

was used to standardise everything, regardless of context and accuracy. This book would have undoubtedly benefited in more than one way from an academic editor, which OUP could surely have provided.

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WAYS OF STUDYING PRACTICAL REASON

OB ER (J.) *The Greeks and the Rational. The Discovery of Practical Reason.* (Sather Classical Lectures 76.) Pp. xxvi + 434, figs. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. Cased, £30, US\$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-520-38016-5.

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O. states that his book is ‘based’ (p. xv) on E.R. Dodds’s 1951 work, *The Greeks and the Irrational*. As Dodds surveyed irrational aspects of Greek culture such as ‘magic, superstition, shamanism, and ecstatic experience in religious ritual’ (p. xv), so O. aims to do the same for ‘practical reason’, which he argues the ‘Greeks discovered’ (p. xiii). He begins with what he calls the ‘folk theory of practical reasoning’ (p. 9), an ‘internally coherent set of assumptions about motivation and action’ (p. 21) that was operative in Greek culture even before it was articulated in theoretical terms by philosophers. He then offers extended discussions of Plato – each of his chapters is framed by a passage from the *Republic* –, Herodotus (in Chapters 1 and 3), Thucydides (Chapter 5) and Aeschylus (Chapter 8). Strikingly, there is comparatively little discussion of Aristotle, despite the fact that the most extended discussion of ‘practical reason’ (*phronēsis*) in classical Greek literature is found in *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.

The Greeks and the Rational is a Cyclopean work. It is massive and singularly focused. O. never takes his eye off his primary goal: to demonstrate ‘that Greek thinkers and lawmakers anticipated the central assumptions about *desire*, *belief*, and *expectation* that underpin contemporary choice theory’ (p. 4). Foremost among these assumptions is that of the self-interested agent who deliberates rationally and calculates what is to their advantage. Beginning with the story of Gyges (as told by both Herodotus and Plato) and concluding with Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, O. analyses a series of such deliberations that he extracts from the several Greek texts he surveys. To do so, he employs both ‘the “tree form” used in contemporary decision theory’ (p. 61) as well as the ‘Four-Box Normal Form’ used to represent a strategic game ‘in which each player (an ideal-type rational agent ...) chooses her move in light of the move she believes will be made by the other’ (p. 87). Two representative titles of his chapter sections are ‘Gyges’ Ring Decision Tree’ (p. 61) and ‘Deioces and the Medes: an Ultimatum Game’ (p. 140). The book contains 26 figures and 5 tables, whose titles include ‘Polybian Tit for Tat’ (p. 161), ‘Elder Guardians’ Decision Tree’ (p. 214) and ‘Furies, Athena, and Citizens Games’ (p. 357).

The volume is stunningly ambitious. O. claims that not only will his book ‘discuss how ancient reflections on cooperation problems bear on our contemporary situation’ (p. xix), it will also ‘provide methodological resources for contemporary political and ethical

theorists' (p. 2) as well as 'offer humanists new insight into ancient texts ... while showing social scientists how much the study of classical literature, history and philosophy has to offer' (p. xix). He expresses the hope that the book will inaugurate 'a field of inquiry that might productively be worked in common by historians, philosophers, literary scholars and by the theoretical and empirical social scientists' (p. xix). Presumably the scholars who heed this call would be united in their belief in the intellectual fecundity of decision and game theory.

A salient feature of the book is revealed in a comment that O. makes about Dodds: 'Dodds' breakthrough was to resituate work on the irrational in *respectable*, contemporary social science' (p. xvi, emphasis mine). This sentence speaks to O.'s own project; for formalised game theory, accompanied by decision trees and two-by-two matrices, is indeed highly regarded in our hypertechnical times. But the presupposition underlying the entirety of book must be challenged. What is truly gained by bringing ancient texts up to date by making them more 'respectable', i.e. more technical?

Consider the following example: what O. calls the 'Persian Constitutional Debate' (p. 146). As reported by Herodotus (3.80–3), this took place between seven Persians who, after having deposed their Median rulers, debated what sort of regime they would institute. Otanes argued on behalf of democracy, Megabyzos favoured oligarchy, and Darius defended monarchy. Herodotus states that 'four of the seven men decided in favor of [monarchy]' (3.83). O. suggests that this vote may have been manipulated by Darius, the man who was eventually selected to be the King. Herodotus makes no mention of this, but O.'s suggestion is not implausible. As he notes, Herodotus depicts Darius as 'both strategic and manipulative' (p. 153). Nonetheless, it is not clear, at least to this reader, how O.'s analysis (pp. 149–52) illuminates this fascinating passage. He presents two tables that display the possible 'distribution of preferences' (p. 151) that could have been registered had the seven men ranked each of the three options (with three being assigned to their first choice, one to their third). O. shows that this sort of procedure can result in different outcomes depending on the sequence in which the votes are taken. It is possible, therefore, that Darius exploited this feature of rank ordered voting to his advantage. As O. puts it, 'Herodotus invites the attentive reader to think about how the final vote count *might* have been arrived at ... and how it *might* have been manipulated by Darius' (p. 153). This may be true, but only for readers who, like O., are interested in contemporary, logical analyses of voting procedures.

Contrast O.'s four pages of statistical analysis and three tables illustrating the 'Persian Constitutional Debate' with a single remark he makes about it. This passage, he says, 'challenges Herodotus' Greek readers' assumptions about the inevitability of Asian monarchy, about the complete absence of freedom in the Persian regime' (p. 155). This is a potentially rich observation, well deserving of elaboration, and it is one made with no statistics whatsoever.

It may be helpful here to recall a remark Socrates makes in Plato's *Apology*. In order to disprove the Delphic oracle's pronouncement that no one was 'wiser than I' (21a), Socrates examined those Athenians who were both reputed and thought themselves to be wise. First he interrogated 'the politicians' (21c) and then the 'poets' (22a), only to discover that neither group had members who were actually wise. His third foray was with the 'technical men' (*cheirotechnas*). Here he found that because 'they actually did know things that I did not they were wiser than I to this extent'. Still, they too fell short. 'Because they practised their *technê* so well each believed that he was very wise when it comes to the greatest matters (*ta megista*), and this folly (*plêmmeleia*) of theirs obscured what wisdom they had' (22c–d). (By 'the greatest matters' Socrates most likely is referring to human excellence and self-knowledge.) In other words, precisely because those who possess a

technê do know something impressive (and often measurable), they convince themselves that they know more than they really do. Given the magnitude of the claims that O. makes for his book, the result reminds us of the wisdom of Socrates' assessment.

To close with a passage from Aristotle, the greatest theoretician of practical reason of them all: in *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3 he states that 'the same level of precision (*to akribes*) should not be sought in all rational accounts (*logois*)' (1094b12–3). Instead, 'it is characteristic of an educated person to seek precision in each genus to the extent that the nature of the subject being studied (*hê tou pragmatos phusis*) allows' (109b23–5). While it is entirely appropriate to expect clear and decisive proofs – or decision trees and two-by-two matrices – from 'a mathematician' (1094b26), it would be inappropriate to make such a demand in 'the study of politics' (*politikê*) whose subject matter is 'the fine (*kala*) and just things' (1094b14). Perhaps it is because Aristotle holds this view that O. devotes so few of his many pages to him.

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THE FIGURE OF THALES

ROSSETTI (L.) *Thales the Measurer*. Pp. xii + 214, figs. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. Cased, £120, US\$160. ISBN: 978-0-367-68709-0.

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Bemoaning the oversimplification of Thales' legacy in contemporary scholarship (and Aristotle's enduringly long shadow: Aristotle was simply not interested in the quantitative research that is Thales' hallmark), R. aims to interrogate what the Milesian thinker accomplished, what he thought and what he wrote. In other words, R.'s goal is to restore the sum of Thales' research from 'impoverished oblivion' and to infuse the thinker afresh with a personality as a self-disciplined, methodical, rigorous researcher who identified intellectual objectives, found effective ways to circumvent obstacles, worked out how to acquire relevant information, and who correctly made pertinent inferences from the data by means of objective, repeatable practices. Thales' legacy is all the more impressive because he lacked models and intellectual predecessors. Thales was often the first (and occasionally the only) thinker to investigate key questions. R. also seeks to disambiguate apocryphal traditions (including the anecdote about Thales and the olive presses of Chios: DK A10) from credible, persuasive evidence and to establish a tentative corpus of authentic fragments. Throughout, R. provides close readings of the primary evidence, casting the net more broadly than the 54 *testimonia* included in Diels–Kranz, and taking into consideration G. Wöhrlé's (*Die Milesier: Thales* [2009]) significant collection of 500 *testimonia* (from 120 authors).

The book falls into five parts, each with three to five short, focused chapters. In Part 1, 'Approaching Thales', R. surveys Thales' intellectual, social and cultural environment. Noteworthy are Miletus' strategic position as a centre of commercial and colonial activity on the western coast of Turkey, ensuring resources and networks as well as the development of coin money (with stamps of *polis* names), and a simple, fully alphabetic