

The Pluralists 2

Anaxagoras (b510BC)



First some revision to help grasp this week's lesson.

Idea 1: **monism** = everything is fundamentally one.

Idea 2: **atomism** = everything is made up of things that are different.

Differences can be

quantitative: how much? Is there more of one thing than another?

qualitative: of what kind? Is one thing a different sort of thing to another?

Philosophers have (and still do) discussed these two opposite ideas about the nature of reality ever since the time of the Milesian philosophers we studied in Week 2 of this course.

There are also two different approaches to epistemology (the theory of knowledge):

Approach 1: **empiricism** = we know by experiencing.

Approach 2: **rationalism** = we know by thinking and reflecting.

Anaxagoras' idea was that the “many” that makes up reality is an infinite diversity of qualitatively different *seeds*. These seeds are infinite in number, infinitely small and all different. He said that what brings the seeds together is mind, *nous*, which is his term for motion.

He thought that originally, everything was in a homogeneous mixture and it was so homogeneous that nothing particular was noticeable because the seeds were so smoothly blended. This reminds us of Anaximander's idea of the “boundless” which we encountered in Week 2. Rather like Anaximander, Anaxagoras said that mind sets up a motion in the seeds forming a circular vortex and some seeds start clumping together and separate out in various sequences. Everything that separates out has a predominance of one type of seed. So a frog is predominately frog seeds. There are other seeds in it as well but it is mostly frog. And so on for everything in the universe. The seeds are infinitely small and infinite in number and everything has a little bit of everything else in it although you do not perceive this because the seeds are so small.

Unlike the Milesians, Anaxagoras was not a monists, rather he considered that there was an infinite number of stuffs (seeds) that were all qualitatively different. His view was not a motivation to research into the natural world. The answer to the question: why is something the way it is? is always just that it has more of those particular seeds. A frog just has more frog seeds in it than anything else. This is not very helpful in seeking answers about the world around us!

From the above description of his ideas would you say that Anaxagoras was a Rationalist or an Empiricist?

What is the problem with Rationalism?

Answers on the next page.

Answers:

Anaxagoras did not come to his conclusions by observation but by rational reflection so he is a Rationalist.

The Rationalist's problem (see Week 5) is that using only reason different philosophers come up with different conclusions. Therefore it seems reason alone cannot lead to the truth! This is because *human* reason is fallen and finite. God, however, is infinite and his reasoning powers are faultless.