Pre-Socratic Study Guide
PHIL301
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As we have seen, a primary question faced by both the ancient Greeks and us is the extent to which our universe is a cosmos rather than 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 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?

In our "Precursors" section, we characterized pre-historic, pre-philosophical rationalist thought as supernaturalist and anthropomorphic. While, as Aristotle will say, the human is the "rational animal", human rationality in this period is relatively undeveloped, in certain important respects, compared with periods to follow. The period following our precursors is know as that of "Pre-Socratic" philosophical thought. This period witnesses the rise of philosophical thought per se, culminating in the thought of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Socrates was the mentor of Plato, and Plato the teacher of Aristotle, so Socrates marks a dividing line between the development of philosophical rationalism and its full expression. Thus, it has become common to speak of philosophy preceding Socrates with the term 'Pre-Socratic'. The Pre-Socratic period of western thought is the period in which western intellectual thought per se begins.

What is distinctive about the Pre-Socratic philosophical era is the striking advance in the power of *logoi* employed in cosmology. Where the anthropomorphism of the pre-philosophical Greeks entailed a primarily self-reflective form of thought, the Pre-Socratics succeeded redirecting this heretofore anthropocentric gaze. Two important movements are central to this reorientation. The first of these is *naturalism* which differs from both anthropomorphism and supernaturalism first by conceiving of nature independent of human forms and second by seeking to understand nature in its own terms rather than in terms of some extra-natural being or phenomenon. As a consequence, the very concept of *nature* is born in western thought.[1]

The second key feature of this new form of thought is its attention to the *logos* per se. Words and ideas are not an object of particular study or attention, prior to the Pre-Socratics. Words and ideas are of course fundamental to human being in all its forms, but prior to the Pre-Socratics, they are tools only, for use, and not themselves objects of considered attention. With the Pre-Socratics, the abstract realm of logic becomes a primary focus of thought. Together, the Pre-Socratic turn towards nature and logic per se constitutes the decisive break with antiquity and the beginning of the western intellectual tradition: philosophy and science begin here.

Several concepts are basic to our understanding of this era.

> 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.
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> *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

[1] Note how our word 'nature' expresses this idea of a self-contained being: we speak of "the nature" of a thing, where this is to refer to its identity as intrinsic to it. Contrast the supernaturalism that requires our looking away from the thing, to a supernatural being, for an understanding of it.

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.

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. The ideal is the proper object of thought. It is knowable, graspable by intellect or reason, and often regarded as unchanging 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.[2]

Metaphysics: the theory and study of reality. In its usual form, metaphysics seeks to determine what is the logic of reality – what are its basic *logoi*? This discipline emerges in the Pre-Socratic era.

Epistemology: the theory and study of knowledge. This discipline emerges in the Pre-Socratic era. In particular, where logic, the *logos* is the object of study, we have the study of the basic terms of knowledge. An important question becomes the relationship between these terms, the *logoi*, and the natural world.

Rationalism per se is the hallmark of the philosophical era, beginning with the Pre-Socratics. Where the pre-philosophical world witnesses only a limited rationalism, the notion of a logical, knowable world is firmly established thereafter culminating in the methods of Socrates and the systems of Plato and Aristotle.

Philosophy begins with the rise of rationalism. Truth is sought for its own sake; the *logos* is seen as independent, capable of direct grasp. Naturalism replaces supernaturalism; the concept of "nature" emerges. Naturalism is instable, leading to idealism via the independence of the *logos*. The question of method and the nature of truth arises.

Order and Chaos: where we have logic, we have order; where logic is absent, we have disorder, as far as the human rational mind is concerned. The development of philosophy from the Pre-Socratics forward is the development of an account of a rationally ordered world. The extent to which philosophy can realize a fully rational world-order is one of the basic questions of this course.

General Questions

1. What *logoi* (concepts, ideas) do the Pre-Socratics employ to explain the order of the universe? What are some of their *archia* (principles)?
2. How do the Pre-Socratic views differ from those of Hesiod? Note the extent to which the Pre-Socratics seek to distinguish themselves from their predecessors.
3. To what extent are these accounts fully rational? To what extent not?
4. In what respects, if any, are the Pre-Socratic theories *naturalistic*?
5. In what respects, if any, are the Pre-Socratic theories *idealist*?

Beginning Phase (the Milesians, Xenophanes Pythagoras, Heraclitus)

[2] The logical, we shall see, is ordinarily understood as *ideal*, and the *ideal* is ordinarily understood as distinct from the material. One question, then, is how metaphysically the two are related, if at all. How is it possible for the ideal to refer to or describe the material, given that the one is different in kind from the other?

6. By means of what *logoi* did the Milesians attempt to explain (a) the existence of the world; (b) the physical make-up of the world; (c) the particular events of the world?
7. How did the Pythagoreans view the relationship between number and the nature of reality? What does this view mean for the possibility of human knowledge of reality?
8. What considerations does Xenophanes bring to bear against the anthropomorphized deities? What is his view of the nature of the divine?
9. What is Heraclitus's view of the structure of reality? How are opposites related, according to him? What is Heraclitus's view of the possibility of human knowledge?
10. What is the significance of this phase of human thought?

Critical Phase (Parmenides, Zeno)

11. Why, exactly, does Parmenides believe that there is no change, no diversity, no plurality, no void, no contingency, and no passage of time? What does this view tell us about the relative authority of reason, on the one hand, and perception, on the other?
12. By what means does Zeno attempt to demonstrate the impossibility of plurality and change (or motion)? What does this view tell us about reason and perception?
13. What is the significance of the thought of Parmenides and Zeno with respect to (a) their Pre-Socratic predecessors and (b) the development of philosophy generally?

Reconciliation Phase (Anaxagoras and after)

14. How do the pluralists seek to reconcile Parmenides' prohibition against change with the world as perceived by us? Why did the pluralists find it necessary to attempt this reconciliation?
15. What is the response of the atomists to the challenge posed by Parmenides?
16. What is the significance of "reconciliation phase" thought with respect to the development of philosophy?