


12-1958

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Recommended Citation

Kahn, Charles H., "Panpsychism and Immortality in Empedocles" (1958). *The Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy Newsletter*. 94.
<https://orb.binghamton.edu/sagp/94>

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PANPSYCHISM AND IMMORTALITY IN EMPEDOCLES

It was once customary to divide the thought of Empedocles into two separate compartments, corresponding to the two titles under which his fragments are quoted. From such a treatment there emerges, on the one hand, the picture of a natural philosopher, offering a rational explanation of the universe in his poem On Nature, balanced on the other hand by the figure of a Pythagorean mystic, preaching the gospel of transmigration in his Purifications. We would have two separate visions of the world and, as it were, two distinct men. In Zeller's opinion, the religious views of Empedocles have "no visible connection with his scientific principles," while Burnet declared that Empedocles' cosmological system "leaves no room for an immortal soul" -- and hence no basis for any of the ideas expressed in his religious poem.

Now there is a certain prima facie improbability in the suggestion that a man of Empedocles' intelligence should have thought about the world in two radically opposed ways, and it would be particularly strange if he had held two flatly contradictory views of the human soul, for this is obviously a question in which he was much interested. Are we to suppose that his religious preoccupations are of later date, or that he simply ignored them in working out his physical doctrines? But it is difficult to believe this of a man who begins his poem On Nature with an appeal to the gods to pour a pure stream of truth from their holy lips, and with an invocation to the Muse to send him a chariot from the realm of Piety (eusebiē), so that he may deal with "those matters of which it is lawful for creatures of a day to hear." Not only is there a comparable religious pathos pervading both poems, but the subject matter of the two overlaps to such an extent that it is not always possible to decide in which of them a given fragment belongs: and there are verbal echoes between the two poems which seem to provide intentional cross-references. 2

For these and for similar reasons, Cornford raised his voice in protest a generation ago against the interpretation of Empedocles as a case of philosophic schizophrenia. 3 His attempt to understand Empedocles' work as an integrated whole has been taken up by recent scholars, and the last 10 years have seen several detailed vindications of "the unity of Empedocles' thought." 4 Their defense of Empedocles' consistency seems to me largely successful, and there would be no point in repeating the arguments which have been urged against the supposed contradiction between his physics and his metempsychosis. But some further light may perhaps be shed on the question of what exactly the "soul" means for Empedocles, and why so many scholars have found his views on this subject contradictory.

When we use the term "soul" nowadays, we generally mean the self in its broadest aspects: the non-bodily reality of the whole person as seen from the inside. The soul for Webster is "the essence or substance of individual life, manifested in thinking, willing, and knowing." And when the soul is understood in such broad terms, the doctrine of its immortality naturally implies the survival of the whole person in his full individuality. In a number of religions, the identity between the immortal soul and the empirical self is emphasized by the belief that the soul will eventually be reunited beyond the grave with its original body in some spiritualized form.

I leave it to the theologians to decide whether or not this is an accurate description of contemporary religious teaching on the subject of soul. But I have no doubt that this is what Burnet meant when he said that an immortal soul was excluded by the physical theories of Empedocles. And if it is, Burnet was obviously right. Neither Empedocles nor any other Greek philosopher before the diffusion of Christianity ever maintained the doctrine of immortality in this form. The survival they contemplate is never that of the whole human being, but only of one element of our empirical self, one whose isolated existence after death involves a complete break with the conditions of human life. The most striking example of such a break is Aristotle's doctrine of the active nous, which is eternally aware of intellectual realities, but entirely unaffected by--and hence without memory of--any specifically human experience. Despite the unique features of Aristotle's doctrine, it is typical of the Greek view of what is implied in immortality. It is *ἁμοίωσις θεῶν*, not the preservation of human nature but an assimilation to the divine. Even in Plato's myth the thread of consciousness is severed, for the souls must drink from the waters of Lethe before they are reborn. In the context of transmigration, above all, there can be nothing permanent or valuable in the human condition as such. It is only the last stage on a journey which begins with the vegetable and ends with the escape into unalloyed divinity. In this view, any reunion of the soul with an individual body can only signify a blot on its purity. What lives on is obviously not the individual human personality, in fact not the man at all, but the godlike element, the divine spark which was lodged within his breast.

For the Greeks, then, there is a fundamental distinction between the soul which survives -- the immortal, and hence divine principle in man -- and the soul in the broader sense, as the living unity of feeling, thought, and desire. Confusion between the two is of course facilitated by the fact that the word *psyche* may designate either one. But as far as the philosophers are concerned, the immortal "soul" is only a portion of the empirical self -- its most significant part no doubt, but still not identical with the whole. If we are to make sense of Empedocles' doctrine of the soul, we must be careful to distinguish this part from the whole human complex in which it is embedded. That is to say, we must separate the problem of immortality from that of consciousness.

It will be best to begin with the second of these two questions, as treated in the physical poem. The general position of Empedocles in the matter of consciousness may be described as a rigorous panpsychism. The faculty of feeling, perception, and thought -- what the Greeks call *aisthanesthai*, *noein*, *phronein*, and the like -- is not considered a prerogative of men, or even of men and animals, but is assumed to be distributed generally throughout the natural world. In this view, there is really no such thing as inanimate nature. The character of any object is conceived of as a vital urge which may be described in terms of thought and volition. We are reminded of the "animism" which is said to be typical of the attitude of many primitive peoples in their dealings with nature. But the panpsychism of Empedocles is formulated in explicit terms. At the end of his poem *On Nature*, he warns his friend Pausanias that the truths he has uttered must be carefully borne in mind, or else "they will suddenly leave you after a time, yearning for their fellows, to return to their own dear race. For be sure that all things have intelligence (*phronesis*) and a share in thought (*noema*)" -- B 110.

This statement suggests a rigorous parallelism between physical objects and mental conceptions. Not only does everything have a share in thought, but every thought is treated like a thing. Apparently Empedocles recognizes no radical distinction between the two, for the constituents of the physical world and of our perception of this world are described in the same terms:

By earth we behold earth, by water water,
By air bright air, and by fire ravaging fire,
Love by love, and strife by gloomy strife (B 109).

For out of these are all things founded and fitted together
And with these do they think and feel pleasure or pain (B107)

The least we can say is that Empedocles posits a one-to-one correspondence between our conscious mind or soul and the physical composition of our bodies. I think it more likely that he simply identifies the two. Love and Hate are described not only as dynamic principles of attraction and repulsion, but even as physical masses, on a par with the bodily elements of Fire, Water, Air, and Earth:

Baneful Strife is apart from these, their match in every way,
And Love among them, equal in length and breadth (B 17,
19-20).

Since body and mind are homogeneous, external sense objects act upon us by mingling their substance with the ingredients of our nature, i.e., with our body and mind at once. It is hard for the truth to reach us, for the passages of entry are narrow and clogged by "wretched impacts which dull men's wits." 7 It is these same "wretched myriads" of incoming sensation which distract us from the truth of Empedocles' words (B 110,7). "For men's mind (metis) is increased according to what is present," i.e., what is present physically in their bodies (B106); when our physical condition changes, the character of our thought is altered (B 108). Since learning, like sensation, is introduced from without, in order to be held fast it must be thoroughly integrated into the mixture of our own nature and character -- our ethos and physis (B 110,5). If not, says Empedocles, it will hurry home to its own kind. The psychological fact of forgetting is interpreted as the escape of ingredients from a particular mixture.

We see that it is the physis or composition of our body which accounts for, if it is not identical with, our psychic character (ethos) and thought (noema). 8 This applies above all to the organ which acts as the central sensorium, and which for Empedocles (as for Aristotle) is the heart:

Nurtured in the seas of the resurgent blood,
Where what men call thought is mainly to be found;
For the thought of men is the blood about their heart (B 105)

The heart-blood plays this privileged role because it is the substance in which the elements are most perfectly blended (Emped. A 86, 10). But the same principle applies to the body taken as a whole, as well as to each one of its parts. "Those in whom the elements are equally blended or nearly so . . . are most intelligent and most acute in sensation, and those closest to them are proportionately [acute and intelligent] while those with the opposite composition are the most foolish And those who have a moderate blend in some one part

are skillful with that part. Therefore some men are good orators, others craftsmen, because the blend in one case is in their hands, in the other case in their tongue". 9

As Aristotle saw, this view of Empedocles implies not so much a single soul as a multitude of psychai, one for each element (since each one perceives its own object) and also one for each part of the body (since each one has its own blend or physis). 10 Our psychic nature taken as a whole is a compound of elemental and organic souls, just as our bodily nature is a compound of elements and of their various mixtures in the different parts. The two compounds are in fact one and the same. And since there is a fragment of mind or "thought" corresponding to every fragment of body, the panpsychism of Empedocles implies an infinite divisibility of the "soul".

It is this fragmentation of the soul in Empedocles which explains his doctrine of immortality. On the one hand, our psychic nature at any given moment is obviously just as transitory as the physical mixture on which it is based. Not only does our empirical "soul" not survive death, it does not survive any physical change whatsoever. The ratio of ingredients is altered by every bite of food, as well as by every act of learning or forgetting. And the cohesion of the mixture is obviously terminated when the organism draws its last breath. 11

On the other hand, there can be no question of extinction, no utter destruction of psychic any more than of bodily reality. As far as the multitude of soul fragments is concerned, the doctrine of immortality follows necessarily from the principle of Parmenides. Nothing comes to be or perishes; there is "only mixing and the separation of what has been mixed" (Emped. B 8).

A man wise in these matters will not conceive in his mind
That when mortals are alive, in what men call life,
Then only do they exist, and encounter good and ill,
But before being formed and once dissolved, they are nothing
at all (B 15).

Fools! they have no wits to reach out long thoughts,
Who imagine that what is generated was not before
Or that anything dies away and is utterly destroyed (B 11).

Death is just as much an illusion in the psychic realm as in the physical. There is formation and separation of individual, transient compounds. But the elements of which the soul is composed are just as eternal as those of the body, for they are exactly the same. Whether we regard this teaching as a religious belief or as a rational doctrine, it clearly serves as the basis for Empedocles' whole physical system. In his view, the Parmenidean attack on generation and corruption has established the fundamental principle of permanence in nature -- a principle which we may describe either as the conservation of matter or the conservation of mind, for the two are conceived as one.

In this fragmentary sense, therefore, the doctrine of immortality is explicitly affirmed in the physical poem. When we turn to the transmigrating soul of the Purifications, the only question to be answered is, Which one of the indestructible components of the individual psyche is of religious significance for Empedocles? Which part

is not so much a new doctrine as a new tonality, a new dimension to the teaching of the physical poem, resulting from the identification of man's ultimate destiny with the principle of Love alone. And this identification is in fact implicit in the cosmology as well. For Philotes appears there as the positive force of natural creativity described in terms of gladness, harmony, and good will, while a mention of Strife is regularly accompanied by such epithets as "baneful", "hateful," or "evil."

Not only logically but psychologically, the Purifications is the later of the two poems. Here Empedocles affirms the truth of what he says on his own authority, not on that of any deity such as the Muse. He himself speaks now as "a deathless god, no longer as a mortal" (B 112, 4). It is difficult not to relate this altered conception of himself to Empedocles' new willingness to speak freely on the subject of transmigration, which he passes over in silence in his physical poem. There he had limited his revelation to the doctrine of the cosmic Aphrodite, 15 while the divine destiny of the soul was excluded as one of those matters of which it was not "lawful for creatures of a day to hear." But if reincarnation and the ban on eating flesh were mentioned only in the second poem, that can scarcely be due to the esoteric character of this work. There seems to be no evidence whatsoever for the view that the physical poem was a public, the religious poem a private composition. On the contrary, the only words which can be construed as an appeal to secrecy are from the physical work, 16 while the Purifications ring with the tone of public preaching. The first poem is addressed only to Empedocles' friend Pausanias, while the second extends its exhortation to all the citizens of Acragas, and through them to the whole human race (B 112; 114; 124; 136)

If we are to hazard an explanation of this contrast between the two works, it is natural to suppose that Empedocles was a much younger man when he wrote the poem On Nature, and that he still felt bound by some rule of silence in regard to his deepest religious convictions. The doctrine of purification must have been communicated to him as an initiate in some private cult association, probably of Pythagorean inspiration. In composing his physical system he was certainly motivated in part by the desire to lay a rational foundation for these religious teachings, and we may guess that the friend to whom the work is dedicated was also an initiate. But at that time he did not feel that it was "lawful" to make public the gospel of salvation and described the temptation to do so as an impious endeavor "to sit upon the heights of wisdom" and "to cull the blossoms of fame and honor in the sight of men" (B 3). Of course the doctrine of transmigration was itself no longer a secret, for it had been parodied by Xenophanes more than a generation earlier (Xenoph. B 7). But the religious meaning of the cycle and of the release by abstinence from flesh does not seem to have been made public before Empedocles, and by him only in the second poem. Now his situation has changed. He has reached fame and honor, not by exploiting the sacred doctrines committed to his discretion, but by his own attainments in science and in public life. The author of the Purifications has acquired sufficient confidence in his immortal powers as "prophet, poet, doctor, and prince" (B 146) to brave the Pythagorean injunction of silence, and to offer to all men a chance to follow that way of salvation by which he himself has regained the status of divinity.

NOTES

1. The problem arises in particular for B 134, which is cited by Tzetzes from "the third book of the Physica." It is generally assumed (e.g., by Diels-Kranz) that the poem On Nature had only two books, and that "the third book" means the Purifications. But Bignone suggested, with good reason, that B 131-134 might all be assigned to the physical work. In fact it is scarcely conceivable that B 131, with its invocation to the Muse and its reference to the author as ἑφημερίων τις can belong to the second poem. And if it does not, it proves that there was also a λόγος ἀμφὶ θεῶν in the poem On Nature.
2. Compare, e.g., the "broad oaths" in B 30 and B 115,2: the enumeration of man, bush, bird, and fish in B 20 and B 117. Whether the verbal repetitions in B 29 and B 134 constitute such a parallel between the two poems or only an echo within the first depends upon the place assigned to B 134 (previous note). For repetitions within the poem On Nature, see B 17, 1-2 = 16-17 and B 17, 7-13 = B 26, 5-12.
3. F. M. Cornford, From Religion to Philosophy (London, 1912), pp. 224-41; also Cambridge Ancient History (Cambridge, 1926), IV, 563-69.
4. H.S. Long, "The Unity of Empedocles' Thought," AJP LXX (1949), 142-58; J.E. Raven in Kirk and Raven, The Presocratic Philosophers (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 348-61. See also Jaeger's treatment of Empedocles in The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers (Oxford, 1947), pp. 128-154 (although the unity which he finds between the two poems is much less rigorous).
5. Strictly speaking, it is irrelevant to ask whether or not the Greeks believed in personal immortality, since they have no word for "person."
6. He thus represents in a more rigorous way the fifth-century tendency to treat psyche as "the mental correlate of soma." See E.R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley, 1951), p. 138. Empedocles' doctrine is based on that of Parmenides (B 16), and both philosophers speak not of the psyche, but of more clearly empirical realities such as noein and phronein.
7. Emped. B 2; see B 114 and B 133 for the difficulties which truth has in reaching the phrēn.
8. Compare Parmenides B 16.
9. Theophrastus De Sensu 11 = Emped. A 86, 11.

10. ^b De Anima 404^a 2, 408^a 16. (Empedocles himself does not use the term psyche in this connection.) Since "all things have a share in thought," I see no reason to distinguish between the direct perception of earth by earth (in B 109) and our consciousness of this perception, which would depend upon the rest of the mixture, according to Raven (Presocratic Philosophers, p. 358), who rejects Aristotle's interpretation of the elemental "souls". I mention my disagreement with Raven as to the nature of the empirical soul, because I am in accord with him on the question of the immortal soul in Empedocles.

11. No fragment of Empedocles gives a detailed analysis of death, but probably the loss of the life-breath would play a leading role. Not only is this the original meaning of losing the psyche (e.g., even in fainting: Il. 22, 467), but respiration in Empedocles' time was closely associated with intelligence, and both were linked to the circulation of the blood. (Besides the theories of Diogenes of Apollonia, see the medical explanation of the loss of consciousness in The Sacred Disease.) Perhaps this return of the life-breath to the atmosphere when the man "expires" explains Empedocles' curious reference to the air as ambrota: of the four physical elements, it is air which most clearly bears the principle of life.

12. The identification of the wandering daimon with Love has been proposed in one way or another by Cornford, Long, and Raven (see notes 3 and 4 above).

13. Logically the same thing should hold for eating plants, and Empedocles seems to have interpreted the bean taboo as symbolical of this (B 141); compare the ban on laurel leaves in B 140.