
ἄρχαί

AS ORIGENS DO PENSAMENTO OCIDENTAL
THE ORIGINS OF WESTERN THOUGHT

REVIEW

Review of Vojtěch Hladký. *Rejoicing Sphairos, Wandering Daimon, and Other Living Beings. Studies on Empedocles' Philosophy of Life (and Death)*. Baden-Baden: Karl-Alber Verlag, 2025, 245pp., ISBN 9783495992920

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Hladký's volume revisits several previously published articles on Empedocles's cosmology, biology, and eschatology, enriching them with new analyses and a new, unpublished chapter that brings together his research findings in the conviction that all these Empedoclean topics are deeply interconnected. Hladký engages with direct fragments from Empedocles's original poem(s) and an extensive, multilingual, and updated secondary bibliography. The volume is further complemented by an *index locorum* and an index of names and concepts.

In the first chapter, "Introduction: Empedocles and His Elementary Principles" (pp. 13-25), Hladký sets out the interpretative principles at the core of his analyses. Firstly, he believes that Empedocles's verses combine—according to modern terminology—a 'scientific' and a 'religious' perspective, in profound relationship with each other. Secondly, he recognises that Empedocles establishes analogies between the different levels of the world and of existence. Finally, he identifies a sort of physicalism, in the sense that everything is an order of bodies accessible either to our senses or to our reason: in this way, forces and other principles are immanent and thus inseparable from the 'body'. According to Hladký, Empedocles's thought does not allow for either materialism or mysticism, but rather a blending of the two: every corporeal and material being is endowed with wisdom, perception, and awareness. Hladký subsequently provides a concise overview of the fundamental tenets of Empedocles's system. Empedocles's philosophy admits the existence of the four elements, metaphorically called the 'roots', as equal, eternal, and divine entities, which are believed to possess both feelings and forms of knowledge; from them, more complex entities emerge. In addition to the four elements, there exist two forces, Love and Strife, which alternate in their domination over the roots, thereby giving rise to the various phases of the cosmos. In light of this framework, Hladký considers questions related to cosmology (especially the nature of the Sphere), zoogony, embryology, and

eschatology. Empedocles interconnects these topics under the principle of analogy.

The second chapter, “Empedocles’ *Sphairos*” (pp. 27-53), focuses on Empedocles’s Sphere. The Sphere corresponds to the cosmic phase in which the influence of Love prevails entirely. What are then the implications of this complete domination? Numerous scholars claim that the Sphere is a fusion of the roots so total and strong that they lose their identity. Hladký hypothesises that the Sphere contains ‘sub-components’ that are perfectly united and joined together, thereby distinguishing itself from mortal, particular, and ‘discontinued’ entities; in this way, its state corresponds to complete happiness and the authentic divine nature. The entities within the Sphere are not merely particular entities considered separately and independently; moreover, Strife is not present inside it.

It is noteworthy that Empedocles’s depiction of the Sphere’s demise bears resemblance to the death of the Homeric heroes, who, upon being struck by a weapon, collapse to the ground dismembered. Hladký thus posits that the Sphere possesses limbs, albeit not in an anthropomorphic sense. In order to elucidate this hypothesis, Hladký provides a concise historical account of the potential antecedents of Empedocles’s Sphere, from Xenophanes’s non-anthropomorphic, impersonal, singular deity, analogous to a mind, to Parmenides’s spherical and homogeneous being, culminating in the Derveni Papyrus, which portrays an ‘all-encompassing’ Zeus as a supreme generative force that harmoniously unites all things. According to Hladký, the Sphere is not an amorphous entity devoid of internal distinctions, since the Greek term *mixis*, “mixture”, has more the meaning of “union”, whereas the opposite, *diallaxis*, means precisely “separation”. Hladký’s theoretical framework posits that more structured and complex beings ultimately unite under Love’s sway: they become an all-encompassing entity or cosmic organism, the Sphere. The Sphere can thus be considered the cosmos itself in its purest and happiest form, a sort of structured holistic whole, rather than an undifferentiated unity; when Strife enters the Sphere-cosmos,

the latter is forced to assume another, discontinued (thus imperfect) shape. Particular beings are able to survive within the Sphere: they are subsequently divided and isolated from the Sphere and one another by Strife's influence. Therefore, the Sphere can be interpreted as a living cosmos, akin to the sensible god of Plato's *Timaeus*, or as a precursor to Lovelock's Gaia theory.

The third chapter, "Ancient Interpreters on Empedocle's *Sphairos*, Zoogony, and the Transmigration of Souls" (pp. 55-102), explores the reception and imagination of the Sphere in later authors, especially in the Platonic tradition. For Hladký, the most prevalent contemporary interpretation of the Sphere as an undifferentiated entity, a formless mixture, originated with John Philoponus, who in turn reinterpreted Aristotle's observations on the Sphere as a substratum from which the four elements derive, a sort of underlying matter. Philoponus 'neoplatonises' this vision and considers the Sphere an a-qualitative instance. Hladký then summarises Simplicius's platonising reading of the Sphere, which coincides with the unitary, simple, and eternal intelligible world, one with the intellect. Hladký then poses the question of the extent to which these interpretations draw upon Empedocles's actual theories of the Sphere (or, more precisely, the extent to which Hladký's own interpretations find partial convergence with Platonic interpretations of the Sphere). Undoubtedly, the eternal existence of the Sphere, the presence of qualities and structures within it (albeit maximally united) akin to the intelligible cosmos, and the interconnection of thinking and physicality are salient features.

Hladký then explores references to Empedocles in select dialogues of Plato. In his *Timaeus*, Plato portrays the cosmos as a living organism endowed with reason, although reason coincides with an incorporeal entity present within the body of the cosmos, the World Soul. Plato also acknowledges transmigration of souls. It is evident that Plato makes reference to the Sphere (Hladký's interpretation of the Sphere as a living whole), the cycle of *daimones*, alongside more specific Empedoclean theories such as breathing, sight, and blood circulation. In the *Statesman*, the myth of Kronos

evidently evokes the phases of Empedocles's cosmos, transitioning from an initial phase of harmony to a reverse cycle. In the *Symposium*, Aristophanes's myth of the androgynes is likely to echo some of Empedocles's tenets: a phase of kinship between celestial bodies and creatures, the importance attributed to the spherical shape, the notion of love as a positive driving impulse, and the separation of the sexes as the result of a violent cosmic force; all these instances refer to a precise zoogonic phase, which Hladký reconstructs in a subsequent chapter.

Chapter four, "The Transmigrating Soul between the Presocratics and Plato" (pp. 103-125), explores the theory of transmigration, or reincarnation, of souls, which emerges from Empedocles's fragments and numerous indirect testimonies. The chapter offers useful elements to situate this theory within the broader context of Hladký's cosmological interpretation of the Sphere. Firstly, Hladký provides a reconstruction of the history of the conception of the transmigrating soul: from the Homeric poems and the survival of the soul as a shadow in the afterlife to the introduction of the new perspective of the reincarnating soul in Greece, allegedly 'imported' from extra-Greek traditions including either Thracian Orphism or India *metempsychosis* via the mediation of the Persians. The concept of the soul as a reincarnating entity is first attested in Greece in Pindar's poetry. It is also present in the Pythagorean tradition, where the soul is understood both as a sort of harmony and as fine matter, linked to the of air and other volatile elements. This conception is further developed by Empedocles, who uses the term *daimon* to denote the reincarnating soul that defiles itself by killing living creatures. According to Hladký, Empedocles, like the Pythagoreans, thus conceived of the soul as a transmigrating yet corporeal entity. This conception is at odds with Plato's theory, which posits that souls are incorporeal and independent from the physical cosmos, even though they can communicate with the material and immaterial realms.

In the final chapter, "Empedocles' Science of Life (and Death)" (pp. 127-200), Hladký tries to demonstrate the unity of Empedocles's thought. Hladký first considers Empedocles's zoogony, which can be

reinterpreted in light of his understanding of the Sphere as the whole cosmos in its best arrangement. For Hladký, zoogony is a single, uninterrupted process, which ultimately leads to the perfection of the Sphere through different sub-phases. In the initial sub-phase, Love's influence leads to the formation of individual limbs and then of living body parts. In the second sub-phase, these living body parts coalesce to constitute more complex entities, the inevitable outcome of the increasing dominion of Love over the cosmos. This process gives rise to beings that are developed improperly, resulting in monstrosities that are unfit for long-lasting life. Subsequently, Love produces creatures that are more fit to live: indeed, in the third sub-phase, Love generates "whole-natured forms", from which human beings have descended. According to Hladký, these entities are androgynous beings, which, in the fourth zoogonic sub-phase, are sexually differentiated by the increasing power of Strife. Indeed, in all phases prior to the fourth, particular entities are said to generate spontaneously from the earth, under the dominion of Love; in the fourth sub-phase, however, particular entities are born from each other, with female wombs acting as earth and with fire acting as a sexual differentiating principle, under the increasing dominion of Strife; this force compels individual beings to acquire more independence from the whole cosmos, thus reaching a conformation totally different from the one they once experienced in the Sphere. When the influence of Strife totally predominates, individual entities are destroyed and reduced to single limbs that wander apart from each other. This process will continue until the cycle is reversed with the return of the increasing influence of Love and the reconstitution of the Sphere. In certain respects, during the zoogonic sub-phases and especially after the fourth one, plants can be regarded as the most primordial organisms, as they possess no sexual difference and are intimately associated with the earth. In this 'evolutionary' narrative, knowledge and forms of wisdom progressively emerge. Hladký posits that all phenomena are constituted of living elements: as such, all entities possess cognition, sensation, and willingness, albeit in different proportions; the gradual complexity of beings, from individual limbs to specific body parts and distinct cognitive organs,

gives rise to more complex levels of wisdom. In this process, the peak is reached with the Sphere, a giant organism identical with a holy mind, according to some of Empedocles's fragments.

Hladký then focuses on Empedocles's embryology, in the belief that Empedocles's theory establishes a profound analogy with zoogony. Empedocles's *pangenes* theory posits that both parents contribute equally to the development of their offspring through their particles, which are inside female and male seeds. Furthermore, the components of the resulting individual are already present in the parents' seed, a theory analogous to early modern Preformationism. Embryos are conceived of by Empedocles as small androgynes, which then undergo a process of sexual differentiation: this process mirrors the last stages of zoogony.

Finally, Hladký analyses Empedocles's eschatology in the light of the hierarchy of living beings he admits in various fragments. According to Hladký, the Orphics and especially the Pythagoreans linked the soul to the air: this is because the soul was regarded as a subtle body that enters the newborn living being after its first inhalation. Hladký then acknowledges the pivotal role attributed by Empedocles to respiration, and suggests that *daimones* (i.e., souls) enters newborns like the Orphic-Pythagorean souls; before this event, the *daimones* reside as disembodied souls in the air, Empedocles's counterpart of Hades, a sort of afterlife. In this manner, it is possible to comprehend Empedocles's claim to possess the ability to reanimate the dead: he was capable of restoring vital life force/the soul/the *daimon*—which is composed primarily of air and, to a lesser extent, fire—to a corpse. The principle of analogy that Empedocles employs in his verses is therefore evident: all living beings, from the macrocosm to the microcosm, share similar structures and undergo similar processes.

In this volume, Hladký puts forward new interpretations of Empedocles's thought. They are clearly highlighted and plainly argued with constant reference to fragments, indirect testimonies and their legacy, even though I do not fully endorse all of the interpretations, since I think that the identification of *daimones* with

souls that enters the newborn at its first breath is not solidly grounded in fragments; moreover, recognizing some—purported—antecedent of the author's thesis in ancient readers of Empedocles does not automatically concur to ascertain the true validity of such a thesis.

In the spirit of Empedocles's morality, the volume ultimately invites us to reconsider our relationships with other living beings, the Earth, and the entire cosmos. We must conceive of these entities as equals, all possessing the same dignity, since everything is part of the same universal entity. By providing innovative perspectives and chapters to enrich some of his previously published papers, Hladký's volume offers a fascinating reconstruction of Empedocles's thought, from which specialists in Empedocles and the Presocratics, as well as Historians of Ideas, will undoubtedly profit in scholarly debates.

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