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## Anaxagoras and human rationality

**ABSTRACT:** In Anaxagoras' system, cosmic Mind is one, indivisible and immutable and thus cannot be divided into parts, into individual minds residing in living beings. The same Mind is in one living being as it is in another. Also, the soul is an individual entity, one soul in one living being. Mind does manifest itself in a living being, not as the soul, but through the soul. Mind must be constantly present in the individual soul for the soul to be capable of thought. Only in this sense could the soul's dormant cognitive ability be called an individual mind. However, for man, only this life remains, although man is highest in the hierarchy among existing beings. Mind seems to make man alive and rational so that man can admire its handiwork, the order and harmony of the world. But this is where man's cosmic role ends.

**KEY WORDS:** Anaxagoras • cosmic Mind • soul • pre-Socratic philosophy

According to Anaxagoras, there are two types of entities in the universe: Mind and everything else. Mind is eternal (B14), infinite, autonomous, mixed with no thing; it is the finest and purest of all things, omniscient, and possesses the greatest power and fashions the world from pre-existing materials (B12). These materials include uniform substances such as air, water, gold, bone, etc., and seeds from which individual entities develop<sup>1</sup>. It seems that there are seeds of entities which grow naturally, e.g., clouds, stalactites, pearls, and the like. However, Anaxagoras apparently had primarily animate beings on his mind when he introduced seeds as elements of the primal materials.

### 1. The soul

Animate beings are characterized by the possession of the soul. These animate beings include humans, animals, and plants. Animate beings are a special category of existing beings since they appear to be under the special

<sup>1</sup> Seeds provide a program of development, according to S.-T. Teodorsson, *Anaxagoras' Theory of Matter*, Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis 1982, p. 85, and structural plans, according to P. Curd, *Anaxagoras of Clazomenae*, Toronto: Toronto University Press 2007, p. 228, so that a dog seed with the instructions it contains develops into a dog (through mind or soul), *ibidem*, p. 175.

care of Mind. Mind created the world by providing a first impulse to the initial rotation of matter (B12), but Mind did not limit its action just to this one moment since there are in the world some beings in which Mind is constantly present (B11); these can only be animate beings since “Mind [now] controls everything that has soul, both small and large” (B12)<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, Anaxagoras made at least a terminological distinction between Mind being present in something and, at the same time, not being mixed with anything. Apparently, Mind is able to maintain its purity when present in a non-noetic substance. Mind remains unmixed with anything, including the soul, although it is not detached from it by receding to its divine abode the way Plato’s Demiurge does.

The soul is of material makeup just as everything else in nature and – with Anaximenes, Archelaus, and Diogenes – Anaxagoras maintained that the soul is like air (A93). This point is where he is most clearly influenced by Anaximenes who was considered to be his teacher (A1.6, A48). For Anaximenes, air surrounded the entire cosmos (13 B2). Anaxagoras opened his *Physics* with the statement that all things were together and air and aether (likely identical with fire, A43) covered all things (B1). Thus, air and aether are special substances that somehow enveloped the mixture of everything else before Mind initiated its creative process. They were, at least to some extent, separated from the rest of the natural substances, and thus they were superior to them<sup>3</sup>. They were still subject to the everything in everything principle<sup>4</sup>, but they were unmixed with other substances, as much as natural substances could be, and, because of their unmixed characteristic, air and aether possessed a divine attribute. Therefore, they could be used to make what is highest in nature: living beings able to exercise intelligent functions. This is so because air and aether are the finest natural substances and thus closest to the substance of Mind which is the finest and purest of all things (B12).

Anaxagoras’ view on the beginning of life also supports the view that the soul is an airy substance. According to Anaxagoras, air contains the seeds of all things which are carried down by the rain and generate plants (A117) and animals (A113). However, his view is reported that animals came first from moist, hot, and earthy matter and only afterwards from one another (A1.9, A42.12, A67). These two views can be reconciled by seeing here a succession: first, the seeds are in the air and then they fall with the rain to

<sup>2</sup> D. Sider, *The Fragments of Anaxagoras*, Meisenheim am Glan: Hain 1981, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. C. M. Zevort, *Anaxagore*, Paris: Joubert 1843, pp. 133–134.

<sup>4</sup> A. Drozdek, *Anaxagoras and the Everything in Everything Principle*, “Hermes” 133 (2005), pp. 163–177.

the ground to find a good environment to germinate into plants, animals, and, presumably, into humans. Afterwards, the normal procreation process is used for bringing forth progeny<sup>5</sup>. That is, first, the seeds have to be in the primordial air and aether before they can become operating seeds. When suspended in the air, they are, as it were, saturated with the air and aether – that is, with the soul substance – and thereby they can become seeds of animate beings. It may be surmised that other seeds – if seeds of inanimate beings are admitted in Anaxagoras’ system – would not have to be in the air before they can develop into full entities<sup>6</sup>.

If Mind and soul are of different natures, why does Mind have to control everything that has soul? One explanation could be that the soul by itself is insufficient to maintain life and it has to be constantly empowered by Mind. Mind is a principle of motion, but it does not move itself (A56). On the other hand, the soul is also a principle of motion (A100, 101a) that apparently is in motion. It seems that one impulse suffices to enable the physical motion of inanimate nature. However, life appears to be of a different order that surpasses the level of mechanistic motion and requires constant supervision of Mind to maintain it. The soul is the principle of motion for a particular living being, but this motive character of the soul is under the continuous control of Mind. Therefore, Mind does not belong to these beings; it is, in a way, an alien element – alien, but indispensable for the existence (living existence, that is) of these beings.

## 2. Cognition

The fact that Mind controls everything that has soul can also be explained by considering the cognitive powers of the soul. All animate beings are not only alive, but also emotional and intelligent, even plants. According to Anaxagoras, plants are earth-bound animals (A116) and, as animals, they are moved by desire; they can sense and can be sad and happy; they are animals and feel joy and sadness – one sign of which is the fall of their leaves. Plants have intellect and intelligence. Also, they have a respiration system (A117). However, there is a hierarchy of intelligence among animate beings. And so, all animals have souls, but “the mind in the sense of φρόνησις does not

<sup>5</sup> Cf. M. Schofield, *An Essay on Anaxagoras*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1980, p. 125. This makes Anaxagoras an advocate of the panspermia theory, M. R. O’Leary, *Anaxagoras and the Origin of the Panspermia Theory*, New York: iUniverse 2008, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> A mention of seeds of all things may have been an unnecessary reference of the doxographer to the everything in everything principle and not to the necessity that literally all (kinds of) seeds must be in the air before they become operational.

appear to belong equally to all animals and not even to all humans” (A100). And yet, man is the most intelligent (φρονιμώτατος) being (A102).

Living beings are endowed with the power of sense perception which is possible through the sensory organs. Perception occurs through opposites. Sight occurs through a reflection in the pupil of the eye (A92.27). Smells are perceived by inhalation, sound by penetration of sound into the brain (A92.28). However, the senses are not reliable witnesses and they can be deceptive (A95, A96). They are feeble, and humans cannot determine the truth with them (B21). However, as stated in the context of discussing perception, Mind is responsible for all things (Theophrastus, *De sensu* 38). It seems that not an individual mind is meant here, but the cosmic Mind, the seat of intelligence and knowledge.

It seems that the human soul is, as it were, an organ of reasoning, and it requires constant presence of Mind to perform any mental function. There is apparently no individual mind in the soul of a living being. The soul thinks because Mind is constantly present in it. A statement can be ventured that a living being does not think: it is Mind that thinks through it. Mind is capable of cognition without living beings; therefore, it is not necessary for Mind that living beings exist for it to exercise cognition. But a living being must be constantly enabled in its cognitive functioning by the presence of Mind. The soul with its rational abilities is the proper venue for Mind to manifest its presence in the world. In this view of Mind and man, human individuality is dissolved in individuality of Mind. Human rationality is extracted from the human soul and is projected onto the cosmic plane to become the rationality of Mind. There is only one complete being in the universe, Mind, and all other beings have a dependent existence. In a way, living beings more so, since their life and rationality depend on the constant supervision of Mind, whereas inanimate nature can continue its existence after being provided with the initial push at the moment of making the primal mixture into the cosmos.

Because Mind is omniscient and knows the entire future, it does not have to use perception to accomplish its task. And so, sensory cognition belongs exclusively to a particular living being. Perception is not the means for Mind to know itself – as omniscient, Mind does not need such a Hegelian mediation, but the living being does not possess reason (mind), it does not have the tool needed for reasoning.

Cognition of independent living beings seems to be limited to the sensory type only. And if any reasoning power – reasoning by analogy, simple induction, etc. – should be ascribed to them, the power is due to the activating presence of Mind. Rationality proper is reserved for Mind alone,

and Mind by its presence in living beings lends it to them by activating the abilities of the soul. In this way, the living being, although devoid of mind, is not mindless, although incapable of exhibiting rationality independently, the living being can manifest it when incited by Mind.

It is unclear how Mind influences the soul and how it stirs it to cognitive activity. According to Anaxagoras, the brain is formed first since all senses arise from it (A108). The brain thus is a center of sensory perception. This may mean that the soul has its seat in the brain, although it is possible that the soul is spread throughout the body since it is a principle of motion (A100). But because of the importance of the brain, at least for perception, an area in the brain may be a meeting point between the soul and Mind<sup>7</sup>.

An individual human being does not disappear altogether, only its independence does since its existence and its mental cognition have to be constantly maintained by Mind<sup>8</sup>. However, the fact that Mind enables the soul's rationality does not consign a rational being to passivity in respect to the rational dimension. As already mentioned, for Anaxagoras, man is the most intelligent (φρονιμώτατος) being since he has hands (A102). This could be taken to mean that man's superior rationality resides, as it were, in his hands, not in his head, as it was understood by Plutarch who stated that Anaxagoras ascribed human wisdom and understanding to the hands (*De fraterno amore* 478 e). In Plutarch's opinion, it would be more cogent to state the opposite, namely, that the hands are the result of man's superior intelligence, because nature distributes tools such as hands according to one's intelligence. In this he repeated the opinion of Aristotle (*De part. anim.* 687 a9–10 = A102). However, Anaxagoras in his statement was consistent with his basic assumptions. In the primal mixture, there were seeds, including seeds of humans. Therefore, these seeds allowed for the formation of the physical constitution of humans. The existence and composition of seeds is presu-

<sup>7</sup> The brain is the seat of the human mind, according to A. Laks, *Les fonctions de l'intellect. À propos, derechef, du Nous d'Anaxagore*, "Methodos" 2 (2002), §14; [http://philosophie.ac-creteil.fr/IMG/pdf/Laks\\_intellect\\_Anaxagore.pdf](http://philosophie.ac-creteil.fr/IMG/pdf/Laks_intellect_Anaxagore.pdf), 16.09.2010.

<sup>8</sup> But this situation can lead to the exasperating statement that for Anaxagoras, a living organism is "a plaything of Mind, a nonentity" since only materials are eternal things. Life perishes and Mind "leaves to man only an empty, perishable appearance of individuality and personality", F. Breier, *Die Philosophie des Anaxagoras von Klazomenä nach Aristoteles: ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Philosophie*, Berlin: Bethge 1840, p. 78. With the spirituality of the world concentrated in Mind, "we should abandon an expectation from him that he should recognize the imperishable individuality of spiritual being". Therefore, "the assumption of individual immortality of the human soul is alien to Anaxagoras' system", F. Hoffmann, *Über die Gottesidee des Anaxagoras, des Sokrates und des Platon, im Zusammenhange ihrer Lehren von der Welt und dem Menschen*, Würzburg: Thein 1860, p. 9.

ably not the work of Mind. They have always been in the primal mixture and they very likely will also exist after the dissipation of the human body so that another human being will be formed from the same seed. Also, a human being as a physical entity is not the work of Mind. After Mind gave the first push to the mixture, physical processes started including the development of seeds. These seeds, as seeds, had a potential to develop into particular structures. The existence of hands in humans was already part of the potentiality of human seeds. But by themselves, these seeds would develop into humans who are physical beings capable only of perception. Rationality in the Anaxagorean universe is limited to Mind alone and no other being can become rational or participate in rationality without Mind's involvement. Therefore, since the seeds already existed, Mind used this physical datum to make the human being complete by enhancing it with rationality which flows from Mind itself. Mind added the highest rationality to humans since they have hands, which in the estimation of Mind, allowed humans, when augmented with rationality, to become the most advanced animate beings.

The soul can exercise its borrowed rationality when, as it were, the light of Mind shines upon it. The soul's rational potential can be squandered or it can be developed and perfected by human activity. Therefore, Anaxagoras would probably agree with a version of Aristotle's dictum that the hand is the result of intelligence, or, rather, the proper use of the hand is assured by the proper level of rationality which can only be found in humans. The level of rationality depends on how Mind's light can shine through the soul and that, in turn, depends on how well the soul is maintained, which is the work of a particular individual. Therefore, the hand allows for the development of rationality enabled by Mind, and only an adequate level of intelligence allows for the proper use of the hand. Therefore, "by experience and memory and wisdom (σοφία), and skill (τέχνη), according to Anaxagoras, we use [animals], we take [their] honey and milk [them] and plunder them and take everything" (B21b). Taking advantage of animals requires superior intelligence and superior practical skills, and such skills can be exercised with superior organs, in particular, the hand.

Because the rational workings of the soul depend on the constant presence of Mind, it is possible to merge the two too closely and see inside a particular soul a fraction of the cosmic Mind at work<sup>9</sup>. Moreover, an in-

<sup>9</sup> Hollow bodies have "imprisoned in their depth a true piece of *fluid-spirit* [= Mind, p. 299] which dwells there as a prisoner due to impermeability of the sensible and the νοῦς", J. Zafriropulo, *Anaxagore de Clazomène*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres 1948, p. 332; the soul is "an amputated fragment of νοῦς", p. 337. "In every organism ... [there is] a piece of Nous as the person, the self, of the organism", F. M. Cleve, *The Philosophy of Anaxagoras*, The Hague:

dividual soul can be blended with this fraction viewed as individual mind. Also, the soul can be viewed as simply a manifestation of Mind in individual living beings<sup>10</sup>. Already Aristotle rebuked Anaxagoras for being unclear on the subject and for creating at one time an impression that Mind (or mind) and the soul are different entities and at another time identifying them<sup>11</sup>. In his interpretation of Anaxagoras' views, Aristotle leaned toward this identification, which has also been accepted by many authors since then.

However, it seems that a clear distinction should be maintained between Mind and the soul. Mind is one, indivisible and immutable and thus cannot be divided into parts, into individual minds residing in living beings<sup>12</sup>. The same Mind is in one living being as it is in another. Also, the soul is an individual entity, one soul in one living being. The soul constitutes the individuality of the living being and is not merely a manifestation of Mind. Mind does manifest itself in a living being, not as the soul, but through the soul. Mind must be constantly present in the individual soul for the soul to

Nijhoff 1973, p. 101. Cf. the statement that "soul must be understood as in some way an individualized form of mind", G. H. Clark, *Empedocles and Anaxagoras in Aristotle's De anima*, Philadelphia 1929, p. 44, and that an individual mind (a finite intelligence) is "the predominance of sorts of the universal intelligence in this particular being", Zevort, *op. cit.*, pp. 90, 136.

<sup>10</sup> Strictly speaking, Mind refers only to the highest intelligence that moves cosmic matter and to the soul when considered as the immanent principle of living beings, W. Schorn, *Anaxagorae Clazomenii et Diogenis Apolloniatae fragmenta*, Bonn: Thormann 1839, p. 28; "nous in its role as the mover and organizer in individual living things is soul", Curd, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle said that "Anaxagoras seems to distinguish the soul and Mind, but in practice, he treats them as one substance", *De anima* 405 a13-15 = A100; A55. Cf. Tertullian's vexation about the fact that Anaxagoras pronounces Mind to be pure, simple, and unmixed, and "on these grounds he separates [Mind] from mixing with the soul and yet elsewhere he merges it with the soul" (*De anima* 12.2). Philoponus commented on Aristotle's statement by saying that Anaxagoras distinguished Mind and soul at the stage of creating the cosmos, after which Mind and soul are identified (*In De anima* 72.9-10). Identification of Mind and the soul is accepted as Anaxagoras' position by E. Schaubach, *Anaxagorae Clazomenii fragmenta*, Leipzig: Hartmann 1827, pp. 185-186, and by Breier, *op. cit.*, pp. 73, 75, who also viewed the soul as a manifestation of Mind, p. 74. This identification was carried to the extreme by F. Krohn, *Der νοῦς bei Anaxagoras*, Münster: Bredt 1907, who considered the idea of the cosmic Mind as a fable (p. 15) and νοῦς to be only the human mind (p. 6), and, at the same time, the attributes of mind and the soul to be indistinguishable (p. 12), i.e., mind and the soul are the same.

<sup>12</sup> "Intelligence and soul, in Anaxagoras, far from being identical, represent two extremes and opposites of the same process, the one transcendent, the other immanent, one spiritual, the other corporeal", S. Fimiani, *Alcune osservazioni su la relazione tra il νοῦς e la ψυχή nella dottrina filosofica di Anassagora*, "Rivista italiana di filosofia" 4 (1889), pp. 75, 72.

be capable of thought. Only in this sense could the soul's dormant cognitive ability be called an individual mind<sup>13</sup>. Incidentally, such an ability would be a forerunner of Aristotle's passive mind residing in each human soul. In this way, Mind would be a counterpart of the active mind from Averroes' interpretation of Aristotle's concise and not altogether clear theory of active mind: according to this interpretation, one cosmic active mind enables the activity of individual passive minds.

### 3. Death


The rationality of the soul is enabled by Mind, but this does not mean the soul is of the same makeup as Mind. The soul is a corporeal structure, but of different makeup than the body. It is made out of air and aether, two eternally existing substances, but the structure of the soul is not eternal and can retain its integrity only as long as the body exists. Both the soul and the body are physical entities that are subject to physical and biological laws, and these laws by themselves are insufficient to ensure the immortality of the soul. Mind's constant presence in the soul enables its rationality, but when the biological processes have run their course, the soul dies: death is the separation of the soul [from the body] (A103). The soul would be fully a soul if it could independently exercise its mental abilities and if it could remember. However, the activation and maintenance of these abilities are due to Mind. Therefore, it would be insufficient for the immortality of the soul if Mind built into the soul the ability for the eternal maintenance of its stability, since this would mean the existence of a soul incapable of thinking. However, it is conceivable that Mind could maintain the life of the soul indefinitely by constantly maintaining its integrity, but it is doubtful that Anaxagoras contemplated such a possibility. When he learned about the death of his children, he said: "nature condemned both of them and me to death a long time ago", and "I knew they were mortal when I begot them" (A1.13, A33). There is nothing in this statement which would indicate a hopeful prospect of life after death and a possibility of reuniting with his children. On the other hand, at his deathbed, when he was asked if he would like to be brought to his hometown, he said, "it is not necessary, since the roads to

<sup>13</sup> It seems that the interpretation proposed by E. Arleth, *Die Lehre des Anaxagoras vom Geist und der Seele*, "Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie" 8 (1895), is close to this view. According to Arleth, there are many minds; they are principles of animation and of cognition, but they all are of the same kind of essence, although different in cognitive power (p. 202). They are not identical with the divine Mind since Mind is an unmoved mover, whereas they are causes of motion that themselves are in motion (p. 203).



the underworld are obviously the same from anywhere” (A34a). Or – in what may be just a different version of the same event – he said to a grieving man in a foreign land, “the descent to Hades is the same from anywhere” (A1.11). Should the reference to Hades be treated literally or is it just a way of saying that it does not matter where our grave is, since it has no influence on our future existence, or rather, inexistence? The latter seems to be more likely.

And yet, there is also a statement that, for Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, and Diogenes, the soul was indestructible (A93), that is, the soul would seem to be immortal, after all. But this could be carried to the extreme and, in fact, there is a testimony that, according to Anaxagoras, and, as phrased by Euripides, “not one of the things that come to be dies, but separating off from one another, they manifest different forms” (Aetius 5.19.23). Thus, everything is immortal. However, such a conclusion stated by Euripides is only partially justified. It is based on the principle that nothing comes from nothing, nothing is truly created *ex nihilo*, no thing comes to be or passes away but is mixed together from the things that are and dissociates into them, as stated by Anaxagoras himself (B17, B10). But this refers only to eternal substances, such as bone, gold, air, aether, etc. Air is eternal, but the soul composed of air, i.e., the structural aspect of the soul, is temporal. The soul dies because its structure is dissolved, but air remains and in that sense the soul, or the psychic substance, is indestructible.

For man, only this life remains. Although man is highest in the hierarchy among existing beings – and even one testimony states that according to Plato and Anaxagoras, God fashioned the world for the sake of man (Aetius 1.7.7) – man’s existence is limited to earthly life. What is the meaning of life, then? Apparently, the goal of life is contemplation and the freedom that it brings (A29) and man is born to contemplate heavens and the order of the cosmos (A30). Mind seems to make man alive and rational so that man can admire its handiwork, the order and harmony of the world<sup>14</sup>. But this is where man’s cosmic role ends. 

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<sup>14</sup> Mind is the cause of beauty and order (A100).