There Is More than One Way to Do It: Fostering an Interdisciplinary Approach to the Politics of Sexuality

CRISTINA D'AMICO

In this paper, I engage with Michel Foucault's philosophy of sexuality, specifically the discursive method articulated in The History of Sexuality, *Vol.1. Drawing primarily from the work of Sigmund Freud (1905), Antonio Gramsci (1931), Ian Craib (1997), as well as prominent York University scholars John O'Neill (1995) and Loree Erikson (2000), the paper uncovers some of the politically debilitating philosophical assumptions on which Foucault's work is predicated, and which prevent his text (as well as other postmodern theories of sexuality) from producing a radical, inclusive and liberating politics of sexuality. The paper does not seek to discredit the validity, utility or profundity of Foucault's constructionist theories — rather, the main objective of the essay is to encourage psychoanalytic, social constructionist, historical and scientific approaches to sexual theory. I suggest that to understand the complex phenomenon of sexuality and promote an inclusive, radical politics of sexuality, theorists need to approach the study of sexuality from multiple perspectives.*

Social construction theory, in the ongoing effort to wrest sexuality from the clutches of biological determinism, forces sexuality to lose its vital psychoanalytic, scientific

and political appendages. Informed by Michel Foucault's (1976) discursive analysis, current social construction theory posits a politically debilitating theory of sexuality. A re-examination of social constructionism using Ian Craib (1997), Sigmund Freud (1905), Antonio Gramsci (1947) and John O'Neill (1995) exemplifies the political weaknesses of discourse analysis and offers alternative strategies for an active politics of sexuality. Of course, the violent attempts to reclaim sexuality are not without merit, as biological frameworks historically foster patriarchy, androcentrism and privilege heteronormativity. Moreover, social construction theory remains a critical tool for understanding the deployment of sexual oppression within society. The work of Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993) and Anne McClintock (1995) incorporate culture and biology, materialism and psychoanalysis, and are exemplary models of interdisciplinary theory. In order to articulate inclusive, liberating political theories of sexuality, construction theory must curb its destructive tendencies, and instead engage with its "constructed" nemeses — science, psychoanalysis and politics.

As suggested by its definition, sexuality comprises elements of biology and the body as well as social and cultural constituents; however, historically, sexuality has not been interpreted as an interrelated whole. Instead, in philosophical and scientific thought, the subject underwent a split, emphasizing the existence of two separate spheres, sex and gender. Sex remained largely a matter of physiological, scientific inquiry and was perceived as an active determinant of the social aspects of one's gender. Cultural anthropological investigation, for example, Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1920), establishes the cultural contingency of gender roles and behaviours.

Certainly, Mead's work (and much of the construction theory which follows it) successfully undermines problematic essentialist arguments which produced an oppressive, exclusionary, heteronormative sexual ideal. However, the current form of social construction theory eradicates and undermines all biological or scientific inquiry in the study of sexuality. For instance, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's reversal of Freud's psychosexual theories undermines the validity of psychoanalysis. Ultimately, Foucault's discourse analysis dissolves into symbolic language games, which have little bearing on material political conditions.

Although the term is not explicitly defined in the given section of the text, in contemporary philosophy the term 'discourse' is commonly understood as a set of ideas and images that structure human thinking and action. Discourse, or the discursive practice, emphasizes the power of language and social institutions to ascribe dominant, hegemonic meanings to certain social or cultural phenomena. According to Foucault, discourse is an active force which possesses the ability to produce knowledge. For example, in *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault's repressive hypothesis critiques the Freudian psychoanalytic theory of repression by arguing that "modern society is perverse" (1976, 47). Foucault argues that the proliferation of numerous discourses of sexuality, namely during the Industrial Revolution, has shaped the ways in which individuals think about sex; therefore, one does not repress sexual desires in the Freudian sense. Rather, one is continuously repressed by social and institutional forces beyond one's control. For Freud, the internal state determines external behavior, and most often he appeals to experiences during infant sexual

development to explain outward manifestations of repression. In opposition, Foucault appeals to the exterior, social forces to explain an individual's perception of sexuality.

Ironically, social constructionists denounce Freudian psychoanalysis as debilitating and resent its ability to make fallacious and deterministic claims under the guise of conclusive and objective science. However, Freudian psychoanalytic theory and the study of the unconscious allow individuals to achieve heightened self-awareness and understanding. Foucault, taking up a pejorative criticism of biology and medicine, implicitly condemns Freudian psychoanalysis and argues that "imbedded in bodies, becoming deeply characteristic of individuals, the oddities of sex relied on a technology of health and pathology [...] sexuality was a medicalizable object" (1976, 44). Foucault dismisses, or perhaps overlooks, the empowering and liberating elements of psychoanalytic theory, including the ability to interrogate, understand and potentially alter one's behaviour; therefore, Foucault's reversal, and his easy dismissal of Freud as "a medicalized discourse" abandons human agency and, consequently, in the same moment, abandons politics (56).

Certainly, it is ironic that postmodern social construction theory, which seeks to dismiss and undermine an entire history of authoritative science and philosophy, should assume a hegemonic, unchallengeable theoretical position in the history of ideas. O'Neill, in his critical text *The Poverty of Post-Modernism,* debunks discourse and discredits Foucault's abandonment of politics and embrace of fleeting, theoretical and symbolic discursive re-articulation (1995, 6–9). O'Neill argues that the decision to jettison political action stems from the

perversion of the coterminous relationship between knowledge and power, where

> in the postmodern scene, power is knowledge of our voluntary servitude. In the Enlightenment scene, our knowledge is the power to end our servitude [...] In the latter sense, the community is a social mirror in which our self is enlarged and enabled through the exchanges of language, labour and communicative exchanges that are ruled by truth, equality and freedom (1995, 35).

Foucault abdicates agency and, consequently, abdicates politics and any potential for social or political transformation. Further, "the post-modern fascination with cultural surfaces and its derision of essence, along with its easy de-constructions of the super/substructure, centre/margin distinctions [...] makes it difficult to resist the power/knowledge trope that now dominates postmodern political thought" (O'Neill 1995, 5). The futility and superficiality of discursive re-articulation does not escape O'Neill's scathing criticism, and he condemns them as passive, apolitical theories which are nihilistic but cannot conceive of newness or inclusive activism.

Postmodern discourse posits ontological and epistemological assumptions which render active political change an impossibility. Foucault and his postmodern politics suggest that ontology, the state of being, is a structuralist fiction and that human beings possess no internal essence. The only changes that occur are the discursive shifts, the changing epistemologies — and

according to Foucault, how we know what we know is not a self-initiated project but, rather, a dictation given by larger social, governmental and medical institutions within society (1976, 23). To completely abandon any form of universal ontology, to wade in random epistemological shifts and merely "play" is an apolitical and elitist articulation (O'Neill 1995, 46–49). Those who are truly disadvantaged by the oppressive, dominant discourses and lack time, money or education necessary to partake in discursive deconstruction are effectively marginalized and cannot participate in playtime.

The shallow, apolitical aspects of postmodern discourse are present in a popular film on gender construction, *A Boy Named Sue*. The film traces the sex change of a young woman named Sue, emphasizing the physical, exterior changes she undergoes in order to become Theo. A friend describes Sue's transformation as a political action, an empowering claim to one's identity and an attempt to express true interiority within the confines of a stifling social framework. How liberating and politicized is Sue's physical transformation? Throughout the film, Theo, claiming that he cannot form any real bonds with other men, expresses feelings of alienation, even though his own internal masculinity now matches his exterior appearance. Theo's discontent and social isolation ultimately lead to the confession that Theo "doesn't really feel like a real man" (2000). Society now reads Theo's body with a different set of false, predetermined cultural discourses that do not describe his own feelings, tastes or desires. The physical transformation is in itself a discursive, symbolic action. The film does not provide complete access to Theo's thoughts and feelings concerning the operation, and it is possible that he is quite

happy today in his new social role. However, as a political statement, Theo's gender transformation is barely an epistemological ripple on the still waters of social discourses of sexuality and gender. Individual discursive re-articulations cannot implode or supersede the discursive framework (O'Neill 1995, 12–14).

Theo's situation articulates the pervasiveness of the masculine versus feminine binary in Western societies. Sexual preference, preferred social roles or leisure activities that do not reflect one's gender norms often incite identification with the opposite gender and produce identity crisis. In opposition to Theo's "atomized" transformation, O'Neill emphasizes mutuality and community as necessary components of political transformation (1995, 6). The possession of community and a sense belonging are invaluable and enabling political assets. Consider, for instance, the role of the male Fafafine in *Paradise Bent: Boys Will be Girls in Samoa.* Samoan culture defines gender roles in terms of one's actions and social roles within the community, and thus the male Fafafine possess fluid, diverse gender roles and behaviours. The maintenance of the community is primary, and identity is achieved through one's place within the larger inclusive framework. When individuals take an active grassroots role in politics and community, society becomes a site of liberation versus a site of subjugation. Further, O'Neill's articulation of communal knowledge speaks to Gramsci's political concept of hegemony.

In *The Prison Notebooks,* Gramsci maintains a theory of radical political transformation that engages with social and cultural discourses. Specifically, his concept of hegemony actively combines society and politics. For Gramsci, hegemony is a relation of force, not a simplistic

relationship of domination and subjugation. The elite, ruling class maintains hegemonic control by asserting political and ideological leadership. Ideology facilitates the assumption that the values of the hegemonic culture are also the "common sense values of everyone," and its maintenance represents the best interests of all groups in society (1946, 53). In this way, the obedience and complaisance of all other social interest groups are secured, and revolutionary action is effectively quashed.

In terms of the politics of sexuality, the heteronormative, moral discourses of sexuality function as the hegemonic ideology in Western society. However, unlike Foucault, Gramsci acknowledges the possibility of active transgression of hegemonic ideologies through the achievement of class-consciousness. The task of achieving new hegemony can only be achieved through "a transformation of popular consciousness" (Gramsci 1946, 36). The notion that an individual could conceive of radical new morals and modes of being contrasts significantly with Foucault's theory. The ability to foster a counter-hegemonic ideology can potentially subvert hegemonic control (36–38). Additionally, he stresses the importance of political alliances between disenfranchised groups in society to achieve political and ideological authority. Therefore, Gramsci, like Foucault, acknowledges the profound influence of social hegemony but also conceives of active theories of resistance. Importantly, Gramsci gives credence to human agency, to the possibility for interior transformation through the development of a new, radical consciousness that can facilitate exterior changes.

In "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," Gayle Rubin takes up Foucault's discursive analytical framework, with the intention of

contributing to a "radical and liberating body of thought about sexuality" (1995, 9). Unfortunately, she fails to conceive of a radical, liberating politics of sexuality due to a glaring contradiction between her goal of radical politics and her theoretical framework. Rubin articulates the need to end sexual suffering and oppression, which she describes as manifest in real, material terms and consequences, such as "reduced physical and social mobility, economic sanctions, loss of institutional support and criminal charges" (18). Rubin, like Foucault, only engages with the subject of reinventing sexuality in terms of the symbolic, analyzing and deconstructing the ways in which law, language and institutions reproduce hegemonic sexuality. Therefore, Rubin's supposedly "radical" notes retreat into the comfortable apolitical space of theoretical inquiry, and no real material terms for political action or hegemonic transgression are offered. Again, as stated by O'Neill, the discursive framework leaves the reader staring into the reflection of his or her own perpetual servitude.

In a similar, although decidedly radical vein, according to Ian Craib, social construction theory presents an irreconcilable paradox: "[It] is the denial of subjectivity and agency, of the 'I' the speaker has, but which the socially produced person apparently has not" (1997, 56). To further build on Craib's psychoanalytic investigation, perhaps the postmodern tendency towards fragmentation and destruction (in the form of deconstruction and discourse) can be perceived as a manifest form of ego splitting. It is a tendency in children to want to destroy that which they cannot understand or possess, and perhaps the inclination exists within postmodern politics. According to Freud, the ego, when presented with

undesirable and painful reality, attempts, as a strategy of defense, to split the subject. In order to achieve a fallacious reconciliation between the desire for autonomy and reality of servitude, "postmodernists destroy, deconstruct, fragment and abandon the hegemonic, overwhelming political history from whence they came" (Waugh 1992, 189–190). However, "this success is achieved at the expense of a rift in the ego which will never heal," and the majority of postmodern political frameworks expend endless energy articulating humanity's perpetual subjection but never attempt to conceive of its possible emancipation (Freud 1941, 65).

To return to an earlier assertion, a radical, progressive and inclusive politics of sexuality necessitates an interdisciplinary conversation, and there is no real merit in completely eradicating or overlooking the endless contributions that constructionism has made in the study of sexuality. Certainly, the social constructionist's complete dismissal of biology does not justify the complete repudiation of all discursive analysis. Rather, the study of history, social analysis and discourse should be perceived as the preliminary steps towards understanding and articulating a politics of sexuality. Discourse analysis is necessary to an understanding of sexuality, but it need not be the end of political engagement. A brief exploration of the work of Fausto-Sterling, McClintock and Loree Erickson highlights the immense potential of interdisciplinary theoretical approaches.

McClintock approaches the study of sexuality using a psychoanalytic analysis of the historical mindset of imperialism. Her work, revealing and relating the ways in which different discourses of sexual otherness were produced and maintained, argues that psychoanalytic

functions are necessary to understanding the way humans think about sex. Similarly, Fausto-Sterling lobbies for a phenomenological theory of sexuality, one which considers all possible appearances of the human experience, and she thereby temporarily suspends the valued divisions of knowledge into categories of "objective reality" and "subjective experience" (1995, 47). For Fausto-Sterling, understanding the biological in terms of the cultural is the first step towards reclaiming the domain of sex and sexuality studies from problematic essentialist discourse. She envisions a biological and scientific inquiry that is fluid versus deterministic and that serves the greater purpose of inclusive health care. In an attempt to do away with the split subject of sexuality but maintaining elements of both biology and culture, she emphasizes that human beings are "one hundred percent nature and one hundred percent nurture" (1993, 1510).

The appropriation of a more fluid, nuanced biological inquiry appears in Loree Erickson's exploration of disability and sexuality. In *Want,* Erickson reinvents her relationship to medical discourse, which historically has described disabled bodies with negative, degenerate descriptors. For example, through the formation of social bonds with her care-workers and the exploration of her physical sexuality, she creates new and positive meanings between disability and the medical institution. Additionally, she uses medicine and biology to foster a more comprehensive understanding of her physical body, and this knowledge becomes a vital tool for the exploration of her body's sexuality. Each theorist actively engages with historically exclusionary disciplines and reinvents them in an active attempt to alter the dominant consciousness and to create political awareness.

Social construction theory and discourse analysis, although productive, critical tools, cannot transform, explain or articulate a comprehensive understanding of human sexuality. As explicitly or implicitly demonstrated by O'Neill, Gramsci and Freud, Foucault's discursive framework operates on a symbolic and ultimately apolitical level, and so abandons the possibility of transformative politics. Additionally, the interdisciplinary approach of Fausto-Sterling, Erickson and McClintock suggests astounding potential for interdisciplinary critical theory and political invention. Therefore, Rubin's incitement to start "thinking sex" represents a fundamental first step for theorists, philosophers and scientists alike (1995, 3). Not surprisingly, the tenets of a productive interdisciplinary politics of sexuality need to make love, not war. The development of a progressive, transformative and radical politics of sexuality necessitates interdisciplinary conversation and engagement.

REFERENCES

A Boy Named Sue. Directed by Julie Wyman. 56 min. Women Make Movies, 2000.

Craib, Ian. 1997. Social constructionism as a social psychosis. *Sociology* 31 (February): 1–15.

Fausto-Sterling, Anne. 1993. The five sexes: Why male and female are not enough." *The Sciences* 33 (March/April): 20–24.

Foucault, Michel. 1990. *An Introduction.* Vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality.* Trans. Robert Hurely. New York: Vintage Books.

Freud, Sigmund. 1977. The three essays on the theory of sexuality. In *On Sexuality*, ed. James Strachey, 33–144. New York: Pelican Books.

Gramsci, Antonio. 1989. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci.* Trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishing.

McClintock, Anne. 1995. The lay of the land: Genealogies of Imperialism. In *Imperial Leather,* 21–74, 399–404. New York: Routledge.

O'Neill, John. 1995. *The Poverty of Post-Modernism.* London: Routledge.

Paradise Bent: Boys Will be Girls in Samoa. Directed by Heather Croall. 51 min. Re Angle citures, 1999.

Rubin, Gayle S. 1993. Thinking sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality. In *The Gay and Lesbian Studies Reader,* 3–44. New York: Routledge.

Vance, Carole S. Social construction theory: Problems in the history of sexuality. In *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?*, 13–34. London: Millivres-Prowler Group Ltd.

Want. Directed by Loree Erickson. 21 min. 2005.

Waugh, Patricia. Modernism, postmodernism, feminism: Gender and autonomy theory. In *Postmodernism: A Reader,* ed. Patricia Waugh, 189–204. New York: Oxford University Press.

The Principle of Nous in Anaxagoras' Philosophical System

PAUL BURD

This paper will provide a detailed explication of Anaxagoras' theory of matter and the role of Mind (or Nous *in Greek) within his philosophical system. The first section will focus on the constituents and principles of Anaxagoras' theory of matter. Following this, the role of nous in Anaxagoras' system will be explicated, with specific focus on the physical and intellectual features of nous. Having outlined the main principles of Anaxagoras' theory of matter and conception of nous, this paper will shift to an examination of Plato's and Aristotle's interpretations of the role of nous within this system. Following a critique of Plato's and Aristotle's criticisms of nous, this paper will then examine several modern interpretations of the role of nous within Anaxagoras' system.*

The Greek investigation of physics, cosmogony and cosmology reached an unprecedented level of sophistication with the philosophical system of Anaxagoras of Clazomenae. In addition to providing an innovative theory of matter, Anaxagoras posited that the *kosmos* was organized and ruled by the physical and intellectual principle of *Nous* (Mind). However, the precise relation of nous to Anaxagoras' theory of matter, and its role in his cosmogonic process and cosmological system has been a matter of controversy since Plato, and

consensus is still lacking in modern scholarship. The fragmentary nature of the extant evidence necessitates a high degree of interpretation when reconstructing Anaxagoras' thought, but several aspects of nous and dimensions of its activity can be gleaned from a close examination of this evidence. To this end, this paper will critically examine the existing evidence in an effort to elucidate the nature of nous and its role within Anaxagoras' philosophical system. Firstly, the basic constituents and principles of Anaxagoras' theory of matter will be explicated with special emphasis on the distinctiveness of his theory from previous systems. Following this, Anaxagoras' conception of nous as a motive force and intellectual agent responsible for change and order in the kosmos will be explained. This paper will then outline Plato's and Aristotle's criticisms of the role of nous within Anaxagoras' system, followed by a critique of their respective interpretations. Lastly, several modern interpretations of Anaxagoras' conception of nous will be provided, as well as comments and critiques of each view.

Anaxagoras accounted for plurality and change in the kosmos by formulating a theory of matter founded on distinct physical units and mechanical principles. The principle unit of this system is the "seed," for Anaxagoras says that there were "seeds of all things" in the primordial, undifferentiated mixture that existed before the formation of the kosmos.[1] He further says that the seeds were "unlimited in amount, in no way like one another," which

1. Richard D. McKirihan, *Philosophy Before Socrates* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), fragment 13.4. This paper will use McKirihan's translations of Anaxagoras' (and Simplicius') fragments. Hereafter references to these fragments will be cited in the form, Anaxagoras frag. # McKirihan.

suggests that there was an infinite variety and quantity of seeds in the primordial mixture.[2] The latter quote also suggests that a constitutive feature of a seed is its complete uniqueness from any other seed, thus making each type of seed totally distinct.[3] Anaxagoras' claim that seeds have various kinds of basic things such as shapes, colours, and flavours suggests that they embody physical and qualitative attributes.[4] It should be noted that Anaxagoras conceived of both physical substances (such as water)[5] and qualities (such as darkness)[6] as basic things or entities that respectively had corresponding seeds. It is clear, therefore, that Anaxagoras considered the seed to be the physical basis of the basic things that exist in the kosmos.

It is important to note that not every perceptible object in Anaxagoras' developed cosmological system is the product of a corresponding basic thing in the form of a seed, for Anaxagoras says that "humans too were compounded and all the other animals that possess life"; and this suggests that living things are one example of a compound of basic things.[7] A further example of a compound within Anaxagoras' system is the astronomical bodies, for Plato and Hippolytus' claim that Anaxagoras thought the sun and stars were fiery stones suggests that these objects should not be considered basic things but rather compounds of them.[8] It, therefore, seems that

2. Anaxagoras frag. 13.4 McKirihan.
3. Felix M. Cleve, *The Philosophy of Anaxagoras* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 11.
4. Anaxagoras frag. 13.4 McKirihan.
5. Anaxagoras frag. 13.16 McKirihan.
6. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.
7. Anaxagoras frag. 13.4. McKirihan.
8. Plato *Apology* 26d–e, Hippolytus *Refutation* 1.8.6.

Anaxagoras conceived of the seed as capable of existing in isolation and in compounded objects and as the principle physical unit of his system and the primary vehicle of basic things.

The innovative nature of Anaxagoras' theory of matter can be seen in its distinctiveness from other physical systems formulated in the post-Parmenidean stage of Presocratic philosophy. Anaxagoras states that his system does not accept "coming to be and perishing," and he alternatively posits that all such apparent cases of this phenomenon are in fact cases of mixture and separation.[9] This illustrates that Anaxagoras intended to formulate his philosophical system in accordance with Parmenides' argument for the impossibility of absolute generation and destruction. However, similar to Empedocles, [10] Anaxagoras does admit plurality and change into his cosmological system by investing his numerous (possibly infinite) basic things with Parmenidean being. As McKirihan notes, Anaxagoras' system differs from Empedocles' in that the former invests every basic substance with being, whereas the latter only invests the four elements with being.[11] Within Anaxagoras' physical system, it is the seed that is the basic unit possessed of Parmenidean being.

The fundamental constituents of Anaxagoras' theory of matter account for the plurality of the kosmos, but it is the central principles of this system that account for physical

9. Anaxagoras frag. 13.17 McKirihan.

10. Anaxagoras frag. 14.43 McKirihan.

11. Anaxagoras frag. 13.4. McKirihan. Vlastos in "The Physical Theory of Anaxagoras," (327) concurs with McKirihan on this point, and he similarly considers this feature of Anaxagoras' system to be the "revolutionary principle of his physics."

change. An important principle of Anaxagoras' system is the rule that "in everything there is a portion of everything." [12] Simplicius interprets this principle as stating that all things in Anaxagoras' physical system are fundamentally mixed, and he cites several examples of basic things being derived from other basic things. [13] It would also seem that the heterogeneous constitution of matter is a permanent condition of Anaxagoras' system, for he states that nothing is fully separate from everything else (except nous, a topic that will be discussed in the next section of this paper) [14] and nothing can be fully "split apart." [15] It therefore seems that Anaxagoras argued that there is a portion of every basic thing in every portion of every basic thing. This principle grants his physical system remarkable flexibility in explaining the possibility of change: Since everything is in part everything else, absolute generation and destruction are not presupposed when one thing transmutes into another (both things were there all along).

Within this fundamentally heterogeneous theory of matter, Anaxagoras explains the existence of identifiable macroscopic objects (such as a lump of coal) by positing that an object is "most plainly those things of which it contains most." [16] In other words, Anaxagoras states, in this

12. Anaxagoras frag. 13.6 McKirihan.

13. Anaxagoras frag. 13.27 McKirihan. This principle can also be gleaned from the following question posed by Anaxagoras: "For how could hair come to be from not hair or flesh from not flesh?" (Frag. 13.10 McKirihan.) The point that Anaxagoras is trying to make is that both hair and flesh are already present in the things from which they come, for it would be impossible for them to be created otherwise.

14. See p. 6 of this paper.

15. Anaxagoras frag. 13.8 McKirihan.

16. Anaxagoras frag. 13.16 McKirihan.

fragment, that objects become identifiable as specific basic things once a dominant amount of a particular thing becomes present in an object. However, Anaxagoras does not provide an explanation in the extant fragments of the process by which a certain basic thing and/or quality becomes dominant in an object. Anaxagoras' use of the word "most" in this fragment suggests a quantitative interpretation, which means that such an explanation would have to account for how a portion of a particular basic thing comes to be dominant and, further, how the previously dominant basic thing comes to be less present.[17] Despite attempts by modern scholars to reconcile this fragment with Anaxagoras' other physical principles,[18] this problem remains a serious weakness in the latter's theory of matter, for Anaxagoras' inability to account for the process by which a basic thing becomes quantitatively

17. Ibid.

18. Vlastos in "Physical Theory" (337) argues that an identifiable substance in Anaxagoras' system is nothing more than a collection of its dominant qualities. For example, Vlastos posits that there is no such thing as a "flesh" seed in Anaxagoras' physical system, but alternatively argues there are seeds that simply possess a certain combination of qualities which gives one the impression of flesh. On this interpretation, it is the qualitative change in an identifiable object that Anaxagoras needs to explain rather than the quantitative accumulation of particular seed types. McKirihan argues for a more biological or literal interpretation of seeds. He posits that particular seeds in a thing will grow to become dominant when combined with certain ingredients and environments. McKirihan in *Philosophy Before Socrates* (215) therefore argues that seeds are "focal points for accretion from which visible amounts" of particular basic things can grow. Therefore, on McKirihan's interpretation, any explanation for how an object becomes identifiable within Anaxagoras' system must account for both the necessary preconditions for growth and the subsequent process of growth and accretion of seeds.

dominant in an identifiable object may entail a violation of the Parmenidean restriction on absolute generation and destruction.

A second important principle of Anaxagoras' physical system is the view that there is no such thing as a smallest portion of matter. Anaxagoras argues that there is "always a smaller" portion of something no matter how many times it is divided, and he further claims that "there cannot be a smallest" portion of a particular thing.[19] This view ensures that any process of dividing matter will always yield further portions of other things, which means that Anaxagoras argued that his physical system did not have definitive pieces of indivisible matter.[20] Therefore, the theory of matter formulated by Anaxagoras systematically accounted for plurality and change in the kosmos through its innovative constituents and physical principles. However, the most distinctive feature of Anaxagoras' philosophical system is its employment of the motive and intellectual principle of nous.

The original cause of motion and change in Anaxagoras' philosophical system is nous, the only principle within this system that is capable of directly causing movement. The specific type of movement that Anaxagoras says nous caused is a rotation, initiated in the primordial mixture

19. Anaxagoras frag. 13.13, 13.6 McKirihan.

20. Many scholars have interpreted this principle of Anaxagoras' system as a response to Zeno's argument against the indivisibility of matter. Zeno argues that the end products of a process of infinite division will have either some size or no size. If the infinite particles of matter have positive size, then they will occupy an infinite space. If they do not have any size, then they will occupy no space. Anaxagoras evades the paradoxical conclusion of this argument by positing that there are no end products in his theory of matter (McKirihan, *Philosophy Before Socrates*, 218).

and resulting in the formation of the kosmos through the "separating off" of identifiable objects from this mass.[21] Anaxagoras therefore posited nous as the central motive principle of his cosmogonic process and further assigns this principle a unique physical status in relation to his theory of matter. Anaxagoras says that nous is totally unmixed with any other type of matter, which makes it the only exception to the principle that "in everything there is a portion of everything."[22] Nous is also described as being the only thing that is completely "separated off" from other things in the initial cosmogonic stages.[23] The unmixed status of nous is also expressed in terms of its physical purity, for Anaxagoras says that this principle is the "purest" of all things and that all portions of nous are alike.[24] It is therefore clear that Anaxagoras conceived of nous as having an absolutely homogeneous constitution.

It also seems that Anaxagoras considered nous to be spatially extended, for he says that it is the "finest" of all things and, further, that there are larger and smaller quantities of nous.[25] However, the exact nature of the spatial extensiveness of nous is ambiguous, for Anaxagoras claims that nous is both "in some things" and also "where all other things are" in the kosmos.[26] These descriptions seem *prima facie* contradictory, for the former claim indicates that nous occupies particular spaces whereas the latter claim suggests that nous is spatially infinite. Anaxagoras clearly conceived of nous as spatially

21. Anaxagoras frag. 13.13 McKirihan.
22. Anaxagoras frag. 13.11 McKirihan.
23. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12. McKirihan.
24. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12, 13.15 McKirihan.
25. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12, 13.15 McKirihan.
26. Anaxagoras frag. 13.11, 13.14 McKirihan.

infinite, for he describes this principle as being "unlimited" and being present in the "surrounding multitude" of things in the kosmos.[27] Alternatively, Anaxagoras also argued that nous is particularly concentrated in forms of life[28] and, further, that human beings possess the most nous out of all life.[29] A possible solution to this tension then may be that nous, as a physical principle, is capable of existing both in a condensed state in particular things and also in a diffuse state throughout the kosmos as a whole. It is evident, then, that Anaxagoras conceived of nous as having physical attributes such as spatial extensiveness and a homogeneous constitution. The unique physical status of nous within Anaxagoras' philosophical system serves to explain its role as a motive principle. Anaxagoras posits that the pure and unmixed nature of nous is a condition of its motive power, for he claims that anything that could be mixed with nous "would hinder it so that it would rule no thing."[30] It is clear, then, that nous plays a motive role in Anaxagoras' cosmogonic process by virtue of its unique homogeneous constitution and through the indirect means of the mechanical rotation that it initiates.

In addition to its mechanical properties, it seems that Anaxagoras also conceived of nous as an intellectual principle. For example, Anaxagoras says that nous "set in order all things" at the outset of the cosmogonic process by

27. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12, 13.14 McKirihan.

28. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.

29. Aristotle *Parts of Animals* 687a7.

30. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan. Cleve interprets this passage as meaning that nous could not exert mechanical force on objects that it could physically penetrate. He posits in *Philosophy of Anaxagoras* (28) that the resistance of nous against normal matter, ensured by the impenetrability of the former by the latter, is the primary way in which nous exerts its motive force.

initiating a rotation, which suggests that nous had knowledge of the imperceptible basic things that existed in the primordial mixture.[31] This means that even though it was the rotation that directly caused the "separating off" of things, Anaxagoras' claim that nous "knew all the things that are being mixed together and separated off" suggests that nous was cognizant of the possibilities for the formation of distinct entities.[32] Anaxagoras' claim that nous "has judgment about everything" further suggests that he conceived of nous as an agent whose influence on the separative process was conscious and deliberate.[33]

It is clear that Anaxagoras assigned nous an intellectual aspect, but it is important to note some fundamental limitations to its creative potential within his philosophical system. Firstly, Anaxagoras describes nous as coexisting with normal matter in the primordial mixture, and it is, therefore, not responsible for creating this matter. Nous also did not create the basic things that exist in the kosmos, for he says that nous merely "knew all the things" that are being formed.[34] The wording here, as well as Anaxagoras' theory of seeds, suggests that the various basic things which matter can transmute into are simply separated out by nous rather than created by it. Nous is responsible for organizing the kosmos into the various things that are possible, but it is not responsible for, nor is it capable of,

31. Anaxagoras frag. 13.13 McKirihan. Anaxagoras' further claim in this fragment, namely, that nous set in order "whatever kinds of things were to be" may also suggest that it was cognizant of the various combinatorial possibilities of matter that were subsequently formed in the kosmos.
32. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.
33. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.
34. Ibid.

determining these possibilities. It is evident, then, that Anaxagoras conceived of nous as a mechanical and intellectual principle that is responsible for and cognizant of the initiation of the cosmogonic process and the subsequent differentiation of the primordial mixture.

The operation of nous within Anaxagoras' philosophical system is not limited to the initiation of the cosmogonic process, for it also plays a central role in his conception of life. Anaxagoras argued that nous "rules all things that possess life — both the larger and the smaller," which means that he conceived of nous as the animating principle of life at the level of both plants and animals.[35] Further, Aristotle's statement that Anaxagoras "says that man is the most intelligent living being because he has hands" indicates that there is a connection between nous and intelligence.[36] If intelligence is taken to denote a high concentration or quantity of nous in this passage, then it is

35. Ibid.

36. Aristotle *Parts of Animals* 687a7. There seems to be a parallelism between Anaxagoras' conception of nous as an organizing and motive principle and his theory that human beings have the most intelligence because they have hands. The primordial mixture presents nous with various elements and their combinatorial possibilities. Through the use of its motive force, nous initiates the cosmogonic process and subsequently actualizes these possibilities by forming distinct entities (as compounds). Human beings similarly conceptualize the combinatorial possibilities of the various elements that they are presented with and actualize such possibilities primarily through the manipulation afforded them by their hands. Movement therefore enables nous to do what hands enable humans to do, namely to separate and organize. Just as nous orders the kosmos by virtue of its understanding of its various elements and its motive power, so too does the human being order its world through the understanding of its various elements and the subsequent manipulation of these elements with its hands.

clear that Anaxagoras held that the relative intelligence of a kind of life is a function of its portion of nous. Professor Gerard Naddaf, a specialist in ancient Greek philosophy, alternatively interprets this statement as suggesting that Anaxagoras postulated a "correlation between the portion of nous and the structure of a living thing."[37] Anaxagoras therefore posited the influence of nous as the animating principal of life in his developed cosmological system.

It is difficult to determine the extent to which Anaxagoras employed nous as an explanation for natural phenomena other than life. Aristotle criticized Anaxagoras' use of nous as an explanation by charging that the latter arbitrarily "drags in nous" to explain particular natural phenomena.[38] The wording used by Aristotle in this passage[39] suggests that Anaxagoras *repeatedly* used nous as an explanation for natural phenomena, which may indicate that the latter employed nous, in the non-extant sections of his work, as an explanation for natural phenomena other than life.[40] In any case, it is clear that Anaxagoras conceived of nous as a motive force and an intellectual

37. Gerard Naddaf, *The Greek Concept of Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 150.

38. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1.4 985a18.

39. Ibid. ("Anaxagoras uses Mind as a *dues ex machina* to account for the creation of the world. When he can not explain why something is necessarily as it is, he drags in Mind, but otherwise he will use anything rather than Mind to explain a particular phenomenon.")

40. The diversity of topics covered by Anaxagoras in the extant fragments, including theories on biology (frag. 13.23 McKirihan), perception (frag. 13.20, 13.21 McKirihan), and astronomy (frag. 13.18 McKirihan), clearly indicate that his work covered a wide array of natural phenomena. Even though the only post-cosmogonic employment of nous in the extent fragments is in reference to life, it is reasonable to suppose on the basis of Aristotle's criticism that nous was used to explain other natural phenomena in addition to life.

agent that exercised a pervasive influence on the cosmogonic process and life within his developed cosmological system.

Many ancient authors put forth interpretations of the various elements of Anaxagoras' philosophical system, but among them it was primarily Plato and Aristotle who criticized the role of nous within this system. In the *Phaedo*, Plato argues that Anaxagoras does not make use to his concept of nous as a final cause. More specifically, he argues that Anaxagoras uses the mechanical forces of his cosmological system, rather than nous, to explain the ordering of the kosmos. In his criticism that Anaxagoras was not able to distinguish "a real cause from the implements necessary to achieve a result," Plato is essentially arguing that the role of nous within the former's philosophical system is non-intentional in that it is restricted solely to the initiation of the cosmogonic process.[41] In addition to criticizing the degree to which nous is responsible for order in the kosmos, Plato also criticizes the manner in which things are formed in Anaxagoras' cosmological system. For example, Socrates says in the *Phaedo* that he was expecting Anaxagoras to account for natural phenomena by explaining that "the way they are is the best way for them to be."[42] Plato thus also objects to the (apparently) non-teleological nature of Anaxagoras' philosophical system, a view that is clearly heavily influenced by Plato's Idealism.

Aristotle criticizes Anaxagoras' philosophical system along the same lines as Plato in arguing that Anaxagoras imports the concept of nous as a convenient motive

41. Plato *Phaedo* 97b8.
42. Ibid.

principle. Aristotle's charge that Anaxagoras, "will use anything rather than nous to explain a particular phenomenon," mirrors Plato's criticism that Anaxagoras uses the purely mechanical, non-necessary elements of his cosmological system to account for its various phenomena.[43] Also similar to Plato, Aristotle argues that Anaxagoras did not associate his principle of nous with teleology, for he complains that Anaxagoras does not state that nous is a perfect final state "towards which physical processes tend."[44]

It is clear therefore that both Plato and Aristotle criticized Anaxagoras' conception of nous on the grounds that it has a limited and non-intentional role within the latter's philosophical system, and further that it does not order the kosmos in a teleological fashion. The charge that Anaxagoras' cosmological system is non-teleological is not serious given that it is based on Plato and Aristotle's shared presumption that any cosmological system must adopt a teleological approach. Anaxagoras explicitly states that the main function of nous is to organize the kosmos in an orderly, rather than ideal, fashion.[45] Anaxagoras' conception of order as the basis of cosmological organization is equally valid to Plato and Aristotle's use of teleology as the basis of the kosmos; the projection of the latter premise on Anaxagoras' system does not simply invalidate the value of the former, as Plato and Aristotle assume. In addition to this, it is clear that idealistic forms are impossible to achieve in principle in Anaxagoras' system, for no matter how much a portion of a particular basic thing dominates an object, there will always be at

43. Aristotle *Metaphysics* 1.4 985a18.
44. Ibid., 988b8.
45. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.

least some measure of every other basic thing within that object.[46] It is evident, then, that the idea of idealistic forms in Anaxagoras' cosmological system is inconsistent with his fundamentally heterogeneous theory of matter.

Plato and Aristotle's further criticism that nous is a non-intentional motive principle limited to initiating the cosmogonic process fails to take account of several central features of nous. Firstly, given the intellectual aspects of nous (as outlined above)[47] such as the cognitive faculties of possessing knowledge and judgment, it is clear that this principle should be considered an autonomous agent in addition to a motive force. It is also clear that the influence of nous extends beyond the cosmogonic process and throughout his cosmological system given that it is the animating principle of life.[48] It should also be noted that nous, according to Anaxagoras' theory, initiated a specific type of motion at the outset of the cosmogonic process — a rotation.[49] There is therefore no reason to assume that nous was limited to initiating this specific type of motion, especially when it is clear that nous enables life to move in all kinds of different ways.[50] It is reasonable to suppose that nous may have been able to initiate a different type of motion, one that potentially would have caused the

46. Ibid. In other words, the principle that "in everything there is a portion of everything" precludes the possibility of ideal forms. In an idealistic sense nous is perfect, a fact noticed by Aristotle (*Metaphysics* 1.7 988b8), but Anaxagoras' fundamentally heterogeneous theory of matter makes it impossible for anything else to achieve the perfection of nous.

47. See p. 8 of this paper.

48. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan. See also p. 9 of this paper.

49. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.

50. Ibid.

formation of different elemental combinations.[51] There is therefore no reason to assume that the rotational motive force nous used to initiate the cosmogonic process was not an intentional choice, among other possible types of motive forces, made by nous.

Plato and Aristotle's observation that nous initiated change through the indirect means of mechanical physical processes is correct. However, their criticism that nous influences the kosmos in a non-intentional manner fails to take account of the intelligent and autonomous nature of this principle, an omission that may have led to an undue emphasis on the motive capabilities of nous. It is clear, then, that Plato and Aristotle interpreted nous as a non-intentional motive principle that influenced the kosmos in a non-teleological fashion, a view that did not take into account many central features of Anaxagoras' philosophical system and one that was ultimately coloured by the shared teleological perspective of these philosophers.

The ambiguous nature of nous and its role within Anaxagoras' philosophical system has also produced many interpretations by modern scholars. A recent interpretation offered by Naddaf holds that Anaxagoras' philosophical system represents a political model. On the basis of a fragment of Euripides stating that Anaxagoras

51. André Laks, "Mind's Crisis. On Anaxagoras' NOUS," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 31 (1993): 30. Laks mentions this as one possible way of analyzing the relationship between nous and the initial cosmogonic rotation. If nous intentionally chose a rotation among other movements, as Laks notes, it can be thought of as completing a "vast hypothetical syllogism; *if* the initial mixture is given a circular or whirling movement, *then* things will be separated out in a way" that will produce the present kosmos.

believed nature should be followed as "the standard of goodness," Naddaf argues that Anaxagoras' cosmological system represents a socio-political model.[52] Naddaf reinforces his argument by situating Anaxagoras in his political context: He was a resident of a Persian province for two extended periods of his life, and he was a friend of the prominent Athenian politician Pericles. Naddaf also argues that Anaxagoras' use of the word *autokrates* to describe the power of nous may be a reference to the Great King of Persia.[53] Based on this evidence that Anaxagoras had a political inspiration for his philosophical system, Naddaf conjectures that Anaxagoras' conception of nous represents the equality of each citizen's individual mind. He further argues that Anaxagoras' cosmological model represents the peace and harmony that can be achieved by submitting to nous, or as interpreted by Naddaf, the rule of law.[54]

One problem with Naddaf's interpretation is his view that Anaxagoras' use of the word autokrates suggests a political inspiration for the latter's system. Anaxagoras' use of such a word may alternatively be due to the tendency of Presocratic philosophers, in general, to use political terminology to describe their philosophical systems. For example, in his one extant fragment Anaximander describes generation and destruction in terms of penalty, retribution and injustice.[55] A further problem with Naddaf's political interpretation is that Anaxagoras does not say that each individual mind is equal in terms of its relative quantity of nous. Anaxagoras

52. Naddaf, *Concept of Nature*, 151.
53. Ibid.
54. Ibid., 152.
55. Anaximander frag. 5.19 McKirihan.

does say that humans have the most nous out of all life, but he does not say that each individual human has an equal portion of nous. In fact, since the relative portion of nous in a life form determines its intelligence,[56] it is reasonable to suppose that the varying levels of intelligence among individual human beings can be explained by their possession of unequal portions of nous. Therefore, it is unclear whether political and ethical considerations were central to Anaxagoras' philosophical system. It is important, however, to note the influence that the politically involved life of Anaxagoras may have had on his thinking.

A further interpretation of the role of nous within Anaxagoras' system is offered by Laks, who posits that the principle identity between the cosmic nous and the nous in animal life is "distinction or discernment."[57] It is the critical nature of nous, rather than its motive capability, at the animal and cosmic level that Laks interprets as central to the overall activity of this principle. Laks interprets the process of separation that nous initiates through a rotation of the primordial mixture as an attempt by this principle to make everything similar to itself or, in other words, to separate (as far as possible) distinct identities that mirror the pure identity of nous.[58] Laks therefore argues that the activity of nous is designed to bring out the identity of every basic thing. However, Laks correctly points out that this process of identification through separation is ultimately doomed to failure given Anaxagoras' principle

56. Aristotle *Parts of Animals* 687a7. See also p. 9 of this paper.
57. André Laks, "Mind's Crisis," 29.
58. Ibid., 31.

that nothing can become completely separate or unmixed.[59]

One major problem with this interpretation is that it does not account for the nous present in plant life. The premise of this argument, that the identity between cosmic and animal nous is "distinction or discernment,"[60] totally excludes any consideration of a possible identity between cosmic and plant nous. Anaxagoras explicitly states that nous controls "all things that possess life," so it is clear that any identity drawn between the cosmic nous and the nous that operates at the level of life must take into account both plant and animal life.[61] Since plants are obviously not capable of distinction or discernment, Laks's argument is an inadequate explanation for the activity of nous in general. Further, Laks's argument that the main activity of nous is the separation of distinct identities does not account for the fact that its most concentrated substantiations are present in life, which are essentially compounds of basic things. If the nature of nous is simply to separate then it is strange that it would operate, and indeed become most concentrated in the compounded forms of life that often themselves (in the case of humans) create further compounds.[62] Laks's interpretation does account for many of the cognitive aspects of both nous and

59. Anaximander frag. 13.8 McKirihan.

60. André Laks, "Mind's Crisis," 29.

61. Anaxagoras frag. 13.12 McKirihan.

62. Axaxagoras frag. 13.4. Anaxagoras himself mentions compounds such as "inhabited cities and cultivated fields"—translated as "inhabited cities and artificial works" by Kathleen Freeman in *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers* (83) —created by human beings. Indeed, Anaxagoras even considers the creative potential of human beings as a survival advantage that we possess over animals (Anaxagoras frag. 13.22 McKirihan).

animals, but it is clear that it neither takes account of the full range of life nor the presence of high concentrations of *nous* in compounds.

Therefore, it is clear from the various and divergent interpretations of Anaxagoras' conception of nous that a definitive and comprehensive account of its role within his system has not yet been presented. However, the fragmentary and, hence, limited nature of our evidence necessitates interpretive attempts to reconstruct Anaxagoras' thought. The lack of scholarly consensus can be most probably ascribed to the inherent ambiguity of the role of nous in Anaxagoras' philosophical system. Compounding the problem of inadequate evidence is Anaxagoras' lack of a developed philosophical vocabulary, a problem that, while common to all Presocratic philosophers, may further explain this lack of consensus.

While a full account of the role of nous in Anaxagoras' philosophical system has not been presented, this paper has outlined several features and activities of this principle. The first section of this paper explicated the constituents and principles of Anaxagoras' physical system. The role of nous as a motive, intellectual and physical principle in Anaxagoras' philosophical system was then outlined, as well as its central role as the animating principle of life. Following this, Plato and Aristotle's criticisms of the role of nous in Anaxagoras' system were outlined and critiqued. In the final section of this paper the interpretations of Naddaf and Laks regarding the role of nous were outlined, and it was demonstrated that a definitive and comprehensive explanation of this question has not yet been formulated. However, that both the ancient and modern interpretations are possible reconstructions of Anaxagoras' thought and,

indeed, that they are all supported in part by the existing evidence, clearly highlights the complex and systematic nature of his philosophical system.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Cleve, Felix M. *The Philosophy of Anaxagoras*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

Freeman, Kathleen. *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971.

Gershenson, Daniel E., and Greenberg, Daniel A., eds. *Anaxagoras and the Birth of Physics.* New York: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1964.

Laks, André. "Mind's Crisis. On Anaxagoras' NOUS." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 31 (Supplement 1993): 19–38.

McKirihan, Richard D. *Philosophy Before Socrates*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1994.

Naddaf, Gerard. *The Greek Concept of Nature*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Vlastos, Gregory. "The Physical Theory of Anaxagoras." *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy* 2 (1975): 323–353.