The cosmic system of the pre-Socratic philosopher Anaximenes and stars and their formation

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(Submitted on 03.12.2014; Accepted on 19.04.2015)

Abstract. In the paper is presented Anaximenes theory of air as the initial cause of nature which is transcendental. We examine Anaximenes account on the formation of Earth and stars, which is based on the accumulations and "thinning" of the primal substance, and discuss some similar characteristics with the scientific theory of star formation, while the philosopher’s reference to the fiery nature of stars reflects the theories of energy production in their interior.

Key words: History of Astronomy, Anaximenes, Star formation

Introduction

The pre-Socratic period of Greek philosophy was undoubtedly the first major landmark in the history of philosophy and science; then for the first time the human intellect attempted to explain natural phenomena based on the relation between cause and effect. Pioneers in this attempt were the philosophers of Miletus, Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, who, in their effort to explain the origins of the world, expressed interesting astronomical views, which sometimes have similarities with results of modern science. In this work we study the role of “air” (the one of the four elements) in the creation of the world according to Anaximenes, through its accumulations and "thinning". We also discuss some similarities of the mechanism described by Anaximenes with the theory of star formation, as well as the philosopher’s reference to the fiery nature of stars reflecting the concept of the energy production in their interior.

1. Wind as a cosmological principle

The cosmological system proposed by Anaximenes is based on the views of the two other philosophers of the so-called Milesian School, Thales and Anaximander, who suggest that the Universe was created on the basis of a primal element, water and apeiron (infinity?), respectively. According to Anaximenes, the underlying nature is one. However, Anaximenes did not consider it as indefinite as he [Anaximander] did, but definite, calling it "air". The air varies with respect to its density and thinness, depending on the substances (Simplicius, In Aristotelis Physicorum, 24, 26-29). Thus, contrary to Anaximander, who theorized that apeiron is not a subject for determinations, Anaximenes stated that the primal element of the Universe should be close to the property of incorporeal, while at the same time it

Bulgarian Astronomical Journal 23, 2015
is infinite and never perishes. These properties point to the transcendental
nature of "air" (Olympiodorus, De Arte Sacra, 25, B3) along with the fact
that air as a cosmological principle including everything and could also
exceed without limits (Kirk, et al. 1988: 154). What is very interesting in
this case is the fact that Anaximenes (just like Thales and Anaximander)
accepted the idea of existence of an initial substratum which is an aspect
of philosophical monism according to which there is only one initial cause
of the Universe. This theory of Anaximenes influenced other scholars such
as Diogenes of Apollonia (5th cen. B.C.) who considered air as the basis
of creation and perishing of every creature in the Universe (Simplicius In
Aristotelis Physicorum, 151, 31). This idea was also accepted by Aristotle
who supported the view that the initial substratum (matter) is unformed
and then can be transformed in every possible way (Aristotle, Physicorum
192a, 31).

The nature of air is, according to Anaximenes, infinite; from it orig-
inate all that was ever born and will be born, and also gods themselves.
Subsequently, from the primal substance originate all beings and the world.
However, its nature is not apparent when it is uniformly distributed (homa-
lotatos) and becomes visible only along with cold, heat, humidity and mo-
tion, concepts that possess the properties of accumulation and thinning
(rarefaction). Thinning creates the element of fire, while from the accumu-
lation result phenomena such as the clouds, while the elements of water and
earth are also created. In the cases of dense accumulations stones are pro-
duced (Hippolytus, Refutatio, I, 7, 1). Apparently all Presocratic philoso-
phers had made observations of the physical world. Although Kirk, Raven
and Schofield (1988: 155) support the view that Anaximenes was the only
Presocratic philosopher who explained every change in the physical world
based on the existence of a unique substance. Also Plato argued that rar-
efaction and condensation of the initial element results in the creation of
other elements like fire, water and physical phenomena such as clouds and
fog (Plato, Timaeus, 49b–50c).

What is important in this context is that the basic essence of the Uni-
verse is originally non-perceivable by the senses, while through motion be-
comes visible because of the creation of elements and natural phenomena
it causes. Even concepts as warm or cold are phenomena of matter caused
by accumulations and rarefactions (Plutarch, De Primo Frigido, 7, 947 f
(DK 13 b1.). His characterization of "air" as divine, and as an essence that
permeates all the elements and bodies, proves the superiority of its nature
with respect to the other elements of the Universe (Aetius, De Plac. I, 7, 3).
Hence, its cosmological role is not limited to the creation of the beings, but
it extends to their cohesion, exactly as the soul "holds together" (contains)
the body (Aetius, De Plac. I, 3, 4 (Diels 278)). It is obvious that according
to Anaximenes thought the nature of air is correlated to that of the soul
because both are incorporeal. In this context the origin of the world is at-
tributed to an element the nature of which is superior to the other elements
of nature.

It is clear that the properties attributed to air by Anaximenes set it
as the primal cosmological principle; in this way, Anaximenes adopts the
principle of mechanical causality (Niarchos 2008: 84), since the motions
of the air are the cause of the creation of beings. This process is of great importance for the creation of the stars and the Earth.

2. The nature of celestial bodies according to Anaximenes

Anaximenes supports the view that the celestial bodies originate from earth and, more specifically, from the evaporations that come from it, when these evaporations rarefy, fire is produced, and from that fire, which ascends, stars are produced (Hippolytus, Refutatio, I, 7, 5). It follows that the earth has been formed from the condensation of the original air (without any mention about its original cause); then, evaporations are produced, which, due to the rarefaction, form the fire of which stars consist (Kirk et al. 2001: 160).

He believed that the Earth is flat and motionless (Aristotle, De Caelo, 294 b 13), that the Sun is also flat like a leaf (Aetius, De Plac. II, 22, 1), while the stars revolve around the Earth. At the same time, he argued that the Sun sets because it hides behind higher parts of the Earth and its distance from the Earth increases (Hippolytus, Refutatio, I, 7, 6). Nevertheless, in his work there are also astronomical elements similarly to the modern scientific views. Specifically, he suggests that the nature of the stars is fiery and that they coexist with bodies that revolve along with them but are invisible (Aetius, De Plac. II, 13, 10). This intuitive description given by Anaximenes is compatible to the existence of planetary systems, in which planets, invisible to us, orbit their stars. Today a large number of such extrasolar planets, which indeed revolve around other stars is discovered. Additionally, many thousands of binary star systems have been discovered, which move around their common centers of mass, with the fainter star of the system (the companion) being invisible in many cases. A nearby characteristic example is Sirius or Alpha Canis Majoris, whose irregularities in proper motion were attributed by Bessel (1844) to an invisible celestial body that is now known to be a white dwarf (Sirius B), which is 8,000 times fainter than the primary star (Sirius A) because of its tiny size and which was discovered in 1862. Also his reference to the fiery nature of stars is compatible to modern astrophysics from which we know that stars are luminous spheres of plasma which shine by turning hydrogen into helium.

Pertaining to the composition of stars, Anaximenes supports the view that the Earth was produced by the condensation of the initial element of ”air”, while the Sun, the Moon and the other celestial bodies originated from the Earth. Anaximenes claims that the Sun is similar to the Earth and becomes very hot because of its very fast movement (Plutarch, Fragmenta 179, 39 (DK 13 a 6)).

These views of Anaximenes show that philosophers not only dealt with astronomy, trying to calculate the orbits of celestial bodies in the sky, but also tried to explain the nature of stars. This is particularly significant as it marks the passing from astronomy to astrophysics. Even nowadays science is not only limited to the observation of celestial bodies thanks to applications such as spectroscopy and modern instruments like space telescopes, we are able to study stars galaxies and quasars million light years away from our planet.
Conclusion

According to the Greek philosopher Anaximenes, the formation of the Earth and the stars was caused by the condensation of the primal substance. Today it is known that, immediately after the Big Bang, the primal material of the Universe was created, in the form of diffuse gas consisting of hydrogen and helium and traces of lithium atoms. Because of accumulation of matter, gravitational forces and nuclear reactions inside these gaseous clouds, protostars were created, followed by the stars and the planets, such as Earth. Moreover, the reference by Anaximenes to the fiery nature of stars is essentially a first attempt to explain their true nature. As it is known today, star formation is influenced by radiation and the rotation of their total mass, while their sources of energy are basically nuclear fusion reactions. The condensation of the original nebula, which consists mostly of light elements, to the protostar stage and the production of radiation through heat, which prevents the gravitational collapse of the star, lead to the creation of heavier chemical elements, which continue to be produced during the star’s lifetime through nucleosynthesis nuclear reactions.

As one can see, Anaximenes tried to understand and explain the star formation and its nature without mythology and deities and some of his intuitive conclusions as the formation of stars by condensation of primal mater and its fiery nature are not inconsistent with modern scientific views.

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