

# AN INSTRUCTIVE FAILURE: THE STATUS OF ANAXAGORAS IN PLATO'S PHAEDO AND PARMENIDES, AND ARISTOTLE'S METAPHYSICS BOOK A

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For both Plato and Aristotle, Anaxagoras is a disappointment and his philosophy a failure. But Anaxagoras' is an extraordinary failure, one that holds a privileged place in Socrates' account of his development in the *Phaedo* (96a-102a), in Aristotle's history of philosophy in Book A of *Metaphysics*, and in *Parmenides*. Anaxagoras is of vital importance to Plato and Aristotle because it is in his failure that the problem of the relation of the causes emerges as an urgent problem for philosophy. Anaxagoras posits Nous<sup>1</sup> as both a self-related principle and as effecting the order of the all-mixed world; yet, he is unable to show how Nous, in its isolation, can enter into ordering relationship with the world. While Plato and Aristotle agree on this criticism, Aristotle goes one step further. Aristotle argues that this problem pertains equally to the self-related forms of Platonism. The purpose of this paper is to outline Anaxagoras' central role in Plato's *Parmenides* and in Book A of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. I propose that the problem of Anaxagoras is a vehicle through which Plato works out the relationship among the causes and through which Aristotle develops his arguments against the tenability of the causes in Platonism.

After praising Anaxagoras for introducing Nous into philosophy as the "cause and order of all arrangement" (*Metaphysics* 984b16), Aristotle asserts that he has grasped "two of the causes which we distinguished in our work on nature – the matter and the source of the movement" (985a11-12). The compatibility of these assertions is puzzling. The implication is that Nous, cause and order of all, is nothing but an efficient cause. Is there no teleology by which Nous sets all things in order? Aristotle claims Anaxagoras uses Nous simply as "a *deus ex machina* for the making of the world, and when he is at a loss to tell from what cause something necessarily is, then he drags reason in, but in all other cases ascribes events to anything rather than to reason" (984a18-22). Aristotle claims that Anaxagoras promises the use of teleology with Nous but fails to follow through.

Socrates' assessment of Anaxagoras largely accords with Aristotle's. He heard that Anaxagoras posited Nous as the cause that "puts the world in order and is responsible for all things" (*Phaedo* 97c). Socrates felt that Nous could hold great explanatory power, and he notes his excitement at the prospect of finding "a teacher of the cause concerning the things that *are*" (97d). But when Socrates rushed to read in Anaxagoras' books how Mind ordered everything according to the best, he saw a man "who didn't employ Mind at all and didn't hold any causes responsible for putting things in order, but instead put the blame on air and ether and water and other things many and absurd" (98b-c). Instead of

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<sup>1</sup> Though Aristotle does not credit him with coming up with Nous. He suggests that Hermodotus of Clazomenae used it first (984b19).

explaining things according to *Nous*, Anaxagoras reverted to mechanism. This leads some scholars to conclude that Anaxagoras' teleology eluded Plato and Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> While this is quite possible, I propose the more subtle reading that their denial of teleology in his work points to a fatal flaw. In other words, Anaxagoras may have intended to be teleological but his theory does not allow for it.

In the early chapters of Book A of *Metaphysics*, Aristotle praises Anaxagoras' discovery of *Nous*, which made him seem "like a sober man in contrast with the random talk of his predecessors" (984a15-18). But when he returns to the subject in chapter 8, he focuses not on Anaxagoras' uniqueness in comparison to his predecessors but on his similarity to Aristotle's own contemporaries. Aristotle contends that, read properly, Anaxagoras "would perhaps be seen to be somewhat modern in his views" (989b5-6). The problems that doom Anaxagoras's older system are the same flaws that doom Platonism.

Book A includes a review of the philosophical tradition's search for causes. Aristotle states that this review "will be of profit to the present inquiry, for we shall either find another kind of cause, or be more convinced of the correctness of those which we now maintain" (983b2-6). While Aristotle concludes that all of philosophy hitherto has been a 'lispering' attempt to name the causes of the *Physics* (993a12-15), it is nevertheless essential for Aristotle to work out the problems of the philosophical tradition before proceeding with his own philosophy. Patricia Curd calls the methodological principle governing this review of the search for causes 'translation' (146). Aristotle provides a conceptual translation of the history of thought, "using his own technical terms to describe or summarize a predecessor's idea" (Curd 146). Using his 'translations', Aristotle immanently critiques each one of his predecessor's to see if his causes can explain what they are meant to explain. Aristotle's 'translation' of Plato and Anaxagoras into his own terminology brings to light a common position and problem: they only make use of two causes and they have no means by which to connect them. Although Plato and Anaxagoras employ different causes, with only two nothing can be explained.

Socrates is disillusioned by Anaxagoras's failure to provide a teleological explanation of what is best and claims never to have found a satisfactory answer, saying, "I was robbed of this and never became capable of discovering it myself or learning it from another" (*Phaedo* 99c). It is young Socrates that is thus robbed, and it is young Socrates that we return to in *Parmenides*. Here, Socrates maintains a view of the forms that is unable to withstand Parmenides' devastating critique. Without conflating their unique problems, I take this critique of the forms in the first part of *Parmenides* to pertain also to the problem of *Nous*. Following this critique, the gymnastic that makes up the second part

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<sup>2</sup> For example, David Sedley: "If all the other worlds can be conjectured to have a sun and a moon, the only plausible explanation is that *nous* is assumed to have planned and created them that way. And once we appreciate that, we can bring into focus the teleological subtext which eluded Plato" (Sedley 22).

of the dialogue is an attempt to point the way towards overcoming their common problem.<sup>3</sup>

In Fragment B12<sup>4</sup>, Anaxagoras defines the capacities of *Nous*. Most fundamentally, *Nous* has knowledge and power over all things. With regard to knowledge, Anaxagoras claims that “indeed it maintains all discernment (*gnōmē*) about everything [...] And *Nous* knew (*egnō*) them all” (B12); and with regard to power, “*Nous* has control over all things that have soul, both the larger and the smaller. [...] And whatever sorts of things were going to be, and whatever sorts were and now are not, and as many as are now and whatever sorts will be, all these *Nous* set in order” (B12). *Nous*, acting upon the primordial mixture, which is “everything in everything”, sets the universe revolving, whereupon the primordial mixture begins to separate out and recombine into new mixtures. The primordial mixture never becomes unmixed; each thing still has every other thing in it. The specificity of each thing is the predominance of a certain element within it, so that “each one is and was most manifestly those things of which there are the most in it” (B12). *Nous*, as the one who orders the revolution, knows everything involved in it.

Anaxagoras explains the conditions for this knowledge and power. *Nous* is unlimited and self-ruling. Most crucially, *Nous* “has been mixed with no thing, but is alone, itself by itself [*αὐτὸς ἐπ’ ἑωυτοῦ*]” (B12). The isolation of *Nous*, its purity and its radical separation from all other things, is the essential condition for *Nous*’ power over and therefore knowledge of all things:

For if it were not by itself, but had been mixed with anything else, then it would partake of all things, if it had been mixed with anything (for there is a share of everything in everything just as I have said before); and the things mixed together with it would thwart it, so that it would control none of the things in the way that it in fact does, being alone by itself (B12).

*Nous*, in its seclusion, knows and controls everything. Everything has a share of everything except for *Nous* which has no share of anything. All *Nous* is alike whereas “nothing else is like anything else” (B12). Any compromise in *Nous*’s purity would result in a loss of its sovereignty. Were self-identical *Nous* to have any share in the all-different stuff of the world-mixture, it would lose its power over the world. In Aristotle’s words, the

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<sup>3</sup> Reading *Parmenides* in this way suggests that the fact that the visitors to whom the conversation is recited are from Anaxagoras’ hometown of Clazomenae is no accident. This reading rejects the position, put succinctly by Reginald Allen in his introduction to *Parmenides* that, “in absence of further evidence, it must be regarded as accidental to the interpretation of the *Parmenides* that Clazomenae was also the birthplace of Anaxagoras” (71). While I have no new external evidence, I argue that, far from being accidental, the fact that the visitors are from Clazomenae provides the context for interpreting the abstract content of the dialogue. This follows James Doull in his commentary on *Parmenides* where he maintains that from of Socrates’, Zeno’s and *Parmenides*’ discussion the visitors “would learn what Anaxagoras had not made clear, how the *nous*, alone unmixed, could relate to the atoms in each of which were all difference, the endless process of separating their differences from the original mixture” (83). The visitors would find discussion particularly relevant to their philosophical heritage.

<sup>4</sup> The source for B12 is Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics*, 300.31-301.1

principles for Anaxagoras are “the One (for this is simple and unmixed) and the Other, which is of such a nature as we suppose the indefinite to be before it is defined and partakes of some form” (989b16-18). To be an effective One, the One can have no share in the Other.

Just as Aristotle reduces Anaxagoreanism to two causes – the efficient and the material cause – so does he reduce Platonism to two causes – “the essence and the material cause” (988a7-8). Just as Anaxagoras, has only the One and Other, Plato has only the One and a dyad. The dyad is the “underlying matter” out which all that is not the One is formed. This dyad, like Anaxagoras’ Other, is indefinite. Aristotle argues that Plato’s main innovation is to make “the One and the Numbers separate from things” (987b30). This innovation is of a distinction between the realm of the One and the numbers and the realm of things. While Plato posits that the things participate in form, he fails to explain “what the participation or the imitation of the Forms could be” (987b13). Aristotle rejects the very notion of participated form, stating that it uses “empty words and poetical metaphors”, and the idea of form sharing itself “means nothing” (991a21; 992a28). Though the connection is not made explicitly, in calling Anaxagoras a “somewhat modern” thinker Aristotle hints that these same problems attend Anaxagoras’s system. This is the problem of how the One (Nous), which is radically separate from the Other, effects the order of the Other.

Plato’s own criticism of the forms in the name of Parmenides is even more overwhelming. The Greatest Difficulty (*Parmenides* 133a–134e) tests the theory of the participated forms to its breaking point, and it is here that the forms appear closest to Anaxagoras’ Nous. As noted earlier, Nous is empowered only through its isolation and self-relation. The forms are similarly isolated and self-related. The problem of the Greatest Difficulty is that Socrates wants to maintain the exclusive self-relation of the form while many of the forms are relative terms (Mastership and Slavery for instance). The absolute self-relation of the form means that the form Master has power only over the form Slave itself, with no relation to actual masters or slaves. As Parmenides lays out the problem: “Those things belong to themselves and are in relation to themselves and so too the things among us to themselves” (133e).

Socrates wished to prove that the things of the sensible world have their existence by participation in the forms. But, instead, he ends up with two autonomous realms. In terms of thought, what emerges is “an unbridgeable gulf between thinking and its objects” (Doull 94). Taking the form “itself by itself [αὐτὰ καθ’ αὐτὰ]” (129d) to its logical conclusion, Socrates here must sever form from beings: “each group relates only to themselves” (*Parmenides* 134d). Ironically, Socrates had initially resisted positing forms of each physical thing, such as hair, mud, and dirt, “fearing to fall and perish in some abyss of foolishness [βυθὸν φλυαρίας]” (130d), and yet he concludes by reinforcing the gulf between these realms. The logical conclusion of this incommensurability is that since we do not possess the form of Knowledge, we cannot have proper knowledge of the forms. Only the gods would possess Knowledge.

But there is “something still more terrible than this!” (134c). Although the gods would possess Knowledge itself, they would not possess knowledge of or power over humankind:

And so if the god possesses the most precise Mastership and this most precise Knowledge, then their mastership could never master us, nor could their knowledge know us or anything else of the things among us. [...] nor, by our knowledge, do we know anything of the divine. According to this speech, in turn, they are not our masters nor do they know anything of human affairs — since they are gods!  
(134d-e)

Positing forms, themselves by themselves related only to themselves, takes away both the knowledge and the power of the gods. In this one speech, Parmenides undermines all the major characteristics of Anaxagoras’ *Nous*.<sup>5</sup>

The theory of the forms, Parmenides claims and Socrates agrees, arises out of observation of a world full of confusion and contradiction. This is resolved by positing the clarity and non-contradiction of the forms. This is explained in Parmenides’ questioning of the oneness of the form: “I think that you think that each form is one because of this: whenever many things seem to you to be great, it seems probable to you, as you look over them all, that there *is* some one and the same idea. From this you conclude that the Great is one” (132a). Socrates uses this theory to dispel his confusion at the sensible world. Socrates does leave space for wonder in one area: the possibility that the forms themselves can admit contradiction. If someone “shall first distinguish the forms as separate in themselves, [...] and then will show that in themselves these things can be mixed together and separated, I’d admire that with wonder, Zeno!” (129d-e).

The second half of the dialogue then demonstrates that “it is possible to save, and to be justified in saving, the higher theory of forms from Parmenides’ well-taken criticisms, but only by acknowledging that forms can (and do) have contrary properties” (Rickless, *Plato’s Forms* 94). Parmenides does not want Socrates to scrap the whole theory as a result of this devastating critique of participated form. Instead, the much more difficult task is to maintain the distinction between the sensible and the intelligible while showing how the sensible and the intelligible could actually be related. Parmenides’ “worklike game” (137b) investigates these contrary properties in the ideas by looking at “things both in relation to themselves and in relation to whatever else you choose” (136c). While the Greatest Difficulty cut off divine sight and sight of the divine, this gymnastic can train one to “attain a lordly view of the True” (136c).

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<sup>5</sup> *Nous* is only questionably a god. On the one hand, there is a testimonium from Aëtius that “Anaxagoras says that God is mind, the maker of the *kosmos*” (Curd, A48, P 101) and on the other, Iranaeus reports: “Anaxagoras, who has also been called an atheist, propounded as dogma that animals are made by seeds falling to earth from the sky” (Curd, A113, P125). The ambiguous middle ground, from the *Suda* is that “he departed his life at the age of seventy years, because he was imprisoned by the Athenians for introducing a certain new belief about god” (Curd, A3, P81).

Parmenides insists that the choice of his hypothesis for the gymnastic is arbitrary and can be substituted (137b). While the total substitutability of the hypothesis is hard to imagine, it is easier to conceive how we could substitute Nous for One.

The first attempt at resolving the *aporiai* starts by deducing from the hypothesis: “If there’s one” (137c). A variety of conclusions are drawn<sup>6</sup>: it is not many, it is neither a part nor a whole, neither at motion nor at rest (to name a few). Everything is denied of the One in the name of pure self-identity. Finally, the denial of the One’s participation in time means that “in no way does the One partake of beinghood” (141e<sup>7</sup>). If the One does not partake of beinghood, it cannot be said that the One *is*, nor can the One be named, spoken of, perceived, or known. Young Aristotle does not assent to the conclusion that this would be “the way it is concerning the One” (142a). Nothing can be predicated of this One since any predication involves a certain copulation of the One and an Other that entails a division of the One. Regarding this hypothesis, Doull writes that, “all division has passed into the self-relation of ‘the one’” (104). The radical purity and ultimate self-identity of the One means that the “One neither is one nor *is*” (141e). While the *aporiai* point to a gap between the ideas and the sensible that had to be bridged, “the first hypothesis supposes this division radically resolved in a one-sided way in a primary identity into which has passed entirely the division of individual and universal or idea” (Doull 102). In a way, the gap is bridged, but only in a one-sided way, totally on the side of identity to the exclusion difference.

While the results of the first hypothesis are not eliminated, the second hypothesis is independent; it is a new beginning with new arguments.<sup>8</sup> While the first hypothesis immediately deduced from “If there’s one” concludes that it is not many, the second hypothesis – “If one *is*” (142b) – immediately throws the One into play, into division and multiplicity. This time, “the ‘*is*’ signifies something other than the ‘one’” (142c). By making the ‘*is*’ copulative this hypothesis posits an original division between One and beinghood. Since beinghood does not “stand aloof from any of the beings,” it is infinitely divided (144b). It “has been chopped up” until it has become “by far the most partitioned of all things” (144b). These deductions run entirely counter to the conclusions of the first hypothesis. This means that the One itself, tied by the copulative ‘*is*’ to beinghood, is itself “chopped up by beinghood” (144e). One is therefore “both many and limitless in multitude” (144e). The undivided One here enters into relations with the ‘dyadic’ principle that Aristotle identified.<sup>9</sup> The One itself is now seen to be many (Doull 104-5). From this original split of the One and beinghood, the One can be said to partake of time: “The One

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<sup>6</sup> Rickless numbers eighteen separate arguments here (“Plato’s Parmenides”).

<sup>7</sup> “Beinghood” is Whitaker’s consistent rendering of οὐσία.

<sup>8</sup> Rickless numbers thirty-three separate arguments (“Plato’s Parmenides”).

<sup>9</sup> Doull notes that “in the second hypothesis the same ordered finitude as was negated in the first principle as pure identity becomes a succession of determinate relations of the undivided and the ‘dyadic’ principles” (112)

then was and is and will be and was becoming and becomes and will become” (155c-d). This chopped up one is in many tenses.

This descent of the One into becoming through beinghood is a mirroring of the conclusions of the first hypothesis. There is now knowledge, opinion, perception, naming, and speaking of the One. This was not simply a careless dispersal but one that maintains a relationship of the dispersed to unity so that the “last of these relations was that of the forms of knowledge in which being and negativity are both exclusive and in undivided unity” (Doull 111). The conclusion is meant to show a distinct division and also the beginnings of an undivision so that “the two hypotheses at that point all but coalesce: all that the undivided ‘one’ was not it now is if divided” (Doull 111). The mirroring of the first two hypotheses, rather than merely opposing them, shows that they form a complementary unity in which the originary divisions are maintained: “for the two hypotheses to be one it remains only that the original division itself be known as resting in the unity at first assumed to be simply undivided” (Doull 111).

In order to attempt to bring them together in a comprehensive unity without erasing this division Parmenides proposes to “now speak yet a third time” (155e<sup>10</sup>). Each of the hypotheses culminated in the relationship of the One to time. Time is here privileged as the knot that must be undone in order to outline a unity comprehensive of this division. Bringing together the conclusions of the problems dealt with in each hypothesis—rest and motion, likeness and unlikeness, sameness and otherness, etc.—we are left with an affirmation and a negation of each: “the ‘one’ is neither and both of [the] contrary predicates” (Doull 113). While being each of either it cannot at that exact time be the other. Young Aristotle must therefore answer ‘no’ to the question: “while it partakes will it be able, at that time, not to partake? Or when not partaking, to partake?” (155e). This attempt to achieve a unity of contradictions brings us up most forcefully against the law of non-contradiction. Non-contradiction in the unity of contradictions is preserved by emphasizing the timeliness of each side of the contradiction, for “how will it be able at one time to have and then not to have the same thing, unless it at one time takes and then releases it?” (156a<sup>11</sup>).

The question that must be asked, if it is to be comprehensive of both sides, is the following: “When, then, does it change? For it changes neither when it stands at rest nor when it’s in motion nor when it is in time” (156c). Something, or rather some place or some time, is needed to be able to finally bring these two sides together by answering the question of “when” each side changes into the other. Parmenides names this thing, which is out-of-place and out-of-time, “the instant” (156d). Something at rest cannot simply

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<sup>10</sup> Doull takes this to be a third hypothesis: “this unity of the first and second hypotheses is not a consequence of either, but a new beginning - a third hypothesis” (111). Whitaker and Rickless take this to be an appendix to the first two hypotheses since Parmenides does not repeat the hypothesis but takes the One “as we have described it” (Whitaker 69n15; Rickless, *Plato’s Forms* 188) and because it does not fit into the plan of the hypotheses Parmenides gave earlier (Rickless 188).

<sup>11</sup> In the *Republic*, where the law of non-contradiction is more openly thematized, albeit for different purposes, time also plays the essential role: “It is obvious that the same thing will not be willing to do or undergo opposites in the same part of itself, in relation to the same thing, at the same time” (436b4-5).

change from this position, nor can something moving change. There is no time at which one thing can change into its opposite. Rather, something sudden is required, a no-time that allows a thing to change in time. This is described as a “sort of momentary, out-of-place nature lurks between both motion and rest and is not in any time” (156d-e). If non-contradiction means that a thing can only be one side of a contradictory pair at a time, this unity can only be preserved by positing this no-time at which the One comprehensive of its contradictions can be neither while changing from one to the other.

Recalling that the Greatest Difficulty left us with two unrelated totalities, tracing the movement of the gymnastic, we can begin to see what a unity comprehensive of these contradictions would need to look like. There needs to be some way to maintain the difference while ultimately showing the undivision of the division. This is the mixture and separation of the things themselves that Socrates would find wondrous. Doull explains that “the interest of the third hypothesis is to give primacy to that unity, allowing place within it for the difference of the two totalities of the finite” (113). The material and the formal cause (the One and the dyad or even, perhaps, Nous and the sensible world) must be brought together without doing violence to either.

While it is difficult to draw definite conclusions from this gymnastic, it helps to solve the problem of the “itself by itself” that is present in both Plato and Anaxagoras. The purpose of the gymnastic was to train young Socrates to philosophize maturely. While it is unclear exactly what Aristotle thought of this gymnastic,<sup>12</sup> he concludes Book A with an account of philosophy in its youth: early philosophy is “like one who lisps, since it is young and in its beginnings” (993a15-16). To rid oneself of this lisp and speak clearly one must learn to separate and combine the causes such that they maintain their individual integrity, which is impossible with only two causes. Anaxagoras holds such high status for both Plato and Aristotle, not because they are so influenced by him but because the problems that define his system provide the best case study by which philosophy can train itself to speak maturely.

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<sup>12</sup> Whitaker: “*Parmenides* is the only major Platonic dialogue not referred to by name in the Aristotelian corpus” (“Introduction” 11).



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