

Basic Terminology

PHIL301

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Some Key Terms

- Chaos: being without order (from the Greek *khaos* meaning abyss or void)
- Cosmos: ordered being (from the Greek *kosmos* meaning an orderly arrangement; also adornment – cf. ‘cosmetic’, which shares this root)
 - o Cosmology: literally, the word of ordered being – i.e., the study or pursuit of principles defining order in the universe (if any)
- Logos (pl. *logoi*): literally, “the word” – an account or theory or concept or idea or reason (from the Greek *logos* of the same meaning). Where a thing (phenomenon, entity, etc.) is “logical”, in this sense, it is both characterized by and therefore understandable in terms of human words (concepts).
- Arche (pl. *archia*): principle – i.e., a relatively general or powerful idea (*logos*), especially as expressing or conferring order in or on a thing
- Anthropomorphism: representing a (presumably) non-human entity or phenomenon in human form or terms
- Supernaturalism: reference to, belief in, or especially explanation of natural phenomena in terms of non- or extra-natural beings, powers, or phenomena
- Phusis (pl. *phusoi*): 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., our world is governed by *phusoi*. We can contrast this view with the *supernaturalism* of Hesiod. On that view, the governing *logoi* of our world originate in and reside in another realm – namely, in the divine realm of the gods.
- Idealism is the doctrine according to which reality consists in non-material, *ideal* beings. It is difficult to say much about the ideal, beyond this. It is knowable, graspable by intellect or reason, and eternal. Other characterizations are negative: the ideal is unchanging, insensible, not located in space and time. One of the fundamental debates in metaphysics and in Greek thought specifically concerns a perceived opposition between naturalism and idealism.
- Rationalism is the view according to which the world around us is understandable in human terms (*logoi* – words, concepts, ideas), where
 - o (a) the extent to which the world is *logical*, i.e., to which our words or ideas express the nature of all things tends to the *maximal* (as opposed to the *arbitrary* or *illogical*, where no *logos* can be put to a given state or event; thus, *chaos*, as far as we are concerned);
 - o (b) a complete, logical account of all things tends to be *systematic*, meaning that the more general principles governing the world are relatively few in number (i.e., an *economical* or relatively *simple* set of basic principles), and that the

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- relationships* among the basic principles are themselves relatively clear or definable (i.e., *logical*);
- (c) these “words” or principles – the truths of the universe generally – are at least in principle *knowable* by application of the *natural* human means of acquiring knowledge, sense and/or reason; in other words, the world is open to investigation by a *critical* method, wherein assumptions are challenged and should be otherwise justified by reference to sense information or rational thought. Note that the supposition of logic and systematicity encourages the pursuit of truth by the critical examination of prior truths.
 - **Argumentation:** a primary means of satisfying this criterion is by *arguing* for the truth of one’s claims, as opposed to merely asserting one’s claims, dogmatically. Arguments must conform to standards of induction or deduction.
 - **Dialectic:** a particular form of argumentation takes the form of thesis, antithesis, synthesis, usually as between two or more theorists. I.e., one theorist asserts a claim or theory (thesis); a second finds fault with it (antithesis), and thereby formulates a further claim or theory (synthesis). By this means, progress is achieved across generations of thinkers.
 - **Empiricism** is the methodology asserting the primacy of sense observation as the source of human knowledge. Empiricism is thus an application of rationalism, in the above broad sense of rationalism. The empiricist method entails collecting data (i.e., by sense observation) and then analyzing, classifying, and organizing that data into some sort of ordered account. Aristotle’s work often exemplifies this method.

Human being is perhaps most remarkable for the logical form of order it brings to the universe. Humans use *words – logoi* – to shape their world. Without words, the world we confront is largely “mute” – without meaning, i.e., a chaos.

Other beings exert some form of order on the universe: ants, for example, excavate elaborate passages under ground in which to live; mammals of various sorts mark territory with scent. All life forms bring some kind of order to the universe. There may be other principles of order at play in our universe, deriving from no living thing. (E.g., physical law.)

Human being is remarkable for both the power and nature of its characteristic organizational methods, which are generally linguistic and rational – in a word, “logical”, which literally means of or pertaining to the word (*logos*).

What is distinctive about the Pre-Socratic philosophical era is the striking advance in the power of *logoi* employed in cosmology. The Pre-Socratics developed an increasingly *rationalistic* method of cosmology, a method of thought that marks the beginning of the Western intellectual tradition. Science, or more broadly, philosophy, in other words, begins here. These developments gained fullest expression in the works of the great philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.

Prior to this period, in the West, cosmology was primarily *anthropomorphic* and *supernaturalistic* and, notably, only implicit in the culture’s religious thought, not that form of thought’s primary purpose. Hesiod’s *Theogony* provides an apt illustration of this form of thought, which tends also to be dogmatic and arbitrary, where cosmology is concerned.

A primary question, faced by both the ancient Greeks and us, is the extent to which our universe is a cosmos as opposed to a chaos. A range of theoretical possibilities is defined by the limits of complete chaos, on the one hand, and complete, maximal order, on the other. In other words, to

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what extent is the world rational – i.e., to what extent does it admit of rational understanding? I.e., to what extent do *logoi* characterize the world we live in? A subsidiary set of questions concern the relation between the *logical* and the material. As ordinarily understood, the *ideal* is different in kind from the material. One question, then, is how metaphysically the two are related, if at all. Are there causal relations between the two? A further question concerns how it is possible for the ideal to refer to or describe the material, given that the one is expressive of a kind distinct from the other.