Commentary on Sorabji

by James G. Lennox

I imagine Greeks of the classical period faced the same sort of obvious combinations of ingredients we do, and wished to make similar distinctions. When I put sand into a glass of water and stir, the result convinces me that no new unity has emerged. When I subject the same glass of water to an attempted union with fire by tossing it on the flames, it is simply gone. When I put concentrated juice crystals into the same glass of water, however, I end up with fruit juice, something new. Furthermore, with some care I could evaporate off the water and end up with something approximating those crystals again. It seems implausible to see these processes as identical, and the theory of chemical bonding has not made it more plausible.

Professor Sorabji has given us, in typical fashion, an illuminating historical narrative of Greek attempts to make sense of these phenomena. I will focus on problems that I have identified in his discussion of Anaxagoras and Aristotle, both because I see continuity in their ideas and because I find problems in the characterization of these ideas. It is the commentator’s job to point out problems where he sees them; it is his occasional good fortune to be forced to think more deeply about issues that he had thought superficially about before. Struggling to identify the difficulties in Professor Sorabji’s paper has been just such a fortunate occasion.
A Brief Note on Anaxagoras

Richard Sorabji rejects what he calls 'philosophically the most elegant' interpretation of Anaxagoras' matter theory—a model according to which Anaxagoras' 'all things in all things' involves blending rather than mere juxtaposition—because he thinks it 'invalidates the reasoning of [Anaxagoras'] fragment 6.' He translates the offending part of the fragment as follows:

Because there cannot be such a thing as the least, things could not be separated, nor come to be on their own, but as in the beginning, so now, all things must be together.

We are then asked 'Why, on these [previously suggested] models, should minimum size give us stuffs in isolation?'

But this is not, it seems to me, the question a model of Anaxagoras has to have an answer to in order to be consistent with fragment 6. Rather, the question one needs to have an answer to is the converse of the one we are here asked, namely: 'Why should stuffs in isolation give us "leasts"?' For the above quoted material seems to assume that the existence of 'leasts' or 'minima' is an unacceptable consequence of the idea that there are stuffs existing in a pure, unmixed state. That is, I see the argument as having the following structure.

1. If the basic stuffs existed on their own, there would be leasts.
2. But there cannot be leasts.
   Therefore the basic stuffs cannot exist on their own.
   Therefore all basic stuffs are together.

Premise 2 rests on Anaxagoras' defense of unlimited smallness (fragment 3). Whatever the basis of the first premise, it seems Anaxagoras could have made this argument only if the original compound were just that, a true compound. For to think of it as a mere juxtaposition of pure stuffs is precisely the position which is said to entail (per impossible) leasts. Further, while I can find much evidence in the fragments for the unlimited divisibility of any part of the compound, only desperation could drive me to suppose that Anaxagoras was thinking of a mixture of simple yet sizeless units—how could sizeless units constitute something with magnitude? Fragment 6 does not seem to force