Cosmic periods in the Philosophy of Empedocles

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EMPEDOCLES THOUGHT of the world-process as the product of the combination and separation of the four elements earth, air, fire, and water, under the influence of Love and Strife. The elements, as well as Love and Strife themselves, are both material, in the usual sense, and divine. The process is cyclical, and consists of a succession of phases, in each of which either Love or Strife is predominant, or gaining predominance, over the other:

I will set forth a double doctrine: sometimes one grows out of many to exist alone, and sometimes several separate themselves out of the one to exist. Twofold is the birth of mortal things, twofold their demise; for the coming together of all things begets and kills the former, and the latter in turn, as things are separated, is nourished and flies apart. And these never cease their interchange, as sometimes all things come together, by Love, into one, and sometimes, in turn, everything is borne apart by the hate that is in Strife. So insofar as one has learned to be born from several and several, again, have emerged as one is divided up, to this extent they are subject to birth and their life is not lasting. But insofar as they never cease constantly interchanging, to this extent they exist forever, unmoved throughout the cycle. (Fr. 17. 1-13).

It is clear that, in the ordinary course of things, both Love and Strife are at work, though at any moment one may be gaining over the other; but what is the nature of the transition from the period of one’s growth to that of the other? There must be a moment at least, or an era, when each of the two reaches, or enjoys, the apogee of its influence, before beginning to decline. If these are moments, one will speak of two cosmic phases, if eras, of four. This problem has been answered in both ways, for unfortunately the evidence from the fragments of Empedocles’ poems is not unambiguous. It is not proposed to discuss this question here; it is enough to note that whether the periods in question are eras or moments, they should have some definable characteristics.

Empedocles makes it clear that the effect of Love is increasingly close association among the elements, so that they voluntarily seek combi-

1 Presented at a meeting of the Society for Ancient Greek Philosophy, at Ann Arbor, Michigan, December 1961.
2 Aristotle thought there were four periods, two of activity, when Love or Strife is gaining, set apart by two intermediate periods of rest; but the lines he quotes in support do not seem to bear this meaning. (Phys. 8. 1. 250 b 26; cf. Zeller-Nestle 971 n. 1)
nation with each other, while the opposite tendency of Strife is to make them hate and withdraw from one another. There is no evidence as to what phase Empedocles used as the starting-point of his exposition, and no likelihood that any of them was thought of as primary. The period of Strife's growing influence brings the progressive disintegration of things, culminating in a state in which the four elements are completely separated from each other, and Love is presumably excluded. Her re-entry, however, and growth in power, bring about a more and more thorough mixture of the elements, a steadily increasing integration of the world.

What would be the culmination of this process? Parmenides had said, of that which exists,

Motionless within the limits of mighty bonds, it is without beginning or end, since coming into being and perishing have been driven far away, cast out by true belief. Abiding the same in the same place it rests by itself, and so abides firm where it is; for strong Necessity holds it firm within the bonds of the limit that keeps it back on every side... But since there is a furthest limit, it is bounded on every side, like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere... (Fr. 8. 26-31, 42-43, tr. Kirk and Raven.)

This picture must have been in Empedocles' mind, and many have supposed that it provided him with a pattern of perfection. And he does say (fr. 17.7, quoted above), "sometimes all things come together, by Love, into one." This can be interpreted to mean that at the triumph of Love the world becomes a thoroughly uniform mixture, motionless and spherical. Though really early evidence for such an interpretation is scanty, it is advanced by some of the commentators on Aristotle, in the Neoplatonic period. Philoponus, for example, writes,

Again (Empedocles) says that during the dominance of Love, all things become one and produce the sphere, which is without quality, so that neither the peculiar character of fire nor of any of the others is any longer preserved in it, each of the elements shedding its particular form.  

Simplicius also speaks of "the sphere" (De caelo 528. 11, not in DK), but without explicitly denying it all quality: "Empedocles says that this

1 De gen. et corr. 19. 3; DK 31 A 41. This is not an independent testimony, but merely a paraphrase of Aristotle De gen. et corr. 315a 3, and "very inaccurate in its inferences", as E. Miller points out (On the interpretation of Empedocles, p. 61 n. 5). His word ἀτομον is not found elsewhere in the tradition. Cf. H. A. T. Reiche, Empedocles' mixture, Eudoxan Astronomy, and Aristotle's connate pneuma (Amsterdam, 1960), p. 40. This book, which reached me after the present paper was completed, discusses some of the same topics, mostly from a different point of view.