

*Quieta non movere.*<sup>1</sup>

## Classical Thought<sup>2</sup>

### The Pluralists 1:

Empedocles (Em-PED-o-clees) (495BC-444BC),



Parmenides had concluded that there was no such thing as change or motion. This conclusion conflicts with experience and seems absurd. He started from the premise that there was one underlying substance. It is tempting, therefore, since his conclusion is absurd, to reject his starting premise that “all is one.” This is what the pluralists did. They argued that there is a plurality of underlying substances.

Parmenides had argued that there was no nothing. He said that everything is full (everything is a “plenum”) and so it is not possible for things to move since there is no space to move to. Empedocles argued that motion *is* possible in a plenum. He thought that this could be demonstrated by a straw being put in water. If you put your finger over top end of the straw no water enters the straw when you push it into water. We know that there is air in the straw preventing the water entering. When you take off your finger, water comes in. So, said Empedocles, there is a plenum but motion is possible because there is a plurality of things: water is one thing and air is another. Water can replace air and you have not granted that there are empty spaces in the world. This gets round Parmenides. Don't worry if you find this somewhat extraordinary – it is!

Empedocles thought there were four different “roots” that made up the world. They were: earth, air, fire and water. Later philosophers described these as the four “elements.”

Empedocles thought the four different roots made up reality by forming mixtures. This was done by two types of motion; a uniting and joining motion which was love and a separating motion which was strife. Chance combinations come about, he thought, because of a continuous cycle of love and strife in the universe. Not all the chance combinations of roots formed in this way survive because the combinations have to be correct to produce something capable of surviving. This is a bit like a pre-echo of evolutionary theory: only the fit survive. Darwin's idea of “survival of the fittest” was similar to this in some ways but more sophisticated.

Empedocles went further than this: he considered that the process of love and strife was God. God, he said, had the personal attribute of mind. This is somewhat contradictory. On the one hand there is an impersonal, mechanical, chance universe. On the other hand, there is mind, which he described as flashing thoughts so rapidly you cannot see them to combine things and separate them through love and strife. This is closer to a view which allows for personal attributes to God. We can see that

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1 Do not move settled things.

2 These lessons come from material in *The History of Western Philosophy* 3 Courses Taught at Christ College by Dr. Greg L. Bahnsen. These are available from Covenant Media Foundation <https://www.cmfnow.com/>. As far as I am aware they are the best (if not the only) rigorous treatment of the whole of the history of philosophy from a Christian perspective. Please note that I do not endorse the Theonomist perspective of CMF and the late Dr. Bahnsen. This perspective does not, however, mar the usefulness of these lectures.

this is not a consistent and well worked out philosophy. It does not really solve the problem pointed out by the Milesian philosophers of how things change and yet stay the same. Empedocles does not say whether, when the four roots come together to form a table or a frog, they each stay air, earth, fire and water or do they become "table?" If so how? In other words, how do the four roots become the many things we experience? Empedocles came up with no answers.