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The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

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The Philosopher's Stone

The Newsletter of The Philosophical Debate

Delving Into Discord

Some things to consider. . .

How do we know when we are looking at order? Is there order in [chaos](#)? Are our emotions chaotic? How does one categorize the phenomenon of luck? If order is deterministic, and freedom is a function of choice, does that mean that our only sense of freedom is in chaos? What is the difference between mystery and chaos? Is a chaotic system something that we are simply not yet knowledgeable enough about to understand? Is order artificial?

Intro to Chaos. . .

According to [Hesiod](#), chaos is the first thing that "came into being." The word "chaos" comes from Greek, where it meant abyss, a yawning chasm, or the primal emptiness out of which order (cosmos) was made. Chaos was "a confused and shapeless mass, nothing but dead weight, in which, however, slumbered the seeds of things" (from Prometheus and Pandora in [Bullfinch's Mythology](#)). Or, in [John Milton](#)'s words: "This wild abyss,/ The womb of nature and perhaps her grave" (Paradise Lost, 11 9 1 0- 1).

The second law of Thermodynamics states that "the entropy of the universe tends toward a maximum." Things tend, in other words, to move from a state of order to a state of disorder. (Like my desk.) In science, it is an interdisciplinary field more technically referred to as nonlinear science or dynamical systems.

This theory is used in the attempt to study systems which defy examination by conventional methods. The "butterfly effect," which means that a butterfly flapping its wings on one end of the earth might cause a tornado on the other side, is meant to represent that in a chaotic (complex) system--such as the weather or a waterfall--a small "perturbation" over a given amount of time can make a large difference in the

motion of the overall system. (The interested reader might see *Chaos: Making a New Science* by [James Gleick](#)). In studying deterministic systems, our capacity for prediction rests on our ability to foretell future states of that system, but it is only in isolated cases that we are able to do this.

Deterministic systems are, in general, chaotic systems, which we are unable to adequately predict. Chaos theory provides useful tools in studying these dynamic systems. But philosophically --in terms of [ontology](#) (being) or epistemology (knowledge) --what ramifications does it have?

-t.

(Works consulted: Audi, ed., The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy, 1995; Brennan, ed., The Dictionary of Scientific Literacy, 1992; Bulfinch's Mythology, 1974 (IOth ed.); Shipley, ed., Dictionary of Word Origins, 1959)

Highlights from the last meeting. . .

We began by defining chaos as "unpredictability," after the notion of complete disorder from the Medieval period. It was noted, however, that the numbers, graphs, and predictions of chaos theory provide a sense of order over time. We distinguished between mathematical and philosophical chaos. Mathematically, for example, in order to accurately predict the weather over long ranges of time, we would need to be able to account for all possible conditions which might affect it. Epistemologically, we cannot have all the data, so there is no way for us to even test whether we could make accurate predictions if we did have all possible information available to us. Also, there are patterns in randomness that we experience.

Is there a necessary connexion between random incidents and chaos? Take, for example, the phenomenon of luck. If someone makes ten successful shots in a row with a basketball, we may say that he is on a "hot streak." But is this streak really random when the larger picture is taken into account? Over the span of his life he has made a certain number of shots; could it not be statistically predicted that at some point he may make ten shots in a row?

In the Judea-Christian sense, God made creation out of nothing, and chaos was always underneath Nature trying to emerge. The Hebrews had a sense of an aggressive chaotic nothingness that was always trying to break up creation.

If chaos theory seeks to determine order in discord, how is the affirmation of seeking this order in chaos different from the start of scientific endeavors?

[David Hume](#) questioned our connexions between causes and effects. He placed causal relations into the realm of probability, rather than the realm of certainty because of the problematic nature of determining at what point quantity becomes a quality. I.E., how many times must a given event occur before its occurrence becomes a part of certain knowledge?

Also, if order is based on repeated events, we can have no sense of order as applied to an isolated or particular event. If there is no order in the particular event, how can we assert order from a given sequence of chaotic events?

The myth of causality denies the role of [Eris, the Greek goddess of discord and strife](#). She was the one who threw the "apple of discord" which eventually led to the [Trojan War](#). And what exactly is lost? The role of spontaneity in our lives; the sense of the unpredictable. We would usually assert order as a value, but would you want to live in a completely ordered and neatly predictable system? Would such a system be human?

Reason is a powerful tool, but it cannot get us to Truth without some illumination. Do we call it inspiration? The rational process requires some insight to make sense of itself. Reason seems to be unable to get us there alone; it needs some help. Is chaos as good a word as any to name that "something"?

We also distinguished between two types of order; that which is socially superimposed and that which is naturally occurring. Natural order is more easily predicted; the social order tends to break down.

[Immanuel Kant](#) said that we superimpose our ideas of order on the world. He also said that what gives an act moral value is that it is performed for its own sake, and not for some Telos, or goal, that we have in mind. This goes along with the assertion that the planner's dream is impossible; we cannot accurately predict consequences.

How do we account for freedom in an ordered world? Is freedom internal or external? Can an individual choose not to be determined? We cannot choose to ignore gravity, so is our freedom limited to the order that we have superimposed and hence we are completely determined only by natural order? Is there another option?

[Hegel's](#) notion of identity in difference gives us another perspective on dynamic systems. His depiction of progress is nonlinear; movement from one stage to another is not simply a logical progression, but rather a dialectical growth.

What is the difference between chaos and mystery? Mystery seems to be more spiritual, where chaos is more neutral. But are they talking about the same thing? Things that we had not previously found order in, through science, we have been able to explain. Does science swallow our mystery and chaos as it finds order?

What is the goal of chaos theory? A theory is designed to explain something. If it is trying to explain chaos, then does the goal of the theory undermine itself? Heidegger says that science looks at those things that it can understand and doesn't take into account the things that it cannot explain.

In terms of the social aspects of chaos, what are Grabbe (*In Praise of Chaos*) and Lemieux (*Chaos, Complexity, and anarchy*) criticizing? They seem to advocate breaking down the superimposed order to allow for the natural order. It is also possibly implied that order and disorder coexist together, and one or the other will be taken as primary. Grabbe says that "Existence is pure joy."

Joy in [Nietzsche](#)'s sense is something more than a momentary feeling--or even more than the feeling of joy itself. A person may succumb to physical suffering in order to achieve a momentary self-transcendence. For example, consider an athlete preparing for competition, or a student preparing for an exam.

What would joy mean if we surrendered to chaos? Do we really want to obliterate the distinction between the Dionysian and the Apollonian? If we submit to chaos, how will we know if there really is order?

We also distinguished between lightweight chaos, which allows for some order, and heavyweight chaos, which defies all order. Could science acknowledge the existence of utter chaos? Will chaos theory help to clarify ambiguities in particle physics? New models are perpetually popping up; when particles are not good enough, we begin to posit the existence of quarks, etc. This is a good example of an "anti-razor" in action (when the theory does not work, simply posit more extensions to it to explain the ambiguities). 'Sorry, [Occam](#).

Having Trouble coming up with a topic for the **ESSAY CONTEST**??
Why not look through our previous issues of *The Philosopher's Stone* for ideas?

The deadline is March 27th!

Guidelines:

- *Essays must focus on a philosopher or some philosophical topic
- *Essays must be a minimum of 1,000 words and include your name and phone number.
- *Awards will be given for first, second, and third place winners.

Drop off your submissions in "The Thought Box" located in the Writing Center, Gamble Hall.

Next Meeting

Wednesday, March 5th

8:30pm

Gamble Hall, Room 106

Our Topic: Contemplating Leisure; How long can a person do nothing? If one isn't doing nothing with one's leisure time, what is it for? What is the relation between leisure and work? Do we really want to not work?