

Study Guide IIb – The Pre-Socratics

LART602

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The Search for Order: The Rational Eye

II. The Greeks

b. The Pre-Socratics

The Pre-Socratics:¹

The Pre-Socratic philosophers represent the origin of science and philosophy² in the recorded Western world. Previously, there was no formal pursuit of truth for its own sake. Just what precipitates the emergence of philosophy remains a matter of speculation. Ancient Greece emerges from a dark age around 800 BCE, so economic improvements enabling greater communication within and without Greece offer partial explanation. Some scholars attribute the rise of philosophy to the particular genius of a few early innovators.

Notice the contrast with the work of the epic poets, Hesiod and Homer. A true, objective account of the workings of the universe is not, it seems, the primary purpose of epic poetry. Nor is the primary goal of the pre-Socratics our entertainment or the elaboration of our religious rituals. The pre-Socratic philosophers self-consciously seek the basic principles of universal order and develop a critical method for doing so. Both the form of universal truth as *logical* and the means of its discover – by dint of human sense and reason – are hallmarks of rationalism. (See Study Guide I for a discussion of these terms.)

The pre-Socratic philosophers sought the principles of universal order. Where previously there had been no concerted attempt to define the rational structure of our world, the pre-Socratics cast about for those concepts by means of which all things might be understood. Thales, for example, identifies *water* as the basic principle of order in the universe; Pythagoras finds order in something more abstract: number. Look for these basic principles or *archia* as you read.

A further key theme in this period is the rise of a rational *method* for acquiring knowledge. Where their predecessors relied on divine inspiration, the pre-Socratic philosophers introduced the systematic application of human sense and reason as the sole proper means of knowing truth. Note the development of a *critical* tradition, for example among the Milesians (Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes) or in Zeno and Parmenides, which involves appeals to sensory evidence or to logical reasoning. (See the definition of *rationalism* in Study Guide I for discussion of these terms.)

We have only fragments of the Pre-Socratics' writings. The passages won't spell out a complete view. Consider them as our civilization's first proper attempts to discover the rational order of the universe.

(See the brief introduction in *Readings in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, pp. 1-7 for further introductory remarks. See also the introductory remarks to each individual philosopher.)

¹ See also my lecture notes on the pre-Socratics, located here:
<http://faculty.winthrop.edu/oakesm/LART602/PreSocratics.pdf>

² The distinction between “science” and “philosophy” does not exist at this time. Elements of both are to be found in the nascent study of the natural world.

As you read, consider the following questions:

The Pre-Socratics

1. To what extent is the world a cosmos for the pre-Socratic philosopher? To what extent is the world chaotic, on the given pre-Socratic's view?
2. What principles of order do the pre-Socratics identify as fundamental?
3. By what means did the pre-Socratics seek knowledge of world order? Think in particular here in terms of the basic human means of knowledge acquisition, sense and reason.
4. In what ways, if any, is the pre-Socratic world view similar to the world view of Homer and Hesiod? In what ways are these views different?
5. What role does religion play in the accounts of the pre-Socratics, if any?

Burkert, "Philosophical Religion," pp. 305-321

Our course focuses in part on religion as a measure of rational world order. Religion is both broad in intellectual scope and narrow in specific application to the individual's life. Religious views and practices thus reveal to us the cosmology of a people as well as the role of rational thought in individual experience.

Walter Burkert reminds us that despite their differences with the preceding tradition, the pre-Socratics play an important role in the development of religion in the Western world. A central feature of the ancient Greek world, to be incorporated into the cosmologies of the pre-Socratics, was religion, both in terms of the general world order and in terms of individual conduct. On the one hand, the pre-Socratics give rise to *theology*, supplanting the poets in their role of keepers of the divine word. And at the individual level, the pre-Socratics sought to define proper human behavior – i.e., the forms of behavior qualifying as *pious*. In both cases, we see the influence of the pre-Socratics' commitment to rationalism.

Consider the following questions as you read:

6. What is the effect, according to Burkert, of the rise of philosophy on religion, on *theologia*?
7. What changes to the concept of the *divine* occur during this period, on Burkert's account? How does the divine come to be related to the rational?
8. How is the divine related to the rest of what exists – nature, the human mind, the moral order – as the Pre-Socratic period evolves?

Further Terminology:

Arche (pl. *archia*): principle – i.e., a relatively general or powerful idea (*logos*), especially as expressing or conferring order in or on a thing

Phusis (pl. *phusoi*): The ancient Greeks give us a term enabling us to conceive of "nature" and the "natural". The distinction between natural and artificial may be expressed as follows: the nature of the natural is internal to it; the nature of an artificial object is imposed from without. That is, *ta phusika* (things physical) have an internal principle or *phusis* defining their essence and behavior. Note that with the designation of the "physical" as self-contained and self-driven, we see the origin of the concept of *nature* that we employ today.

Naturalism is the view that the principles (*archia*) defining the material world around us and governing its behavior are *intrinsic* (or internal) to that order. I.e., the view that the world is governed by *phusoi*. We can contrast this view with the *supernaturalism* of Hesiod. On that view, the governing *archia* of our world originate in and reside in another realm – namely, in the divine realm of the gods. Put another way: naturalism is the view that the universe is composed of *ta physika* – physical things having an internal principle of change.

Idealism: The view according to which that which is real is ideal. The ideal is understood by reference to *ideas*, which in this context are thought to be non-material (non-physical), insubstantial entities, typically capable of intellectual grasp and thus logical (in the above sense). Plato adds to this the second sense of ‘ideal’, meaning “highest” or “perfect” or “best”, so that for him ultimately reality is non-physical and perfect. The ideal is typically understood to be immutable (unchanging) and thus eternal.