

Essay number 5: Dialogue between Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes on the question of: What is the reason for change in the primary substances?

Thales: It is very encouraging to see that my investigations into the nature of the universe and its substance have become a past time here in Miletus, my good friends, and that you have continued to think about these issues, but I must say that I find your thoughts particularly odd in one respect.

Anaximenes: What is that old Thales?

Thales: You both seem to have exceedingly strange accounts of change between substances. On the one hand you, Anaximenes, have a theory that things become more dense or more relaxed, which I would very much encourage you to explain, and on the other hand you Anaximander, believe that there is some sort of cosmic justice that leads to a balance between opposites. Whereas it seems to me quite obvious that the change in substances occurs out of the energy that comes from within themselves.

Anaximander: Well since you are the oldest here and certainly have developed a reputation for being the first among us, why don't you start by explaining how you think change comes about?

Thales: Well why not? Of course you know that I have said in the past that 'all things are full of gods'. It is possible that nobody really understood what I meant. But the point of all this is that we see movement all the time in objects. Who is moving them? How do they come to move? And in fact why is it that we ourselves are able to move at all? I've given up on those Olympians, you know, but I see rocks that have a power of themselves to move objects and other stones. Rivers flow. Plants grow out of the ground. The wind around us moves. I think that the gods are actually in these things themselves and moving all the time. Otherwise, everything would just stand still.

Anaximenes: Well, that's all very well old man, but really, do you think there is a god in every single object. How many gods do you want? You say you've given up on the Olympians, but I don't see why you need to bring in a new team of gods, and at that a team that seems almost infinite in number. What's more, it seems to me that the sort of movement in each object is very similar. Things have motion in all directions that is either slow or fast. But they move the same way. Things heat up and cool down, but still in the same manner. Tell me, when ice changes into water does that mean it comes to be inhabited by a new god? Or is it the same god with a different nature? Don't you think that instead of many gods in all the different objects of the universe we might have an underlying process going on?

Thales: And what do you think that might be my good friend?

Anaximenes: Condensation and rarefaction caused by a constant motion of the primary substance, leading to forms that are thicker and the thinner. Objects change into one another depending on their state of density. The underlying substance is air, but it changes. In fact, you see that when a piece of hot metal changes temperature, from hot to cold, that it actually changes from a liquid to a solid. Likewise we see something similar with ice and water, and then with water and steam.

Anaximander: But my dear Anaximenes, what you are failing to do with this theory of yours is to explain *why* things actually change. You say that making air less dense leads to fire. But why would something become less

dense in the first place. We know that fires exist, but the energy in them almost seems to come out of the objects that burn themselves. On this account I'd almost be inclined to agree with Thales in that there is some sort of god in the objects, if I didn't know better.

Thales: So you do know better do you?

Anaximander: Well, it seems to me that you are both off the mark in different ways. I can't agree with you Thales that it makes any sense to put gods inside all the objects of the universe either. But what you both fail to explain is how everything stays in balance. And this is the key to why we have both fire, which you Anaximenes say is a 'relaxed' substance, but also rocks, which you say are very dense. Because all things are in harmony, and change in one object will lead to an equal reactions by the cosmic force, so that there will be an equal reaction. And hence it is possible to have all types of objects, but no one comes to dominate, because a change into one, say from water to steam, will be countered by an opposite change, say from water to ice. And hence we have a balance, and the underlying substance, the apeiron, remains the basis of all the elements, but they will change their qualitative state in harmony so that no one type comes to dominate. Because if all things are in eternal motion, my dear Anaximenes, then I don't see how you can show that anything is slowing down. How can anything be in balance, but would they constantly be moving towards the type of substance that has the most motion? I have a feeling that your world, Anaximenes, is really full of fire.

Anaximenes: Well that is all very interesting, but are you sure that your theory doesn't need eternal motion as well. In my opinion, if there isn't eternal motion, then I don't think that your 'cosmic balancing act' is going to work, because if things stopped moving for a moment then there would be no need for any counter-reactions- in fact, the whole universe would stop, and nothing would ever change. But besides, I haven't said that constant motion leads to more motion. Where did you get that idea from? All I said is that air, which is the primary substance, is always on the move and hence always changing into different forms.

Thales: Well my question to you both is how you in fact explain humans themselves. Anaximander, you say that all things are in balance but what is the opposite of human? Don't say it is death because death is a lack of change, a permanent state- it can't balance anything. Unless you still believe in Hades? But surely you've moved on from that. No my friends, the god in us leaves us when we die- that is why we stop moving. And Anaximenes, how can we be full of air- I hope you are only referring to yourself then. But that is enough for an old man like myself. No doubt someone intelligent will come along and improve on all these theories.