

From *Borne On Air: Essays by Idaho Writers*, Mary Clearman Blew and Phil Druker, eds. (Cheney, WA: Eastern Washington University Press, 2009), pp. 173-178.

## Anaximenes' Answer

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On May 28, in the year 585 BC, on a clear night in the Greek city of Miletus, a man named Thales successfully predicted an eclipse. According to Aristotle, this prediction made Thales the first philosopher: the unmoved mover of a discipline that has since spawned all others, a discipline endeavoring to replace the mythological answers to life's enduring questions with answers rooted in earthly reason and experience, a discipline which has set the course of the Western intellectual tradition ever since. This was indeed no small feat.

The following generations of Greek philosophers were fairly obsessed with uncovering *archē*, the ultimate and underlying substance of the universe, that which all else is made of, that which remains constant while all else passes through dramatic and marvelous change. Thales kicked off this debate by pronouncing that the ultimate stuff of the universe was, in fact, water. Given that water was not only the most abundant of the four Greek elements—earth, air, fire, water—but that it was also the most obvious in its changes, Thales pointed to water as the basic stuff out of which all else emanated.

Anaximander, an acute yet critical student of Thales, was like all good students adept at pointing out the foibles of the professor's

work. If everything was indeed fundamentally water, argued Anaximander, then all would have the appearance of water. However, all does not have the appearance of water. Moreover, if all is ultimately water, then the opposite of water, fire, could not exist. Fire, however, most certainly does exist. *Archi*, that fundamental stuff our Greek forefathers were so passionate about uncovering, could not be water after all.

Academic justice was once again served when Anaximander's student, Anaximenes, contradicted his master. Anaximenes, the student of the student of Thales, suggested that it was not water but in fact *air* that was the ultimate stuff of the universe: air, more or less diffused or rarefied, more or less condensed or felted. We experience air as the middle stage between all other forms. As air becomes rarified, thinned, or spread out, it becomes steam, then smoke, then fire, then sky, and then the heavens themselves. As air becomes condensed or thickened, it becomes mist, then water, then mud, then dirt, then stone, then earth. Thus Anaximenes takes Anaximander's challenge to Thales head-on: all elements of the universe display the qualities of air.

Anaximenes also believed that temperature was a function of condensed or rarified air, which becomes cooler as it condenses or hotter as it is rarified. Would you like evidence?

Open your hand up wide, pull your palm close to your mouth, purse your lips tight, and blow into your hand. Seriously, do it! The air is cool, isn't it? If you do it again, and if you focus on your hand and your arm, you can sense your hand and arm constricting ever so slightly in a miniscule rush of energy toward the cool spot. Now open your mouth wide and blow into your hand. It's warm, right? Again, if you focus on your hand and your arm you can feel a different sensation, a tiny bit of relaxation, a warming. Noting this reverse linkage of temperature and compaction was the first attempt at articulating a cornerstone of contemporary science: the qualitative differences we experience in the world are actually a product of quantitative variations at the "building-block" level of reality.

And here's the real kicker: because of its centrality, its eternity, and its ability to cause change or motion, air was also thought by the Greeks to be divine and sacred. Since all things were ultimately air, the atmosphere around us was therefore completely divine. Cicero comments that "Anaximenes determined that *air is a god* and that it comes to be and is without measure, infinite and always in motion." Think about it; this is an amazing idea. As a sacred substance, air possessed what later philosophers have come to refer to as intrinsic value, or value that transcends mere use or instrumental value, value most often associated with our children, our family heirlooms, and our fellow humans.

This "divinity of substance" existed in Thales' world of water as well. It absolutely amazes me that a boy growing up in ancient Greece could consider that fish in an inland river were swimming in a milieu of the divine, while as a boy I viewed the carp in the industrial river flowing through my hometown as wallowing in what amounted to an open sewer. An ancient Greek could look into the sky over Miletus and see the sacred, while a contemporary American living in Denver peers up through a brown cloud of a disrespected commons.

Can you imagine living in a world where everything is imbued with the divine, the sacred, the intrinsically valuable? How far away is Anaximenes' world from ours, where nature is valuable only to the extent that it provides steel girders, diamond rings, cheap mental therapy, fodder for a computer screen background, toothpicks, and two-by-fours? What has happened to us? How did we travel so far away from our pre-Socratic forefathers? Where did the sacred earth go?

The sixth century views of Thales and Anaximenes were eventually supplanted by the atomic theory of nature formulated in the decade between 440 and 430 BC. For Leucippus and Democritus, everything was composed of tiny solid particles, or atoms. Because the sacred, divine, or intrinsically valuable has no room in a totalizing atomistic ontological scheme, Leucippus and Democritus helped to define it out of existence. This

reductionism, however, created a crisis for humanity. If the entirety of the earth is atoms, and if humans are of the earth, then we too are but a mechanistic collection of atoms—just so much desecralized “matter in motion.”

In order to save humanity from this insulting reduction, Pythagoras (followed by Plato, Descartes, and all Western religious traditions) posited that while the sacred exists only in a world beyond ours, humans do possess sacred souls. According to this view, intrinsic value exists only in the heavens and in humans. Therefore, nature is profane and this world is a shoddy way station, a temporary stop on our way elsewhere. From the Renaissance on, this view has been vehemently and often violently held. Thousands and thousands have been put to gruesome deaths because they dared to believe otherwise; because, like Anaximenes, they dared to ground the sacred within this world.

I think it is important to remind and rehearse this story of our Western intellectual history. I think it is important to see that we come from a tradition that held nature to be sacred and intrinsically valuable, that such a view is a part of our heritage. When I give public, professional, or classroom lectures, I often hear two sets of disempowering excuses: first, that we as humans are psychologically unequipped to perceive sacred and intrinsic value in nature; and second, that we Westerners lack the cultural history to do so. Hence, it is difficult or impossible for us to establish an ethical relationship with nature.

I can readily dismiss the first excuse by pointing to the many cultural traditions that perceive the earth as sacred. The second excuse is more difficult to deal with. In the West we sometimes suggest that atmosphere (or waters, rivers, and oceans for that matter) lack the necessary solidity to be metaphysically tangible and hence real enough to merit intrinsic value. Is it perhaps that we perceive the fluidity of rivers, the vast and mysterious oceans with their massive gyres, or the seemingly unending atmosphere as containing too much scale or variability? Or do scale and variability convince us that oceans and atmosphere can absorb

untold, even unlimited, amounts of human impact without harm? Is it that we can so readily dissipate our impact, our waste, our effluents that they become out of sight, out of mind, and hence out of the realm of ethical inclusion?

Such a view represents our misreading of our own intellectual tradition. As philosopher and nature writer Kathleen Dean Moore has noted, while contemplating a hiking trail blocked by a house-sized rock broken off from a cliff above:

The rock was proof, if any proof was needed, that solidity is only a function of time. A river revealed in a flash of lightning is as thick and quivering as gelatin. And yet, measured against a millennium, a mountain melts down the sides of the valley and pours into the sea.

Along a slightly different line, West German space shuttle pilot Ulf Merbold once reflected on this view of earth from space:

For the first time in my life, I saw the horizon as a curved line. It was accentuated by a thin seam of dark and light blue—our atmosphere. Obviously this was not the “ocean” of air I had been told it was so many times in my life. I was terrified by its fragile appearance.

If we combine this willingness to externalize our impact with a view of air as merely profane, the result will be as tragic as it is predictable.

I often hear the refrain that while American Indians and Buddhists might be culturally equipped to view the earth or nature as intrinsically valuable, such a vision is not part of Western cultural history. Humbug! People who say such things do not know their own intellectual history. It is most certainly possible to create or re-create systems of thought which imbue nature with the sacred and with intrinsic value and remain squarely within Western thought. In fact, as one of our most important and inspiring environmental thinkers, Aldo Leopold, warned, not only is such thought an “evolutionary possibility,” but also it is more

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importantly an “ecological necessity.” For Leopold, various communal arrangements simply do not hold together without corresponding ethical systems. If we are part and parcel of a biotic or land community, then only an environmental or land ethic which attributes intrinsic value, the sacred, or direct moral standing to the nonhuman as well as the human parts of our world will serve to hold that biotic or land community together. Failure to find a viable alternative to our pre-Socratic notions of the value of nature comes at a cost none of us can afford.

I am not suggesting a simplistic return to Anaximenes’ world. I am rather requesting the energy, creativity, and humility to find new ways to live on earth where the nonhuman holds sacred or intrinsic value.

Where I come from in Wisconsin, the August air is absolutely fetid. I’ve always thought that that was a good word for it, “fetid,” from the Latin *foetidus*: having an offensive smell, stinking. The fusion of raw heat and oppressive humidity, coalescing with rotting plant and animal flesh, saturates the air with the dank smell of decay and decomposition. It’s difficult to know if you are smelling death or life. When life and death ride so readily on the wind, it doesn’t take a tremendous perceptual alteration to imagine or envision that this air is animated, imbued with spirit. I now live in northern Idaho, and the air here is different: clean and dry and fresh. It’s pleasant but unfamiliar. My first summer in Idaho was spent unconsciously sniffing the breeze for something other than wheat field dust, forest fire, and my neighbor’s dog-poop-laden yard. I simply couldn’t bring the air to life. But in my second summer it happened. After a monthlong trip to my native Midwest, I stepped into my Idaho yard and the air was filled with cedar and sage, I smelled the sun baking the dew off the damp morning grass, and I noticed the air as it moved the leaves on the neighbor’s aspens, mimicking raindrops and filling a robin’s wings with flight. It felt good to be home.