparently, key players in the period of plurality, there is another god, called “Sphairos” —that is, “sphere” except that the word has been made masculine—whose emergence appears to coincide with the destruction of all the rest, and the removal of all the effects of strife.⁴⁵ Without going into controversial details about the cycle, we can safely conclude, I think, that this god is alone, when he exists, and that he ceases to exist when plurality returns.⁴⁶ There are two questions to consider here. One is the philosophical background to this idea of a unitary god of spherical shape, and the other is his gender.

In the background to the monotheism and sphericity, we should probably see the work of Xenophanes and Parmenides. Empedocles seems to be consciously referencing both these earlier Eleatic contributions.

Clearly reminiscent of Xenophanes are some lines (B29) quoted by Hippolytus as being about “the form of the cosmos—what it is like when arranged under love”.⁴⁷ Hippolytus quotes three lines:

οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ νότοιο δύο κλάδοι αἴσσονται,
οὐ πόδες, οὐ θοὰ γούνα(α), οὐ μήδεα γεννήεντα,
ἀλλὰ σφαῖρος ἔην καὶ <πάντοθεν> ἴσος ἑαυτῶι.
For no pair of branches sprang from his back,
No feet, no swift knees, no genitals for reproduction,
But he was a sphere (*sphairos*) and equal he is to himself.

Empedocles B29.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ The details are controversial, but see B27 and 28.

⁴⁶ B28, B30, B115.

⁴⁷ Hippolytus *Refutatio* 7.29.

⁴⁸ Part of the last line (“he was a sphere”) is known to Simplicius (*In Phys* I 124.1), but the second half of that line, quoted only by Hippolytus, which is not

The lines clearly describe the shape of the cosmos, as Hippolytus remarks in introducing the lines. But the cosmos is now “he” (not “it”) and the key points worthy of remark concern what he lacks: the protruding body parts typical of normal organic bodies. This lack is surprising only if we are already thinking of the cosmos as an organism, and not if we are thinking of it as some inorganic body, which would never be likely to have wings protruding from its back, nor knees nor feet nor male genitalia, not at any stage of its development. It is when we think of the cosmos as a god that we are likely to imagine something anthropomorphic with four limbs and a phallus.

So this fragment confirms that when Empedocles writes about the changing physical world, as it becomes unified under love, he is not offering a reductionist account of physical cohesion and division, without religious implications. At the point that the world becomes wholly unified, what was a plural cosmos, containing many gods, becomes one singular god, and the poem that describes it becomes not just a cosmology, but also, a theology, because at this point the cosmos becomes (temporarily) the most perfect god, not just an amalgam of short-lived divinities. And one key implication of this theogonical episode is that the resulting unitary god is not at all like the gods in Homeric religion. He—for it is a “he” despite lacking the phallic bits—is unitary, spherical and has no external body parts. And when we say spherical, we mean literally spherical, with equal dimensions whichever way you measure him.

quite metrical in the manuscript, is sometimes read as Hippolytus’ prose paraphrase (e.g. Mansfeld (1992) p. 215 n.30). Others take it as a slightly lacunose line of verse and supplement accordingly. Either way, the content is paralleled in other known lines (especially B28).

It is worth comparing this solitary spherical god that is the world in total unity, in Empedocles, with earlier remarks by Xenophanes, who develops two themes in his work on theology: one negative, denying that the true god is as we imagine, and ridiculing anthropomorphic ideas (B11-15 and 23), and one positive, asserting that the true god is solitary, stationary, capable of causation without effort, and intelligent in all parts of his body (B23-26).

Xenophanes' denial that the god has a body or thought "in any way like mortals" (B23) is evidently comparable to Empedocles' denial that Sphairos has any visible body parts such as arms and legs. Similarly Sphairos's lack of feet and swift knees (Empedocles B29) implies that he does not move around by running on legs and feet. So Sphairos, like Xenophanes' god, remains always "in the same place",⁴⁹ a thought encouraged by the equality of his dimensions, and the absence of motion during the period of the sphere.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Xenophanes too uses the masculine gender of his god.

But is Parmenides an influence too? Famously, in the "Towards Truth" part of his poem, Parmenides' goddess describes her unitary being as stationary, held fast in the chains of necessity, and having a form like that of a well-rounded sphere:

αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ πείρας πύματον, τετελεσμένον ἐστὶ
πάντοθεν, εὐκύκλου σφαιροῦς ἐναλίγκιον ὄγκωι,
μεσσοῦθεν ἰσοπαλὲς πάντη·

But since the limit is the outermost one, it is complete
From all sides, like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere
Equal in every direction from the centre.

Parmenides B8.42-44.

⁴⁹ αἰεὶ δ' ἐν ταύτῳ μίμνει, Xenophanes B26.

⁵⁰ Empedocles B27. "Unboundedness" is also attested in B28.

The motif in line 44, of equal dimensions in every direction, is also repeated at Parmenides B8.49, where the words πάντοθεν ἴσον clearly anticipate Empedocles B28, save that the masculine ἴσος in Empedocles replaces the neuter ἴσον, because Empedocles' god is masculine. The neuter in Parmenides refers to "being" (τὸ εἶν), placed in subject position at B8.32, and again at B8.35 and 37.

So in Xenophanes, Parmenides and Empedocles (in that order) there is in every case a contrast between (a) the one being, which is spherical, complete in itself, motionless, and with none of the normal bodily bits, and (b) a plural world of diversity and change. In Xenophanes this rival plurality is not prominent, except in the implied contrast between his favoured "one god" hypothesis, and the polytheistic assumptions of ordinary human beings (B23.1). But for Parmenides it has become a major theme, as the one being is emphatically contrasted with the duality of fire and night, and the plural cosmology based on those principles, in the "Towards Seeming" part of the poem. This Parmenidean contrast is surely echoed directly in Empedocles' contrast between Sphairos, who rejoices in motionless solitude, and the grim cosmos of exiled divinities that emerges at the outbreak of strife. Here periodicity and alternation replace Parmenides' contrast between truth and appearance.

But it cannot be accidental that the Sphairos is a god, and is masculine, despite his lack of genitals, whereas Being was neuter, and not apparently a god at all, in Parmenides. For Empedocles has not only changed the gender, but also the tense: his god no longer is the being (neuter) that is "like the bulk of a well rounded sphere

(feminine)”,⁵¹ but instead he was a sphere (masculine) (ἀλλὰ σφαιῖρος ἔην).⁵² There could be no such past tense for the eternal being in Parmenides.⁵³ Unlike the tenseless being of Parmenides, which has no past or future (B8.5), the Sphairos in Empedocles exists only in the past and the future, and not the present.

Why is Empedocles’ god male, then? We have seen reason to think that gender plays some explanatory roles in the behaviour of Empedocles’ cosmic divinities. It is therefore unlikely that his choice of the masculine gender for his spherical god is purely random. It is plainly deliberate. One effect is to make the Sphairos into an intelligent being, more like that of Xenophanes, and less like the inanimate abstract entity that is the “Being” of Parmenides. Empedocles’ god “feels joy” in his solitude (B27), and is probably traumatised by the quivering in his limbs when strife breaks out (B31).

But perhaps it is not just to make him a thinker that Empedocles makes him a *male* thinker. For, as we have seen, in Empedocles’ cosmos many things come in gendered pairs. So was this male god also part of a gendered pair? It is not obviously so, since he is alone, and rejoices in his loneliness, as Empedocles seems keen to explain.⁵⁴ But perhaps we should notice that we now have three isolated beings with gender in this way: Love who is consistently female, Strife who is consistently neuter,⁵⁵ and the Sphairos who is consistently male. None of these gods engages in marital relations, in the way that the temporary beings (such as the roots) do in the

⁵¹ Parmenides B8.43.

⁵² Empedocles B29 (see above).

⁵³ Parmenides B8.5.

⁵⁴ B27, B28.

⁵⁵ See above, Section II.i

cosmic period.⁵⁶ In fact these solitary gods do not mingle with one another at all, but rather take each other's places as successors in the cycle of power. So in this case the gender difference does not seem to be about marriage or sexual attraction. It could, however, be about complementary gender characteristics in the behaviour of the respective gods. Perhaps these gods are stereotypes: the pure thought of the male god, gives way to the unprincipled and purposeless destruction of the neuter strife—a kind of undoing of all that is deliberate and purposive—which then yields to the desire to draw all back to the hearth and home, as encapsulated in the feminine love.

Arguably Empedocles' spherical god is subsequently echoed in Plato's intelligible "Living thing" in the *Timaeus*, which is the unchanging paradigmatic archetype upon which the moving cosmos is modelled, and in Aristotle's unmoved mover who is the sizeless, shapeless god who is the object of all desire and the focus of all purpose. But in Plato the archetypal *zoon noeton*⁵⁷ is neuter, and Plato has another principle that is clearly masculine (the "father"), namely the demiurge; and in Aristotle, what is called "god" is sometimes identified with *nous* (mind) or thinking,⁵⁸ but is again also occasionally said to be a *zoon*.⁵⁹ Neither of these is a precise match for the male god in Empedocles.

⁵⁶ See above, Section I.

⁵⁷ *Timaeus* 30c1-31a1.

⁵⁸ *Metaphysics* 1074b15-35.

⁵⁹ *Metaphysics* 1072b29.

V Conclusion

Aside from the wandering *daimones* of B1 I5, including their unified reincarnation as the solitary *Sphairos*,⁶⁰ we have found three sets of possible gods or god-like agents in Empedocles: namely (i) Love and Strife, whose relative power is manifest in the attitudes and commitments of the daimonic agents, whose behaviour varies with their periodic allegiance to Love and Strife; (ii) two marital pairs of divinities, the “roots of all things” (B6), which combine and mingle in organic compounds during the cosmic periods, and (iii) the standard gods of conventional religion who are recipients of cult at various periods of the cycle, of which we know most about the ones who are not worshipped in the age of Cypris. We have not found anything, either in the cosmos or out of it, that is not an intelligent agent with plans and intentions. Furthermore, we have seen reason to believe that the gender of each of the cosmic agents is also a key to understanding its role in the system, and its motivations and attractions. The cosmos, we might say, is composed of living beings, and any explanations for how the cosmic cycle works and how change is effected, will be at best incomplete, and at worst quite wrong, if they eliminate the purposive desires of intelligent agents, or the other explanatory factors that belong to living thinking beings, such as the inclinations that belong with sexual differences and gender, and factors such as the role of cult in religion. If we try to reduce

⁶⁰ On the *daimones* see much of my earlier work, and particularly Osborne (2005). As suggested above, I believe these *daimones* to be the main agents throughout the cycle, common to both the so-called “physical” and “demonological” aspects of the story, and I believe that they are instantiated successively as elements, organisms, limbs, and as the *Sphairos*, who is produced when they return to a condition of perfect love and destroyed when they disperse again.

causation to physical forces operating on inanimate material things, we shall not understand Empedocles at all.

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