

## EMPEDOCLES' *ON NATURE* FR. B 8–9 IN THE CONTEXT OF PLUTARCH'S *AGAINST COLOTES*\*

The Epicurean Colotes, in a work entitled Περὶ τοῦ ὅτι κατὰ τὰ τῶν ἄλλων φιλοσόφων οὐδὲ ζῆν ἔστιν,<sup>1</sup> cited two fragments of Empedocles in order to prove that the poet denied that existence exists (fr. B 8–9 DK = 12–13 Wright). Both are prominent in controversies about Empedocles' physics and his usage of the term φύσις,<sup>2</sup> but fr. 9 is very corrupt. To have any hope of restoring it, we will need to examine carefully Plutarch's *explication de texte* in his *Adversus Colotem* (10–12, 1111F–1113E). Although there have been two detailed treatments of this passage, neither has resolved the difficulties.<sup>3</sup>

In the first fragment, fr. B 8, Empedocles argues that there is no coming to be or passing away, but only the mixture and dissolution of the elements. According to Aëtius, this discussion of Empedoclean μεῖξις<sup>4</sup> was in his *On Nature* Book 1.<sup>5</sup> Since Aëtius' readings are nearly all superior to Colotes' (most editors of Empedocles rightly

\* For improvements to this article I thank Victor Caston, Mirjam Kotwick, Debra Nails and the other participants in the Michigan Ancient Philosophy Reading Group, and sundry anonymous readers; its deficiencies remain mine.

<sup>1</sup> Plutarch records its title at *Adv. Col.* 1, 1107B. For a collection of its fragments see E. Kechagia, *Plutarch Against Colotes: A Lesson in History of Philosophy* (Oxford, 2011), 295–303.

<sup>2</sup> e.g. A.P.D. Mourelatos, 'Quality, structure and emergence in later pre-Socratic philosophy', *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 2 (1987), 127–94; P. Curd, 'The metaphysics of physics: mixture and separation in Empedocles and Anaxagoras', in V. Caston and D.W. Graham (edd.), *The Presocratics. Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos* (Aldershot, 2002), 139–58, at 139–46; J. Palmer, *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy* (Oxford, 2009), 260–77.

<sup>3</sup> The first is N. van der Ben, 'Empedocles' fragments 8, 9, and 10 DK', *Phronesis* 23 (1978), 197–215, whose focus fell so heavily on Empedocles' text (of which he gives a thorough account of the proposals to that date) that he did not fully explore the context; the second is J. Boulogne, 'Plutarque exégète d'Empédocle: une leçon de lecture', *RPhA* 22 (2004), 97–110. S. Trepanier (*Empedocles: An Interpretation* [New York and London, 2004], 67–8, cf. 179) explicates the context, but does not use it to restore the fragment, and Kechagia (n. 1) does not explore the topic. For a full commentary on fr. 8–9 see M.R. Wright, *Empedocles: The Extant Fragments* (New Haven and London, 1981, 1995<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>4</sup> μεῖξις is the correct spelling, as the Derveni papyrus, copied in the fourth century B.C., confirms (see τῆι μεῖξει at col. xxii 13, with ἀναμειγμένον at col. ix 5); the later Greek etacism μῖξις or μίξις, which confused ει with ι, was never remedied by Byzantine correctors. μεῖξις and the present, sigmatic aorist and perfect stems of μείγνυμι retain the Indo-European *e*-grade in the root, whereas the zero-grade of it (with short iota) is correct in μίσγω and ἐμίγην. So P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque* (Paris, 1968–1972), 2.676–7; R. Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden and Boston, 2010), 920. Wherever these words occur in our texts of ancient authors they need this correction. The spellings in LSJ<sup>9</sup> and Frisk's *Griechisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* are simply outdated, *pace* van der Ben (n. 3), 214 n. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Ἐμπεδοκλήης· φύσιν μηδεν(ός) (corr. Stein) εἶναι, μ(ε)ῖξιν (corr. Steinhilber) δὲ τῶν στοιχείων καὶ διάστασιν· γράφει γὰρ οὕτως ἐν τῷ πρώτῳ Φυσικῶν (Aët. 1.30.1).

adopt them),<sup>6</sup> the Epicurean probably relied on a source who quoted from memory, as did Aristotle.<sup>7</sup> Here, however, is the text as Colotes quoted it, with line 5 added by me:

- 1 ἄλλο δέ τοι ἔρέω· φύσις οὐδενὸς ἔστιν ἐκάστου  
 θνητῶν, οὐδέ τις οὐλομένη θανάτοιο †γενεθλή,  
 ἀλλὰ μόνον μ(ε)ῖξις τε διάλλαξις τε μιγέντων  
 ἔστι. ‘φύσις’ δ’ ἐπὶ τοῖς ὀνομάζεται ἀνθρώποισιν  
 5 <καὶ ‘θάνατος’>.<sup>8</sup>

I’ll tell you something else: there is no birth of each  
 of mortal things, nor baleful †birth of death,  
 but only mixing and dissolving of mixed elements;  
 these processes receive the name of ‘birth’ from men  
 <and ‘death’>.

One of Plutarch’s complaints against Colotes is that the Epicurean excerpts his sources inaccurately or incompletely.<sup>9</sup> In this case Colotes omitted the concluding reference to death that I have supplied, in order to argue that Empedocles denied the existence of ‘existence’ itself, which, he claimed, the poet here calls φύσις. Plutarch rightly objects that Empedocles actually uses φύσις to mean ‘generation’ or ‘birth’ here; as the latter observes, evidently drawing on knowledge of the original poem, the fact that the poet opposes φύσις to θάνατος proves that this is the sense.<sup>10</sup>

Plutarch goes on to charge that, if the Epicureans equate mixture with generation and dissolution with destruction, they themselves do away with existence; his long tirade makes clear that he was motivated by hostility to what he perceives as atheism on their part.<sup>11</sup> He then accuses Colotes of being unable to interpret language, rightly in this case.<sup>12</sup> Plutarch notes that Epicurus himself used the periphrasis ἡ τῶν ὄντων φύσις for τὰ ὄντα.<sup>13</sup> He puts words into Epicurus’ mouth, making him grant that he employs ordinary language by convention, and end by quoting to that effect Empedocles fr. 9.4, νόμῳ δ’ ἐπίφημι καὶ αὐτός:

κἄν εἴ τις ἔροιτο ‘τί λέγεις, ὦ Ἐπίκουρε, τὸ μὲν τι κενὸν εἶναι, τὸ δὲ φύσιν κενού;’, ‘μὰ Δία,’ φήσει, ‘νενομίσται δὲ πως ἢ τοιαύτη τῶν ὀνομάτων ὀμιλία: “νόμῳ δ’ ἐπίφημι καὶ αὐτός”’.

If someone were to object ‘Epicurus, why do you say that “void” exists, and “the nature of void” exists?’ ‘But by Zeus,’ he will say, ‘such usage of words is standard: “I too speak by convention myself”.’ (Adv. Col. 11, 1112F)

<sup>6</sup> Except for Bollack, they do not follow Aëtius in line 4, presumably because of the contrary testimony of Aristotle (whom they do not follow for line 1). For a good discussion of the superiority of Aëtius’ text see van der Ben (n. 3), 199–203.

<sup>7</sup> van der Ben ([n. 3], 198) well suggests that Colotes may have depended on Hermarchus’ Πρὸς Ἐμπεδοκλέα, which was in twenty-two books (cf. D. Obbink, ‘Hermarchus, *Against Empedocles*’, CQ 38 [1988], 428–35).

<sup>8</sup> Sources: Arist. *Metaph.* Δ 4, 1015<sup>a</sup>1 (vv. 1b, 3–4); *MXG* 2, 975<sup>b</sup>7 (vv. 3–4); Aët. 1.30.1 (p. 326 Diels); Plut. *Adv. Col.* 10, 1111F. Apparatus criticus: 1 ἐκάστου Plut.: ὀπάντων Aët.: ἔόντων Arist. 2 οὐλομένη ... γενεθλή Plut.: οὐλομένου ... τελευτή Aët. 3 correxi 4 δ’ ἐπὶ τοῖς Arist., Plut.: δὲ βροτοῖς Aët. 5 addidi propter Plut. *Adv. Col.* 1112A, ὅτι γὰρ ἀντὶ τῆς γενέσεως εἶρηκε τὴν ‘φύσιν’, ἀντιθεὶς τὸν ‘θάνατον’ αὐτῇ, δεδήλωκεν ὁ Ἐμπεδοκλῆς.

<sup>9</sup> Kechagia (n. 1), 42.

<sup>10</sup> 1112A, cited above (n. 8). Scholars have made unduly heavy weather of this: see e.g. van der Ben (n. 3), 204–7, with further references in Wright (n. 3), ad loc.

<sup>11</sup> 1112A–D; the attack on atheism is at 1112C. Cf. Kechagia (n. 1), 38–9.

<sup>12</sup> So Boulogne (n. 3); cf. Kechagia (n. 1), 41–2.

<sup>13</sup> 1112E–F, citing Epic. fr. 76 Usener, ἡ τῶν ὄντων φύσις σώματά ἐστι καὶ τόπος.

Next Plutarch argues that Empedocles too employed the standard usages of φύσις and θάνατος, even though the poet criticized such usages; to prove his point, he cites the heavily corrupted fr. 9. I reproduce Pohlenz's Teubner text as revised by Westmann, and my translation tries to replicate the verses' obscurity:<sup>14</sup>

τοσοῦτον <δ'> (add. Pohlenz) ἐδέησε τοῦ κινεῖν τὰ ὄντα ..., ὥστε μηδὲ τὴν φωνὴν ἐκβαλεῖν ἐκ τῆς συνηθείας, ἀλλ' ὅσον εἰς τὰ πράγματα βλάπτουσιν ἀπάτην παρῆχεν ἀφελῶν αὐθις ἀποδοῦναι τοῖς ὀνόμασι τὸ νενομισμένον ἐν τούτοις·

- 1 οἱ δ' ὅτε μὲν κατὰ φῶτα μιγὲν φῶς αἰθέρι < – – >  
 ἢ κατὰ θηρῶν ἀγροτέρων γένος ἢ κατὰ θάμνων  
 ἢ κατ' οἰωνῶν, τότε μὲν τὸν < – – > γενέσθαι.  
 εὔτε δ' ἀποκρι(ν)θῶσι, τὸ δ' αἰ δυσδαίμονα πότμον.  
 5 ἢ θέμις, <οὐ> καλέουσι νόμῳ δ' ἐπίφημι καὶ αὐτός. (fr. B 9)<sup>15</sup>

<δ'> (add. Meziriacus) ὁ Κωλώτης παραθέμενος οὐ συνείδεν ὅτι φῶτας μὲν καὶ θήρας καὶ θάμνους καὶ οἰωνοὺς ὁ Ἐμπεδοκλῆς οὐκ ἀνήρηκεν, ἃ γέ φησι μ(ε)γνυμένων (correxī) τῶν στοιχείων ἀποτελεῖσθαι, τοὺς δὲ τῆ συγκρίσει ταύτη καὶ διακρίσει 'φύσιν' τινὰ καὶ 'πότμον δυσδαίμονα' καὶ 'θάνατον ἀλοιτήν' (corr. J.G. Schneider: ἀλοιτήν codd.) ἐπικατηγοροῦντας ἢ σφάλονται διδάξας οὐκ ἀφείλετο τὸ χρῆσθαι ταῖς εἰθισμέναις φωναῖς περὶ αὐτῶν. ἐμοὶ μέντοι δοκεῖ μὴ τοῦτο κινεῖν τὸ ἐκφορικὸν ὁ Ἐμπεδοκλῆς ἀλλὰ, ὡς πρότερον εἴρηται, πραγματικῶς διαφέρεσθαι περὶ τῆς ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων γενέσεως, ἣν 'φύσιν' τινὲς καλοῦσι.

Empedocles was so far from disturbing reality ... that he did not expel the word (*sc. physis*)<sup>16</sup> from his usage, but, abolishing only the harmful misunderstanding of reality that it produces, he restored to the words (i.e. *physis* and *thanatos*) their conventional meaning in the following verses:

When in a wight light mixed with aither <\*\*\*>,  
 or in the race of savage beasts or in the race of plants  
 or in the race of birds, then him <\*\*\*> to come to be.  
 When they are parted, that again <\*\*\*> 'unhappy fate'.  
 They do <not> name <\*\*\*> rightly; but by custom I too call <\*\*\*> so.

<sup>14</sup> M. Pohlenz and R. Westman, *Plutarchi Moralia* VI 2 (Leipzig, 1959). The Loeb edition (B. Einarson and P. De Lacy, *Plutarch's Moralia* XIV [Cambridge, MA, 1967]) prints μίγεν in verse 1; I have not checked the codices.

<sup>15</sup> Apparatus criticus to fr. B 9: 1 μὲν cod. E: om. cod. B: κεν ci. Mullach: ἴκη ci. Bignone φῶτα codd.: φῶτας Karsten μιγὲν φῶς αἰθέρι < – – > (sc. spatium vii vel viii litt.): μιγέντ' εἰς αἰθέρ' ἴ(κωνται) ci. Diels: μιγέντ' εἰς αἰθέρι(ον) φῶς Bignone: μιγὲν φῶς αἰθέρ(ος) ἴ(κη) Mullach: μιγὲν φῶς αἰθέρη <κύρη> Burnet: μιγέντ' εἰς αἰθέρ' ἴ(δωνται) Pierris: μιγὲν φῶς αἰθέρ(ος) εἶδον) Mansfeld (*Die Vorsokratiker* II [Stuttgart, 1986] 76): μιγὲν φῶς αἰθέρι(ον βῆ) Primavesi (ibid. ed. 2, 2011) 450 3 τὸν < – – > (sc. spatium viii litt.): τὸν <φασί> Friedländer: τά(δε φασί) Xylander (τό(δε) Bernadakis, τό <γε> Panzerbieter): τὸ <λέγουσι> Reiske et τὸ <νέμουσι> Burnet, ponte Hermannii rupto: <βί>ον <γε> van der Ben, balbutians 4 ἀποκρι(ν)θῶσι corr. Panzerbieter τὸ δ' Reiske: τάδ' codd.: τὰ δ' Stephanus: τὸδ' Inwood, monente Woodbury 5 ἢ θέμις <οὐ> Wyttenbach post Meziriacum ad Plut. *Mor.* 820F: εἶναι codd. EB: <οὐ> θέμις ἢ Wilamowitz, *Hermes* 65 (1930), 246: ἢ θέμις <ἀνθρώποισι> van der Ben, καλέουσι deleto καλέουσι νόμῳ corr. Reiske e Plut. *Mor.* 820F et 1113A: καλέουσιν ὅμῳ codd. EB

<sup>16</sup> B. Inwood (*The Poem of Empedocles* [Toronto, 2001<sup>2</sup>], 95–6), in his translation of 1113A–D, thinks this φωνή is γένεσις, referring back to 1113A, where Plutarch notes parenthetically that most people personify Birth and Death in cases where things are constituted and dissolved ('Γένεσιν' τινὰ καὶ 'Φθορὰν' καλοῦσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ἐπὶ τοῖς συνισταμένοις καὶ διαλυομένοις), citing Hom. *Il.* 18.535. But Plutarch must be referring to his discussion of the word φύσις itself, of which γένεσις is one possible meaning; otherwise his rebuttal would be ineffectual.

In citing <these verses>, Colotes was unaware that Empedocles does not do away with people, animals, plants and birds, which, he says, arise when the elements are mixed. Rather, he teaches those who label this compounding and separation ‘birth’ (*physis*), ‘unhappy fate’ and ‘avenging death’ that they are mistaken, yet he did not abolish the use of the usual words for them. Empedocles seems to me not to alter this mode of expression but, as was said earlier (*sc.* 1113A), to disagree on a point of fact about generation from non-existent things, which some call ‘birth’ (*physis*). (*Adv. Col.* 11, 1113A–12, 1113C)

As transmitted, Empedocles’ verses cannot prove Plutarch’s point that the poet also used φύσις in its ordinary sense of ‘nature’, because they do not contain the word φύσις at all.<sup>17</sup> But Plutarch’s last paragraph certainly proves that he thought Empedocles used the words φύσιν, πότμον δυσδαίμονα and θάνατον ἀλοίτην in the verses that he cited. δυσδαίμονα πότμον duly appears in verse 3. θάνατον ἀλοίτην does not appear, and therefore received a separate fragment-number in Diels–Kranz (fr. B 10). However, it is all too likely, since the *Adversus Colotem* is badly transmitted via two late medieval codices only, that a verse containing these words has fallen out after verse 4; if it began with η like the next line, the loss of a verse by homoearchon is easy to posit.<sup>18</sup> But where is φύσις, which, if Plutarch is right (and there is no reason to distrust him), Empedocles must have used here in its standard sense of ‘nature’ rather than of ‘generation’?

There have been dozens of efforts to repair verse 1; most involve taking μίγνεν ‘the thing mixed’ as the subject and either as the place where the new life-form appears.<sup>19</sup> None can be called satisfactory. To my knowledge, nobody has proposed that φύσις appeared in this fragment, but I hope to have shown that such a reconstruction is inevitable. Its rightful place is precisely in verse 1; the order in which Empedocles uses the words φύσιν, πότμον δυσδαίμονα and θάνατον ἀλοίτην will then match the order in which Plutarch mentions them. In later Byzantine script, φύσις could readily have been confused with φῶς. Moreover, immediately before φῶς ‘light’ Empedocles says φῶτα ‘wight’, where I have used the English archaism to render φῶς ‘man’, as unfamiliar and obscure to later Greeks as ‘wight’ now is to us. As Diels already saw,<sup>20</sup> φῶς and/or φῶς could well have appeared in a supralinear Byzantine gloss, meant to explain that φῶτα is not from φῶς. Greeks were well aware of the homonymy, since Parmenides wittily adapts Homer’s phrase ἀλλότριος φῶς ‘alien wight’ (*Od.* 19.219) as ἀλλότριον φῶς to describe the moon’s ‘alien light’ (fr. B 14), and Empedocles borrowed the latter phrase for the moon.<sup>21</sup> However, the poet would have been extraordinarily clumsy to put φῶτα next to φῶς, a quasi-homonym with a completely different sense. Hence I propose that φῶς is an error for φύσις.

If this is so, verse 1 meant ‘when the nature of <\*\*\*> was mixed with either in a man’, referring to the mixture of elements, as Plutarch makes clear (ἄ γέ φησι

<sup>17</sup> As Wright (n. 3) noted (*ad loc.*), Empedocles does use φύσις to mean ‘nature’ in fr. 63 and 110.5 (56 and 100 Wright); each instance has the connotation of ‘growth’, as an anonymous reader points out to me. Plutarch cites neither passage, since neither suits his argument. However, their existence does not prove him wrong either.

<sup>18</sup> van der Ben ([n. 3], 211–12) already made a similar proposal, viz. to insert after verse 4 the hexameter εἶναι (καὶ) θάνατον (τότε δὴ) καλέουσιν ἀλοίτην, but I do not see how καλέουσιν can govern εἶναι.

<sup>19</sup> Diels’s restoration is perhaps the most popular, e.g. in D.W. Graham (*The Texts of Early Greek Philosophy* [Cambridge, 2010], 148), but its own author signalled his uncertainty about it by adding a question mark.

<sup>20</sup> H. Diels, *Poetarum Philosophorum Fragmenta* (Berlin, 1901), 109.

<sup>21</sup> Fr. B 45. I thank an anonymous reader for this point.

μ(ε)γγυμένων τῶν στοιχείων ἀποτελεῖσθαι, 1113B); Empedocles used the same periphrasis as that in Epicurus fr. 76, i.e. ‘the φύσις of *p*’ in place of *p*. Thus he specified two elements which are mixed in living beings, although the mixture would have varied both according to their species<sup>22</sup> and in their different parts.<sup>23</sup> What is their main constituent, which must have been specified in the lost disyllable at the end of verse 1?

Since either air or fire is already named, it must be air, water or earth. It can hardly be air or water, since the living creatures that Empedocles lists are more solid than these substances. Hence the missing term must be earth, which would clearly be present in all these creatures. We have a few actual recipes for the mixture in different animals or parts of animals. Empedocles called the body surrounding the soul ἀμφιβρότην γθόνα ‘earth that surrounds a mortal’.<sup>24</sup> According to him, bone consists of four parts of fire, two of earth and two of water;<sup>25</sup> the first humans contain water and aither as they sprout from the ground (and the latter origin also implies that they contain earth);<sup>26</sup> blood and flesh have equal parts of all four elements;<sup>27</sup> shellfish have the earth on the outside, and stags’ horns are made of earth;<sup>28</sup> and plants concentrate earth in their roots but aither in their shoots.<sup>29</sup> Since this passage goes on to list all the kinds of life, both animal and vegetable, that result from this mixture, the elements which they hold in common should be water, earth and fire, which supplies vitality and motion (Empedocles is unlikely to have understood that plants respire). But there are only two of them here; given the choices, earth is surely preferable, since mixtures of fire and air or fire and water do not produce solid bodies. Thus the missing disyllable can easily be restored as γαίης; Empedocles will then be using φύσις ... γαίης as a periphrasis for γαῖα. The aorist passive neuter singular participle μίγνεν needs to be a singular finite verb governed by φύσις; the third person singular μίγη lies ready to hand.<sup>30</sup>

Thus fr. 9 of Empedocles should be restored and translated as follows:

- 1 οἱ δ' ὅτε μὲν κατὰ φῶτα μίγη φύσις αἰθέρι (γαίης)  
 ἢ κατὰ θηρῶν ἀγροτέρων γένος ἢ κατὰ θάμνων  
 ἢ κατ' οἰωνῶν, τότε μὲν τὸν (φασί) ‘γενέσθαι’.  
 εὔτε δ' ἀποκρι(ν)θῶσι, τὸ δ' αὖ ‘δυσδαίμονα πότμον’  
 4a (ἢ  $\underline{\omega} - \underline{\omega}$  –  $\underline{\omega} - \underline{\omega}$  – ‘θάνατον’ καλέουσι ‘ἀλοίτην’).  
 5 ἢ θέμις, (οὐ) καλέουσι· νόμῳ δ' ἐπίφημι καὶ αὐτός.

When in a man the nature of <earth> was mixed with aither,  
 or in the race of savage beasts or in the race of plants  
 or in the race of birds, then <they say> he ‘came to be’.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Aët. 5.19.5.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Aët. 5.22.

<sup>24</sup> Fr. B 148, from Plut. *Mor.* 683E.

<sup>25</sup> Fr. B 96.

<sup>26</sup> Fr. B 62, 5; J. Bollack seeks to distinguish heat (aither) from fire in this passage (*Empédocle* [Paris, 1969], 3.431), needlessly in my view.

<sup>27</sup> Fr. B 98.

<sup>28</sup> Fr. B 76 with *P. Strasbourg* gr. inv. 1665–6 ensemble **b** Martin–Primavesi; this passage, which also reveals that shellfish have earth on the outside, is Book 1 lines 354–9 in the latest papyrological reconstruction (R. Janko, ‘Empedocles, *On Nature* i 233–364: a new reconstruction of *P. Strasb. gr. Inv. 1665–6*’, *ZPE* 150 [2005], 1–25). For an attempt to rebut this reconstruction see O. Primavesi, *Empedokles Physika I: eine Rekonstruktion des zentralen Gedankengangs* (Berlin and New York, 2008), with my reply in *Ancient Philosophy* 30 (2010), 407–11.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. fr. A 70 (Theophr. *CP* 1.12.5), τὸ γεννᾶν ... Ἐμπεδοκλῆς διαίρει καὶ μερίζει τὴν μὲν γῆν εἰς τὰς ρίζας, τὸν δ' αἰθέρα εἰς τοὺς βλαστούς.

<sup>30</sup> In verse 3 there is now no need to alter τὸν, since it can agree with φῶτα in verse 1.

When they are parted, that again <they name> 'unhappy fate'  
<or                   \*\*\*                   'avenging death'>.  
They do <not> name them rightly; but by custom I too call them so.

*University of Michigan*

RICHARD JANKO  
[rjanko@umich.edu](mailto:rjanko@umich.edu)