

## Anaxarchus on Indifference, Happiness, and Convention

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### 1. Life and Sources

Anaxarchus was born about 380 BCE in Abdera, the birthplace of Democritus, and he died around 320 BCE. This makes him roughly contemporaneous with Aristotle—perhaps a bit younger. But in his ethics, epistemology, and metaphysics, he draws upon an older, Democritean tradition. His ethics has affinities to the iconoclastic hedonism of the Cyrenaics, and he influenced Pyrrho, the namesake for the later skeptical movement. Because of his impassivity and contentment, he was known as the “Happy Man” (Εὐδαιμονικός). (DL 9 60) This impassivity is the subject of some of the anecdotes concerning his life, most dramatically in the edifying story of his death: as he was being pounded to death in a mortar at the orders of a tyrant he had insulted, he cried out “pound the envelope containing Anaxarchus, you do not pound Anaxarchus,” and when the tyrant ordered his tongue cut out, Anaxarchus bit it off and spit it at him. (DL 9 59) He also accompanied Pyrrho on Alexander’s expedition to India, and we have a fair number of anecdotes (most likely spurious) about Anaxarchus’ interactions with Alexander and with Pyrrho. Apparently, Anaxarchus was rebuked by an Indian for paying court to kings, and it was this rebuke that led Pyrrho to withdraw from worldly affairs. (DL 9 63)

Our evidence on Anaxarchus is awfully thin—barely four pages total in Diels-Kranz’s compendium of the sources on the pre-Socratics, both testimonia and two brief “fragments.” One of our main sources on Anaxarchus is Diogenes Laertius. With the possible exception of Epicurus, this is usually a bad sign, and in Anaxarchus’ case, as Jim Hankinson correctly notes,

“Diogenes’ ‘Life’ is more than usually anecdotal and worthless.”<sup>1</sup> We also have Clement of Alexandria putting him in the Democritean succession (Clement *Strom.* I.64.4), a passing reference to him in Cicero, a few anecdotes about his interactions with Alexander the Great related in Plutarch, Arrian, and elsewhere, a valuable report on his epistemology in Sextus Empiricus, and a couple of brief quotations from *On Kingship*, the only work by him that we know of. That is about it. (Variations on the tale of Anaxarchus’ heroic death take up a large portion of the *testimonia*.)

So, if we’re going to try to reconstruct Anaxarchus’ philosophy broadly and his ethics specifically, the nature of the evidence places severe constraints on the methods of inquiry. Because the *testimonia* are mainly anecdotal, we need to rely on those dubious anecdotes and try to extract philosophical significance from them. Relying on dubious anecdotes like this is obviously less than ideal, but it is not hopeless. Many of these anecdotes were probably composed in order to provide fitting and amusing illustrations of a philosophical point or of a position of the person in question, and so they can be used as evidence for their philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Also, we need to draw on the philosophical doctrines of predecessors and contemporaries of Anaxarchus, about whom we have better information, who would serve as plausible inspirations

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<sup>1</sup> R. Hankinson, *The Sceptics [Sceptics]* (Routledge, 1995) 54.

<sup>2</sup> A similar figure in this regard is Aristippus the Elder, the founder of the Cyrenaics, where dubious anecdotes form a large portion of our evidence regarding his philosophy. In his book on the Cyrenaics’ ethics, Kurt Lampe argues that these anecdotes often have more philosophical than historical value. See K. Lampe, *The Birth of Hedonism: The Cyrenaic Philosophers and Pleasure as a Way of Life [Hedonism]* (Princeton, 2014) 204-5 for more on this evidential issue and pointers to further discussion.

for his arguments, in order to fill in *why* he might hold the positions that he does, rather than simply what they are.

Reconstructing Anaxarchus' philosophy is not doomed to failure, but any reconstruction will be speculative, and the best we can hope for is a likely story. As Aristotle warns us (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1 iii), we should not expect more exactness from an inquiry than the subject-matter allows.

## 2. Indifference regarding value: its basis and its benefits

Anaxarchus' ethics is distinctive. He develops an anti-realist position that is based on Democritean metaphysics, but which is not present in Democritus himself, and which has affinities to Pyrrho and the later Pyrrhonian skeptics like Sextus Empiricus, but different practical implications.

The starting place for considering Anaxarchus' ethics is Diogenes Laertius' description of his happiness and the reason for it:

Because of the impassivity (*ἀπάθεια*) and contentment (*εὐκολία*) of his life, he was called “the Happy Man.” (DL 9 60; text A in the appendix)

This impassivity was (supposedly) most strikingly displayed by the way he withstood being pounded to death in a mortar with iron pestles by the orders of a tyrant he had insulted. (DL 9 59; text B) Like Pyrrho, his impassivity and contentment are based upon an indifference to the value of things around him: when Anaxarchus fell into a pond and Pyrrho passed by without giving him any help, others criticized Pyrrho, but Anaxarchus praised him for being indifferent (*ἀδιάφορος*) and without compassion (*ἄστοργος*). (DL 9 63; text C) In this situation, the indifference that Anaxarchus praises is most plausibly thought of as Pyrrho's ethical indifference

regarding the value of helping his companion out of the pond, instead of epistemological indifference regarding whether it is the case that his companion is in the pond.<sup>3</sup>

Pyrrho's indifference to the value of things is strongly stated near the start of Diogenes' discussion of him:

[Pyrrho] said that nothing is noble (καλός) or shameful (αἰσχρός), just or unjust, and similarly, nothing is in truth, but people do everything by custom and habit; each thing is no more (οὐ μᾶλλον) this than this. (DL 9 61).

And this indifference is beneficial: the wise person will attain tranquility (DL 9 68), and those who wish to be happy should be without opinions. (Eusebius, *PE* 14.18.1-5) It is precisely this aspect of Pyrrho's thought that makes him the namesake for the much later skeptical movement: the Pyrrhonian skeptic suspends judgment on all questions of what is good or bad by nature, and doing so leads to tranquility. (Sextus Empiricus, *PHI* 27-8)

And so Anaxarchus, Pyrrho, and the later Pyrrhonian skeptics share a great deal of ethical common ground, all of them holding that indifference regarding the value of things in the world somehow leads to contentment. But in order to draw out what is distinctive about Anaxarchus' ethics, I will compare Anaxarchus to Pyrrho and to the later Pyrrhonian skeptics on four questions:

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<sup>3</sup> Here, I agree with J. Warren, *Epicurus and Democritean Ethics. An Archaeology of Ataraxia* [*Archaeology*] (Cambridge, 2002) 79, although later I will argue against his thesis that indifference for Anaxarchus is *restricted* to value. Warren's reading is bolstered by the pairing here of being indifferent with "lacking compassion" or "being heartless" (ἄστοργος), since lacking compassion is a matter of not valuing something, rather than not believing it to be the case.

- (1) In what sense are they “indifferent” about the value of things in the world; i.e., what beliefs or dispositions do they hold about the value of things in the world?
- (2) On what basis do they arrive at their conclusions (or dispositions) regarding (1)?
- (3) How is this indifference supposed to lead to contentment?
- (4) What is the practical upshot of this indifference?

Let us start with questions (1) and (2). “Indifference” about value can take many forms, both epistemological and metaphysical; we may draw an analogy here with “skepticism” regarding the existence of god, as the term is popularly used. Both T. H. Huxley and Madalyn Murray O’Hair may be called skeptics: but Huxley’s skepticism is an epistemological thesis, that he does not know (and perhaps cannot know) whether or not god exists, whereas O’Hair’s skepticism is the (negative) metaphysical thesis that there is no god.

For Sextus Empiricus, indifference is a matter of lacking of any epistemological commitment: he suspends judgment on all questions about whether anything is good or bad by nature. The skeptic has developed a number of techniques (the skeptical “modes,” or τρόποι) to achieve suspension of judgement, and the tenth mode takes aim at ethical beliefs in particular. (*PH* I 145-163, see also *PH* III 198-238) This mode starts from observing the variety of ways of life, habits, laws, mythical beliefs, and dogmatic suppositions, each of which make things seem right or wrong, good or bad. An example would be cannibalism. Sextus admits that cannibalism appears wrong to him, given the society he lives in. But he sees that cannibalism appears acceptable to some barbarian tribes and to the Stoics, and he has no criterion to use to decide who—if anybody—is correct on the matter. (*PH* III 207-8) The general result of using this mode is that the skeptic is unable to say what the external object is like in its nature (ὅποῖον ἔστι τὸ ὑποκείμενον κατὰ τὴν φύσιν), only how it seems to be with respect to some way of life, law, or

custom. (*PH I* 163) So skeptical indifference is concerned with how the thing is in itself, apart from how it seems to us or how we judge it to be.<sup>4</sup>

The situation with Pyrrho himself is far murkier, and delving into all of the complications would quickly derail this paper, which focuses on Anaxarchus. But let me give a quick summary. The quotation above from Diogenes Laertius on Pyrrho's position regarding value echoes what Democritus has to say about the existence of sensible qualities: "Sweet exists by convention, bitter by convention, color by convention; atoms and void exist in truth (ἐτεῖν)." (Sextus Empiricus, *M VII*, 135, also reported in *DL 9 72*) Like the Pyrrhonian skeptic, Democritus is concerned with how things are in themselves, or in their nature, apart from how they appear to us. (When Diogenes Laertius paraphrases Democritus' overall metaphysics at *DL 9 45*, he says that the qualities of things exist by convention, while atoms and the void exist in nature.) But unlike the Pyrrhonian skeptic, Democritus does not suspend judgment on how things are in themselves; instead, he *eliminates* sensible qualities from his ontology. As Sextus reports, from the fact that honey appears sweet to one person and bitter to another, Democritus infers that the

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<sup>4</sup> This sketch of Sextus' position is mainly based upon Sextus' programmatic description of the skeptic's procedure in the opening sections of the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*, especially in *PH I 7-15*. Sextus' actual arguments, both in the *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* and especially in *Against the Learned*, are messier than this sketch. Sometimes they conform to it, but in other cases he seems to advance the sort of eliminativist argument from relativity that I attribute below to Anaxarchus. See chapter sixteen of R. Hankinson, *Skeptics*, 262-272 and chapter four of R. Bett, *Pyrrho, his antecedents, and his legacy [Pyrrho]* (Oxford, 2000) 189-240 for more on this issue. Here I avoid the topic since resolving it is unnecessary for the purpose of illuminating Anaxarchus' thought.

honey itself is neither, pronouncing that it is no more (οὐ μᾶλλον) sweet than bitter. (Sextus Empiricus, *PH I* 213) Pyrrho was extremely fond of Democritus (DL 9 67), and the report in DL 9 61 may tempt us to think that Pyrrho eliminates value from his ontology in a way that parallels how Democritus eliminates sensible qualities: by convention, we regard certain things as noble or shameful, but in truth (or by nature) things are neither noble nor shameful.

But this apparent parallel is not quite accurate, because what Pyrrho says about the qualities of things in the world is more unusual and obscure than a straightforward Democritean eliminativism. According to a much-worked-over report of Pyrrho's views by his disciple Timon, our opinions tell us neither truths *nor falsehoods*, so that the statement "cannibalism is shameful" is neither true nor false, and likewise for "cannibalism is noble." (On a straightforward Democritean eliminativist view, both statements would be false.) This is because things are by nature "equally indifferent (ἰδιάφορος), unstable (ἀστάθμητος), and indeterminate (ἀνεπίκριτος)" and as a result we should say of each thing "that it no more is than is not, or it both is and is not, or it neither is nor is not." (Eusebius, *PE* 14.18.1-5) It is hard to know quite how to understand this, but the best reading (in my opinion) is Richard Bett's: the nature of things is inherently indeterminate, so that nothing is determinately either the case or not the case. And because of this indeterminacy, our opinions and sensations are neither true nor false of things. Pyrrho has no opinions about the value of things, but this lack of opinion is based upon a sweeping metaphysical thesis regarding the indeterminacy and indifference of the world.<sup>5</sup> (This

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<sup>5</sup> See chapter one of R. Bett, *Pyrrho*, 14-62 for an extended argument for this interpretation and pointers to further literature, and J. Warren, *Archaeology*, 86-92 for further support. I agree with Bett's "metaphysical" reading of Pyrrho, but I will not defend it here. The alternative "epistemological" reading accepts a proposed emendation of Eusebius' text. It takes Pyrrho as

position may appear internally inconsistent, but it is not. When Pyrrho says that things are indeterminate, so that we should not have any opinions that ascribe determinate characteristics to them, he is not thereby ascribing a determinate characteristic to things.)

In the case of Anaxarchus, his Democritean background allows us to supply a much more straightforward sense in which things are indifferent in value, and an argument for this metaphysical conclusion. For Democritus, honey is “no more” sweet than bitter, because in itself the honey is *neither* sweet *nor* bitter—it is just atoms and the void. And a sign of this is the relativity of perception. The same honey that seems sweet to me may seem bitter to another animal, depending on our bodily conditions. So we should think that the sweetness or bitterness is not out there in nature as a quality of the honey in itself, but is simply a change in our senses. (Theophrastus, *De sens.* 63-64) Similar eliminative reasoning can easily be extended—although it is not by Democritus himself—to values.<sup>6</sup> We conventionally deem things noble or shameful,

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saying we are unable to make accurate determinations regarding the way things are, and it reads the adjectives describing the world modally, e.g., that things are equally *undifferentiable* and *undeterminable* (by us). Pyrrho, on the epistemological reading, is much closer to later Pyrrhonian skeptics than he is on the metaphysical reading. But there is still an important difference between them, insofar as Sextus claims that thinking that it is impossible to attain knowledge is itself a kind of definite epistemic commitment, characteristic of later Academics like Arcesilaus, that the genuine skeptic eschews. (*PHI* 3; *PHI* 226)

<sup>6</sup> We have many reports concerning Democritus’ ethics, but it is controversial what to make of them, as they consist mainly of his sayings rather than any philosophical theses or arguments. Jonathan Barnes regards them as nothing more than dreary platitudes about how to avoid disturbance, whereas Julia Annas sees Democritus advancing an interesting eudaimonist ethical



and various actions will appear noble or shameful to us. But the same action that seems shameful to me may seem noble to another person, depending on our upbringing and our societies' mores. So we should think that nobility and shamefulness are not out there in nature as qualities of actions in themselves. Any particular action is no more shameful than noble because it is *neither*,

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position. (J. Barnes, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, (Routledge, 1982), 530-535; J. Annas, "Democritus and Eudaimonism," in V. Caston and D. Graham (eds.), *Presocratic Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Alexander Mourelatos*, (Ashgate, 2002), 169–82.) The relationship, if any, between Democritus' ethics and metaphysics is also controversial, with Gregory Vlastos arguing that his ethics rests on his metaphysics, whereas Christopher Taylor is dubious of any connection. (G. Vlastos, "Ethics and physics in Democritus," in D. Furley and R. Allen (eds.), *Studies in Presocratic Philosophy*, Volume 2: *Eleatics and Pluralists*, (Routledge, 1975), 381–408; C. Taylor, *The Atomists: Leucippus and Democritus. Fragments, A Text and Translation with Commentary*, (Toronto, 1999), 232–4.) We have nothing indicating that Democritus espoused skepticism regarding value, although our reports are too thin to attribute a realist position either. (Indeed, he may have had no position one way or the other: it is entirely possible to have first-order beliefs regarding ethical matters without considering metaethical issues about the ontology of value.) One point of contact between Democritus and Anaxarchus is the goal of their ethics. Democritus posits "cheerfulness" (εὐθυμία) as the goal of life, where εὐθυμία for Democritus is characterized as a well-settled and peaceful state of mind, undisturbed by fear (DL 9 45; Seneca, *Tranquility* 2.3). This is not so different from Anaxarchus' impassivity and contentment.

and (unlike in Pyrrho) any statement like “this action is shameful,” which assigns a value to something, would simply be false.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, shortly after Anaxarchus was active, we see the Epicureans defending the reality of evaluative properties from precisely this sort of eliminativist “no more” (οὐ μᾶλλον) argument from relativity. The Epicurean Polystratus reports that some people claim that our beliefs regarding the noble, the shameful, and such are false, because unlike things like gold, the noble and the shameful are not everywhere the same.<sup>8</sup> The Democriteans are the most likely source for this particular skeptical argument from relativity that Polystratus is responding to. That is because, even though others in antiquity advanced οὐ μᾶλλον arguments from relativity, they

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<sup>7</sup> Of course, being a conventionalist about things like justice and what is shameful *need* not lead to skepticism about value. The Epicureans, after all, assert that the justice of nature is an agreement neither to harm nor be harmed, combining a type of conventionalism about justice with realism. When people make a certain sort of useful agreement about how to treat one another, this agreement renders things just and unjust. (Epicurus, *KD* 31-33) But Pyrrho clearly *contrasts* something’s being truly shameful or noble and its being merely thought so by custom or convention, as does Democritus regarding sensible qualities, each advancing a debunking conventionalism.

<sup>8</sup> See Polystratus, *On Irrational Contempt*, 23.26-26.23 for the argument and his convincing reply, which involves defending the reality of relational and dispositional properties across the board. It is text 7D in A. Long and D. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, 2 vols. (Cambridge 1987); pp. 32-37 of vol. 1 and T. O’Keefe “The Ontological Status of Sensible Qualities for Democritus and Epicurus,” [“Sensible Qualities”] *Ancient Philosophy* 17 (1997), 119-134 at 126-129 discuss the argument and Polystratus’ reply.

would have derived different sorts of conclusions from them, rather than saying that we *falsely* believe that things are noble or shameful. For instance, from the wind feeling hot for me and cold for you, Protagoras draws the relativistic conclusion that the wind is *both* hot (for me) *and* cold (for you). (Plato, *Tht.* 152a-b) In questions of value, Protagoras likewise concludes what is just or unjust for some society is relative to the conventions of that society. (Plato, *Tht.* 167c-d)<sup>9</sup> An Academic skeptic would conclude that we have “no more” reason to believe one or the other report concerning the temperature of the wind, or concerning the shamefulness of cannibalism, rather than concluding that our beliefs regarding them are false.

Now, on to question (3), how indifference is supposed to lead to happiness. Sextus Empiricus gives the fullest explanation. He says that suspending judgment about value helps one attain tranquility as follows: the skeptic will sometimes feel cold or thirsty, since he is human after all. But accompanying this discomfort he does not have the further disturbing thought that he is suffering something that is bad by nature; consequently he is unperturbed. (*PH* I 12, *PH* III 235-238) This same basic sort of explanation would also be available to both Pyrrho and to Anaxarchus, and the anecdotes about each one’s tranquility comport with it. Pyrrho has no

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<sup>9</sup> I am here agnostic about whether the relativism regarding justice espoused by the character Protagoras in the *Theaetetus* should be ascribed to the historical Protagoras. (See chapter two of M. Lee, *Epistemology After Protagoras: Responses to Relativism in Plato, Aristotle, and Democritus [Relativism]* (Oxford 2005), 8-29 for a good discussion of the question of the relationship of the *Theaetetus* to the historical Protagoras.) What matters for my purposes is the logic of the Protagorean position: if a Protagorean were to advance an οὐ μᾶλλον argument regarding value, saying that *x* is in itself no more just than unjust, he should draw a relativist conclusion rather than an eliminativist one.

opinions about things being one way rather than another, and *ipso facto* he would have no opinions that he is suffering something that is bad by nature. Most people regard things like pain and danger as naturally bad, and not doing so helps Pyrrho remain tranquil.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Anaxarchus, he does not suspend judgment about questions of value, but as he believes that nothing is bad by nature, he would never believe that he himself is suffering something bad by nature.<sup>11</sup>

But this raises the problem: what sort of value are these people indifferent about? For all three philosophers, I have been concentrating on questions of what is just or unjust, noble or shameful; these are often linked to issues of equity and of how we should regard the interests of others.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of convenience, I will label these *moral* values. (I use this shorthand

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<sup>10</sup> See chapter two of R. Bett, *Pyrrho* 63-111 for more on this issue.

<sup>11</sup> Note that, on this score at least, Pyrrho and Anaxarchus would apparently have an advantage over Sextus. If the thought that one is experiencing something bad by nature produces additional trouble, then Pyrrho and Anaxarchus can confidently assert that they are not suffering something bad by nature, whereas Sextus, it seems, would still have to worry that what he is experiencing *might* be bad. I myself find this whole line of thought about the psychological benefits of indifference wildly implausible—if I am drenched to the bone, it is freezing, and I am shivering violently, or if I am being pounded to death in a mortar at a tyrant’s orders, I doubt that the thought “ah, yes, but at least things like cold and excruciating pain are not *by nature* bad” would be terribly comforting.

<sup>12</sup> For an example, see Aristotle’s discussion of justice throughout *Nicomachean Ethics* book 5.

But this linkage is not invariable: Socrates effectively objects to Callicles’ hedonism by

because the claims that it is *shameful* to betray my friend for the sake of money, and that it is *unjust* to cheat my customers and take more than my fair share, are akin to the claim that these actions are *immoral*. But in using this shorthand, I do not wish to commit myself to any substantive theory of what is distinctive of morality, or to any position about the exact relationship between these sorts of values.)

The sort of value that is pertinent to the supposed benefits of indifference regarding shivering with cold or getting pounded to death at a tyrant's orders, however, is not these things' *moral* badness—that in suffering these things I am somehow being shameful or unjust—but their *prudential* badness. That is, I gain peace of mind because I am indifferent regarding their *welfare* value, i.e., whether they are good or bad for me as far as my well-being is concerned. And it is quite possible to be skeptical regarding moral value and not skeptical regarding welfare value. That seems to be the position of the Cyrenaics, who claim that nothing is just or noble or shameful by nature, but merely by convention (DL 2 93), but who also maintain that pleasure is by nature good.<sup>13</sup> (DL 2 88) And while ancient ethicists like Plato and Aristotle want to firmly

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appealing to Callicles' conviction that the pleasures of the catamite or the endless scratcher are shameful. (*Gorgias* 494c-495a)

<sup>13</sup> A contemporary example would be J. L. Mackie, who famously advances an error theory regarding ethics but less famously also seems to be a realist (albeit a subjectivist and relativist) regarding welfare: “[F]or any individual a good life will be made up largely of the effective pursuit of activities that he finds worthwhile, either intrinsically, or because they are directly beneficial to others about whom he cares, or because he knows them to be instrumental in providing the means of well-being for himself and those closely connected with him.” (J. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Penguin 1977), 170)

link what is noble and what is beneficial, the two are not clearly inter-entailing, neither for us today nor for the ancient Greeks. This is shown by Polus' contention that, when a tyrant unjustly inflicts horrific suffering on somebody, it is more shameful to do what he does than to suffer what his victim suffers, but the suffering is worse for the victim than engaging in the wrongdoing is for the tyrant. (Plato, *Gorgias* 466a-475d)

In the case of Sextus Empiricus, he makes it absolutely clear that the skeptic suspends judgments on both kinds of value: the shameful of eating human flesh and the badness of shivering with cold. For Pyrrho and Anaxarchus, things are not as clear as we would like them to be. For Pyrrho, the report of his indifference regarding value in Diogenes Laertius mentions only values like the noble, shameful, just, and unjust. For Anaxarchus, the Democritean eliminativist argument that Polystratus rebuts likewise mentions only what noble and shameful, and Anaxarchus' interactions with Alexander—which I discuss below—also indicate skepticism regarding what is just, unjust, and shameful in particular. Nonetheless, absent any countervailing evidence, I think that it is reasonable to suppose that both Pyrrho and Anaxarchus are indifferent about both moral and welfare value, insofar as doing so helps make sense of the anecdotes concerning their way of life and their peace of mind in the face of adversity. (Below, I will address the question of what value peace of mind itself is supposed to have.)

### 3. Anaxarchus' atomism and skepticism

If I am going to claim that Anaxarchus' skepticism regarding the existence of value in the world has a metaphysical basis in his Democritean eliminative atomism, a slight detour from his ethics proper is necessary, in order to establish that Anaxarchus is an atomist and an eliminativist.

As with everything else concerning his philosophy, the evidence for Anaxarchus being an

atomist is not as strong as we might like it to be, but it does point pretty persuasively in that direction. Anaxarchus is put in the Democritean succession by Diogenes Laertius and Clement (Clement, *Strom.* 1.64.4). However, non-atomists such as Pyrrho and Protagoras are also put in these successions, so this does not give us strong grounds for thinking Anaxarchus is an atomist. Cicero also makes a passing reference to Anaxarchus as a “Democritean.” (*ND* 3 82) This is better evidence, both because Cicero is an earlier and more reliable source, and because one of the distinguishing characteristics that qualifies one as a “Democritean” for Cicero is espousing atomism. Cicero is not in the habit of lumping together all philosophers in dubious successions, making folks like Pyrrho or Protagoras Democriteans. For instance, in *Academica* 1 44, in retracing the history of the skeptical Academy, Cicero attributes the view to Democritus that since truth is hidden, opinion and custom rule, while not calling an Academic like Arcesilaus a Democritean. He can distinguish between those who qualify as followers of Democritus and those who are merely influenced by him.

Furthermore, Anaxarchus is reported to have advanced the characteristically atomist thesis that there is an unlimited number of worlds (κόσμοι), which caused Alexander to despair that he did not yet rule over even one. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 466d, text D; Valerius Maximus 8.14) Now, it is not explicitly said that this particular cosmological thesis was held on the basis of atomist physics, but the atomists were the only philosophical school to hold the thesis,<sup>14</sup> and Valerius Maximus says that Anaxarchus advanced it “on the authority of his teacher

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<sup>14</sup> See D. Furley, “The Greek Theory of the Infinite Universe,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (1981), 571-585 for much more on what he calls the “two pictures of the world”—the infinite universe of the atomists, with an unlimited number of worlds, and the spatially limited universe of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle which has a single κόσμος.

Democritus.” I take this to indicate that he holds the view for Democritus’ reasons. Richard Bett proposes that it may indicate that Anaxarchus is simply relating the Democritean view, not endorsing it himself.<sup>15</sup> But neither version of the anecdote suggests this; they simply have Anaxarchus asserting straightforwardly that there is an unlimited number of worlds. In any case, the conversation probably never actually occurred. Instead, whoever originally devised the anecdote—whether Plutarch or someone else—was trying to make a point about excessive desires leading to mental turmoil, and that even Alexander, who had more power than anyone else in the world, could still be dissatisfied. Bringing up the thesis of an unlimited number of worlds helps make a fitting point about the futility of boundless desires. But if you are inventing this sort of story, it makes more sense to put the thesis into the mouth of a philosopher who actually endorses it, rather than having it repeated by an Aristotelian who is simply relating Democritus’ view, or by somebody entirely agnostic on the matter.

Finally, Anaxarchus shares Democritus’ skepticism regarding our ability to gain knowledge of the world via the senses. Sextus Empiricus reports:

Quite a few have said that both Metrodorus and his followers, and Anaxarchus and also Monimus abolished the criterion—Metrodorus because he said, “we know nothing; we do not even know this thing itself, that we know nothing,” Anaxarchus and Monimus because they likened things (τὰ ὄντα) to painted scenery, and supposed them to resemble what occurs in sleep and madness. (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7 87-8; text E)

What work are these comparisons doing? To compare my perception of a forest to a painting of a forest on a stage would not initially seem to fuel any skeptical worries—after all, typically it is not difficult to distinguish even a skillful stage-painting from an actual three-

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<sup>15</sup> R. Bett, *Pyrrho* 162 n. 116.



dimensional scene that such a painting represents. You might be momentarily fooled by it, but a bit of looking around and changing position would quickly show that it is just a two-dimensional painting, not the real thing. Furthermore, since the audience of a play is fully aware that what they are viewing is merely a painted representation of a three-dimensional scene, they might regard the stage-painting as more or less accurate, or more or less convincing, but they wouldn't regard their impression of it as *delusional*.<sup>16</sup>

The comparison with a stage-painting, however, does serve as an excellent illustration of a different point: that our perceptions of ordinary objects, like trees and rocks, that we think we

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<sup>16</sup> For this reason, I am dubious of Jim Hankinson's suggestion (*Sceptics*, 54-5) that the comparison to scenery is supposed to serve as part of an indistinguishability argument against the trustworthiness of the senses, akin to the skeptical hypothesis arguments advanced by Descartes in *Meditation 1*. The comparisons to dreamers and madmen are more plausible candidates for advancing such a global indistinguishability argument against the senses. But doing so would have been unprecedented. Plato's *Theaetetus* 157e-158d does bring up the cases of dreams and insanity, with Socrates even maintaining that it may be difficult to prove whether one is awake or asleep. But Socrates advances the cases in order to undermine Theaetetus' straightforward definition of knowledge as perception, with the perceptions of dreamers and the insane being paradigmatically false. The first known indistinguishability arguments are by the academic skeptics, who use examples of indistinguishable twins, or eggs, in order to combat the Stoics' notion of infallible *kataleptic* impressions. And even then, the deployment of such examples was piecemeal, rather than being used as the basis for the sort of global skepticism of Descartes. So I think it more likely that those comparisons are simply being used to illustrate the pessimistic conclusions of Anaxarchus' epistemology.

are acquainted with in our experience—τὰ ὄντα—are merely *representations*, not the objects themselves at all. Furthermore, insofar as stage-paintings seem three-dimensional but really aren't, it illustrates the point that these representations can be systematically misleading. This would be a vivid way of expressing a thought already present in Democritus: that we do not know anything about the things themselves, only about what enters our body and presses upon it, shifting in accordance with our bodily condition. (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7 136) This thought occurs immediately after Sextus' report that the sensible qualities we experience, like sweetness, exist merely by convention and not in truth, which in turn is based on the relativity of perception, with the same object seeming sweet to one perceiver and bitter to another.

Now, Democritus is saying that we have knowledge only of the experiences that are caused by things,<sup>17</sup> and not of the things themselves, whereas Anaxarchus says that the things themselves are like a stage-painting. Initially, they seem to be advancing quite different positions, but I think the two turn out to be basically the same. If Anaxarchus were seriously to think that ordinary objects themselves, like trees and rocks, are merely phenomenal representations of unknowable things-in-themselves, he would be anticipating Kant, an exciting but unlikely possibility. And so, by τὰ ὄντα, I take it that Anaxarchus means that our *impressions*

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<sup>17</sup> I take the latter part of the quotation to be referring to our own experiences, or πάθη, as Democritus has a theory of perception where our experiences are caused by the influx of atomic films from objects into our sense organs. That we are acquainted with only these πάθη and not with the external objects that cause them anticipates the epistemology of the Cyrenaics. See chapter four of V. Tsouna, *The Epistemology of the Cyrenaic School* (Cambridge, 1998), 31-61, for more on that topic.

of real things are like painted scenery,<sup>18</sup> or—to put the same basic point slightly differently—τὰ ὄντα is here is being used with something like implicit “scare quotes”: the objects we are aware of in our sensation, which we usually *think* are “real things,” are actually just like painted scenery. But by simply saying that τὰ ὄντα are like painted scenery, Anaxarchus makes his point sound more striking and paradoxical.<sup>19</sup>

Merely to note that our senses give us representations of objects, instead of the things themselves, is just to posit the distinction between appearance and reality. On its own, this need not carry skeptical import—as it did not for the Stoics, for instance. But then the question arises: *How well* do our experiences represent the world? And the second part of the comparison replies: not well at all. In fact, we are in no better position than are dreamers and madmen, people whose experiences are paradigmatically false (or at least untrustworthy).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> As R. Hankinson, *Sceptics*, 54 suggests.

<sup>19</sup> And so, I disagree with Richard Bett, *Pyrrho* 162, who also notes that Anaxarchus likens the “existing things” (his translation for τὰ ὄντα) themselves, and not *our experiences* of them, to a stage-painting, but takes this as a reason for thinking that Anaxarchus is not making a point about our experiences here at all.

<sup>20</sup> Both Bett and Warren deny that Anaxarchus’ comparisons have any epistemological force at all. Instead, they maintain that he is “indifferent” only regarding value, and that the report in Sextus is a result of later philosophers inaccurately reading wider skeptical points back into the pronouncements of their predecessors. While this is possible, I think that comparing things, or our experiences of them, to stage-paintings, and to the experiences of dreamers and madmen, is more plausibly taken as making an epistemological rather than an exclusively ethical point. Bett disagrees, saying that a modern comparison would be somebody sighing “‘Life is but a dream’.”

The source for such a low opinion of the senses is close at hand: Democritus. Although the exact scope of, and reasons for, Democritus' skepticism are controversial, I believe that the following points are not contentious.<sup>21</sup> As noted earlier, because of the relativity of perception, Democritus concludes that the sensible qualities we usually take objects to have are not really present in the objects themselves at all. The reports of the senses are systematically misleading, for the senses are constantly informing us that objects possess properties that they do not really have. As a result, the senses give only "bastard" knowledge. (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7 138-9) This makes Democritus conclude that attaining knowledge of the world is, at a minimum, very difficult, and he may think that it is impossible. Whatever its exact extent, there is a heavy

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(*Pyrrho*, 163) I find this rather strained. The most salient feature of the experiences of dreamers and madmen is that they are *false*, not that they are *worthless*. Similarly, Bett and Warren give ethical readings of the scene-painting comparison, with Bett saying that this is like somebody remarking "All the world's a stage," (*Pyrrho*, 163) and Warren comparing it to the Stoic Aristo's contention (DL 7 160) that the wise person should regard all externals as utterly indifferent and view himself as an actor merely playing a role. (*Archaeology*, 76-78) But these comparisons are inapt, since they concern how we should approach our social roles. The most salient feature of a painting of a tree on a stage is that it is merely a representation of a tree instead of the tree itself, and that it may be considerably different from the tree it represents, not that the painting is worthless.

<sup>21</sup> For an introduction to some of the reports and issues regarding Democritus' skepticism, see R. Hankinson, *Sceptics*, 47–50. For an in-depth consideration with references to much of the literature on this topic, see chapters eight and nine of M. Lee, *Relativism*, 181-250. For my own views on these questions, see T. O'Keefe, "Sensible Qualities," 119-126.

skeptical strain in Democritus, which is developed further by some of his followers, such as Metrodorus, who, recall, famously says that we know nothing, not even that we know nothing.

If the exact extent of Democritus' epistemological skepticism is not entirely clear, this applies in spades to Anaxarchus. He may have moved further in a skeptical direction than Democritus himself—this is suggested by the fact that later ancient thinkers lump him together with Metrodorus—but our reports do not allow us to determine this. Luckily, pinning Anaxarchus down on this question is not crucial for my purposes. Whatever its extent, I want to establish simply that Anaxarchus shares Democritus' skepticism regarding the senses, in order to help make plausible the contention that he also shares the particular feature of Democritus' atomism that fuels his skepticism: the elimination of sensible qualities from his ontology. This more general ontological thesis, then, helps provide a basis for Anaxarchus' distinctive view that things are indifferent in their *value*.

#### 4. Indifference and action

Finally, on to the question of what the practical upshot of Anaxarchus' indifference is. Many of the anecdotes on Anaxarchus concern his pursuit of pleasure and his love of luxury; for instance, that he would wrap himself up in three rugs against the cold when a cloak would have been enough (Plutarch, *Alexander* 52 5; text F), that he asked for a huge sum of money from Alexander when Alexander told him to ask for as much as he wanted (Plutarch *Moralia* 179f; text G), and even that he used his riches to have a beautiful naked woman as his cup-bearer (Ath. *Deipnosophists* 12.70 548b-c, *apud* Clearchus of Soli, a peripatetic philosopher of the fourth to third century BCE; text H).

When an Indian reproached Anaxarchus for paying court to kings, this caused Pyrrho to withdraw from the world and live in solitude. (DL 9 63; text I) Timon, the disciple of Pyrrho, gives a mixed verdict on Anaxarchus:

Wherever it rushed forward, the Cynic strength of Anaxarchus seemed audacious and persistent. But even though he knew better, they say, he was wretched. His pleasure-struck nature carried him back. Most sophists tremble at it. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 446b-c; text J)

Timon here suggests that Anaxarchus, given his beliefs about the indifference of things, should have been impassive about luxury and pleasure, just like the ancient Cynics were. However, his conduct fails to conform to his principles, whereas Pyrrho more successfully realizes the practical upshot of indifference by paying no attention to things that are indifferent.

But this sort of criticism of Anaxarchus immediately raises the inaction (ἀπραξία) objection to skepticism. This objection is usually levelled against skepticism regarding the possibility of gaining knowledge (or perhaps justified belief) about the world in general; but it can also be deployed against someone who is a skeptic regarding the existence of value. If consistency requires a person who is skeptical about whether  $F$  is valuable by nature neither to pursue nor to avoid  $F$ , and one is globally skeptical about the natural value of things, then the consistent skeptic would have no basis for action whatsoever. Indeed, Cicero objects to Pyrrho's doctrine of value indifference on precisely these grounds (Cicero, *Fin.* 2 43, *Fin.* 4 43), and Pyrrho supposedly lived in a way consistent with this principle, taking no precautions against the risks posed by carts, cliffs, and dogs, with only the friends who followed him around saving him from harm. (DL 9 63)

But Aenesidemus, the founder of the later Pyrrhonian skeptical movement, protested that Pyrrho—who lived to nearly ninety—did not lack foresight in his actions. (DL 9 62) A sensible

value skeptic who wishes to act should abandon the principle that he should neither pursue nor avoid things that are not valuable by nature. Instead, in order to act while still reaping the (supposed) psychological benefits of indifference, he may adopt a weaker principle that Richard Bett advocates on Pyrrho's behalf: the skeptic "should not have any serious *stake* in what happens" as a result of his actions, and he "does not permit their occurrence to *matter*" much to him, which is consistent with calmly seeking things he likes and avoiding ones he does not.<sup>22</sup> This principle does not render the skeptic's decisions about what to pursue and what to value *arbitrary*, insofar as he has things he likes and things that he does not.<sup>23</sup> And having preferences in this way also does not commit the skeptic to thinking that the objects of his preferences and dispreferences are naturally good or bad—and this can extend even to peace of mind, which Pyrrho and Anaxarchus prefer, and pleasure, which Anaxarchus seems to prefer. Thus, while Anaxarchus' ethics may be broadly subjectivist, insofar as what informs his actions is the value that his preferences for certain objects and states of mind confer on things, he need not be committed to any theory of what is good by nature like that of the Cyrenaics, who hold that our immediate approval of pleasure in our experience of it shows that pleasure is good by nature. (Sextus, *M* 7 199-200)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> R. Bett, *Pyrrho*, 79.

<sup>23</sup> Pace J. Warren, *Archaeology*, 81-2, who thinks that for Anaxarchus values are created by the agent's arbitrary *fiat*, akin to the way a ruler like Alexander creates justice via his decrees. (I discuss Anaxarchus on justice below.)

<sup>24</sup> The later Cyrenaic Hegesias, while subscribing to hedonism, holds that all objects conventionally thought to be valuable are really indifferent, and that realizing this indifference

Returning to Timon’s criticism of Anaxarchus: Bett’s principle of skeptical action is consistent with the policies adopted both by Pyrrho and by Anaxarchus. Pyrrho withdraws from the world and its troubles, whereas Anaxarchus actively engages with it. Anaxarchus advocates that you go ahead and pursue what presently attracts you, going for the rugs, the money, and the cup-bearer. But you should do so realizing that these objects have no value in themselves, and that they are pursued merely because of the value with which you endow them through your preferences. Realizing that they have no value in themselves, you will not be terribly distraught if you fail to attain them, and you will be able to adapt yourself to circumstances effectively. This adaptability to circumstances might be why Anaxarchus says that the *καιρός*—the “right time” or the “opportune moment”—is the boundary marker of wisdom. (Clement, *Strom.* 1.6.36.1-2; text K) Anaxarchus displayed this wisdom in his request of great wealth from Alexander. Pyrrho would have spurned such an offer. But Anaxarchus, even though he says that it is hard to collect money, and even harder to keep it safely (Aelian, *VH* 4.14; text L), seized the opportunity and correctly guessed that Alexander would be flattered by the *chutzpah* of his request. In his pursuit of wealth, flouting of conventional norms, and ability to adapt himself to circumstances, Anaxarchus resembles the Aristippus the elder, the follower of Socrates and founder of the Cyrenaics.<sup>25</sup>

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helps the wise person do better than the fool does. See chapter seven of K. Lampe, *Hedonism*, 120-146 for more on Hegesias and indifference.

<sup>25</sup> For more on the elder Aristippus, see V. Tsouna McKirahan “The Socratic Origins of the Cynics and Cyrenaics,” in P. Vander Waerdt (ed.), *The Socratic Movement*. (Cornell, 1994), 367-391, and K. Lampe, *Hedonism*, 27-35, 57-76, and 103-108.



## 5. Indifference and convention

Although all of them are by nature equally indifferent, Anaxarchus is much more dismissive concerning the action-guiding status of traditional laws and customs than he is of wealth and rugs. This is illustrated by a striking anecdote in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. (A slightly different version of the story is given in Arrian, *Anabasis* IV 9.) Alexander the Great and his friend Cleitus get into a drunken quarrel. They exchange insults, and in a rage, Alexander picks up a spear and kills Cleitus. His anger then immediately dissipates, and he would have killed himself if his guards had not prevented him. (*Alexander* 50-1) Over the next several days, Alexander is in a bad way, staying in his room and loudly lamenting what he has done.

(*Alexander* 52) Anaxarchus barges in and shouts out the following:

“Here is Alexander, to whom the whole world is now looking, but he lies on the floor crying like a slave, fearing the law and the censure of people. He should be the law and standard of justice for them, since by his conquests he has gained rulership and mastery, not be enslaving himself to the mastery of a vain opinion. Don't you know,” he said, “that Zeus has justice and law seated beside him, so that everything done by the master of the world may be lawful and just?” (Plutarch, *Alexander* 52; text M)

Here, Anaxarchus is clearly espousing a conventionalism about justice and lawfulness: whatever those who have power decree as just *ipso facto* becomes just. Furthermore, Alexander has no reason to worry over the opinions of others regarding whether his behavior was vile, because he has power, and other men cannot harm him.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Although this conventionalist position may appear similar to Thrasymachus' account of justice in book I of the *Republic*, it is actually closer to the one put forward by Thrasymachus' associate Clitophon. (*Republic* I 340a-c) Clitophon maintains that the just is to obey the orders of the

Anaxarchus' reasoning here has wider application than it might initially appear to. Although Anaxarchus speaks of justice and law, the action that Alexander performed—killing a friend in a drunken rage, a friend who, furthermore, had earlier saved Alexander's life (*Alexander* 50)—would have been considered not merely illegal, but shockingly base. Most Greeks would agree with Arrian's judgment that Alexander's conduct was vicious and that he was right to regret his deed and recognize that it was horrible. (*Anabasis* IV 9) And so, when Anaxarchus says that Alexander need not worry about censure and the opinions of others, since as the ruler what he says goes, this would make all moral norms merely conventional.

We need to be careful about reading moral import off of Anaxarchus' advice to Alexander. Alexander is in a singular position as the ruler of much of the world, and so, because of his power, he *does* get to make the rules, and he *can* disregard what others think.<sup>27</sup>

Nonetheless, the sort of reasoning that Anaxarchus urges upon Alexander can be adopted by others. For Anaxarchus, there are only contingent, instrumental reasons to worry about moral considerations, which is shown by the fact that Alexander has no reason at all to submit "like a slave" to the opinions of people who have no power over him. Peons like us may need to tread more lightly, but insofar as any of us is in a position where we need not fear the rebukes and

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rulers, which the weaker must do, whether or not those orders turn out actually to be to the rulers' advantage. See J. Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford, 1981) 36-45 for more on the differences between Thrasymachus' and Clitophon's positions.

<sup>27</sup> So I think that J. Warren, *Archaeology* 82 generalizes a bit too quickly from Alexander's example to the rest of us. Warren says that Alexander "may be said to be Anaxarchus' indifferent man writ large." No things are valuable by nature, the wise person realizes this, and like Alexander he is able to become "the arbiter for himself of various values" through his decisions.

censures of others, the mere fact that something goes against the moral or legal conventions of society does not, in itself, give us any reason to refrain from doing it. Anaxarchus, then, would be agreeing with the recommendation that Antiphon gives in *On Truth*, that in the pursuit of your self-interest you should regard the laws as important when among witnesses but not when alone. This may be one reason—in addition to Anaxarchus’ accepting large amounts of money for his services—that Plutarch calls him in passing a sophist and somebody who is shameless.<sup>28</sup>

To bring out what is distinctive about Anaxarchus here, we may contrast him with Sextus Empiricus. For Sextus, traditional laws and customs are part of his fourfold observance of everyday life, which also includes the guidance of nature, the compulsion of the affections, and the instruction of the arts. (*PH* 1 23) Given that he has been raised as a member of a certain society, if a skeptic like Sextus thinks about killing his friend or eating human flesh, doing so would seem shameful and revulsive to him, and this gives him a motive not to act in that way. The skeptic does not endorse these conventional values as *correct*—but that does not make the actions stop appearing wrong to him. After all, the Pyrrhonian skeptic also does not think that being cold or hungry are bad by nature either, but that does not make them stop seeming bad, and their apparent badness gives him a motive to avoid them. So in this way, the evaluative

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<sup>28</sup> Plutarch, *Alexander* 28 and *Moralia* 529a (in one group of mss.). While Plutarch probably shares Plato’s estimation of the “sophists” as ethically subversive, whether that estimation is accurate is much more contentious. See R. Bett, “Is there a Sophistic Ethics?” [“Sophistic Ethics”] *Ancient Philosophy* 22 (2002), 235-262 for a nuanced account, including a discussion of Antiphon. Also good is R. Barney, “The Sophistic Movement,” in M. L. Gill & P. Pellegrin (eds.), *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, (Blackwell 2006) 77-97, which differs usefully from Bett on some questions.

appearances he has regarding cannibalism as a member of his society are on a par with those he has regarding hunger as a human being.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Anaxarchus regards laws and customs as “merely conventional” in a way that licenses us to disregard them unless doing so interferes with our satisfying some *other* preferences we have.

A similar dismissive attitude towards piety is illustrated by our other extended anecdote of Anaxarchus with Alexander. Alexander arranges for a discussion at a wine-party of whether he should be considered a deity, and whether people should prostrate themselves before him as before a god. Arrian reports:

Anaxarchus started the discussion by saying that it was more just to consider Alexander a god than Dionysius and Heracles, not because<sup>30</sup> of the number and magnitude of the deeds he had accomplished, but also because Dionysius was only a Theban, in no way related to the Macedonians, and Heracles was an Argive, not at all related to them, except that Alexander was a descendent of Heracles. The Macedonians might with more justice bestow divine honors on their own king, for there was no doubt that when he had departed from humanity they would honor him as a god. How much more just then would it be to honor him while alive than after his death, when there would be no advantage to being honored. (Arrian, *Anabasis* IV 10; text N)

After Anaxarchus speaks, Callisthenes— a Peripatetic philosopher and in fact nephew of

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<sup>29</sup> My discussion here of “evaluative appearances” is indebted to pp. 105-108 of H. Thorsrud, “Sextus Empiricus on skeptical piety,” in D. Machuca (ed.), *New Essays on Ancient Pyrrhonism*, (Brill 2011) 91-111.

<sup>30</sup> The grammar here is awkward, as we would expect “not *only* because” rather than “not because.” See below for more on this issue.

Aristotle himself—opposes the proposal, expressing the common Greek and Macedonian opinion towards such a proposal, that honoring humans as gods is impious and debases the gods. (Arrian, *Anabasis* IV 11) (It is worth noting that the Persians had no problem prostrating themselves (Arrian, *Anabasis* IV 12).)

Anaxarchus is notable not only for advocating actions that would be considered impious by most Greeks, but for the arguments he gives. As Jacques Brunschwig notes, both arguments advanced by Anaxarchus seem to undercut rather than support Alexander's claim to divinity.<sup>31</sup> In the first, the decision to deify Alexander, if it were made, would be made on the basis of local favoritism and bias, not any sort of actual godly accomplishments. The grammatical construction of Anaxarchus' claim is awkward: we would expect him to say that Alexander deserves to be deified more than Heracles and Dionysius *not only* because of his great deeds, *but also* because Heracles and Dionysius have no connection to Macedonia: but it says that it is *not* because of his great deeds, *but also* because Heracles and Dionysius have no connection to Macedonia. The “only” would have to be filled in by the listener. And since Alexander aspires to be the ruler of all of the known world, and to be honored by all of the subjects of his empire, advocating his deification on the basis of his connection to Macedonia is odd.

In the second argument, Anaxarchus says that, since the Macedonians are going to honor Alexander as a god after his death anyway, they might as well do so now when it will do him some good—after all, once he is dead it will not make any difference to him. But this suggests that Alexander should be honored as a god because of the political advantage it would give him, even though Alexander is not divine. And Anaxarchus makes light of Alexander's claims to

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<sup>31</sup> J. Brunschwig, “The Anaxarchus Case: An Essay on Survival,” *Proceedings of the British Academy* 82 (1993), 59-88. My discussion of both arguments follows Brunschwig's, pp. 74-77.

divinity elsewhere. When a group of people is terrified at a great clap of thunder, he asks Alexander, “Can you do something like that, son of God?” and Alexander laughs, saying that he does not wish to cause his friends fear. Plutarch takes this to show that Alexander did not really believe in his divinity but just used it to subjugate others. (*Alexander* 28; text O) And when Alexander had actually started to think that he might be a god, Anaxarchus deflates this pretension by pointing at a wound of Alexander’s and saying, “See, there is blood, and not the ichor which flows through the blessed gods.” (DL 9 60; text P)

Once again, it would be nice if we had arguments or even clearly stated philosophical theses to work with, rather than just anecdotes. After all, approaching decisions such as whether Alexander should be honored as a god with an attitude of cynical *Realpolitik* need not express any well-worked-out theory about the status of conventional norms of honesty and piety. But here, Anaxarchus expresses a willingness to advance a false religious claim simply on the basis of its political expediency. This is reminiscent of the atheistic theory advanced in the so-called “Sisyphus fragment,” perhaps by Critias, which says that fear of the gods and divine punishment were created by a clever man in order to deter people from engaging in secret wrong-doing.<sup>32</sup> (Sextus, *M* 9 54)

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<sup>32</sup> Sextus attributes the theory to Critias, but its source is uncertain. For more on the Sisyphus fragment, see R. Bett, “Sophistic Ethics,” 251-254, and C. Kahn, “Greek Religion and Philosophy in the Sisyphus Fragment,” *Phronesis* 42 (1997), 247-62.

## 6. Conclusion

Because of the state of our evidence, any reconstruction of Anaxarchus' ethics will be speculative and incomplete. But he seems to have a distinctive position. It overlaps with several disparate ethical traditions but is not merely a hodge-podge; it hangs together as a unified whole. His assertion that things are indifferent in value and that realizing this indifference leads to contentment recalls Pyrrho and the later Pyrrhonian skeptics. But this doctrine of indifference is rooted in Democritean atomism. And in his pursuit of pleasure and dismissiveness of conventional standards of what is just, noble, and pious, Anaxarchus is closer to fifth century thinkers such as Aristippus, Antiphon, and Critias.

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Appendix. Passages on Anaxarchus

- A. Because of the impassivity and contentment of his life, he was called “the Happy Man.”

Οὗτος διὰ τὴν ἀπάθειαν καὶ εὐκολίαν τοῦ βίου Εὐδαιμονικὸς ἐκαλεῖτο (DL 9 60)

- B. He seized [Anaxarchus], threw him into a mortar, and ordered him to be pounded with iron pestles. But taking no thought of the torture, he uttered that famous claim, “Pound the bag containing Anaxarchus, you do not pound Anaxarchus.” And when Nicocreon ordered his tongue cut out, the story is that he bit it off and spit it at him.

συλλαβὼν αὐτὸν καὶ εἰς ὄλμον βαλὼν ἐκέλευσε τύπτεσθαι σιδηροῖς ὑπέροις. τὸν δ’ οὐ φροντίσαντα τῆς τιμωρίας εἰπεῖν ἐκεῖνο δὴ τὸ περιφερόμενον, “πίσσε τὸν Ἀναξάρχου θύλακον, Ἀνάξαρχον δὲ οὐ πτίσσεις.” κελεύσαντος δὲ τοῦ Νικοκρέοντος καὶ τὴν γλῶτταν αὐτοῦ ἐκτμηθῆναι, λόγος ἀποτραγόντα προσπτύσαι αὐτῷ. (DL 9 59)

- C. And once, when Anaxarchus fell into a pond and Pyrrho passed by without helping him, others blamed Pyrrho, but Anaxarchus himself praised him for his indifference and lack of compassion.

καὶ ποτ’ Ἀναξάρχου εἰς τέλμα ἐμπεσόντος, παρῆλθεν οὐ βοηθήσας· τινῶν δὲ αἰτιωμένων, αὐτὸς Ἀνάξαρχος ἐπῆναι τὸ ἀδιάφορον καὶ ἄστοργον αὐτοῦ. (DL 9 63)

- D. Alexander wept when he heard from Anaxarchus that there is an unlimited number of worlds, and his friends asked what had happened to him. Alexander said, “Isn’t it worth weeping over, if there is an unlimited number of worlds, and we haven’t yet become the rulers of one?”

Ἀλέξανδρος Ἀναξάρχου περὶ κόσμων ἀπειρίας ἀκούων ἐδάκρυε, καὶ τῶν φίλων ἐρωτῶντων ὅ τι πέπονθεν, “οὐκ ἄξιον,” ἔφη, “δακρῦειν, εἰ κόσμων ὄντων ἀπείρων ἐνός οὐδέπω κύριοι γεγόναμεν;” (Plutarch, *Moralia* 466d)

- E. As I said before, quite a few have claimed that both Metrodorus and his followers, and Anaxarchus and also Monimus abolished the criterion—Metrodorus because he said, “we know nothing; we do not even know this thing itself, that we know nothing,” Anaxarchus and Monimus because they likened things (τὰ ὄντα) to painted scenery, and supposed them to resemble what occurs in sleep and madness.

Οὐκ ὀλίγοι δὲ ἦσαν, ὡς προεῖπον, οἱ καὶ τοὺς περὶ Μητρόδωρον καὶ Ἀναξάρχον ἔτι δὲ Μόνιμον φήσαντες ἀνηρηκέναι τὸ κριτήριον, ἀλλὰ Μητρόδωρον μὲν ὅτι εἶπεν “οὐδὲν ἴσμεν, οὐδ’ αὐτὸ τοῦτο ἴσμεν ὅτι οὐδὲν ἴσμεν,” Ἀναξάρχον δὲ καὶ Μόνιμον ὅτι σκηνογραφία ἀπέεικασαν τὰ ὄντα, τοῖς τε κατὰ ὕπνου ἢ μανίαν προσπίπτουσι ταῦτα ὁμοιωσθαι ὑπέλαβον. (Sextus Empiricus, *M* 7 87-8)

- F. It is said that once at a meal there was a conversation concerning the seasons and weather, and that Callisthenes was among those who said that it was more cold and wintry there than in Greece. He was contentiously opposed by Anaxarchus, and he said, “But you must agree that it’s colder here than there: for there you would pass the winter in a threadbare cloak, but here you lie down with three rugs thrown over you.” This certainly made Anaxarchus more irritated.

Λέγεται δὲ ποτε παρὰ δεῖπνον ὑπὲρ ὥρων καὶ κράσεως τοῦ περιέχοντος λόγων ὄντων, τὸν Καλλισθένην, μετέχοντα δόξης τοῖς λέγουσι τάκεῖ μᾶλλον εἶναι ψυχρὰ καὶ δυσχείμερα τῶν Ἑλληνικῶν, ἐναντιουμένου τοῦ Ἀναξάρχου καὶ φιλονεικοῦντος, εἰπεῖν· “Ἀλλὰ μὴν ἀνάγκη σοὶ ταῦτα ἐκείνων ὁμολογεῖν ψυχρότερα· σὺ γὰρ ἐκεῖ μὲν ἐν

τρίβωνι διεχειμάζεις, ἐνταῦθα δὲ τρεῖς ἐπιβεβλημένος δάπιδας κατάκεισαι.” τὸν μὲν οὖν Ἀναξάρχον καὶ τοῦτο προσπαρώξυνε. (Plutarch, *Alexander* 52)

- G. [Alexander] ordered his treasurer to give to Anaxarchus the philosopher as much as he would ask for. The treasurer said, he asks for a hundred talents. “He does well,” he said, “knowing that he has a friend who is both willing and able to give so much.”

Ἀναξάρχῳ δὲ τῷ φιλοσόφῳ δοῦναι τὸν διοικητὴν ἐκέλευσεν ὅσον ἂν αἰτήσῃ· τοῦ δὲ διοικητοῦ φήσαντος ὡς ἑκατὸν αἰτεῖ τάλαντα, “καλῶς,” ἔφη, “ποιεῖ γινώσκων ὅτι φίλον ἔχει καὶ δυνάμενον τηλικαῦτα δωρεῖσθαι καὶ βουλόμενον.” (Plutarch, *Moralia* 179f-180a)

- H. Of Anaxarchus, Clearchus of Soli writes as follows, in the fifth book of his *Lives*:

“When Anaxarchus (called “the Happy Man”) had become wealthy from the ignorance of those who abundantly furnished him from their resources, he would have a naked young woman, selected as more beautiful than all others, pour his wine; in truth, she exposed how those who used her this way lacked self-control. And his baker would knead the dough while wearing gloves and a mask over his mouth, so that no sweat would drip, nor would the person kneading the mixture breathe on it.”

Περὶ δὲ Ἀναξάρχου Κλέαρχος ὁ Σολεὺς ἐν πέμπτῳ Βίων οὕτω γράφει· τῷ εὐδαιμονικῷ καλουμένῳ Ἀναξάρχῳ διὰ τὴν τῶν χορηγησάντων ἄγνοιαν περιπεσούσης ἐξουσίας γυμνή μὲν ὠνοχόει παιδίσκη πρόσηβος ἢ προκριθεῖσα διαφέρειν ὥρα τῶν ἄλλων, ἀνασύρουσα πρὸς ἀλήθειαν τὴν τῶν οὕτως αὐτῇ χρωμένων ἀκρασίαν, ὁ δὲ σιτοποιὸς χειρῖδας ἔχων καὶ περὶ τῷ στόματι κημὸν ἔτριβε τὸ σταῖς, ἵνα μήτε ἰδρῶς ἐπιρρέοι μήτε τοῖς φυράμασιν ὁ τρίβων ἐμπνέοι. (Ath. *Deipnosophists* 12 70 548b-c)

- I. [Pyrrho] would withdraw from society and live alone, rarely showing himself to his household. He did this because he heard some Indian reproaching Anaxarchus that he could not teach someone else to be good while paying court in a king's palace.

ἐκπατεῖν τ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἐρημάζειν, σπανίως ποτ' ἐπιφαινόμενον τοῖς οἴκοι. τοῦτο δὲ ποιεῖν ἀκούσαντα Ἰνδοῦ τινος ὀνειδίζοντος Ἀναξάρχῳ ὡς οὐκ ἂν ἕτερόν τινα διδάξαι οὗτος ἀγαθόν, αὐτὸς ἀλλὰς βασιλικὰς θεραπεύων. (DL 9 63)

- J. As Timon would mock Anaxarchus, “Wherever it rushed forward, the Cynic strength of Anaxarchus seemed audacious and persistent. But even though he knew better, they say, he was wretched. His pleasure-struck nature carried him back. Most sophists tremble at it.”

ὡς Ἀναξάρχον ἐσίλλαινε Τίμων,  
ἐν δὲ τὸ θαρσαλέον τε καὶ ἐμμενὲς ὄπη ὀρούσαιφαίνεται' Ἀναξάρχου κύνειον μένος·  
ὅς ῥα καιειδῶς, ὡς φάσαν, ἄθλιος ἔσκε, φύσις δέ μιν ἔμπαλιν ἡγενηδονοπλήξ, ἦν  
πλεῖστοι ὑποτρείουσι σοφιστῶν. (Plutarch, *Moralia* 446b-c)

- K. And so Anaxarchus “the Happy Man” writes well in his *On Kingship*, “Much learning can greatly help, but can also greatly harm the one who has it. It helps the clever person, but harms the one who easily says any word in any place. One must know the measure of the right time (καιρός), for this is the boundary marker of wisdom. Those who recite a saying outside of the right time, even if what they recite is wise, aren't reckoned to have wisdom, but are considered fools.

Εὖ γοῦν καὶ Ἀναξάρχος ὁ Εὐδαιμονικὸς ἐν τῷ περὶ βασιλείας γράφει· πολυμαθίη κάρτα μὲν ὠφελέει, κάρτα δὲ βλάπτει τὸν ἔχοντα· ὠφελέει μὲν τὸν δεξιὸν ὄντα, βλάπτει δὲ τὸν ῥηϊδίως φωνέοντα πᾶν ἔπος καὶ ἐν παντὶ δήμῳ. χρὴ δὲ καιροῦ μέτρα

ειδέναι· σοφίης γὰρ οὗτος ὄρος. ὅσοι δὲ ἔξω καιροῦ ῥῆσιν ἀείδουσιν, κῆν πη πεπνυμένην ἀείδωσιν, οὐ τιθέμενοι ἐν σοφίῃ, γνώμην δ' ἔχουσι μωρίας. (Clement, *Strom.* 1.6.36.1-2)

- L. And Anaxarchus in his *On Kingship* said that it is hard to collect money, but harder to keep it safe.

καὶ Ἀνάξαρχος ἐν τῷ Περὶ βασιλείας φησὶ χαλεπὸν χρήματα συναγεύρασθαι, χαλεπότερον δὲ φυλακὴν τούτοις περιθεῖναι. (Aelian, *VH* 4 14)

- M. “Here is Alexander, to whom the whole world is now looking, but he lies on the floor crying like a slave, fearing the law and the censure of people. He should be the law and standard of justice for them, since by his conquests he has gained rulership and mastery, not be enslaving himself to the mastery of a vain opinion. Don’t you know,” he said, “that Zeus has justice and law seated beside him, so that everything done by the master of the world may be lawful and just?”

“Οὗτός ἐστιν Ἀλέξανδρος, εἰς ὃν ἡ οἰκουμένη νῦν ἀποβλέπει· ὁ δὲ ἔρριπται κλαίων ὥσπερ ἀνδράποδον, ἀνθρώπων νόμον καὶ ψόγον δεδοικώς, οἷς αὐτὸν προσήκει νόμον εἶναι καὶ ὄρον τῶν δικαίων, ἐπεὶπερ ἄρχειν καὶ κρατεῖν νενίκηκεν, ἀλλὰ μὴ δουλεύειν ὑπὸ κενῆς δόξης κεκρατημένον. οὐκ οἶσθα,” εἶπεν, “ὅτι τὴν Δίκην ἔχει πάρεδρον ὁ Ζεὺς καὶ τὴν Θέμιν, ἵνα πᾶν τὸ πραχθὲν ὑπὸ τοῦ κρατοῦντος θεμιτὸν ἦ καὶ δίκαιον;” (Plutarch, *Alexander* 52)

- N. Anaxarchus started the discussion by saying that it was more just to consider Alexander a god than Dionysius and Heracles, not because of the number and magnitude of the deeds he had accomplished, but also because Dionysius was only a Theban, in no way related to the Macedonians, and Heracles was an Argive, not at all

related to them, except that Alexander was a descendent of Heracles. The Macedonians might with more justice bestow divine honors on their own king, for there was no doubt that when he had departed from humanity they would honor him as a god. How much more just then would it be to honor him while alive than after his death, when there would be no advantage to being honored.

ἄρξαι δὲ τοῦ λόγου Ἀνάξαρχον, ὡς πολὺ δικαιότερον ἂν θεὸν νομιζόμενον Ἀλέξανδρον Διονύσου τε καὶ Ἡρακλέους, μὴ ὅτι τῶν ἔργων ἔνεκα ὅσα καὶ ἡλίκᾳ καταπέπρακται Ἀλεξάνδρῳ, ἀλλὰ καὶ ὅτι Διόνυσος μὲν Θηβαῖος ἦν, οὐδέν τι προσήκων Μακεδόσι, καὶ Ἡρακλῆς Ἀργεῖος, οὐδὲ οὗτος προσήκων ὅτι μὴ κατὰ γένος τὸ Ἀλεξάνδρου· Ἡρακλείδην γὰρ εἶναι Ἀλέξανδρον· Μακεδόνας δὲ ἂν τὸν σφῶν βασιλέα δικαιότερον θείαις τιμαῖς κοσμοῦντας, καὶ γὰρ οὐδὲ ἐκεῖνο εἶναι ἀμφίλογον ὅτι ἀπελθόντα γε ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ὡς θεὸν τιμήσουσι· πόσῳ δὲ δικαιότερον ζῶντα γεραίρειν ἢ περὶ τελευτήσαντα ἐς οὐδὲν ὄφελος τῷ τιμωμένῳ. (Arrian, *Anabasis* IV 10)

- O. Once when there was a great clap of thunder and everyone was frightened, Anaxarchus the sophist, who was there, said to Alexander, “Can you do something like that, son of God?” Alexander laughed at this and said, “I don’t wish to make my friends afraid” [...] From what has been said, it is clear that Alexander himself was not affected or deluded by the belief in his divinity, but used it to enslave others.”
- ἐπεὶ δὲ μεγάλης ποτὲ βροντῆς γενομένης καὶ πάντων ἐκπλαγέντων Ἀνάξαρχος ὁ σοφιστὴς παρὼν ἔφη πρὸς αὐτόν, “Μὴ τι σὺ τοιοῦτον ὁ τοῦ Διός;” γελάσας ἐκεῖνος, “Οὐ βούλομαι γάρ,” εἶπε, “φοβερὸς εἶναι τοῖς φίλοις, [...] ὁ δ’ οὖν Ἀλέξανδρος καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν εἰρημένων δηλὸς ἐστὶν αὐτὸς οὐδὲν πεπονθῶς οὐδὲ τετυφωμένος, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἄλλους καταδουλούμενος τῇ δόξῃ τῆς θειότητος. (Plutarch, *Alexander* 28)

P. And [Anaxarchus] was able to bring people to their senses in the easiest possible way.

For he turned around Alexander when he started to think he was a god. Seeing blood running from a wound, he pointed to him with his finger and said, “See, there is blood, and not the ichor which flows through the blessed gods.”

καὶ ἦν ἐκ τοῦ ῥάστου δυνατὸς σωφρονίζειν. τὸν γοῦν Ἀλέξανδρον οἰόμενον εἶναι θεὸν ἐπέστρεψεν· ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἔκ τινος πληγῆς εἶδεν αὐτῷ καταρρέον αἷμα, δείξας τῇ χειρὶ πρὸς αὐτόν φησι, “τουτὶ μὲν αἷμα καὶ οὐκ ἰχώρ οἷός περ τε ῥέει μακάρεσσι θεοῖσι.”

(DL 9 60)