

Western thought involves a generally coherent tradition: that is, it involves a common set of problems, roughly similar set of issues under consideration, and a similar set of terms (vocab) in use. Here is what some of these big words mean:

Greece

Course covers birth of systematically rational thinking as we know it, during the period 600-300 BCE in and near Greece. Over 2,500 years have passed since this mode of inquiry was first conceived and refined. To study it now is a daunting and error-prone task. It requires us to 'think our way back' to an era and way of life we can know only indirectly. If you can perform this act of imagination, you will be rewarded with an fascinating ride through what one poet calls "the morning of thought" in the west.

The Greek city-states were, during the early part of the period 600-300 BCE, breaking away from the control of the Persian societies in Turkey and eastward.

To understand what the presocratics, Plato and Aristotle were doing, you must understand how unlikely it was that it be done at all. The dominant way of understanding and explaining the world in and before their time was mythopoetic, i.e., was based upon imaginative stories and storytelling. These stories presented a world driven by capricious, irregular forces existing largely outside the perceptible world of possible human experience. As you will see, the new mode of inquiry these Ionians, Athenians, and Eleatics invented turned this traditional mode of explanation on its head. Why, in a world where daily life was often more chaotic and unpredictable than our own, did these people come to believe the world was governed by something systematic and regular, let alone one explicable entirely in terms of things which could be found within the world (as opposed to things, like gods, lying outside of it)? As you read Hesiod and the early presocratics, try to remember that their theories, which seem quite bad, even preposterous to us now, were revolutionary and comparatively rigorous in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. Although Hesiod still used gods and goddesses to explain natural events, his deities were not capricious entities standing outside the world. Rather, they represented natural forces found in the world. The resulting Hesiodic explanations for natural events constitute an intermediate step toward those thinkers like Thales, Anaximander and the rest, whose theories, while wildly parsimonious, no longer make appeal to outside entities and powers at all in explaining nature.

THE ARGUMENT

The presocratics to a degree, and Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to an inestimable extent, were all involved in a protracted and serious cultural battle with the poets, dramatists and sophists over whose mode of understanding and counsel would guide the Greek city states into the future. In a sense, this battle has not died. We see evidence of it in modern debates about the role of science, the arts, the emotions, the inner or "spiritual" life of men, etc., in the way we go about determining how to live in the modern world. Some evidence for this lies in the following

quotation, taken from a book by Loren Eiseley, a very thoughtful anthropologist who, despite his commitment to scientific study of the world, reflects a quite ancient, almost pre-presocratic doubt about the possibility of explaining the world fully by scientific means:

. . . In the world there is nothing to explain the world. Nothing to explain the necessity of life, nothing to explain the hunger of the elements to become life, nothing to explain why the stolid realm of rock and soil and mineral should diversify itself into beauty, terror and uncertainty. To bring organic novelty into existence, to create pain, injustice, joy, demands more than we can discern in the nature that we analyze so completely.

As the semester progresses, I think and hope you will find yourself going back and forth about whether Eiseley is right in this passage. You may come to see that he has made more than one claim here, and the claims are not necessarily dependent upon each other (so you can believe one is true, while consistently maintaining others are false). I hope you will always keep in mind that any true philosophical claim is one whose supporting arguments and explanations can, in principle, be retraced by anyone, and which must pass the test of your own intuitions. This does not mean that everyone's intuitions are equally good (if you don't understand the problem correctly, you can quite easily, almost inevitably, have intuitions which cannot be trusted). But it does mean that philosophy is not a "mystery discipline". Like scientific discourse, it is open for inspection, and if you find it wanting, and can produce sound arguments to show it is wrong, then philosophical thinkers must take you seriously. A crucial distinction, as you will see when we read Plato's dialogues, lies between persuasive but bad arguments (associated with the Sophists), and persuasive and good arguments produced by the successful philosopher. It will seldom be the case that you can resolve a given problem here in one sitting, even several. But you should not take these claims as anything more than suggestions from a friend whom you respect.

ACCOUNTS/ANALYSES/EXPLANATIONS

In the next 15 weeks you will repeatedly hear talk about "accounts" of things. I will tell you that Thales offers an "account" of nature; or we will try to evaluate Plato's "account" of justice. This idea of an "account" is very close to other ideas, such as the idea of an "explanation" or of an "analysis". It usually consists in a set of reasons for thinking the matter at hand is such and so rather than such and so. If you offer an account of justice, you must tell us what you think justice is, and some good reasons in support of your claim. If you offer an account of physical objects, you must do the same. We often speak of the former in the language of "analysis". That is, to give an account of justice is to give a successful analysis of the idea and practices of justice. By contrast, when we speak about accounts of nature, we tend to speak in terms of explanation: to account for nature is to explain why it is such and so. But these two things, analysis and explanation, are not so distinct from each other. When you investigate nature, you engage in a process of analyzing lots of other stuff: information, hypotheses, experimental methods, and even the tentative theories you hope to prove/disprove. The result of this analysis, that is, your resulting theory of nature, explains the phenomena under consideration, or so one hopes. By the same token, when you study justice, you analyze instances of just action, perhaps, as well as our ways of talking and thinking about justice, and perhaps also other theories of

justice, etc., and produce, if you are successful, your own theory of justice. But this theory must account for the evidence you have gathered in pursuing these lines of inquiry into justice, and stands as a kind of explanation for that evidence: the theory explains the evidence, just as it harmonizes it (i.e., 'makes sense' of the disparate bits of evidence, brings them into a kind of coherent whole).

Obviously, justice and nature are quite different, and explanations/accounts/analyses of them will employ different tools, at least to some important extent. But in many respects, these differing inquiries, particularly in the hands of prechristian Greeks, share underlying assumptions about what counts as a good explanation/account/analysis. It will be one of our central concerns here to clarify what these thinkers put forward as criteria for a good explanation, and why.

With this in mind, and so we can make these ideas more concrete, let's consider some different explanations we might offer for the fact that my shirt is green.

10 Explanations

Consider these explanations for the fact that my shirt is blue. Ask yourself both what is good about each explanation (if anything), and what is undesirable about each one (if anything).

1. My shirt is blue because it wishes to be blue.

Virtues:

Simplicity

Noncircular

Flaws:

Anthropomorphic (presumes shirts have wishes, like people)

Magical (presumes shirts are godlike--have powers even we lack)

Incomplete (even if shirts are like people and have remarkable powers doesn't tell us how these powers are exercised...how does it do that?)

How can we determine whether it is true or not?

Lacks universality (do all blue shirts wish to be blue? This explanation only applies to my shirt)

2. My shirt is blue because Zeus is sad.

Virtues:

Simplicity

Noncircular

Flaws:

Explains things in the world through things outside the world.

So, how can we determine if it is true...since we are here, not there?

Anthropomorphic (presumes gods have feelings, like people)

Lacks universality (not all shirts will be blue for the same reason, or we don't yet have reason to think they will based on this explanation).

3. My shirt is blue because, on the day the seamstress was spinning the cotton, Venus, the planet that rules blue things, was in Scorpio, the domain of shirts.

Virtues:

Relies on things in the world for the explanation.

Offers some kind of "internal" reason for the relation between the color and the shirt (unlike #1 or #2, which seem largely arbitrary...why shouldn't Zeus make things purple when he's sad, or red?)

Seems to have universality

Might be testable by us

Noncircular

Flaws:

Doesn't explain how stars and their relations to earthly objects produce these effects.

How can we be sure that, even if all shirts made under these circumstances turn out blue, that this is not just a coincidence? (i.e., is this explanation truly universal?)

4. My shirt is blue because a Blue Spirit lives inside of it.

Virtues:

Simplicity

Relies on things in the world

Flaws:

Relies on magical entities (cannot be seen, touched, hence cannot be tested)

Circular (what makes the "blue spirit" blue?...we still need an explanation for that!)

Lacks universality

5. My shirt is blue because it is made out of almost imperceptible bits of blue matter, gathered together to make one big blue thing.

Virtues:

Explains the world with things in the world which we (potentially) can inspect through perception.

Flaws:

Circular

Lacks universality

6. My shirt is blue because it is composed of fire and water, held together by the atmospheric pressure and the effect of gravity. Fire and water combine to make steam, and steam is blue when packed tightly together, which happens whenever it condenses into a solid object under the influence of atmospheric pressure and gravity.

Virtues:

Explains world with things in the world (at least in principle)

Offers some idea how the different elements might combine to product the property being explained.

It seems, unlike some other theories considered so far, possible for us to determine whether it is true or not.

Why? Because we know what many of the elements in this explanation are, and how they behave.

Has universality

Is not obviously circular

Flaws:

Invokes unfamiliar powers of familiar things.

Makes use of concepts (packed steam) which are not yet clear.

7. My shirt is not really blue. It only looks that way because you cannot see it for what it truly is.

Is this an explanation? If it is, it is a strange sort of one. What we were going to explain now turns out to be an infirmity of our capacities for observing shirts.

One weakness: we need to know much more about what is wrong with how shirts appear to us. See #8.

8. My shirt is blue because my eyes react to something in the material in a way that

produces an experience of "blue" in my visual field.

This is very like #7, but here we get some story about how we misperceive the shirt. If it complete the story, this explanation might work.

Virtues:

explains using things in the world

has universality

is Noncircular

Flaws:

Incomplete

9. My shirt is blue because in white, full-spectrum light, it reflects some wavelengths of light, and absorbs others. The wavelengths it reflects are perceived by our eyes as falling within the "blue" range.

Virtues:

Universality, Noncircular, employs only natural elements, simplicity

Flaws:

Incomplete...we need to know more about the relation between wavelengths and the appearance of color properties in our visual field.

10. My shirt's color cannot be explained....it is a basic fact about the world which is beyond our powers to understand.

Like 7 & 8, this is a sort of "meta-explanation"; i.e., it offers a reason for changing the very project with which we began.

Virtues:

Simplicity, universality, Noncircular

Flaws:

Makes the world mysterious in this respect

Incomplete: why can't we explain colors?

How would we determine if this claim is true or not?

Elements of a "good" explanation, Greek style:

1. universality (applies everywhere and everywhen to everything within the "scope" of the explanation...."scope" is a fancy word for "everything you want to explain with your theory").

2. simplicity (Occam's Razor satisfied, no deus ex machina [person or thing that is introduced suddenly and unexpectedly and provides a contrived solution ton an apparently insoluble difficulty])

3. employs only elements found in nature herself (all nonnatural things are made deus ex machina by this requirement)

4. noncircular (doesn't explain X using X)

Behind these criteria lie some hidden assumptions:

A. The world is intelligible ("intelligible" is a fancy word for "can be thought about usefully" ...this assumption, then, says that the reality of things we wish to explain can be apprehended by the thought of some mind).

B. The world is intelligible to us (i.e., our minds can think about it usefully).

C. The things to be explained are regular (i.e., they have a set of systematic, structured properties which remain the same to some extent over time). Put differently: the world, and anything else we expect to successfully explain, is predictable.

D. There is some set of true statements about the world, the contraries of which are false.

E. In respect to these statements it cannot both be the case that X is true and X is false.

In the course of the semester you will see one thinker after another apply each of the criteria in 1 thru 4, and assume one or more of A thru E. However, there will be cases among the presocratics in which only some criteria will be satisfied, or where a given criteria will be exaggerated, taken too far (this will be particularly true of "simplicity"). Keep in mind that the very idea of what constitutes a good explanation was being worked out in the period from the earliest presocratic thinkers to the time of Aristotle, and in some respects continues to be worked on to this day. Do not expect every thinker to reflect each of the theoretical virtues I have outlined, or to share all the assumptions I mentioned. But if you keep your eyes peeled for what each seems to think or assume about what makes a good argument, a good reason, and thereby a good explanation, you will find that the work of these thinkers tends toward a common picture of good explanation, one very close to that which I have outlined today. This will be the case even though they differ vigorously about other things, such as whether naturalism or naturalism+ is the way to go, what is real, whether reality comes in degrees or not, what we humans can possibly know and explain, etc.