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Who do we think 'we' are?

In the newly recovered papyrus fragments of Empedocles there are a few genuinely surprising novelties. Most intriguing are the first-person plurals in what is now the extension of fragment 17 DK [a(i) 6 = B 17 line 36 and a(ii) 17 = B 17 line 56] and in fragment 20 DK line 2 as improved by the reading of ensemble c. With the new readings of the papyrus we now find ideas like these in fragment 17:

"But these very things are, and running through each other
they become different at different times and are always, perpetually alike
..... **we** come together into one cosmos,
..... to be many from one,
from which all things that were, that are and will be in the future have sprung"
"... and in the very middle... **we** come together to be one alone."

and this in fragment 20:

This is very clear in the bulk of mortal limbs:
at one time **we** come together into one by love,
all the limbs which have found a body in the peak of flourishing life;
at another time again, being divided by evil quarrels,
they [the limbs] wander, all of them separately, about the breakers of life.

The appearance of 'we' here should not, I argue, be surprising and hence hesitations about accepting the evidence of the first hand in the papyrus (where theta is read) rather than the corrector's hand (which supplies nu) need not arise on the grounds of the sense of the lines.

One of Empedocles' great accomplishments is to force his audience to reassess who 'we' really are, what constitutes the personhood to which human beings have come to feel so desperately attached. Empedocles uses his own case as an example. Now a god (B 112), he has himself been "a boy and a girl and a bush and a bird" and some kind of salt-water fish (B 117). He has also been the ravaging beast who tore apart flesh with his claws in order to have food, and yet was not destroyed for his sin (B 139) but pitifully banished to a hard life among the mortal elements (B 115) instead. Empedocles has a theory about what makes up a human being (B 9), but ordinary men don't realize "who is who" – like the fools who slaughter their own family members in their ignorance (B 137).

Even without the new readings of the papyrus, which suggest that our very identity as persons is open to question and challenge, we can tell that Empedocles forced his audience to re-evaluate who "they" really are. The evidence of the papyrus merely provides further indication of *how* he does so. This new evidence should be welcomed on philosophical as well as on palaeographical grounds.