E.R. Dodds and the Irrational: “Agamemnon’s Apology” Revisited*

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It is often overlooked that *The Greeks and the Irrational* follows the conventional “from-*muthos*-to-*logos*” pattern, which was largely taken for granted at the time of the book’s appearance. Dodds starts with the description of the “pre-classical” mind as attested in early sources, proceeds to the “triumph of reason” as assumed for the Classical Age, and concludes with what used to be seen as the regression of rationalism in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. At the same time, *The Greeks and the Irrational* is subtly subversive of the pattern from which it ostensibly proceeds, deviating from it in two significant respects. First, Dodds does not accept the dichotomy between the rational “Apollonian” and the irrational “Dionysian” principles as introduced by Nietzsche and taken further by Rohde and others, but offers a much more nuanced picture allowing for the presence of the “rational” even in the presumably “irrational” epochs, and for undercurrents of the “irrational” even in the so-called Greek Enlightenment. Second, and no less important, he empathizes with the irrational both on a scholarly and a personal level, thus avoiding the widespread equation between the irrational and the primitive. ‘Agamemnon’s Apology’, the book’s opening chapter, is emblematic of Dodds’ approach.

I

Proceeding from Martin P. Nilsson’s pioneering treatment of Homer’s people in terms of modern psychology, Dodds introduces what in subsequent years will become the standard view of Homeric man’s mental functioning. His starting point is the following passage from the speech delivered by Agamemnon at his reconciliation with Achilles:

> Again and again have Achaeans mentioned to me this story [of the quarrel with Achilles] and condemned me, but I am not responsible (*aitios*), but rather Zeus and *moira* and Erinys who walks in darkness: they put in my mind a ferocious *atē* on that day when at the assembly I of myself took away Achilles’ prize (*geras*). But what could I do? It is god who accomplishes all (*Il.* 19.85-90).

The key-word of Agamemnon’s apology is *atē*. It is generally agreed that in Homer the meaning of the word is ‘folly’, ‘blindness’, ‘infatuation’ (to be distinguished from ‘ruin’, ‘disaster’, the meaning which it acquires in tragedy). Agamemnon’s argument, as adduced above, also applies to other cases in which mistaken or wrong behavior is explained as originating in *atē*. The characteristic features of this kind of behavior are a temporary lack of understanding, attribution of the act to some external factor, usually one of the gods, and the fact that the agent is not recognized either by himself or by others as an autonomous cause of what he has done. Compare, for example, Helen’s apology as put in the mouth of Penelope in *Odyssey* 23:

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* All translations from the Greek are mine.

> Never would Argive Helen, daughter of Zeus, have lain with a stranger and become his lover had she known that the warlike sons of the Achaeans would bring her home again to her own land. However, it was the god who impelled her to do this shameful deed; not till then did she lay up in her heart the ruinous *atē* wherefrom on us too came sorrow (218-24).

Note that, like Agamemnon's act, that of Helen is accounted for as originating in *atē* and divine causation.[1] Referring to the phenomenon as 'psychic intervention', Dodds has demonstrated its applicability to such other aspects of Homeric man's mental and physical functioning as communication of martial valor and strength (*menos*) by one of the gods or the interference of an unnamed deity (*daimon*) into man's behavior.

Yet, as distinct from Nilsson, who accounted for the phenomena in question by introducing the idea of Homeric man's mental instability (*psychische, Labilität*), the explanation proposed by Dodds is much more nuanced. Proceeding from the observation that the idea of mental instability can by no means apply to all of Homer's characters, he embarks on the analysis of Homeric man's inner self, and above all the most active of the so-called mental organs, the *thumos* (conventionally translated 'spirit'). He emphasizes such features of Homeric psychology as the dependence of human behavior on divine intervention and the predominant part played by the *thumos* in every aspect of Homeric man's mental functioning. It is indeed not difficult to discern that almost any action or state of mind in Homer can be 'thrown' or 'sent', 'put' or 'breathed' into one's heart by a god, 'stirred', 'moved', 'ordered' or 'impelled' by either a god or man's *thumos*, and thus cannot be regarded as effected by a compulsion of the will, as premeditated or deliberate.

When his actions and states of mind arise in this way, man neither intentionally produces nor controls them, just as he does not produce or control his natural instincts, and the fact is that man's physiological instincts, such as hunger and thirst, as well as the instinctive behavior of animals, are described in exactly the same way. To use Nilsson's expression, in situations like these man becomes a 'stranger' to his own behavior and therefore cannot regard it as part of his ego. Clearly, this is where the 'argument from non-responsibility' as represented in Agamemnon's apology originates. Small wonder, therefore, that Dodds' conclusion was that the actions and states of mind caused by gods cannot be regarded as part of the self, that the *thumos* must have enjoyed such a degree of independence that it too could not be felt as part of the self, and that 'all departures

[1] Cf. *Od*. 4.261-62, where Helen's act is also explained as deriving from *atē*. Homer's characterization of Agamemnon's behavior as resulting from *atē* is even more consistent: the state of *atē* is ascribed to Agamemnon, by both Agamemnon himself and others (see esp. *Il*. 1.412 = 16.274), no less than eleven times, more than to all the other named individuals taken together, see A.W.H. Adkins, 'Values, Goals, and Emotions in the *Iliad*', *CP* 77 (1982), 307 with n. 33. The broader Homeric context that these examples supply puts limitations on the common interpretation of Agamemon's apology as an exemplary specimen of the strategy of self-excuse: in fact, it would be more appropriate to say that Homer's anthropology that transpires in this and similar cases may well be employed as a basis for the strategy in question (as e.g. in Aegisthus' case discussed below).

from normal human behaviour whose causes are not immediately perceived ... are ascribed to a supernatural agency'.[2]

At the same time, Dodds never loses sight of the rational side of Homeric man's functioning. Consider for example his emphasis on what he defines as Homer's 'intellectualist approach to the explanation of behaviour'. This approach, which in the Classical Age will culminate in the Socratic paradox 'virtue is knowledge', finds its expression in Homer's 'habit of explaining character or behaviour in terms of knowledge' (16-17). Thus, Achilles 'knows wild things, like a lion', Polyphemus 'knows lawless things', and so on.[3] This seems to indicate that everything entering man's knowledge was envisaged as forming an integral part of the self. It is only when taken against this rational background that Homeric man's irrational starts making sense: 'When he [Homeric man] acts in a manner contrary to the system of conscious dispositions which he is said to "know", his action is not properly his own, but has been dictated to him. In other words, unsystematized, nonrational impulses, and the acts resulting from them, tend to be excluded from the self and ascribed to an alien origin' (17). That is to say, the nonrational impulses notwithstanding, Homeric man's self is unambiguously envisaged as rational: in that, it does not essentially differ from the conscious self as operated with in modern psychology.

II

Dodds' analysis of Homeric man's mental functioning is very much along the lines of Freudian psychology, and this was probably one of the reasons why "Agamemnon's Apology" immediately became vastly popular among both classicists and laymen. This is not to say, however, that the method adopted by Dodds fits Homer's material in every respect.

To begin with, Dodds makes no provision for an error originating in the rational. He treats all wrong behavior as psychologically abnormal and therefore as deriving from irrational factors such as *atē*: when translated into terms of psychoanalysis, this would mean that Homer's people repress their wrong acts and, just as Agamemnon in his apology, project them onto external causes. This line of interpretation had exerted such a strong influence that in subsequent Homeric anthropology all wrong and bad behavior became habitually ascribed to irrational factors, and all right and good behavior to rational ones. Besides *The Greeks and the Irrational* itself, this would be true of such influential syntheses as, for example, *The Justice of Zeus* by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, in which *atē*, this time understood as a person's yielding to his or her irrational drives, is treated as the only source of error in Homer, or of *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* by Albrecht Diehle, according to which the early Greek view of human behavior can be exhaustively accounted for by the so-called bipartite psychology based on the interaction of the rational and the irrational and error as the prevailing of the latter over the former.[4]

The problem however is that, side by side with *atē*, Homer also operates with a pattern of error which originates in the rational: this pattern is designated by the word

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2 E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley 1951), 13.

3 *Il.* 24.41; *Od.* 9.189. See further Dodds (n. 2), 16-17.

4 H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 2nd edn (Berkeley 1983), 8-24; A. Diehle, *The Theory of Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley 1982), 20-47.

atasthaliē, conventionally translated 'recklessness'. Compare for example Zeus' famous theodicy in *Odyssey* 1. Zeus complains that mortals usually hold the gods responsible for their misfortunes, although rather more often than not they themselves are to blame. To bring his point home, Zeus adduces the example of Aegisthus:

> Oh shame, how pointlessly do mortal men blame the gods! For they claim that their troubles come from us, whereas they of themselves, because of their own *atasthaliai*, have sorrows beyond their portion (*huper moron*). Thus even now Aegisthus, beyond his portion, took in marriage the wedded wife of the son of Atreus and killed her husband on his return, knowing only too well of the impending destruction. For we had warned him by sending Hermes, the keen-sighted slayer of Argos, that he should neither kill the man nor woo his wife, for the son of Atreus shall be avenged by Orestes when he grew up and longed for his own land. So spoke Hermes; yet he did not persuade Aegisthus' heart even if he wished him well; but now he has paid for all his deeds (32-42).

It can be seen that Agamemnon's apology and the anti-apology of Aegisthus act as mirror-images: Agamemnon, who was stimulated by the gods and his portion (*moira*), is not held responsible for his act, whereas Aegisthus, who acted against the gods' advice and his portion (*huper moron*), is fully responsible for what he did. However, while Agamemnon's apology occupies a place of honor in every treatment of Homer's view of man, the anti-apology of Aegisthus is usually seen as relevant to the sphere of theology and ethics rather than to that of anthropology.[5] Yet, to obtain an adequate picture of Homer's anthropology, we must look for systematic rather than statistical regularities, for frequency of occurrence cannot in itself provide sufficient grounds for the claim that a given view is the only one to be considered relevant. That is to say, if there are even isolated cases which present Homeric man's behavior as not falling into current patterns of interpretation, our picture of Homer's people can only be balanced if it includes these cases together with the statistically prevalent ones.

As I have argued elsewhere, in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey,* the acts deriving from *atasthaliē* are normally represented as having been committed notwithstanding the fact that the agent was explicitly warned not to take a particular course of action. Moreover, as the formula 'they perished by their own *atasthaliai*' testifies, such acts are consistently regarded as ones for which the agents are held fully responsible.[6] This is true not only of Aegisthus, who was warned by Hermes not to kill Agamemnon and marry his wife, but also of the Suitors, who were warned not to sleep with Odysseus' women slaves; of Odysseus' companions, whom he warned not to touch the sacred cattle of Sun; of Odysseus himself, asked by his companions not to risk their lives on the Cyclops' island; and, in the *Iliad*, of Hector, who was advised by Polydamas not to take the troops outside the walls of Troy.[7] All of these agents knew or at least were aware of the possibility that

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5 It is seen as representing a later stage of ethical thought in W. Jaeger, *Paideia* I , trans. G. Highet (Oxford 1965), 143; A. Heubeck, *Der Odyssee-Dichter und die Ilias* (Erlangen 1954), 81-86; Dodds (n. 2), 32-33; Lloyd-Jones (n. 4), 28-29; for a comprehensive discussion see R. Friedrich, 'The Hybris of Odysseus', *JHS* 111 (1991), 18-19.

6 M. Finkelberg, 'Patterns of Human Error in Homer', *JHS* 115 (1995), 26-28.

7 The expression οὐ πείθειν/πείθεσθαι frequently appears in this connection, see *Il.* 22.103 (Hector of himself) = *Od.* 9.228 (Odysseus of himself). See also *Od.* 9.500 (of Odysseus); 1.42-43 (of Aegisthus), 22.316 (of the Suitors; cf. also 24.458). Cf. also *Il.* 4.408-409.

the course of action they were taking could result in disaster: in that they had been warned of the future consequences of their acts and still committed them they are set apart from those whose errors were committed under the influence of *atē*. Thus, *atasthaliē* is associated in Homer with foreknowledge, responsibility, and planning just as firmly as *atē* is associated with their opposites. In other words, *atē* and *atasthaliē* are mutually complementary in that, while *atē* presupposes an error which originates in the irrational, *atasthaliē* presupposes an error originating in the rational. This distinction, however, is absent from the picture of Homeric man offered by *The Greeks and the Irrational*.

Another problem in Dodds' approach concerns his analysis of Homeric man's self. In so far indeed as the self is associated with knowledge, one of the implications of this would be that everything not entering one's knowledge should not be recognized as part of the self. Dodds is quite explicit on this point: 'If the character is knowledge, what is not knowledge is not part of the character, but comes to a man from outside' (17). If we take into account that Homer had no special term for "self", "soul", or "character", it would not be difficult to understand why so many scholars have arrived at the conclusion that Homeric man possessed no integrated personality whatsoever.

One of the observations on which this conclusion is based is that Homeric man's *thumos*, which almost invariably stands for irrational factors in Homeric psychology, 'tends not to be felt part of the self'.[8] The difficulty however is that in making this conclusion Dodds proceeds from a tacit assumption that the interaction between man and his *thumos* is always one-sided, that is, that like the gods, *thumos* can only act on man but is never acted upon in response. However, Homeric expressions rendering the idea of restraining one's *thumos*, such as *thumon epischein*, *eretuein*, *damazein*, and the like, although not numerous, firmly point in the opposite direction.[9] Moreover, the much discussed pattern of self-deliberation, almost invariably opening with the formula 'and in distress he spoke to his large-hearted *thumos*' seems to have been cast especially for expressing the idea of man's interaction with his *thumos*, an interaction which regularly results in man's taking control over the *thumos* rather than vice versa.[10] Now, as far as man is capable of constraining his *thumos* but not capable of constraining a god, this must mean that while the gods were seen as external agents, the *thumos* was not. That is to say, the very fact that Homer takes into account not only the possibility of man's yielding to his *thumos* but also that of his taking control over it suggests that Homeric man was in fact much more integrated an entity than Dodds was ready to admit.

The above presupposes that the tension between the rational and the irrational was not conceived as irresolvable.[11] The rational and the irrational do not intrude into each

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8 Dodds (n. 2), 16. Cf. E.L. Harrison, 'Notes on Homeric Psychology', *Phoenix* 14 (1960), 78: 'His θυμός . . . is felt to be an entity quite distinct from his ego, and even alien to it, 'ordering' him and 'impelling' him, like some external agent'.

9 For the most part these are connected with Achilles and appear in *Iliad* 9, see 255-56 (Odysseus to Achilles); 496 (Phoenix to Achilles); 635-37 (Ajax to Achilles), cf. 462-63. Characteristically, the expression 'to yield to one's *thumos*' also appears mainly in this book, see 109-10 (of Agamemnon); 598 / (of Meleager); cf. *Il.* 24.42-43; *Od.* 5.126.

10 *Il* .11.403; 17.90; 18.5; 20.343; 21.53, 552; 22.98; *Od.* 5.298, 355, 407, 464.

11 See M. Finkelberg, *The Birth of Literary Fiction in Ancient Greece* (Oxford 1998), 61-67.

other's spheres because, in a sense, Homer's people were *a priori* aware of the acts for which they would be held or not held responsible. This is evidently how one should explain the apparent inconsistency between Agamemnon's claim that he is not to be held responsible for insulting Achilles, and his simultaneous proposal of a fair compensation to the insulted. In so far indeed as the act itself was ascribed to the *atē* thrown into his heart by the gods or stirred by Agamemnon's own *thumos*, it could not be part of Agamemnon's self-consciousness; accordingly, he could not see himself as the real cause of this act and be held morally responsible for its consequences. In so far, on the other hand, as the act he performed was socially qualified as an insult, the situation thus produced fell under his knowledge of the norms of social behavior shared by each member of the community, that is, as an act for which the agent is held socially responsible.

It follows, then, that, rather than mutually exclusive, the rational and the irrational in Homeric man's behavior act as mutually complementary. Moreover, although it cannot be denied that Homer's people may effectively be described in such categories of modern psychology as "ego" and "non-ego" (that is, all of the psyche that is not part of the conscious self),[12] it seems to me that the coexistence of the rational and the irrational within one and the same person would find itself much more at home when rendered in terms of the partition of the soul comparable to those later used in classical Greek philosophy: the *Phaedrus* allegory of the rider and the horses immediately comes to mind in this connection.

III

The above reservations notwithstanding, there is no denying that "Agamemnon's Apology" presents a well-balanced and coherent interpretation of Homeric man's mental functioning, an interpretation whose essentials have proved sound enough to sustain its validity till today. This is especially noteworthy in view of the dramatic eclipse of another influential treatment of Homeric man, one which appeared almost simultaneously with *The Greeks and the Irrational*.

Die Entdeckung des Geistes (known in the English translation as *The Discovery of the Mind*) by Bruno Snell was the culmination of studies in Homer's mental terminology started by Snell and others in the 1920s and 1930s. The most salient characteristic of these studies was approaching Homeric man with terms and categories used in our own days and emphasizing thereby how different had Homeric man been from the later Greek and, moreover, the modern individual. While the scholarly value of such studies, which have led us to realize that the Homeric vocabulary lacks terms explicitly designating the person as a whole, is incontestable, in everything concerning our better understanding of Homeric man their effect has been, paradoxically enough, rather negative. As far indeed as such concepts as "self", "soul", "character" are said to be lacking in Homer, and what is proposed instead is a loose conglomerate of the so-called "mental organs", Homeric man is inevitably turned into an incognizable entity completely estranged from what is understood as human in our days or indeed in Classical Greece. At the same time, the

12 See e.g. R.W. Sharples, '"But why has my spirit spoken with me thus?": Homeric Decision-making', *G&R* 30 (1983), 1-7; H. Pelliccia, *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar* (Göttingen 1995), 260-61.

essential humanity of Homer's people is immediately recognized by every reader of Homer, and the incompatibility of this experience with the image created by terminological speculations about Homeric man has been strong enough to call in question the relevance of the results obtained through the terminological approach.[13]

To make a long story short, it has been convincingly argued that the fact that Homer's mapping of man's mental experience is different from ours does not suffice to conclude that it differed in any essential way from the mental experience of the people of other historical epochs, including our own. One may indeed wonder how our own mental experience would look like if someone approached our civilization by taking literally all expressions involving such words as "heart", "brain", "spirit", "stomach", or "guts". Small wonder, therefore, that the criticism of the terminological approach expressed over the years by such scholars as Albin Lesky, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Kenneth Dover, Bernard Williams, to mention only a few, has resulted in that today, sixty years after its publication, *The Discovery of the Mind* is no longer considered authoritative or indeed valid.

This is not so, however, as far as *The Greeks and the Irrational* is concerned. It is of course true that, alongside Snell's book, *The Greeks and the Irrational* has been responsible for the spread of the view, which has taken a strong hold over many studies in Homeric psychology, that Homeric man was psychologically or even anthropologically different from the Classical Greek, let alone the modern individual.[14] The important *caveat,* however, is that as distinct from Snell and other similar treatments of early Greek mind, Dodds never associates the irrational with the primitive. It was arguably this, above all else, that prevented him from committing himself to the "from-*muthos*-to-*logos*" pattern which underlied much of Snell's reasoning. This would be true not only of his "Agamemnon's Apology", whose interpretation of Homer's people in categories of modern psychology speaks for itself, but also of his 'Rationalism and Reaction in the Classical Age', another chapter in *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Here again, Dodds embraces both the rational and the irrational, and this not only allows him to avoid crude dichotomies and deeply rooted preconceptions characteristic of many previous treatments of the so-called Greek Enlightenment, but also leaves room for

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13 For criticism of the terminological approach see especially H. Schwabl, 'Zur Selbständigkeit des Menschen bei Homer' *WS* 67 (1954), 46-64; A. Lesky, *Göttliche und menschliche Motivation im homerischen Epos* (Heidelberg 1961), 5-11; Lloyd-Jones (n. 4), 2-3, 8-10; Sharples (n. 12), 1-7; R. Gaskin, 'Do Homeric Heroes Make Real Decisions?' *CQ* 40 (1990), 1-15; S. Halliwell, 'Traditional Greek Conceptions of Character', in Chr. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford 1990), 34-42; B. Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley 1993), 21-49.

14 Julian Jaynes' influential *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (New York 1976) is a good example. It is true of course that Dodds who, as we saw, introduced the "irrational" only to supplement the "rational" and not to supersede it, cannot be held responsible for such far-reaching conclusions as, for example, that the Iliadic hero 'did not have any ego whatsoever' (73), or that Homeric gods were 'organizations of the central nervous system' (74), or that Homeric man 'did not have subjectivity as do we' or that 'in distinction to our own subjective conscious minds, we can call the mentality of the Mycenaeans a *bicameral mind*' (75; Jaynes' italics). The fact remains, however, that in his treatment of Homeric psychology Jaynes leans heavily upon *The Greeks and the Irrational*.

accommodating such new discoveries as for example the Derveni papyrus, which renders the dichotomies and preconceptions in question obsolete.

Beyond *The Greeks and the Irrational*, the same kind of approach is equally characteristic of Dodds' commentary on the *Bacchae*, in itself a poignant reminder of hidden powers of the irrational pronounced at the peak of the so-called Age of Reason by one of its most authentic representatives. It comes as no surprise that such a prominent historian of the Classical Age as Martin Ostwald fully shared Dodds' view of Euripides' masterpiece. In his 'Atheism and Religiosity of Euripides' Ostwald wrote: 'The tension between the attempt to comprehend life through the intellect and through direct experience of the divine stands at the heart of Euripidean religiosity in the *Bacchae*'.[15] These words could have well be written by Dodds himself, and the fact is that further on in the same essay Ostwald adduces Dodds' commentary in support of his view.

The equation between the irrational and the primitive was alien to Dodds to such a degree that, as the concluding paragraph of his autobiography demonstrates, he envisaged this kind of mental experience as fundamentally akin to that of his own. Let me quote his words:

> At rare moments in my story an obscure being whom I call my daemon emerges upon the stage and assumes command. Sometimes he acts without giving me previous notice, as in that business about not standing up and in other instances I could quote; without consulting me he tells my body what to do and it does it. More often he functions as a kind of referee, a court of last appeal whose word is final. It was, for example, he and not I who in the end took the crucial decision to abandon my secure and safe-walled paradise in Sir Harry's Road and confront instead the challenge of an unknown and unloved Oxford. If any pattern is still discernible in the patchwork of my life, it is he who imprinted it. I do not know his true name. But I am grateful to him and to fortune for what, between them, they gave me, a much fairer deal than most of my contemporaries received.[16]

While Dodds' mention of his 'daemon' might well be Socratic, there is little doubt that his '[I]t was … he and not I who in the end took the crucial decision' and 'I am grateful to him and to fortune' are almost *verbatim* quotations from Agamemnon's speech. That is to say, Dodds draws no distinction between his own psychological experience and that coming to the fore in Agamemnon's apology. To my mind, this tells volumes about his interpretation of the latter.

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15 M. Ostwald, 'Atheism and the Religiosity of Euripides', in T. Breyfogle, *Literary Imagination, Ancient and Modern. Essays in Honor of David Grene* (Chicago 1999), 44.

16 E.R. Dodds, *Missing Persons. An Autobiography* (Oxford 1977), 194-95.