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Immortality in Empedocles

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Abstract: The paper examines Empedocles' attributions of immortality. I argue that Empedocles does not withhold immortality from the gods but rather has an unorthodox conception of what immortality is. Immortality does not mean, or imply, endless duration. A god's immortality is its continuity, as one and the same organism, over a long but finite period. This conception of divine immortality then influences Empedocles' other attributions of immortality, each of which marks a contrast with discontinuity, real or apparent. The nature of this contrast varies from context to context, and there is considerable heterogeneity in the list of immortal items. On the other hand, the attribution of immortality never implies that the item is completely changeless.

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Empedocles identifies himself as a *daimôn* (B115) and elsewhere as a god (B112), but his account of the cosmic cycle suggests that *daimones* and gods, or at least some gods, do not last forever. Despite claiming to have attained godhood he does not believe that his existence will continue endlessly into the future. It is natural to contrast Empedocles' eschatology with the account of the soul that Socrates eventually vindicates in Plato's *Phaedo*,¹ according to which the soul will never perish, whatever else may befall it. How is the contrast between Empedocles and Plato best expressed? We may find it natural to say that Empedoclean gods, unlike Platonic souls, are "mortal", not "immortal". But this does not correspond to the attributions of "immortality" in Empedocles' poetry. I will argue in this paper that Empedocles is not withholding immortality from the gods, but offering a different, and in retrospect non-Platonic, conception of what it means to be immortal. My approach will be to start with the items

¹ Plato has put forward for consideration other views of the soul, such as Cebes' suggestion that the soul is ultimately perishable but more durable than the body (86e6-88b8). In this paper I focus on the contrast between Platonic and Empedoclean conceptions of immortality, a contrast suggested already by O'Brien (1995, 452). For discussion of the later Platonist interpretation of Empedocles see O'Brien 1995, 407–8 and 458–65.

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that are described as immortal and to consider in each case what their immortality involves, rather than to assume from the outset what immortality ought to mean.

It may seem incredible that an immortal item could fail to be endlessly long-lived. The immortal gods of Homer and Hesiod are described as αἰὲν ἔόντες (e. g. Hesiod *Theogony* 21, 105), and accordingly we would expect Empedocles to attribute immortality to items that will persist endlessly into the future. That expectation is encouraged by Hippolytus, according to whom (*RH* 7.29.10) Empedocles viewed as “immortal” Love and Strife, both of which, as Empedocles’ own words (B16) show, will always exist (and indeed are ungenerated). But ungenerated gods are not the only gods in Empedocles’ theology. Empedocles says that some gods came to be: they arose or “sprouted up” from the elements (e. g. B21.10-12), at least in some cases from a previous mode of existence as human beings (B146). There is an obvious problem if these generated gods persist for ever: as they are generated during part of an endlessly repeated cycle, their persistence into all subsequent cycles would entail an infinite proliferation of gods. (This assumes not that each cycle is exactly identical to each of the others, but merely that some gods are generated each time.)² But there is no threat of divine overpopulation: “all things” come together in the reign of Love (B17.4 and 7). The generated gods, like the “god” (B31) Sphere, do not last forever.

We would thus expect these gods to be described as “mortal”, and the description of generated gods as having long lives (B21.12, B23.8, a (ii) 2) is often taken to imply precisely that point: they are long-living, but nonetheless mortal.³ But according to Empedocles the gods are immortal. Here is a list of the items said to be “immortal” in the surviving verses:⁴

- (1) Empedocles himself (ἄμβροτος, B112)
- (2) the gods and (perhaps) the former humans who join them (ἀθάνατος, B147)⁵

² Trépanier 2003a discusses exact repetition between cycles.

³ See Wright 1995, 273; Barnes 1982, 501–2; Sedley 1998, 9 n.43; Trépanier 2004, 86, 2010, 305 and 2014, 175; Rangos 2012, 317 and 318 n.8. For the “mortality” of the Sphere see Kirk et al. 1983, 296. Empedocles seems to have coined “long-living”, δολιχάων, and so the term demands special comment. See p.16 below.

⁴ I believe that ἄμβροτος and ἀθάνατος must be equivalent, for otherwise Empedocles’ self-description ἄμβροτος, οὐκέτι θνητός (B112.4) would be poorly worded. All the same, I indicate in parentheses which term is applied to each of the items on the list. For ἄμβροτος as “immortal” in Homeric Greek see Buttman 1861, 80.

⁵ The former humans become ἀθανάτοις ἄλλοισιν ὁμέστιοι, and, as Inwood observes (2001, 57), ἄλλος need not imply that the former humans share the property of immortality. See LSJ s.v.

- (3) Calliope, Empedocles' Muse (ἄμβροτος, B131.1)
- (4) cosmic objects made of air, said to be "drenched in light" (ἄμβροτος, B21.4)
- (5) the onset of Love (ἄμβροτος, B35.13)
- (6) items that became immortal and then, during Love's onset, became mortal (ἀθάνατος, B35.14)

Later in the paper I will try to identify the more obscure items, (4) and (6). The absences from the list are no less striking than the inclusions. Despite Hippolytus' testimony, Love and Strife are not said to be immortal; it is rather than the "onset" (ὄρμη) of Love that is immortal, and Love's onset will⁶ not endure endlessly. Eventually the Sphere will be formed, and later still Strife will push back. Nor does her onset go back infinitely far into the past; at some point she started bringing things together. We might suppose that "immortal" in Φιλότητος ἀμεμφούς ἄμβροτος ὄρμη has been transferred and, strictly speaking, applies to Love herself.⁷ That is possible but unnecessary, for, as I hope to show, a process of finite duration can be understood as "immortal", once we make sense of Empedocles' use of that word elsewhere. If we are determined to find Love on the list of immortals then Calliope is the only other candidate, but, given Empedocles' robustly pluralist theology (see e. g. B122), that identification is far from certain.⁸ There is surprisingly little evidence that Empedocles ever attributed immortality to items of infinite duration, and strong cumulative evidence that he attributed it to items of finite duration.

As one would expect, it has been suggested that Empedocles is merely "speaking loosely" when he uses the word "immortal".⁹ Behind that suggestion lies an assumption that "immortal", if intended seriously, must refer to something unending. Empedocles' attributions of immortality would then have to be explained away in order to distinguish his eschatology from those, such as Plato's, that promise an endless future.¹⁰ But some other evidence in Empedocles suggests a different explanation: he and Plato do not have the

II 8. For fuller discussion see O'Brien 1995, 446–8, which finds the most "natural" reading to be that the former humans too are immortal.

6 The tenses of these verbs are relative to the time described in B35.13; I do not refer to the stage of the cycle in which Empedocles places himself and his contemporaries.

7 So Wright 1995, 208. Wright provides no parallels, but see B27.2 (αἴης λάσιον μένος).

8 For Empedocles' "theogony" see Porphyry *Abst.* 2.21. Empedocles' "theogony" may of course have been far shorter than Hesiod's, but otherwise there is little to support Wright's scepticism about an Empedoclean theogony (1995, 282–3).

9 Barnes 1982, 502.

10 "Personal immortality is not, in fact, explicitly promised in Empedocles' eschatology" (Barnes 1982, 502).

same conception of immortality. The most decisive passage is Empedocles' claim that immortality can be gained and then lost: "what had previously learned to be immortal grew to be mortal immediately" (B35.14). Something can be immortal without being immortal forever.¹¹ We can add that he warns his reader not to expect "birth" and "death" to be used in their usual sense: people call "birth" or "coming to be" (γενέσθαι) the arrival, in the air, of the combined constituents of a man, animal or plant, and they call "ill-fated death" (δυσδαίμονα πότμον) the separation of the constituents (B9; compare B8 and B11). These appellations are not "right" (θέμις), but Empedocles says that he will follow the convention (I take it, by using the terms "birth", "death" and related words).¹² The fact that he censures the ordinary usage of "death" should shake any confidence that he must be using "immortal" in its ordinary sense.

My approach in the paper will be to examine the items called "immortal" and those with which they are contrasted. In most occurrences of "immortal", there is an explicit contrast between "immortal" and some other term: "mortal" (B35.13-14, B112.4), "ephemeral" (B131), "human" or "belonging to men" (B147). The single exception is B21, where Empedocles speaks of "immortals" composed of air and does not explicitly contrast them with something else, although I will suggest that these "immortals" are contrasted with the appearance that they give to human observers.

As we have just seen, B35 indicates that it is possible, at least for some items, to gain, or "learn", and then lose immortality. It is less clear how much importance to attach to his choice of the verb "learned" (35.14). Empedocles elsewhere describes the elements "learning" to become one (B26.8, a verse also inserted by Diels as the ninth line of B17), and it is not certain that he has in mind a genuinely cognitive transformation. And while the humans who achieve immortality, such as Empedocles, are undoubtedly learned, they become immortal on the strength of their benefits to other people (in religion, medicine, leadership and poetry) not merely their learning (B146). "Learned" in B35.14 probably means little more than "became".

One final preliminary point is that the problem I am addressing is not the familiar one of relating Empedocles' "religious" thought to his physics. Some

¹¹ See O'Brien 1995, 449; Wright 1995, 292; Rangos 2012, 333. B112.4 ("immortal god, no longer mortal") confirms that an item can be immortal without always having been immortal; compare "learned to be immortal" in B35, and contrast the Platonic theory of an *essentially* immortal soul in the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus*.

¹² If θέμις really was in Empedocles' text (see Wright 1995, 177), he may be referring not merely to his denial of total destruction (and generation from nothing), but also to the impiety of blaming a *daimôn* for one's mortality. As B115 suggests, the *daimôn* responsible is none other than the mortal himself.

scholars would say that the above list of six “immortal” items combines verses from different poems, and so it might be thought that the problem derives from artificially juxtaposing religious and scientific doctrines.¹³ But even if we confine ourselves to the passages most at home in an *On Nature* – that is, the descriptions of immortals (4), (5) and (6) above – a puzzle remains. Immortality can be gained and then lost (B35), and bodies of air (B21) are called “immortal”: what does this mean?

Sky and Moon (B21)

I begin with Empedocles’ discussion of large cosmic bodies, which almost certainly has a theological dimension, given the many connections between his poem and Hesiod.¹⁴ Later in the paper I will consider Empedocles’ account of the *daimôn*’s punishment (B115) and its relationship with the account in Hesiod of the coma and isolation of a perjured deity (*Theogony* 783-804). At this point I will outline one aspect of the relationship between Empedocles and Hesiodic theology. Empedocles’ gods are generated, as we have seen, but without sexual intercourse. Xenophanes had criticized others for supposing that the gods are born or “fathered” (γεννᾶσθαι, B14). It is not certain whether Xenophanes intended to deny that the gods come to be at all or, more specifically, from parents.¹⁵ Empedocles took Xenophanes’ side, or what he probably took to be Xenophanes’ side, against Hesiod, and denied that gods are generated sexually. Whereas in Hesiod’s *Theogony* sexual intercourse is the central cause of new divine life, to such an extent that the exceptions are often noted (e. g. *Theogony* 132, 213) in Empedocles’ theogony sexuality does not feature, and even in his zoogony it is given a severely restricted explanatory role. Humans and other animals may reproduce sexually now, but this is only one of several forms of generation (Aetius 5.19.5, A72).¹⁶ New gods continue to emerge, but not from parents; rather, they “sprout up” from humans (ἀναβλαστοῦσι, B146.3).¹⁷ One

¹³ I find the two-poem hypothesis more plausible (see p.16 below), but it should be obvious that I am trying to find an interpretation of “immortality” that takes into account all the fragments.

¹⁴ See for example Most 2007, 284–92; Koning 2010, 210–17.

¹⁵ Leshner 1992, 86–8 assumes that generation of any kind is denied – as did Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1399b6–8).

¹⁶ See Sedley 2007, 40–1.

¹⁷ Empedocles uses vegetative language when needs an alternative to sexual generation. In B21.10-12 βλαστάνειν is used first of trees, which is not surprising, but then of other organisms,

consequence, surely intended by Empedocles, of this further generative stage is that the humans who have attained immortality become, as gods, parentless. Empedocles even says explicitly that two gods, Sphere and “immense, holy intelligence”, do not have sexual organs (B29, B134).¹⁸ Sphere’s successor (the next Sphere) will be generated by Love, but, again, not sexually. Many gods are generated, but no god has a parent, or is a parent, in the literal sense.¹⁹ So much for the elaborate family tree of Hesiod’s *Theogony*.

As is often observed, Hesiod’s deities include the largest parts of the physical world. Earth, sky, sea, sun and moon are gods and members of the divine family (*Theogony* 126-32, 371-4). What is the status of these huge cosmic bodies in Empedocles’ system? (I call them “cosmic” bodies or masses in order to distinguish them from the huge elemental masses that are formed, on one interpretation, during the acosmic reign of Strife.) Given his responses to Hesiod, such as the response outlined above, it is hard to believe that Empedocles did not see a question about the largest cosmic bodies as, at least in part, a theological question. It is well known that Empedocles applied the names of gods to the four elements or roots (B6), but it does not follow from this that he did not also regard as a god the large cosmic conglomeration of an element. In B38 he gives a divine name, “Titan”, to one such cosmic mass (either the sun or the sky),²⁰ and in B42 he applies to the moon Athena’s epithet

including gods, men, women and animals. A verb conveying asexual generation is appropriate throughout the passage, as it concerns the relationship between organisms and the elements, not an organism and its parents. See also βλαστάνειν in B57, where the organisms are not yet capable of sexual reproduction, and ὄρηξ in B62.

18 Given the similarities between their descriptions, it is tempting to identify the intelligence with the Sphere (as in Primavesi 2008, 258), but for arguments against the identification see Santaniello 2012, 310. Notice the strange combination of genders in *Sphairos* (B27.3, 28.2), a feminine noun with a masculine ending. Perhaps such a combination seemed more effective than a neuter to mark completeness without a particular sex.

19 This is in keeping with Empedocles’ views on marriage and sexual (or at least heterosexual) intercourse (Hippolytus *RH* 7.29.22, 7.30.4). Compare the speculations recorded at Aulus Gellius 4.11.9-10, which may or may not be based on intelligent reading of Empedocles.

20 In B38 “Titan” is usually taken as a name of the αἰθήρ, but Kingsley 1995a argues that “Titan” is a separate object, the sun. Unfortunately the name “Titan” could be used intelligently both of the sun and of the sky. If it names the sun Empedocles may be referring to the Titan Hyperion (as in e. g. *Odyssey* 1.24, one of the parallels cited by Kingsley). If it names the sky, on the other hand, there may be a connection between Hesiod’s etymology of “Titans” (“they stretched or exerted themselves”, *Theogony* 207-10), and Empedocles’ choice of “Titan” as the name of the vastly extended body that surrounds the world. One further question is whether the sky is identical to the “Olympus” of B44 (on which see Kingsley 1994, 323); in my discussion of B21.4 and its airy immortals I give pride of place to B38 for the reason that there the sky is explicitly said to be composed of air. For Empedocles’ use of αἰθήρ for “air” see Kingsley 1995b, ch. 2.

γλαυκῶπις. It is easy to assume that any mention of “sun” in Empedocles is merely a reference to the element fire (and so on for earth, sea or rain, and sky). But this is only sometimes the case. For example, in B98 (the composition of blood and flesh) “rain” must stand for “water”, as Simplicius notes.²¹ By contrast, in B38 “sea” really is the sea: Empedocles is promising to explain how the sun, earth (the Earth, not the element), sea and sky all came to be. Elsewhere (B41) he says that the sun was “assembled” (presumably from fire; cf. A49) – and of course he cannot mean that *fire* was assembled from fire.

In Empedocles’ theology, as in Hesiod’s, being generated is consistent with being a god. But in Empedocles’ system the cosmic conglomerations come to an end. In B27 he describes a period (the reign of Strife, according to Plutarch, *fac. lun.* 926d) when the sun, earth and sea do not exist, and another period (that of the Sphere, according to Eudemus)²² when the sun no longer exists. And yet in B21.4 some cosmic bodies, composed of air (the three other elements are represented in 21.3-6) are called “immortal”:

ἀλλ’ ἄγε, τῶνδ’ ὄρων προτέρων ἐπιμάρτυρα δέρκευ,
εἴ τι καὶ ἐν προτέροισι λιπόξυλον ἔπλετο μορφῇ,
ἥελιον μὲν λευκὸν ὄραν καὶ θερμὸν ἀπάντη,
ἄμβροτα δ’ ὅσος εἶδει²³ τε καὶ ἀργέτι δεύεται αὐγῇ,
ἄμβρον δ’ ἐν πᾶσι δνοφρόντά τε ῥιγαλέον τε·
ἐκ δ’ αἴης προρέουσι θελεμνά τε καὶ στερεωπά.

Come, look upon the witnesses to that previous account, should its form have been at all lacking: the sun, bright to see and hot all over; all the immortals (ἄμβροτα) that are drenched in heat and shining light; the rain, dark and cold in everything; and from the earth pour things rooted and solid. (B.21.1-6)

This has obviously discomfited translators and commentators. Wright 1995 translates ἄμβροτα not “immortal” but “heavenly”, and in Kirk, Raven and Schofield²⁴ it is suggested that ἄμβροτα are the “breezes and expanses of air” that supply *ambrosia* to the sun; ἄμβροτα would then point to their role as nutrients and not (as we would certainly expect) to immortality.

In B21 Empedocles is trying to support a claim about the elements, namely that even though there are only four of them they jointly constitute the observable world. In support of this he calls upon visible or tangible “witnesses” (21.1-6). The witnesses testify to the contrasting qualities of the elements. Empedocles obviously associates the witnesses very closely with the elements,

²¹ Simplicius in *Phys.* 32.3-4.

²² See Simplicius in *Phys.* 1183.27-8.

²³ For the emendation εἶδει see Bollack 1965-9, vol. 3, 112.

²⁴ 1983, 294.

for after the description of the witnesses he describes, without marking a contrast, how the *elements* come together, fall apart and constitute divine and non-divine organisms (21.7-14). But there is nonetheless a distinction between witness and element,²⁵ shown above all in the sixth line of the fragment, where the “witness” is not the element earth but the solid objects that come forth in abundance from the Earth. And the witnesses testify by means of their own qualities. For example, the sun shows the brightness and heat of the element fire because it is itself so obviously bright and hot. So we should not suppose that the qualities predicated of the “witnesses” are true of the elements and are *not* true of the witnesses themselves.²⁶ The sun is hot, the rain is dark and cold – and the airy “witnesses” are themselves immortal.

What are these witnesses, and why are they called “immortal”? They are said not to be bright or dark but to be “drenched” in light (and perhaps in heat). This suggests a more subtle contrast between air and fire than between fire and water. The sun shows the ability of fire to heat and illuminate, rain shows the darkness and coldness of water, and the ἄμβροτα show the ability of air not to generate light (and maybe heat), but to be illuminated (and maybe warmed) by something else. (Compare the “drenched” altar of B128.8, which is made wet and bloody not by itself but by the sacrifice.) These airy bodies do not emit light of their own, and so cannot include stars, but they are illuminated, and so cannot include breezes.²⁷ The moon, which is made of air (A30, A60) and gets its light from the sun (B43, B45, B47), is the obvious match. Given that he uses the plural ἄμβροτα, there must be at least one other illuminated immortal, and this is most likely the sky (B38), another illuminated body consisting of air.²⁸

The nature of their immortality is, to our eyes, quite simple, but to Empedocles it must have seemed pioneering. He draws on Parmenides’ discovery about the moon and the source of its – or “its” – light (Parmenides B14, B15),

25 Simplicius is thus misleading when he says that in this passage Empedocles is simply using “sun” as a word for “fire”, “rain” for “water” and so on (*in Phys.* 159.10-12).

26 Contrast Bollack 1965-9, vol. 3, 112.

27 Contrast Wright 1995, 178 (moon and stars), and Kirk et al. 1983, 294 (“probably breezes and expanses of air”).

28 For a quite different approach see Picot 2014, where B21 is connected with the names of deities, particularly Hera, at B6. Picot argues that in Homeric Greek ἄμβροτος refers to items that are not immortal but are merely associated with an immortal (2014, 369). But it is not certain that an item associated with an immortal cannot itself be immortal (compare Buttman 1861, 80), and in any case Homeric usage should not be emphasized at the expense of Empedocles’ own usage, particularly if Empedocles is putting forward a new and non-Homeric view of immortality. When Empedocles uses ἄμβροτος of himself (B112.4) he is not claiming merely to be associated with an immortal; he himself is no longer mortal but a god.

and extends it to the sky. The sky is illuminated at some times and at others is not;²⁹ the moon appears to lose and then regain large segments of itself, and in eclipses it disappears entirely. But in fact both sky and moon are not destroyed or diminished. There is thus a contrast between, on the one hand, the appearance of diminution or destruction and, on the other, the persisting reality. ἄμβροτος gets its meaning through this contrast: these bodies persist and, despite the appearance of destruction and diminution, do not really undergo those changes.

Empedocles can thus explain why, and in what sense, two of Hesiod's deities, sky and the moon, are immortals. But he does not suggest, as Hesiod would certainly suggest, that these "immortals" will last forever. And during their existence Empedocles' "immortals" may, despite their immortality, undergo changes, such as the moon's locomotion (B45). ἄμβροτος points not to complete changelessness, but to the absence of specific changes during the item's existence. Similarly in other fragments, as we will see, immortals are not totally changeless, but changeless in some specific respect.³⁰

Love and the Former Immortals (B35)

αἴψα δὲ θνήτ' ἐφύοντο, τὰ πρὶν μάθον ἀθάνατ' εἶναι,
ζωρά τε τὰ πρὶν ἄκρητα διαλλάξαντα κελεύθους,
τῶν δέ τε μισγομένων χεῖτ' ἔθνεα μυρία θνητῶν
παντοίαις ιδέησιν ἀρηρότα, θαῦμα ιδέσθαι.

What had previously learned to be immortal grew to be mortal immediately, and those that were unmixed before became mixed, having exchanged paths. As they mixed tens of thousands of races of mortals poured forth, fitted with forms of every kind, a wonder to behold. (B35.14-17)

Here Empedocles describes how mortality contributes to new life. Two groups of mortals are mentioned. By being mixed, some previously immortal items become mortal, and through that process other mortals, of staggering

29 At B48 Empedocles states the explanation: the earth is interposed between the sun and the stretch of sky above the observer. Aetius 2.20.13 (A56) suggests a very different picture, in which there is one celestial hemisphere full of fire, another containing fire and air. Kingsley 1994 argues persuasively that this attribution is incorrect and explains how such a view came to be attributed to Empedocles.

30 Contrast O'Brien 1969, 59, where it is suggested that the "immortal" objects of B35.14 are changeless.

number and variety, are generated. The second group of mortals owe their lives to the newly gained mortality of the first group. Members of the second group are said to belong to countless “races” (35.16; compare 35.7), and so must be living organisms, although it is not agreed whether they are the organisms of Empedocles’ own day or some other period. It is difficult to discuss this passage without taking a stand on some central questions about Empedocles’ cosmology. In what follows I take no view on whether or not the organisms generated at the end of B35 are Empedocles’ contemporaries. But I do assume that whereas Love brings together portions of different elements, Strife brings together portions of the same element; I also assume that “mixture” refers exclusively to Love’s activity, not Strife’s.³¹

In the present context the key question concerns the nature and identity of the first group of mortals (B35.14), those that used to be immortal. The standard identification is with the elements or roots.³² That may seem the only possible reading, given that their mortality is connected to mixture. But here it is vital to distinguish between (1) an element, (2) a particular mass or body composed exclusively of a single element, and (3) the portions of the element that compose a single-element body. When setting the scene for the loss of immortality Empedocles says that Strife has withdrawn partly but not fully from the world, and still “restrains” some portions of the elements (35.8–11).³³ That is, Strife prevents some portions from being mixed with other elements. But some other portions are now mixed. So at this time not every portion of, say, fire is in the same condition; “many” portions of fire are not mixed with other elements, but mixed portions of fire exist simultaneously (35.8). Given that there already exist mixed portions of the elements, the unmixed items of line 15—that is, the items that so far have been immortal – cannot be the “elements” without some further specification. Rather, they must be the unmixed portions of each element, the constituents of one-element bodies, i. e. (3) in the list above. All that we are told about those unmixed portions is that they are “many” (line 8). The bodies constituted by them must therefore be either large or numerous (or both), and so far as I can see nothing

³¹ See for example Inwood 2001, 49–55; Trépanier 2003b, 35. Some importance evidence is what Inwood calls (50) “the creative power of strife”, shown by the *two* painters of B23. That suggests that Strife does not merely fragment; it sorts. I do not have space here to address properly the innovative interpretation of the cycle in Sedley 2007.

³² “Il (l’Amour) force les éléments à quitter leur divinité” (Bollack 1965-9, vol. 3, 204). See also O’Brien 1969, 59; Long 1974, 410 n.15; Wright 1995, 208; Primavesi 2006, 68; Trépanier 2010, 303.

³³ For separation in Empedocles see also A30 and A49, and for discussion of the topology see Graham 2005.

in B35 helps us choose between these interpretations.³⁴ If the world described in 35.8-11 at least resembles the world inhabited by Empedocles and his contemporaries, then the single-element bodies include vast masses, such as the sun, moon, sea and sky. Imagining those bodies combining to produce new organisms would certainly inspire the awe professed by Empedocles in 35.17.

The contrast between “immortal” and “mortal” in 35.14 is between the contrasting conditions of one and the same portion of an element. First, together with other portions of the same element, it belonged, as an “immortal”, to a single-element body; then, under the influence of Love, it is mixed and becomes a constituent of a “mortal”. Henceforth the portion will be recycled in a succession of living compounds, and at this point it itself becomes a mortal – as Empedocles says, it changes “path” (35.15). “Immortality” thus marks the condition of the portion when it belonged to a specific, single-element body, by contrast with a sequence of mortal compounds; what it lost, when it is mixed with other elements, is a kind of continuity. There is a controversy about how far down the new discontinuity goes: when the elements are combined, it is not certain whether each of the combined elements retain its distinctive qualities.³⁵ But the following should be uncontroversial: at least part of the new discontinuity will be the secondary, or derivative, properties for which the elemental portions become responsible. The portions of a single-element body give rise to a specific and unchanging group of properties, such as warmth and solidity; in that regard they do not change, even though a single-element body and its portions may still experience other changes, such as (again) locomotion. By contrast, when they become portions of living mortals they, in combination with other elemental portions, give rise to diverse properties: the characteristics and parts of different organisms. If “immortal” marks a kind of continuity, not endless duration or complete changelessness, we can understand why the onset of Love through the world should itself be called “immortal” (35.13). Love’s expansion is a continuous and uniform process. It will end, and during its existence it affects more and more portions of the elements, but as long as it exists it promotes mixture.

If the “immortals” of B35.14 are previously unmixed portions of an element, does he ever indicate whether or not the elements themselves are immortal?³⁶

³⁴ I am grateful to Brad Inwood for discussion of this point.

³⁵ For recent discussion see Ierodiakonou 2005, 6; Palmer 2009, 279–317.

³⁶ According to Hippolytus the four elements are not immortal but mortal, as they die and are revived (*RH* 7.29.10-11, 7.29.23; compare B26.2). See Inwood 2001, 31–2. Hippolytus may have in mind B35; if so, he is wrong to associate their dying with Strife rather than Love.

The closest he comes to answering that question is in his discussion of the elements' changes and permanence (B26.8-12; cf. B17.9-13). There he suggests that it depends on one's perspective. If one looks to the regularity of the elements' changes, then, as he says, "they are always changeless in the cycle": the elements come together, are separated and so on without end. But if one asks 'are the elements divided or integrated?', the only answer is that they constantly change. In this regard they have no "firm life" (17.11, 26.10). The implication is that neither "mortal" nor "immortal" is fully appropriate.

Empedocles and Other Gods

In B112 Empedocles announces to his fellow-citizens that he is an "immortal god, no longer mortal", echoing solemn self-revelations of deities in epic.³⁷ It has been argued – mistakenly, in my view – that Empedocles does not really commit himself to the self-description. Empedocles says that he is an immortal god ὑμῖν (112.4) and that he is honoured ὥσπερ ἕοικα (112.5); his wording in these two lines has been taken to show that he is merely telling the people of Acragas how they perceive him.³⁸ As has long been recognized,³⁹ however, ὑμῖν is merely an "ethical" dative; any translation risks overtranslating, and nothing stronger than Wright's "I tell you" is needed. A Homeric parallel (*Odyssey* 22.348) shows that ὥσπερ ἕοικα points to what the speaker deserves, not to how he is perceived by the addressee, and anyway in the Empedoclean passage ὥσπερ ἕοικα should be taken with "honoured", not "immortal". The meaning is that Empedocles is honoured by all, and appropriately. In recent scholarship it has also been suggested that the large number of the addressees (the inhabitants of Acragas) shows the passage and, perhaps, the *Katharmoi* more generally, to be "exoteric".⁴⁰ Without some specification of what it means to be exoteric – accessible or guarded, vague or actually misleading – this does not tell us much about Empedocles' immortality. And if we want to explain the large number of addressees in B112 there is a credible alternative to exotericism. As I have observed already, in B146 Empedocles suggests that immortality is achieved by benefactors: leaders, poets, prophets or doctors, or those who, like Empedocles himself, combine these different roles. So it is hardly surprising

³⁷ *Iliad* 24.260; *Odyssey* 20.47.

³⁸ Trépanier 2004, 84; 2010, 304.

³⁹ See Panagiotou 1983 and Zuntz 1971, 189-90. As Zuntz asks, why would the inhabitants of Acragas need to be told how they perceive Empedocles?

⁴⁰ See Primavesi 2001, 2008, 268. Compare Kingsley 1995b, 366.

that when proclaiming his own immortality he puts himself in a relation not with an individual but with an entire city, and then shows how, as a religious authority and doctor, he has benefited cities on a vast scale.

The contrast in this fragment is between the mortal and immortal Empedocles. In order to understand the contrast we need to understand Empedocles' mortality, and the passage where he describes that is his self-identification with one of the *daimones* who become "all the forms of mortals" (B115.7).⁴¹ When a *daimôn* is punished with mortality, the duration of its existence is not curtailed. Instead it loses uninterrupted existence as a particular kind of organism (the best kind, a deity). Much of Empedocles' description of the cause, nature and end of the punishment echoes or responds to Hesiod.⁴² For example, in Hesiod's *Theogony* perjured deities are denied the food of the immortals until their punishment is over (796-7, 802-4), and similarly Empedocles says that those who gain immortality join the company and "table" of the immortals (B147). (The divine feast is even made to seem more relevant in Empedocles' poem, given that food brought about, and can prolong, the deity's exile.)⁴³ Less conventional is his emphasis on change and disruption as a form of punishment.⁴⁴ The punished *daimôn* "exchanges the harsh paths of life" (115.8), and must keep migrating between the regions of air, sea, earth and sun (115.9-13). Transmigration thus takes it not merely between organisms, as Empedocles reveals elsewhere (B117), but between elemental environments.

At least in Empedocles' version, transmigration is not supposed to offer consolation. On the contrary, Empedocles is trying to surpass Hesiod in severity. Whereas the punished deity in Hesiod returns to the other gods in the tenth year, Empedocles' *daimôn* is banished for thirty thousand "seasons" (probably ten thousand years),⁴⁵ and is banished repeatedly. The unhappy deity is shunned and ejected from wherever it tries to make its home (sea, earth, air or the rays of the sun). We might compare B15, where Empedocles implies that a mortal, or what is formed as a mortal, continues to exist after death (he says that a wise man would not suppose otherwise). This is not intended to be an entirely encouraging message, for the view he rejects is that goods *and evils* are confined

⁴¹ See also B113, where he says that "mortal" human beings are "destroyed" many times. A mortal must survive one "destruction" only to face yet another one, and then another one after that. Here too mortality is connected not with brief, or finitely long, existence but with transmigration.

⁴² See Kirk et al. 1983, 317; Most 2007, 286-91.

⁴³ See B115.3 and B139.

⁴⁴ But here too there is a verbal echo of Hesiod, as Most 2007 has shown. See ἄλλος δ' ἐξ ἄλλου δέχεται in B115.12 and *Theogony* 800.

⁴⁵ See O'Brien 1969, 85-92; Primavesi 2001, 27.

to what is called life (15.3). By denying annihilation at death Empedocles risks elevating all human beings to the status of immortals, and an attraction of transmigration is that it restores a sharp distinction between immortals and mortals – as long as “immortality” is reserved for those who have escaped transmigration. Survival is guaranteed, but it will involve further suffering, and little continuity, for all those who have not attained immortality. Godhood brings not total changelessness (the god of B134.5 thinks *rapidly*), but, once again, continuity of a more specific kind.

Empedocles is frustratingly unforthcoming about how much the *daimôn* retains from one life to the next, but that may indicate that, until the achievement of immortality, very little is retained. All that is certain is that it must retain its guilt, again until it regains immortality, for it continues to be punished up to that point. It might be argued that the *daimones*, or some of them, must be able to recollect previous lives, but the evidence for this is not as strong as one would expect. When Empedocles lists his previous forms of life (B117), the list highlights the contrasts between his previous lives (he has been female as well as male, a bird, a fish and even a plant), and so his claims may be based not on recollection (or on what he took to be recollection) but on an inference from his theory that any *daimôn* is punished with contrasting modes of life.⁴⁶

Empedocles’ attitude to Pythagoras is therefore complicated. When Empedocles praises an anonymous man of exceptionally broad knowledge (B129), he was taken by some ancient readers to be speaking of Pythagoras.⁴⁷ Empedocles says that the man had knowledge ranging over ten or twenty lifetimes, but he does not say that the man’s knowledge came from personal recollection. Instead, as scholars have noted, in the little he says about the basis of the man’s knowledge – “he had the greatest wealth of understanding” – he echoes his description of the knowledge to which Pausanias should aspire.⁴⁸

46 Compare Wright 1995, 59. At B118 Empedocles says that he wept and wailed on seeing an “unfamiliar place”, which might be thought to imply that he remembers previous modes of existence. But we do not know what he means by the “unfamiliar place” – or the identity of the more familiar place with which it is contrasted. One credible possibility is that he is describing his reaction as a newly born baby, used to the womb, to the chilly air outside it: according to Clement (*Strom.* 3.14.1) Empedocles was in this passage disparaging γένεσις. Compare the similar wording in the report of Epicurean doctrine at Sextus Empiricus *M* 11.96.

47 For the identification of the man with Pythagoras see Porphyry (*vit. Pyth.* 30) and Iamblichus (*vit. Pyth.* 67). According to a different view (Diogenes Laertius 8.54) Empedocles was referring to Parmenides. As Lloyd observes (2014, 30 n.10), the disagreement suggests that Empedocles himself left obscure the identity of the man, at least in the part of the passage still available to some later readers.

48 See Macris and Skarsouli 2012. With *πραπίδων πλοῦτος* (B129.2) compare *θείων πραπίδων πλοῦτος* (B132) and *ἀδινῆισιν ὑπὸ πραπίδεσιν* (B110).

Moreover, the man is said to have known not merely the details of his own previous lives but far more than that: “each of *all* things” over a huge period. We are reading a description of an outstanding polymath. On the other hand, this does not show that the ancient identification of the man with Pythagoras was incorrect. Empedocles may be reinterpreting Pythagoras’ knowledge in such a way as to accommodate anecdotes about Pythagoras⁴⁹ without implying that the *daimôn* can actually recollect previous lives. Pythagoras simply knew more than anyone else, and so, when asked, could “see” previous events as if he had been there.⁵⁰

As we have seen, when the *daimôn* becomes one “mortal” after another, its longevity is unaffected, if longevity means merely length of existence. But it is no longer one and the same kind of organism throughout its existence: it is through this discontinuity, as well as banishment from the company of the gods, that the *daimôn* is punished. By contrast, achieving immortality as a god is not only to return to the gods but to regain continuity, psychological and bodily, over a long but ultimately finite period. This will involve some kind of transition: as Empedocles says, reaching for an alternative to sexual reproduction, a select few “sprout up” as gods (B146). But Empedocles may expect, as a god, to retain his current knowledge and memories, and so in that regard immortality is already his.

When addressing his “immortal” Muse Calliope Empedocles contrasts her with someone “ephemeral” (B131.1). The goddess is contrasted either with a poet who was previously assisted by her, or with the addressee of such a poet.⁵¹ In a recent paper Most suggests that Empedocles has in mind Hesiod, who singles out Calliope at *Theogony* 79, but it is easier to understand her interest in “our concerns” (131.2) if the reference is to either Empedocles or Pausanias.⁵²

49 For the story of Pythagoras and his former life as Euphorbus see Heraclides of Pontus (reported in Diogenes Laertius 8.4-5), Lucian *Dialogues of the Dead* 6.3, Philostratus *Life of Apollonius* 3.19, Hippolytus *RH* 1.3.

50 The passage may thus respond to Heraclitus B40. Pythagoras’ knowledge had a practical application (129.3), no doubt in purification above all, and so being a polymath had indeed given him understanding.

51 ἔφημερων τινος could of course be neuter, but see Zuntz 1971, 212. A contrast between a Muse and an ephemeral person is more natural than one between a Muse and an ephemeral poem or subject matter. The fragment as quoted by Hippolytus (*RH* 7.30.4) is incomplete in line 2, and Zuntz argues (211-13) that an entire line has been omitted after line 2.

52 Most 2007, 291-2 (Hesiod); Zuntz 1971, 213 (Pausanias). Most’s explanation of “our concerns” is that Empedocles connects himself with Hesiod as “members of the same professional guild”. Empedocles’ opposition to divine sexuality makes it unlikely that, when aiming to write piously about the gods (B134.4), he would connect himself with Hesiod and even suggest that Hesiod had divine assistance.

“Ephemeral” and the contrast with “immortal” suggest that the reference must be to Pausanias, not Empedocles, but that is certain only if Empedocles has “immortal” status throughout the fragments. So far I have tried to avoid the question of the number of Empedocles’ poems, but as it happens Empedocles’ comments on his own mortality and immortality constitute some of the evidence for his having written at least two poems, not one. In B112, the opening of the *Katharmoi*,⁵³ Empedocles says that he is a god, no longer mortal, whereas in B115 he is an exile from the gods, doomed as a *daimôn* to become different mortals. How can he both be “no longer mortal” and continue to become “all forms of mortals”? The simplest explanation is that B115 derives from an earlier poem where he still saw himself as a mortal.⁵⁴ As the Strasbourg papyrus has shown,⁵⁵ Empedocles did not write with a clean separation between religious and cosmological questions; this is evidence neither for nor against a two-poem hypothesis, but it does show that the subject matter of B115 no longer requires us to place it in the same poem as other fragments with a “religious” theme.

We must finally return to the description, in three passages, of the gods as “long-living” (B21.12, B23.8, a (ii) 2). These gods do not last forever, but if, on the strength of that, we call them “mortal” we are deviating from Empedocles’ own choice of words elsewhere. In each of the passages where gods are called “long-living” they are said in the same line to be “pre-eminent in honours” (“pre-eminent” must be supplied to complete the line in the Strasbourg papyrus). Given that context, it is most unlikely that “long-living” is intended to show what the gods *lack*.⁵⁶ Empedocles frequently connects the shortness of life to ignorance or error: in their lives people see only a small portion of life (B2.3), and the Muse of long memory is contrasted with the “ephemeral” creatures who will listen to her (B3.4). B11 suggests a connection between the short time people have for reflection and the short duration that they, mistakenly, attribute to things (in both cases, from birth to death and no further). Their thoughts are doubly οὐ δολιχόφρονες. In drawing attention to the gods’ longevity – that is,

⁵³ Diogenes Laertius 8.54.

⁵⁴ See Kahn 1974, 452; Sedley 1998, 10. For defence of the one-poem hypothesis, and discussion of the key evidence at Diogenes Laertius 8.77, see Trépanier 2004, ch.1; for arguments in favour of allocating B115 to the *Katharmoi* see O’Brien 2001. It is true that, as O’Brien observes, Hippolytus mentions the *Katharmoi* shortly after quoting B115 (*RH* 7.30.3-4; 7.29.14-25) – among other fragments. But the fact that Hippolytus names the *Katharmoi* there shows at most that it contained the prohibitions mentioned in 7.30.3-4.

⁵⁵ See e. g. Janko 2005, 2; Primavesi 2008, 267.

⁵⁶ Compare εἰκῶς μῦθος in Plato’s *Timaeus*, the negative connotations of which have long been overemphasized. See above all Bryan 2012, ch.3, but also Burnyeat 2005.

their longevity as a specific organism – Empedocles is showing the gods’ most important advantage, in cognitive terms, over humans.

This gives us the best clue as to why Empedocles’ uses of “immortal” are so heterogeneous and, to our eyes, strange. Despite their finite duration Empedocles wants to retain “immortal” as an honorific for his gods, and as an honorific the term should accurately mark what gives the gods an advantage, particularly an epistemic advantage, over other creatures. A long or even infinitely long existence would be of no benefit to gods if they did not also enjoy continuity as a specific organism, for this continuity is necessary if they are to have full access to their vast stock of previously acquired experiences. “Immortal” should thus be used of the gods’ freedom from disrupting “deaths” during their long existence. This then controls how “immortal” is applied to further items, even though these other items have widely different functions, effects and qualities that, for as long as they are immortal, are not interrupted. But, as I have tried to show, the Hesiodic context of his poetry makes it less surprising that he applied his new conception of “immortality” to vast cosmic bodies.

Conclusion

Empedocles uses “immortal” when making various contrasts, and denying various changes, and in conclusion I consider what the immortal items have in common. Empedocles sometimes associates death with mixture or separation (B9, B17.4), and this encourages the thought that immortal items are unmixed or undivided, by contrast with some item that is mixed or divided. We have seen this in the case of the illuminated objects of air, which despite appearances retain their physical integrity, and the “immortal” portions of B35, which lose their immortality when they are mixed with portions of other elements. But elsewhere mixture and division, at least of this kind, have not been as prominent as one would expect. In his discussion of the punished *daimôn* (B115) he talks of separation from the gods, where the *daimôn* is not divided but isolated from others. Empedocles must believe that transmigration involves physical mixture of some kind, given that human, animal and plant life start with mixture (B9), but the details of this are notoriously left vague.⁵⁷ Such “mixture” as there is in B115 is the new compulsion on the *daimôn* to inhabit different environments.

Empedocles saw continuity, over a long but finite time, as the more important common feature, for it is concerning this that we find a verbal echo between passages. His discussions of both *daimones* and elemental portions suggest that

⁵⁷ For a recent account see Trépanier 2014.

for long as something is immortal it does not “change paths” (B35.15 and B115.8), even though it may change in other respects. Of course, what it means not to “change paths” will vary from case to case. An immortal god remains one and the same organism, and, unlike a transmigrating *daimôn*, retains the memories and understanding acquired over its long life as that organism. Celestial objects perceived by means of “borrowed” light (B45) retain the size and shape that they appear to lose. Unmixed portions of an element give rise to the same set of properties until they are mixed with other elements – the “mortality” caused invariably by the “immortal” expansion of Love.

Does immortality have a common cause or origin? We might find it natural to associate immortality with Love, particularly as the *daimôn* loses its immortality from placing its trust in Strife (B115.14), but in fact Love is not the only cause of immortality, and sometimes causes the opposite: in B35 Strife causes portions of elements to become immortal, and Love is then responsible for their mortality. The common feature of the immortals’ origins is rather that in each case the origin is asexual. The celestial objects, for example, are created when portions of an element come together. Apotheosis is represented as quasi-vegetative generation, and so the awkward fact that the human being had parents can be discounted. Empedocles aims to keep immortality pure from sexuality; Hesiod is his principal target, but this is also one of the main differences between Empedocles and Plato. By comparison with Empedocles, Plato’s discussions of immortality are more accommodating to sexuality and human reproduction. Unlike Empedocles, Plato sees no reason to deny immortality to a soul that is still transmigrating, but in Plato a soul that has merely finite duration would not be immortal.

Conventions used and acknowledgments: Throughout the paper I use upper-case letters (A and B) to refer to the reports and fragments in Diels and Kranz 1951; a lower-case letter in bold (**a**) refers to the Strasbourg papyrus (Martin and Primavesi 1998; Janko 2005). My thanks to those with whom I have discussed the interpretation outlined above, particularly Brad Inwood and Simon Trépanier. Most of the work was undertaken in Toronto during a Leverhulme Research Fellowship; I am very grateful to the members of Toronto’s CPAMP, particularly Martin Pickavé, and to the Leverhulme Trust.

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