

Guide to Lecture 11: Empedocles, Anaxagoras, the Atomists

A) Empedocles (born ca. 492 BC)

a) Life

b) **Background from Parmenides:** being must be permanent and unchanging. Solution: permanent elements moved around by an active power.

c) Beliefs/Themes:

- i) Six fundamental beings: the four elements, Love, Strive/Hate. The world we experience is a function of rearrangements of the elements on the micro level. Love brings elements together, Strife draws them apart.
- ii) World-cycles driven by Love and Strife: Love and Strife are *cosmic* conditions, not just local ones. The world begins in a state of love when all elements are thoroughly mixed; then Strife gets the upper hand. Pure Love can only exist when everything's current state is cancelled and mixed together.
- iii) Reincarnation: you can be reborn as any kind of animal or plant; hard to know where Empedocles gets his soul-principle from—what about individuality? Maybe in the sense we are all star-dust. Eating meat has forced us to reincarnate, vegetarianism will save us. The *daimon*.
- iv) Theory of Vision. Vision occurs when effluences from things meet rays of fire from our eyes, and the effluences enter pores in our eyes.
- v) Medicine. The four elements and their qualities are established as a group by Empedocles. Medicine and health as a function of how the

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elements and humors are mixed in your body; a “balanced” diet.

Philosophy as being like medicine because you can restore the proper balance of the parts of your soul. Medicine is to health as Philosophy is to happiness.

d) Criticisms and comparisons

- i) The problems flow from his use of Love and Strife as having moral content, but used in a physical way.
- ii) If Love is the goal, two objects can be just as unified (or more so) than humans can; no principled way to distinguish moral values from physical ones. And Love can only be accomplished fully at the beginning/end of the universe, when our bodies will not even exist anymore.
- iii) How does the interchange between Love and Strife work? Empedocles lacks measure, harmony, *logos*, or other organizing principles. Why shouldn't change be constant, or why shouldn't everything come to a standstill? Dykes's proposal based on astronomy.

B) Anaxagoras (ca. 500 BC – ca. 428 BC)

a) Introduction. Different types of active powers in the universe.

b) Life of Anaxagoras.

c) Physics

- i) Instead of four elements moved by Love and Strife (Empedocles), indefinitely many elements directed (in some sense) by Mind (*nous*).
- ii) Something is an element if it can be divided and each part is still of the same kind. Example: glass is an element, a human is not.

iii) The elements are mixed together in everything. On the macro level, something of a certain kind if an element predominates. Example: milk is a kind, but a glass of milk just has milk predominating; there are many other elements mixed in. If milk builds bones, maybe there is elemental bone in milk.

d) Mind

- i) In the beginning of the universe, everything was blended uniformly. Mind started to turn things in a circle, which made certain elements split off in different ways. Mind is not mixed with anything else; does it do more than turn things in a circle?
- ii) Socrates' disappointment with Anaxagoras (according to Plato's *Phaedo*).

C) The Atomists: Leucippus (dates unknown) and Democritus (born ca. 460 BC)

a) Physics

- i) Only two kinds of things exist: atoms and empty space or void.
- ii) An atom is a tiny thing that is "uncuttable." They differ in size and shape.
- iii) At the beginning of the world, atoms moved about randomly, swarming around; then they began to clash and get entangled; atoms of different types get separated out and become the so-called "elements."
- iv) The atomists take motion for granted; don't seem to feel like they should explain it; but why aren't things flying apart and coming together all the time? We need another principle.

b) Ethics in Democritus

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- i) The senses are somewhat untrustworthy because the macro properties we perceive are not genuine constituents of reality; sweetness is something by “convention,” because it’s an accidental relation of certain atoms in food with those in my tongue; it doesn’t pertain to the atoms themselves.
- ii) Importance of moderation, avoiding excesses and deficiencies; a suspicion of pleasure which becomes a constant theme in Greek thought.