

Anaxagoras' theory of the universal Mind was the precursor to Hegel's idealist Theory of the Absolute.' - Discuss.

‘...nothing comes into being or perishes, but is rather compounded or dissolved from things that are...coming into being composition and perishing dissolving.’

Here Anaxagoras is remaining within the Parmenidian framework of denying change and continues the notion of basic stuff being in everything, only the concentrations of stuff varies, which affects our perception of difference.

When it comes to the mind, Anaxagoras says it is everywhere and it is thus a universal absolute entity that is not simply given out to individuals, but we are manifestations of that universal Mind. Mind controls all things. For this awareness, Anaxagoras uses the term ‘*nous*’:

‘In everything there is a share of everything except nous, but there are some things in which nous, too, is present.’

‘Mind, which ever is, is assuredly even now where everything else is too, in the surrounding mass and in the things that have been either aggregated or separated.’

‘The other things have a share of everything, but nous is unlimited and self-ruling and has been mixed with no thing, but is alone itself by itself.’

There seems to be an inconsistency in the above quotes attributed to Anaxagoras as to whether Mind is in all things or not. We can only ever try to reassemble the fragments of Anaxagoras’ thinking as passed onto us by others but I will assume Anaxagoras’ idea of Mind is everywhere, universal while remaining unmixed and independent. Thus Mind has knowledge of everything and for us its importance is the knowledge that it ultimately shapes our world.

For Anaxagoras, our own sense perceptions are based on the experience of feeling the differences in our environment: ‘like is not affected by like’. So we are responding to our perception of comparisons. I sense only what is colder or hotter than my current state, not my current state. In this way, the universal mind knows through human perceptions and is thus aware of any physical change in the universe. We have control of our bodies through our minds; that nutrition and growth work; and through the great revolutions of the universe - so the greater *nous* is known.

In controlling the revolution of things, *nous* is making everything that appears to us. Anaxagoras does not suggest this *nous* has a purpose in controlling things; that it is a god. He is claiming:

1. *Nous* has the power to know and understand all ingredients.
2. *Nous* in us has some understanding through sense perception moving beyond it in thought.
3. Things have stability and can thus be knowable through our senses.

However, our senses are feeble and only know things superficially. We are not able to know the truth – ‘appearances are a sight of the unseen’. At this point we can segue Hegel’s thinking into the discussion. Hegel will agree with Anaxagoras here, that the phenomenon of the world is that which we can base our reality on but it is only a partial view of reality - so where is the full reality? For Hegel, we have to accept the Mind as a phenomenon and it is also not just part of the reality, but ultimately, it is reality.

For the subject to know the objective world there must be some sense of an identity to thought, otherwise the subject would have no access to the objective world. Here, Hegel is attempting to resolve the subjective/objective dualism problem in the same way as Anaxagoras had, by accepting the universality of mind.

There can be no doubt that Hegel sees Anaxagoras’ description of universal Mind as essential in the development of philosophy and particularly his own idealist grounding. From Hegel’s own ‘History of Philosophy: Greek Philosophy’ Chapter One he tells us: ‘With Anaxagoras it is the moving, self-determining thought itself that is then known as existence, and this is a great step forward.’ It is the supremacy of objective Thinking that may classify Hegel as the arch idealist and he is acknowledging the origin of this in Anaxagoras. Hegel again: ‘It is the Universal, Thought itself, in and for itself, without opposition, all embracing which is the substance or principle as any opposition to it has to return to itself.’

We can then end any ‘discussion’ as to whether Anaxagoras’ universal Mind was a precursor to Hegel’s theory of the Absolute as it clearly was, as stated by Hegel himself. It might then be more useful to see how Hegel develops his own attitude to this universality, to determine how close he stuck to Anaxagoras and how far he strayed and whether he departed from him altogether detaching himself from the precursor.

For Anaxagoras, Mind is everywhere eternally but for Hegel the Mind has developed historically, even though it existed in a lower form before Mind came into being, historically through modern humans. It is that tension between our first self, the subject’s own self and the second self, the objective not self in the material world that leads to the dialectic which enables consciousness to ascend to a universal self-consciousness or Absolute self; a universal mind that develops over time through the actions of individuals, collections of people and governments. Hegel is using the *Geist* (spirit) not as an object or transcendental god but as an absolute ‘natural’ spirit driving a teleological principle of history and an idealistic principle of world explanation. This is distinct from the more ‘localized’ *nous* of Anaxagoras being everywhere that matter is and operating as a system of control but without purpose.

How big is the difference between *nous* and *Geist*? It would seem that Anaxagoras’ *nous* is where everything else is while Hegel’s *Geist* is not existent with things but is the whole of reality itself. This is a crucial distinction in thinking, even though they recognise Mind as universal, it is in their operation that the difference is clear. *Nous* and *Geist* are not the same at all.

In Hegel's eyes, the Absolute is by necessity a product of the differences themselves, taking subject and object as one difference there has to be a very striving for unity. For Anaxagoras, the Mind is influenced by our perceptions or senses of differences, where for Hegel the Mind becomes because of them. For Anaxagoras, *nous* is more of 'an awareness' than reasoning, while for Hegel reasoned knowledge can become evident and even embodied by human figures. It is Thought as Reason that ultimately plays out in the world. For Anaxagoras, it is the universal Mind that uses us to monitor differences; as its sensors in mapping the universe, where for Hegel it is us, through our use of the dialectic posed by opposites, which can then make the Absolute spirit that steers our world in a 'forward' direction.

If we take a Hegelian historical perspective, we could say Anaxagoras has synthesised Subject and Object into a universal that helps philosophy step forward. Thanks to Anaxagoras, we might say that Socrates, Plato and Aristotle will then all be comfortable with the concept of a world spirit. In breaking into the problem of Mind as an ultimate object itself Anaxagoras allows Hegel to eventually attempt what might have been the final idealist Theory of Everything. The discussion, I suggest, ends there.

Arguably, Hegel, as post-Kantian idealist, takes us to the most evolved form of Anaxagoras' paradigm of the objective, universal Mind when he notes:

'The knowledge of Mind is the highest and hardest, just because it is the most 'concrete' of sciences. The significance of that most Absolute commandment, Know thyself – whether we look at it in itself or under the historical circumstances of its first utterance is not to promote more self-knowledge in respect of the particular capacities, character, propensities, and foibles of the single self. The knowledge it commands means that of man's genuine reality – of which is essentially and ultimately true and real – of mind as the true and essential being.'