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# ἄρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL  
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

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ARTICLE

## ***Phren Hiere: A New Theology for a New Society in Empedocles's Verses***

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to analyze Empedocles's main doctrines in the light of his historical and cultural context. To be precise, I will attempt to show how the Agrigentum and Sicily of his time – ravaged by inter-Greek wars, infighting between the various social classes, and even indigenous Sicilians' revolts against Greek settlers – bore witness, in his eyes, to the ever-increasing power of Strife, which was influencing the cosmos not solely on a physical

level but also on a moral one. Empedocles hoped in the exit from the present cosmic cycle through the attainment of a higher condition, capable of transforming the *daimones* into ‘holy minds’, i.e. into entities completely imbued with Love and, for this reason, unassailable by Strife in this cosmic phase, well before the return of the sphere. In this way, Empedocles tried to found a new theology, with Love as the main deity, and a new ethical code, in opposition to traditional poems and values, which were the expression, as everything else in the world save for his *On nature* and *Purifications*, of Strife.

**Keywords:** Empedocles, On nature, Purifications, Daimon, Politics, Ancient Sicily.

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## 1. The cycles of Empedocles: the roots, the δαίμονες, and the phase of growing Strife

The – so-called – physical doctrines of Empedocles are well known: “mortal living beings” (θνητά), i.e. plants, animals, humans, as well as everything else in the cosmos, are composed of four “roots” (ρίζωματα), i.e. fire, air, water, and earth; the processes commonly referred to as birth and death are simply the effect of the continuous interactions between the four “elements”, which compose or decompose a ‘contingent aggregate’. Significantly, Empedocles regards roots as divine entities.<sup>1</sup> There are also two ‘forces’: “Love” (Φιλία) and “Strife” (Νεῖκος), as eternal as the four roots and responsible, respectively, for the processes of union and separation of the ρίζωματα; each entity is, simply, an “aspect” (εἰδέα), a

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<sup>1</sup> See fr. DK31B6; 8; 9; 11; 12; 16. I follow the edition and numbering of Diels; Kranz (1951). Direct translations from Greek are indicated by “” and are mine. Regarding the need to interpret Empedocles’s statement regarding the divine nature of the four roots literally and not metaphorically, as beings endowed with a form of perception and will, see the fundamental analyses by Rowett (2016).

momentary conformation assumed by the roots.<sup>2</sup> The influence of Love and Strife is progressive, one to the detriment of the other: this gives rise to two cosmic phases in which one of the two forces predominates more and more, and two other phases in which the total dominance either of Love or of Strife completely unifies the roots into an agglomerate devoid of any differentiation, the “sphere” (σφαῖρος), or completely separates each of the four roots into the stage of the “many” (πλέονοι), respectively; Empedocles believes to belong to the phase subject to the increase of Νεῖκος.<sup>3</sup> The development of the cosmos is, therefore, analogical and specular: there are two forces, whose effects are opposite; two moments, subject to the growth either of Love or of Strife; and two stages in which there are no particular entities, either by total separation or by complete interpenetration of the roots.

In addition, Empedocles admits a cycle of the δαίμονες; these are entities that have lost their condition of original bliss and are forced to live in a mortal form, within a sort of cycle of transmigrations (which causes continuous suffering), to be precise for having indulged in bloodshed (in all its forms: murder, eating of flesh, immolation of sacrificial victims, etc.);<sup>4</sup> one could also admit a kind of ‘original’ and ‘archetypical’ guilt, which atavistically bound all the δαίμονες in the cycle of transformations and which coincided with their very birth from the sphere during the return of Strife’s hegemony, with their determination as specific entities after the phase in which there were no differences but full indistinct unity – an event that entailed the ‘rupture’ of the σφαῖρος, precisely the violation of its integrity, somehow its ‘murder’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See the important remarks of O’Brien (2016).

<sup>3</sup> See fr. 17; 21-23; 26; 35; 115.7; 128; 130. For the alternation of the cosmic cycles, I follow Trépanier (2003).

<sup>4</sup> On the δαίμονες, see especially fr. 115. Empedocles alludes to the cycle of transformations especially in fr. 117-120; 126; 127; 137.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, as Osborne (1987) notes, the inevitable influence of Strife and its necessary and recurrent destruction of the sphere is a guilt of which the livings – and thus the δαίμονες within them – are all virtually guilty: in response, they must

The two cycles, both of roots and of δαίμονες, are described in the fragments attributed by the doxographical tradition to the two lost poems *On Nature* and *Purifications*, respectively.<sup>6</sup> Proposals for identification of these δαίμονες and attempts to relate their cycle to the physical one of the roots have been numerous:<sup>7</sup> in this paper, I maintain the ambiguity that emerges from the fragments, and focus the attention on the existence of the δαίμονες and their destiny as it emerges from the fragments usually ascribed to the *Purifications*. The four ῥιζώματα and those δαίμονες that are forced to assume a mortal form are indeed subject to the influence of the two forces Love and Strife: they all belong to the cosmos. If we consider that the fragments of the *Purifications* insist more on ‘ethical’ and ‘eschatological’ issues, it follows then that the sway of Φιλία and

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serve the sentence of transmigrations. Alvarez (2024), suggests that δαίμονες had allegorically ‘murdered’ themselves and their divinity when they chose to follow Strife: as such, they must recover their original divine condition by abstaining from Strife.

<sup>6</sup> I do not address the problem of determining whether Empedocles composed a single work or two separate writings. The fragments usually ascribed to the *Purifications* seem to presuppose a reference to certain doctrines that emerge from those ascribed, instead, to the poem *On Nature*: if they were two different writings, Empedocles's thought would therefore be unitary. In the text I quote the fragments as if they belonged to two separate works, to follow their placement in Diels's and Kranz's editions.

<sup>7</sup> I only mention a few of the many hypotheses put forward over the years. On the possibility of overlapping roots with δαίμονες, see Primavesi (2008). According to Trépanier (2013), the δαίμονες could correspond to the “limbs” (γυῖα) as the ‘essential’ part of every mortal entity. See also the particular theses of Kahn (1971), according to whom the term δαίμων refers to an entity that is exclusively part of Φιλία. Following Rodríguez (2011), the δαίμονες are personal entities that transfer themselves from one body to another upon the death of their previous body. I am personally convinced that the δαίμονες coincide, for Empedocles, with the roots that were once divine (most notably, when they lived within the sphere and enjoyed the happiness granted by this condition of indistinct unity), forced to give rise to mortal beings: they must attract particles of Φιλία inside the contingent aggregates that they make up in order to be able to escape from the cycle of transmigration, through the precepts illustrated by Empedocles in his *Purifications*. However, I do not try to solve this issue in this paper: regardless of the interpretation one prefers to follow, the main theses I will advance in this paper regarding Empedocles's eschatological message and its historical implications could apply to any hypothesis on the true nature of the δαίμονες.

Νεῖκος must be looked at not only eminently from a physical perspective, with the roots as its protagonists, but also from an ethical point of view, with the δαίμονες as its protagonists. The message of the *Purifications* was then mainly addressed to those who, like Empedocles, found themselves living in the phase of growing Strife or, rather, to those δαίμονες forced to assume such a mortal form in this precise cosmic phase: as I will suggest, the call for concord and harmony that seems to emerge from the *Purifications* may have been formulated by Empedocles in response to clear evidence of the prevailing power of Νεῖκος over the world and, especially, over his own Agrigentum, permeated by unending human conflicts. Empedocles may have been attempting to spread a message of peace based on a precise soteriological theory, which in turn involved the rewriting of traditional theology and commonly-shared moral values: the Agrigentine and, more generically, the Greek culture that had produced religious and ethical beliefs was contaminated by Strife, contrarily to Empedocles's messages, which are a direct expression and 'manifestation' of Love.

## 2. The 'conflict' between Love and Strife: the physical cycle and the ethical cycle

Even a first reading of the surviving fragments of Empedocles's poems allows us to state that the two forces that act on the ῥιζώματα, Φιλία and Νεῖκος, are distinguished not only from the simple point of view of the physical effects they produce, namely aggregation and decomposition: in several fragments, Love and Strife are also differentiated from each other through numerous epithets, which emphasise, for the former, absolute positivity, for the latter, total negativity.<sup>8</sup> These characteristics can be explained, from a physical point of view, by considering the condition of the roots in the phase of the sphere: the interpenetration of everything into everything, so

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<sup>8</sup> On the positivity of Love, see fr. 17.20,24; 19; 20.2; 21.8; 22.5; 26.5; 27.3; 35.4,13; 71.4; 86; 87; 95; 96.4; 98.3; 122.2; 128.4; 151. On the negativity of Strife, see fr. 17.8,19; 20.4; 21.7; 22.8; 26.6; 109.3; 115.14; 122.2.

strong as to make roots lose any precise quality, seems indeed to be considered by Empedocles as a moment of complete happiness.<sup>9</sup> Since the σφαῖρος is the outcome of the complete dominance of Love over the roots, of the uncontested sway of its unifying power, this force can only be considered benign; on the contrary, the separation and identification into particular entities underwent by the ῥιζώματα, the main effect caused by Strife, are unequivocally described as a source of unhappiness for the living beings. Suffering emerges above all in the fragments traced back to the poem *Purifications*, and is most strongly attributed to those δαίμονες who find themselves living inside contingent entities, which are generated after the destruction of the sphere and after the ‘enchainment’ of δαίμονες inside mortal beings.<sup>10</sup>

On a closer reading, the physical influence is not the only reason that makes Φιλία – also called Aphrodite or Cypris and thus a deity – superior to Νεῖκος; both forces also impact the nature of those actions performed by mortal entities and thus, by extension, by the δαίμονες that have assumed their shapes. Indeed, Empedocles argues that both intentions and actions are directed by Love to the promotion of concord: in the cosmic cycle of its progressive dominance (which will eventually lead to physical union within the sphere), each θνητός coexists with the others in total peace, as murder is avoided as the worst of actions.<sup>11</sup> Regarding Strife, it is not explicitly stated that it drives one to evil behaviour, but in a fragment Empedocles alludes to the fact that he has been chained in the cycle of aggregation-

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<sup>9</sup> In fr. 27-28 Empedocles repeats the same verse: “The round sphere rejoicing in the enveloping stillness” (σφαῖρος κυκλοτερῆς μονίῃ περιηγεί γαίῳ).

<sup>10</sup> See fr. 113.2; 115.6-14; 118; 119; 124; 145. The particular emphasis on the negativity of present life could even mean that it coincides with life in Hades, i.e., in a sense, with death, as suggested by Trépanier (2017, p. 147-156, 165-167).

<sup>11</sup> In fr. 17.23 thoughts and actions are directed only at love (τῇ τε φίλα φρονέουσι καὶ ἄρθμια ἔργα τελοῦσι); in fr. 130 it is said that even predators (θῆρες τ’ οἰωνοί) are devoid of aggressive stances; in fr. 128, the cult of Cypris, i.e. Love, is the only one allowed in the cosmic phase under Love’s reign, with sprinklings of myrrh, frankincense, and honey, since bloody sacrifices as well as every other murderous action are considered a terrible action (ἀλλὰ μύσος τοῦτ’ ἔσκεν ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστον, / θυμὸν ἀπορραΐσαντας ἐνέδμεναι ἥεα γυῖα).

separation “for having trusted” in Νεῖκος:<sup>12</sup> a link would thus seem to have been established between a violent action and a drive caused by Strife; moreover, according to the principle of specularity mentioned earlier, one would have to admit that Νεῖκος, like Φιλία, affects the conduct, albeit maliciously. It clearly emerges, then, that Φιλία is the force to be indulged in and followed. Moreover, its characteristics, its influence, and the preferability of the conduct inspired by it seem to be the objects of a higher form of knowledge, granted by a specific faculty, “thought” (νοῦς), and to be mainly a human prerogative.

In this regard, several features of Empedocles’s theory of knowledge can be identified. First of all, it can be labelled with the formula “the like knows the like”:<sup>13</sup> from each entity parts of the roots are detached (‘effluences’), gathered by those ῥιζώματα of a similar nature that make up the organs of perception; the five senses and the νοῦς both function according to this principle.<sup>14</sup> It is not possible, however, to recognize the existence of Love and its unifying action on the basis of the senses alone, just as one cannot perceive the divine nature with them: for all this, the νοῦς is necessary, a faculty whose seat is attributed by Empedocles to the “mind” (φρήν), which coincides with the blood circulating around the heart. The latter is composed of a mixture of roots as close as possible to a 1:1 ratio,<sup>15</sup> and grants a deeper understanding of the nature of the cosmos.<sup>16</sup>

Another characteristic allows one to consider cognitive processes as a kind of “accumulation” (αὔξις) of particles in the organs both of sensation and of thought so much so that they are filled with what is known, i.e. with parts of the roots of the perceived object, but also – it is possible to infer – with Love itself, in the case where its existence

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<sup>12</sup> See fr. 115.14 (νείκεϊ μαινομένῳ πίσυνος).

<sup>13</sup> See Arist., *De Anima* 404b16 (γινώσκειν γὰρ τῷ ὁμοίῳ τὸ ὅμοιον).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the seminal article of Long (1966).

<sup>15</sup> See fr. 98. See also the commentary by Theophrastus, *De Sensu*, 8, 23 (in the testimony on Empedocles A86 according to the Diels-Kranz collection).

<sup>16</sup> See fr. 17.21; 133.

is recognised thanks to the poems of Empedocles and then worshipped and followed, elected, in other words, as a model of conduct.<sup>17</sup> The advantages of those who enjoy a full understanding of the characteristics of the cosmos are clearly described: those who accept the content of the poem *On Nature* will be able to offer fundamental services for the prosperity of other humans.<sup>18</sup> Some of the services outlined by Empedocles are typical of the individuals considered to be, in a fragment attributed to the *Purifications*, the most authoritative and the best, namely “seers and poets and doctors / and chiefs”: they represent the pinnacle of the human condition, since from them “gods sprout forth”.<sup>19</sup> Perfect knowledge, the same knowledge possessed by Empedocles and of which he makes the rest of human apart in his poems, consequently makes an individual not only exceptional, but even a deity: in other words, the best faculty, the *voûς*, could allow one to ‘transfigure oneself’.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, human *voûς*, if properly exercised, guarantees not only a complete ‘understanding of the cosmos in its physical aspect, but also the preferable conduct: killing is considered by Empedocles, indeed, to be the fruit of ignorance.’<sup>21</sup> Finally, the best knowledge, especially

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<sup>17</sup> As can be inferred from fr. 17.14; 110. See also fr. 133.2-3, where Empedocles seems to hint to the idea that notions make their way, spatially, into the body. On knowledge as – literally – an *αὔξις*, I follow Darcus (1985).

<sup>18</sup> See fr. 111; 112.

<sup>19</sup> See fr. 146 (εἰς δὲ τέλος μάντιες τε καὶ ὕμνοπόλοι καὶ ἱητροί / καὶ πρόμοι (...) ἔνθεν ἀναβλαστοῦσι θεοί). Picot; Berg (2015) argue that the definition of the ‘pinnacle’ of humanity – i.e. the characters described in fr. 146 – belongs to a point in the poem where Empedocles speaks of Strife’s cycle, since soothsayers and war-leaders are necessarily connected to violent actions – sacrifices, battles, etc. It could be, however, that the poets, soothsayers, and chiefs of fr. 146 are the ‘new’ wise humans among ordinary (and ignorant) humans, those who have accepted Empedocles’s teachings and are therefore supposed both to replace ‘current’ poets, seers, and generals (compromised with the drives of Strife) and to enjoy the status of blessed gods, as I will try to clarify.

<sup>20</sup> Empedocles himself, moreover, states that he has been wandering among other humans no longer as a mortal, but as an immortal god (θεὸς ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός) thanks to the knowledge he possesses (fr. 112.4).

<sup>21</sup> In fr. 136 Empedocles states: “Will you not cease from the terrible slaughter? Do you not see / that you are devouring one another because of indolent thought?”



about the true divine nature, seems to guarantee the attainment of happiness.<sup>22</sup>

One conclusion can be drawn from all that has been observed so far. Understanding the nature of Φιλία and pursuing only those forms of behaviour favoured by it would allow one to receive and accumulate within the blood located around the heart parts of Love: it is, indeed, the seat of the νοῦς, that is, of the only thing that allows one to know Φιλία, as Empedocles says; the blood – the mind – is, in turn, very similar to Love, since its nature approaches full harmony (it is the result of a 1:1 mixture of the roots).<sup>23</sup> The presence of Love within those humans who turn their νοῦς to Φιλία and to the conduct inspired by Love would make such humans deeply imbued with Φιλία or, rather, would make the δαίμονες who have been forced to assume the form of the humans in question totally pervaded by Love itself and thus by its power; Love’s sway would then act, at the same time, both as a unifying influence at a physical level and as a peace-making influence at an ethical level; as a corollary, this would entail the complete exclusion of Strife, thus of its separating force, on a physical level, and its inspiration of violence, on a moral level.

Indeed, in a peculiar fragment, it is said that those who escape the cycle of continuous recombination into mortal forms “share home and tables with other immortals, / exempt from human suffering, indestructible (ἀτειρεῖς)”.<sup>24</sup> The divine nature is described, in another

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(οὐ παύσεσθε φόνοιο δυσηχέος; οὐκ ἔσορᾶτε / ἀλλήλους δάπτοντες ἀκηδείησι νόοιο;).

<sup>22</sup> In fr. 132, it is said that those who enjoy perfect knowledge can be considered “blessed” (ὄλβιος), while those who linger in ignorance are destined to remain “wretch and miserable” (δειλός).

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Empedocles holds that the principle of knowledge – and, therefore, of attraction and accumulation – of like with like also applies to Love: in fr. 109.3 he affirms that “with love [we see] love, with strife the terrible strife” (στοργῇν δὲ στοργῇ, νεῖκος δέ τε νεῖκειῶ).

<sup>24</sup> Fr. 147. The term ἀτειρεῖς is connected with the idea of robustness, steadfastness, also in a metaphorical sense. Beekes; van Beek (2010, p. 161): “*indestructible, stubborn, hard*”. In the Homeric poems, one of the main sources for Empedocles’s lexicon as will be seen, such an adjective recurs, for example, to indicate metals (e.g. *Il.* 5.292; 7.247). Empedocles may have used this word, rather than in the

fragment, as a “sacred mind” (φρήν ἱερή) devoid of any other characterisation – it is not divided into limbs nor parts – and able to quickly comprehend every feature of the cosmos.<sup>25</sup> These attributes are entirely superimposable on the nature of the sphere, which is also homogeneous, firmly united and happy, as mentioned above. If in the phase under the growing influence of Strife someone can become an indestructible god, who returns to feast in communion with other immortals, then Empedocles may have considered the recovery of the best and preferable condition: the δαίμονες would be transfigured into entities no longer constrained to dispersion within other mortal entities, precisely because the knowledge of Love and the need to avoid any violent action is tantamount to assimilating parts of Love within oneself, which allow one to remain untouched by the disintegrating force of Νεῖκος; this new condition, attainable by a few extraordinary individuals, would endure despite the fact that the cosmic cycle of increasing Strife imposes ever more separation.<sup>26</sup> It is for this reason, then, that the gods thus ‘generated’, i.e. formed from excellent humans, are conceived of as minds: it is the φρήν, the seat of thought, that knows Love, that receives part of Love within itself and, therefore, is pervaded by its aggregating power. The gods of whom Empedocles speaks in the fragments just mentioned would

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figurative sense of inflexible or mighty, in its literal meaning, to indicate that the divine nature enjoys the perfect condition *par excellence*, that of the firm sphere (see fr. 27), as will be shown: the literal meaning seems to be the preferred one in fr. 84.6.

<sup>25</sup> See fr. 134,

<sup>26</sup> Since they are deeply imbued with parts of Φιλία, they could reach Love when it is exiled to the limits of the cosmos as Strife gains hegemony. Regarding the cosmic phase leading to the sphere, it is indeed said that Strife and some roots (and δαίμονες?) – it is possible to infer, still totally infused by Strife – retreat to the extreme borders of the cosmos (ἐπ’ ἔσχατα τέρματα κύκλου – fr. 35.10): due to the principle of analogy and specularity of the cosmic phases mentioned at the beginning of this paper, it is necessary to admit that, symmetrically, Love also withdraws ἐπ’ ἔσχατα τέρματα κύκλου with some roots (and δαίμονες?) totally infused by Love when Strife reaches its apex of power. One of the first scholars to have suggested this hypothesis was Bignone (1916, p. 223, 576, 585). Wright (1995, p. 207) also posited the existence of the equivalent of the ‘Isles of the Blessed’, where Love resides along with those who follow her after Strife gains the upper hand in the cosmos.

be none other, therefore, than those who have attained perfect knowledge of every characteristic, physical and moral, of the laws that govern the cosmos or, better, they would be those δαίμονες who have escaped, thanks to the knowledge attained by the contingent form they have assumed, the fate that awaits them all when they are degraded to remain in the cosmic cycles, as superhuman entities forced into a mortal life: that is to say, the δαίμονες have attained a condition – that of the holy mind – very similar to that of the sphere, which corresponds to being totally interpenetrated by Love and, therefore, happy and blessed.

With the description of the cosmos, the forces that govern it, the true divine nature, and the preferable behaviour Empedocles aimed to offer a space of exit from a condition of generalised evil and suffering, that is, from the world subject to the increasing dominance of Strife. The hope of salvation passed, above all, through a pacification of the relationships that existed between mortals, endemically permeated by bloodshed in all its forms, and the need to understand the true order of the cosmos and the preferability of submitting to the dictates of Φιλία, recognisable by thought, thus becoming holy minds, entities fully imbued with the Love they know and tend to: it could be that Empedocles had developed his message from, and in view of, the historical context in which he lived, so that wars and conflicts inside and outside Agrigentum were to be replaced by universal φιλία.

### **3. Empedocles's Strife-Driven Sicily and the *Purifications'* Message of Hope**

Throughout Empedocles's lifetime, Agrigentum was the protagonist of numerous political and social 'turbulences', whose magnitude profoundly shook both its internal organisation and its relations with other Sicilian cities: in some ways, Empedocles's Sicily seemed to fully embody the disruptive drive of Strife, that is, to prove that the current cosmic phase was the one undergoing the growing hegemony of Νεῖκος, which would ultimately lead to a total

physical separation of the roots, but which foresaw, at the same time, a deleterious influence on human relations.

The key episode that opened a series of clashes and conflicts was the death of the Agrigentine tyrant Theron in 472 B.C.E: Thrasylus, who succeeded his father, led a war against Syracuse which ended in total defeat, forcing the new tyrant into exile.<sup>27</sup> The regency of the city consequently passed to a council (βουλή) composed of the most influential citizens, belonging to the ancient landowning families, whose first task was to negotiate a peace with Syracuse.<sup>28</sup> Despite this, Agrigentum intervened, together with a coalition of other Sicilian cities, to overthrow the Syracusan tyranny ruled by Thrasylus (466 B.C.E.): the new government of Syracuse forcibly expelled those foreigners who had been fully included in the citizenry by the tyrants who had succeeded it, a measure emulated by Agrigentum.<sup>29</sup> The latter was subsequently forced to face a long struggle against a native Sicilian independence movement, led by the indigenous chieftain Ducetius and spread over a large part of the island, which prompted the council to ally itself temporarily with Syracuse in order to finally defeat the leader<sup>30</sup> after about fifteen years of fighting (461-446 B.C.E.). Immediately after the end of this threat, Agrigentum renewed the conflict with Syracuse, lost again on the battlefield.<sup>31</sup>

Numerous anecdotes project Empedocles's – alleged – political activity against the backdrop of these events: he had some members of the council executed, who were guilty, in his eyes, of aspiring to tyranny; he harangued the crowd to prevent the erection of a monument to the father of the Agrigentine physician Acron, in the name of the equality (ισότης) that was to prevail among citizens; he dissolved an institution, the assembly of the thousand (τὸ τῶν χιλίων

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<sup>27</sup> See Sartori (1980).

<sup>28</sup> See Millino (2000).

<sup>29</sup> See Robinson (2000).

<sup>30</sup> See the fundamental studies by Adamesteanu (1962) and Rizzo (1970).

<sup>31</sup> On all this, see Adornato (2006).

ἄθροισμα); he refused the proposal to occupy a top-level position (βασιλεία) in the city.<sup>32</sup> The first two anecdotes are, in all likelihood, the result of later reworkings, either with a celebratory tendency or interested in portraying the philosopher as the defender of the principle of equality between citizens. The fourth anecdote is also most likely unreliable from a historical point of view, but converges perhaps with a certain ‘image’ propagated by Empedocles himself, as an absolutely authoritative and superior figure: this would then have given rise to this ‘hagiographic’ anecdote. The common basis of these tales certainly testifies to the presence of rivalry within the class of wealthier citizens at the reins of government: the accusations of aspiring to supreme power, the attempts to preserve the balance of power, and the desire to conform to the principle of equality should not, consequently, be understood as the expression of a deep-rooted fear of the loss of freedom for all citizens, but as the desire to preserve the traditional isonomy that existed between the sole exponents of the Agrigentine oligarchy of the fifth century B.C.E., particularly against the constant threat of a monopolisation of power that could be claimed by some of them. Empedocles may have been a victim of this climate of ‘suspicion’, as some accounts state that he was forced into exile.<sup>33</sup> The third anecdote, namely the episode of the dissolution of the assembly of the thousand (there is no other information on the characteristics of this institution) would reflect the will either of Empedocles or of the wealthier citizens – to whom Empedocles belonged – to limit access to public office, which in the course of time became exercisable also by persons of different extraction, especially by the equestrian class.<sup>34</sup>

In the period between the end of the tyranny and the conclusion of the last war with Syracuse in 446 B.C.E., Agrigentum was therefore the protagonist, in parallel with the political clashes

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<sup>32</sup> On the anecdotes, see Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae Philosophorum*, 8.63-66, who claims to borrow them from Timaeus of Tauromenius.

<sup>33</sup> See Diog. Laer. 8.52,71.

<sup>34</sup> On these, see Asheri (1990).

mentioned above, also of moments of social tension within the upper classes.

It is difficult to establish exactly how Empedocles's political engagement was translated into practice or whether he even took part in public life, due to the lack of historical reliability of the reported anecdotes: it is not implausible, however, to assume that he participated in discussions in the council of the wealthiest citizens, as a member of the aristocratic class,<sup>35</sup> or that, although he was not directly involved in government tasks, he advised the citizens on preferable conduct. It is precisely the latter hypothesis that can be supported by the fragments, especially those ascribed to the poem *Purifications* analysed above: indeed, he invites people to live peacefully, shunning any kind of violence, even during cult celebrations. It could then be that Empedocles – who must have experienced much of his city's internal clashes and external wars – had turned, especially with the *Purifications*, to Agrigentum to try to recompose, with his message, the turmoil that was going on his city.

The *Purifications* and the poem *On Nature*, together, were to legitimise, on the basis of the cosmic order, a precise pattern of behaviour: one could legitimately admit that behind the exhortations to peace and mutual benevolence encouraged by Empedocles was the attempt to establish a society that was a re-proposition of the one that had developed at the time when the cosmos was in the cycle of growing Love, subject to its – gradually stronger – positive influence and, therefore, permeated by friendship and respect among the εἰδέα θνητῶν, the many mortal beings. The insistence on the message of generalised concord is due to the fact that Empedocles was living in the moment of increasing Strife, which translated, on a moral level, into the rise of violence: the history of Agrigentum would be the 'empirical' confirmation of this. As has been suggested, the fate of the δαίμονες bound in the mortal existence of this new society would have been to definitive escape from Strife's nefarious influence, from the future series of aggregations and, therefore, from unhappiness (at

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<sup>35</sup> See Diog. Laer. 8.51.

least, until the return of the sphere and the new beginning of the cosmic cycles): this could be achieved thanks to the conduct conformed to the dictates of Love. Empedocles's political message, then, was not primarily, or only, aimed at maintaining a regime based on isonomy among an economically well-defined social class – the members of the landed aristocracy holding public office – and thus at defending the equal exercise of power to prevent the emergence of a tyranny, as ancient evidence would suggest:<sup>36</sup> it had, perhaps, a broader scope, i.e. to put an end to any kind of violence and disagreement inside or outside Agrigentum and thus guarantee the necessary condition for achieving happiness, i.e. to live peacefully, which is tantamount to honouring and venerating Φιλία; ultimately, all citizens must put down any form of violence and subdue to the will and command of those few extraordinary humans of fr. 146, the seers, doctors, poets, and chiefs transformed into gods, those who have managed to fully acquire Empedocles's knowledge, the pinnacle of humanity, the progeny of Love, unlike the war-loving tyrants Thrasydaeus and Thrasibulus, the members of Agrigentum's βουλή and the greedy equestrian classes, the Sicilian rebel chieftain Ducetius, and eventually the fame-loving doctor Acron and all those poets (back to Homer, as we will see), seers, soothsayers, and, generically, influential citizens who accompanied and supported the authorities in battle, at court, or in public and political meetings, the offspring of Strife.

The new Love-inspired society of Empedocles was then imbued with an 'eschatological' aspiration: to condition all forms of behaviour and direct them towards a common and shared goal, which looked not exclusively to the contingent moment – to the precise space-time context in which each human found themselves living – but also to a more extended perspective in time, that is, to the destiny that would befall the δαίμονες forced to live as humans, as θνητά.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> On this conclusion, see Mele (2006, p. 190-194).

<sup>37</sup> Although, as Porter (2025) punctually observes, for Empedocles any 'eschatological' aspiration passes through a 'mundane' pacification: whatever condition is achieved, it will never be eternal and stably the same, because of the

This message must, of course, have been addressed primarily to the inhabitants of Agrigentum – the most obvious example, in Empedocles's eyes, of the clashes and riots that prevail in the phase of increasing Strife<sup>38</sup> – but its value was such that it could be extended to any other city, precisely because Empedocles aimed to rewrite human conduct:<sup>39</sup> it may have been this need, then, that prompted Empedocles to choose poetry as a means of describing the cosmos and expressing his exhortation.

Empedocles's poetic language is multifaceted: it owes a strong debt to the Homeric poems, from which it borrows – sometimes with a slight alteration – typical words, images, and formulae.<sup>40</sup> Added to this is the use of terminology that is close to the ordinary and, at times, 'agronomic' world, set in a context that, however, is often intended to evoke a 'hieratic' framework:<sup>41</sup> the epic and everyday lexicons create, at the same time, an effect of proximity and distance in the reader or listener; the widespread knowledge of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* would, indeed, have prompted the audience, as soon as they recognised a few words typical of the Homeric poems, to recall the original passage, finding, however, the image originally illustrated in the Homeric poems used to describe something quite

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incessant repetition of the cosmic phases. I would add that it may be possible to hope, at the very least, for a space of individual happiness – albeit momentary – during the cycle of growing Strife in case some of the δαίμονες achieve a different state of existence thanks to Empedocles's revelations.

<sup>38</sup> Moreover, in fr. 112.1-4 Empedocles addresses the citizens of Agrigentum: see.

<sup>39</sup> It is worth noting that the message would indeed have limited the violence among all humans, but that the attainment of full divine condition was envisaged for a few individuals, those rare mortals capable of knowing every aspect of the cosmos in depth; to be precise, those who would have read and fully understood not only the *Purifications*, but also the poem *On Nature*, figures evoked in fr. 111, 112, 146. For Empedocles, therefore, his message could potentially reach anyone, but not everyone would be able to fully acquire knowledge of the laws of the cosmos and master it as doctors, soothsayers and other divine individuals could do. Ciampa (2021) insists on Empedocles's 'elitist' conception of salvation, much like Pindar's one.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Capizzi (1987). For other poetic sources, see Gallavotti (1980); Nagy (2006).

<sup>41</sup> On this, see Battagazzore (1991).



different; colloquial language was meant to be immediately understandable, but it served to create metaphors to describe a – physical or moral – law of the cosmos that was previously unknown. Empedocles thus offered representations that were clear (thanks to the epic phraseology, known to most of the public, and the reference to everyday life) and yet almost oracular, as if these were the expressions of a higher truth (thanks to images that could not be immediately associated with what the two linguistic registers primarily evoked).<sup>42</sup>

The fusion of hieratic tones and ordinariness could also be due to another reason: the content of the poems would justify the sacred tone, since it consists of the description of the intimate nature of everything and the revelation of salvific conduct, both of which have been ignored by the rest of mankind; the medium through which Empedocles's message is conveyed would explain the use of images closer to the everyday life, since he claims to speak of the cosmos using human language even though he is aware of its inadequacy.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, a divine entity narrates cosmic laws to humans living in a condition of cognitive and moral 'insufficiency'.<sup>44</sup> All of the characteristics of Empedocles's language outlined above, then, should respond to a precise strategy: to support his claim to excellence, to be a god with knowledge of a superior truth (hence the hieratic tone and the different, almost alienating, context in which ordinary and well-known epic language is inserted); in parallel, to spread his message forcefully and easily among 'inferior' humans and mortals (hence the reference to Homeric poems or everyday life as an immediate means of communication for previously unknown truths).

Writing a didactic work in verse did not imply a choice to the detriment of prose, since the poetic form was an integral, structural

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<sup>42</sup> For this hypothesis, see Palumbo (2006).

<sup>43</sup> See fr. 9.5.

<sup>44</sup> Empedocles is no longer a mortal, but a god (fr. 112.4). On the inferiority of the rest of humans see fr. 2; 4.1-2; 11; 15; 110.6-7; 113.

part of this type of production:<sup>45</sup> if the author's intention was to appeal to the widest possible audience, so that the latter would fix and preserve the message, then poetry was the ideal medium. Empedocles's verses were to be remembered as formulated, not interpreted: only – his – poetry would guarantee this result, thanks to the images it was able to evoke and fix in the audience's memory.

In this way, Empedocles may have nurtured the aim of substituting traditional poems with his *On nature* and *Purifications*: indeed, his reflections could be considered in tune with the generalized tendency of his times of 'rewriting' the shared beliefs about the nature of the gods and the preferable moral conduct – derived largely from the Homeric poems and those of Hesiod – that interested a large part of the so-called Presocratics.<sup>46</sup> As we have seen, Empedocles considers the roots and Love to be gods, and admits also another kind of divine entities, the holy minds, which, thanks to the knowledge at their disposal, live in a state of bliss, of happiness, which seems to coincide with a total lack of differentiation, a complete unity, a state similar to that enjoyed by the roots in the sphere (which is also conceived of as divine). The poem *On Nature* was consequently the basis for fully developing, also thanks to the *Purifications*, a new theology, which corrected in every respect all previous, common, and erroneous representations about the gods.<sup>47</sup> Alongside this was the plan to 'derive' from it a different code of ethics, one that could build the basis for modifying every type of relationship between θνητά and thus create a society far different from the reference horizons largely derived from the Homeric poems, namely the pursuit of excellence, the competitive spirit, and the fame to be obtained, preferably, in war.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> See Osborne (1998).

<sup>46</sup> More details in Most (2006).

<sup>47</sup> On Empedocles's willingness to replace traditional epic poetry with his poems see for example Cerri (2006).

<sup>48</sup> For Empedocles's entanglements with the ethics of the Homeric poems, see Picot (2023).

According to Empedocles's theology, the δαίμονες are entities deprived of the happiness they previously enjoyed, possibly in the sphere: all humans must, consequently, recognise the fact that they are the momentary form assumed by superhuman beings, to whom one must grant the recovery of original bliss through the veneration of Love and the abandonment of the most widespread cults, such as that of Zeus, Ares, Cronos, as they inspire only evil actions, which bind the δαίμονες relegated in mortal form to the cycle of aggregation-decomposition, the cause of continuous suffering.<sup>49</sup> Empedocles's theology would thus envisage two 'orders' of gods: on the one hand, Love would be a divinity *for* humans or, rather, *for* the degraded δαίμονες, forced to form multiple εἰδέα θνητῶν, multiple mortal beings, towards whom Love is benevolent and beneficent precisely because it allows – by the means reconstructed above – the δαίμονες to escape the cosmic phases of transformation; on the other hand, the δαίμονες that have become divine beings and especially sacred minds could recover their original blessed condition well before the cosmic cycle reaches its completion with the sphere; the condition of the φρὴν ἰηρή would represent the preferable end that the δαίμονες must achieve when they are forced to live in mortal form.<sup>50</sup>

The model on which Empedocles built the descriptive and prescriptive structure of his poems may have been principally Hesiod, who illustrated, in his *Theogony*, a 'history' of the gods that highlighted the birth and importance of Zeus's reign of justice, and showed, with the *Works and the Days*, the preferable behaviour that conforms to Zeus's will. Whoever would accept Hesiod's injunctions

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<sup>49</sup> See fr. 128, which describes the type of worship widespread in human society that had developed during the phase of growing Love.

<sup>50</sup> On the basis of what I suggested above, I do not follow the proposal to understand the divine φρὴν as a single entity that always persists in the cosmos, as suggested by Drodzdek (2007). Indeed, each divine φρὴν would be one of those δαίμονες that recovered, during the cosmic cycles, the blissful condition it originally enjoyed through the total infusion of Love. For a different reading – in a metaphorical key – of fragment 134, where the sacred mind is mentioned, see Picot; Berg (2018).

– which mirrored the commandments of Zeus – would be guaranteed to be happy, i.e. not to incur divine punishment and to alleviate the fatigue that structurally belongs to the human condition. Both Hesiod’s poems would, that is, complement each other, offering a ‘system’ that, on the basis of the description of the divine world, showed humans the best conduct.<sup>51</sup> Empedocles’ works, then, could be seen as a rewriting of the *Theogony* and the *Works and the Days*, with the fallen δαίμονες as the new protagonists and their fate as the main concern.

The poems *On Nature* and *Purifications* were thus to be understood as the ‘definitive’ cultural code of Agrigentum – and, potentially, of every Greek cities – in that they offered a new (the only true) theology, on which a different moral message was grafted: it was aimed at the creation of a new society – peaceful, stable, conflict-free – that reflected, in mortal form, the harmony and unity of both the roots joined in the sphere and the sacred minds, all under the banner of Φιλία. This society would ensure its members would not vainly hope, in an age of unrest and evils, for perfect happiness.

## Data Availability

Not applicable.

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<sup>51</sup> On Hesiod and Empedocles, see the seminal paper of Hershbell (1970). For Hesiod’s description of the reign of Zeus and the extent of his influence on human life see *Op.* 42-48, 225-247, 267-335, 826-828.

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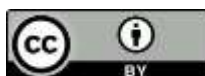
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