

**Perceiving Aphrodite:
Empedoclean Metaphysics***
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ABSTRACT: This essay proposes a synchronic reading of Empedocles' fragments that emphasizes the relationship of the mortal human mind to all of the determinants in the system, including the Sphere which represents the zenith of Love's power and the vortex which represents the zenith of Strife, simultaneously in the present moment, over the diachronic account in which the systematic determinants are disposed in a temporal cycle of world history with the two principles alternating in dominance. The essay does not seek to claim that such a diachronic account is not present in Empedocles, as it evidently is, but rather to argue that we must understand Empedocles' discourse as operating on more than one register, and that in this very distinction we may see the cosmic principles of Love and Strife operating as epistemic principles as well. Love, on this reading, is what makes possible the perception of the integrity of living things on a continuum from the recognition of functional biological structures to the recognition of the metaphysical character of the individual *daimōn*, while Strife is active in the analytic that decomposes such unities into their elemental components as well as their historical process of emergence.

Empedocles of Acragas (c. 495-435 BCE) was one of the dominant early Greek thinkers. He was a groundbreaking natural scientist with an ambitious physical theory the explanatory reach of which extended from biology to geology and meteorology. He offered detailed technical explanations of the structures of living beings, which he integrated with accounts of their evolutionary development in a way that anticipates Darwin. But Empedocles was also deeply pious, and it is clear from his writings that he considered himself to be a prophet and ultimately a divine being with a moral and eschatological vision he took to be of urgent importance for everyone within the reach of his words. Furthermore, he was a practical worker both in medicine and in what we would term thaumaturgy.

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Since the discovery in recent years of new papyrus fragments of Empedocles' work, we have an even better understanding of just how integrated all of these different aspects of his persona and his thought were in his writings. [41] The consensus prior to the discovery of the new fragments had been that Empedocles wrote two books, one on nature and natural science (the *Peri Physeōs*) and another, the *Katharmoi* or 'Purifications', on moral and eschatological concerns. Whether or not the newly found fragments have decisively undermined this consensus is beyond the scope of this essay, but it seems inescapable now that even if there were two books with different emphases, these lines of thought which seem so distinct from the perspective of our contemporary discursive categories were present together in both.

The goal of the present essay is to pursue a particular path through the fragments of Empedocles' thought that I believe offers a way to grasp the unity of his philosophical project: specifically, I wish to recover the peculiarly Empedoclean sense of *intelligibility*. For Empedocles, intelligibility was created by the elements recognizing themselves:

"For it is by earth that we see earth, by water water, by aether divine aether, and by fire destructive fire, and fondness by fondness, and strife by baleful strife," (D207/B109).¹

We shouldn't presume that the mode of perception of the elements we conventionally regard as 'visible', namely earth, water, air (aether) and fire, is itself simple or unproblematic to grasp. Indeed, Aristotle, to whom we owe this fragment, is quite critical of Empedocles in this regard. But the question naturally presses itself upon

¹Quotations of Empedocles are from André Laks and Glenn W. Most, ed. & trans., *Early Greek Philosophy: Western Greek Thinkers: Part 2* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

the reader of this fragment, just what we perceive when we perceive ‘fondness’—*storgēn* being one of the variant terms Empedocles uses for his cosmic principle of ‘Love’, most commonly *philia* or *philotēs*—and ‘strife’, and how does this perception work, insofar as it is attributed to the agency of these same cosmic elements?

For Empedocles, mortal beings are composed of what later tradition has come to refer to as the four ‘elements’, but which he calls *rhizōmata* or ‘roots’—fire, air, earth and water, which one fragment famously names as Zeus, Hera, Hades, and Nēstis (probably Persephone), though without making the correspondences fully explicit:

“Hear first of all the four roots of all things: Zeus the gleaming, Hera who gives life, Aidoneus, and Nēstis, who moistens with her tears the mortal fountain,” (D57/B6).

Whether fire, which is in other fragments represented by Hephaestus, is represented here by Zeus or by Hades, whether air is Hera or Zeus or Hades, or [42] earth Hades or Hera—all of which have been argued based upon this or that ancient source—is perhaps impossible to resolve conclusively given the fragments we possess.²

In a further and deeper sense of ‘composition’ for Empedocles, Love is present in us through the forms given to creatures by Aphrodite as divine artisan. Mortal beings are formed from the roots by the opposing activity of the forces of Love, or Aphrodite, and Strife (*neikos*). Strife seems not to have had a particular divine identity for Empedocles, since he avoids using the name of Eris, a Goddess well-known from Homer and Hesiod,

² Frag. D12/B142 may be relevant, inasmuch as it speaks of the exiled *daimōn* (on which see further below) being received neither by “the covered abodes of aegis-bearing Zeus” nor “the dense palace of Hades”, which establishes an opposition in which Hades seems to wield the sovereignty of earth, and Zeus the sky. But is the latter ‘air’ or ‘fire’? Moreover, frag. D25/B128 refers to Aphrodite as *basileia*, ‘queen’, an epithet much more commonly accorded to Hera, while Hera is ‘giver of life’ (*pheresbios*) in D57/B6, very much as Aphrodite is ‘life-giving’ (*zeidōron*) at D64.

for this cosmic principle.³ The cosmic principle of ‘Love’, on the other hand, is frequently referred to by Empedocles by the personal name of Aphrodite (or ‘Cypris’). Empedocles also uses Aphrodite’s name for the principle of Love far more often than he uses the names of deities for the ‘roots’.

These roots, as well as the forces of Love (Aphrodite) and Strife, are all eternal for Empedocles, while mixtures come and go. Under Love’s influence, the roots join with each other to form the immense variety of mixed substances we find around us, but also a substance in which the elements are perfectly balanced and bonded to each other, and which is somehow the physical substrate of mind. At the zenith of Aphrodite’s power, the entire cosmos has apparently been formed into a Sphere (*sphairos*) of this balanced mixture—though we shall see below that I intend to raise certain questions about this picture—through which a divine intelligence moves, as a result, without obstruction. The divine intelligence (*hierē phrēn*) is not identified in surviving fragments with any particular divinity, But Aphrodite’s activity is by no means limited to simply creating this single substance, for she also fashions all of the detailed structures of living bodies in accord with her apparent desire to preserve them as individuals and as species. Essentially, Aphrodite *is* Empedocles’ demiurge, or cosmic engineer, and it is evident that she is the most powerful intelligence in his universe.

The force of Strife, by contrast, exhibits no such complexity: it causes the [43] roots to segregate, and to bond solely with one another, and seems to have been characterized by Empedocles as a kind of vortex motion. While this force is responsible

³ Note that Plato, in a reference to Empedocles (“Certain Sicilian Muses”) at *Sophist* 242d-243a, speaks on the one hand of “Aphrodite” while on the other merely of “a certain strife” (*neikos ti*). Compare a rare use of *eris* in the fragments, where the term refers to plural, anonymous ‘strifes’: “Alas! Wretched race of mortals, miserable race! From such kinds of strife [*eridōn*] and from such groans are you born!” (D17/B124).

in many incidental ways for natural structures of every kind and scale, there is no evidence in Empedocles' fragments that Strife plans anything or exercises any intentional agency, as Aphrodite does.⁴

There are indications from ancient authorities that the difference between the reign of Aphrodite and the dominance of Strife is not merely a question of different moments in a temporal cycle. It is the potential of such an interpretation that the present essay wishes to explore, without pretending to exclude the other. Empedocles evidently did give a temporal account, even speaking, it seems, of certain quantified periods within it (D84-86), but this need not exhaust the sort of multi-layered discourse in which Empedocles was engaged. And indeed, what would be the sense of Empedocles' prescriptive tone, if everything about the lives of mortals was essentially determined by the moment in the cosmic cycle in which they were living?

Perhaps most tellingly, according to Aristotle Empedocles omitted any account of the genesis of things under Love (D83/A42). Was this because such a 'historical' account was somehow not appropriate to the reign of Aphrodite? We see, instead, the care with which Empedocles treats of Aphrodite's works of engineering, as in this beautiful account of her fashioning of the eye:

Just as when, thinking of setting forth, someone arms a lamp, a gleam of bright fire across the stormy night, lighting [or: assembling] a lamp-case to protect it against all kinds of winds, which scatters the breath of the blowing winds while the light, leaping outward as far as possible, shines beyond the threshold with its unyielding rays—thus, after Aphrodite had fitted the Ogygian fire enclosed in membranes with pegs of love, she poured round-eyed Korē [i.e., the pupil] in filmy veils: these protected it

⁴ It is also noteworthy that in Empedocles' account Aphrodite is in a way 'senior' to the children of Cronus, just as she is in Hesiod, albeit not in a temporal fashion, but rather on account of the privilege Empedocles accords her through her crucial role in cosmogony.

against the depth of water flowing around, while the fire gushed through outward as far as possible.⁵

What matters to Empedocles in his account of Aphrodite's activity seems to be the present *functional* organizations for which she is responsible. Could it be that the reign of Aphrodite exists, not in a certain cosmic time, but in a different, *metaphysical* register from the 'works' of Strife, insofar as the latter are works rather of chance than of design? In R13, Aristotle complains that [44] Empedocles has insufficiently distinguished between Strife and chance as forces: "But it is not under the effect of Strife that the aether has been borne upward, but sometimes he [Empedocles] says that it is as though by chance: 'For it was in this way that it happened to run sometimes, but often differently'," (D105/B53). Similarly, at D97/<A30, an indirect account explains that the motion of the cosmic hemispheres "originated by chance, from the fire that pressed down when it was being massed together [...]"

Closer to Empedocles' core concerns, in D152/ad B61 Simplicius explains that "at the beginning of Love there were born first, as it happened by chance, the parts of animals, like heads, hands, and feet, and that later these came together," which is followed by an evolutionary, adaptive account:

And all of the parts that were assembled with one another in such a way as to be capable of surviving became animals and continued to exist because they satisfied each other's need, the teeth cutting and chewing the food, the stomach digesting it, the liver turning it into blood. And a human head, coming together with a human body, ensures the survival of the whole, but with a cow's it is not adapted and is destroyed. For whatever did not come together according to an appropriate relation perished. It is in the same way that everything happens now too.

⁵ D215/B84, but accepting Rashed's emendation, which incorporates D214/B87 into the body of this fragment (see Laks & Most, p. 547 n.1).

This is Simplicius' explanation of Empedocles' views, and not his own words. But it suggests that the temporal markers in Empedocles' discourse can also be seen as standing for different levels of explanation, one of which is mechanical, the results of which are then tested by the environment and either survive or fail, whereas the other is frankly teleological, in which the successful organisms are seen as having been directly fashioned by Aphrodite's beneficent design. We are disposed to see evolutionary and teleological accounts as being in conflict, because such a conflict occurred between Darwinian evolutionary theory and the vestiges of ancient teleological thought which had been taken up into the framework of Christian Scholasticism. Such a conflict, however, is not inherent absent the zero-sum game between reductionist science and totalizing monotheist ontotheology.

A related issue, which has been a principal difficulty for modern interpreters of Empedocles, providing a key reason for positing two poems with distinct doctrines, has been the question of the personal identity of the *daimones* of which Empedocles speaks, including himself, across multiple incarnations, which is difficult to understand if the *daimōn* is wholly identified with a composite of the *rhizōmata* which dissolves at death under the force of Strife, or dissolves without remainder into an undifferentiated unity under the force of Love. For example, D40/B147 speaks of a condition of permanence that does [45] not seem to fit the notion of an unending cycle of composition and dissolution: "Sharing the hearth with other immortals, sitting at the same table, without any share in men's sufferings, indestructible."

Frag. D257/B110 speaks of a curious effort of thought, by which one "with pure efforts" would "gaze upon them [the elements] benevolently [*eumeneōs*]," with the result that

They [the elements] will all be present to you throughout your lifetime and many other good things will come to you from them. For these themselves are what makes each thing grow in one's character, according to each person's nature. But if you yourself covet different things, such as those that among men are countless miseries that blunt their thoughts, certainly they will abandon you quickly, as the time revolves, in their desire to rejoin the race that is theirs. For know that all things feel [*phronēsin*] and have their share of thought [*nōmatos*].

By an effort of *looking differently* at things, our relationship to the elements is also different, without regard to our position in the cosmic cycle. As a result of the 'benevolent' gaze, the elements nourish us and continue to contribute to our personal integrity, while a different way of *thinking* leads to them seeking their own kind, as happens under the sway of Strife. The final sentence seems to be the key, urging us to attribute the same power of thought and feeling as we experience in ourselves, to all things in their turn.

What does it mean, first, to turn a 'benevolent gaze' upon the *rhizōmata*? In D73 we read that each of them "presides over a different honor [*timē*], each one has its own character [*ēthos*], and by turns they dominate while the time revolves." Superimposed upon the cycle of Love and Strife, therefore, there is also a cycle of dominance of the 'roots'.⁶ It is noteworthy that Empedocles here uses the term *timē*, which Hesiod and other authors use to refer to the individual 'prerogatives' of the Gods. Perhaps we glimpse here a formula for an elemental hermeneutic of the mythic conflicts of the Gods; but what seems to matter more to Empedocles is the idea of recognizing the dignity of the *rhizōmata* in their own right. This is perhaps what Simplicius has in mind when he says,

⁶ Some of the reception fragments which seem to refer to a Stoicizing interpretation of Empedocles' cosmic cycle centered upon fire (R41/<A31; R100) might depend upon this cyclical elemental dominance.

combining Empedocles' doctrine with his own, Platonic terminology, that "it is not Love that is the One, but Strife too leads to the One" (R68, p. 675 Laks & Most), namely that it is not only Love which is a principle of individuation for things, for Strife leads to the individuation of the *rhizōmata*, which we would otherwise only experience in mixture. And this may give us insight, too, into [46] why Empedocles would not think it necessary to grant any absolute identity to Strife, inasmuch as it can ultimately be seen as an expression of the *self-love* of the elements tending to assert itself, even though this works against the integrity of the composite beings Love fashions.

Empedocles apparently finds the perfect balance of the elements in the body to occur in blood, for humans especially the blood around the heart, which is accordingly the seat of human reason—there "above all is located what humans call thought: for the blood around the heart is for humans their thought" (D240/B105). Sensation is of effluences from things (D208-212) by means of the corresponding elements; all things thus "think and feel pleasure and pain" (D241/B107) insofar as they affect the world by their effluences and are affected by the effluences from their surroundings. The more balanced the mixture is, however, the greater sensitivity it possesses. Perception is thus part of a broader system of homeostasis, and we play a role in sustaining a harmony among the elements, both in our own bodies and in the world.

But the occurrence of perfect balance among the roots in the body can represent not only the integrity of the living being, but can also point to assemblages beyond the individual body. Hence certain fragments (D237/A86; D239/A30) suggest that Empedocles explained unusual talents by decentering the disposition of that which 'directs' the soul, what the Stoics termed the *hēgemonikon*. Since the soul is directed from wherever the best mixture of blood occurs in the body, a person who has this

mixture in their tongue can be directed from this and become an orator, while another, having the best mixture in their hands, can become a gifted craftsman. And we know, moreover, that Empedocles stressed the truth-value of all the senses: “from none of the other limbs, in whatever way it provides a path for thought [*noēsai*], withhold your trust, but think [*noei*] in whatever way each thing is evident,” (D44/B3). The use twice of forms of *noein* underscores that what the subsequent metaphysical tradition knows as ‘intelligibility’ is indeed understood by Empedocles as forms of perception spanning the spectrum from sensation to cognition. The idea that a creature might be most present, so to speak, in a peripheral part of themselves, however, suggests a more profound decentering, in which, for example, the tongue of the orator belongs as much to the assemblage it forms with the ear of the willing listener, or the artisan’s hands to the material willing to be shaped, as to their ‘organic’ unities.

But for Empedocles the limbs going their separate ways is also the principal way of conceiving of the disintegration and death of mortal beings:

...in the illustrious bulk of mortal limbs, sometimes by Love we come together into one, all limbs that the body has received in the flower of blooming life; sometimes in turn, cut apart by evil quarrels, each one wanders separately in the surf of life. (D73/B20)

[47] And this is also how he speaks of the forces that obscure and distort thought, that which makes mortal thought all too mortal:

For narrow are the resources spread out along the limbs, and numerous the miseries that break in, blunting the thoughts. Having seen in their existences only a small part of life, they fly off, swift-fated, borne along like smoke, convinced of whatever one thing each one of them has encountered, driven in every direction. (D42/B2)

Once again, therefore, we see the possibility of a twofold interpretation of the same phenomena in Empedocles, one benevolent and constructive, the other focused on conflict and decomposition.

Some sort of distinction, though by no means absolute, seems appropriate between the perfectly quantitatively balanced mixture of the *rhizōmata* and ‘mind’ (*phrēn*) as such, both on the macrocosmic and the microcosmic level, despite Empedocles’ staunch affirmation that “the blood around the heart is for humans their thought” (D240/B105). With respect to the macrocosm, divine mind is said to “dart forth across the entire cosmos by swift thoughts” (D93/B134), implying that the cosmic Sphere, in which the elements are in perfect balance, is like the body of this mind. Moreover, by calling the Sphere a ‘cosmos’, Empedocles implies that it has *structure*, and is not just an undifferentiated single physical substance. But if such a distinction can be drawn with respect to the microcosm, nothing prevents a similar distinction applying to the *daimones* whose vicissitudes were once thought to be the subject matter of the *Katharmoi* as distinct from Empedocles’ book on Nature. Inasmuch as these *daimones* are present in successive different bodies, some such distinction is clearly required in their case. And if such an analogy is established, then the consequences for the structure of the Sphere are profound. For the Sphere would not have to literally be composed of an undifferentiated mass of a single matter akin to blood, which has been sarcastically described as Love’s ‘blood bath’.⁷ But to be clear, Empedocles never actually states anything like this, nor do ancient authorities. All that he says, repeatedly, is that by the force of Love, things come together to be ‘one’ out of ‘many’, e.g., “for at one time they grew to be only one out of many, at another time again they separate to be many out of

⁷ Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Inverness: Golden Sufi Center, 2003), p. 354.

one” (D73/B17). But thanks to the new papyrus, we can see from the continuation of this very fragment that it is “together into one *world (kosmos)*” that things are brought (D73.267). In a *world* the balance of the elements could be established *on the level of the totality*, preserving the structures of complex creatures, fashioned by Aphrodite with such care, intact.

If divine mind comes into being whenever and wherever the perfect [48] balance of the roots comes together, then perhaps what thus comes to be is a *daimōn*, and in the context of the Sphere, through which divine ‘thoughts’ dart, these thoughts must be the very lines along which articulation occurs, insofar as this articulation is not seen from the viewpoint of Strife, as the breakdown of the sphere (“when Strife had grown great in his limbs” (D94/B30); “for all the god’s limbs were shaken, one after another” (D95/B31))—these thoughts may be, in fact, the *daimones* themselves. The divine mind, like Dionysus-Zagreus,⁸ is fragmented, its separate parts preserved by Aphrodite in fragile vessels of flesh, but always seeking broader and deeper harmonies, voices of the divine mind.

Reading the cosmogonic account, one must never lose sight of the practical orientation of Empedocles’ discourse, as he surely never did: his discourse is addressed to the men and women who follow him, “thousands of them, asking where is the road to benefit: some of them desire prophecies, others ask to hear, for illnesses of all kinds, a healing utterance” (D4/B112). He tells his student Pausanias that he will learn “remedies

⁸ In this connection, it is interesting to note the remark Plutarch places in the mouth of one of the characters in *De genio socratis*, to the effect that the Pythagorean philosophy had, in the hands of Empedocles, become “positively Bacchic” (580c).

for ills and protection against old age,” control of the weather, and to “bring out of Hades the strength of a man who has died” (D43/B111).⁹

Love and Strife meet in the microcosm of the living organism. Health is the preponderance of Love, leading to the greater integrity of the organism. How then is this to be accomplished? “For it is with regard to what is present that intelligence [*mētis*] grows in humans” (D243/B106); accordingly, when the power of Love is greater, so is our perception/cognition of Love, and when Strife is ascendant, our perception/cognition of Strife grows. But we can also change from within: “And to the extent that what they are becomes different, to the same extent each time it happens to them also to think [*phronein*] different things,” (D244/B108). Is there even any way to differentiate between the reign of Love in the individual and in the cosmos? For the affinity between the roots, Love and Strife in the world and in us which explains perception at D207/B109 is also an *objective* affinity: the elements are “all joined in their own parts ... which by nature wander far from them among mortal things,” and “in the same way, all the things that are, rather, receptive of mixture love one another, made similar by Aphrodite” (D101/B22). The Empedoclean *logos* is not merely heard; it is incorporated into one’s body, where it modifies one’s perception of the world. But it also alters the world itself when we recognize that “all things feel and have their share of thought” (D257/B110). This is a fundamentally different knowledge than that which “covet[s] different things, such as those [49] that among men are countless miseries that blunt their thoughts,” and which “certainly will abandon you quickly, as the time revolves, in their desire to rejoin the race that is theirs” (ibid)—in accord, that is, with Strife, whether micro- or macrocosmic.

⁹ Empedocles’ thaumaturgical works are mentioned by Diogenes Laertius (8.59-62), including the resuscitation of a woman without respiration or pulse for thirty days.

Perception/cognition of Love contributes to one's own integrity and allows one to develop to one's fullest potential, in the greatest possible harmony with other things, with their integrity and their own possibilities for self-realization, whereas the perception/cognition of Strife tends toward the mutual dissolution of beings into their constituent elements, as each element reaches out to grasp the corresponding element in the object. Nor is this necessarily only the case with the ultimate elements, the *rhizōmata*; one fragment states, albeit shorn of context, that “the sweet seized hold of the sweet, the bitter rushed upon the bitter, the pungent mounted the pungent, and the hot rode upon the hot,” (D68/B90). The perception of Strife is an *expenditure* of myself and of the object, we might say: it is entropic. The conservation of my *phrēn* depends, by contrast, upon learning to recognize and conserve *phrēn* in other beings.

One comes to this recognition by learning to see the integrity of systems and contexts that demand differing forms from creatures having in common their quest for survival. In different environments *phrēn* takes on different external forms, different thoughts, as it were, in accord with what it is in contact. The bodies of creatures are their concrete cognition of their environment, their way of belonging to its systems, each creature participating in as many systems and the most complex they can. This very process of adaptation, seen from the cosmic perspective of the Sphere, is a harmonization of the elements in each environment. This cosmic engineering is not just what Aphrodite does, it is what each individual animal and each species of animal does as well. Love discerns the relationship between the object and the divine mind insofar as *phrēn* too recognizes its like, with which it is joined in the Sphere. The perception of and by Love encompasses both an intellectual grasp of teleology as well as an immediate feeling for life or *élan vital*.

The discernment of function, which weaves elements together, is the recognition of, and therefore participation in, Aphrodite's craftsmanship; hence Empedocles carefully delineates the similarities between hair, leaves, feathers and scales (D198/B82), as well as between fruit and eggs (D254/B79). This knowledge of biological forms contributes to our sympathy with other living things and to the sensation of life within us. In the service of it, we will need to bring all our senses into harmony, "whatever ... provides a path for thought" (D44/B3). This too is a way of bringing the elements into balance. By joining the different senses we create a single *amodal* experience irreducible to any of the aspects revealed by the senses in isolation from each other. This is one way of understanding what Empedocles means when he speaks of what "it is impossible ... to attain with our eyes or to grasp with hands" (D9/B133), given [50] his defense of sensation in general. Divine knowledge is not separated from human knowledge by any chasm; its superiority is due to the correction of biases that come from unbalanced constitutions. At the extreme end, such unbalance virtually dismembers the organism and contributes to the dismemberment of the Sphere of divine mind as well.

Dismemberment is however a complex and ambivalent symbol, for alongside the image of dismemberment in suffering is the doctrine of a generation of creatures assembled by Love from *separate limbs* rather than by the reproduction of a form. The fracturing of the sphere can apparently be understood in two ways: into discrete *daimones* which replicate the sphere's composition in miniature, and into *limbs*. It is interesting that in D154/B57 Empedocles refers particularly to faces, arms and eyes as the wandering limbs, all of which, through sensation, communication and instrumentality are sources both of division and of union between humans and other living things.

The creatures that Aphrodite assembles from the separate limbs are not monsters; rather, we could understand them as possibilities for sympathetic transformation, different modes of being a body that start from organs as nodes of desire. The bovine-headed men and man-faced bovines Empedocles mentions in D156/B61 express sympathy between species. The double-faced creatures mentioned in this fragment are another sort of aggregate, like mythological twins whose skills complement each other. Moreover, when Empedocles recollects previous lives in which “I was already both a boy and a girl, a bush and a bird, and a sea-leaping, voyaging fish” (D13/B117) this is a similar kind of grafting, and which is as much in the ‘now’ of the recollection as in some merely recollected ‘then’. What these all have in common is that form is shaped by a desire transgressing the boundaries of some given organism. Whatever else they may be, the forms thus produced are concretized thoughts of divine mind as it darts through the cosmos. They may not be harmonized or sustainable as *kinds* of organisms, but they are part of the total harmony of the cosmos at any given moment, if we can perceive them as such. These forms are contingent, direct libidinal investments rather than coming from a reproductive process that merely conserves forms. Could humans becoming divine reactivate this process and alter their forms to reflect the contingent disposition of their desire, and, e.g., become a Minotaur?

By contrast, it may be that any purely mechanical account of how living beings have come about is, just by virtue of leaving out Aphrodite’s role, an account of Strife. Hence D101/B22 speaks of “molded [*ekmaktoi*] forms, in every way strangers to unification and terribly sad ... born from Strife.” Perhaps it is not a question here of specific ‘molded forms’ but of form in general when grasped in this fashion, as ‘molded’ by purely extrinsic forces, and the different forms of which are “enemies that keep most

distant from one another” (ibid.), because they have no mode of union that is not destructive of their identities. [51] That which is more ready to combine in living creatures, what has been “made similar by Aphrodite” (ibid.), and which hence *enables comparison*, is the *phrēn*, the *daimōn*, while what is a “stranger to unification”, not just with one another, but also in its own, constantly endangered individual integrity, is the mechanical structure of their bodies, formed lovingly by Aphrodite to preserve the *daimones* in a strife-torn world, but compromise structures nonetheless. The source of integrity for animals being in the ‘metaphysical’ register, Empedocles is less concerned about purely mechanical causes of integrity. Hence, he affirms the female’s positive contribution to the offspring (D164, D171/B63), to which Aristotle objects (*Gen. An.* 722b11; 764b17). For Aristotle, no proper unity can come from the synthesis of equal partners. It is noteworthy how he characterizes Empedocles’ view: “He says that in the male and in the female there is something like *a fragment of the same piece*, and that the whole does not come from either of them.”

Some commentators have balked at the attempt to read a consistent message in the *Peri Phuseōs* and the *Katharmoi*; the cosmos of the former is mechanical, governed by the impersonal operations of Love and Strife upon the roots with no room for the other poem’s ethical demands. But this is to miss Empedocles’ point altogether; for we move from living and thinking according to Strife, “relying on [*pisunos*]” it (D10/B115), giving it credence as an adequate explanatory principle for everything around us, to the perception of Love by a *loving perception* that recognizes living things as ends in themselves, and only thus do we rise by stages to the fullness of our own autonomy, our will gradually emancipated from the mechanical decomposition in ourselves and our environment to participate in—that is, *co-constitute*—divine intelligence.

In this sense, it is we who bring the reign of Aphrodite into reality. Until we are ready to begin the process, the elements pass us from hand to hand (D10/B115). Our imbalanced inclinations toward one element or another carries our *daimōn* into successive incarnations as the only way in which these imbalances can be harmonized on the cosmic scale. Until we come into the cognition of Love, our spiritual maturity, we are the playthings of mechanical forces, only able to remember enough to inarticulately “weep and wail upon seeing an unaccustomed place” (D14/B118), for every place is alien insofar as it is alienated, disarticulated by the very perception of it.

It is noteworthy that Empedocles does not blame the lion (D36/B127) for its carnivorous ways, but only humans, who in the “carelessness of [their] mind” (D28/B136) fail to rise to their full potential. Lions live according to necessity, “mountain-bedded, earth-couched” (D36), and do right by doing what they must to survive, thus preserving the *phrēn* entrusted to their form. Humans, however, are capable of more. An “oath”, we read, has been established among Love and Strife and the elements which mandates the “interchange” of their prerogatives (D94/B30); and it is an “oath”, again, that is violated whenever [52] one of the *daimones* “pollutes his limbs by murder,” thus “perjuring himself” (D10/B115). Would an oath among Love, Strife, and the roots alike in some respect require a witness, and could we be that witness? Or, to put it differently, what is it in us that has sworn the oath against shedding innocent blood? If our perjury enforces the part of the oath which guarantees that Strife shall have its day, then is it not our fidelity to the oath which also ensures that through our own development, we help to bring about Aphrodite’s reign? Frag. D75/B35 speaks of Aphrodite having “volunteers” (*thelēma*, 6). Human development begins from the restoration of fundamental health, to incarnation as “seers, hymn singers, doctors, and

leaders for humans on the earth” (D39/B146), to sharing hearth and table with the Gods (D40/B147), having become Gods, as Empedocles proclaims himself, perhaps with some ambivalence (viz. “I, who *for you* am an immortal god,” D4/B112, 4).

Empedocles describes a religious life in some past era centered around the bloodless worship of Aphrodite as Queen of the Gods:

There was neither some Ares for them as a God nor Kydoimos [‘din-of-battle’], nor Zeus king nor Cronus nor Poseidon, but Cypris queen [... lacuna] She it was whose favor they won with pious images, painted animals and artfully scented perfumes, sacrifices [*thusiais*] of unmixed myrrh and of fragrant incense, casting onto the ground libations of blond honey. The altar was not drenched with the unmixed blood of bulls, but this was among men the greatest pollution [*musos*]: to rip out the life and to devour the noble limbs. (D25/B128)

It would be hard to believe that Empedocles does not intend this as a state of affairs he would wish to see reestablished, which brings us back to the question of the establishment of Aphrodite’s reign in a world like ours, as opposed to conceiving of the Sphere as a dissolution of all things into an undifferentiated mass. If this latter was truly the best state of affairs, and it will come about with a determinate span of time, no matter what anybody does, what would be the significance of a cult that obviously existed in a mixed phase of the cycle, with distinct entities, and what would be the value of reinstating it, if it is not going to change our fundamental situation? We can see in the same light Empedocles’ political activism as reported by Diogenes Laertius (8.63-6; 8.72), who quotes several authors with respect to Empedocles’ “democratic [*dēmotikon*] tendency” and his championing of “political equality [*isotēta*]”, which were apparently well-known. Aphrodite, in her epithet of *pandemos*, was known as a divine patron of democracy, through the mutual friendship that is necessary for such a community to function. Alcmaeon, a peer of Empedocles in many ways, even spoke of the healthy

balance of the elements in the body in overtly political terms, as *isonomia*, ‘equality-before-law’ or ‘equal rights’ as opposed to [53] the “monarchy of only one among them <which> causes sickness” (D30/B4, p. 763-5 in Laks & Most).

The key to Aphrodisian perception, so to speak, may be expressed as that nature, inner as well as outer, is not privative in relation to form. It is not merely raw material waiting to be processed; rather, it teems with personhood, with personal beings of every dimension and description. Even the ‘roots’ themselves are alive, even as they are woven all through other beings, for they are “joined in their own parts ... which all by nature wander far from them among mortal things” (D101/B22). This recognition of life at once irreducible and intimately intermingled can itself spark a reevaluation of multiplicity which would be the turning point in the cycle toward Aphrodite’s dominion, and the trigger for the process by which mortal beings regain their awareness of divinity within and outside them. The Sphere is not a unity other than the world: it is the unity *of* the world, which is in turn the integrity of *each* thing *in* the world.