

# Cosmic Emotions; or, Why Is the Universe Joyful according to Plato's Timaeus and Empedocles?

Chiara Ferella

Volume 3, Number 2, 2022

Emotions in Contexts: Cultural Conceptions in Ancient and Medieval Societies

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1110115ar>  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v3i2.42528>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Institute for Research in Classical Philosophy and Science

ISSN

1549-4470 (print)

1549-4497 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ferella, C. (2022). Cosmic Emotions; or, Why Is the Universe Joyful according to Plato's Timaeus and Empedocles? *Aestimatio*, 3(2), 13–46.  
<https://doi.org/10.33137/aestimatio.v3i2.42528>

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# Cosmic Emotions; or, Why Is the Universe Joyful according to Plato's *Timaeus* and Empedocles?

by

Chiara Ferella

Johannes Gutenberg University, Mainz  
[ferella@uni-mainz.de](mailto:ferella@uni-mainz.de)

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*Aestimatio* ns 3.2 (2022) 13–46

## Abstract

Plato and Empedocles depict a universe that manifests beauty, goodness, reason, and bliss. This article aims to investigate why both philosophers felt it important to describe a cosmos that participates in a human emotion such as happiness. First, it will be shown how both Plato and Empedocles could not dispense with embodied human experience, including emotional experience, in the formation of cosmological concepts. Indeed, their respective cosmoi are constructed through notions derived from the conceptual domain of human agency. Second, attention will also be paid to Plato and Empedocles' reconstruction of the notion of the happy life. The main argument advanced here is that both Plato and Empedocles conceive of their (macro)cosmos as a paradigm of behavior, so that the conception of a happy universe has a significant ethical function at the level of the microcosm, ultimately demonstrating the centrality of the concept of happiness in the doctrines of both authors.

### About the Author

CHIARA FERELLA is a research associate within the project “Early Concepts of Humans and Nature: Universal Specific, Interchanged” (RTG 1876) at the University of Mainz and an elected member of the Junge Akademie (Mainz). After receiving her PhD in classics from the University of Pisa, she held positions at the LMU Munich and Topoi Berlin and was a fellow at the Center for Hellenic Studies at Harvard University. She is the author of the book *Reconstructing Empedocles' Thought*, in press with Cambridge University Press.

**Keywords** Plato, Timaeus, Empedocles, joyful cosmos, Sphairos, happiness and divinity

**I**n the fourth century BC, Plato put forward an account of natural philosophy in which he presents an elaborate story of the universe and the origin of humankind. The *Timaeus* is one of his latest works and consists, for the most part, of a long monologue given by the title character Timaeus of Locri, allegedly a philosopher of the fifth century BC, affiliated to the Pythagorean school.<sup>1</sup> Timaeus' account of the formation of the universe, its parts, and its characteristics, which constitutes one of the foci of this paper, proposes a cosmos that is the product of rational and benevolent agency. A divine and supremely good Demiurge or Craftsman [*Tim.* 28a6], imitating an immutable and eternal model, imposed mathematical order on a preexisting chaos to form the κόσμος, or ordered universe. Because it is the work of a benevolent divine agency, this universe shows beauty, goodness, and reason. Moreover, it manifests supreme bliss.

A similar project aiming at a comprehensive explanation of the cosmos and its living beings was authored a century earlier by the Presocratic philosopher Empedocles of Acragas. His extant verses deal with the dynamic of the four elements—fire, air, water, and earth—which are defined as “the roots of all things” (τῶν πάντων ῥιζώματα) [DK 31B6.1] since they constitute the basic ingredients of every existing thing. These elements are eternally and regularly brought together into a single entity, the Sphairos (σφαῖρος) at the hands of the cosmic unifying force of Love and are separated again into many things by the dividing power of Strife. Furthermore, similarly to Plato, Empedocles assumed that a certain form of the universe, that is, the Sphairos, manifests ideal beauty, knowledge, and bliss. It is for this reason that Hippolytus defines the Sphairos as “the most beautiful form of the cosmos” (κάλλιστον εἶδος τοῦ κόσμου) [*Refut.* 7.29.14], and Aristotle calls it the “happiest god” of Empedocles' system [*Meta.* 1000b1–20].<sup>2</sup>

The affinities between the Empedoclean Sphairos and Plato's cosmos in the *Timaeus* are so many and so obvious that one can only assume that Plato

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<sup>1</sup> The existence of a historical Timaeus of Locri is dubious since he only appears as a literary figure in Plato; all other ancient sources either are based on Plato or are fictional accounts.

<sup>2</sup> On the superlative characteristics of the Sphairos, see §2.1, p. 27 below.

composed his cosmology with Empedocles in mind. Plato's Empedoclean reminiscences have already been the subject of numerous studies<sup>3</sup> and for this reason will not be discussed here. To the best of my knowledge, however, the joyful nature that Timaeus' cosmos shares with (or takes from) Empedocles' Sphairos has not yet been investigated in depth. The purpose of this article is precisely to bridge this gap.

Specifically, I will address the question of why the description of a world that manifests beauty, goodness, and order to an excellent degree includes a typically human emotion such as happiness. Certainly, one could argue that this attribution of a human emotion stems from the fact that the cosmos is explicitly defined as a living being in Plato's *Timaeus*. In the case of Empedocles, however, the question of why the universe is described as happy becomes intriguing. Although, as we shall see, in his conception of the Sphairos he seems to go beyond traditional anthropomorphism, Empedocles cannot dispense with embodied human experience, including emotional experience, in the construction of cosmological concepts. Indeed, the Sphairos is clearly construed through notions derived from the conceptual domain of human agency.

Related to this, moreover, the emotional quality of a happy nature is not the only feature associated with the human sphere present in Plato's and Empedocles' descriptions of the universe. Mind, reason, and, consequently, knowledge—just to mention some of the most relevant qualities of both their cosmoi<sup>4</sup>—are all related to the same conceptual domain of human agency. The attribution of these features to the universe could have been motivated, at least on Plato's part, by teleological reasons;<sup>5</sup> but what can be said about the cosmos' joyful nature? What is the function of happiness in Platonic and Empedoclean cosmology? Why, in other words, did Plato and Empedocles deem it necessary to specify that their universes feel emotions and are happy?

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., [Bignone 1916](#), 613–623; [Cornford 1937](#), 44–45 n4 and 55; [Hershbell 1974](#); and, more recently, [Hladký 2015](#), 71–82.

<sup>4</sup> More precisely, whereas Plato's universe possesses these features, as we will see in [§2.1, p. 27 below](#), the Empedoclean Sphairos can be identified with Mind and has, therefore, knowledge.

<sup>5</sup> With regard to Empedocles, [Sedley 2007](#), 53–62 proposes an exploration of the concept of divine craftsmanship in Empedocles' cosmology that could represent a case of Presocratic teleology.

A secondary issue that my investigation of the joyful nature of the Empedoclean and Platonic worlds necessarily brings out is the idea of a happy life that Plato and Empedocles elaborated on (or implied) in their works. In *Eth. Nic.* 1.4 1095a18–20, Aristotle recognized that the great majority of humankind agree about calling the highest good “happiness”, since “both the multitude and cultivated people...conceive ‘the good life’ or ‘doing well’ to be the same thing as ‘being happy’”. However, what actually constitutes happiness remains, so argues Aristotle, “a matter of dispute; and the account of it given by ordinary people is not the same as that given by philosophers”.

An additional difficulty inherent in this inquiry is the discrepancy between our idea of happiness and the conception of a happy life in antiquity. While the predominant modern concept of happiness has especially subjective connotations and denotes a type of positive feeling or experience that makes us ultimately content with our lives, Plato’s and Empedocles’ conception of a happy life refers primarily to “the achievement of an objectively worthwhile life, the sort of life the gods give one when they are favourably disposed”, as C. C. W. Taylor puts it [2008, 224: cf. Rabbås, Emilsson, Fossheim, and Tuominen 2015, 7]. Their focus, in other words, is on the objective aspect of an accomplished and worthwhile life. With this in mind, in the following I will then analyze the content of a happy life according to Plato and Empedocles, highlighting the relevant points of contact between them, especially with regard to the relationship between happiness and divine existence.

More specifically, my investigation is broadly conducted in two parts. I will begin with Plato, because he gives us a reason for his happy cosmos—namely, its being a paradigm of behavior for those who want to be truly happy—that may already be present, albeit *in nuce*, in Empedocles’ depiction of the joyful Sphairos. My treatment of each author will then proceed according to the same pattern; that is, the first section on each will illustrate each philosopher’s description of the cosmos. I will then investigate their conceptions of a happy life in §1.2 (Plato) and §2.2 (Empedocles) and try to establish the reason why the world is made happy by Plato in §1.3 and by Empedocles in §2.3. By summarizing the salient points of the discussion, finally, I will argue that both Plato and Empedocles agree that the conception of a happy (macro)cosmos has a significant ethical function at the level of the microcosm, demonstrating in conclusion the ways in which happiness is a central concept in their doctrines.

## 1. Plato's *Timaeus*

### 1.1 Timaeus' narrative of the cosmos

As already mentioned, Plato's dialogue *Timaeus* deals with the existence of the universe as the handiwork of a supremely benevolent Demiurge, the personification of νοῦς (*Nous* or Intellect), who, by bringing an Ur-chaos to order, creates the cosmos—that is, an ordered world—as a manifestation of goodness and reason. The cosmological narrative follows a teleological model, and so the cosmos as a whole and its different components are organized in such a way as to tend toward an end. In short, the universe was made as a living being that is by nature as excellent and perfect as possible. Therefore, it comprises reason moulded within a soul and the soul fashioned within a body [see *Tim.* 30b–c].

At the end of his treatment on the body of the world and before dealing with its soul, Timaeus presents us with a summary of the world's shape:

Οὗτος δὴ πᾶς ὄντος ἀεὶ λογισμὸς θεοῦ περὶ τὸν ποτὲ ἐσόμενον θεὸν λογισθεὶς λείων καὶ ὀμαλὸν πανταχῆ τε ἐκ μέσου ἴσον καὶ ὅλον καὶ τέλειον ἐκ τελέων σωμαίων σῶμα ἐποίησεν· ψυχὴν δὲ εἰς τὸ μέσον αὐτοῦ θεὸς διὰ παντός τε ἔτεινεν καὶ ἔτι ἔζωθεν τὸ σῶμα αὐτῆ περιεκάλυπεν, καὶ κύκλῳ δὴ κύκλον στρεφόμενον οὐρανὸν ἕνα μόνον ἔρημον κατέστησεν, δι' ἀρετὴν δὲ αὐτὸν αὐτῷ δυνάμενον συγγίγνεσθαι καὶ οὐδενὸς ἑτέρου προσδεόμενον, γινώριμον δὲ καὶ φίλον ἰκανῶς αὐτὸν αὐτῷ. Διὰ πάντα δὴ ταῦτα εὐδαίμονα θεὸν αὐτὸν ἐγεννήσατο. [Plato, *Tim.* 34a–b]

All this, then, was the plan of the god who is for ever for the god who was some-time to be. According to this plan he made it smooth and uniform, everywhere equidistant from its centre, a body whole and complete, with complete bodies for its parts. And in the centre he set a soul and caused it to extend throughout the whole and further wrapped its body round with soul on the outside; and so he established one world alone, round and revolving in a circle, solitary but able by reason of its excellence to bear itself company, needing no other acquaintance or friend but sufficient to itself. On all these accounts the world which he brought into being was a blessed god. [Cornford 1937, 58]

While this passage recapitulates the most relevant characteristics of the cosmos, which include an absolutely balanced body rotating in a circle and enveloped by a soul, in what precedes this summary, Timaeus dwells on the creation of the cosmos by the Demiurge as well as on the reasons and ends that led him to construct each of its individual parts in the manner in which it now stands. In particular, Timaeus clarifies that the Demiurge made the body of the world unique from a model that is itself unique and complete. Moreover, like its model, the world is unitary, proportionate thanks to an element of Love (φιλία) in it, whole, everlasting, spherical, rotating around its axis, uniform, and not anthropomorphic. The passage quoted above adds

the notion that the world has been made solitary—an idea that is related to the unique nature of the cosmic model. Nevertheless, Timaeus clarifies that the world, though solitary, is “able by reason of its excellence to bear itself company”; indeed, it does not need acquaintances or friends but is self-sufficient.

The quality of being solitary merits brief exploration. In *Tim.* 31a–b, the cosmos is described as the only existing being, a characteristic recalled at 34b5 by the adjective «ἕρημον». Viewed from this perspective, the solitary nature of the world carries with it the idea of a being that, by encompassing all that exists, inevitably has no interaction with similar fellow beings or entities [Sedley 2017, 327–328]. Furthermore, the solitary nature of the cosmos and the fact that it has no interactions with other beings relate to the universe’s quality of being self-sufficient, which reinforces the idea that the world does not (need to) engage in any social, political or other interactions. Indeed, the characteristic of being self-sufficient should be understood in a general sense, that is, in terms of a being that has no need or desire whatsoever to satisfy or repress. In fact, the body of the world is such that it imposes no affect (πάθημα) on its soul. Its being solitary and self-sufficient then ensures that the world’s only occupation is, as Timaeus states in 36e4–5, the exercise of reason resulting in a “ceaseless and intelligent life for all time”.

In this respect, the text that follows *Tim.* 34a–b describes the way in which the soul makes the world utterly rational and intelligent. It is said how the Demiurge imposed an everlasting order on the world’s soul which, by virtue of that, has revolutions that can never be disordered.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, the world is able always to formulate true judgments; whereas the rational human soul, although being formed by the Demiurge in the same bowl and out of the same elements used to forge the world’s soul, may on its own initiative make incorrect judgments.<sup>7</sup> In short, the universe is made a sensible god with an entirely harmonious body (“smooth and uniform,

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<sup>6</sup> This cosmic order is revealed in the order of the heavens. It is worth noting that the stars are said to “think always the same things about the same things” [40a8–b1: Cornford 1937, 118]; accordingly, they always follow the same regular path.

<sup>7</sup> In 41d, Timaeus explains that, after forming the celestial gods, the Demiurge turned once more to the same mixing bowl wherein he had mixed and blended the soul of the universe, and poured into it what was left of the former ingredients, blending them this time in somewhat the same way, only no longer so



everywhere equidistant from its center, a whole and complete body”) and an utterly rational and intelligent soul.

Lastly, in the passage quoted above, we have seen that the world is a blessed god. For what cosmological reason and function did Plato deem it necessary to conceive a world that is happy? To answer this, we must first investigate what Timaeus considers a happy life.

## 1.2 Divine Nature and happiness according to Timaeus

In the preceding section, we saw that Timaeus makes the cosmos the handiwork of a supremely good Demiurge who created it to be utterly beautiful and ordered in shape, excellent in reason and true judgment as well as self-sufficient. Moreover, we are told that the cosmos so constructed is blessed. In order to explore why the attribution of such a human emotion to the universe is significant in Timaeus’ cosmological account, let us now consider what a happy life is according to Timaeus.

In his speech, there are two passages in which the pursuit of a happy life is thematized. In the first passage, Timaeus, presenting the law of the reincarnation of souls, says the following:

ὅποτε δὴ σώμασιν ἐμφυτευθεῖεν ἐξ ἀνάγκης, ... πρῶτον μὲν αἴσθησιν ἀναγκαῖον εἶη μίαν πᾶσιν ἐκ βιαίων παθημάτων σύμφυτον γίνεσθαι, δεύτερον δὲ ἡδονὴν καὶ λύπην μειγμένον ἔρωτα, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις φόβον καὶ θυμὸν ὅσα (b) τε ἐπόμενα αὐτοῖς καὶ ὅποσα ἐναντίως πέφυκε διεσθηκότα· ὧν εἰ μὲν κρατήσοιεν, δίκη βιώσοιντο, κρατηθέντες δὲ ἀδικίᾳ. Καὶ ὁ μὲν εὖ τὸν προσήκοντα χρόνον βιούσας, πάλιν εἰς τὴν τοῦ συννόμου πορευθεὶς οἴκησιν ἄστρου, βίον εὐδαίμονα καὶ συνήθη ἔξει. [Plato, *Tim.* 42a–b]

Whensoever they [i.e., the souls] should of necessity have been implanted in bodies, ... there must needs be innate in them, first sensation, the same for all, arising from violent impressions; second, desire blended with pleasure and pain,

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pure as before, but second or third in degree of purity. And when he had compounded the whole, he divided it into souls equal in number with the stars, and distributed them, each soul to its several stars. [Cornford 1937, 142].

As Cornford 1937, 142 clarifies,

the human soul, no less than the World-Soul, must be composed as to be like the objects it is to know, and it must possess the faculties of intelligence and knowledge, opinion and belief.

Nevertheless, “human souls are inferior, because they can do wrong of their own wills.” Moreover, because they are made by Demiurge himself, the souls are indissoluble; yet as Timaeus explains in 42d, they are entrusted to the care of the previously created gods, who must add to them both the body and those mortal parts that inevitably result from association with the body.

and besides these fear and anger and all the feelings that accompany these and all that are of contrary nature: and if they should master these needs, they will live in righteousness; if they were mastered by them, in unrighteousness.

And those who should live well for their due span of time should journey back to the habitation of their consort star and there live a happy and congenial life. [Cornford 1937, 143–144 slightly modified]

After explaining that the *παθήματα*<sup>8</sup> are of necessity innate to an incarnated soul—simply put, human beings are by nature compelled to have many kinds of needs, sensations, desires, passions, and emotions—Timaeus affirms that souls can either master their needs and live in righteousness or be mastered by them and live in unrighteousness. Then, he concludes that those who spend their life well will have a happy existence once their soul is released from the body. In contrast, for those who do not live well, Timaeus envisages a destiny of reincarnation and a long sequence of possible rebirths, as we read in the passage that immediately follows *Tim.* 42a–b.

The ideal of a happy life that Timaeus is proposing here is, first of all, achieved only without the body, when the released soul can return to its original abode and consort star. The fact that genuine happiness is a state attained only beyond the body invites one to understand that Timaeus does not consider happiness to be like other emotions, that is, as an affection (*πάθημα*) of the soul created by the body. Rather, and second, Timaeus' idea of a happy life follows necessarily from the individual's ability—which is also a form of virtue [Carone 2005, esp. 65]—to master those needs resulting from the interaction between body and soul. Thus, while it pertains to a disembodied soul and is enjoyed after liberation from the body, happiness is earned during embodied life, particularly, in a life that has been well spent (“those who should live well for their due span” [Cornford 1937, 144]. As we can infer from *Tim.* 42a–b, a life well spent is a life according to righteousness, that is, a life lived by mastering bodily needs. In sum, happy are those who, having lived a righteous and consequently well-spent life, have escaped rebirth and finally enjoy a disembodied existence on/with their consort star.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The word «*παθήματα*» is here translated as “needs”, though the Greek indicates everything that may affect the soul, namely, as Timaeus clarifies, perceptions, desires, passions, and emotions.

<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that in *Theaet.* 176b it is said that in order to avoid evils, which necessarily reside among human things and, as we might infer, live consequently in peace and contentment, we should “try to escape from earth to the dwelling of the gods as quickly as we can”.

While a life of righteousness will ensure a happy existence for the disembodied soul, in the second passage in which the pursuit of a happy life is thematized, Timaeus explains that there is a life that is “distinctively happy” or the best life. Moreover, as we may infer from *Tim.* 90a–c, this distinctively happy existence is such that it does not have to wait for the liberation of the soul from the body to be enjoyed but can already be attained in embodied life [see Sedley 1999; 2017].

Τὸ δὲ δὴ περὶ τοῦ κυριωτάτου παρ’ ἡμῖν ψυχῆς εἶδους διανοεῖσθαι δεῖ τῆδε, ὡς ἄρα αὐτὸ δαίμονα θεὸς ἐκάστω δέδωκεν, τοῦτο δ’ ἡμῶν οἰκεῖν μὲν ἡμῶν ἐπ’ ἄκρῳ τῷ σώματι, πρὸς δὲ τὴν ἐν οὐρανῷ συγγένειαν ἀπὸ γῆς ἡμᾶς αἴρειν ὡς ὄντας φυτὸν οὐκ ἔγγειον ἀλλὰ οὐράνιον, ὀρθότατα λέγοντες· ἐκεῖθεν γάρ, ὅθεν ἡ πρώτη τῆς ψυχῆς γένεσις ἔφυ, τὸ θεῖον τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ ρίζαν ἡμῶν ἀνακρεμαννὸν ὀρθοῖ πάν τὸ σῶμα. Τῷ μὲν οὖν περὶ τὰς ἐπιθυμίας ἢ περὶ φιλονικίας τετετακότι καὶ ταῦτα διαπονοῦντι σφόδρα πάντα τὰ δόγματα ἀνάγκη θνητὰ ἐγγεγονέναι, καὶ παντάπασιν καθ’ ὅσον μάλιστα δυνατὸν θνητῷ γίγνεσθαι, τούτου μηδὲ σμικρὸν ἐλλείπειν, ἅτε τὸ τοιοῦτον ἠδὲ ξηκότι· τῷ δὲ περὶ φιλομαθίαν καὶ περὶ τὰς ἀληθείς φρονήσεις ἐσπουδακότι καὶ ταῦτα μάλιστα τῶν αὐτοῦ γεγυμνασμένῳ φρονεῖν μὲν ἀθάνατα καὶ θεῖα, ἕνπερ ἀληθείας ἐφάπτητα, πᾶσα ἀνάγκη που, καθ’ ὅσον δ’ αὐτὸ μετασχεῖν ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει ἀθανασίας ἐνδέχεται, τούτου μηδὲν μέρος ἀπολείπειν, ἅτε δὲ αἰεὶ θεραπεύοντα τὸ θεῖον ἔχοντά τε αὐτὸν εὖ κεκοσμημένον τὸν δαίμονα σύνοικον ἑαυτῷ, διαφερόντως εὐδαίμονα εἶναι. [Plato, *Tim.* 90a–c]

As concerning the most sovereign form of soul in us we must conceive that heaven has given it to each person as a guiding genius—that part which we say dwells in the summit of our body and lifts us from earth towards our celestial affinity, like a plant whose roots are not in earth, but in the heavens. And this is most true, for it is to the heavens, whence the soul first came to birth, that the divine part attaches the head or root of us and keeps the whole body upright. Now if a man is engrossed in appetites and ambitions and spends all his pains upon these, all his thoughts must needs be mortal and, so far as it is possible, he cannot fall short of becoming mortal altogether, since he has nourished the growth of his mortality. But if his heart has been set on the love of learning and true wisdom and he has exercised that part of himself above all, he is surely bound to have thoughts immortal and divine, if he shall lay hold upon truth, nor can he fail to possess immortality in the fullest measure that human nature admits; and because he is always devoutly cherishing the divine part and maintaining the guardian genius that dwells with him in good estate, he must needs be happy above all. [Cornford 1937, 353–354]

At the end of this passage, Timaeus plainly states that happiness necessarily follows a life spent cherishing the divine part in us, that is, our rational soul, and maintaining it in good condition. In the Greek text, this concept is developed through a play on words. The term “happy” is «εὐδαίμων» in Greek, a compound of the adverb «εὖ» (well) and the term «δαίμων» so

that “being happy” is thus interpreted as “having a good δαίμων”. The term «δαίμων» is translated in the quoted text as “guardian genius” and, according to Timaeus, this guardian genius is to be identified with “the most sovereign form of soul in us”, that is, with our rational soul.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Timaeus interprets “being happy” as having the rational part of our soul in good condition, while advising the reading that this is achieved when we “always devoutly cherish it”, that is, as Timaeus explains, when we set our heart on the love of learning and true wisdom, lay hold upon truth, and exercise that rational part of us above all. By doing so, we attain happiness.

Yet there is more. Timaeus seems to suggest that individuals can identify themselves with that part of the soul [see n10] they care about the most. Therefore, those who are engrossed in appetites and ambitions and spend all their solicitude upon these, have mortal thoughts and are necessarily and fully mortal since they have “nourished the growth of [their] mortality”. In contrast, those who exercise above all the rational part of their soul in learning and true wisdom possess immortality “in the fullest measure that human nature admits”. Thus, those who cherish the divine part in them not only have their soul in good order and are therefore happy; they also identify themselves fully with the rational and immortal part of their souls and are subsequently godlike. The conclusion is that happiness goes hand in hand with a godlike existence that corresponds, according to Timaeus, to a life almost entirely devoted to intellectual activity.

Comparing this passage with *Tim.* 42a–b, we can appreciate the way in which Timaeus confirms that a happy life pertains to a divine existence.<sup>11</sup> However, we also notice that he introduces an element that refines his conception of

<sup>10</sup> Plato develops a tripartite structure of the soul in the fourth book of the *Republic*: two mortal parts fulfilling mortal needs and ends and one rational, immortal, and divine [see also *Tim.* 44d, 69d–70d, 73d, 87a, 89e, and 90a].

<sup>11</sup> Remarkably, *Theaet.* 176b, cited as a parallel to *Tim.* 42a–b [see p. 21 n9 above], relates liberation from the cycle of rebirths, which ensures happiness for the disembodied soul, to the soul’s “becoming godlike insofar as this is possible” (ὁμοίωσις θεῶν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν). The expression «ὁμοίωσις θεῶν κατὰ τὸ δυνατόν» is highly reminiscent of the idea of being godlike “to the fullest measure that human nature admits”, which we find in *Tim.* 42a–b. This confirms that, throughout the dialogue, Timaeus has the same idea of a happy life, namely, that happiness pertains to a divine existence. However, in *Tim.* 90a–c, we find a redefinition of divine existence and happiness explicitly connected to intellectual activity and knowledge and thus recast in terms of a state of the soul that can be attained while still embodied.

a happy life presented earlier in his speech. Though in 42a–b Timaeus maintains that a happy life is the result of a life well spent and is thus achieved only in disembodied existence when the soul escapes rebirth and returns to its star, in 90a–c a supremely happy life, as well as a godlike existence, is closely associated with intellectual activity and the knowledge deriving from it and is guaranteed to incarnated humans. Indeed, the expression “possessing immortality in the fullest measure that human nature admits” (καθ’ ὅσον δ’ αὐ̄ μετασχεῖν ἀνθρωπίνῃ φύσει ἀθανασίας ἐνδέχεται [90c2–3]) suggests that a godlike existence pertains to an incarnated individual and so happiness can be attained not merely once the soul is freed from the body, but also already in embodied life [Sedley 1999, 310; 2017, 325]. In this sense, happiness prominently follows the learning and true wisdom that characterizes a contemplative life, which is a life very close to divine nature.<sup>12</sup> In fact, as Sedley has highlighted, the exercise of reason

makes minimal use of what is distinctively human about us—our bodies, our appetites, our interdependence with fellow members of our society—and instead assigns maximum value to attributes associated with the divine, especially wisdom and self-sufficiency. [Sedley 2017, 336]

In sum, we may conclude that Timaeus makes a joyful existence the result of a divine existence. Divinity can be achieved once the soul has freed itself from the body, if the person has mastered control of his or her needs. Or we can become like god “in the fullest measure that human nature admits” already in this life by exercising our rational soul in intellectual activity aimed at knowledge of truth. In this way, our soul will be in good order and we will finally attain happiness.

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<sup>12</sup> Analogously, Aristotle writes:

The person who pursues intellectual activity, and who cultivates their intellect and keeps that in the best condition, is also the person nearest to the gods. For if, as is generally believed, the gods exercise some superintendance over human affairs, then it will be reasonable to suppose that they take pleasure in the part of the person which is best and most akin to themselves, namely the intellect, and that they recompense with their favours those people who esteem and honour this most, because these care for the things dear to themselves, and act rightly and nobly. Now it is clear that all these attributes belong most of all to the wise person. This person therefore is most beloved by the gods and, if so, is naturally most happy. [*Eth. Nic.* 1179a24–32; trans. Rackham 1927, 627 slightly modified]

On godlikeness in Aristotle and its Platonic dimension, see Sedley 1999, 314, 324–328 and 2017.

### 1.3 Timaeus' joyous world

Having introduced Timaeus' description of the world as a blessed god, among other things, and having set out which conception(s) of happiness Timaeus presents in his long speech, we are now in a position to return to our main focus and ask why Timaeus' universe is joyous. From what we have seen by analyzing the Platonic concept(s) of a joyful life, the answer to this question can only be composite. Let us therefore explore by degrees the reasons for which happiness is a significant characteristic in the construction of Platonic cosmology.

To begin, since happiness pertains to a godlike nature, the universe is happy primarily because it is a god. Indeed, it is the major god in Plato's structure of reality. Expanding on this conclusion, we saw above that the true content of a happy life, coinciding with a divine existence, is having the rational and immortal part of the soul well ordered. The world's soul is always in the best possible state, with its motions and revolutions being always constant and regular, as is shown by the heavenly motions. In 40a–b, the stars are said to “think always the same thoughts about the same things” and “abide forever revolving uniformly upon themselves”. Moreover, they always follow the same regular path. Thus, we can conclude that the cosmos' happiness results from its perfectly ordered soul.

Moreover, its constant and regular motions ensure that the world's soul can perpetually engage in true wisdom. Indeed, as mentioned in [§1.1, p. 18 above](#), the revolutions of the cosmic soul cannot ever be disordered and, for this reason, its judgements are always true. Additionally, Plato urges us to consider how the soul of the world is the source of the cosmos' excellence, and although it does not exist in isolation, but is deeply intertwined with the world's body, the latter does not create any needs for the universe (33a–d)—needs which may constitute, just like the needs created by our bodies in our earthly lives, troubles, obstacles, or limits to rational activity. For this reason, the everlasting order of the world's soul results in its cognitive and ratiocinative excellence, so that it has no other occupation than the exercise of reason. From this perspective, it may well be concluded that Timaeus' cosmos rejoices in its intellectual activity.

Since happiness resides in a well-ordered soul, while the order of the world's soul is shown by the constant and uniform motions of the stars, Timaeus envisages a way in which human beings can put their rational souls in order, acquire excellence in reason and wisdom and be finally happy: by observing the movements of the stars. In 90c–d, Timaeus affirms that as “for the divine

element in us [i.e., our rational soul] the motions which are akin to it are the thoughts and revolutions of the whole world” and so we should “correct those revolutions in our head that were deranged at birth, by learning to know the harmonies and revolutions of the world”. In this way we can make our rational soul “resemble the object of its thoughts, in accordance with its ancient nature” and thereby “win the fulfillment of the best life set by the gods before mankind both for this present life and for the time to come”. As we apprehend, the study of “the harmonies and revolutions of the world”, that is, astronomy, is valued here for its potential to redirect our thoughts toward heavenly, divine things and thus to correct the deviant motions of our rational soul by harmonizing them with celestial revolutions. In this way we can put our soul in good order, making it resemble its object of thought and thus attain our best life and happiness.

This means that the universe with its constant and regular motions is made a “perfect example of what it is to be a rational being whose behavior conforms to its thoughts” [Sedley 2017, 77] and is therefore the model for human behavior if they want to fulfill their life and be supremely happy.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the world offers the paradigm of an utterly joyous existence of which human happiness represents an approximation. Therefore, if we want to be happy, we should imitate the consistency of the universe in our thoughts and deeds. To this end, we must first observe the celestial revolutions, and then internalize them to the point we harmonize our soul’s movements with those of the heavens.<sup>14</sup> Thus, astronomy is presented as “a bridge-discipline that can make our own thoughts godlike” [Sedley 2017, 326]. Through its study, universal order and cosmic bliss not only become familiar to us to the point of triggering our actions in the phenomenal world, but can even change our being by bringing it to be “in good estate” and thus closer to its original, divine nature.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> On the issue of the Forms as models in Plato’s middle dialogues and the universe as a model in the *Timaeus*, see the discussion in Sedley 1999, esp. 315–324. See also Carone 2005, 73–74.

<sup>14</sup> Carone 2005, 74–75. See also Sedley 2017, 316: “The divine world-soul and our souls, akin in their very origins, are structured in such a way as to enable us, via the study of astronomy and mathematics, to share god’s own thoughts.”

<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that, in the *Philebus*, Plato was concerned with self-knowledge and proper understanding of the nature of things as the way to a happy life. Later in the *Laws*, astronomy is said to reveal to people the marvelous calculations in

In conclusion, Plato maintains that through the exercise of our reason and especially through the study of the mathematical order of the heavens, everyone can bring their rational soul in good estate and, in virtue of that, be finally happy. Indeed, the universe is made a common paradigm, whose order can be internalized by anyone. Thus, the macrocosm—the divine, intelligent world made by the Demiurge—in its constant regularity, provides us with the ideal model of perfect happiness and with the pattern we should follow to become godlike and happy. In the second half of this paper, I will argue that a similar idea had already been outlined by Empedocles a century earlier.

## 2. Empedocles' cosmos

### 2.1 Perfection, love, and happiness: the Sphairos

Having set out in what sense the cosmos of Timaeus excels in reason and rational activity and is, therefore, supremely happy, I will now move on to explore more closely the joyous cosmos proposed by Empedocles. As has already been mentioned, Empedocles postulated a universe that changes its shape according to a regularly recurring cosmic cycle, the presentation of which constitutes the greater and textually better established part of his philosophical poem *On Nature*, a part, however, that still occasions scholarly controversy.<sup>16</sup> In order not to go into the details of a discussion that would inevitably take us off topic, I will focus on what is generally agreed, namely, that the cosmic cycle consists of regular oscillations between the states of the hegemony of Love and Strife over the four elements. During the stage of Love's hegemony, all things are drawn together and the universe takes the shape of one thing alone, the Sphairos, called god (θεός) in *DK* 31B31. Indeed,<sup>17</sup> as will be shown, the Sphairos is presented as the major god of Empedocles' physical system. In due time, however, Strife regains power and destroys the Sphairos.<sup>18</sup> Worlds like the one that we inhabit occupy

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heaven, which are manifestations of intelligent design [966e–968a], to help them to become divine and attain a human's best state [818c].

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of debates on Empedocles' cycle and attempts at reconstruction, see [Ferella 2021](#).

<sup>17</sup> For this reason, I have chosen to refer to the Sphairos, as Empedocles does in the majority of his fragments, with masculine pronouns.

<sup>18</sup> See *DK* 31B30 for Strife regaining power over Love in due time. In B35 Empedocles points out that Love's expansion starts when she occupies the center of a whirl of elements, which was produced by Strife's separation of the Sphairos, while Strife



some intermediary stage between the disruption of the Sphairos and its new formation and are the result of the continuous but temporary mixing and separating of the four elements influenced by Love and Strife.

Concerning the shape of the Sphairos, DK 31B27 reads as follows:

ἐνθ' οὐτ' ἠελίοιο διείδεται ὠκέα γυῖα  
 ...<sup>19</sup>  
 οὕτως Ἄρμονίης πυκινῶι κρύφωι ἐστήρικται  
 Σφαῖρος κυκλοτερῆς μονίη περιγηθεί<sup>20</sup> γαίωv.

There neither the swift limbs of the Sun can be distinguished

...

So much remains riveted in the dense hiding place of Harmony  
 round Sphairos, exulting in his joyous solitude.

The close of the fragment emphasizes the Sphairos' joyful nature through the juxtaposition of the adjective «περιγηθής» (very joyful) and the present participle «γαίωv» from «γαίω» (exult, rejoice). Line 1 invites a reading that this joyful nature refers to the physical make-up of the Sphairos, whose characteristics, as we shall see, represent him as ideally perfect.

To begin, Empedocles' lines highlight the Sphairos' overall balance and symmetry. In this respect, at B27.1, by indicating that “neither the swift limbs of the Sun can be distinguished”, Empedocles seems to point out that, when mixed to be one thing, the four elements can no longer be seen as four distinct entities. Understanding the “limbs of the Sun” as a representation

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has reached its lowest depth (ἐπεὶ Νεῖκος μὲν ἐνέρτατα βένθε' ἔκηται/δίνης, ἐν δὲ μέσηι Φιλότης στροφάλγγι γένηται) [B35.3–4]. Additionally, her uniting movement gradually increases over the course of time, but in the first moments of Love's expansion, the elements are still unmixed under the influence of Strife [see B35.5–9]. The inference is that when the elements are completely unmixed, they move, shaping a whirl. On this topic, see O'Brien 1969, 146–155.

<sup>19</sup> Diels and Kranz reconstruct line 2 as follows: «οὐδὲ μὲν οὐδ' αἴης λάσιον μένος οὐδὲ θάλασσα». In the text quoted by Simplicius [Diels 1882–1895, 1183.28], our source for the verses quoted above, this line is missing. Diels inserted it here based on a quotation by Plutarch, *De fac.* 926D, which he believed to coincide with Simplicius' quotation. However, as Bignone [1916] has demonstrated, although B27.1 is identical to the first line of the verses quoted by Plutarch, Plutarch's comment shows that his Empedoclean quotation comes from a context that does not deal with the Sphairos.

<sup>20</sup> Diels and Kranz print «περιγηί» (encircling), which is attested by Achilles Tattius and Proclus. The form «περιγηθεί» is transmitted by Simplicius [see Palmer 2009, 260–317].

of the element of fire [cf. B21.3] and assuming that what holds for fire also holds for the other elements, it follows that, when merged into a single entity, neither fire, air, water nor earth can be identified as single elements. This claim may even entail that, as John Palmer has argued, the elements, when blended with one another, lose their distinctive qualities to become, under the influence of Love, a completely new being with new properties and qualities of its own [see Palmer 2009, 260–317]. Thus, the impossibility of distinguishing between its ingredients may well point to a representation of the Sphairos as a thorough blend.

This conclusion accords with

ἀλλ' ὅ γε παντοθεν ἴσος <ἐοῖ> καὶ πάμπαν ἀπεύρων  
Σφαῖρος κυκλοτερῆς μονίῃ περιγηθέ<sup>21</sup> γαίωv. [DK 31B28]

But he is everywhere equal <to himself> and completely boundless  
round Sphairos, rejoicing in his joyous solitude.

As in B27 quoted above, Empedocles here again focuses on the joyful nature of the Sphairos as a consequence of his physical form and its overall balance, which is emphasized by the characteristic of being everywhere equal to himself. This relates well to the representation in B27 of the Sphairos as a blend that does not reveal its ingredients. Additionally, the specification that he is everywhere always identical to himself indicates that the thorough blend of B27 corresponds to a perfectly balanced shape.

This conclusion accords with the indication that the Sphairos is spherical, as is made explicit through both the adjective «κυκλοτερῆς» [B27.3, B28.2] and by the name «Σφαῖρος» itself, the masculine form being derived from the Greek «σφαῖρα» (sphere). His spherical shape is reminiscent of Parmenides' claim that Being is like the bulk of a well-rounded sphere,<sup>22</sup> while the later philosophical tradition will concur that roundness is a perfect shape.<sup>23</sup> In

<sup>21</sup> Diels and Kranz [1951], 31B28 print «περιγηέι» (encircling), which according to them also appears in the comparable line of B27 (but see n20 above). The manuscripts of Stobaeus [*Eclog.* 1.15.2ab; Wachsmuth and Hense 1884–1923, 1.144.20], our sources for these lines, have «περιτεθῆ» or «περιτεῖθη», which can be taken as corrupted forms for «περιγηθέι».

<sup>22</sup> DK 28B8.42–49. See Palmer 2009, 314 for further Parmenidean reminiscences in Empedocles' depiction of the Sphairos.

<sup>23</sup> In this respect, the depiction of the spherical form of the world in Plato, *Tim.* 33b is noteworthy:

And for the shape he [i.e., the Demiurge] gave it [i.e., the world] that which is fitting and akin to its nature. For the living creature that was to embrace all

fact, any point on the surface of a sphere is equidistant from its center, and this is considered a sign of ideal symmetry. Thus, the Sphairos' roundness serves to construct the ideal of the balance of the "most beautiful form" of the universe, which is ultimately functional to Empedocles' ideal of perfection. The Sphairos's multidimensional symmetry and, therefore, its being everywhere equal to himself, is repeated almost verbatim in another fragment. Yet, that fact that the Sphairos has identical parts is presented here as the result of his being a non-anthropomorphic god:

οὐ γὰρ ἀπὸ νότοιου δύο κλάδοι αἰσσοῦνται,  
οὐ πόδες, οὐ θοὰ γούνα(α), οὐ μήδεα γεννήεντα,  
ἀλλὰ Σφαῖρος ἔην καὶ <πάντοθεν> ἴσος ἑαυτῶι. [DK 31B29]

For from his back two branches do not shoot forth,  
no feet, no swift knees, no generative organs,  
but he was Sphairos, and <everywhere> equal to himself.

The Sphairos does not have human limbs: he has neither arms nor feet, nor knees, nor genital organs. In the light of this description, scholars generally agree that lines 1 and 2 are Empedocles' reaction to the traditional, anthropomorphic representations of the divine.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the Sphairos' lack of genitals contrasts the specific paradigm of epic theogony with personified gods that reproduce themselves sexually, pointing out instead that the Sphairos has no need of reproduction or procreation. Thus, instead of an anthropomorphic shape, what Empedocles proposes is a spherical, balanced, and symmetrical entity.

The non-anthropomorphic shape of the Sphairos relates him to another entity in Empedocles' system: the Holy Mind (φρὴν ἱερή). This comparison is worth investigating, since it provides us with a further quality of the Sphairos—perfect knowledge—which amounts to depicting him as an ideal of perfection and, as will be argued, is also related to the notion of his joyful nature. The Holy Mind is presented as follows:

οὐδὲ γὰρ ἀνδρομέμη κεφαλῆι κατὰ γυῖα κέκασται,

living creatures within itself, the fitting shape would be the figure that comprehends in itself all the figures there are; accordingly he turned its shape rounded and spherical, equidistant every way from centre to extremity—a figure the most perfect and uniform of all; for he judged uniformity to be immeasurably better than the opposite. [Cornford 1937, 54]

<sup>24</sup> This reaction can be traced back to Xenophanes. In pointing out the subjective character of such anthropomorphic accounts, Xenophanes emphasized that different societies represent their deities with physical characteristics that are typical of those societies. For instance, in DK 21B16, the Ethiopians represent their gods as snub nosed and dark skinned; whereas Thracian gods have blue eyes and blond hair. Moreover, in 21B15, Xenophanes added that if horses and oxen had the ability to represent their deities, they would make them horselike and oxlike.

οὐ μὲν ἀπαὶ νότιοι δύο κλάδοι αἴσσονται,  
 οὐ πόδες, οὐ θοὰ γούνα(α), οὐ μήδεα λαχνήεντα,  
 ἀλλὰ φρήν ἱερὴ καὶ ἀθέσφατος ἔπλετο μῦνον,  
 φροντίσι κόσμον ἅπαντα καταΐσσουσα θοήσιν. [DK 31B134]

For his limbs are not furnished with the head of a man,  
 from his back two branches do not shoot forth,  
 no feet, no swift knees, no shaggy organs,  
 but he was nothing but mind, holy and vast,<sup>25</sup>  
 darting forth across the whole cosmos by swift thoughts.

Lines 2 and 3 are almost identical to B29.1–2 quoted above, and also aim to represent a non-anthropomorphic entity. However, B134.4–5 do not talk directly about the Sphairos but depict a holy and vast mind whose swift thoughts move across the whole κόσμος as fast as hurling arrows.

Given the analogies between the two fragments, may we conclude that the Holy Mind and the Sphairos are the same entity and, as such, the same form of the universe in Empedocles' system? Scholars are divided on this issue. For instance, W. K. Guthrie has argued that the Holy Mind's darting its thoughts across the cosmos constitutes an objection to this identification since "the Sphairos exists only at a certain stage of the cycle" and "during its perfection there is no cosmos in the ordinary sense" [Guthrie 1965, 258–259]. Guthrie clearly uses the word «κόσμον» in B134.5 to refer to our world, which in Empedocles' cycle is opposed to the Sphairos since it includes a multitude of things in contrast to the Sphairos' unitary nature.<sup>26</sup> However, his interpretation encounters some obstacles when compared to other occurrences of the term «κόσμος» in the Empedoclean fragments. These indicate that «κόσμος» may well refer to any well-integrated, harmonious form that is one and united with respect to its parts [see, e.g., B26.5], while

<sup>25</sup> This translation of «ἀθέσφατος» is according to Picot 2012, 21–23.

<sup>26</sup> In B17, Empedocles presents the essential tenet of his cosmic cycle as an opposition between One and Many, with the elements growing at one time to be only one form and at another time becoming many things again:

δίπλ' ἐρέω· τοτὲ μὲν γὰρ ἓν ηὐξήθη μόνον εἶναι  
 ἐκ πλεόνων, τοτὲ δ' αὖ διέφθ' πλέον' ἐξ ἑνὸς εἶναι [DK 31B17.1–2]

Twofold is what I shall say: for at one time they grow to be only one out of many, at another time again they grow apart to be many out of one.

in PStrasb. a(i)6 [Laks and Most 2016, D73.267] «κόσμος» seems to denote the Sphairos.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, other scholars have noted that the thinking activity of the Holy Mind, described by Empedocles as thoughts swiftly moving across the cosmos, contrasts with the fact that the Sphairos is at rest, as we will see below. However, the argued verb «καταίσσοῦσα» may here be in use figuratively to conceptualize the quick and pervasive production of thoughts by the Holy Mind. This could be an indication that the verb does not denote a real motion, least of all the spatial movement that Empedocles denies the Sphairos. Rather, one might argue that Empedocles, as elsewhere, used vivid and concrete images to illustrate an abstract and more elusive mental faculty. In this sense, “darting through the entire cosmos (or cosmic order) with swift thoughts” could express the concept of a deity whose thoughts concern extremely rapidly every aspect of what exists and, in this sense, “dart and reach” every part of the cosmos. Moreover, by assuming that the Holy Mind coincides with the Sphairos and, therefore, with the whole universe, thoughts reaching what exists in all its parts could denote an entity that is entirely and ubiquitously perceptive and knowing, like the “one god” of Xenophanes which “sees as a whole, thinks as a whole, and hears as a whole” [DK 21B24] Furthermore, Empedocles’ theories of thought and knowledge acquisition provide an additional element that supports identification between the Holy Mind and the Sphairos. According to Empedocles, the mind in human beings is identified with blood around the heart, which is able to produce thoughts and gain knowledge because of its highly symmetrical mixture (κρῆσις) of elements [see DK 31B98, B105]. Indeed, the mixture of the four elements in blood is in the ratio 1:1:1:1 and this makes it able to think and know best, as Theophrastus tells us [*De sens.* 10]. As we can see, the blood’s elemental ratio reproduces, on a microcosmic level, the elemental ratio of the Sphairos, made out of the four elements in the same proportions.<sup>28</sup> By this standard, it is possible to think that, by virtue of his elemental ratio, the

<sup>27</sup> Rangos [2012, 323] interprets the activity of the Holy Mind “as an extroverted and emotional care... which implies the existence of an entire ordered structure (κόσμος ἅπας) as something *distinct* from the holy mind itself” (author’s emphasis). On the term «κόσμος» in B134 indicating the Sphairos, see Hladký 2017, 18.

<sup>28</sup> According to B17.27, the four elements are all equal and identical in birth, thereby suggesting they are all equally fundamental. In fact, none is greater in size or temporally and ontologically prior to the others.

Sphairos is a cosmic mind and can produce cosmic thoughts—like blood does on a minor scale.

The notion of a cosmic mind invites the reading that the Sphairos has, just like the Holy Mind, superlative thinking and knowing power. However, an ancient reader of Empedocles, such as Aristotle, would have disagreed with this conclusion, believing rather that the Sphairos is a god who cannot genuinely know because of the lack of Strife in his elemental composition. Aristotle attributes to Empedocles the view that knowing occurs by like [*Meta.* 1000b5 ἢ δὲ γνώσις τοῦ ὁμοίου τῷ ὁμοίῳ] and supports his claim by quoting a fragment in which Empedocles states that each element knows its homologue:

γαίη μὲν γὰρ γαίαν ὁπώπαμεν, ὕδατι δ' ὕδωρ  
αἰθέρι δ' αἰθέρα δῖον, ἀτὰρ πυρὶ πῦρ ἀίδηλον,  
στοργὴν δὲ στοργῆι, νεῖκος δέ τε νεϊκέϊ λυγρῶι. [DK 31B109]

By earth we see earth, by water water,  
by aether shining aether, by fire destructive fire  
Love by Love and Strife by dread Strife.

In his *De anima*, moreover, Aristotle reiterates his criticism of Empedocles' theory of knowledge and, again citing B109, deduces that the Sphairos must be the least intelligent of all beings.<sup>29</sup> In fact, by assuming that knowledge occurs through elements in the body that know their homologous elements in the things around it and focusing on Strife as a principle through which we know the world, just like one of the four elements, Aristotle concludes that the absence of Strife from the Sphairos' mixture makes him incapable of achieving perfect knowledge, since he cannot know Strife.

However, one of our most important sources for Empedocles' theories of perceiving, thinking, and knowing, Theophrastus, makes it clear that the acquisition of knowledge according to Empedocles does not rest upon each single principle in the knowing subject that knows its homologous principle in the object of knowledge, so much as upon the fact that perception and understanding rest upon the κρᾶσις of elements in the organs of perception and knowledge being symmetrical to, and consequently grasping,

<sup>29</sup> See Aristotle, *De an.* 410b5–8:

On Empedocles' view at least it follows that God must be most unintelligent; for he alone will be ignorant of one of this elements, namely Strife, whereas mortal creatures will know them all; for each individual is composed of them all. [Hett 1975, 59]

epistemic inputs from the outside (from the objects of knowledge).<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the more harmonious the elemental mixtures in body organs are, the more symmetrical they are with respect to external effluvia emanated by things in the world, the more the external epistemic inputs adapt to our organ of knowledge, giving us the possibility of knowing more and better. This is why, as we have seen, the knowing organ in humans is blood around the heart. Its harmonious blend makes pericardial blood apt to produce thoughts and gain knowledge to the highest degree.

Since the characteristics of harmony and symmetry are associated with Love and it is Love that forms harmonious and symmetrical mixtures, it follows that the ability to perceive, think, and know, related as it is to principles of symmetry between the agent and object of knowledge, is always connected to Love's power. This invites the reading that Strife is an impediment to, rather than a principle for, knowing. Indeed, since Strife always works to hinder the integral and well-ordered compounds of Love, an elemental mixture affected by Strife would lack the balance that ensures adaptation between effluvia and organs of thought, thus preventing rational thought and knowledge. Consequently, the Sphairos—whose composition lacks Strife and is for this specific reason utterly symmetrical (and accordingly harmonious to the highest degree)—must also be, by virtue of this, the most rational and wisest of all beings.

In this respect, we will now see additional qualities ascribed to the Sphairos that indicate he is the result of Love. First, the universe's most beautiful form is said to "stand still" (ἑστῆρικται [B 27.2]). As movement is conceptually related to the idea of a process that is not yet completed, perfection requires in contrast completion of motion and, therefore, rest. We already find this idea in Parmenides [DK 28B8.31–8], who connects Being's lack of motion to the fact that it is not allowed to be incomplete (οὐκ ἀτελεύτητον τὸ ἐὸν θέμις εἶναι). Thus, any entity is perfect if and only if it is complete, and it is complete if and only if it does not move. The quality of rest, in conclusion, is yet another hallmark of the ideal of perfection that the Sphairos represents.

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<sup>30</sup> Theophrastus talks about Empedocles' theories on perception and knowledge acquisition in *De sens.* 7–24. In ch. 15, moreover, Theophrastus admits that in his theories on sensation, thinking, and knowing Empedocles is silent about the compositional likeness between the object and organ of perception/knowledge. Further, although Theophrastus introduces Empedocles as a likeness theorist, he recounts his views solely in terms of effluences being symmetrical and thus fitting into the elemental κρῶσις of our organs. See also Sedley 1992, 27–31; Kamtekar 2009, 217.

Moreover, the Sphairos' state of rest is a consequence of Love's dominion over Strife. In fact, whereas Empedocles makes it clear that Strife is the principle of struggle and movement—Νεῖκος starts motion by separating the Sphairos—Love results in peace and rest. Indeed, although Love can also initiate and influence movement (e.g., of heterogenous things that come together in mixture), O'Brien has cogently demonstrated that "the movement which Love initiates is movement towards rest, and when Love is successful there is no longer any movement" [O'Brien 1969, 103].

Second, in B27.3 and 28.2 the word «μονήνι» suggests that the Sphairos is unique, another hallmark of perfection connected to Love. The quality of uniqueness emphasizes the notion of oneness, which in the case of the Sphairos results, as we have seen, from a thorough mixture of the elements.<sup>31</sup> Both mixture and oneness are Love's result, in contrast to multiplicity, associated with Strife and separation. However, the meaning of «μονήνι» is debated.<sup>32</sup> The word may derive from «μένειν», indicating that the Sphairos is at rest, or it may stem from «μόνος», thus defining the Sphairos as a solitary, single entity.<sup>33</sup> R. M. Wright [1981] is surely correct in emphasizing that "the unusual word was probably deliberately chosen for its ambiguity," which nonetheless displays that Love is in charge, as the concepts of both single-ness and rest can be associated with her [Wright 1981, 188]. However, since the absence of movement in the Sphairos is pointed out, as we have already seen, through the verb «ἐστήρικται» at B27.2, the option for «μονήνι» stemming from «μόνος» seems to be preferable: alongside the notion of rest, Empedocles may have wanted to stress the fact that Love has now brought multiple entities into one single thing.

In sum, the fragments on the Sphairos analyzed above emphasize the Empedoclean ideal of perfection and strongly suggest that the Sphairos, just like Timaeus' cosmos, is the main god of Empedocles' physical system. As we have seen, the Sphairos' perfection is more specifically characterized as

<sup>31</sup> Whereas this is generally taken as meaning that the Sphairos is an amorphous blend of the four elements, Sedley 2016 and Hladký 2017 argue in contrast that the Sphairos is not just a monolithic lump, but an organism (a "superorganism" according to Sedley) composed of functioning parts.

<sup>32</sup> See Guthrie 1965, 2.169.3; Bollack 1969, 3.137; O'Brien 1969, 22–24; Wright 1981, 188; and Ferella 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Moreover, «μονήνι» stemming from «μόνος» could also be described as Empedocles' hint at the Orphic Zeus-μῦθος and Parmenides' *what is*-μῦθονγενές; see Ferella 2019.



supreme beauty resulting from utter symmetry and harmony, and, therefore, as a quintessential balance, physically represented by the spherical form. Moreover, the Sphairos' perfection also consists in rest and oneness as well as, very similarly to Timaeus' world, in outstanding intelligence and wisdom. Each one of these qualities is connected to the principle of Love, and in B27.2 Empedocles makes it clear that the Sphairos is riveted "in the dense hiding place of Harmony".<sup>34</sup> By showing that Love's triumph over her rival Strife coincides with the formation of the Sphairos, this line also reveals that Love is the source of the very ideal of perfection.

Why, we may now ask, does Empedocles argue that the Sphairos must be not only perfect but also extremely happy (the happiest of all beings, as Aristotle reminds us)? In the following, I will set out the ways in which Empedocles makes happiness a fundamental element in the construction of his ideal of perfection. In particular, I will show that the source of the Sphairos' perfection is also the very source of happiness, so that a perfect entity is necessarily a joyful being.

## 2.2 An Empedoclean idea of happiness

Having shown that Empedocles ascribes to the Sphairos a perfect nature, making him not only "the most beautiful form", as Hippolytus tells us, but also, *pace* Aristotle, the most intelligent and wisest of all beings, I shall now explore the reasons why he is also depicted as a happy god. To this end, I will now explore what it means to be happy in Empedocles' philosophical system by examining those passages in which aspects belonging to the conceptual and emotional domain of happiness, or its opposite, are thematized.

First, Empedocles suggests that happiness relates to divine nature as much as misery and suffering are connected to mortality. On the one hand, a miserable existence seems to be the specific hallmark of humankind. In DK 31B124, human beings are said to be "wretched and very unhappy", as they are born "from strifes and groanings" (ἐκ τ' ἐρίδων ἐκ τε στοναγῶν). Analogously, men and women are depicted as "much-lamented" (πολυκλαύτων<sup>35</sup> at B62.1) and as having narrow cognitive devices, living a small portion of life and being influenced by "many miserable things [that] strike in and dull their meditations" (πολλὰ δὲ δεῖλ' ἔμπαια, τὰ τ' ἀμβλύνουσι μέριμνας at B2.2).

<sup>34</sup> Harmonia, like Aphrodite and Cypris, is equated with Φιλότης.

<sup>35</sup> Literally speaking it appears to be just women described as *πολυκλαύτων*, but as Bignone [1916, 450] has observed (following Diels) the adjective probably refers ἀπὸ κοινοῦ to both men and women.

All this prevents people from gaining genuine knowledge of the whole (πάντοσ' ἐλαυνόμενοι· τὸ δ' ὅλον <τίς ἄρ'> εὐχεται εὐρεῖν at B2.6 [cf. Mansfeld and Primavesi 2021, 440]).<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, they are analogously said to be “foolish” and unable to understand the truth.<sup>37</sup>

Next, happiness seems to be associated with the divine reward people may obtain at the end of the cycle of rebirths. Empedocles professes a doctrine according to which human beings are compelled to be reborn as all kinds of living beings until, after a due process of purification, they are able to escape rebirth and achieve divine reward. The traditional referent fragment for Empedocles' concept of rebirth is B115, which describes rebirth as the punishment of gods who, because of certain faults,<sup>38</sup> are compelled to leave their divine abode and stay in our world for a very long time. We are told that guilty gods are condemned to a life that, in accord with the pejorative depiction of the human condition they are compelled to embrace, is made of “painful paths” (ἀργαλέας βιότοιο...κελεύθους at B115.8).

Moreover, B115 is the fragment that presents Empedocles as one of those guilty gods, exiled from the divine community and a wanderer because of his trust in Strife [B115.13–4]. Related to this, two fragments, B118 and B119, which presumably belong to a depiction of the very first location visited after Empedocles' banishment from the gods, present us with Empedocles' despair [B118]: “I wept and wailed when I saw the unwonted place” (κλαυῦσά τε καὶ κόκυσα ἰδὼν ἄσυνήθεα χῶρον) are the words he uttered immediately after losing his divine existence and taking on a mortal life.<sup>39</sup> Empedocles' desperation offers the measure of the emotional distance that separates his present, mortal condition from the state he enjoyed before his guilt. The contrast between the two conditions and the emotional turn of Empedocles'

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sextus Empiricus' remark in *Adv. math.* 7.122–124.

<sup>37</sup> B11 and B137.2. It has been noted that all this clearly hints at Strife's work in generation. On men and women as typical examples of Strife's wretched generations, see Trépanier 2003, 19–22.

<sup>38</sup> The usual interpretation points to slaughter and perjury as faults deserving punishment. However, B115.3–4 present textual problems, on which see Ferella 2013, 25–27.

<sup>39</sup> Note that Empedocles' despair links B118 with *PStrasb.* d-f.3–10, where Empedocles analogously relates his suffering to his crime and actual condition as a mortal being.

existence is strengthened by B119, which illustrates the divine state before exile as “a height of happiness”.<sup>40</sup>

However, Empedocles assumes that his exile on earth and reincarnations in different living beings are only a temporary punishment and that he will eventually regain his lost home and B state. Indeed, he professes a doctrine according to which, through a process of purification, people can be reborn as prophets, poets, political leaders, and doctors and finally become “gods highest in honor” [B146.3]. As B147 clearly states, those who obtain divine rewards “share hearth and table with other immortals, not partaking in human suffering”. Thus, while suffering pertains to humans, the divine reward awaiting those who escape rebirths specifically consists in “a height of happiness”, characterized as an eternally joyful and feasting life.<sup>41</sup>

It is also worth noting that Empedocles designed a series of purificatory rules, including abstinence from certain foods (most notably, but not exclusively, meat) and from sexual intercourse, in order for people to climb from reincarnation to reincarnation and escape rebirth and mortal nature. In B141, we read that a miserable life awaits those who eat beans, a food that, at least since Pythagoras, is deemed unfit for consumption: “wretches, utter wretches, keep your hands off beans” (δειλοί, πάνδειλοι, κυάμων ἄπο χειρας ἔχεσθαι). The adjective «δειλός» (miserable, wretched), which usually has a compassionate sense, is employed to highlight “the misery of those who violate the precepts of purifications” [Kahn 1960, 8 n12]. It follows that those who lead ascetic lives can avoid a miserable existence and expect to be consequently happy. As this idea is clearly related to the concept of a happy life attained after release from rebirth, we can conclude that Empedocles considers happiness to be closely associated with the transcendence of mortality and the achievement of a divine nature.

Connected to this, in B132 Empedocles claims that a joyful existence relates to divine knowledge:

ὄλβιος, ὃς θείων πραπίδων ἐκτήσατο πλοῦτον,

<sup>40</sup> B119 has «ἐξ οἷς τιμῆς τε καὶ ὄσσου μήκεος ὄλβου...». Our source for this line, Plutarch, *De exil.* 607E, cites these few words closely after B115 and refers them to the depiction of the perfect happiness that the gods enjoy before their guilt. See also Clement, *Strom.* 4.12., another source of this line, which presents the words as spoken by Empedocles himself when he was banished “from Zeus’ kingdom”.

<sup>41</sup> For similar beliefs, see Pindar *Ol.* 2.56–78, fr. 143 [Maehler 1989]. Exceptional honors following liberation from rebirths are also promised to the initiates of mystery circles, as attested in the golden tablets, for which see Graf and Johnston 2007.

δειλὸς δ', ὅτι σκοτόεσσα θεῶν πέρι δόξα μέμηλεν.

Happy is the person who has gained the wealth of a divine mind,  
wretched the individual who cherishes an obfuscated opinion about the gods.

The meaning of the fragment is ambiguous. Its gnomic tone in line 1 straightforwardly coupled a happy condition (ὄλβιος) with the acquisition of a divine mind and makes us assume (and expect) that misery is in parallel associated with a mortal mind. However, line 2 quite unexpectedly associates misery with an obfuscated opinion about the gods. In other words, unlike the previous line, happiness/unhappiness is connected not with the instrument of knowledge (mind) but rather with the content of knowledge (or the object to be known, such as the gods). The unexpected turn of the second line causes us to question the meaning of the first: to have the wealth of a divine mind may therefore mean both to possess a divine understanding of things—the most natural interpretation if we did not have the second line—or to have a clear understanding about the gods.

However, I would argue that both interpretative directions lead to the association of happiness with divine epistemic power. Indeed, if we adopt the first interpretation, happiness is directly associated with divine cognitive ability and knowledge. But even following the second interpretation, happiness is still connected to the clear understanding of a subject—the nature of the gods—traditionally considered elusive to common human knowledge. In both cases, in other words, happiness is associated with a degree of understanding that goes beyond ordinary human ken, approaching the knowledge of a god.

Having seen that, in a manner comparable to Plato, Empedocles relates joyful existence to divine nature and wisdom, it is worth noting that he also conceptualizes divinity as closely associated with Love. First, we have already seen that genuine, divine knowledge is as related to Love as ignorance is to Strife. Second, B115.14 makes it clear that guilt and subsequent rebirths are the result of trusting in Strife; therefore, it can be inferred that liberation from rebirth and the attainment of divine reward are instead associated with Love. More generally, it can be concluded that divinity is associated with Love as much as mortal nature is associated with Strife.

Expanding on this conclusion, Empedocles' fragments make us appreciate the ways in which the emotional outcome of suffering/happiness, connected to the dichotomy of mortal/divine nature, closely relates to the opposition between of the forces of Love and Strife in his philosophical system. Specifically, Empedocles construes this dichotomy by representing Love as the

positive principle and cause of good in contrast to Strife, the negative principle and cause of evil. This is made clear by Aristotle: “if you follow what Empedocles really means...you will find that Love is the cause of good things and Strife of evil things” [*Meta.* 985a 4–7].

Aristotle’s claim finds support in Empedocles’ fragments, where Love and Strife are usually associated with positive and negative qualities respectively. For instance, in B17.22–23 Empedocles makes Love responsible for people’s friendly thoughts, pleasure, sexual impulses, and deeds of concordance. Analogously, in B35 Love’s renewed unfolding among the elements is a “gentle-thinking immortal drive of blameless Love”<sup>42</sup> that produces an increase in voluntary unions of the elements.<sup>43</sup> In B21.7–8 it is said that under Love things desire each other, whereas under Strife, “all things are divided in form and are separated”.<sup>44</sup> In B21.7, moreover, Strife is called Κότος (Rancour, Resentment, Ill-will, and consequently Vengeance). Further, B22 states that under Love things are “receptive of mixture” and “love each other”, while under Strife they are “enemies most different in birth and mixture and molded forms, in every way stranger to unification and terribly sad because they were born from Strife”.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, Strife is characterized through pejorative attributes such as κακήσι...Ἐρίδεςσι (evil Quarrels) [B20.4] and νεϊκέϊ μαινομένωι (mad Strife) [B115.13]. Finally, and most notably, in B17, Strife is said to be “accursed” or “wretched” (οὐλόμενον), whereas Love is the principle whereby people think friendly thoughts and accomplish deeds of concordance. Therefore, she is also called Harmony, Aphrodite, and, above all, Joy.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> B35.13 ἠπιόφρων Φιλότητος ἀμεμφέος ἄμβροτος ὀρμή.

<sup>43</sup> ἐν τῇ δὴ τάδε πάντα συνέρχεται ἐν μόνον εἶναι, οὐκ ἄφαρ, ἀλλὰ θελημα συνιστάμεν’ ἄλλοθεν ἄλλα. [DK 31B35.5–6]

<sup>44</sup> ἐν δὲ Κότῳ διάμορφα καὶ ἄνδιχα πάντα πέλονται, σὺν δ’ ἔβη ἐν Φιλότητι καὶ ἀλλήλοισι ποθεῖται. [DK 31B21.7–8]

<sup>45</sup> ὡς δ’ αὐτως ὅσα κρήσιν ἐπαρκέα μᾶλλον ἔασιν, ἀλλήλοισι ἔστερκεται ὁμοιωθέντ’ Ἀφροδίτη. ἐχθρὰ <δ’ ἄ> πλεῖστον ἀπ’ ἀλλήλων διέχουσι μάλιστα γέννη τε κρήσει τε καὶ εἴδεσιν ἐκμάκτοισι, πάντη συγγίνεσθαι ἀήθεα καὶ μάλα λυγρὰ Νεικεογεννήτοισιν, ὅτι σφίσι ἴγένναν ὀργάτ’. [DK 31B22.4–9]

<sup>46</sup> Νεϊκός τ’ οὐλόμενον δίχα τῶν, ἀτάλαντον ἀπάντη, καὶ Φιλότης ἐν τοῖσιν, ἴση μῆκός τε πλάτος τε

Thus, not only do Love and Strife make things aggregate or separate, they also influence people's contrasting emotions. As we can see from the examples above, specific emotions, such as resentment, rancor, and sadness, are associated with Νεῖκος, whereas joy, pleasure, (sexual) desire, and love are tightly connected to Φιλότης. It is worth noting that not only humans, but also the elements (and virtually every existing thing) when being affected by Love and Strife have a share in those human emotions that the two forces are able to trigger. Thus, the elements under the influence of Love desire and love one another and, because of this, engage in unions.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, Strife spreads hate and discord and causes the elements to be enemies of each other and consequently to avoid any bond.

Most notably for the present study, finally, B17 explicitly states that one of Love's many names is «Γηθοσύνη» (Joy). The word is related to the verb «γηθέω» (rejoice), a cognate term of «περιγηθής» which in B27 and B28 is used to depict the Sphairos as very joyful. As the personification of Joy, in conclusion, the principle of Φιλότης is not only the cause of divine nature but also the source of happiness in all its forms.

### 2.3 A joyful Sphairos

Having seen that happiness is tightly associated with divine nature and with Love, the very source of divinity and joy, we are now in a position to address the question of the meaning of Empedocles' joyful cosmos. Indeed, an intuitive but appropriate answer is that the Sphairos is utterly happy, because he embodies the form of the universe when Love has complete dominion over the elements to the total detriment of Strife. As the positive principle in Empedocles' physical system, Love, in her conflict against Strife,<sup>48</sup> strives to build a "kingdom" that represents absolute goodness. This is finally achieved with and in the Sphairos, whose goodness consists in being Empedocles' ideal of perfection, with the most beautiful shape, supreme knowledge and happiness. With respect to his happiness, however, it should be pointed out

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...τῆι τε φίλα φρονέουσι καὶ ἄρθμα ἔργα τελοῦσι,  
Γηθοσύνην καλέοντες ἐπάνυμον ἢ δ' Ἀφροδίτην. [DK 31B17.19–24]

<sup>47</sup> It is worth noting that already in Hesiod, *Theog.* 120–122, Eros is one of the first divine beings with his function to bring diverse gods and divinities together.

<sup>48</sup> On the metaphor of conflict to depict the working of Love and Strife in Empedocles' cosmic system, see [Ferella 2020](#).

that, unlike Plato's cosmos, the Sphairos does not rejoice in his perfect reasoning and intellectual activity, but he is joyful because he originates from the very source of joy.

That being said, is it possible to assume a cosmological function for a universe conceived as the happiest of all beings? I would argue that, in a way that resonates with Plato's depiction of the blissful cosmos in the *Timaeus*, Empedocles' Sphairos represents the ideal model of divinity and happy life to which human beings should draw inspiration for their actions and thoughts in their lives. This means that while the Sphairos is in the hands of Love and, by virtue of that, is whole and harmonious, wise and blissful, so too should we try to renounce Strife as much as possible and associate with Love. In this way, we will approach the divine nature of the Sphairos, having an immortal life in contrast to a life of fragmentation and rebirths, possessing harmony<sup>49</sup> in contrast to unbalance, and perfect knowledge in contrast to the ignorance of ordinary mortals who have a short lifespan and know just what they happen to experience [see B2]. Most importantly, we will attain the quintessence of happiness that characterizes divine existence and approximates the supremely joyful nature of the Sphairos.

### 3. Conclusion

Plato and Empedocles describe a universe that manifests beauty, goodness, reason, and blissfulness. In this article, I have endeavored to show that the reasons why both philosophers deem it important to depict a cosmos that is joyful arise from considerations that are idiosyncratic to their own philosophical systems. Thus, whereas Plato's cosmos rejoices in its intellectual activity, Empedocles' Sphairos, though possessing outstanding knowing power, is happy because he arose from the very source of joy. However, as with other features of *Timaeus'* cosmos that are highly reminiscent of Empedocles' Sphairos, the emotional quality of the universe as a supremely happy god also presents points of convergence between the two cosmological representations.

Both Plato and Empedocles conceive of a happy life as closely related to a godlike nature. In Plato's *Timaeus*, this idea is developed, as we have seen, in two slightly different ways. On the one hand, a happy life can only be fully enjoyed in a disembodied existence when the soul, freed from the body on its consort star, can spend a blissful existence according to its true, divine

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<sup>49</sup> In B110, Empedocles suggests that purifications are able to change one's own being to the point that it can be assimilated to what is divine.

nature. On the other hand, in a more original version, a godlike and happy existence is accorded to those who live their lives devoting themselves to reasoning and knowing and, in so doing, cherish their rational soul to the point of identifying their true self with it.

As for Empedocles, not only does he profess a doctrine of rebirth similar to that found in Plato, according to which the liberation from rebirth assures a joyful existence with the gods; he may also be taken as a forerunner of Plato's notion of happiness acquired through learning and true knowledge as ways that bring us closer to a godlike nature. Indeed, Empedocles seems to think that divinity is closely linked to true knowledge of "the whole", just as mortality relates to ignorance [see B2 and above], whereas happiness is associated with a divine level of understanding. Additionally, the Platonic conception that the world is happy by virtue of its rationality and knowledge may have already been foreshadowed in Empedocles, if we accept as I think we should, the notion of the Sphairos as a cosmic mind.

Most importantly, in both cosmological representations we find the idea (overt in Plato, implicit in Empedocles) of the (macro)cosmos as the domain in which divinity and happiness are manifested and, for this reason, the universe is seen as the pattern that we should follow to become truly divine and happy. In particular, Timaeus argues that the study of the ordered revolutions of the heavens enables the restoration of our own soul to its ancient, well-ordered divine nature, which is the crucial condition of a happy life. Empedocles, on the other hand, by making Sphairos the perfect formation of Love, provides the concept of what it means for a living being to live exclusively by Love. This model of perfection could then serve as an ethical pattern for those who want to be truly divine and happy. The idea of a macrocosmic example to which human behavior should conform, in conclusion, shows the centrality of happiness in Plato's and Empedocles' doctrines.



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DK See Diels and Kranz 1951.

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