Anaximander and Anaximenes: The Earliest Greek Theories of Change?

C. JOACHIM CLASSEN

To talk about Anaximander¹ and Anaximenes² is to talk about Homer and Hesiod on the one hand (and as some believe, also about the East³) and to talk about Aristotle and Theophrastus on the other.⁴ For we have to examine the reports on the early thinkers in the light and in the framework of the writings of those to whom we owe these reports; and we have to relate the early thinkers to their own time and to the modes of thought and of expression current in their time. Of course, we have to allow for personal contributions and innovations; but we also have to beware of importing modern notions. By modern notions I mean not only our own, but also those e.g. of Aristotle and Theophrastus. There is no need, here, to dwell on these basic problems. But as the general theme of this colloquium⁵ “Change in Aristotle and the Presocratics” might suggest that Aristotle is or should be the starting point for our discussion, a few general remarks seem to be called for as regards the procedure adopted in this paper.

I shall not begin with Aristotle’s theory or theories of change nor with the question which of them, if any, is found in Anaximander or Anaximenes. Nor shall I go through all the doxographical reports on Anaximander’s views. Instead, I shall first try to single out those pieces of information which seem to bear most clearly the stamp of the individual early philosophers and which seem least likely to have

¹ A bibliography on Anaximander may be found in Pauly – Wissowa R. E. Suppl. 12, 1970, 67-69; more recent work is listed in L’année philologique.
⁴ As I am trying to keep the notes to a minimum, I cannot here give a full bibliography and have to refer the reader again to L’année philologique.
⁵ This paper was read at the third “Colloquium on Ancient Philosophy” at Toledo (26.-30. August 1974). I should like to express my gratitude both to our hosts and to those responsible for the perfect organisation of the symposium, Professors M. Fernández-Galiano, G. B. Kerferd, M. Marcovich and especially to Professor W. J. Verdenius, chairman of the section on “Change in Aristotle and the Presocratics”.

89
been invented or corrupted later; and I shall, then, examine whether they contain a theory of change or at least a clear notion (or various notions) of change. Next, I shall consider the other evidence, especially the reports and critical remarks in Aristotle’s works; and, finally, I shall have to see whether Anaximander and Anaximenes seem to have made any significant contribution towards a theory of change.

Unfortunately, there are only two texts on Anaximander – not even fragments from his book – that can help us here, the report in Pseudo-Plutarch (Diels-Kranz 12 A 10, based on Theophrastus) on the coming-to-be of the world or a world (an individual ordered world or cosmos), and Aëtius’ account of the coming-to-be of animals (Diels-Kranz 12 A 30).

The section in Pseudo-Plutarch consists of a number of disconnected statements, even more carelessly put together than those in the accounts of Diogenes Laertius (Diels-Kranz 12 A 1) or of Hippolytus (Diels-Kranz 12 A 11). First there is a general statement, obviously phrased in later terminology (’Ἀναξίμανδρον... τὸ ἀπειρὸν φάναι τὴν πάσαν αἰτίαν ἐχειν τῆς τοῦ παντὸς γενέσεως τε καὶ φθορᾶς), then a relative clause follows, possibly from another source (as the repeated φησί implies: εἰ δὲ δὴ φησί τοῦς τε οὐφανοὺς ἀποκεφρίσθαι καὶ καθόλου τοὺς ἀπαντὰς ἀπείρους ὅντας κόσμους), which may preserve traces of Anaximander’s own vocabulary (e.g. οὐφανός, cf. Simpl. in Phys. 24, 17-18 and Hippol. 1, 6, 2; see also Aristot. De Cael. 303 b 13). While the third sentence contains nothing specifically Anaximandrean (ἀπερήγατο δὲ τὴν φθοράν γίνεσθαι καὶ πολὺ πρῶτερον τὴν γένεσιν εἰς ἀπειρὸν αἰῶνας ἀνακυκλουμένον πάντων αὐτῶν), the fourth is not likely to be any later author’s invention (though the actual word κυλλνδρος or κυλλνδρο-εκδής is presumably later6); and again the following account is more likely than not to derive from Anaximander. Whatever the exact reading and meaning of the first half of it may be (φησί δὲ τὸ ἐκ τοῦ ἀδιόν γόνυμον θερμοῦ τε καὶ ψυχροῦ κατὰ τὴν γένεσιν τούτῳ τοῦ κόσμου ἀποκρίσθη-ναι)7, in the rest we have so peculiar a description of the coming-to-be of a world that one has no choice but to suspect Anaximander’s own

6 For κυλλνδρος and κυλλνδροεκδής see Liddell-Scott-Jones s.v.v. and also Diels-Kranz III, Wortindex s.v.v.