REVIEWs

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This large, ambitious book was first published in France (with some Italian contributions) under the title of Le Savoir Grec: Dictionnaire Critique in 1996. In the passage from French to English, knowledge has been ostensibly downgraded from titular to subtitular status, with a corresponding promotion of ‘thought’ to the centre of attention. But if the term ‘thought’ might arouse expectations of a multifaceted enquiry into cultural attitudes, beliefs and categories, including ‘mentalités collectives’, the reality turns out to be something rather different. This collection of essays is overwhelmingly concerned with the intellectual end of the spectrum of ideas—with domains of thought in which articulated, systematising theory came to bulk large. Almost throughout, philosophy dominates the agenda, with science in a strong supporting role and other traditions of reflection (including history, rhetoric, poetics) tagged on in places. The editors tell us (pp. ix-xi) that the book’s centre of gravity lies not so much in surveying the substance or development of theoretical disciplines as in elucidating the methodological self-questioning and the ‘fundamental reflexivity’ which they manifested, individually and collectively. In practice, however, many of the chapters do deliver fairly conventional, if often highly proficient, surveys of specific fields of enquiry or the ideas of particular thinkers. Most contributions are pitched at a level suitable for academic though non-specialist readers, readers who can themselves cope with abstract argument and not be put off by a shortage of basic background information: little cultural context or orientation is provided; dates are commonly eschewed (the chronological table at the back is no substitute for these); a lot of minor figures are mentioned allusively; and even some of the book’s handsome plates are inadequately captioned.

The collection’s sixty-two essays are divided into five sections: ‘Philosophy’ (pp. 3-124; see below); ‘Politics’, four essays on prominent themes in Greek political theory, perhaps the most thought-provoking being Richard Bodel’s ‘The Statesman as Political Actor’, which concentrates on the memorialisation of ‘emblematic’, mostly archaic, statesmen and legislators (pp. 125-90); ‘The Pursuit of Knowledge’, a varied section that covers institutional and conceptual aspects of intellectual study, as well as the history of individual disciplines, from astronomy to rhetoric (pp. 191-524); ‘Major Figures’, biographical essays on twenty-three thinkers, of whom fourteen are philosophers, five scientists and four historians (pp. 525-798); ‘Currents of Thought’,
where, again, philosophy predominates, eight out of eleven articles here being devoted to specific schools/movements, though there are also essays on ‘Hellenism and Christianity’ (Alain Le Boulluec on Greek influences on Christian theology) and a sketch by Serge Bardet of Hellenistic contacts between the cultures ‘Hellenism and Judaism’ (pp. 799-998).

A little more detail about the first of these sections, ‘Philosophy’, may help to give a slightly fuller sense of the style, as well as the limitations, of the project. Michael Frede’s essay ‘The Philosopher’ (pp. 3-19) traces with characteristic lucidity the fluctuations between theory and practice in ancient conceptions of philosophy. It takes the story down as far as the new theurgical tendencies of the Imperial period and the resulting interaction between pagan and Christian ideas of philosophical revelation. Frede well conveys the tensions in a tradition that grew out of real human needs but whose theorising sometimes threatened to detach itself from a fully embodied life (though he is wrong to claim that all philosophers from Socrates onwards thought that ‘to become a good person . . . one has to be a philosopher’ [p. 5]. Aristotle, for one, would have been startled to learn that he did not count any non-philosopher as ‘good’). In ‘Images of the World’ (pp. 20-38), Geoffrey Lloyd (who elsewhere supplies predictably assured treatment of the ancient idea and practice of science) stresses that naturalistic world-views never entirely superseded religious models, while Luc Brisson, in ‘Myth and Knowledge’ (pp. 39-50), somewhat similarly, though too skimply, suggests that Greek attempts to establish autonomy for certain domains of knowledge could not wholly escape from religious-cum-mythological presuppositions; both these essays, however, prompt the question why the book as a whole does not do more to explore the overlap and interplay between intellectual and popular levels of ancient thought. (The contributor who asserts that ‘from its very inception, philosophy thrived by breaking with tradition’ [p. 511], offers a misleading half-truth.)

John Dillon, ‘The Question of Being’ (pp. 51-71), helpfully surveys ancient metaphysics, not least the contrast between transcendent and immanent conceptions of reality. Jacques Brunschwig’s ‘Epistemology’ (pp. 72-93), one of the best pieces in the collection, provides a stimulating reappraisal of ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’ strands in the Greek quest for an adequate account of knowledge: he pays particular attention to paradoxes that arise within those philosophical epistemologies, including Plato’s, in which a paradigm of knowledge as vision exercises marked influence. Finally, Monique Canto-Sperber’s ‘Ethics’ (pp. 94-124) emphasises how Greek moral reflection tended to centre on agency, character, and the living of a certain kind of life, not on the fulfilment of categorical imperatives. Here again, though, a chance was missed to connect different areas or dimensions of Greek thought and thereby to build up a more complex picture of what counts as ‘thought’ in the Greek tradition. When Canto-Sperber mentions in her very last sentence that Greek tragedy (an immensely potent vehicle of a characteristically Greek world-view, yet one scarcely touched on in this book) posed a challenge to philosophical aspirations to ‘moral autonomy’, one is forced to contemplate how the ethical systems of philosophers have been isolated from
wider cultural trends and values—an anomaly in a book that titles itself *Greek Thought*.

There is no doubt that this volume contains an impressive wealth of information and interpretative insight. Within its own terms, its coverage is rich and full, though I do not understand why ‘psychology’ (ideas of soul/mind, of perception, and of the ‘self’) does not get a treatment of its own. Non-specialists can safely turn here for (in most cases) clear, reliable, but also probing expositions of major themes/figures in ancient philosophy and science. This reviewer at least, however, was left wondering how the enterprise might have been even more rewarding. I have already indicated my main reservation—that a book on Greek thought (or Greek knowledge) could and should have done more to take a cross-disciplinary perspective on Greek attitudes, values, and forms of wisdom. This is especially so given the abundant space at the editors’ disposal. Figures like Plato and Aristotle crop up repeatedly in thematic chapters, have essays devoted to themselves, and are also the subject of articles on their schools. The result is a somewhat indulgent degree of overlap, not to mention duplication of material readily available elsewhere (several of the chapters on ‘major figures’ fail this last test), all of which could have been pruned to make way for more discussion of the intersections between intellectuals and the mentalities of the cultures around them, including consideration of certain patterns or modes of thinking that cut across domains and disciplines (dialogue and debate, for example, would be prime candidates here).

What this book very largely excludes, or acknowledges only at the margins, is the kind of thought that finds its home in myth, in religion (considered here chiefly *qua* philosophical theology), in poetry and much visual art, as well as in popular discourse, and which often depends more on narrative, images and ethical paradigms than on abstract concepts or carefully organised investigation. Many contributors make a nod in the direction of these broader, pretheoretical mentalities, usually by a brief acknowledgement of Homeric or Hesiodic antecedents to the ideas with which they are concerned. But few go any further. One exception is Oswyn Murray, whose short but shrewd piece on ‘History’ (pp. 328-37), focussed on the emergence of a range of models of historiography in Greek culture, gives provocative support to its concluding proposition that ‘history is not separable from myth: like myth, it is a story that aims at the truth rather than one that is true’ (p. 336). For the most part, however, contributors take refuge in the safety of self-contained intellectual analysis—at a generally high, attractive level of expertise, to be sure, but one which leaves vital parts of the horizons of Greek thought outside its field of vision.

Finally, a grumble about the disappointingly mechanical and flawed index, a crucial tool in a book of this size and structure. Dominated by individuals (less so by schools of thought), it conspicuously fails to include separate entries on concepts and categories (cosmos, geography, history, language, mind, myth, nature, religion) that cut across disciplines and periods; it thus underlines the book’s relative failure to explore the cross-disciplinarity of Greek thought. Entries, moreover, are often skimpily documented (I noted dozens of missing references), while a fair number of
figures mentioned in the text are not indexed at all (many are minor, but not all: Posidonius is among them).

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This is a valuable and instructive addition to the series of encyclopaedic histories of the ancient world and areas of ancient thought and literature that Cambridge has produced. The editors are Christopher Rowe of the University of Durham and Malcolm Schofield of the University of Cambridge, both of whom have contributed several chapters to the work. In the introduction (pp. 1-11), Rowe explains that the volume is intended to present a fresh, critical account of ancient political thought (p. 1) rather than of political theory as narrowly conceived. The intimate connection between political and ethical philosophy is stressed (p. 5f.). In other words, ‘political thought’ is interpreted as widely as possible.

Part 1 deals with Archaic and Classical Greece, part 2 with the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. The work stops in the mid-fourth century AD. It is not confined to strictly political books, such as those of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and other less famous authors. The political features of poets like Homer (but not Vergil), dramatists, orators and historians are well covered. One is even surprised to see sections on such writers as Philo and Josephus, who are normally considered to be on the fringes of the Roman world. There are two clear maps, one of Greece, the other of the Roman empire. There is a satisfactory index, and three detailed bibliographies on Archaic Greece, Socratic and fourth-century BC thought, and the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

The work starts with the beginnings of Greek literature in Homer and Solon. There is of course more material in the fifth and the fourth centuries BC, especially the historians (chapter 4, pp. 61-121, by R. Winter) and the orators (chapter 6, pp. 130-41, by J. Ober). Isocrates is considered with Xenophon in chapter 7 (pp. 142-54). Herodotus and Thucydides are included because the polis was a central issue in their histories (p. 102). Herodotus stressed the basic importance of nomos or law in a community. He raised the general Greek concern of how to maintain stability in a political system (p. 110). Thucydides is sensitive to the clash of oligarchy and democracy in small states and the devastating effect of stasis on political dissension in them (pp. 117, 121).

M. Lane provides in chapter 8 (pp. 155-63) an excellent overview of the approach taken by Socrates and Plato. She points out (p. 163) how little interest Socrates shows in communal decision-making, whether in a democratic or in an oligarchical polis. In chapter 9 (pp. 164-89), T. Pinner skilfully makes the background to classical Greek political systems clear. M. Schofield discusses the Republic in