HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Empedocles (492 B.C.-432 B.C.)

Empedocles was born and lived his life in Acragas in Sicily, and was a physician as well as a philosopher. Like Heracleitus and Parmenides. Empedocles is a philosopher in hexameters, using the same coercive and shaping metrical vehicle as Homer and Hesiod. His work has come down to us in the form of two lengthy poems, 'On Nature,' and 'Purifications.' The first deals with the cosmos in general, and the nature of coming into being and perishing—in natural terms. The second deals with the proper principles of moral behavior inside such a cosmos.

In 'On Nature' Empedocles maintains that there are four material 'roots,' from which all that exists grows. These 'roots' are fire, air, earth, and water. Two forces give momentum to these roots—which might be compared to the fundamental elements Thales and the other Milesians consider the building blocks of natural reality. For Empedocles those elements, *love* and *strife*, both join and separate the constitutents of reality, building and disassembling them in an infinite sequence of creations and destructions. As Empedocles puts it:

A twofold tale I shall tell: at one time it grew to be one alone out of many, at another again it grew apart to be many out of one. Double is the birth of mortal things and double their failing; for one is brought to birth and destroyed by the coming together of all things, the other is nurtured and flies apart as they grow apart again. And these things never cease their continual exchange, now through Love all coming together into one, now again each carried apart by the hatred of Strife. So insofar as it has learned to grow one from many, and again as the one grows apart [there] grow many, thus far do they come into being and have no stable life; but insofar as they never cease their continual interchange, thus far they exist always changeless in the cycle.

In *The Purifications*, Empedocles conceives himself as a *daimon*, a spirit force or 'god,' who was banished from the immortals for infractions like meat eating. From his post as spokesperson for moral rehabilitation—and as a step on his own path toward immortality--Empedocles discourses here on purificatory rites, such as vegetarianism, whose spiritual importance he seems to have learned from the teachings of Pythagoras.