

History of Philosophy

02 The Moral Universe in the Pre-Socratics

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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes presents the **pre-Socratic philosophers** not merely as primitive scientists, but as thinkers deeply rooted in the **emerging concept of cosmic justice**. He argues that these early Greeks moved beyond the arbitrary whims of mythology to propose a **moral universe** where natural, social, and individual life are all governed by a singular, rational order. This perspective connects the **logos of Heraclitus** and the **nous of Anaxagoras** to a broader cultural evolution toward universal law and ethical harmony. While most schools sought an **intelligible balance** within nature, the materialist **Democritus** provided a significant counterpoint by attributing the world's order to **blind chance and necessity**. Ultimately, Holmes illustrates how this tension between a **law-governed cosmos** and a mechanistic one established the foundational ethical and metaphysical debates of Western philosophy. These early ideas directly set the stage for the later works of **Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle**.

Briefing Document:

The Moral Universe of the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Briefing on Cosmic Justice

Executive Summary

This document synthesizes an interpretation of the pre-Socratic philosophers as primarily ethical thinkers concerned with the concept of "cosmic justice." While traditional history—*influenced by Aristotle*—often categorizes these thinkers as "pre-scientific" speculators on the physical origins of nature, a deeper analysis of the Greek literary tradition and philosophical fragments suggests a different focus. These thinkers posited that nature, the city-state, and the individual moral life are all governed by a singular, law-bound order. This "moral universe" suggests that justice is inherent in the very structure of reality, a theme developed through concepts such as Anaximander's "retribution," Heraclitus's *Logos*, and Anaxagoras's *Nous*. Conversely, the materialism of Democritus serves as the historical counterpoint, offering a universe of chance and necessity that leads to a hedonistic rather than law-governed ethic.

The Three Orders of Law and Harmony

A central theme in pre-Socratic thought is the analogy between three distinct but parallel levels of existence. These thinkers argued that the same principles of order and law-governed processes apply across the following domains:

Order	Domain	Characterization
Macrocosm	Nature as a whole	Ordered, law-governed, and characterized by "cosmic justice."
The Intermediate	The City-State	The emerging idea of society as a law-governed social order.
Microcosm	Individual Moral Life	A law-governed existence where "justice will out" and actions have moral consequences.

The Literary Evolution of Justice

The philosophical pursuit of cosmic justice was not an isolated development but an extension of themes found in earlier Greek literature.

From Arbitrariness to Law

- **Homer (The Iliad):** Early mythology depicted the gods as fickle and arbitrary. The "heroic virtues" (beauty, wealth, status, and honor) took precedence over social responsibility or justice for the common man. Fate (*Moirai*) was seen as an impersonal, lurking force.
 - **Homer (The Odyssey):** A shift begins where the gods, specifically Athena, become interested in securing justice.
 - **Hesiod (Theogony and Works and Days):** Hesiod marks a significant transition, asserting that Zeus oversees human affairs through his daughter, *Dike* (Justice). He calls for "honest labor" and warns that those who violate justice face divine punishment.
 - **The Tragedians (Aeschylus and Sophocles):** In works like the *Oresteia* and *Antigone*, blood feuds and arbitrary edicts are superseded by the "rule of law" and "higher laws of heaven" that are eternally valid.
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Key Philosophers of the Moral Universe

Anaximander: Nature as Retribution

Anaximander applied moral language directly to natural processes. He argued that the generation and destruction of things happen "according to necessity," stating:

"For they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice according to the assessment of time."

This suggests that even physical changes in the universe are a form of balancing moral or cosmic scales over time.

Pythagoras: Mathematical Harmony and Community

Pythagoras moved beyond physical elements to identify an intelligible, mathematical order.

- **Peras vs. Apeiron:** He distinguished between *peras* (order/boundary) and *apeiron* (the undefined/unlimited).
- **The Ethical Community:** Pythagoras founded a "society" or "cult" intended to be a microcosm of cosmic order—a morally idealistic community characterized by a "balance of opposing influences" and dietary restrictions governed by reason.

Xenophanes: The Rationality of the One God

Xenophanes criticized the immoral anthropomorphism of Homeric gods (guilty of "theft, adultery, and deceiving each other"). He proposed:

- **A Single Non-Anthropomorphic God:** A greatest god, not like mortals in body or mind, who "moves everything by just the thought of his mind."
- **Unity and Order:** This conception was intended to uphold an ordered unity in life and the cosmos, rather than to engage in abstract theology.

Heraclitus: The Universal Logos

Heraclitus is characterized as a "double-aspect monist," balancing change with permanent ordered unity.

- **The Logos:** He introduced the *Logos*—a universal law of reason, measure, and harmony common to all. He urged men to "listen not to me, but to the Logos."
- **Justice Through Strife:** He argued that while "war is the father of all" and justice is found through strife, everything ultimately happens according to the *Logos*.

- **Ethics:** He claimed "wisdom is speaking the truth and acting according to nature," rejecting the "heroic virtues" of the past.

Anaxagoras: The Cosmic Mind (Nous)

Anaxagoras identified *Nous* (Mind or Intelligence) as the force that brings order to the primal chaos.

- **The Architect:** *Nous* is described as "infinite and self-ruling" and the "purest of all things." It took command of the "universal revolution" (the cosmic vortex) to separate materials into an ordered cosmos.
- **Plato's Critique:** While Anaxagoras saw *Nous* as a shaper or fashioner, Plato later criticized him for failing to identify a conscious *purpose* (teleology) behind this order.

The Materialist Counterpoint: Democritus

Democritus represents the opposing "worldview" to the concept of a law-governed moral universe.

- **Mechanistic Materialism:** He viewed the cosmos as the result of "sheer chance"—the random collision of atoms in a vacuum. There is no *Logos* or *Nous* directing the "whirl" of necessity.
- **Subjectivity of Qualities:** He argued that sensory qualities like "sweet," "bitter," and "color" exist only by "convention," not by nature.
- **Hedonistic Ethic:** Because the universe lacks intrinsic moral order, Democritus concluded that "pleasure and the absence of pleasure are the criteria of what is profitable." His ethic focuses on enjoyment and the avoidance of pain, rather than adherence to a cosmic moral law.

Conclusion: The Pre-Socratic Legacy

The pre-Socratic era was not merely a precursor to science but a foundational conflict between two worldviews:

1. **The Moral Order:** A belief in an inherently just, law-governed universe (Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Anaxagoras).

2. **The Materialist Order:** A belief in a universe of chance and necessity (Democritus and later Sophists).

This tension set the agenda for Western philosophy, providing the essential alternatives—Empiricism vs. Rationalism, Materialism vs. Idealism, and Hedonism vs. Moral Law—that Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle would subsequently address.

Study Guide:

The Moral Universe of the Pre-Socratics: A Comprehensive Study Guide

This study guide explores the philosophical transition from Greek mythology to early Greek philosophy, focusing on the emergence of "cosmic justice." While traditional histories often categorize the Pre-Socratics as "pre-scientific" speculators, this analysis emphasizes their role as ethical thinkers who viewed the universe as a moral, law-governed order.

Part I: Review Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in two to three sentences based on the provided source context.

1. **How does Dr. Holmes's "third way" of interpreting the Pre-Socratics differ from the traditional Aristotelian view?**
2. **According to the text, what are the three parallel levels of order recognized by early Greek thinkers?**
3. **What significant shift in the portrayal of gods and justice occurs between Homer's *Iliad* and his *Odyssey*?**
4. **How does Hesiod's *Works and Days* characterize the relationship between human labor and cosmic justice?**
5. **How does Anaximander apply moral language to describe the natural processes of generation and destruction?**
6. **What is the significance of the terms *peras* and *apeiron* in Pythagorean philosophy?**

7. **On what grounds does Xenophanes criticize the traditional Greek depiction of the gods?**
 8. **In Heraclitus's philosophy, what is the "Logos," and how does it relate to "private understandings"?**
 9. **How does the role of Anaxagoras's *Nous* (Mind) differ from the Judeo-Christian concept of a creator?**
 10. **Why does Democritus's mechanistic materialism lead to a hedonistic ethic?**
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Part II: Answer Key

1. **How does Dr. Holmes's "third way" of interpreting the Pre-Socratics differ from the traditional Aristotelian view?** The traditional view, influenced by Aristotle, sees Pre-Socratics as pre-scientific speculators about nature's physical principles. Holmes's "third way" suggests they are actually in continuity with Greek literary predecessors, focusing on "cosmic justice" and the idea that the universe is a moral order governed by law.
2. **According to the text, what are the three parallel levels of order recognized by early Greek thinkers?** The three levels are the macrocosm (the law-governed order of nature), the microcosm of society (the law-governed city-state), and the individual microcosm (the ordered moral life). Greek thinkers saw constant analogies between these three, believing that justice must prevail across all of them.
3. **What significant shift in the portrayal of gods and justice occurs between Homer's *Iliad* and his *Odyssey*?** In the *Iliad*, the gods are portrayed as fickle, limited, and uninterested in human affairs, with an emphasis on "heroic virtues" like wealth and status. By the *Odyssey*, there is an evolution toward a moral order where the gods, specifically Athena, become involved in securing justice for the characters.
4. **How does Hesiod's *Works and Days* characterize the relationship between human labor and cosmic justice?** Hesiod argues that Zeus has established a moral law for humanity that distinguishes them from animals, who devour one another. He maintains that those who practice "straight judgments" and honest labor will see their cities flourish, while the "far-seeing Zeus" eventually punishes those who delight in violence.

5. **How does Anaximander apply moral language to describe the natural processes of generation and destruction?** Anaximander describes the coming to be and passing away of things as a process where elements "pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice." He uses this moral metaphor to suggest that nature follows a "necessity" that balances itself out in the course of time.
6. **What is the significance of the terms *peras* and *apeiron* in Pythagorean philosophy?** *Peras* represents order, boundary, or mathematical limit, while *apeiron* refers to the unlimited or undefined chaos. Pythagoras believed that nature and society should be characterized by *peras*, creating a harmony of opposing forces through rational limits.
7. **On what grounds does Xenophanes criticize the traditional Greek depiction of the gods?** Xenophanes criticizes the gods of Homer and Hesiod for being immoral, noting they are guilty of theft, adultery, and deception. He also mocks anthropomorphism, stating that if oxen or horses could paint, they would create gods that look like oxen or horses, whereas he proposes a single, immaterial God who moves all things by thought.
8. **In Heraclitus's philosophy, what is the "Logos," and how does it relate to "private understandings"?** The Logos is a universal, cosmic reason or "ordered universe" that is common to all people. Heraclitus argues that while the Logos is universal, many people live as if they have "private understandings"—like dreams in the night—rather than following the one rational law that governs all things.
9. **How does the role of Anaxagoras's *Nous* (Mind) differ from the Judeo-Christian concept of a creator?** Unlike the Judeo-Christian concept of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), Anaxagoras's *Nous* acts as an architect or fashioner. It takes command of a "primal chaos" or "universal revolution" and brings order out of it by separating and drawing off different kinds of things into a cosmos.
10. **Why does Democritus's mechanistic materialism lead to a hedonistic ethic?** Democritus believes the universe is the result of sheer chance and the collision of atoms, with no intrinsic moral order or cosmic justice. In such a world where "right" does not necessarily prevail, he concludes that pleasure and the absence of pain are the only logical criteria for a profitable life.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the themes discussed in the source context to develop comprehensive responses to the following prompts.

1. **The Evolution of Justice:** Trace the development of the concept of "justice" (Dike) from early Greek mythology through Hesiod to the Pre-Socratic philosophers. How did the definition of justice move from arbitrary fate to a universal principle of nature?
2. **Teleology vs. Mechanism:** Compare and contrast the "ordered universe" of thinkers like Anaxagoras and Pythagoras with the "mechanistic" universe of Democritus. How does each worldview dictate a different approach to human ethics and society?
3. **The Role of the Divine:** Analyze the transition from anthropomorphic polytheism to the more abstract concepts of God found in Xenophanes and Anaxagoras. Why was this transition necessary for the development of a law-governed view of the cosmos?
4. **The Concept of the Logos:** Heraclitus suggests that "what is in opposition is in concert." Explore the meaning of this statement in the context of his Logos. How does the Logos provide unity to a world characterized by constant change and strife?
5. **Pre-Socratics as Moral Architects:** Dr. Holmes argues that the Pre-Socratics were setting a moral agenda for Western philosophy. Evaluate this claim by discussing how their theories of nature (macrocosm) were intended to justify specific ways of life in the city-state (microcosm).

Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
Apeiron	The "unlimited" or "undefined" something; the primal, unmanageable chaos used by Anaximander and Pythagoras to describe the base state of matter.
Cosmic Justice	The emerging Greek notion that the universe is a moral order in which justice will eventually prevail "in the course of time."

Dike	The Greek word for "right" or "justice"; often personified as the daughter of Zeus who oversees human affairs.
Double Aspect Monism	A philosophical view (attributed to Pythagoras and Heraclitus) that nature has two sides: one characterized by change and fire, the other by permanent, ordered unity.
Heroic Virtues	The values of the Homeric aristocratic hero, including beauty, wealth, status, and honor, often pursued regardless of social benefit.
Logos	A multifaceted term meaning speech, rationality, measure, or harmony; it represents the universal reason or order that gives meaning to life.
Macrocosm / Microcosm	The conceptual parallel between the "large world" of nature (macrocosm) and the "small world" of the human individual or city-state (microcosm).
Moirai	An impersonal, arbitrary "fate" that lurks behind natural processes in early Greek mythology.
Nous	Greek for "Mind" or "Intelligence"; the cosmic power described by Anaxagoras as the purest thing that brings order to the primal vortex.
Peras	Meaning "border" or "boundary"; it represents the mathematical and rational order that balances opposing forces in Pythagorean thought.
Teleology	The belief that there is an inherent order and purpose in natural processes; the idea that nature is end-oriented.