Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (ca. 500–428 B.C.)

The progress of thought is leading toward a non-mechanistic concept of reality; the universe is gradually coming to be described as a great mind rather than a great machine.

James Jeans

Personality

If Empedocles is the last great Greek thinker in whom the Apollonian and Dionysian elements, the practical and the religious, the rational and the mystical, as yet remain unified, Anaxagoras is the first genuine representative of the scientific-philosophic spirit in today’s sense. To the question of why it is better to be born than not to be born, he would answer, “In order to study the heavens and the order of the entire universe”. To this philosophic inclination, he would passionately devote himself, making it the aim of his life and freeing it of all social, political, practical and religious overtones. He would slight worldly interests, and to the objection of his fellow citizens that he was not concerned with politics and did not honor his homeland, he would answer, pointing to the heavens, “I honor her indeed and am deeply concerned for her”. Anaxagoras would be the first Western thinker to lend a wholly independent and self-contained dimension to scientific investigation and thought, separating them from all mystical tendencies, which as yet remained widespread in his time.

Life

Born in 500, B.C., in Clazomenae, Ionia, he was a contemporary of Empedocles and Leucippus. Although he was of a well-to-do family, he left his property to relatives in order to go to Athens, the glowing intellectual capital of his time, ‘the Greece of Greece’, as it was styled by Thucydides. He would remain in Athens thirty years, teaching and associating with the intellectual leaders of the city – especially Pericles. It was the friendship with Pericles, which would be the cause of his later being forced to leave Athens. So as to attack Pericles through Anaxagoras, Pericles’s political adversaries passed a bill and on the basis of this vote, Anaxagoras was accused of impiety, because “he called the sun a fiery stone” in an age when the Athenians still believed the sun to be a god. Anaxagoras finally was aided by Pericles to escape to Lampsacus on the Hellespont. There he would continue his teaching, founding a school of philosophy, where he would be succeeded after death.
by his student Archelaus of Athens, who would become the mentor of Socrates. Though a stranger, he was greatly honored by the Lampsacenes, and according to his wish the day of his death was declared a holiday for children. Upon his tomb was inscribed: ‘Here lies Anaxagoras, who ascertained to the highest degree the ultimate truth of the universe’.  

**Writings**

The period immediately following the victorious Persian wars (492–479, B.C.) were Athens’s ‘Golden Age’. In this cultural capital of the Hellenes – ‘the soul and the Magistrate’s Hall’ of Greece – where tragedy, comedy and the plastic arts were already at a peak, creating masterpieces that remain peerless to our day, Anaxagoras would be the first to introduce philosophy. It would also be inevitable that he would be the first philosopher in history to stand trial and finally be forced to flee.

In his main treatise, *On nature*, “written in an attractive and dignified style”, he would deal with the first principles, matter and motion. He considered “as the archē of everything mind and matter; mind as creator and matter as product”. Being the first to introduce *mind* as the cause of motion, Anaxagoras would himself be called ‘the Mind’.

**Matter**

It appears that what most concerned Anaxagoras was not the structure of the universe so much as the possibility of change within the restrictive limits of the Parmenidean principle that Being is uncreated and imperishable. In order to explain change, it would be necessary to develop a theory about the constitution of things in the tangible world. Anaxagoras would support this theory on the basis of the following principles:

- “Nothing comes to be from, or perishes into, non-existence.”

This is the pervading Parmenidean principle that could not be set aside by any later Greek thinker.

- “In everything there is a portion of everything except Mind”.

Anaxagoras would arrive at that conclusion as an answer to his basic question, “How can hair come out of not-hair, and flesh out of not-flesh”? This would be possible, according to Anaxagoras, only if “everything has a portion of everything”. On the basis of this reasoning, Anaxagoras would reject Eleatic monism, would refuse to limit existence to the four roots of Empedocles, and affirm that ‘being’ is a common characteristic of all things. The infinite variety of all material things, as