

Dodds

## **The Greeks and the Irrational** (1951)

Dodds, E. R., and NetLibrary Inc. "The Greeks and the Irrational." In *Sather classical lectures v. 25*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951.

Chapters 1, 2, 7, 8

The aim of the book is to investigate the religious beliefs of ancient Greeks. Dodds looks first to Homer for clues in the ancient language and reveals that certain meanings are far less volatile and wicked and really take on more of a supernatural presence. He examines the psychology behind the use of the language.

### **Chapter 1: Agamemnon's Apology**

**Psychic Intervention:** Dodds looks at the words ATE (A state of mind), MOIRA (destiny) and ERINYS (dispensers of Ate, carry out the moira). The will of the gods:

Agamemnon pleads his case when he is found robbing Achilles of his mistress: "Not I," he declared afterwards, "not I was the cause of this act, but Zeus and my portion and the Erinys who walks in darkness: they it was who in the assembly put wild ate in my understanding, on that day when I arbitrarily took Achilles' prize from him. So what could I do? Deity will always have its way."

Homeric man's belief in psychic intervention is connected to 2 peculiarities:

- 1) Homeric man has no unified concept of soul or personality. Homer has no word for soul or life-soul
- 2) Homer explains character in terms of knowledge. "Achilles knows wild things, like a lion."

If character is knowledge, then what is not knowledge is not part of the character, but comes to us from the outside. Non rational impulses are ascribed to an alien origin.

Homeric man belongs to a "shame culture"; Anything that exposes man to contempt or ridicule of his fellow is felt as unbearable.

### **Chapter 2: From Shame Culture to Guilt Culture**

#### **Divine Hostility**

As time moves on, beliefs don't change, but reaction does. We find increased emotional reaction to uncontrolled forces. There is a deeper awareness of insecurity and helplessness. There is accent on futility of human purpose.

This correlates to emergence of divine hostility. Not evil, but an overpowering wisdom that forever holds man down and keeps him from rising above his station.

“Insight does not belong to man. We live like beasts, always at the mercy of what the day may bring.” Semonides

### **Three Types of Daemons:**

#### **(1) Agents of Justice**

There is now a tendency to think of the supernatural daemons as an agent of justice. Ate is still a state of irrational behavior caused by mostly unidentified demons or gods, but now it is moralized, used as punishment; seen as divine anger. The daemons draw closer and and more persistent, sinister and insidious.

Homeric man feels that these things are not truly part of the self since they are not within man’s control - they have a life and energy of their own. This is how they interpreted passions as well.

#### **(2) Daemons projected by a particular human situation**

Powerful forces in whose grip mankind is especially helpless: cholera, famine, smallpox and plague were all marked as having been created by evil spirits.

Hereditary pollution begins to take shape: the idea that one generation’s sins are carried to the next if the debt is not paid in the person’s lifetime.

#### **(3) Demons attached to a particular individual**

Daemons attached to someone, usually at birth, and determines his destiny. One daemon seems to carry more weight than one’s individual character. Zeus is seen as a god who directs the daemons.

Plato later completely transforms Zeus, giving him the role of the lofty spirit guide in the *Timeus* who is identified with pure reason. Plato made him morally and philosophically respectable.

### **SERIOUS CULTURE CHANGES:**

Between Homer and Sophocles (400 years) there grew an undeniable anxiety and dread. The Archaic Age recast the tales of Oedipus and Orestes as horror stories.

### **Chapter 7: Plato, the Irrational Soul and the Inherited Conglomerate**

How did Plato see non-rational factors in human behavior? All questions were settled by *Reason*.

While Plato wrote in the 4th c. B.C., his personality was moulded during the 5th c.

Plato visited the Pythagoreans of western Greece and effectively cross-pollinated Greek Rationalism with Magico-Religious cult ideas of their Shamanistic culture. Plato transported these ideas of revelation onto the plane of rational argument. They attributed all sins and suffering of the psyche to the pollution arising from contact with a mortal body.

Plato had 2 tendencies at work in his viewpoint concerning the status of man:

- (1) He had faith and pride in human reason, which he inherited from his 5th c upbringing
- (2) He developed a bitter recognition of worthlessness forced upon him by his experience of contemporary Athens.

380 B.C. Republic: Internal dialog between the two parts of the soul emerges. The passions are no longer seen as an infection of extraneous origin, but as *part of man*; a necessary part of the life of the mind. It even becomes a source of energy which can be channeled toward sensuous or intellectual activity.

360 B.C. Phaedo: "Only when by death or by self discipline the rational self is purged of the folly of the body can it resume its true nature, which is divine and sinless: the good life is the practice of that purgation." p. 212.

360 B.C. Timeus: Trying to reformulate his earlier vision of the unitary soul in the Phaedo, but this time calls it a daemon. It has another kind of soul built into it: the mortal kind where passions and sins reside. Plato fuses empirical man into daemon and beast.

Laws: Plato sets forth his idea of the Conglomerate: He calls for a closed society where people abide by laws (including magical forces and rituals) that are as unchangeable and inevitable as the laws of nature and the rising sun. In a closed society, the collective is emphasized and the individual would not ever be aware of making a conscious choice because everything would already be determined for him by the priests and political officials.

His conglomerate did *not* include:

- (1) Divine Justice - Plato ignores belief in a jealous God
- (2) The Inherited Guilt - Plato believed in the Law of Spiritual Gravitation: Souls gravitate naturally to the company of its own kind - the wrongdoer suffers in person, in his own time.

Plato did not attach any value to the magic laws himself, but considered them the price he had to pay to keep superstitions within bounds. He was trying to save society from

contamination of dangerous thoughts which he believed to be destroying the springs of social conduct.

His idea of a closed society based on rationalism did not come to pass.

### **Chapter 8: The Fear of Freedom**

From around 335 B.C. to 200 B.C., Rationalism was on the verge of final triumph; the city, society, passions stood exposed to rational criticism. The first attempts to organize scientific research in many fields emerged.

For the first time in Greek history, ancestry didn't matter. There was new freedom of movement in space and in the mind. Greeks were free to *use* their tradition, without being used *by* it.

Greek pride in human reason escalated and man's intellect was not merely akin to god, it was god. The mind was a portion of the divine substance in its pure and active state.

Aristotle: "We don't have to subject ourselves to think only in mortal terms, for as long as we can live on an intellectual level, we are not mortal." (p. 238).

Aristotle knew that no man could sustain a life of pure reason for more than a very brief period. He and his students appreciated *the need to study the irrational factors in behavior if we are to reach a realistic understanding of human nature.*

His ideas of the irrational only carried through the first generation of his students. The natural sciences (study of the universe and natural laws) detached themselves from Philosophy in the early 3rd c. B.C. Psychology was left in the hands of the philosophers.

Hellenistic Period cared almost exclusively about the rational study of the ideal man.

To attain moral perfection, it depended solely on reason. There was no irrational soul to contend with. The passions were merely errors of judgement: correct the error and the disturbance would cease; leaving the mind passionless, pitiless and perfect.

This fantastical philosophy maintained for 200 years because it was thought necessary to maintain a moral system.

**Rational Religion:** no longer an act of the cult, but silent contemplation of the divine. Deity is no longer an arbitrary power, but is the embodiment of the rational ideal. (Plato was key to this transformation of the deity)

**The Stoic Religion (Zeno):** a direct inheritance from the *Timeus* and *Laws* - like Plato, they were anxious to totally break free from the cult. Zeno tried to keep the old forms of magical worship, but to fill them with new meaning and purified content.

**Decline of Religion:** Public and civic religion had become a social routine. Progressive decay of tradition set the religious man free to choose his own gods, like the poet chooses his own style. With individual solitariness, people began to form their own small religious clubs devoted to the worship of individual gods - old and new,

The gods have left, but their rituals live on; and no one except a few intellectuals notice that they ceased to mean anything. The Inherited Conglomerate did not parish by disintegration: large portions of it were left standing; a lovable facade, until the Christians came along one day and pushed it over, only to realize there was virtually nothing left behind it. This began a long, drawn out decline of Rationalism. (p. 244.)

## **The Return of the Irrational**

1st c. B.C.

The gap between the intellectuals and the people was still wide, but rapid changes in social stratification and educational opportunities created more chances for interaction between the two.

Anti-rationalism: Pseudo-scientific literature appears, claiming to be based on divine revelation, including ancient superstitions - but wrapped with trapping of ancient Greek philosophy. This new idea won over a large part of the educated class.

The Irrational Emerges again: When the tide of Rationalism began to retreat, the philosophical schools took a new direction.

They now conceived the cosmos as accessible. Combining prayer, magic, alchemy and astrology, Bolus described each planet as having it's own earthly representative in the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms. One could access the intangible cosmos first hand by manipulating these earthly counterparts.

Religion reasserts itself, not based on logic, but based on authority. Ideas from Pythagorus, combined with remnants of Plato and Bolus places the physical world under the influence of evil powers - the soul should not unify with the world, but needs to *escape from it*. Thoughts were preoccupied with techniques for salvation and philosophers presented themselves as dealers in salvation.

## **Dodds' Theory: The Fear of Freedom**

By the 3rd c B.C., the Greek were very close to an open society with the rise of Rationalism. A completely open society would be where all behavior is determined by a rational individual choice between alternatives, all conscious and deliberate. Then the retreat began.

The Rationalists retreated in an unconscious flight from the heavy burden of individual choice which an open society lays upon its members; the refusal of responsibility deepened with an increasing anxiety.

## **Hope**

Even the creators of Rationalism were never mere rationalists. They were deeply and imaginatively aware of the power, the wonder and the peril of the irrational.

They could only describe the irrational by means of symbolic language; they had no instrument for understanding it, even less for controlling it.

Dodds believes that the irrational elements of human behavior tell us much about our thinking, and that today, while we are in a similar age of rationalism, marked by scientific advances beyond, we are beginning to acquire the instruments necessary to approach understanding of the irrational, therefore coming closer to understanding ourselves better.

We have also seen, in the last 40 years, the unmistakable symptoms of a recoil. He waits to see if our society will make the decisive leap toward the intangible or hesitate, as the Greeks did.