

Study Guide IIa: Pre-Historic Rational Order

LART602

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The Search for Order: The Rational Eye

II. The Greeks

a. Pre-Historic Rational Order

For Class, Tuesday, 8/27/13:

A. Discussion Questions

1. To what extent is the mythological world of Ancient Greece a rationally ordered world?
To what extent is this world chaotic?
 - a. What principles of order do we find in the Ancient Greek world of myth?
2. In the world of the poets, by what means do humans at this time come to know the order of the universe, its primary truths?
3. What do the poets teach us, in fact, if anything?

Notes and Study Questions:¹

The Pre-Historic Era

We refer to the historical era as that in which we find a reliable written record of human activity. This era begins slowly and sporadically, in the West, with Egyptian and Sumerian hieroglyphic and cuneiform writing c. 3500-3000BCE; reliable and unbroken historical record begins for us with the Greeks around 600-500BCE, becoming well-established in Greece's "golden age" of c. 550 to 350BCE.

We consider the pre-historic human era in order to bring into relief some of the central characteristics of recorded human history that may otherwise be taken for granted. In particular, as our study is of human rationality, and as human rationality is fundamental to our world view, we gain some appreciation of this foundation by reference to a very different human era, that largely preceding the written human word.

Our evidence of the pre-historic era is by definition sketchy, but we catch glimpses of it in traditions extending from the pre-historic into the historic era, primarily religious traditions as expressed in myth and ritual. The epic poets Homer and Hesiod hand down to us accounts of some of these myths and rituals. The scholar of religion Walter Burkert offers some interpretation of such myth and ritual. And we find in Stravinsky and his choreography Nijinsky an evocation of the spirit of these times.

Look in these materials for signs of order and organization. What order did pre-historic humans perceive in their world? By what means did pre-historic humans order their world?

Consider also this question: what is the primary purpose of the epic poems of Hesiod and Homer? Is their purpose an account of the truth? And insofar as a truth is revealed, what exactly

¹ See also lecture notes on Hesiod located here: <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/Hesiod.pdf>

do the poets tell us: are their truths those pertaining to the natural or cosmic order, or, rather, those pertaining to us, our psychology, our concerns?

Terminology:

Pre-Historic: The pre-historic period is that period of human history that precedes written documentation. Human written records begin in the West with the Egyptians and Greeks, sporadically, around 3000BCE and become well-established around 500BCE.

Pre-Philosophical: The pre-philosophical period is that period prior to the active pursuit of rationalist truth. The “philosophical” era is thus the era characterized by this pursuit and beings, for us, with the Pre-Socratic philosophers.

Anthropomorphism: representing a (presumably) non-human entity or phenomenon in human form or terms. For instance, “mother earth.”

Supernaturalism: reference to, belief in, or especially explanation of natural phenomena in terms of non- or extra-natural beings, powers, or phenomena. E.g., to the extent that “magic” is not a natural phenomenon, explaining a death by magic would be to offer a supernatural explanation for a natural-world occurrence.

Hesiod, *Theogony*:

Hesiod is the lesser known of the two great Greek epic poets but his work is no less valuable for the portrait that it presents us of the pre-historical human world-view. The *Theogony* is an account of the origin of the gods of the ancient Greek pantheon. Note that the *Theogony* would have been recited in a festival setting where its purposes would have included entertainment as well as theology. And note too that while the general thrust of the account would have been taken seriously, its audience would have received it as but one popular account among others. See the introduction and notes to the Lombardo edition for further helpful information.²

1. What are the basic principles defining Hesiod’s world? What sorts of order are present in this world? (Think of: how change is brought about; what sorts of things or events are similar to what others.)
2. In what ways is this world without order? What, if anything, goes unexplained or lacks a “reason”?
3. What is the status of human knowledge with respect to Hesiod’s world? By what means do humans come to know truth in this world?
4. Is this a rational world order?

Homer, *Iliad*, Book I:

Homer’s *Iliad* tells the well-known and tragic tale of the Greek war with Troy. As another epic poem deriving from a pre-historic oral tradition, the *Iliad* opens for us a window upon the world-view of pre-historic humanity. Consider again the world-view of those hearing this poem. While

² We’re reading the poem *Theogony*; our Hackett edition includes Hesiod’s *Works and Days* which is not assigned (though of course worth reading).

these are indeed *poems*, not to be confused with scientific reports, they nevertheless reveal an account of the workings of the world and the place of humans in those works.

1. Again, what forms of order do we find in Homer and where do we find disorder, chaos?
2. To what extent is the world intelligible to humans, on this account? How does the world work and what can we know about it?
3. Is this a rational world order?

Burkert, "Zeus":

Walter Burkert is one of the great scholars of ancient Greek religion. His sensitive descriptions of Greek religious practice and myth further reveal features of the pre-historic Greek world view. Burkert is particularly interested to evoke the experience of the ancients in their world, to try to place us in this distant time and culture. Zeus is the principal god of the ancient Greeks, and it is noteworthy for our purposes that he is thus the god of wisdom and order. Think, then, about what this implies in the mind of the ancient Greek about reason and a rational world order.

1. What role does Zeus play in the Ancient Greek pantheon?
2. What forms of order are associated with Zeus?
3. What role does Zeus play in our knowledge of reality (see esp. p. 131)?

Stravinsky, *Rite of Spring*:

This ballet was intended by Stravinsky to evoke the power of atavistic ritual. While fanciful, perhaps, it nonetheless succeeds in expressing primitive forces familiar to us in a context independent of our present intellectual understanding.

1. What would pre-historic experience of fertility ritual be like?
2. What understanding of the world might such rituals reveal?
3. What sorts of order might pre-historical humans recognize?
4. To what extent might the world be experienced as a rational world order by its pre-historic inhabitants?