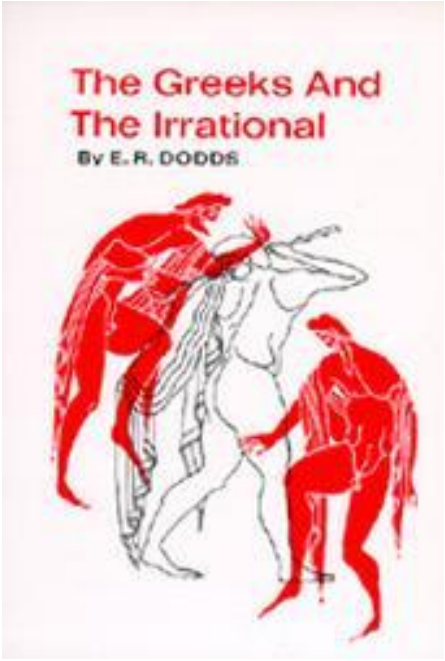

The Greeks and the Irrational

E.R. Dodds

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The Greeks and the Irrational E.R. Dodds
In this philosophy classic, first published in 1951, E.R. Dodds takes on the traditional view of Greek culture as a triumph of rationalism. Using the analytical tools of modern anthropology & psychology, he asks, "Why should we attribute to the ancient Greeks an immunity from 'primitive' modes of thought which we do not find in any society open to our direct observation?" Praised by reviewers as "an event in modern Greek scholarship" & "a book which it would be difficult to over-praise," *The Greeks and the Irrational* was Volume 25 of the Sather Classical Lectures series.

The Greeks and the Irrational Details

Date	:	Published December 1st 1962 by University of California Press (Berkeley) (first published 1951)
ISBN	:	9780520003279
Author	:	E.R. Dodds
Format	:	Paperback 327 pages
Genre	:	Philosophy, History, Nonfiction, Religion, Psychology, Classics

From Reader Review The Greeks and the Irrational for online ebook

Matthew Gallaway says

I read this book four times in a row. The premise is that the advent of Socratic rationalism did not lead to an enlightened society (at least outside of an intellectual elite) in ancient Greece, but somewhat disastrously led to a popular/mainstream backlash that ushered in a new society that became increasingly irrational, superstitious, and fundamentalist (not to mention lacking in innovation from scientific and artistic perspectives) in ways that have amazing parallels to divisions in modern society. The book is beautifully written and argued, and even the footnotes are worth scouring. I would give this book fifty thousand stars if I could.

Erik Graff says

Dodds was a classicist and member of the Society for Psychical Research who apparently got fed up enough with the hackneyed portrayal of the classical Greeks as rationalists to pen this popular study of the irrational elements of their culture and beliefs. It's an easy read and somewhat of an antidote to the usual picture given students in high school and introductory college courses.

Alan Johnson says

Although I don't necessarily agree with every detail in this book, it is, overall, an excellent work of scholarship and interpretation. I especially like the way the author interprets how Plato attempted to modify the irrational Greek religion and culture into something more compatible with reason. Dodds was able to achieve this insight notwithstanding his acceptance of the conventional nineteenth- and twentieth-century view of Plato as having "developed," i.e., changed, in his philosophical views over time. The latter is one way of interpreting Plato. The Straussians have a different approach. For example, as Joseph Cropsey wrote in his foreword to Leo Strauss's *The Argument and the Action of Plato's "Laws"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975) (published two years after Strauss's death), "the book will engage the attention of those who continue to entertain the question whether the *Laws* is not a sweeping recantation that expresses Plato's senescent disenchantment with Perfection. The epigraph to this volume suggests rather that the *Laws* differs from the *Republic* not in its sovereign conception but in its decisive if tacit theme." Ibid., vii. See also Catherine H. Zuckert, *Plato's Philosophers: The Coherence of the Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For additional discussion, see my post 38 here.

Kristen Li says

This book is the reason why I don't like Academic Publications. Long sentences with poorly explained jargons used by Academia in a niche studying field. I feel bad for the author who had to waste so much of his time studying such a non-stimulating and useless subject. I feel even worse for my peers who have to read this book for class. This book should not be read in a high school Classical Civilization class. Teachers

please don't torture your students with this book.

Manny says

(click for larger version - bottom of page)

Derek says

Despite its age, this work by Dodds is still considered a seminal text for students of Greek history and classics. The usual survey-level understanding of the Greeks is that they were a culture which always put rationality on a pedestal at the expense of all else and ultimately ignored the irrational until well after the passing of the classical period. Dodds corrects this view, showing irrational impulses and institutions which were more widely accepted during the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic Periods than the works of rationalist philosophers such as Heraclitus and Plato. At a most fundamental level, this work is great for putting Greek intellectuals in their proper place at the fringes of society and in reaction to it.

This was one of the first works of ancient history to employ modern anthropological and psychological theory as a tool for interpreting the past. Though early efforts at this were almost always clumsy and driven more by the theory than by the facts, Dodds uses his modern insights cautiously, judiciously, and helpfully. The scope of the work is broad and every chapter addresses some different aspect of Greek irrationality. The chapter which several Classics professors seem to have memorized is the one on how Greece transitioned from being a shame culture in Homer's time to a guilt culture by the Archaic Period. This was based on studies trying to make sense of Japanese shame culture after World War II. This part seems a bit simplistic and is probably the most dated section, but since the Classics Department at my current university is rather geriatric, I can see why they are still bewitched by this section.

Other sections carry with them certain assumptions about the nature of religion which are out of vogue, such as the idea that the beliefs of the elite and common people were completely different. However, that does not necessarily mean that Dodds was wrong and at least his assumptions are out in the open and can be seen for what they are. Though what is here lacks the latest evidence and isn't the most in-depth coverage of any particular facet of Greek religion and psychology, it is still an excellent summary of classical scholarship up to 1951 and everything here seems like a reasonable interpretation of the evidence then available.

If you are a hardcore Hellenophile, then this is one of the best books ever. However, it is definitely not for the casual reader or a novice to the subject matter.

Mary Catelli says

A book on a somewhat loose and heterogeneous collection of concepts. Then, it was to combat the pop culture image of the Greeks as the perfect culture of rationality that the Enlightenment is so blameworthy for coming up with. (The middle ages get the equally and oppositely ridiculous image of the world of irrationality; for that I recommend C. S. Lewis's *The Discarded Image*.) To be sure, it uses the loose-goosey, pop culture notion of what's rationality and irrationality, but then, so does the image.

So it goes though monitions in Homer, whether the characters are said to be moved by gods, and the development of a guilt-culture from a shame culture and all the attendant development of pollution and catharsis, which originally meant ritual purification. An insane man might go through many ceremonies for many gods and goddesses known to cause insanity, and if it didn't work -- why, obviously, they had yet to propitiate the right god.

Inspiration as a form of madness, whether it caused prophecy, ritual dancing, or poetry.

Dreams. They did not think all dreams significant. (Unlike, say, Freud. I must say that it's a few decades and takes Freud rather more seriously than turned out to be wise.) But you have your premonitions and other abilities.

This took on a rather shamanistic slant -- he puts out a correlation to demonstrate that Orpheus was a shaman -- and the reason that the dreams can be prophetic is that the god-like soul is more god-like when semi-liberated by sleep. Logically, still more god-like when liberated by death. Which lead to Puritanism. One Pythagorean dictum was that pleasure was always bad, because souls were put in bodies to be punished, and they should be punished. (On the principle of taking your medicine as quickly as you could.)

The rationalistic culture and the dream of progress, rather like the Victorian. Also, like the Victorian, leading to a rapid backlash. Partly because questioning everything gave a good number of young men to believe in rights without responsibilities, Right Makes Might, and other beliefs that no society can possibly survive when they run wild. The persecution of which Socrates was perhaps the best known victim -- but there were other prominent ones. A great deal of discussion about society and whether it can survive such questioning. (I think his optimism in the last chapter is undercut by this one.)

Plato and his changing views on the irrational soul. Hellenism and the revival of magic and other irrationalities.

A fascinating grab-bag of information.

Shinynickel says

Off this review: http://thebrowser.com/interviews/mary...

Can you describe what your first book, The Greeks and the Irrational, is about?

This is one of the books that made me decide that Classics was worth spending a lifetime on. It starts with

this extraordinary anecdote which is very meaningful for many readers. Dodds was at an exhibition of the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum and he got talking to a schoolboy. The boy told him: “I know it’s a terrible thing to say, but I don’t really like this stuff – it’s all so rational.” Well, that got Dodds thinking about this common idea that the Ancient Greeks were all very cerebral, gliding about in white gowns. But was Greek culture so fantastically rational? So Dodds wrote the book to explore that idea.

But why should it matter to us if it is rational or not?

It mattered to me because in order to understand about us, we have to understand what was at stake in the past. What is interesting is that you can take one of the most formative intellectual cultures and show that just underneath that sparkling surface is a seething heart of irrationality that results in madness and murder. Dodds wrote this book just after the Second World War and I think one of the questions in his mind was, not just that nice encounter in the British Museum, but how could European Society have gone so mad that it did what it did. I wouldn’t say there are direct links between Hitler’s Germany and Ancient Greece but there are indirect links about where the non-rational elements are in any culture, and how they work, how you can understand them and what difference that makes.

Regan says

While Ancient Greeks are most known for the triumph of rationalism over superstition and magic, E.R. Dodds presents an alternate history which demonstrates that, despite the intellectual advancements in the direction of reason, the Greeks (particularly Plato) of the Golden Age fundamentally retained certain pre-5th century magical (read: irrational) thinking within their traditions. Dodds thinks this is a good thing, since we are not merely thinking but also *feeling* agents--a fact that Socrates and Aristotle understood well. Dodds argues that the progressive excision of "irrationality" in the Stoic and Epicurean traditions turns out to be a regression--a failure to appreciate the affective elements of living a human life. He sees this failure culminate in medieval Christianity's devaluation of earthly life.

This book is essential and utterly fascinating. Because it was first delivered as a series of lectures (each chapter is relatively short--approx 15-20 pages), it is eminently digestible and suitable for any audience. But boy, does he pack a lot of detail in: on average there are about 100 footnotes a chapter. This makes this a great bibliographical source in addition to being a spectacular read.

Cârmâz says

Ungherele sufletului, straturile mai întunecate, mai obscure ale firii sînt singurele locuri din lume în care putem surprinde realul în faptul constituirii sale. - William James

Exist? o serie de pasaje în Homer în care un comportament nes?buit ?i inexplicabil este explicat prin ate sau descris cu ajutorul verbului din aceea?i familie de cuvinte, (...) ate este o stare de spirit - o întunecare, o confuzie temporar? a con?tiin?ei normale. Este, de fapt, o nebunie par?ial? sau vremelnic?; ?i, ca orice nebunie, nu este atribuit? unor cauze fiziologice sau psihologice, ci unui factor extern, „daimonic". într-adev?r, în Odiseea se spune c? un consum excesiv de vin provoac? ate; implica?ia nu pare a fi îns? c? ate este un produs „natural", ci, mai degrab?, c? vinul con?ine ceva daimonic sau supranatural. (...) De asemenea, ate, în cazul unui anume Agastrophus care se dep?rteaz? prea mult de carul s?u ?i este ucis, nu

este o „pedeaps?" pentru nes?buin??; nes?buin?a este ea îns??i ate, sau un rezultat al st?rii de ate, ?i nu implic? vreo vin? moral? - este doar o eroare inexplicabil?, ca ?i tîrgul prost pe care l-a f?cut Glaucos. Iar Odiseu nu a fost nici el vinovat sau imprudent atunci cînd a adormit tocmai cînd nu trebuia, oferind tovar??ilor s?i ocazia s? m?cel?reasc? boii sacri. A fost, cum am spune noi, un accident; dar pentru Homer, ca ?i pentru toat? gîndirea anistoric? în general, nu exist? accidente - Odiseu ?tie c? somnul i-a fost trimis de zei, pentru orbire, ca „s?-?i bat? joc de el". Astfel de pasaje sugereaz? c? ate nu avea, la origine, vreo leg?tur? cu vina. (...) Iar cînd Agamemnon î?i învinuie?te moira, el nu se declar? un determinist sistematic, la fel cum nu o face nici ??ranul grec modern atunci cînd folose?te un limbaj asem?n?tor. Întrebarea dac? eroii lui Homer cred în determinism sau în liberul arbitru este un anacronism; nu numai c? ei nu ?i-au pus-o niciodat?, dar chiar dac? ar fi fost întreba?i nu ar fi în?eles ce înseamn?. Ceea ce îns? în?elegeau era deosebirea între fapte fire?ti ?i fapte s?vîr?ite în starea de ate. Faptele de tipul celor din urm? sînt atribuite nediscriminat moirei sau voin?ei zeilor, dup? cum problema e pus? din unghi subiectiv sau obiectiv.

Cînd un b?rbat simte menos în pieptul lui sau „urcîndu-i, ca un fum, în n?ri", el devine con?tient de un misterios plus de energie vital?, de încredere ?i elan. (...) este întrebuin?at?, prin analogie, pentru a descrie energia devoratoare a focului. In cazul omului, ea este energia vital?, „ardoarea" care nu vine cînd ai nevoie de ea, ci func?ioneaz? tainic ?i chiar capricios. (...) Posedarea temporar? a unui menos intensificat este, ca ?i ate, o stare anormal? care cere o explica?ie supranormal?. (...) Pot face cele mai grele lucruri cu (prea) mult? u?urin??, ceea ce este un semn tradi?ional al puterii divine. Pot chiar, asemenea lui Diomede, s? lupte împotriva zeilor f?r? team? de pedeaps? - o ac?iune care, pentru oamenii în stare normal?, este foarte periculoas?. De fapt, cei c?rora li s-a indus menos sînt, în acest r?stimp, ceva mai mult sau poate ceva mai pu?in decît oameni. Ei sînt adesea compara?i cu ni?te lei înfometa?i.

Atunci cînd cineva are o idee str?lucit? sau prosteasc?; cînd deodat? î?i d? seama de identitatea altei persoane sau i se dezv?luie brusc în?elesul unui semn prevestitor; cînd î?i aminte?te de ceea ce ar fi putut uita sau cînd uit? ceea ce ar fi trebuit s? ?in? minte, atunci el sau altcineva va vedea în aceste fenomene, dac? lu?m cuvintele lor în sens literal, o interven?ie la nivel psihic a acestor fiin?e supranaturale anonime. Desigur, ei nu se a?teapt? întotdeauna s? fie lua?i în sens literal: Odiseu, de exemplu, nu trebuie luat în serios atunci cînd atribuie faptul de a fi ie?it f?r? manta pe o noapte rece ma?ina?iunilor unui demon. Totu?i nu este vorba de o simpl? „conven?ie epic?", deoarece personajele sînt cele care vorbesc astfel ?i nu poetul însu?i. Conven?ia poetului este alta - el manipuleaz?, ca ?i autorul Iliadei, zei antropomorfi bine defini?i, ca Atena sau Poseidon, ?i nu daimoni anonimi. Personajele sale folosesc o conven?ie diferit?, fiindc? acesta este felul de a vorbi al oamenilor: poetul este un „realist". Într-adev?r, astfel ne a?tept?m s? vorbeasc? oamenii care credeau (sau ai c?ror str?mo?i au crezut) în avertismente zilnice ?i de fiecare clip?. Recunoa?terea, intui?ia, amintirea, ideea str?lucit? sau pervers? au o tr?s?tur? comun?, ?i anume aceea de a trece omului „prin cap dintr-o dat?". Adesea, el este con?tient c? nu a ajuns la ele cu ajutorul unui ra?ionament.

Înfrico??tor lucru este s? c?dem în mîinile Dumnezeului celui viu. Evrei 10:31

În faptul crea?iei omul e smuls din sine. El cufund? în adîncurile subcon?tientului un soi de c?ldare ?i aduce la lumin? ceva care în mod obi?nuit îi este inaccesibil. E.M. Forster

„Cele mai mari binefaceri - spune Socrate în Phaidros - ajung la noi pe calea nebuniei."(...)„cu condi?ia ca nebunia s? fie un dar divin". Se deosebesc apoi patru tipuri de „nebunie sacr?", produse, spune Socrate, „ale unei schimb?ri provocate de divinitate în normele sociale curente". Cele patru tipuri sînt:
1) Nebunia profetic?, al c?rei zeu este Apolo.
2) Nebunia telestic? sau ritual?, al c?rei protector este Dionysos.
3) Nebunia poetic?, inspirat? de muze.
4) Nebunia erotic?, inspirat? de Afrodita ?i Eros.

Cristian says

Este semnificativ de observat cum chiar ?i cultura paragonic? a idealului ra?ional, "spiritul geometric" al civiliza?iei europene, ?i-a avut ?i ea dozajul ei de ira?ionalitate. ?i unul pe m?sur?!

Expunerea trece prin perioada homeric?, apoi prin cea arhaic?, clasic? ?i elenistic?. Nota definitorie a evolu?iei de con?tiin?? a omului grec, dintr-o etap? în urm?toarea, am putea s-o reducem la formarea con?tiin?ei de responsabilitate. Vedem la Homer cum oamenii î?i absolv? orice vin? pentru gre?elile lor blamând voin?a n?stru?nic? a cerului pentru ele cu dezinvoltura ?i aerul banal al unei norme de epoc?. Interven?ia divin? în psihicul uman devine o m?sur? coercitiv?("ate" nebunie) odat? cu cultura arhaic?; faptele rele sunt pedepsite, hybris(trufia uman?) mai cu seam?. Prin personalit??i ca Hesiod, Solon, Eschil, Herodot, Zeus are parte de "educa?ie moral?". Cu toate acestea, abia prin ie?irea din epoca arhaic? ?i intrarea în cea "luminist?" unitatea moral? va fi de domeniul individului, c?ci pân? la acest moment, responsabilitatea moral? a ?inut de ordinul familial. Deloc întâmpl?tor, model justi?iar ceresc dubleaz? pe cel statal(reformele lui Solon) , a?a încât, printr-o situa?ie oarecum for?at?, individul devine o realitate, omul singur e responsabil de faptele sale.

A?a cum se va vedea pe parcursul c?r?ii, popula?ia nu era înc? preg?tit? s? îmbr??i?eze libertatea individual? a unei prime epoci a Luminilor. Rezultatul? Dec?derea într-un primitivism ?i reînvierea magiei, fructificat? tot mai mult dup? colapsul sistemului religios. Între clasa intelectual? ?i needucatele mase se casc? o pr?pastie tot mai mare, pân? la scindarea ce-a urmat lui Aristotel, primul gânditor ce-a separat explicit treburile ob?te?ti de cele filosofice. S? nu se cread? c? intelectualii au fost scuti?i de partea lor de ira?ional. Platon a încercat din r?sputeri o conciliere între religie ?i ?tiin??, Euripide e în mare m?sur? un poet al mecanismelor incon?tientului, din perioada elinistic? interesul s-a îndreptat spre pseudostiinte ?i prescrierea de conduite autoritare de via??, drept compensa?ie pentru dec?derea modelului religios.

Con?inutul de informa?ii al c?r?ii e dens, bibliografia repartizat? la capitol dep??e?te la o medie cu mult zece titluri pe pagin?, documentare demn? de laud? în sine. Cu toate acestea, scrisul e plin de verv? ?i accesibil. În ciuda imensei sale realiz?ri, Dodds nu ne mai sl?be?te din a se autointitula modest drept "un simplu profesor de greac?".

Lisa Lieberman says

I first read this book during the height of my Greek phase in college--a phase, I should add, that lasted through grad school, when I did one of my fields in medieval Christian thought, largely so that I could trace the influence of Plato through to the early modern era. Joining the Group Read of Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* has provided me with an opportunity to revisit my love of ancient Greek literature and philosophy. Needless to say, a great deal has changed since the 1970s.

Dodds, I am sorry to report, has not aged well. If you're looking to explore the wondrous aspects of Homer's world, I would recommend Why Homer Matters by Adam Nicholson. For an overview of Athenian thought in the 4th century BC, start with Gregory Vlastos, Plato's Universe: with a new Introduction by Luc Brisson, which opens with the Presocratics and goes through to Aristotle. (I had the privilege of hearing Vlastos lecture, toward the end of his life, at the University of London. He was a rock star in the field of Classical

Studies and I am not ashamed to admit to having been a groupie.)

But back to Dodds. *The Greeks and the Irrational* originated as a series of lectures delivered at Berkeley in 1949 and the book bears the marks of the era. Erich Fromm's Escape from Freedom (1941) and Karl Popper's The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945) were significant influences on Dodds. Both Fromm and Popper were refugees from Nazi Europe, the first a psychoanalyst, the second a philosopher. Both sought to apply the tools of their trades toward understanding how Totalitarianism was possible, in a world that seemed to be progressing toward freedom and enlightenment. Fromm found an answer in the still-primitive impulses within our psyche--paralleling the impulses that the cultural anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor observed in primitive societies. (Freud was influenced by Tylor, I should mention.) Popper found evidence of these impulses in Plato's *Republic*, and speculated that the great philosopher was articulating the anxieties felt by members of his class toward the spread of Athenian democracy. He called Plato a proto-fascist. (Let me say right now that, notwithstanding Plato's paternalism in the *Republic*, I disagree with Popper. So did Vlastos. Vehemently.)

Dodds said that he wanted to approach the ancient world on its own terms, rather than succumbing to the tendency of some of his peers of viewing the past through the lens of the present. The depth of his scholarly understanding of the Greeks is fully evident as he traces notions of divine possession from the earliest parts of the Homeric epics through the classical period and beyond, but in terming these elements "irrational," and "religious," as if the two were synonymous, he shows his hand. By the time we get to the final essay in the book, "The Fear of Freedom," his allegiances are clear.

Mind you, I share his concern over the "recoil from rationalism" or, to put it in Existentialist terms (Dodds was also reading postwar French philosophers, as was I at the same time I was reading the Greeks and Dodds's book), "the unconscious flight from the heavy burden of individual choice . . ." This burden of responsibility drives some into the arms of conservative parties and authoritarian leaders who promise a return to simpler times. Did the Greeks go there first? Can we draw lessons from what Dodds ultimately confesses is the theme of his book -- "the failure of Greek rationalism" -- so that we, unlike the Greeks, will face squarely "those irrational elements in human nature which govern, without our knowledge, so much of our behavior and so much of what we think is our thinking" and subdue them?

Sadly, I'm afraid not.

Feliks says

Interesting topic; the writing is as dry as the dust on the Acropolis; but overall too fascinating to dismiss as just pedantic. If you want to get to know Greek culture, this is a good means; because it invokes a 'thinking-about' process rather than just 'receiving the stories'. The author --discussing various aspects of mental irrationality and how they might have been perceived by the Greeks--draws on numerous references. At the end of each chapter (e.g., 'madness', 'spiritual possession', 'prophecy' or 'ghosts') you come away with much to mull over. Its an info-dump from the mouth of a howitzer. No 'hand-holding' or 'spoon-feeding', here. This kind of author would write rings around someone like Jared Diamond or Malcolm Gladwell. Copious notes and bibliography placed *after each chapter*, rather than all at the end. You rarely see that anymore.

Kate says

An absolutely necessary book for anyone interested in having a framework for understanding Classical Greek Literature. It is a standard, and it is excellent--though definitely in the Greek Geek category.

Caracalla says

Strong 3 stars,awesome research, some interesting and important conclusions that generalize a little too much for the liking of most, particularly in literature

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Christopher Rush says

Pragmatically speaking, this would be for me about two stars, but as I can sense (more than rationally grasp) the quality and use of so much of the book I cannot read (such as most of the footnotes, almost all of which are pure Greek plus a smattering of French and German with a pinch of Latin), I've deigned out of my wellspring of munificence to bestow an up-rounded three stars. You may kiss my ring at a later time.

I read this because it's been too long since I've read scholarly material about Homer, and I vaguely remembered the first chapter was about Homer, and boy was it. The first chapter was really interesting, about Agamemnon and Achilles and Odysseus and the gang, and it was a chapter I wish I had read several years ago, since it is rather helpful insight for trying to teach the Iliad and Odyssey to sophomores, as I tend to do on occasion. I tried to sneak in some of the fine notions from Professor Dodds at the untimely time of Semester Exam Review day, which naturally was met the level of enthusiasm you could expect from sophomores trying to review a semester's worth of learning and being given new knowledge on top. Still, I really enjoyed chapter one.

Then came the rest of the book. And while it was interesting, it truly did what the name indicated it would do: survey the field of pre-classical and classical Greece in relation to the "irrational." Unfortunately from my perspective, Professor Dodds spends an inordinate amount of time equating "irrational" with "religion," and while I would agree in a literal sense a significant component of religion requires utilization of non-rational human faculties, for Professor Dodds the "irrational" is tantamount with, basically, the "false." Thus, "religion," for Professor Dodds, is "a waste of human time," and those who pray to gods and such are hampering the growth and progress and goodness of humanity. It gets a bit much in the middle and late sections of the work, especially when Professor Dodds puts Plato up on a huge pedestal toward the end and enjoins us in light of WW2, which was the fault of religious people, pretty much, to turn away from religious, id est, irrational, notions, and focus on man's rational capacities and what magnificent salvific things can be achieved with ratiocination alone.

If I learn Greek someday, perhaps this book would be more engaging, and I acknowledge fully and humbly the fault is wholly within me and my American public school education, but since the subject matter of the litany of third- and fourth-tier classical writers, all of whose works exist solely in fragmentary form from which Professor Dodds draws so many authoritative-sounding conclusions, does not interest me, it's quite likely I may give this book away and never read it again.

The main force potentially preventing me from giving this book away, however, is the world's most

embarrassing cover. Seriously, who thought this cover was a good idea, and why was this team allowed to make actual decisions? Perhaps the footnotes explain. Alas for the monolinguistics of man.

Andrew Fairweather says

Much of Dodds book was a challenge for me since my acquaintance with Greek thought is casual at best, but this book was a lot of fun nonetheless. In 'Greeks and the Irrational,' we follow the understanding of the irrational from the Homeric to Hellenistic period.

The early chapters which draw from attitudes reflected in the Illiad illustrate the concept of *ate* as something which comes from without, an essential corruption of the character of the subject being acted upon. Homeric interpretation of the irrational was as an interference of the normal course of life by "nonhuman agency," interrupting or influencing the subject's thought and conduct.

"[...] that [irrational behavior is] not truly part of the self, since they are not within man's conscious control; they are endowed with a life and energy of their own, and so can force a man, as it were from the outside, into conduct foreign to him."

Much of this divine intervention is expressed as the physical intervention of gods as an outward divine mechanic expression of an inward monition. Dodds sees this as a technique of storytelling which would make tangible the feelings of the irrational—In other words, the personification (or deification) of divine intervention gave this psychological expression a tangible pictoral form for the listener, an essential literary device for a society whose approach to discussing psychological phenomena was limited.

In the early Greek world, motive was not considered a factor in judgement or in regard one took to one's actions. Instead, the consequences external to any "motive" or "conscience" as a result of an action were all that mattered. Following these observations, Dodds makes an interesting distinction between Christian "sin" whose guilt stems from a disease of the inner consciousness, and Archaic guilt whose transgressions are inherited for generations as a kind of "curse" which plays out consequently.

After the Homeric view, this Archaic view began to see feelings of guilt (as opposed to Homeric shame) as manifest in the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, where the aforementioned generational "curse" is a major theme in their work. The popularity of these devices may have been rooted in the instability of society as a result of the Doric invasions of that period. Tensions were also felt within the family, that pillar of Greek societies, between a growing individualism in revolt against the *pater familias* whose judgement increasingly needed a moral foundation, which, heretofore had not been necessary (the difference between "because it is the right thing to do" as opposed to "because I said so"...). Through the work of Freud, the guilt meant to be associated with overthrowing the father are surely apparent to us Moderns—to Greek society, it was a terribly great and indulgent sin.

In this Archaic society, *hubris* was the greatest danger. It is in this period we see a transition from gods whose arbitrary power is hard to trace to *jealous* gods which are always attempting to suppress our foolish striving for immortality. In this world, there is, as Dodds characterizes it, an "accent of despair" in life, insofar as the gods have a plan, obscure to mortals, which usually disregards the happiness of these said mortals. Instead, humanity is at the mercy of an apparently arbitrary Power and any attempt to deny this is

inevitably futile.

As the tension between society and the individual became greater, rituals such as Dionysian rites gave a cathartic outlet to exercise irrational impulse. Dodds says the aim of the Dionysian cult was *ecstasis,* or, a removal of oneself from oneself—an interesting alteration of personality when we consider that the rituals of "dancing mania" and the like not only released you from social pressure, but came part and parcel with untethering the individual from themself, as the two pressures were rightly seen as inextricably linked.

Though the Dionysian rituals were still often understood as a sort of "possession," from an external force, Greek understanding of the irrational would gradually turn inward. The soul (psyche) would seek release from the prison of its body, and would be freest in sleep. Yet in the early stages of psyche, psyche was not yet the equivalent of the personality of the living person. In a sense, the psyche dwelled within the person, perfectly at home within the body and spoke to the body's owner with a voice of its own.

As the relationship with the psyche becomes more prominent in philosophy, the shaman and withdrawal through meditation becomes a common way of discourse with the irrational. The psyche also, however, provided an excellent way to explain the growing sense of guilt which arose in the Archaic Age—that perhaps, sins committed in a former life were carried with an eternal soul which passed from body to body. The body in this sense becomes a vehicle for punishment which could purge the guilt of the soul—a prison of the soul. Ritual practices of cleanliness and diet, *askesis* (as in the Pythagorian faith) became common since the body was the host of the soul—polution of the body would, in turn, pollute the soul...

Fast forward, as we enter the age of the Epicureans and Stoics who would view irrationality as something of a threat to the self, and must be avoided at all costs. Dodds argues that the loss of a healthy relationship with Rationalism's irrational counterpoint paved the way for an increasingly puritanical society whose superstitions aimed to cleanse the soul and prepare it for the next life. From start to finish, Dodds has traced the Greek irrational from a phenomenon which occurs as some sort of divine intervention from the outside, to something of a corruption which stems from within the psyche which, if indulged, pollutes and destroys.

I'm sure I've left out tons of detail in Dodd's argument (the references and notes in one chapter of this book alone... yeeesh...) but I hope I've managed to do it a little justice. 'Greeks and the Irrational is a very inspired work and a pleasure to read. His admonitions to the reader that we must converse with the irrational rather than fear or ignore it, lest we fall back into superstition, are very well put indeed and remain extremely relevant for these interesting times we live in.

Individualfrog says

I've seen this book cited in many other books, but the one which made me especially want to read it was The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind. It turns out the problem with it is very similar to the problem with that one: its hostility to its own subject matter, in favor of a very High Modernist view of SCIENCE AND REASON as the be-all end-all of virtue and goodness, a view which seems to me very foolish, staggering drunkenly under the weight of its unexamined assumptions and prejudices. Except for the now-amusing unquestioned Freudianism, there's nothing in here which would give Gibbon pause--except perhaps insofar as the real Gibbon differs from the caricature Gibbon who saw the medieval period as a uniform Dark Age of superstitious ignorance, etc. Dodds certainly believes in that absurd notion, like a reddit atheist brandishing The Graph.

Which seems odd, considering the anecdote which begins the book. A student at the British Museum says the Greek art leaves him cold because "it's all so terribly *rational*", and Dodds wrote the book, more or less, to set him straight, to show that Ancient Greek culture was not "lacking in the awareness of mystery and in the ability to penetrate to the deeper, less conscious levels of human experience." And goes on to give examples of the truth of this, from Homer down to late Antiquity. So far so good. But like Jaynes, no doubt under Dodds' influence, was later to do, he pivots in his last chapter to essentially say, "however, all this irrationality is actually why the Greeks were stupid and terrible, and your desire for something else, student, means you desire totalitarianism." (In the first note to this chapter, he says, "A completely 'open' society would be, as I understand the term, a society where modes of behavior were entirely determined by a rational choice between possible alternatives and whose adaptations were all of them conscious and deliberate", which pretty much sets the tone for the bizarre, Gernsbackian sci-fi assumptions to come, that Man is poised on the edge of a Great Leap, if only we have the courage to face the Cold Equations of rationality, instead of, like, chickening out and having feelings.) It's true the entire book is full of clues: the constant use of words like "primitive" and "progress" and "Oriental" meaning weird, static, hierarchical, etc. But it's still a disappointment to slog through that last chapter, and realize yet again that I don't have an ally after all, that yet another famous book is dedicated to propositions that I find absurd and repugnant. It's like when Spock pronounces sagely that "logic dictates" some excellent moral precept: though I may agree with the precept, I cannot agree with the idea that "logic" or "reason" dictates anything. You can reach literally any conclusion (perhaps excepting a self-contradiction) using logic, it just depends on what assumptions you start from -- as the very expert logicians of those Dark and Superstitious and Ignorant Middle Ages knew quite well. Reason can't save you from being evil, and doing bad things. I'm much more inclined towards the view, disdained in these pages, that reason is mostly used to rationalize conclusions already reached in the heart. And certainly I find it hardly clear that the White Male Bourgeois Rational Technocrat is the apex of human life, guiding us Onward and Upward to the stars.

So it's yet another book where the content is wonderful, the information is fascinating (I don't know what modern anthropology thinks of the assumption, here as in Frazer etc, that every myth and ritual and story is actually just a cover for something else, usually human sacrifice -- but I enjoy that too), but the attitude is gross and dismissive. Honestly I begin to see why people responded well to Jung -- who else, in those Midcentury times, was saying that things don't have to "make sense" to be good, that the irrational can be healthy, that inchoate, unreasonable emotions are OK?

Colin says

A book I quite enjoyed, though I would not recommend it to many non-Classicists, as it is rather dry and scholarly - Dodds' book explores expressions of and reactions to the irrational in ancient Greek culture. Topics addressed include everything from strong emotions ("ate," "menos," the role of "thumos" and "psyche," kai ta loipa) to dreams to divine possession and madness (there's even an appendix on the Maenads). If you're a professional Hellenist, it's definitely worth a look, I'd say - if you're not, probably better stick to something less specialized.

Muzzy says

I suggest everyone should read chapter 2 on shame- versus guilt-culture, as well as the excellent concluding chapter "Fear of Freedom."

In the last chapter, Dodds asks how it's possible for a civilization to walk right up to the edge of reason and then, at the last minute, retreat into magic and superstition. What caused this turn away from an "open" society? He does a great job reviewing all the socio-economic arguments, which he dismisses one by one. That leaves him with one hypothesis: some deep, subconscious fears and desires must have driven the Greeks to embrace the irrational.

Okay, fine. But then he concludes in a way that makes me scratch my head. In his last two paragraphs, Dodds writes that the Greeks lacked an "instrument" for understanding and controlling those unconscious drives. Fortunately, though, we moderns do possess such an instrument. We could achieve a rational, open civilization, if only we choose.

I wonder what exactly that "instrument" might be? I'm afraid he might be referring to Freudian psychoanalysis. Were intellectuals of the 1940s really so optimistic about the potential for psychology to save the world? Nobody in the 21st century seems to believe that Freud is the answer. So I'm skeptical.

I came up well after the 1940s, so I didn't get much exposure to the mistaken idea that Ancient Greece was purely rational. My college professor was all about Dionysus and mystery cults. He made us read Walter Burkert. So I've pretty much always assumed the Greeks were just as weird and superstitious as modern Americans.

Nevertheless, read this book.