

Anaxagoras: Conceptualizing Pollution and Purity

In today's world, it is much too easy to shirk notions and ideas introduced by thinkers from the past — in particular Pre-Socratic era philosophers. Concepts elucidated by thinkers such as Anaximander and Democritus seem primitive given the nature of contemporary technology, science, and education. That being said, disregarding the concepts put forth by said thinkers is ignorant and ill-informed. This is the case as the majority of these early philosophers were the first natural scientists: the foremost thinkers to question the process of growth, to inquire about the nature of the world, and to attempt to explain the past, present, and future. In fact, the pseudo-scientific investigations carried out by Pre-Socratic thinkers allow for a “penetrating insight into the physical universe” — facilitating thought about present-day issues regarding nature and our tenuous ties to it.¹

Anaxagoras' theories about the origin of the cosmos, and the implications of said origins are rooted in an acceptance of the challenge set forth by Parmenides. One of the core tenets of the Parmenidean Challenge is that “what is, is being” and “whatever is not, is not nonbeing.”² This means that whatever comprises the world around us, must always “have been” since nothing can arise from nothing.³ Anaxagoras endorses this Parmenidean belief, but rejects Parmenides' ideas of monism, choosing instead to craft an image of the cosmos that allows for pluralism and change. Reality as we know it is diverse in every sense: the political and ethical structures of the world are just as varied as the constructs found within it. A pluralistic approach to understanding the cosmos allows for the emergence of pluralistic knowledge.

In introducing the origin of the cosmos, Anaxagoras boldly states that “[a]ll things were together. Then thought came and arranged them.”⁴ Anaxagoras explicates that the Universe began as an undifferentiated mass — something entirely nebulous and indistinct. He asserts that this unified mass was then differentiated by Thought. Thought, or Mind, is identified as being the

¹ Macauley, David. "The Flowering of Environmental Roots and the Four Elements in Presocratic Philosophy: From Empedocles to Deleuze and Guattari." 9, no. 3 (2005): 281-314. Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809309>.

² Patzia, Michael. "Anaxagoras (c. 500—428 B.C.E.)." Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Accessed November 28, 2018. <https://www.iep.utm.edu/anaxagor/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Anaxagoras." In *Early Greek Philosophy*, translated by Jonathan Barnes, 185-98. Second ed. Penguin Classics, 2011, page 185.

casual agent through which everything is made distinct. Thought is what enables the development of the articulated world. Anaxagoras continues by explaining that “in all things which are associating there are present many things of every sort and seeds of all things.”⁵ The fundamental point made here by Anaxagoras is that everything is in everything. This means that a homogenous universal mixture constitutes all the aspects of nature and the natural world. This insinuation that all the things in the world remain mixed for eternity fosters a sense of kinship between everything in existence. Everything being entangled therefore cultivates a sense of responsibility — humans are responsible for plants, plants for animals, animals for humans, and so forth. By creating this connection, Anaxagoras fashions an unending cyclical pattern of ethical responsibility. There is never a future where the shared bonds can be severed. There is merely arrangement and rearrangement — no “real qualitative changes and transformations” can occur in the world, there is no creation and there is no destruction.⁶

In his construction of the cosmos, Anaxagoras states that there is no limit to both the concepts of smallness and largeness. The lack of a lower bound on smallness ensures that no seed or element can be separated out of the universal mixture. Accordingly, the smallest particles are infinitely divisible. The lack of an upper limit on largeness serves to communicate the notion that nothing can ever be genuinely pure — that properties can become more emergent as their proportions increase. The lack of limits on largeness and smallness suggest that all things within the cosmos have a space — that no species is too small, and that no species is too large. The lack of limitations also endorses the notion that there is no supremacy amongst the beings that constitute the natural world, instead all plants, animals, and humans are able to find a place within the cosmos.

Once smallness and largeness have been discussed, it is possible to explore the manifestation of properties. In a sense, the “primeval chaos” of the universal mixture is a “reservoir containing in a latent state all substances that can appear.”⁷ Properties manifest

⁵ "Anaxagoras." In *Early Greek Philosophy*, translated by Jonathan Barnes, 185-98. Second ed. Penguin Classics, 2011, page 190.

⁶ Curd, Patricia. "Anaxagoras." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. August 22, 2007. Accessed November 28, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/anaxagoras/#NoBecPasAwa>.

⁷ Graham, Daniel W. "Empedocles and Anaxagoras." In *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, edited by A. A. Long, 159-80. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, page 174.

depending on the ratios present in the mixture — we perceive things and constructs in the natural world as being different because every single thing is and was most clearly those things of which it contains most. Therefore, the principle of quantitative dominance is what allows for the appearance of discrete shapes, objects, and living things. For example, more hot than cold makes something hot, a predominance of salt in water makes water more salty than sweet, and more blue than orange gives an object the appearance of being blue. Being able to comprehend the process of differentiation and the perceptions that shape our world is crucial, but a core competency of Anaxagoras' philosophy involves distinguishing between everything else and the force of Thought.

Thought is wholly pure in Anaxagoras' cosmos. While “[o]ther things share a portion of everything” Thought is “limitless and independent,” it “has been mixed with no thing.”⁸ Thought initiates separation, and is itself separate from all else — giving Thought the ability to self-rule and endowing it with supremacy over the universal mixture. Thought controls the rotations and the separations — it gives force to the constant processes of association and dissociation, the very processes which are imperceptible by the human eye. The corollary that can be drawn is that the function of thoughts and the mind in human beings is a microcosmic reflection of the macrocosmic way in which Thought functions. In essence, thoughts control our actions in the same way that Thought controls the rotations that allow for alteration to take place in the world. Our thoughts allow us to differentiate between one another and to organize into spheres of work, culture, and politics. Our thoughts give us the ability to differentiate between what we perceive is right and wrong. Our thoughts act as a separating force — creating and shaping the societies and communities that surround us. Additionally, it is important to note that Anaxagoras gives the impression that Thought embodies a sense of divinity by iterating and reiterating the idea that Thought is unconnected while all else is the opposite. All of these ideas postulated by Anaxagoras allow for a deeper understanding of the world that surrounds us. This is true when considering the contemporary issue of pollution — especially given Anaxagoras' attention to concepts of purity.

⁸ "Anaxagoras." In *Early Greek Philosophy*, translated by Jonathan Barnes, 185-98. Second ed. Penguin Classics, 2011, page 192.

Pollution is an incredibly complex issue. This is the case as pollution is both a physical and theoretical phenomenon. The physical dimension of pollution is the dimension that individuals are most familiar with. The “pervasive” nature and spread of physical pollution is “increasingly visible.”⁹ As humans we perceive that stars are shrouded and hidden as a result of light pollution, that smog fills the air across the planet, landfills pile up with waste, and oceans are constantly assaulted with trash and remnants of plastic. Similarly, theoretical pollution is also rampant as ethics become more malleable and politics becomes more corrupt. Pollution, both physical and conceptual, have long been seen as a threat to natural organization and life. This is the case as it is often thought that the natural order of things hinges on a network that is uncorrupted. There is often a push to work against pollution — to attempt to remove it. However, when looking at the concepts put forth by Anaxagoras it is possible to reexamine pollution, and to reorient our thinking.

Anaxagoras’ ideas allow for pollution to be reframed. This is the case as nothing in Anaxagoras’ cosmos, apart from Thought, is pure — or for lack of a better term, uncorrupted. Thought is special because it has an inkling of the divine and as a result is able to uphold a standard of purity. The remainder of matter in Anaxagoras’ cosmos sidesteps purity and instead relies on mixture and mingling. Essentially, everything else in the cosmos is corrupted, or polluted, by the presence of all other things. After all if everything is everywhere, that means by extension, pollution also has a place in the natural order of the world and the cosmos. Anaxagoras allows for a reassessment of pollution, his thinking challenges the contemporary definition we hold to be true. This reassessment can be best understood by looking at thoughts explicated by Heraclitus. Heraclitus, like Anaxagoras explored the multitudinous nature of the world, and so looking at his work provides context for Anaxagoras and his thoughts. In his work, Heraclitus asserts that “[s]ea” is the “purest and most polluted water, for fish drinkable and life-sustaining, for people undrinkable and death-bringing.”¹⁰ The capability for sea to hold the qualifications of both “purest” and “most polluted” concurrently shows that there is no space for

⁹ Macauley, David. "The Flowering of Environmental Roots and the Four Elements in Presocratic Philosophy: From Empedocles to Deleuze and Guattari." 9, no. 3 (2005): 281-314. Accessed November 28, 2018. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43809309>.

¹⁰ Hussey, Edward. "Heraclitus." In *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, edited by A. A. Long, 88-112. Cambridge Companions to Philosophy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, page 95.

absolutes in Anaxagoras' world of mixture and flux.¹¹ As a result, qualifications of pollution and purity are subjective. The presence of pollution and purity therefore do not manifest simultaneously for all creatures and constructs of the Earth. Therefore, our definitions of pollution and what constitutes pollution has to be reassessed in order to include other species. Additionally, given the interconnectedness and kinship amongst all living creatures it is selfish to solely define pollution through the human lens. Consequently, when dealing with combatting pollution we as a populace have to be more practical in our approach — what is often best for us, may be harmful to the other creatures of this Earth. Furthermore, we must rethink the language we utilize when we attempt to talk about pollution and the consequences we perceive that it has. In regards to Anaxagoras and his work, removing pollution is not an option as nothing can ever be removed or destroyed. Instead we have to work on altering the states of pollution, so that pollutions presents its self less and less as it becomes a smaller portion of the whole.

Overall, the work done by Anaxagoras is compelling and impactful. It allows for us to reassess our bonds with the world around us. It ties us to all other living constructs — reminding us that our selfishness often dictates our endeavors, no matter how positive we perceive them to be. We often forget our shared kinship with the cosmos — believing that our judgement and lives are more important than the lives of other plants and animals. Anaxagoras' work implores us as individuals to rethink our way of thinking and in doing so allows for us to connect with the cosmos more deeply — guiding us towards a life that is more fair and egalitarian to all other things and forms of life.

¹¹ Ibid.

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