

The Greeks and the Irrational

Short title: Greek Irrationality

Fall 2020, Thursdays 9th period 4:05 - 4:55 On-line live Zoom

Instructor:

Name: Roger L. Papke, B.A, M.S., Ph.D.

Office: Academic Research Building R5-295

Hours: By appointment

Course description

The Book:

The Greeks and the Irrational (E. R. Dodds, 1951 University of California Press) is based on a series of lectures given by Professor Dodds at Berkeley. It has become a landmark work for advancing popular understanding of a truly formative period in the development of Western culture, as the Greeks transitioned out of their own Dark Ages into the Classical Period, which is exemplified by writers of the great tragedies and the rise of the Athenian schools of philosophy. Dodds' analyses begin with a discussion of the heroes of Homer and how their behavior was shaped by guiding principles of an archaic shame culture. With the development of the democratic city-states, these principles, although traditionally respected, no were longer satisfying, so people sought out new ways to adapt to their changing world. This led to the development of the so-called "mystery religions", the worship of Dionysus, and the pursuit of ecstasy. In response to their changing culture, the tragedians presented new guide posts for behavior, initially rigid and fatalistic, but ultimately introspective and almost modern. In many ways, these changes primed the world for the cultural changes that followed from Plato and Aristotle and ultimately nurtured the growth of Christianity.

Assignments: In the introductory meeting the instructor will provide a background presentation and an initial set of discussion questions focused on the first chapter of the book. This syllabus provides the additional discussion questions based on the major topics of the book and short supplemental readings as appropriate, excerpted from translations of the sources that Dodds drew upon, such as Homer, Plato, and the Greek tragedies. These are all now in the public domain and can be freely downloaded.

Preliminary list of topics (based largely on the book chapters):

Agamemnon's Apology: The behavior of Greek kings in the time of Homer

From Shame-Culture to Guilt-Culture

The Ajax of Sophocles

The Blessings of Madness

The Bacchae of Euripedes

Maenadism

Dream-Pattern and Culture-Pattern

The Greek Shamans and the Origin of Puritanism

Theurgy: the operation or effect of a supernatural or divine agency in human affairs.

Rationalism and Reaction in the Classical Age

Plato, the Irrational Soul, and the Inherited Conglomerate

The Fear of Freedom

Student responsibilities:

Students will be expected to remain current with the reading assignments and be prepared to discuss the previously assigned questions.

Each week the students are requested to provide two images of Classical art (or current events) that illustrate the week's discussion topics. You should email these to the instructor in advance so that he can choose some to show during the class session. During the weekly classes, students whose images are selected will explain how they relate to the current discussion topics.

Each week one student will be the designated discussion leader and present the discussion questions to the class along with their ideas to get the discussions started.

Students will select a topic and prepare a five-page essay covering the topic in depth. A list of suggested topics related to the weekly assignments and associated materials will be provided by the instructor. Students may suggest alternative topics, subject to the instructor's approval.

Grades will be based on student participation in class (25%), preparedness for discussions (25%), illustrative images (20%), and the written essay (30%).

Note: Course materials, including a pdf of the text as well as other reading assignments, will be available for download at this site:

<http://papke.med.ufl.edu/brian/Dodds/>

Instructor's Biography:

The instructor is a Professor of Pharmacology and Neuroscience in the College of Medicine. He has Ph.D. in Neurobiology and Behavior from Cornell University. He also has a B.A. in Classical Civilization from New York University and prepared his own undergraduate honors thesis on a topic inspired by Dodds. He has written two books on the history of human artifacts and is presently writing a book on the history of the Greco-Roman cultures as told by their coins. He is an avid motorcyclist.

August 31 - December 9

Thursdays 9th period 4:05 - 4:55

September 3

Introduction: Papke

September 10

Agamemnon's Apology: The behavior of Greek kings in the time of Homer

What is Agamemnon apologizing for? Why did he think he needed to apologize?

Does he "apologize" or merely explain his own helplessness?

Does the concept that humans are helpless to control their fate persist today?

What is the difference between ate and menos?

What is thumos? Is it internal or external?

September 17

From Shame-Culture to Guilt-Culture

When Dodds refers to "deepened awareness of human insecurity and human helplessness", how is this different from the sense that the gods control your actions?

What is the danger of hubris?

Research question: What was the crime of the ancestors of Croesus?

How is inherited guilt like "original sin"? How is it different?

September 24

The Ajax of Sophocles

How does Ajax deduce that he has been manipulated by Athena?

There are several key points when Ajax makes crucial decisions about his actions; identify those points and discuss what would you have done?

What were the ultimate sources of Ajax's "guilt" and/or "shame"?

October 1

The Blessings of Madness

Plato lists four types of Madness:

- 1) Prophetic madness, whose patron god is Apollo.
- 2) Telestic or ritual madness, whose patron is Dionysus.
- 3) Poetic madness, inspired by the Muses.
- 4) Erotic madness, inspired by Aphrodite and Eros.

Which, if any of these, would we consider madness today?

Are there modern equivalents of ritual madness corresponding to Dionysiac mountain dancing?

What are the differences between Enthusiasm and Ecstasy?

The poet presumably asks the Muse for knowledge, not the talent to write or speak it well. Is this like asking Apollo for prophesy?

October 8

The Bacchae of Euripedes

What is the fault in Pentheus? Why should he be punished?

Are there parallels to the fates of Pentheus and Ajax?

A turning point is when Dionysus asks, "How'd you like to gaze upon those women out there, sitting together in the mountains?" Has Dionysus already decided the fate of Pentheus at that point? Did Pentheus ever have a chance?

What about Agave? Is she not punished by the god most of all?

What of Cadmus? He was willing to seek the god. What if he had been found out by the Maenads?

October 15

Maenadism

Dodds begins with relating contradicting opinions of whether such activities really occurred. What is another case where a current cultural bias affects the interpretation of ancient literature? (hint: Achilles and Patroclus)

Has Christianity allowed dance to become completely secularized?

What is Saint Vitus Dance?

What might be the effect of "the carriage of the head in Dionysiac ecstasy"?

What are the homoeopathic effects of a flesh diet?

October 22

Dream-Pattern and Culture-Pattern

Dodds claims that dreaming is different for us. What types of dreams do you have?

How did people approach the god Asclepius?

What are the Gates of Ivory and Horn?

October 29

The Greek Shamans and the Origin of Puritanism

"A shaman may be described as a psychically unstable person who has received a call to the religious life."

How different is this from a person's madness as a "blessing" from Apollo or Dionysus?

What is meant by Orphic?

What does Dodds mean by Puritanism? How universal was it among the Greeks?

November 5

Theurgy: the operation or effect of a supernatural or divine agency in human affairs.*

Does Theurgy refer to just a sort of magic or conjuring?

What is the association, if any, between Theurgy and Neoplatonism?

What was the connection between Julian the Theurgist in the 2nd century CE and the 4th-century Emperor Julian (Julian the Apostate)?

What was the importance of images in the form of statues to Theurgy?

Are Séances performed today a remnant of Theurgy?

* In this appendix, Dodds is not so considerate of the reader who is not fluent in ancient Greek, and he includes a large untranslated section on the "Séance in the Iseum". I provide a translation of this in the online class files.

November 12

Rationalism and Reaction in the Classical Age

Dodds states, "for religious growth is geological: its principle is, on the whole and with exceptions, agglomeration, not substitution."

What cases do you think this describes, and what are the exceptions?

What do you think Heraclitus meant by saying, "dead is nastier than dung"? Why did it threaten traditional beliefs?

What does Dodds mean by "enlightenment?"

Medea voices the internal/eternal conflict: "I know what wickedness I am about to do; but the thumos is stronger than my purposes, thumos, the root of man's worst acts." Is this looking to use a supernatural agency as a scapegoat?

Is there a parallel to anti-intellectualism in the present day?

November 19

Plato, the Irrational Soul, and the Inherited Conglomerate

What is the Inherited Conglomerate? Can it be applied to other religions, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism?

Plato comes off as an elitist; is he opening the door for Totalitarianism?

Did Plato give up on the human race or on his own idealism? Why?

Plato says: "He would provide religious faith with a logical foundation by proving certain basic propositions." Is this even feasible?

Dodds says that Plato would "give religion a legal foundation by incorporating these propositions in an unalterable legal code, and imposing legal penalties on any person propagating disbelief in them."

Is he endorsing the trial and execution of Socrates?

December 3

The Fear of Freedom

Do we see an approach toward Buddhism in the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies?

To what degree were the gaps in pagan belief filled by the religions of Catharsis and Madness also filled by Christianity?

How can the old Conglomerate even continue to exist when men still alive are worshipped as gods, a custom that began with Alexander the Great?

"there can be little doubt that the over-specialisation of science and the development of popular education in the Hellenistic Age led to the decline of mental activity." Compare this statement to a contrast in human craft and usage over the last two hundred years. It is not too difficult a thing to understand both how to use and to construct a wagon or a shovel, but who amongst us could explain or indeed construct a television or a cell phone?

Is the fear of freedom satisfied by a demand for a prophet or a scripture?

Ideas/suggestions for papers*

Plays mentioned in Dodds

Aeschylus:

The Persians

Sophocles:

Oedipus the King

Euripides

Medea

Hippolytus

The Trojan Women

Aristophanes

The clouds

The birds

One of the dialogues of Plato

Phaedo

The Republic

The Sophist

The Apology

The influence of Dodds on Julian Jaynes

In 1976 Julian Jaynes wrote a book called *The Origin of Consciousness in The Break-Down of The Bicameral Mind*. His ideas were strongly influenced by Dodds, and the chapter on dreams in particular. He cites Dodds eight times. What does he mean by "The Bicameral Mind", and what evidence does he draw from Dodds? While the book is a daunting read on its own, I have several secondary articles and other materials that I can share, as I presented a seminar on this topic last semester.

"The Sacred Tales" by Publius Aelius Aristides, accounts of his dreams while trying to seek cures sleeping in the temple of Asclepius

A selected work by other philosophers mentioned in Dodds

Hesiod

Pythagoras

Empedocles

Hecataeus

Heraclitus

Other examples of shame cultures, ancient or modern

*While the use of Wikipedia is encouraged for your basic reading of Dodds, it is not suitable as a primary source for your papers. You should rely primarily on original sources (in translation).