

The Empedoclean *Κόσμος*:
Structure, Process and the
Question of Cyclicity

Proceedings of the
Symposium Philosophiae Antiquae Tertium Myconense
July 6th - July 13th, 2003

edited by
Apostolos L. Pierris

Part 1: Papers

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SIN AND MORAL RESPONSIBILITY
IN EMPEDOCLES'S COSMIC CYCLE

Introduction

Traditional accounts of Empedocles's physical system conceive of the cosmic cycle as a mechanical rotation or oscillation, with fixed periods between regular recurring events. Such a system seems to leave little room for moral agency to have any significance. The current state of the evidence has shifted scholarly opinion towards including more of the moral imperatives and lifestyle appeals within the same context as the cosmology, and rejecting major rifts in Empedocles's thought. Yet even in fragment B115, traditionally taken as central to the moral and religious parts of the poem, the exile of the daimon for 30,000 seasons looks like a fixed duration, so that it remains unclear what good it could do for the daimon to recognise his or her predicament, listen to Empedocles's cries of alarm or take his teachings to heart. Is there room in the system for sin to have any meaning? Can we (if it be we) be blamed for our actions, if they are predetermined in an inevitable cycle of sin and return? What good can it do to repent and live righteously, if the time of punishment is already decided in advance and nothing can hasten the return of the golden age? And if it does no good, why should we bother, and why should Empedocles bother to tell us of our plight?

In this paper I want to suggest that the periods of the cosmic cycle are not in fact fixed in advance. Instead I shall suggest that the kind of necessity that ensures the continuation of the cycle is not deterministic, but rather bears some relation to the inevitability that we associate with the Fall of Adam. In what follows I shall not be producing knock down arguments against the familiar mechanical and deterministic interpretations of the cycle. Instead I shall try to sketch a unitarian account of Empedocles's thought that integrates the religious and physical doctrine, explains the references to "necessity", and allows sin and moral responsibility to be meaningful—indeed to be the primary determinants of the cosmic periodicity. I hope to convince you that this reading is philosophically more satisfying than the familiar mechanical pictures, in that it appeals to a kind of causation that is neither purely arbitrary, nor bizarrely fanciful. I shall suggest that causation in the Empedoclean universe is due to free actions on the part of voluntary agents, together with some kind of built in moral code.

On this interpretation we find that moral reasons are built into the working of reality. This replaces the amoral determinism characteristic of the traditional accounts. It is my view that the moral principles provide a less arbitrary foundation, and that this reading of Empedocles is to that extent both more charitable and more satisfying as an explanation of causation.

What is necessity? Free will, foreknowledge and fate

In Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* Oedipus finds that he has done a number of terrible things that he had spent his whole life trying to avoid doing. In that play he acknowledges responsibility for the actions: no one else can be held to blame for what has happened.¹ Every one of the actions was his own action, done freely if not under the relevant description; he was not constrained to do those actions and he could have done otherwise in each case—indeed would certainly have done otherwise, had he known then what he knows by the end of the play.

In the later play by Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is portrayed taking a different attitude. He feels, there, that he has been

too harshly punished for faults that were not strictly his. He struck in self-defence, he was operating under a veil of ignorance, and anyway the gods were out to destroy him.² If he did what he did because the gods had got it in for him, then why should he be further punished for the crimes that he could not avoid and never chose?

Both these ways of looking at unavoidable or predictable wrongdoing seem to have some appeal to modern sensibilities, and I think it is the second one, the view expressed by the aged Oedipus in the *OC*, that prompts Bernard Williams, in his *Shame and Necessity* to conclude that people in the ancient world lived with an extra kind of necessity, "Supernatural Necessity", that has no place in our world view. The ancients, according to Williams saw some events, and actions that figured in their lives, as necessitated by divine forces with supernatural powers of intervention which made particular outcomes inevitable.³ Hence as they saw it, their lives, and their moral purity, were not fully under their control.

I disagree profoundly with Williams's understanding of ancient theology, which is what yields this conclusion. I think that reflecting on Empedocles may help us to see why it might be unsatisfactory. But let us begin with the question whether it correctly captures the world of Sophocles's tragedies. My first thought is that it does not apply to the *OT*. In that play Oedipus lives in a world where a certain destiny is *predicted* for him. But he does not treat that destiny as necessitated. Rather he and the others who share in his destiny work on the assumption that at every moment at which he might fulfil that destiny, he equally might not, and that has clearly been the motivation behind every major decision that he and his parents have taken, in their bid to minimise the opportunities for accidentally fulfilling the prediction. When he acts, he acts on his own volition. In every case he could have acted otherwise, though the force of circumstances might put some pressure on him, as it would on anyone else who found himself in those circumstances. There is no special act of god that takes away his judgement or holds his hand. Terrible deeds are predicted for him. They are not done for him.

In Empedocles there is, I think, a similar contrast to be drawn between prediction and necessity. Thinking of the act of bloodshed (let us assume it is that) that sets off the cycle of banishment of the daimones in B115, if we wonder why and when that act occurs, we

may be tempted to think that we need a sufficient controlling factor to *make* it happen, now rather than at some other time. We may be tempted by Parmenides's sceptical reasoning at Parmenides B8.9-10: what could have forced it to happen then rather than at some other time? This thought, in Parmenides applied to the origin of reality, should surely apply equally to the disruption of the blessed sphere in Empedocles, if there is no prior history nor anything in the peace of the unified sphere to prompt it to happen. Empedocles seems to predict that the outbreak of bloodshed will inevitably occur. But how can he predict that if it is not necessitated by some superior power? Whereas Parmenides had asked what necessity provokes an event with no prior history, Empedocles does not echo the question. Instead he asserts an *oracle*, a *χρήμα* (the word is derived from the less familiar of the two verbs *χράω*, this one what a god does when it delivers an oracle).

There is an oracle, then—an oracle, I would suggest, rather comparable to the oracle that predicts for Oedipus that he will inevitably kill his father. The prediction specifies neither the point in time at which the event will occur, nor any means that will ensure that it happens. In Oedipus's case it does happen, and it happens as a result of the coincidence of two factors, namely (a) the circumstances in which it *could happen* (Oedipus and his father happen to be on the same road at the same time) and (b) the free action of Oedipus when he deliberately strikes the man. The prediction would equally have been fulfilled had the occasion happened to be a different one: the possible circumstances are multiply realisable. And had Oedipus chosen not to strike back, or had he failed to finish his father off on that occasion, the avoidance of the predicted outcome would not have negated the prediction. Not until every such occasion was survived and Oedipus or his father died unscathed would the prediction have been avoided. That is, of course, the irony explored in the play, as Jocasta too readily counts the oracle disproved every time she sees that one apparent opportunity has been safely closed off and dismissed.

Turn back to Empedocles. Suppose the daimones stay calm and non-violent for ever so long. No matter how long peace is preserved, that will never negate the prediction that strife will one day break out.

The return of Strife: necessary or permissive?

However, we might suppose that the combination of B30 and B115, both of which in their own way seem to speak of the return of strife, imply that there is a particular time that is predicted, at which Strife will "spring to his honours" in the conventional translation of B30.2. As time rolls round, so we might think, there comes an appointed moment, a moment fixed by those broad oaths present in both B30 and B115. To get this reading we have to take the genitive absolute *τελειομένοιο χρόνοιο* as causal: the completion of the time is sufficient to generate the result; it is not just a specification of the circumstances that would permit it to happen. The relative clause in line 3 of B30 appears to indicate that a fixed time is specified, turn by turn, for the two powers, and that this fixes the time that must be completed before Strife can once again take up the reigns of power. We might link that specification of alternate times to the period of banishment of the daimones, also attributed to a broad oath, in B115. That decree fixes the period of exile, and that seems to equate to the time of Strife's supremacy; but if *ἀμοιβαίως* indicates matching rights for each power, we should expect symmetry in the provision of an equal time allotted to Love, before Strife is entitled to regain his rights. Hence we might envisage Strife waiting in the wings, while Love is permitted her equivalent share of the time. When the time is up, he breaks in and disrupts the peace.

So looking at fragment 30 alone, I think we can see why Aristotle complains that Empedocles offers no answer to the question "why?". He just tells us that it happens, *οὕτως πέφυκεν*. This is how Aristotle reads the *τελειομένοιο χρόνοιο*. It is the equivalent of saying "that's nature's way". It claims that at a certain point a certain event will happen of its own accord; it does not offer a further explanation or cause. And it does not invoke a supernatural cause.

In this respect it is, however, just like the oracle that predicted that Oedipus would kill his father. That too predicts that it will happen, but it does not specify what will cause it to happen. Yet that does not mean that the event is either a law of nature, or uncaused and inexplicable. It is in fact brought about by ordinary human agency.

Furthermore, if I am right about the causal explanations of Oedipus's parricide, there is no supernatural force that causes him to do the deed. The list of causes would be exactly the same length as the list of causes we would supply for a similar event today. Similarly in Empedocles's oscillating world of love and strife, there is no extra supercosmic force intervening from outside to *cause* Strife to return at the appointed time.

What there may be, in the case of Strife, is the removal of an obstacle, much as Oedipus's return to the region of Thebes removed the obstacle successfully preventing his committing the deed during his childhood in Corinth. With his arrival at manhood, Oedipus left his Corinth home and returned (unwittingly) to his native Thebes. That transition, both temporal and spatial, contributed to the fulfilment of the prophecy by making it possible for him to meet and kill his father. Nevertheless it did not cause the murder. So too, in B30, *τελειομένοιο χρόνοιο* may give us the period of time during which Strife is out of the way, and his disruption of the sphere is therefore out of the question. When that period ends, the way is clear. But the end of the waiting period is not what causes the next event.

That period of waiting is, apparently, specified by some kind of oath.⁴ We need not suppose that this oath is imposed from without upon Strife. Certainly it constrains him until the appointed time; but it might well be a mutual agreement under oath, made between the individuals who are to be bound by it. If B115 is anything to go by, it was a vote of the gods, *ψήφισμα θεῶν*.⁵ They took a vote; they made a decision. They bound it with broad oaths, *πλατέεσι κατεσφρηγισμένον ἔρκους*.⁶ Who are these gods? Surely they are the very ones who are bound by it: indeed nothing could be more natural as a reading of the language of decision making and oath taking in B115.⁷

Thus we need not imagine an external law or constraint governing the behaviour of Love and Strife. The notion of a vote and an oath implies rather the reverse: a mutual agreement sealed with oaths. So we should, I think, read the opening of B115 as explaining the alternate times by reference to a voluntary piece of self-legislation: the divinities whose activities are to be constrained by the mutual taking of turns themselves set up the rules, and the rules involve the right to uninterrupted dominance for a set period. It is also complicated by the reference to a misdeed, and we shall return to that in a minute.

But a rule about how long you are entitled to freedom from interference does not in itself provide a reason for that interference, nor a means of ensuring that it happens. Suppose a certain period must elapse before Strife enters the scene again; it will still require that someone do something. It has to happen. We may know that Oedipus is expected to kill his father. He still has to do it. It doesn't happen until he does.

So whatever may constrain Strife—perhaps his own agreed rule—the return will not be adequately explained by the lapse of the precluded time. Still the action itself must take place. What is it for Strife to be gestated in the limbs and to spring forth to status, in B30 1-2?⁸ It may be worth pressing the birth and growth imagery here: Strife is perhaps pictured as a foetus nurtured in the womb of the sphere. There is a certain time lapse, the gestation period, before he emerges to take up his reciprocal honours. But the metaphorical birth can also be cashed out in the imagery of B115. What is it for Strife to be born? Perhaps it happens when someone commits an act of strife: *εἰτέ τις ἀμπλακίησι φόνωι φίλα γυῖα μίηνη*: when someone stains his own limbs with blood.⁹ Perhaps the limbs are his own because at the birth of strife the Sphere which was the womb, the *γυῖα* of fragment 30, becomes Strife's body. The death of the Sphere is the birth of the plural world. And at his birth Strife murders his mother (or is it his father? For the Sphere is distinctively given a masculine gender), and stains his own limbs with the blood that is both the pollution of murder and the pollution of birth.¹⁰ The stained limbs will then be his own limbs, the limbs of the one who committed the deed, because the murder was the murder of the Sphere, in whose womb Strife was conceived. But of course in another sense it is not Strife who commits the deed, but the Sphere himself, who murders himself at the moment that he becomes the agent of Strife. When some agent sheds blood, that is sufficient to constitute the birth of Strife, born from the womb that is the Sphere. Before the deed was done there was only one agent to do it and one victim: the Sphairos. Once the deed is done, Strife has been reborn, in a birth that is in itself the shedding of blood.¹¹

So just as the prediction that Oedipus will murder his father is not fulfilled until Oedipus does murder his father, so the expectation that Strife will return is not fulfilled until someone commits the inevitable

act of strife. In each case the fact that the murder is predicted, or that it is inevitable, does not prevent it from being a sin, or from being the responsibility of the agent who committed it. And hence it does not make it *necessary* in any sense that conflicts with free will. The inevitability is in the fact that the person in question (in B115 "someone", *τις*) will, in due course choose, as a matter of fact, to do the deed.

In Empedocles there is, in addition, considerable stress on the *wrongness* of the deed. It is slightly unclear what oaths are being broken, how the daimon is forsworn, and what *ἀμπλακίησι* refers to (B115.3-4), but it seems clear that we are to understand the deed to be morally reprehensible. It involves some kind of offence against a code of conduct that is morally binding, something to which the agent has previously bound himself in some explicit way. One can be forsworn, only if one has first sworn. At some stage in the previous history, the agent in question has sworn not to commit whatever deed it is that now breaks that oath. Whatever these lines, 3-4 of the reconstructed B115, are doing (much is far from clear) they seem to make it crystal clear that the deed described is one for which the agent is fully responsible, and for which punishment is richly deserved. As Oedipus in killing his father (not to mention those other things) broke a fundamental taboo and deserved the punishment in the form of exile, so too the guilty agent in Empedocles B115 deserves the punishment, exile, for a murder that pollutes the whole community of daimones. Oedipus had to be expelled to rid his city of the plague that was evidence of the pollution of unexpiated murder.

In a culture where bloodshed creates pollution, there can be no excuse or excusing oneself on the grounds that some kind of fate or destiny was being fulfilled, in the action that broke the rules. Oedipus perceives himself as an object of hatred to the gods, but he does not think that that removes his own offences. He does not abandon his sense of his own agency, nor resign himself to any supernatural necessity governing his actions.¹²

Necessity in B115

So what should we do with the reference to 'necessity' in the first line of B115? Does this conflict with the idea that I have been

sketching, namely that the sin is voluntary and deserving of punishment? I think not. For one thing the lines appear to apply the term *ἀνάγκης χρέημα* to the gods' prior agreement about what punishment should follow upon such an act, not to the inevitability of the act itself. "There is an oracle of necessity to the effect that *when x occurs, y and z must follow.*" So we might take the oracle to state not that *x will necessarily happen*, but that *when x does happen, necessity requires that the following period of banishment must ensue.* The decree will then specify the necessary period of time *before* the daimon can return to love, not the necessity of that return, nor of any subsequent return of Strife either.¹³

On the other hand, Hippolytus, in his exegesis of lines 1-2 of B115¹⁴ tells us that the term *ἀνάγκη* here refers to the change from one to many and many to one, under Strife and Love respectively. Of course this could be a rather vague way of saying that the necessity of the punishment following upon the crime (the agreed penalty for sin, as we just described it) does, as it happens, constitute the necessary transfer of power from Love to Strife. In this sense the regime-change might be said to follow of necessity, being an integral consequence of the necessity of the punishment.¹⁵

However, another interpretation of Hippolytus's commentary could also be canvassed. Hippolytus may believe that there is *another* kind of necessity, which ensures that not only the punishment, but also the outbreak of Strife itself, is inevitable. Perhaps the crime is necessitated in some sense? If that is what he means, can we accommodate such a necessity without succumbing either to Aristotle's objection (that it amounts to no more than saying lamely *οὕτως πέφυκεν*: it just happened by nature) or to a Bernard Williams-type appeal to supernatural necessities?

One option is to suggest that Aristotle is right to say that it amounts to saying *οὕτως πέφυκεν* but that the appeal to nature is not vacuous as Aristotle had implied. We might take 'necessity' to have the force it often has in Plato, meaning what is arbitrary or without ulterior motive. A classic example of this usage occurs in Plato's *Laws* book 10, 889c1,¹⁶ where Plato is explaining what appears to be Empedocles's theory of the creation of the world, a theory in which earth, air, fire and water, and the things that develop from them, all come about by nature and chance.¹⁷ Plato proceeds to use the phrase

'of necessity' in association with the phrase 'by chance' to explain how the mixtures are produced randomly, without any design or plan.¹⁸ To use 'necessity' in this sense is to claim that the world does not work to any divine plan or purposive design. There is no *benefit* conveyed by having Strife return at some specified time. It is not for *something*. It just happens; the inevitability is amoral.

To attribute the return of Strife to necessity in this sense is to appeal to precisely the opposite of Williams's supposed supernatural necessity: it is to see the world as governed by no further inscrutable purposes or intervening supernatural wills. It is to see oneself as part of a universe that has no rationale and no plan: a world that is arbitrary, but not unpredictable. Indeed, I would imagine that this outlook resembles the predominant understanding of nature common to our contemporary western culture. It does not appeal to a mysterious supernatural necessity with which we are out of touch.

On this view the return of Strife is *merely* a function of necessity. No purpose is achieved; no one designed it to happen thus. It is, if you like, arbitrary. Necessity, in this sense, characterises what is unintentional as opposed to what is designed. Here, reading necessity in this sense in Empedocles, we might say that the inevitable return should be not exactly random or accidental. For it has a certain predictability to it. But it is not planned either, nor is it part of a deliberate design. It is the deliberate action of an agent who, as it happens, chooses to act thus but with no ulterior motive. It is neither random nor planned, neither destined nor accidental. It just happens to be what the agent wants at the moment at which it occurs, and nothing further causes it to occur besides the typical choices of agents of this kind.

Thus the return of Strife, even if it is chosen spontaneously by some voluntary agent, yet because it happens at no particularly significant time and for no significant reason, it might also be described as a mere happening, part of nature's random products. And the same thoughts might equally apply to the necessity that is written into the punishment and the period of exile. If the gods agree on an arbitrary pattern of periodic exile for sin, that too is not for any ulterior motive nor to achieve some further good end. It is just what they happen to have decreed as the fair punishment for the crime. It has no moral significance in itself. So it is worth noting that the gods

do not plan to create a world, nor do they design it so as to get a process of oscillation; and in particular, they *do not plan the sin*. On the contrary, it appears that they swear solemnly *not* to commit the sin.

This sense of necessity clearly does not in any way diminish the daimon's responsibility for her action. On the contrary, it leaves it intact. If the murder is not externally planned, is not imposed as a duty upon the daimon, then the daimon is a free agent, acting of her own accord. The time and purpose of the action is arbitrary. It has no special place in any bigger scheme of things. The culprit was not the plaything of the gods; she was not forced to act. If she commits bloodshed, she and she alone is responsible. I say 'she' but actually the daimones in B115 (including Empedocles himself) appear to be male, as is the Sphere, also called god in B31, whose limbs quiver seriatim as he, the only daimon there is at that time, commits the deadly deed that turns him into a bloody mess and brings Strife to birth.¹⁹

Similarly, I would say, Oedipus, and Oedipus alone, was responsible for killing his father. He may have been destined to do so, but his decision to do it was spontaneous and reflected his own assessment of what was best for him to do at the time.

Oedipus at Colonus: the excessive punishment

In *Oedipus at Colonus* Oedipus observes that he did not intend to do the actions that he committed in his blindness.²⁰ In exactly the same way, Empedocles also observes (B137) that a father unwittingly sacrifices his own son: unwitting because, like Oedipus, he does not know the identity of the victim. The appeal, *οὐκ ἔσορᾶτε* in B136 draws attention to the fact that we commit sins of murder and cannibalism out of blindness. But blindness is not an excuse. The horror of the actions is not removed by the unintentional character of the sin.

So what should we think of Oedipus's feeling that the loss of his sight and his exile in old age have been an unjust punishment, too harsh for a man who never intended to do wrong? It is worth noting how the play uses the motif of the scapegoat, and ends with Oedipus becoming a source of blessing and sanctity to the community in

whose land his mortal remains are interred. Reviled and hated during his life, the scapegoat who is invested with the pollution of the entire community, becomes the source of wonder and sanctity once he has performed the task of purification for which he was selected.²¹ This motif of the *pharmakos* figure depends precisely upon the scapegoat (whether man or beast) being picked upon, laden with sins that are not his, or not of his choosing, and sent out into the wilderness bearing the pollution of the whole community. In the case of Oedipus the selected victim is not, as usually, innocent and laden arbitrarily with the sins of others beside himself, since the sins are in a way his own and no one else's. But he is in some sense unjustly punished, and serving his sentence as expiation for a pollution that is afflicting others besides himself.²²

In Empedocles's daimon story we can find similar motifs, but again the pattern is not quite as we expect. Instead of *one* scapegoat taking the pollution of the whole community, we find that all the daimones (B115 line 5 *δαίμονες ὅτε μακρῶντος λελάχασι βλοιο*) seem to take banishment for the sin of one (*τίς... ὅς* lines 3-4). Yet that too is not so strange: compare the doctrine of the sin of Adam, into which all subsequent generations are born. If the moment of sin is the creation of the plurality of daimones, then what was one becomes all. All are guilty, for it was not just one of them that did the deed. The change from singular to plural between lines four and five of B115 is truly poetic in its dramatic reconstruction of that conversion of the unique Sphairos into the plurality of Strife-trusting daimones. The subject of the lines remains the same; but the number has changed from singular to plural.²³

Whatever the oddities of Empedocles's version, the result remains similar to that dramatised in *Oedipus at Colonus*. The end of the period of homeless wandering, in which the hateful wanderer is thrown out by each unwelcoming community, is, in Empedocles too, the restoration of a state of purity and blessedness, and the divinisation of the tortured individuals, who at long last become once again the blessed Sphairos. That the punishment is, to some degree, *unfair* or undeserved seems crucial to the efficacy of the process as a route to divinity.

Thus it would be wrong to take the *OC* as support for Williams's idea of supernatural necessity. That play does not invite us to see

Oedipus as a plaything of the gods. Oedipus does indeed protest at the injustice of it all, but the complaint is one that any of us could equally make, in a world where no gods are required to explain the events. His marriage to Jocasta was presented to him as a prize; his murder of his father was in self-defence.²⁴ He was on the receiving end of actions of others—the action of the city in donating what appeared to be a reward; the death threat from a man he did not know. His response was to behave as anyone would behave: to accept the gift, to respond to an assault with violence. Oedipus does not need to find the hand of god at work to exonerate himself from full responsibility in deeds that were to turn out to be horrific. It is a story of tragic coincidences, but the agents are all human and all acting freely.

Using the motifs from *Oedipus at Colonus*, motifs of exile for impure deeds done in error, and the subsequent divination and sanctity of the suffering victim, I think we can fruitfully ask whether the *Katharmoi* of Empedocles's title are perhaps the daimones in exile, who figure as the heroes of the story.²⁵ Or perhaps as the chorus. We might compare the way in which tragedies are often known by the identity of their chorus. Did Empedocles perhaps coin a masculine '*katharmos*', in place of neuter *katharma* or feminine *katharsis*, in order to invent a name for the daimones who are the key players in his story? The technique would match his practice in coining a masculine form of the term *sphaira* to serve as the name of his god, Sphairos.²⁶

Who's who in Empedocles?

So is the physical cycle determined and mechanical or not? I want to suggest *not*. I want to suggest that the phases of the physical cycle are a result of free actions, on the part of agents who act voluntarily, and that the regime-change is effected by agents changing their attitude: agents who formerly manifested hostility come to adopt a friendly attitude or vice versa. That change consists in a change in their outlook and behaviour, and it is spontaneous in the way that intelligent behaviour is spontaneous. So these agents are not inert matter pushed around by supernatural forces of love and strife, but participants in a world of morally responsible beings, bound by a moral code to which they (or their former selves) have explicitly

consented. They belong to a world in which values are given (perhaps by mutual agreement, perhaps in the nature of things) and punishment for sin is justified.

Who, then, are the intelligent agents who choose, voluntarily, to act in these ways? How are those sinning *daimones* related to the components that figure in the physical cycle? If the oath of B115 alludes to the same periodicity that operates in B30, how exactly do the agents in B115 relate to the agents in the cosmology? My claim here has not changed substantially from my suggestions in earlier published work: the agents in the two worlds (or rather the one world) are, I would argue, exactly the same.

It has to be said that this continuity of agency is not obvious from the mangled texts that we currently pore over in our attempt to sort out the structure of Empedocles's world. That is understandable. Empedocles's material is both vague and confusing because the specific *identity* of the participants in the story changes from stage to stage of the cycle. That is, the question 'who are they?' has two answers, one of which is constant—they are the same as what was there before—and the other varies over time as they exchange life for life in the sequence of reincarnation and as they exchange the unity of the sphere for the plural identities of the world of strife. This problem arises in any theory that involves re-incarnation, though it becomes more acute if the number of distinct individuals in the world changes from time to time, as it clearly does for Empedocles.²⁷ So in the first answer, 'they are the same as what was there before', we cannot ask 'the same what?' if there is no non-specific term to capture the contents of the world that is neutral between any and all of the plural participants in one part of the cycle and the singular participant in another. Arguably there was a neutral term for Empedocles, and it was '*daimones*' (or perhaps that term is used neutrally for all the individuals in the plural world, and god for the Sphere).²⁸ But the traditional division between religious poem and physical poem, and the assumption that matter is not imbued with life or intelligence, has tended to discourage scholars from recognising the term *daimon* as a suitable description for individual parts of the physical cosmos.

If, as I am suggesting, Empedocles's idea was that elements compounds and mortal creatures are just phases of the history of the *daimon*, and the Sphere (or god) just is the *daimon/daimones* with all

the differences eliminated, it is understandable that we find it hard to get our heads round the story. For one thing we have to make space for the idea that part of my history might be common to your past: that at some stage you and I were one being, and that we will be one in the future too. This conflicts with current assumptions about what it is to be an individual. But I do not think that we should rule out the possibility that this was part of Empedocles's model, just because we have different expectations about what continuity of consciousness is and how closely it links with identity.

The primacy of the *daimon* story

It has been customary for many years to present Empedocles's work with the physical doctrines first and the so-called *katharmoi* fragments relegated to the end. This has had an effect on contemporary assumptions about the principles on which Empedocles constructs his cosmic cycle, leading to the mechanical and deterministic reading of the physical cosmos which I have been challenging in this paper. If one sets up the story using texts that have been sifted to eliminate any reference to religious or moral motifs (sifting that has occurred in both ancient and modern selections of texts to illustrate particular themes) it is natural that one achieves a result such as that we are used to: a mechanical cosmos in which the rationale for the alternation is mysterious, followed by a moral tale whose connection with the earlier amoral universe and with its mechanical cycle is mysterious.

With the benefit of the new evidence from the Strasbourg papyrus, however, and renewed confidence that Plutarch was right in suggesting that the story of the *daimon* came at the beginning of the poem, we have to change our whole outlook on the cosmic passages. The story of the *daimon* came first. The reader of fragment 17 had already read 230 lines that set the cosmic events within a moral structure, one in which the fall from unity was the effect of violence in heaven. Starting from that beginning, one does not approach the physical world as a place devoid of passion: rather one reads the alternation of one and many, in the bigger cosmic pattern, as itself explained by and constituted of the deeds of hate and love of which we heard in the opening story. So the puzzles fall away, for no longer is the

rationale for the alternation mysterious—or, not mysterious in the way it was for the mechanistic reconstruction. It is a symptom of the spontaneous behaviour of moral agents who have bound themselves to certain rules and brought upon themselves a periodic punishment for sin. And no longer is it mysterious how we should connect the fate of the daimon to an apparently deterministic cosmic cycle, for the daimon's will is what determines the cosmic pattern. And no longer is it odd to find that the text in the Strasbourg papyrus winds up its extended development of the familiar account of the physical world by lurching back into the moral scene, recalling once again the impending suffering of the fallen soul and uttering the desperate wish never to have committed the terrible violence of having devoured flesh.²⁹

Thus the tale of the daimon is the principal theme, and it sets the tone of Empedocles's whole philosophy. We are to read the cosmic sequence as providing the evidence that that tale is true: for we can recognise in the world around us, as it functions on the grand scale and as it functions in daily intercourse, the symptoms of a history of malaise and the lasting scars of primeval impurity. So there never was a purely physical tale. First and foremost Empedocles is in the business of telling us that the world has a deeper meaning, a meaning which we must learn to read everywhere around us, in the physical behaviour of plants, of animals and of the phenomena in the heavens. Physics can be understood once we know why it would work like this, and that involves understanding where we stand, in a world in which the avoidance of unwitting wrongdoing is imperative, since every misdeed prolongs the punishment. Yet even now we are living with the consequences of past misdeeds which render the immediate future events inevitable. For these we can only cry out in remorse, just as Oedipus cried out against his terrible crimes in Sophocles's two great tragedies.

APPENDIX

The Comments in the Byzantine Scholia

There has been some discussion recently of a series of Byzantine scholia on Aristotle, published in M. Rashed 'La chronographie du système d'Empédocle: documents byzantins inédits', *Aevum Antiquum* 1 (2001) 237-59. These appear to specify precise times for the duration of particular phases of the cosmic cycle in Empedocles, and would, if reliable, therefore count against my thesis that the length of time before Strife breaks out, and the length of the period of exile, are, in principle, not pre-determined but depend upon voluntary actions together with a mutually agreed system of privileges and punishments.

Below I present a text of the relevant scholia, from Rashed's text, aligned alongside the passages of Aristotle to which they belong, and my own translation and notes. However, it is my view that the testimony in these texts is probably worthless as evidence for how Empedocles himself intended his system to work, although it may well be interesting evidence of some later interpretation to which the Byzantine scholiast adheres.

Byzantine scholia on Aristotle, Cod. Laur.gr 87.7

As published in M. Rashed 'La chronographie du système d'Empédocle: documents byzantins inédits', *Aevum Antiquum* 1 (2001) 237-59.

Aristotle *Physics* VIII 1, 250b 26-29

ἢ γὰρ ὡς Ἀναξαγόρας λέγει
(φησὶν γὰρ ἐκεῖνος, ὁμοῦ πάντων
δυντῶν καὶ ἡρεμοῦντων τὸν ἀπει-
ρον χρόνον, κίνησιν ἐμποιεῖσαι τὸν
νοῦν καὶ διακρίναι), ἢ ὡς Ἐμπεδο-
κλῆς ἐν μέρει κινεῖσθαι καὶ πάλιν
ἡρεμεῖν, κινεῖσθαι μὲν ὅταν ἡ φιλία
ἐκ πολλῶν ποιῆ τὸ ἓν

For it must be either as Anaxagoras says (for he says that all things having been together and resting for the infinite time, Nous imposes motion and divides them) or as Empedocles, that they move and then rest again in turn — move when Friendship is making the one from many

Scholion a τὸν σφαῖρον i.e. the Sphaeros, the intelligible
fol 91 lin 5 τὸν διανοητὸν world
a d P h y s . διάκοσμον
250b28

ἢ τὸ νεῖκος πολλὰ ἐξ' ἐνός, ἡρεμεῖν or Strife is making the many from
δ' ἐν τοῖς μεταξὺ χρόνοις, one, but rest in the between times,

Scholion b Πανομένης For when love [also] stops after the
fol 91 lin 6 γὰρ καὶ τῆς sixty time periods, strife does not
a d P h y s . φιλίας μετὰ immediately begin to do its
250b28 τοὺς ἑξ' χρό- dismembering, but is still.
νους, οὐκ
εὐθὺς ἤρξατο
ποιεῖν ἀπό-
στασιν τὸ
νεῖκος, ἀλλ'
ἡρέμει

καὶ add. s.l. pr. m.

λέγων οὕτως saying as follows:
ἢ μὲν ἐν ἐκ πλεόνων μεμάθηκε In so far as they learnt to become
φύεσθαι, one from more,
ἢ δὲ πάλιν διαφύντος ἐνός πλέον' And then again with the one falling
ἐκτελέθουσιν, apart they add up to many,
τῇ μὲν γίνονται τε καὶ οὐ σφισιν In that sense they come to be and
ἔμπεδος αἰών for them there is no permanent
ἢ δὲ τὰ δ' ἀλλάσσοντα διαμπερές life;
οὐδαμὰ λήγει, But in so far as these things never
ταύτη δ' αἰὲν ἔασιν ἀκίνητοι κατὰ give up changing for ever,
κύκλον. In this sense they are for ever,
motionless on the cycle.
Empedocles B17 9-13

τὸ γὰρ ἢ δὲ τὰ δ' ἀλλάσσοντα For we have to understand him to
ἐνθὲνδε ἐκεῖσε λέγειν αὐτὸν ὑπολη- mean 'from this state to that state'
πτέον. by the phrase ἢ δὲ τὰ δ' ἀλλάσσο-
ντα.

Aristotle *Physics* VIII 1 252a3-12

εἰ δὲ ταῦτ' ἀδύνατα, δηλον ὡς
ἔστιν αἰδιος κίνησις, ἀλλ' οὐχ ὅτε
μὲν ἦν ὅτε δ' οὐ· καὶ γὰρ ἔουκε τὸ
οὕτω λέγειν πλάσματι μάλλον.

So if these things are impossible, it is
clear that motion is eternal, not here
one time and gone another. For
indeed talking like that resembles
nothing more than a fairy story.

ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τὸ λέγειν ὅτι πέφυ-
κεν οὕτως καὶ ταύτην δεῖ νομίζειν
εἶναι ἀρχὴν, ὅπερ ἔουκεν Ἐμπεδο-
κλῆς ἂν εἰπεῖν, ὡς τὸ κρατεῖν καὶ
κινεῖν ἐν μέρει τὴν φιλίαν καὶ τὸ
νεῖκος ὑπάρχει τοῖς πράγμασι ἐξ
ἀνάγκης, ἡρεμεῖν δὲ τὸν μεταξὺ
χρόνον.

But likewise also saying that "this is
nature's way" and that one should
think of this as foundational, which
is what Empedocles would seem to
say, that friendship and strife taking
turns to rule and to initiate motion,
and resting in the intervening time,
this belongs to things by necessity.

Scholion c οὐκ εὐθὺς μετὰ
fol 93 lin 9 τὴν παρέλευ-
ad Phys. σιν τῶν ἑξ' χρό-
252a9-10 νων ἐν οἷς
ἐκράτησεν ἢ
φιλία γενέσθαι
διάσπασμα

οὐκ Rashed: καὶ ms || ἐκράτησεν Rashed

Not immediately after the passing
of the sixty time periods during
which love dominated did the
dismembering occur.

τάχα δὲ καὶ οἱ μίαν ἀρχὴν ποι-
οῦντες, ὡς περ Ἀναξαγόρας,
οὕτως ἂν εἴποιεν. ἀλλὰ μὴν οὐδὲν
γε ἄτακτον τῶν φύσει καὶ κατὰ
φύσιν ἢ γὰρ φύσις αἰτία πᾶσιν
τάξεως.

Maybe those who create a single
origin would also speak in this way.
But anyway there is certainly
nothing random among things that
are by nature and in accordance
with nature; for nature is the source
of order in all things.

Aristotle *Physics* VIII 1 252a27-32

εἰ δὲ προσοριεῖται τὸ ἐν μέρει, λεκτέον ἐφ' ὧν οὕτως, ὡσπερ ὅτι ἔστιν τι ὃ συνάγει τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, ἢ φιλία, καὶ φεύγουσιν οἱ ἐχθροὶ ἀλλήλους. τοῦτο γὰρ ὑποτίθεται καὶ ἐν τῷ ὅλῳ εἶναι. φαίνεται γὰρ ἐπὶ τινων οὕτως.

But if he is to specify the taking of turns, he ought to say what things it is like this for, like that there is something that draws people together, friendship, and enemies flee from one another. This he proposes is true in the universe too. For it appears to be thus for some things.

τὸ δὲ καὶ δι' ἴσων

But that it is also governed by equal

Scholion d
fol 93 lin 2 ab
imo, ad *Phys.*
252a31

πρὸς ἰ'

proportional to 10

πρὸς in compendio scriptum

χρόνων

times

Scholion e
fol 93 lin 2 ab
imo, ad *Phys.*
252a31

κρατεῖν τὸ
νεῖκος καὶ τὴν
φιλίαν

that strife and love dominate

δεῖται λόγου τινός.

needs some explanation.

Aristotle *De gen. et cor.* 315a 3-15

Ἐμπεδοκλῆς μὲν οὖν ἔοικεν ἐναντία λέγειν καὶ πρὸς τὰ φαινόμενα καὶ πρὸς αὐτὸν αὐτὸς. ἅμα μὲν γὰρ οὐ φησὶν ἕτερον ἐξ ἑτέρου γίνεσθαι τῶν στοιχείων οὐδέν, ἀλλὰ τὰλλα πάντα ἐκ τούτων, ἅμα δ' ὅταν εἰς ἐν συναγάγη τὴν ἅπασαν φύσιν πλὴν τοῦ νεῖκος,

Empedocles seems to contradict both the phenomena and himself. For he both denies that any of the elements comes from any other, saying rather that all the other things come from them, and at the same time whenever he gathers the entirety of nature (besides Strife) into one,

Scholion f
fol 201 lin 1 ab
imo, ad *Gen. et Cor.* 315a6

σφαῖρον, ἵνα
γένηται ὁ δια-
νοητὸς κόσμος
τῆς φιλίας ἐπι-
κρατησάσης

i.e. the Sphaeros, where the intelligible world comes into being at the moment when love achieves supremacy.

ἐκ τοῦ ἐνὸς γίνεσθαι πάλιν ἕκαστον.

that each emerges again from the one

Scholion g
fol. 201v, lin 1,
ad *Gen. et Cor.* 315a7-8

διακρίσει, μετὰ
ρ' χρόνους νε-
ικους ἐπικρα-
τούντος

by division, after 100 time periods of strife being dominant (or, after 100 time periods, as strife takes control)

ὡστ' ἐξ ἐνός τινος δῆλον ὅτι διαφοραῖς τισι χωριζομένων καὶ πάθεισιν ἐγένετο τὸ μὲν ὕδωρ τὸ πῦρ, καθάπερ λέγει τὸν μὲν ἥλιον λευκὸν καὶ θερμὸν, τὴν δὲ γῆν βαρὺ καὶ σκληρόν· ἀφαιρουμένων οὖν τούτων τῶν διαφορῶν (εἰσὶ γὰρ ἀφαιρετὰ γενόμεναί γε) δῆλον ὡς ἀνάγκη γίνεσθαι καὶ γῆν ἐξ ὕδατος καὶ ὕδωρ ἐκ γῆς, ὁμοίως δὲ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἕκαστον, οὐ τότε μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ νῦν μεταβάλλοντά γε τοῖς πάθεισιν.

So that it is clear that from things that were separated out of a single thing in virtue of some differentiae and qualities, one bit became water and another fire, just as he says the sun, on the one hand, bright and hot, the earth on the other heavy and hard. So since these differences are removed (for they are removable, given they developed) it is clear that of necessity earth comes from water and water from earth and the same for each of the others, not just then but now too, altering in their very qualities.

Notes and queries on the scholia and their bearing on the interpretation of Empedocles:

Scholia b and c imply a pause of no specific duration before the outbreak of strife. Would they have said how long it was if there was a set time?

Scholion f does not identify the arrival of the sphere by the expiration of a set time, but by the achievement of Love's domination. Does this mean that the time of arrival was *not* set.

Scholion g might imply a fixed period of forty years for the pause, if 40 plus 60 makes a complete half cycle.

Scholion d implies that the scholiast thought the description 'equal' needed to be qualified in some way. But what exactly?³⁰

NOTES

1. Sophocles *OT* 1369-1421
2. Sophocles *OC* 258-73, 521-348, 594-5.
3. Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, esp. 18-19, 130.
4. B30.3. Cf. 115.1-2.
5. B 115.1
6. B 115.2
7. Empedocles lists a range of entities that qualify as gods at various points in his poem and this reference in B115 is unspecific. If, as I suppose, the acts of strife and love are constituted by acts (loving or hostile respectively) on the part of the elements and/or daimones (alternative descriptions of different manifestations of the same beings) then agreement between the superpowers Love and Strife will be agreement among the eternal entities (gods, daimones etc.) to behave in accordance with such an agreement.
8. Here I am proposing to read the term *ἐθρέφθη* (nurtured) as referring to pre-natal growth (cf. Aeschylus *Eumenides* 665) rather than rearing the child in the nursery, and interpret *ἐνὶ μελέεσσιν* as a reference to the organ (womb) that is the nurturing container, not Strife's own limbs, nor the frame of the universe (though in fact the womb in which it is nurtured will indeed be Love's world, the Sphere; but since Strife is in suspension during this phase he is not, so to speak, spread through the Sphere, but is a latent potency

within getting ready to break out and have an effect, and this is a sense that the womb imagery captures well). The antenatal reading seems to me to improve the sense of line 1. The phrase *ἐς τιμᾶς τ' ἀνόρουσε* (sprang up to his privileges) is more tricky. It is usually read as a reference to the adult prince ascending to the throne ('rose to office', Barnes), but Wright suggests instead a military metaphor. I am inclined to suggest that the metaphor is of birth: the unborn child comes to life (note that *ἀνόρουσε* can be used of waking from sleep) and steps out into his hereditary rights—or in this case not hereditary but reclaimed rights (note the association of *τιμαί* with compensation and tit for tat penalties/privileges). There will then be scope for a continued expansion period during Strife's period of increasing domination. *τελειομένοιο χρόνιο* I take to be an allusion to the idea of a fixed gestation period typical of viviparous reproduction in nature.

9. Birth is itself a polluting process without the added dimension of redescribing it as murder. See Robert Parker, *Miasma: pollution and purification in early Greek religion*, Oxford Clarendon Press 1983, chapter 2.
10. It might be objected that *φόνος* cannot be used of the birth fluids, since it is the blood of killing, but clearly in the metaphorical context of a birth that is effected by means of a murder, the suggestion that the birth fluids are the blood of the victim is not out of place. In any case Empedocles regularly uses *φόνος* interchangeably with *αἷμα* for normal descriptions of physiology (e.g. B100, the account of the process of breathing): the two words fit different metrical positions. Note also the occasional comparisons between childbirth fluids (and/or menses) and the blood shed from a sacrificial beast in Hippocratic texts: *De morbis mulierum* 1.6, 1.72 and *de natura pueris* 18.
11. When the Sphere is shattered the death of the God is his conversion into blood (since blood is an equal mixture of the four elements, and the conversion from unity to plurality at the outbreak of Strife will turn the unified sphere into a mixture of elements). See Peter Kingsley, *On the Teaching of Empedocles*, Unpublished dissertation (M.Litt), Cambridge 1979, and Catherine Osborne 'Empedocles Recycled' *CQ* 37 (1987) 23-50, esp. 47-8.
12. By contrast Eteocles does indulge in fatalism in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*. See for instance 689-704. The impression given by that play is that such an attitude is morally culpable.
13. This was the position defended in Catherine Osborne 'Empedocles Recycled' 36-7. The reference to B39 there should read B30.
14. Hippolytus *Refutatio* 7.23, (214 Wendland; Osborne *Rethinking* page

- 318). Simplicius *In Phys.* 1184.9 gives the same interpretation as Hippolytus. See Catherine Osborne *Rethinking Early Greek Philosophy* (London, Duckworth 1987) 117.
15. This is, I think, what I intended to suggest in *Rethinking* 118.
16. Plato also employs the word in this sense in the *Timaeus* (47e to 48a and *passim*).
17. φύσει πάντα εἶναι καὶ τύχῃ φασίν, *Laws* 889b2.
18. καὶ πάντα ὅποσα τῆ τῶν ἐναντίων κράσει κατὰ τύχην ἐξ ἀνάγκης συνεκράσθη 889c.
19. Not all daimones are malé, since the list of divine names of the elements in B 6 include two male and two female gods. Assuming, as I do, that these elements are temporary manifestations of (some of) the daimones of the plural world, and that they (as well as a variety of limbs and body parts) are among the ones who increasingly have intercourse in B59 under the influence of love, I conclude that the masculine gender used of the daimones in B115 may be a generic masculine, not gender-specific.
20. See for example *O.C.* 258-71.
21. The motif is explained and explored at length in René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory), Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. Girard's ideas resonate with many of the motifs in Empedocles. Note that the term *καθαρός* (as well as *κάθαρμα*) can also occasionally be used of the scapegoat as an alternative to the more standard term *φαρμακός*. For references see Osborne *Rethinking* 118 n. 136.
22. The term *καθαρός* occurs in *Oedipus at Colonus* in connection with purification of the pollution that Oedipus brings to the sanctuary at Colonus. The chorus instruct him, starting at 466, to perform an elaborate sequence of rituals as cleansing, though (as the scholiasts note) it turns out that these rituals can be performed on his behalf by his daughter: again we find the substitution-motif, vicarious purification.
23. Many recent editors (Wright, Martin & Primavesi) correct the text so as to provide a singular object from line 6 onwards, by reading *μιν* in line 6 (found in Plutarch), changing *φυσόμενος* to *φύομενον* in line 7 (with Stein, Wilamowitz, Zuntz, Bollack) and accepting *σφε* in line 9 (from Plutarch) as singular. However they need a plural antecedent for *τῶν* in line 13, for which line 5 is rather distant. Their text changes from singular (3-4) to plural (5) to singular (6-12) to plural (13). Hippolytus reports masculine plural objects throughout lines 6 to 12, glossing the victims as 'souls' (*ψυχαί*) at line 9. Others (e.g. Diels, Bollack) accept Plutarch's *μιν* at line 6 but retain Hippolytus's plural victims in line 7, and read *σφε* as plural in line

- 9, so the text changes from singular (3-4) to plural (5) to singular (6) to plural (7-13). I suspect that the poetic effect is preferable if (as in Hippolytus) the change from singular to plural occurs once, at line 5 (as Strife shatters the One) and there is no accusative in line 6. Hippolytus reads *μὲν* not *μιν* at that point. Less likely is that *μιν* is an epic accusative plural (LSJ *μιν* II) wrongly "corrected out" by Hippolytus.
24. *OC* 536-48.
25. This is to flesh out the enigmatic hints in my *Rethinking* 118; and 'Empedocles recycled' 41. For other cases of exile for accidental or involuntary killing in both myth and classical law, see Parker *Miasma* 114-130, and esp. note 51.
26. It is interesting to note that in the extant texts, Empedocles never uses the term *katharmos* nor any other related noun (only the adjective *καθαρός*). This makes it hard to tell what kind of referent was intended by the term *katharmos* in the title.
27. See Philoponus, *In De generatione et corruptione* 19.3 for a clear recognition of the fact that the elements lose their own characteristics at the point of complete unification. Cf. also B35. 14. Several testimonia (collected at DK 31A43) seem to suggest that during the cosmic period Empedocles stopped short of allowing real mixture of elements in the mortal compounds, in order to prevent that loss of identity of the pure element, instead having juxtaposition of minute (always further divisible) *ἄγκοι*. cf. Aristotle *De Caelo* 3.6, 305a1.
28. Items in the plural world have temporary identities by becoming a variety of 'mortals', B115..7. This latter term clearly refers to a thing with just one lifetime in the sequence. Another option is to become a 'long-lived god', B21, B23, Strasbourg papyrus a(ii) 2, which is presumably like a mortal life, only longer.
- I am suggesting that these mortal lives are lives that belong to daimones, who are there all along though they are constantly taking on different forms as a result of the mixing and remixing, or (in B115 language) the falling into and spitting out from, that goes on during the plural world. I think that the chief problem for this interpretation is the question as to how many such daimones there are: four (the elements) or more? I suspect that we should have to allow Empedocles to refuse the question: there are increasing numbers the more plural and diverse the world gets. If that makes it hard to see how they are permanent and endure repeated incarnations as mortals, we have to appeal again to the original idea that the now plural daimones are all in some sense continuous with what was just one in the sphere. Just as the

Sphere fragments, so also the daimones fragment repeatedly as Strife increases.

29. Ensemble d.

30. This paper has benefited immensely from the fruitful discussions, both formal and informal with the congenial company of other Empedocles experts during the Myconos meeting hosted by Apostolos Pierris, and at the Oxford meeting of the Southern Association in 2003. I am also grateful to Myles Burnyeat for insisting that I address the Byzantine scholia in this context, even if I am less than convinced of their significance, and to Oliver Primavesi for noble assistance in enabling me to access Rashed's publication in time for the presentation in Oxford. Final revisions to this paper were made during a period of leave funded jointly by UEA and the Arts and Humanities Research Board.