

Chaos, Cosmos, and *Logos*

PHIL301

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It is a challenge to gain a grasp of anything as deep and broad as a culture, let alone one that is at the same time complex and fundamentally joined with our own. We need broad concepts, concepts that strike to the heart of the ancient Greek mind and we need careful self-prepossession in order to discern basic features of reality that we take for granted. We will employ a number of basic concepts for this purpose.

It is important that you keep your wits about you as we proceed. You will have a tendency to mystify our subject matter: you will tend to mistake it for something strange and foreign when it is in fact something common and familiar to you – the primary features of your own world-view. It requires a certain agility of mind to abstract from your own experience the features that are fundamental to it and it will require further mental agility to consider different versions of that basic mental architecture. For in contemplating the mind of ancient Greece, we will see our own minds and experience revealed in somewhat different terms from those that we use. Indeed, much of philosophy and of human thought generally involves just this process of construing and reconstruing ourselves and our surroundings in new and again new terms.¹

We begin with the concepts of chaos, cosmos, and *logos*. These terms come to us directly from the ancient Greek culture that we are examining and we attempt here to reconstruct their meaning. We think that our understanding of these terms is in fact very similar to that of the Greeks: we are in this respect very much the cultural and intellectual heirs of the Greeks.

- Chaos: being without order (from the ancient Greek *khaos* meaning abyss or void)
- Cosmos: ordered being (from the ancient Greek *kosmos* meaning an orderly arrangement; also adornment – cf. ‘cosmetic’, which shares this root)²
- Logos³ (pl. *logoi*): literally, “the word” – an account or theory or concept or idea or reason (here, we use the ancient Greek word without translating it). Our word ‘logical’ derives from this term, as does ‘logic’. Where something (an object, event, phenomenon, etc.) is “logical”, in this sense, it is both characterized by and therefore understandable in terms of human words (concepts). The concept of *logos* is one of the most important concepts that we humans possess.
- Arche (pl. *archia*): principle – i.e., a relatively general or powerful idea (*logos*), especially as expressing or conferring order in or on a thing

Chaos, generally, is anything that is disordered or lacks order. Think of your sock drawer, for instance: is it orderly or not? Think more broadly of your life? Is it always orderly, or are there

¹ To complicate matters, of course, we sometimes make *mistakes* in stating our views of the world. Much of philosophy involves disputes over the correct way to characterize one or another feature of our experience. So, in addition to learning to abstract subtle features of your experience, and in addition to learning new ways of conceiving these features, you will sometimes encounter *errors*. When a philosopher makes a mistake, the student must see what the philosopher is trying to do even as s/he fails to do it. Abstractions piled on top of abstractions piled on top of abstractions, etc.

² Thus, with the following entry, *logos*, we have the study known as cosmology: literally, the word of ordered being – i.e., the study or pursuit of principles (words) defining order in the universe (if any).

³ This word, *logos*, is italicized because it is a foreign language word. It is common practice, and required in this course, to italicize (or underline) foreign language words. (Be clear that this is not the plural of our word ‘logo’, which refers to an emblem representing an idea or, frequently, a business.)

periods of chaos? This concept is familiar to us. We will use the above definition to make precise what we mean by use of the term. Note that chaos can exist alongside order: the knit of your socks represents a certain form of order, as does their general shape, even if their arrangement in the drawer doesn't exhibit any order.

Cosmos, by contrast, is anything that is orderly, ordered, or having order. If your sock drawer isn't particularly orderly, then it's not a cosmos. The galaxy that we live in, however, is a highly ordered system, one ordered by basic physical principles, especially that of gravity – thus our use of the term 'cosmos' to refer to the system of stars and planets. And while we don't ordinarily use our word 'cosmos' to refer to lesser systems of order, such as that composing a sock, or a well-ordered pantry, we could so use the term: anything having order is, for the ancient Greeks, a cosmos. As is mentioned in the etymology of the term, above, note the link to the idea of adornment: a cosmos is something of beauty. This reflects the important human proclivity to find order pleasing and disorder uncomfortable. You might consider the extent to which you find this so in your own experience.

The term *logos* is in some ways the most important of the three, for our purposes. This word was the ancient Greek word for "word". Like our term, 'word', the Greek '*logos*' can mean not simply "word" but refer also to any general word-construction: a theory or an account of something, or an idea or concept. "What's the word on today's weather?" we can say, just as the ancient Greeks could ask, "What's the *logos*?" While it's a bit of a stretch to use our term 'word' for a theory or systematic account, such as we might find in biology or chemistry, or in philosophy, that broader use of the Greek *logos* was a natural extension of their term. As you have probably already noticed, our word 'biology' comes directly from the Greek *bios* meaning "life" plus *logos*: biology is the theory of life. Note, too, the derivation of our word 'logic' from *logos*. Etymologically speaking, logic is anything pertaining to *logos*: the logical, in other words, is the "wordy" in the sense of being something that we can put a word to. And where we have words, we have concepts, human general thought. To call something "logical", in other words, is to say that it's something that we can understand.

It is in this connection to concepts and human understanding that we find the importance of the term *logos*, for this course. To say that the universe is an orderly cosmos is to say that there is some logic to the universe, some idea or system of ideas that organize it. And if there is a system of ideas organizing the universe, then in principle it is possible of us humans to discover and understand that system of ideas and thus the universe itself. Did you ever wonder whether the universe was logical? Have you ever asked yourself whether your life or things in general make logical sense? This is to ask whether there is a logic or *logos* to the universe.

This point bears emphasis: if the extra-mental world is "logical", then – somehow – it has the same form as the rational operations of the human mind. For *logic*, the human word and thought, is characteristic first and foremost of us, our minds. To postulate a logical world beyond our minds is to say that the world beyond our minds has the exact same form as human rational thought. This identity of forms, then, grounds the possibility of human knowledge of the external world. If the form of the external world is identical to that of human rational thought, then we can come to know the exact nature of the world around us. It remains only to discover the particulars of that nature for us to know it.

It is also important to emphasize that it is *logos* that distinguishes cosmos from chaos. The *logos* of an ordered system is precisely its element of order: it is the principle ordering the system in question. Were the logic of the system to be somehow removed, a cosmos would lapse into chaos. Consequently, we speak in Greek also of the *arche* of a cosmos – the principle ordering it. A principle (*arche*) is also a more general or more powerful *logos*, one inherent in many parts of our world, or at its foundation. Just as we do today, the ancient Greeks sought the fundamental logical principles by means of which our universe is ordered. To know these would be to know the truth of the world.

These three terms, then, give us a terminology for examining the ancient Greek mind and by extension our own. To what extent was the Greek world a cosmos, an ordered realm that we can come to understand? To what extent was the Greek world a chaos? Were the features of the world that couldn't make sense, that we couldn't comprehend? These are some of the basic questions that we will raise in this course. And as we raise them, we will of course raise also the question of our own understanding of the universe, the extent to which our world is orderly, logical.

Our final basic term is *rationalism*. If there is a single, overall theme defining the development of ancient Greek thought it is the trend towards the ascendancy of rationalism. Rationalism is the view according to which the world is, in fact, a logical place, a place of rational order. (See below for a complete definition of this term.) Notice that our worldview is today generally much committed to this doctrine: think of the extent to which science governs our understanding of the world. This view – that the world we live in is logical and knowable – did not come from nowhere, nor is it by any means the only possible view. The rationalist world view has been more pronounced in some ages and less in others. You might think of this as the “correct” worldview, but this is a matter very much at issue in human affairs; it is part of the purpose of this course to give you some appreciation of this fact.

In this course we will see the rise of rationalism from crude beginning to fully developed, sophisticated system of thought. We will also have occasion to challenge this worldview. For now, it is important first to come to a general understanding of the idea, so consider the following definition:

- Rationalism is the view according to which the world around us is understandable in human terms (*logoi* – words, concepts, ideas). More specifically, our world is:
 - (a) logical: the extent to which the world is *logical* tends to be *maximal* and the extent to which the world is illogical, *chaotic*, tends to be *minimal*: generally speaking, features or aspects of the universe are orderly; there is a discoverable logic defining them; fewer aspects of the universe are *arbitrary* or illogical; we have a cosmos, rather than a chaos;
 - (b) systematic: a complete, logical account of all things tends to be *systematic*, meaning that the general principles governing the world are relatively few in number (giving us an *economical* or relatively *simple* set of basic principles) and the *relationships* among these basic principles are themselves relatively clear or definable (i.e., logical);
 - (c) knowable: these “words” or principles – the logic of the universe – are at least in principle *knowable* by application of the *natural* human means of acquiring knowledge, sense or reason (or both); because the world is ordered logically, and because human rational thought is logical, it is possible for humans to know the order of the universe. The knowability of our world may be further specified as follows:
 - Critical Method: 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: if we know one truth, and truths are generally systematically related, then logical examination of the one truth may lead to discovery of others.
 - 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.

Chaos, Cosmos, Logos

- 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 inquirers.
- Empirical Observation: if the world around us is logical, then we may be able to discern this logic by sense observation. (We encounter a question here as to whether sense, per se, can detect logic; reason is generally supposed to be so capable.)

Human being is perhaps most remarkable for the (literally) logical form of order it brings to the universe. Humans use *words – logoi* – to shape their world.⁴ Without words, the world we confront is essentially “mute” – without meaning, i.e., a chaos, as far as we are concerned. As above, we tend to take for granted that our world “makes sense;” whether this is so is one of the themes of this course.

Somewhat more generally, let us take a step back and consider our project, here. This is a philosophy course, one focusing on the philosophy of the ancient Greeks. As you have seen above, a major theme of the course concerns logic and order. Think then generally about these questions:

- What is logic? Where, in the world, do you find logic? What does it consist in?
- What is reason? What does it do? What does it tell us about the world, if anything?
- What is it for the world to be “rational”? Is it the world that is rational, or only ourselves?
- What is order?
- What is chaos?
- What is it for the world to be orderly? chaotic?
- Is your experience of the world orderly? Is it chaotic?
- What role do logic and reason play in your experience of the world?

Philosophy is a course in the *humanities*: ultimately, its focus is on us – what we are, what our being in the world is like.

⁴ 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, if this is something apart from human activity.)