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EMPEDOCLES VS. XENOPHANES: DIFFERING NOTIONS OF THE DIVINE

Introduction

The nature of the gods in Empedocles has been the topic of numerous discussions. Is assigning the names Zeus, Hera, *Aidôneus*, and *Nêstis* to the four divine roots of everything just a manner of speaking *via* the common language of Greek mythology, and merely fanciful? Or is it something real and more serious for Empedocles? When Empedocles gives details about Aphrodite, what is mythical imagery, allegory, metaphor, poetic presentation – and what is not? Out of all these questions and so many others which continue to divide the scholars, we propose here to tackle the question as to whether or not (and if so, to what extent) Empedocles humanizes the gods; in particular, we want to examine his relation to Xenophanes, traditionally the first to champion a critique of anthropomorphism. We will finish by trying to understand what could have pushed Empedocles (a) to name gods in place of what Aristotle would eventually name principles or elements, and (b) to attribute life and sometimes human behavior to what could have been seen as inanimate matter.

The Question of fr. 134¹

Let us open the subject with a citation from Ammonius – followed by another from Tzetzes and finally another from Olympiodorus – all regarding the same verses of Empedocles (fr. 134 DK). On pp. 248.17–249.18 of *In Aristotelis de interpretatione commentarius* by Ammonius (ed. Ad. Busse, 1897; *Commentaria in Aristotelem Graeca* 4.5), we encounter the following passage:

διὰ ταῦτα δὲ καὶ ὁ Ἀκραγαντίνος σοφὸς ἐπιρραπίσας
τοὺς περὶ θεῶν ὡς ἀνθρωποειδῶν ὄντων παρὰ τοῖς
ποιηταῖς λεγομένους μύθους, ἐπήγαγε προηγουμένως
μὲν περὶ Ἀπόλλωνος, περὶ οὗ ἦν αὐτῷ προσεχῶς ὁ

¹ For the fragments of the Presocratics, we will follow Diels – Kranz' numbering (H. Diels & W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin 1951), without adding D.–K. Fragment (fr.), here, is understood as a fragment under the B section of D.–K. An updated bibliography concerning fr. 134 can be found at <http://sites.google.com/site/empedoclesacragas/bibliography-to-b-fragments>. For the sources of the Presocratics: <http://www.placita.org/>.

λόγος, κατὰ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ περὶ τοῦ θείου
παντός ἀπλῶς ἀποφαινόμενος

οὔτε γὰρ ἀνδρομέη κεφαλῇ κατὰ γυῖα κέκασται, 1
οὐ μὲν ἀπαὶ νώτων γε δύω κλάδοι αἰσσοῦσιν, 2
οὐ πόδες, οὐ θοὰ γοῦν¹, οὐ μήδεα λαχνήεντα, 3
ἀλλὰ φρήν ἱερῇ καὶ ἀθέσφατος ἔπλετο μῶνον, 4
φροντίσι κόσμον ἅπαντα καταἰσσοῦσα θοῆσι, 5

For those reasons the Wise Man of Agrigentum rebutted the myths told by poets about gods having human form, and brought forth [the following verses] primarily about Apollo (about whom his argument was immediately concerned), but equally about the totality of the divine in general, declaring

*For its members are not surmounted by a man's head, 1
two branches don't jut from its back, 2
it has no feet, no swift knees, no hairy sex, 3
but it is only¹ a sacred and immense phrèn 4
darting through all the cosmos with swift thoughts. 5*

Tzetzies quotes the two last lines of fr. 134 in his *Chiliades* VII (522–526 Kiessling), within the following context:

νοῦν ἐπὶ θείας φύσεως κυρίως φαμέν μόνον,
ἐπὶ θεοῦ ἀγγέλων τε καὶ τῶν ὁμοιοτρόπων,
ὡς Xenophanes ἔγραψε τοῦτο καὶ Parmenίδης.
Ἐμπεδοκλῆς τῷ τρίτῳ τε τῶν φυσικῶν, δεικνύων
τίς ἡ οὐσία τοῦ θεοῦ, κατ' ἔπος οὕτω λέγει·
οὐ τότε τε θεός ἐστιν, οὐ τότε τε καὶ τότε,
ἀλλὰ φρήν ἱερῇ καὶ ἀθέσφατος ἔπλετο μῶνον.
φροντίσι κόσμον ἅπαντα καταἰσσοῦσα θοῆσιν².
οὕτως ἐπὶ τῶν θείων μὲν τὸν νοῦν φαμέν κυρίως·
[...] εἰ νοῦς γὰρ ἦν ἀνθρώποις,
πρὸ τοῦ ἀκοῦσαι ἅπαντα εἶχον νοεῖν ἄν μόνοι.

We can only talk properly about Mind in reference to a divine nature, in reference to God, and angels, and such-like beings; Xenophanes wrote that, and so did Parmenides. Empedocles, in the third book of the Physics, had this to say, word for word: God is not this and that and the other thing, [fr. 134.4–5] Thus do we talk properly about Mind in reference to divine beings. [...] For if humans had Mind, they would have the ability all by themselves to know everything before hearing it.

Olympiodorus (*In Platonis Gorgiam commentaria* 4.3.34–37, ed. L. G. Westerink, 1970) speaks of God as the one first cause, quotes three verses of a

¹ We regard ἔπλετο as an aorist, and translate it here with the present *it is* (cf. D. B. Monro, *Homeric Grammar*, Oxford 1891², p. 38), which is in harmony with the perfect κέκασται. Some, however, understand ἔπλετο as an imperfect, though simultaneously accepting the perfect κέκασται. Μῶνον is to be understood as an adverb (*only, exclusively*) modifying the verb ἔπλετο.

² We write θοῆσιν and not θυῆσιν (Th. Kiessling's 1826 edition), assuming that the υ of θυῆσιν is a misprint.

Hymn to God, and soon after introduces the first line of what we take as fr. 134:

οὐδὲν οὖν ἐκεῖ σωματικόν, ὡς καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Ἐμπεδοκλῆς
λέγει πρὸ Πλάτωνος· φησὶ γὰρ
"οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀνδρομέη κεφαλὴ κατὰ γυῖα
κέκασται"

καὶ τὰ ἑξῆς.

*So there is nothing bodily there, as Empedocles also says, before
Plato. For he says,*

"There was no human head fixed upon the limbs",

*and so on.*¹

These, then, are the data; let us proceed to our analysis. Despite the fact that Olympiodorus does not quote fr. 134.3–4, we take it that he has in mind – like his scholiast² – the φρῆν ἱερὴ καὶ ἀθέσφατος and not something else. Besides, he takes the φρῆν ἱερὴ to be a god. What Olympiodorus says – that Empedocles denies that god is σωματικόν – flies in the face of all the evidence we have in the Empedoclean corpus. God, whether seen as one of the four divine roots, or as *Sphairos* or a similarly long-lived god, or as *Philotes*, or the φρῆν ἱερὴ, is not immaterial, not incorporeal. There is no anticipation of Plato in that regard.

More needs to be said on this topic. When we speak of the four divine roots, we must recall fr. 6:

*First hear the four roots of all things,
gleaming Zeus and life-bringing Hera and Aïdôneus
and Nêstis, who moistens with tears the spring of mortals.*

(transl. B. Inwood)

Zeus, Hera, *Aïdôneus*, *Nêstis* are the fire, ether, earth and water that make up all things. Among *all things* there is the *Sphairos*. Of course, the *Sphairos* has no feet, no knees and so on (fr. 29):

οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ νώτοιο δύο κλάδοι ἀίσσονται,
οὐ πόδες, οὐ θοὰ γούνα, οὐ μῆδεα γεννήεντα,
ἀλλὰ σφαῖρος ἔην καὶ <πάντοθεν> ἴσος ἑαυτῶι.

Olympiodorus would undoubtedly have the same view as Hippolytus and the Neo-Platonists: he would think that the *Sphairos* is a κόσμος νοητός³. Now, there is abundant proof that a κόσμος νοητός is a sheer anachronism with regard to Empedocles. In fr. 17.20, *Philotes* dwells among the four roots,

¹ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*, transl. R. Jackson, K. Lycos & H. Tarrant, Leiden – Boston – Köln 1998, p. 87.

² A marginal scholium to the text of Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Gorgiam commentaria* 4.3.36, has lines 1, 3, 4, 5 of fr. 134, with some slight variation in line 3 vs. the same line in fr. 134: οὐ χεῖρες, οὐ θοὰ γούνα, οὐ μῆδεα λαχνήεντα (*it has no hands, no swift knees, no hairy sex*). We see that the scholiast has taken up what Olympiodorus had in mind in his citation of a single verse of Empedocles followed by *and so on*, and has felt obliged to report it more completely by adding what were to his knowledge the three verses that followed that one-line citation. The scholiast's version could be the authentic verses of the Agrigentine (see M. R. Wright, *Empedocles: the extant fragments*, New Haven – London 1981, pp. 251–252, J.–C. Picot, *Apollon et la φρῆν ἱερὴ καὶ ἀθέσφατος* (*Empédocle, fr. 134 DK*) in: *Anais de Filosofia Clássica* 11, 2012, pp. 1–31, esp. pp. 3–4.

³ Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 7.29.17.2–3: μάκαρας καλῶν τούς (σ)υνηγμένους ὑπὸ τῆς φιλίας ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν εἰς τὴν ἐνότη(τ)α τοῦ κόσμου τοῦ νοητοῦ.

equal in length and width. Length and width is typical of a body. And *Sphairos* is the domain of *Philotès*.

Furthermore, and again contrary to what Olympiodorus tells us, the φρήν ἱερή of fr. 134, which would be an Empedoclean Apollo according to Ammonius, has a corporeal nature. Olympiodorus jumps too quickly from the idea that an Empedoclean god does not have a human shape (οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀνδρομέη κεφαλὴ κατὰ γυῖα κέκασται) to the idea that such a god is without any body at all (οὐδὲν οὖν ἐκεῖ σωματικόν).

But it is not only ancient scholars who have misunderstood Empedocles' conception of the divine. There seems also to be a general consensus in modern scholarly commentaries about fr. 134, to the effect that fr. 134 reiterates Xenophanes' critique of anthropomorphism. That consensus would agree with Tzetzēs, who mentions Xenophanes when he introduces Empedocles' lines on the form of the divine. We intend now to present arguments against that view.

Empedocles' humanizing of the gods

Ammonius reports that *the Wise Man of Agrigentum rebutted the myths told by poets about gods having human form*. It is well known that Xenophanes, a century before Empedocles, criticized Homer and Hesiod, and humans generally, for their anthropomorphism when describing the gods:

πάντα θεοῖσ' ἀνέθηκαν Ὀμηρός θ' Ἡσίοδος τε,
ὅσσα παρ' ἀνθρώποισιν ὄνειδεα καὶ ψόγος ἐστίν,
(DK 21 B 11.1–2)

*Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything
that is a shame and reproach among men ...*

ἀλλ' οἱ βροτοὶ δοκέουσι γεννᾶσθαι θεούς,
τὴν σφετέρην δ' ἐσθήτα ἔχειν φωνὴν τε δέμας τε,
(DK 21 B 14)

*But mortals consider that the gods are born, and that they have
clothes and speech [and body]*

ἀλλ' εἰ χεῖρας ἔχον βόες <ἵπποι τ' > ἢ ἑ λέοντες
ἢ γράψαι χεῖρεσσι καὶ ἔργα τελεῖν ἄπερ ἄνδρες,
ἵπποι μὲν θ' ἵπποισι βόες δέ τε βουσὶν ὁμοίως
καὶ <κε> θεῶν ἰδέας ἔγραφον καὶ σώματ' ἐποίουν
τοιαῦθ' οἷόν περ καὶ τοὶ δέμας εἶχον <ἕκαστοι>.
(DK 21 B 15)

*But if cattle and horses or lions had hands, or were able to draw
with their hands and do the works that men can do, horses would
draw the forms of the gods like horses, and cattle like cattle, and
they would make their bodies such as they each had themselves.*

(Quoted by Clement of Alexandria, *Stromates* V, 14, 109: Εὐ γοῦν καὶ Ξενοφάνης ὁ Κολοφώνιος, διδάσκων ὅτι εἷς καὶ ἄσώματος ὁ θεὸς ἐπιφέρει')

εἷς θεός, ἔν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος,
οὔτι δέμας θνητοῖσιν ὁμοίος οὔδὲ νόημα.

(DK 21 B 23)

[In any event Xenophanes the Colophonian, teaching that God is one and bodiless, does well to assert:]

One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or in thought.¹

It is a commonplace today to assert that Empedocles in fr. 134 trod the path of Xenophanes' criticism. As we have reported above, Tzetzēs long ago created a link between Empedocles and Xenophanes. We will not deny that there is some justification for his doing so. But we find it instructive to point out the limits of Empedocles' rebuttal to religious anthropomorphism, and to go on from there to uncover his veiled attack on Xenophanes in fr. 134.

Anthropomorphic projection, which Xenophanes denounces so eloquently in fragment DK 21 B 15, is a common, obvious human tendency – and a natural one, since the human being is not so unique that none of his traits can be noticed in other living beings. Empedocles, too, thinks in terms of analogies. He sees points in common between mere things and living beings, and he sees points in common between gods and humans. We can even come up with a list of some passages where anthropomorphism is obvious in Empedocles:

- The Muse has white arms (fr. 3.3), drives a chariot (fr. 3.5); has a mind (fr. 131.2).
- Among the four roots (fr. 6) there are two male figures (*Zeus*, *Aidōneus*) and two female figures (*Hera*, *Nēstis*) who seem to be grouped as married couples (*Zeus* and *Hera* on the one hand and *Aidōneus* and *Nēstis-Persephone* on the other).
- *Nēstis* weeps (fr. 6.3: Νῆστις θ', ἧ δακρύοις τέγγει κρούνωμα βρότειον).
- The One can learn (fr. 17.9, fr. 26.8); the elements come back together voluntarily (fr. 35.6); they learn (fr. 35.14); all things have breath and odor (fr. 102), desire and hope (fr. 110.9), and thought (fr. 103 and fr. 110.10); and different, separate forms desire one another (fr. 21.8).
- The *Sphairos* rejoices (fr. 27.4: Σφαῖρος κυκλοτερῆς μονίῃ περιηγέι γαίῳ). Empedocles may well have conceived that, for the *Sphairos*, rest and rejoicing were possible at the same time. In any case, there is an anthropomorphist projection in the statement that *Sphairos* rejoices.
- Harmony provides a dense cover wherein the *Sphairos* is fixed (fr. 27.3), as if this dense cover was the womb of the goddess; Aphrodite has divided meadows (fr. 66) and perfect harbors (fr. 98.3) – possible allusions to her sexual organs.
- *Cypris* is a queen (fr. 128.3), acts as a potter (fr. 73), has palms (fr. 75, fr. 95).

¹ All Xenophanes' translations from G. S. Kirk & J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge 1957, pp. 168–169.

- The alternation of power between *Philotès* and *Neikos* is governed by a broad oath (fr. 30.3); now an oath is not something mechanical: it is sworn by men or by gods. Thus in fr. 115.2, the gods seal a decree with broad oaths.
- Strife acts blamelessly (fr. 35.9); the impulse of *Philotès* is blameless (fr. 35.13).
- The moon has an eye (fr. 42); the moon gazes at the circle of its lord (fr. 47); the sun has a fearless face (fr. 44); the sea is the earth's sweat (fr. 55), it vomits (fr. 115.10); fire has an intention or desire (fr. 62.6), air, sea, earth, sun have hatred (fr. 115.12).
- The immortal gods are around a table (fr. 147.1).

Empedocles is a poet. He is famous for his metaphors. But sometimes we wonder when, from an Empedoclean perspective, a poetic manner of speaking starts, and when it stops. When does he think he's presenting fantasy, and when does he mean to be taken literally and seriously?

We can of course decide that from Empedocles' point of view all of the above passages where anthropomorphism is obvious are poetic metaphors, that nothing here is meant to be taken literally, that they are just convenient ways to make concrete and understandable the realities that are otherwise out of reach to his audience; in other words, that we should try to penetrate to the real and deep thought of Empedocles that lurks beneath the popular idiom with which he addresses his disciple Pausanias or a larger audience. And of course the common clichés of previous poets come into play to embellish his wording – new ideas conveyed through old bits of poetry. We need to remind ourselves that Empedocles is working both within and against the epic tradition in which he, with his didactic poem in dactylic hexameters, chooses to stand. Empedocles is faced with the task of stating his *principia* in Homeric and Hesiodic terms, while at the same time combating the cultural tendencies that originated with Homer and Hesiod. As Herodotus puts it (2:53):

Whence the gods severally sprang, whether or not they had all existed from eternity, what forms they bore [ὅκοιοί τε τινες τὰ εἶδεα] – *these are questions of which the Greeks knew nothing until the other day, so to speak. For Homer and Hesiod were the first to compose Theogonies, and give the gods their epithets, to allot them their several offices and occupations, and describe their forms* [εἶδεα] (transl. G. Rawlinson).

The Agrigentine poet must walk a fine line between Homer's inspired and inspiring humanization of the gods, and the deeper philosophic truths Empedocles is trying to propound. So when the poet comes to criticize the anthropomorphic representation of the traditional Apollo – a god who for the poet would only be a *phrèn hierè* as stated in fr. 134.4–5 –, it is not simply a criticism of humanization (after all, we humans have *phrenes*, too), but criticism of excessive or inappropriate anthropomorphism. In fr. 29, the god of Love, the *Sphairos*, is not a god with two branches on his back, and with feet, swift knees and genitals. We take the two branches as a metaphor and understand that the *Sphairos* is not a traditional Eros with his two wings; he is an Empedoclean Eros, without two wings (just as the *phrèn hierè* is an

Empedoclean Apollo against the traditional Apollo)¹. That god *Sphairos*, so unfamiliar to us, rejoices nevertheless – just as we humans rejoice. Likewise, we humans have a *phrèn* like the Empedoclean Apollo.

Philotès, Cypris or Harmony – whatever name is chosen for the principle, that principle actively creates living beings. It is a feminine principle or power. She seems to have a body, a blend of elements, like the body she creates. She imposes a goal upon an organ – the eye for instance – just as she herself has a goal. She acts as craftsmen act, with means and goals, with intelligence to coordinate the means in view of a goal. But nothing of the kind with *Neikos*. *Neikos* is not even grammatically a he or a she. It is a faceless, neutral principle. It cannot be in itself a model for creating a living being. Nevertheless, *It* is a God and we are tempted to see a He in It. Empedocles seems to invite us to do so when in fr. 115.14 he speaks of himself as an exile from the gods and a wanderer, deliberately choosing the words νεΐκεΐ μαινομένωι πίσυνος, *trusting in furious Strife*, which would naturally bring to mind the well-known passage from Homer,

[...] Ἐκτῶρ δὲ μέγα σθένεϊ βλεμεαίνων
μαίνεται ἐκπάγλως πίσυνος Δί (Iliad IX, 237–238),

where the object of trust is a male god (Zeus). We must, however, resist the temptation to make *Neikos* strictly a He. Empedocles does not want to suggest a possible union of *Philotès* and *Neikos*, whether a marriage or not (like the love affair between Aphrodite and Ares), because no such thing ever occurs in the cosmic cycle. Furthermore, it would have been preposterous to make *Neikos* a personality as Aphrodite is, for *Neikos* promotes the destruction of every personality. And more: *Neikos* must not be in itself a living being, because living beings are the products of *Philotès*. So we must keep the odd figure of a god in neuter gender, without sex, like an inanimate object, but who/which is active, who/which can behave as a living being.

The Muse

Let us see now what Empedocles says about his own Muse. She has white arms (fr. 3.3: καὶ σέ, πολυμνήστη λευκώλενε παρθένε Μοῦσα). The Muse in Bacchylides also had white arms (33[V].176 Edmonds: λευκώλενε Καλλιόπα). That was already a cliché in Greek literature. Several women, goddesses or not, are *white-armed* there. How could Empedocles the philosopher believe that this kind of detail was true for a goddess, his Muse? We would assume, in the first place, that he could hardly believe that the Muse had arms like humans have arms, and even less that the color of those non-existent arms could be white. The *white-armed* epithet would be pure fantasy on the part of a poet who simply wanted to insert his poetry into a tradition (transmitted for instance by Bacchylides with his Καλλιόπα). A further example: the Muse drives a chariot (fr. 3.5). We understand there that the chariot is the poem Empedocles is writing. With the chariot, Empedocles

¹ See J.–C. Picot, *Apollon et la φρήν ίερή και ἀθέσφατος* (Empédocle, fr. 134 DK), p. 26.

wants to say that his poem is inspired by a Muse, as Homer, Hesiod, Parmenides, Bacchylides and so many others did before him.

So Empedocles could make use of divine images filled with anthropomorphism and not believe that those images conformed to reality. Finally, fr. 134 and fr. 29 tempt us to agree that Empedocles is truly anti-anthropomorphic and does indeed walk in Xenophanes' footsteps.

But let us take a closer look at Empedocles' Muse. At least she is there in his poetry. We have no evidence that Xenophanes had a Muse; it would surprise us if he did, for that would not be coherent with his criticism. Empedocles has one and she is not an empty character. The Agrigentine proclaims his inspiration through a feminine and divine figure beyond himself. That figure guarantees the truth of what he asserts. We face here a reality we cannot leave aside when trying to understand Empedocles.

The Muse is closer to Love than to Strife. Love is a feminine figure, whether we call it *Philotès* or Aphrodite or Cypris or Harmony. Empedocles does not think of it merely as an abstract unifying principle. He thinks of that unifying principle as something *feminine*. Allusions to the power of Aphrodite's sexual parts (fr. 66), of Harmony's (fr. 27.3), and of Cypris' (fr. 98.3) are not fantasy and only fantasy. Empedocles does believe in the sexuality of the divine roots and of the power of Love, and in the sexuality of the Muse close to Love¹. This belief goes against what Xenophanes contended, if we take for granted his anti-anthropomorphism and what he says in our fragment DK 21 B 23, namely that one God is not at all like mortals in bodily form. Wherever Empedocles clothes his abstract conceptions (union, separation, cycle) with flesh, with human behaviors and institutions, it is preposterous to hold that he does so only to help clarify what is difficult to figure out.

Empedocles confronts the Aeschylean Zeus

Scholars have suggested that the chorus of Aeschylus' *Suppliants* portrays Zeus in a Xenophanean light with the words (91–95, 100–103)²

πίπτει δ' ἀσφαλές οὐδ' ἐπὶ νώτῳ	91
κορυφᾷ Διὸς εἰ κρανθῆ προᾶγμα τέλειον.	92
δαυλοὶ γὰρ προπίδων	93
δάσκιόι τε τείνουσιν πόροι	94
κατιδεῖν ἄφραστοι ...	95
πᾶν ἄπονον δαιμονίων·	100
ἥμενος δὲν φρόνημά πως	101

¹ See C. Rowett, *Love, sex and the gods: why Empedocles' things have divine names and come in pairs?*, [forthcoming]: *The elemental divinities come together in love and sexual union, to generate compound wholes, when they are affected by love, and the effect of love is to create this kind of bonding and creative generation of new beings.*

² See e.g. W. Jaeger, *The Theology of the Early Greek Philosophers*, London – Oxford – New York 1967 (1947¹), p. 45 & F. Solmsen, *Hesiod and Aeschylus*, Ithaca 1949, p. 222 n. 166: [...] Suppl. 96, which shows a very interesting combination of Hesiod's (Op. 6) view of Zeus with that of Xenophanes (21 B 25 Diels and Kranz) ...

αὐτόθεν ἐξέπραξεν ἔμ-	102
πας ἐδράνων ἀφ' ἁγνῶν ¹	103
<i>But surely and not on its back does a matter land</i>	91
<i>If by the nod of Zeus it is destined to be fulfilled</i>	92
<i>For rugged and shadowy do the paths of his heart extend</i>	93/94
<i>Impossible to descry</i>	95
<i>... All is effortless for the divine:</i>	100
<i>seated above, it fulfils a thought completely afar,</i>	101–102
<i>from the holy seat.</i>	103

(transl. adapted from P. Sandin)

We notice ἄπρονον (v. 100) and think of Xenophanes' ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο in fr. DK 21 B 25. We perceive a parallel between ἡμενος ... ἐδράνων ἀφ' ἁγνῶν (v. 101–103) and αἰεὶ δ' ἐν ταύτῳ μίμνει κινούμενος οὐδέν (DK 21 B 26.1), and another parallel between Zeus – the god who accomplishes his thought (v. 101–102: φρόνημα ... ἐξέπραξεν) – and the God of Xenophanes who νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει (DK 21 B 25: ἀλλ' ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενὶ πάντα κραδαίνει).

Xenophanes imagines an impersonal God. Aeschylus maintains Zeus with all the traditional clichés. Empedocles is likely to have known those passages in both Aeschylus and Xenophanes. The verses of fr. 134 would be one way to bring his own doctrine into confrontation with Aeschylus and Xenophanes. That is what we now wish to demonstrate.

Could it be a coincidence that κεφαλή found in line 1 of fr. 134, along with φρήν and ἀθέσφατος in line 4, seem to echo the words κορυφᾶ, προπίδων, ἀφραστοί, from *Suppliants* 91–95? No, it is no coincidence. We are able to identify here a known borrowing technique in Empedoclean dialoguing with major ancient texts – a technique which is not his own and has already been noticed in Hesiod's *Shield*. The words count to make the link; the syntax is of less importance².

The word κορυφᾶ in Aeschylus means *head* just as κεφαλή means *head* in fr. 134.1. In describing the majesty of Zeus who acts without moving (v. 102–103), Aeschylus is following Xenophanes. But he keeps the old song – ruled out by Xenophanes – when he attributes a head (κορυφᾶ) to Zeus (the nod of Zeus belongs to tradition). And the same old song comes back with the expression ἐδράνων ἁγνῶν, the holy seat. It might be thought that the ἐδρανον here is just an abode, a dwelling and not specifically a seat for humans, fitted to their shape. But we recognize that Aeschylus is echoing the imagery he has from Homer: in Homer Zeus also has his throne (*Iliad* I 536, VIII 442).

¹ For the somewhat problematic text of Aeschylus here, we have preferred to follow the manuscripts rather than Westphal's transposition.

² See J.-C. Picot, *Sur un emprunt d'Empédocle au Bouclier hésiodique* in: *Revue des études grecques* 111, 1/1998, p. 50 & p. 56.

What then of the φρήν ἱερή καὶ ἀθέσφατος (Empedocles) compared to the πόροι ἄφραστοι πραπίδων (Aeschylus)? In archaic texts, the word φρήν is an equivalent to πραπίδες: both mean the midriff, i.e. the location in the middle of the human body where humans think and feel. It is important to stress that the πραπίδες, here in the *Suppliants*, are those of Zeus; which helps to support the suggestion of a parallel with the holy (ἱερή) – that is, more than human, divine – φρήν, an Empedoclean Apollo. To sum up, we can bring together the φρόνημα of Zeus (*Suppliants*, 101), the πραπίδες of Zeus (*Suppliants*, 93) who does not move from his seat, the φρήν of the God of Xenophanes (DK 21 B 25) who does not move at all, and the φρήν of fr. 134.4, which moves a great deal indeed (fr. 134.5: καταΐσσουσα). Our contention is that Empedocles has developed his own conception of divine φρήν against the background of Xenophanes and Aeschylus. His φρήν ἱερή καὶ ἀθέσφατος is characterized by a swift movement (καταΐσσουσα), with swift thoughts (φροντίσι θοῆσι), while Aeschylus' and Xenophanes' God do not move at all.

The φρήν of fr. 134.4 is called ἀθέσφατος, an adjective which is found nowhere else in the corpus of ancient Greek as a qualification of *phren* or of *phrenes*. It would be best to retain here its original sense of *immense*, applied to something that cannot, or can no more, be measured, rather than the sense of *unspeakable* or *ineffable* often read in the translations. The latter meaning is imprecise and risks making a transcendent being out of the *phrèn*¹. Aeschylus' *Suppliants* can help us prove that point. In the *Suppliants*, the word ἄφραστοι qualifies the πραπίδων πόροι – the paths of the god's thoughts – and indicates here an insufficiency in the action expressed by the verb κατιδεῖν. The adjective ἄφραστοι means *incomprehensible*, *impenetrable*. So the two words ἀθέσφατος and ἄφραστος in their separate contexts do not have the same meaning. The epithet ἀθέσφατος has a physical meaning while ἄφραστος addresses especially the limits of the human intellect and has no physical meaning. At first sight, then, Empedocles would seem to be saying something different from Aeschylus. But the story does not stop here. Keeping in mind the equivalence of *prapides* and *phrèn* or *phrenes*, we must add two important passages of the *Suppliants* where Aeschylus talks about the *phrèn* of Zeus:

Διὸς οὐ παρβατός ἐστιν	1048
μεγάλα φρήν ἀπέρατος.	1049
...	
τί δὲ μέλλω φρένα Δίαν	1057
καθορᾶν, ὄψιν ἄβυσσον;	1058

Aeschylus' chorus reports that the φρήν of Zeus is μέγαρα and ἀπέρατος (v. 1049) – vast and without limit. That is precisely the sense of ἀθέσφατος in fr. 134.4. It also reports that the φρήν of Zeus is an *abyssal* sight (*Suppliants* 1057–1058) for anyone who might attempt to observe (καθορᾶν) it. That which is abyssal is also something that could be qualified with the

¹ See J.-C. Picot, *Apollon et la φρήν ἱερή καὶ ἀθέσφατος (Empédocle, fr. 134 DK)*, pp. 21–22.

word ἀθέσφατος. The verb καθορᾶν is also worth noting. The same verb in the aorist, κατιδεῖν, was employed in speaking of the προπίδων πόροι (*Suppliants*, 93–94). We may then be allowed to think that for Aeschylus the ἄφραστοι paths of the *prapides* are in the same league as that abyssal *phrèn*; that permits us to conclude that Empedocles could have followed an Aeschylean model here.

Deification

In an attempt to understand the intellectual process involved in Empedocles' thinking about the gods and about nature, let us engage here in a bit of speculation. Empedocles knew Xenophanes' critique, knew the allegorism of Theagenes of Rhegium¹, and for his part did not doubt that there needed to be a revision of thought about the gods of Greek tradition. Fragment 132 signals his interest:

ὄλβιος, ὃς θείων προπίδων ἐκτήσατο πλοῦτον,
 δειλὸς δ' ᾧ σκοτόεσσα θεῶν πέρι δόξα μέμηλεν.
*Blessed is he who obtained wealth in his divine thinking organs,
 and wretched is he to whom belongs a darkling opinion about the
 gods.*

(transl. B. Inwood)

Theagenes' allegorism amounts to a consideration of the elements of nature using the Homeric gods as a vocabulary. But what are those elements? We know that Empedocles identified four of them and that they are called, in the common/profane vocabulary, πῦρ, ὕδωρ, γαῖα, ἤηρ or αἰθήρ. They enter into mixtures, though not transforming themselves into one another. What are they in a pure state? We're faced with the fact that Empedocles doesn't define them anywhere in the body of fragments or in other evidence at our disposal. He often restricts himself, as one does in everyday speech, to the perceptible phenomena.

The sun, for example, taken as a major manifestation of fire (fr. 21.3, fr. 22.2, fr. 71.2, fr. 115.11), is white and hot (fr. 21.3). The sun doesn't behave like the flame rising from a body in a state of combustion, but appears as heat and light (fr. 21.4). Sunbeams (taken by Aristotle as manifestations of fire), when entrapped in clouds, are responsible for lightning (A 63); now, we know that the Empedoclean Zeus is *argès* (fr. 6.2): he is the *keranos*, the

¹ See P. Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, transl. M. Chase, Cambridge MA – London 2006, pp. 40–41: *The mythical representation of the gods was criticized by those who were called the phusikoi, who gave a purely material explanation for the birth of the world. Philosophers such as Xenophanes and Anaxagoras openly attacked poetic theology. [...] Through skillful exegesis, called "allegorical exegesis" (allegorein means to make someone understand something other than what is said), a hidden philosophical meaning was discovered under the letter of the texts. [...] This phenomenon had already appeared in the sixth century BCE, in a commentator on Homer, Theagenes of Rhegium, whose work is unfortunately known only through late citations, but who seems to have proposed an allegorical exegesis of the Homeric poems that was physical (the battle of the gods becomes the battle of the elements) and moral, perhaps in reaction against the sharp criticisms formulated against Homeric mythology by Xenophanes. – On Theagenes, see Diels–Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* 1951, pp. 51–52 & J. Svenbro, *La Parole et le marbre: aux origines de la poésie grecque*, Lund 1976, pp. 108–138. On Theagenes and Empedocles see O. Primavesi, *Empedocles: Physical and Mythical Divinity* in: *The Oxford Handbook to Presocratic Philosophy*, (eds.) P. Curd & D. W. Graham, Oxford 2008, pp. 250–283, esp. p. 257.*

lightning hitting the ground, and stands for fire¹. So fire does not necessarily go up, as we might think (B 51); it can also go down. Fire appears to be a personality with several facets or forms, a Zeus with multiple metamorphoses².

The lack of a definition of what fire is in a pure – shall we say *primitive*? – state is painfully obvious in fr. 84 (the eye compared in structure and function to a lantern). In a lantern, the fire is a flame fed by a body in a state of combustion; it emits light and heat. For the purpose of comparing the lantern to the eye, attention is given to (1) fire in the form of flame emitting light, (2) the translucent panels of the lantern, and (3) the light passing unimpeded from the lantern's interior toward the outside. But in the comparison the fire inside the eye is not said to be a flame; we know only that it is ὠγύγιον, which could mean *primitive*. This fire of the eye, different from a flame, shares an emission in common with the lantern's flame: light. The fire that passes through the eye's inner membranes, because it is apparently finer than the transmitting fire called ὠγύγιον, is the fire referred to as light (fr. 84.11: πῦρ, in contrast to fr. 84.5: φῶς). This time, ordinary language is of no help. Indeed, ordinary language has a word for fire (πῦρ) and a number of words for light: φῶς, φέγγος, ἀύγη. Common parlance doesn't confuse fire and light the way Empedocles would like to do. We see in the eye/lantern example that Empedocles didn't have a strictly defined physical point of reference for fire. But he was certainly aware of it, and on the basis of that awareness, was able to conceive that fire was something divine, with a life and a personality, possessing the capacity to exist in various manifestations, with a character both fixed and flexible, depending on circumstances and on relationships cultivated at any given moment with the other elements.

After the allegorism put forward by Theagenes – after the passage of the gods of tradition into natural phenomena which had not been in themselves divine – Empedocles had, we might say, reversed his direction and deified nature, because he now understood nature in terms of four elements which themselves showed characteristics proper to gods. That represents, in essence, an archaizing return to a Hesiod imagining the beginning of the world proceeding from Chaos, with the god Ouranos representing the heavens and the goddess Gaia representing the earth. In such a scheme, gods and major elements are purely and simply identified with each other, without a suggestion of metonymy, synecdoche, or anything of that sort: Ouranos *is* heaven, Gaia *is* earth. Empedocles thus refuted the later stage in which the Olympian gods would become distinct from the great cosmic subdivisions. In this regression back to the gods of origin, the Agrigentine discovered in each element a god who is not what the Greek tradition could have imagined. This

¹ For Zeus = fire, see A 33. See comments in: J.-C. Picot, *L'Empédocle magique de P. Kingsley* in: *Revue de philosophie ancienne* 18, 1/2000, pp. 25–86, esp. pp. 59–70.

² For Empedocles, *in Anger they have distinct forms and are all apart* (fr. 21.7: ἐν δὲ Κότῳ διάμορφα καὶ ἀνδιχα πάντα πέλονται). Distinct forms are especially seen in fire, which easily comes under the sway of Hate, as Aristotle says (*Metaphysics* α, 994a6–7: κινήθῃναι [...] τὸν δὲ ἥλιον ὑπὸ τοῦ νείκους), inspired apparently by Empedocles (Plutarch, *De primo frigido*, 952B9–10: ἢ καὶ παρέσχεν Ἐμπεδοκλῆς ὑπόνοιαν, ὡς τὸ μὲν πῦρ "Νεῖκος οὐλόμενον" κτλ.; cf. fr. 17.19).

new deification was not a simple return to the anthropomorphic gods of Homer. No, Empedocles produced an original synthesis. The divine word to designate the first principles is now *root* (ρίζωμα). That word in itself signifies life – which the word *principle*, for example, does not. Empedocles introduces the four roots of all things (fr. 6) in this way:

τέσσαρα γὰρ πάντων ρίζώματα πρῶτον ἄκουε·
 Ζεὺς ἀργῆς Ἥρη τε φερέσβιος ἠδ' Αἰδωνεύς
 Νῆστις θ', ἣ δακρύοις τέγγει κρούνωμα βροτέιον.

Notice Zeus. He is the bolt of lightning, the lightning that is ἀργῆς, *brilliant, gleaming*. In fr. 21.4, the epithet ἀργῆς will be applied to light, the light that comes from the sun (αὐγή). Zeus is therefore fire, manifested in the lightning bolt and in light. There are no restrictions: he is fire in all its manifestations. In particular, he is the flame that mounts toward the sky (fr. 62.2, fr. 62.6), while lightning, which would be conceived as a manifestation of fire, descends from the sky toward the earth; he is the light of the sun descending toward the earth (fr. 21.3) or illuminating Olympus (fr. 44).

We should note that, since Empedocles doesn't give a physical definition of fire, it is therefore easy for him to claim that fire is always the same in the mixtures. A personality can stay the same and nevertheless display a number of different expressions. No one would think of saying that Zeus, however different his amorous moments are from his moments of anger, however different his various metamorphoses are – no one would think of saying that he is not always the same. A divine personality, like a human personality, plays in different registers. There is something elusive, inexpressible about it – something ἀφραστον.

What Empedocles says about *Nêstis* (fr. 6.3) is worth looking into: *Nêstis, who moistens with tears the spring of mortals*. The *spring of mortals* is a metaphor for the earth¹, from which humans emerge, along with, undoubtedly (by synecdoche), all living things on earth (not necessarily excluding fish and other sea creatures). Empedocles believes that *Nêstis* – water – is close to mortals and that water is close to Love (as Plutarch says in B 19²) – that is, to Aphrodite, the goddess born from the sea, who shaped mortals on earth.

In fact, *Nêstis* is not a goddess with human attributes, a face, or human eyes. Nevertheless, she sheds tears like a human (fr. 62.1). The tears are a metaphor for drops. Drops that moisten the earth from which living things emerge are in all likelihood raindrops. In essence, *Nêstis, who moistens with tears the spring of mortals* could be translated into everyday language as *Water, whose drops in the form of rain moisten the earth, which generates living beings*. What does the introduction of the divine root *Nêstis* contribute to that ordinary, factual statement? *Nêstis*, the root of water, is not simply rain; she is also water in all its forms – sea, rivers, springs, ice, snow, vapor. So rain is another synecdoche. But her tears lead us to think that *Nêstis* is sad. Her contribution to the life of earthly mortals, then, would not be for her a joyous

¹ See C. Gallavotti, *Empedocle: Poema fisico e lustrale*, Milan 1975, p. 174 & J.-C. Picot, *L'Empédocle magique de P. Kingsley*, pp. 63–66.

² We can add the adhesive property of water in fr. 34, comparable to the glues of Harmony in fr. 96.4.

occasion. She seems to know that those mortals will be full of tears (fr. 62.1: πολυκλαύτων); she reacts with compassion. The sadness of the goddess of the water cycle (whose other name is Persephone) brings up the question of life and of death, and of the *daimon*'s exile familiar from the *Katharmoi*.

We read from time to time that Empedocles named the four elements after gods because gods are uncreated and immortal, and because the elements themselves are also uncreated and immortal. But that argument is weak. A god of Greek religion like Zeus has a birth. He is revered. The root Zeus has no birth. It is not revered. To be sure, the elements are immortal, like the gods of Homer and Hesiod, but the grounds for Empedocles' making elements of gods go far beyond the simple fact of shared immortality. *A contrario*, Empedocles calls the *Sphairos* a god and reveres him, although he is mortal; he is reborn on a cyclical basis, always the same. It should be noted that, in Empedocles, being immortal can simply mean being distinct from the ephemeral mixtures (fr. 35.14, fr. 147) that are subject to multiple destructions (fr. 113.2). And it wouldn't follow that the elements involved in the ephemeral (and therefore mortal) mixtures are mortal like the mixtures themselves, and are therefore not divine. The elements involved in all the mixtures are always the four roots of all things, the roots that nourish and support all natural phenomena. Empedocles is a pantheist.

In contrast to the roots as gods with familiar faces, the roots as elements appear to be no more than passive substances and simple objects. And that's what they are at times, especially when Love acts on them. That's the case in the comparison of the painters (fr. 23), where the elements are the colors that the painters utilize. Fr. 71 confirms the necessity for the four elements to be in the hands of Aphrodite in order to make up the shapes and colors of mortal things. But the elements are not always passive. Empedocles specifically states that all things have thought and a share of intelligence (fr. 110.10). The elements move by themselves in keeping with the principle of like-to-like attraction (fr. 17.28, 35; fr. 37; fr. 62.6; fr. 110.9–10).

The installation of gods as well-known as Zeus, Hera, Hades, and Aphrodite in nature underscores the nearness of the gods in relation to humans; furthermore, it sanctions a rethinking of traditional religion. Empedocles preserves the traditional male–female coupling of Zeus with Hera, and Hades with Persephone (*Nēstis*), for their coupling belongs also to the dynamics of Empedocles' non–traditional system. But to conceive that fire is Zeus is to break with the traditional image that has Zeus associated with air or with ether¹. To conceive that Hera is φερέσβιος, and that air or ether is Hera, is to break simultaneously with Demeter and/or Gaia φερέσβιος, and at the same time to put the root Hera in the place of ethereal Zeus. This subversion

¹ The traditional image is, for instance, the one of *Iliad* XV, 192. That image applied to Empedocles is defended by P. Kingsley, *Ancient philosophy, mystery, and magic*, Oxford 1995. If Zeus, known as the supreme God apart from the other gods, is fire for Empedocles, and if Empedocles is consistent through his *Physics* in thinking of fire as a kind of Zeus, then we can understand why Aristotle says that for Empedocles fire is specifically active, and is one apart from the other three (earth, air, water), which are taken together as one (*Metaphysics* A, 985b & *De generatione et corruptione* 330b19–20). If fire is Hades, as Kingsley wants, we should conclude that Empedocles is not consistent.

goes hand-in-hand with that other subversion, the condemnation of the bloody sacrifices of traditional religion – the Agrigentine’s best-known battle.

Conclusion

We need to stay on guard against modernizing Empedocles, against suppressing the most archaic aspects of his thought, no matter how quaint they may appear to us. When it comes to his vision of the gods, Empedocles is still dependent on Homer and Hesiod. He has only partially adopted Xenophanes’ critical attitude toward those two poets. Empedocles’ references to the gods – their actions and interactions, their moods and desires, their goals and affinities – are not mere metaphors. Nor are his gods immaterial presences, abstractions, or noetic principles. They are real and corporeal, as is everything in Empedocles. His gods bear a greater resemblance to the older Hesiodic gods that are the vast divisions of the universe – sky, earth, Titanic underworld – than to the remote, unmoved, disembodied Mind that dominates Xenophanes’ thought. Furthermore, Empedocles knows the alternatives to his own view. He shows his familiarity with Aeschylus’ modifications of Xenophanes, and yet deliberately chooses his own way, the way that makes the most sense to him. The gods of Empedocles are not inaccessible, mysterious strangers; they dwell with us and within us, they are as close to us as our own limbs, our sight, our breath. They feel our pleasure and our pain. Their nearness makes it incumbent upon us to understand them, listening well to the words of the Sage of Agrigentum.