

Review of Josiah Ober's *The Greeks and the Rational: The Discovery of Practical Reason*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022, xxv + 425 pp.

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With the provocative title *The Greeks and the Rational: The Discovery of Practical Reason*, Ober chooses two fundamental works as his reference point: E.R. Dodds' *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951) and Bruno Snell's *Die Entdeckung des Geistes* (1946). Whereas Dodds famously argued against Greece presenting a 'triumph of rationalism' by pointing out pre-modern attitudes and modes of thinking, Bruno Snell asserted that the Ancient Greeks in Homeric times lacked a conception of the self and later gradually discovered introspection and a theory of mind. Following the line of his earlier books, Ober argues the exact opposite: the Ancient Greeks did not only behave rationally but also had a discourse about various aspects of rationality. The general claim of Ober's book is that a so-called 'Folk Theory' of instrumental rationality emerged in the Greek world in the first half of the fifth century BCE. Although this Folk Theory does not resemble the form of modern rational choice theory, it made similar assumptions, such as that people employ their cognitive capacities to form ordered preferences and consistently act to obtain the best possible outcome. Ober (6) illustrates this by quoting Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 3.9.4: "that all persons deliberately choose, out of what is available to them, what they think is most advantageous to themselves, and they do this".

This theory of instrumental rationality was first propagated by the Sophists and, through their education, their ideas permeated Greek public discourse, leading to numerous reflections in the late-fifth and early-fourth-century Greek philosophical and historical texts. When this popular theory was brought into practice in ancient Athens, it led to a process of institution formation (chapter 4) that enabled the Athenian democracy (chapter 6) to become a rational and, therefore, dominating force in contemporary international politics (chapter 5). Moreover, when practiced by individuals, it led to remarkably high (for premodern standards) economic growth (Chapter 7; see also Ober 2015).

While the successes of their conceptualization of the Greek individual as "unerring craftsmen of self-interest" (Plato, *Republic* 340e–341a; *Greeks and the Rational*, 46–47) are visible in retrospect, instrumental rationality was, as Ober shows, always met with suspicion in the Classical Era. As Ober shows in the first three chapters, authors such as Plato and Herodotus feared that pursuing self-interest, although considered a foundational force in the birth of political communities, would become detrimental to society. In Chapter 1, Ober describes how, according to a 'Thrasymachean' variant of the folk theory, the strong by nature (*phusis*), who are subjugated by the weak through convention (*nomos*), would become criminals and tyrants if their restraints were lifted. In chapter 2, Ober shows how even according to the 'conventionalist' variant of folk theory, in which individuals are willing to form communities for protection, the fear of Thrasymachean defectors is a challenge that needs to be overcome. In Chapter 3, Ober shows how 'constitutional moments' (such as successful coups and revolts) that demand a proper democracy—the constitution that will best serve the people's interests—can be hijacked by aspiring autocrats. These concerns led Plato to develop what Ober calls a theory of "ethical rationality" (135), which combines the strength of means-to-end reasoning with the postulation that the ends of reason must also be objectively reasonable (chapter 6).

As Ober concludes in chapter 8, by reinterpreting Aeschylus' tragedy *Eumenides*, the fifth-century BCE Greeks first formulated a theory of practical reason. For the fourth century BCE Socratic philosophers Plato, Xenophon, and Aristotle, the rediscovery and ethical refinement of this theory was a central effort, which ultimately led to Aristotle's claim in the *Eudemian Ethics* and *Nicomachean Ethics* that for a man and a state to achieve happiness (*eudaimonia*), instrumental means-to-end reasoning must be combined with a virtuous choice of ends. In the line that Ober draws through Western philosophy, this idea of eudaimonistic ethical egoism was dominant until the 18th century, when it was challenged by Kant's deontology (egoism is not ethical) and, to a lesser extent, utilitarianism (prudent egoism does not need to be unethical). However, according to Ober, the Socratic ideal was revived by John Rawls, who emphasizes that the ideal moral agent should both be (means-to-end) rational and reasonable in his choice of ends. Ober concludes, in opposition to several of Rawls' many critics, that this Socratic ideal can inspire a new approach combining positive and normative approaches to political theory and thereby overcome the limitations of rational choice theory and the hazard

that normative considerations are crowded out by instrumental reasoning (following Amadae 2016).

In his book, Ober takes his readers on a tour de force through history and philosophy, departing from Ancient Greek ideas about the role that self-interest plays at the very origins of society and showing how the Ancient Greek analysis of the problem of “vicious egoism” can be still relevant today (392). The journey is layered, rich, and generally well-anchored in multiple debates, as the carefully composed introduction clarifies. While Ober’s argument makes existing lines of research on rationality in ancient Greece more robust, it adds much by taking the Greeks’ discourse (rather than their behavior) as the central unit of analysis. Throughout his argument, Ober shows that he is an attentive reader, a sharp analyst, and a rigorous reasoner who makes this book a true conversation partner for social scientists.

While reading and discussing the book with fellow classics scholars interested in Ancient Greek economic performance and theory, I noticed that Ober’s argument is complex, and the book’s premise is too quickly criticized and not considered carefully. It, therefore, seems a good starting point to defend the book from some clear misconceptions. Ober’s claim is not that the Greeks were rational *per se* (no more or less rational than we are, with well-known cognitive biases and limitations); that they were the first to be rational (they were not); that they were the first to discover rationality (they were not); that they only became rational after discovering it (Ober compares it to “Molière’s disingenuous M. Jourdain, who, under the tutelage of a ‘master of philosophy’, discovered to his amazement that he had been speaking prose for his entire life” (1)); or that they had the first discourse about rationality (they did not: Ober relativizes the uniqueness of Greek discourse and suggests that, e.g., Indian and Chinese discourses could as well be examined (3–4)).

Another potential point of criticism, which Ober addresses himself, is his use of game theory to explain how some narratives or situations are rational. This approach is relatively new in the humanities (38–40). Among others, Ober (2015) has pioneered its application to Classical Studies, which has the potential to produce more promising work in the future (cf., Węcowski 2022). While Ober himself concedes that this method, including his focus on the language of choice and reasoning, is reductive because it leaves many contexts out of consideration (15), I think Ober’s careful and insightful application of game theory shows this

approach can be rather revealing of elements we would otherwise have missed.

For example, in chapter 3, Ober analyses the voting passage in the so-called ‘Constitutional Debate’ (Herodotus, *Histories* 3.80–82), in which seven victorious putschists decide between three constitutions (democracy, oligarchy, monarchy) for the Persian empire. Ober demonstrates that if such a decision with this setup had been made through multiple rounds of voting, Darius, the later Persian King who had pleaded for monarchy during the debate, is likely to have profited from a weakness in the voting procedure by changing his vote in between the rounds, thus manipulating the result to his advantage. Herodotus, as Ober innovatively argues, may have used this story to show that the decision-making mechanisms of democracy can be fickle and will not always produce a rational result that fairly aggregates the voters’ preferences.

Another misconception that one could have about this book is that it promotes rational choice theory, which has become the object of criticism for promoting an inaccurate and harmful image of human nature (Bowles 2016; Urbina and Ruiz-Valverde 2018). Although Ober only mentions some criticisms of rational choice theory at the end of his book, it becomes clear that he sees it as a model and means of theorizing that is at times a fallible predictor of an opponent’s action. In chapter 5, Ober describes how Thucydides theorizes that Pericles’ foresight and his ability to take risks upon accurate calculation make the Athenian empire thrive at the offset of the Peloponnesian war. Whereas Athens may continue to function as a rational agent after Pericles’ demise if it has prudent leaders (and good institutions), city-states such as the much weaker Melos may act irrationally and revolt against the Athenian might because of the prospect of being free (Kahneman and Tversky 1979), leading to their annihilation.

Chapter 7, on which I now would like to focus, plays an essential role in Ober’s effort to show what rational choice theory leaves out if it is divorced from practical reason. Whereas a considerable part of scholarship in this field collects evidence for rational, maximizing economic behavior in order to refute Finley’s (1973) idea that the Greek status-focused mentality prevented them from economic thinking (cf., Leese 2021), Ober departs from this line of reasoning by showing that ancient ‘entrepreneurs’, such as Cephalus in the *Republic*, do not act as ideal types of economic rationality (297) (contrary to his brief treatment of economic rationality in Aristotle and Xenophon later on). Using game theory, Ober

demonstrates how, in the *Iliad*, the greedy leader Agamemnon is a “clueless” game player and how he worsens the epic’s central conflict by switching between his unranked preferences (314ff.). Arguing against Snellian explanations, Ober shows that Agamemnon serves as a foil, undermining the ideal of the leader as a rational and reasonable decision-maker (since Achilles characterizes Agamemnon as someone “that does not at all know to look both backward and forwards in time” (*Iliad*, 1.343–344; (310)). Ober connects this point to Socrates’ conversation with Cephalus and Polemarchus about the importance of being equitable (*epieikeia*) in the *Republic*, a virtue that, in economic reality, enabled instrumentally rational people from different social classes (including the enslaved) to engage in commercial exchange with each other.

This chapter shows the strengths and limitations of Ober’s approach. First, Ober innovatively refutes Finley’s line of argumentation by demonstrating that the Greeks were capable of instrumental rationality and possessed economic mentality. However, he then shows, based on the normative philosophical discourse, on which also Finley had based his argument, that successful commercial practice (in theory) requires both instrumental and value-driven reasoning. Second, Ober’s focus on discourse rather than performance balances the widely used New Institutional Economics (NIE) approach. However, his (insightful yet indeed reductive) reconstruction of a single discourse on rationality leaves little room for appreciating discursive pluralism (380), whereas Xenophon’s oeuvre and works belonging to the genre of *oikonomia* literature could have formed promising opportunities to do so (Helmer 2021; Hinsch 2021). Furthermore, Ober’s re-evaluation of practical reason could have been supported by delving into ‘thicker’ notions of rationality. Fruitful concepts to work with could have been *aspiration* (Cephalus’ aspiration to bequeath more than he had inherited himself both informs and limits his instrumental reasoning—see Wincewicz 2018) or *ecological rationality* (Agamemnon’s failure at strategic rationality shows the value of correct intuitive decision making—see Todd and Gigerenzer 2012). Most importantly, however, while Ober provides evidence for the discourse on rationality and the astonishing economic performance of ancient Greece, the precise connection between the two often remains tentative. Hopefully, this relationship will be developed in future research.

Apart from hopefully becoming a landmark publication and a source of inspiration for many classics scholars, ancient historians, philosophers, and other humanities scholars, this book promises to be an

intriguing read for any political or social scientist working on game theory and rationality in theory and performance. For such scholars, this perhaps unexpected engagement with the Classics can be surprisingly stimulating and insightful. As Ober states: "Reading classical texts with and against formal theory alerts us both to the dangers of rationality divorced from ethics and to the unworldliness of politics without strategic rationality" (392).

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