

## Agamemnon's cluelessness: rationality and *eudaemonia*

Josiah Ober. UCLA Classics Dept. Handout (key passages)

1. Achilles on Agamemnon's choice: "Truly he rages with baneful mind, and knows not at all to look both backwards and forwards in time (*hama prossô kai opissô*), so that his Achaeans might wage war in safety beside their ships."

ἦ γὰρ ὁ γ' ὀλοίησι φρεσὶ θύει, / οὐδέ τι οἶδε νοῆσαι ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω, / ὄππως οἱ παρὰ νηυσὶ σοοὶ μαχέονται Ἀχαιοί (*Iliad* 1.343-344).

2. *Iliad* 3.109-110: "but in whatsoever an old man takes part, he looks both before and after, that the issue may be far the best for either side" (οἷς δ' ὁ γέρον μετέησι ἅμα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω / λεύσσει, ὄπως ὄχ' ἄριστα μετ' ἀμφοτέροισι γένηται).

*Iliad* 18.249-250: "Then among them wise Polydamas was first to speak, [urging retreat before Achilles reappears on the field] the son of Panthous; for he alone looked at once before and after." (τοῖσι δὲ Πουλυδάμας πεπνυμένος ἦρχ' ἀγορεύειν/ Πανθοῖδης: ὁ γὰρ οἷος ὄρα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω). *Odyssey* 18. 451-453: "Then among them spoke the old lord Halitherses, son of Mastor, for he alone saw before and after: he with good intent addressed their assembly" [urging the relatives of dead Suitors against seeking revenge]. (τοῖσι δὲ καὶ μετέειπε γέρον ἦρως Ἀλιθέρης/ Μαστορίδης: ὁ γὰρ οἷος ὄρα πρόσσω καὶ ὀπίσσω / ὅσφιν ἔϋφρονέων ἀγορήσατο). The last case concludes as follows (*Odyssey* 18.464-65): "So he spoke, but they sprang up with loud cries, more than half of them, but the rest remained together in their seats; for his speech was not to their mind, but they hearkened to Eupheithes, and quickly thereafter they rushed for their arms." Here, as in the Khryses scene in *Iliad* 1, the majority fails to determine the course of action and disaster follows.

3. Cephalus himself is, he says, "middling" (*mesos tis*) as an expert money-maker (*chrêmatistês*): μέσος τις γέγονα χρηματιστῆς τοῦ τε πάππου καὶ τοῦ πατρός. "For my part I am content if I pass on to heirs not less (*mê ellatô*) but a little more (*brachei... pleiô*) than I inherited" ἐγὼ δὲ ἀγαπῶ ἐὰν μὴ ἐλάττω καταλίπω τούτοισιν, ἀλλὰ βραχεῖ γέ τι πλείω ἢ παρέλαβον (Plato, *Republic* 330b).

4. Cephalus appears to Socrates to lack the excessive passion (*sphodra agapan*) for money typical of those who have made it themselves: μοι ἔδοξας οὐ σφόδρα ἀγαπᾶν τὰ χρήματα, τοῦτο δὲ ποιοῦσιν ὡς τὸ πολὺ οἱ ἂν μὴ αὐτοὶ κτήσωνται· οἱ δὲ κτησάμενοι διπλῆ ἢ οἱ ἄλλοι ἀσπάζονται αὐτά. (330b-c).

5. "Those who have made money take it seriously, as their own creation" (*hôs ergon heautôn*), as well as valuing its use, "as other people do." Money-makers (as opposed to wealth inheritors) are, Socrates states, difficult to spend time with (*chalepoi... sungenesthai*) because they can praise only wealth (*ploutos*). ὥσπερ γὰρ οἱ ποιηταὶ τὰ αὐτῶν ποιήματα καὶ οἱ πατέρες τοὺς παῖδας ἀγαπῶσιν, ταύτη τε δὴ καὶ οἱ χρηματισάμενοι τὰ χρήματα σπουδάζουσιν ὡς ἔργον ἑαυτῶν, | καὶ κατὰ τὴν χρεῖαν ἦπερ οἱ ἄλλοι. χαλεποὶ οὖν καὶ συγγενέσθαι εἰσὶν, οὐδὲν ἐθέλοντες ἐπαινεῖν ἀλλ' ἢ τὸν πλοῦτον (330c). Cf a direct citation in Aristotle, *NE* 1120b11-14: "Men who have

inherited a fortune are reputed to be more generous than those who have made one, since they have never known what it is to want; moreover everybody is especially fond of a thing that is his own creation: parents and poets show this.”

ἐλευθεριώτεροι δὲ εἶναι δοκοῦσιν οἱ μὴ κτησάμενοι ἀλλὰ παραλαβόντες τὴν οὐσίαν· ἄπειροί τε γὰρ τῆς ἐνδείας, καὶ πάντες ἀγαπῶσι μᾶλλον τὰ αὐτῶν ἔργα, ὥσπερ οἱ γονεῖς καὶ οἱ ποιηταί.

6. “If two people are friends, and one gives back money deposited (*parakatathemenôî*) with him to the other when the exchange is going to cause harm, the one returning the money is not giving the other what is owed to him...”: ὅτι οὐ τὰ ὀφειλόμενα ἀποδίδωσιν ὅς ἂν τῷ χρυσίον ἀποδῶ παρακαταθεμένῳ, ἐάνπερ ἡ ἀπόδοσις καὶ ἡ λῆψις βλαβερὰ γίγνηται, φίλοι δὲ ὧσιν ὅ τε ἀπολαμβάνων καὶ ὁ ἀποδιδούς (332a-b).

7. “So what about justice, now? For what need, or for producing what, would you say it was useful in peacetime?” “It is useful in connection with business contracts (*ta sumbolaia*), Socrates.” “By business contracts do you mean partnerships (*koinônêmata*), or something else?” “Yes, I mean partnerships.”

Τί δὲ δῆ; τὴν δικαιοσύνην πρὸς τίνος χρεῖαν ἢ κτῆσιν ἐν εἰρήνῃ φαίης ἂν χρήσιμον εἶναι; Πρὸς τὰ συμβόλαια, ὦ Σώκρατες. Συμβόλαια δὲ λέγεις κοινωνήματα ἢ τι ἄλλο; Κοινωνήματα δῆτα (333a-b).

8. “So what then is the occasion for the joint use of silver or gold when the just man is a more useful partner than others?” “When it is to be put on deposit (*parakatathesthai*) and kept safe, Socrates.” “Όταν οὖν τί δέη ἀργυρίῳ ἢ χρυσίῳ κοινῇ χρῆσθαι, ὁ δίκαιος χρησιμώτερος τῶν ἄλλων;” “Όταν παρακαταθέσθαι καὶ σῶν εἶναι, ὦ Σώκρατες. Socrates closes the trap: “In fact, you mean, when we have no need to use it at all, but to put it by (*keisthai*)?” Polemarchus: “Exactly.” Socrates: “So, when money is useless, that’s when justice is useful in relation to it?” Οὐκοῦν λέγεις ὅταν μηδὲν δέη αὐτῷ χρῆσθαι ἀλλὰ κεῖσθαι; | Πάνυ γε. “Όταν ἄρα ἄχρηστον ἢ ἀργύριον, τότε χρήσιμος ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ἡ δικαιοσύνη; (333c).

9. Aristotle defines *epieikeia* as a special kind of justice and the *epieikês* as, “he is one who by choice and in practice does what is equitable, and who is not a stickler for the letter of the law, but is content to receive a lesser share although he has the law on his side.” φανερόν δ’ ἐκ τούτου καὶ ὁ ἐπιεικῆς τίς ἐστιν· ὁ γὰρ τῶν τοιούτων προαιρετικὸς καὶ πρακτικὸς, καὶ ὁ μὴ ἀκριβοδίκαιος ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον, ἀλλ’ ἐλαττωτικὸς καίπερ ἔχων τὸν νόμον βοηθόν, ἐπιεικῆς ἐστι, καὶ ἡ ἕξις αὕτη ἐπιείκεια, δικαιοσύνη τις οὔσα καὶ οὐχ ἕτέρα τις ἕξις. (NE 1137b34 -1138a3). Note that in his discussion of lending and borrowing, Aristotle discusses conditions in which the general rule of paying what is owed is not applicable (NE 1165a4-14).

10. So, for whatever someone is a skillful guardian (*deinos phulax*), he will also be a skillful thief?" "I suppose so." "If then the just person is good at guarding money, he will also be good at stealing it." "That's the way the argument seems to be pointing." "Then it appears that the just man is unveiled as some kind of thief, and you're likely to have learned that from Homer. For I tell you he's fond of Autolycus, Odysseus' maternal grandfather, and says that 'he excelled all men in thieving and perjury.'  
Ὅτου τις ἄρα δεινὸς φύλαξ, τούτου καὶ φῶρ δεινός. Ἔοικεν. Εἰ ἄρα ὁ δίκαιος ἀργύριον δεινὸς φυλάττειν, καὶ κλέπτειν δεινός. Ὡς γοῦν ὁ λόγος, ἔφη, σημαίνει. Κλέπτῃς ἄρα τις ὁ δίκαιος, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἀναπέφανται, καὶ κινδυνεύεις παρ' Ὀμήρου μεμαθηκέναι αὐτό· καὶ γὰρ ἐκεῖνος τὸν τοῦ Ὀδυσσεύος πρὸς μητρὸς πάππον Αὐτόλυκον ἀγαπᾷ τε καὶ φησιν αὐτὸν πάντας ἀνθρώπους κεκάσθαι κλεπτοσύνη θ' ὄρκῳ τε. (Plato, *Republic*, 333e-334b).

11. They [all humans in communities] each share things (*metadidōsi*) with each other, if there is something to share, or exchange them (*metalambanei*), believing that it is better for each of them in this way." Μεταδίδωσι δὴ ἄλλος ἄλλῳ, εἴ τι μεταδίδωσιν, ἢ μεταλαμβάνει, οἴομενος αὐτῷ ἄμεινον εἶναι (Plato, *Republic*, 369c).

12. "Indeed as a result of this [specialization of economic function] all these things [the necessities of life: food, housing, clothing] grow *more plentiful* [*pleiō*] and become *better* [*kallion*] and *easier* [*rhaion*] when one man does one job according to his aptitudes and opportunities, and leaves everything else alone." Ἐκ δὴ τούτων πλείω τε ἕκαστα γίνεταί καὶ κάλλιον καὶ ῥᾶον, ὅταν εἷς ἕν κατὰ φύσιν καὶ ἕν καιρῷ, σχολὴν τῶν ἄλλων ἄγων, πράττη (Plato, *Republic*, 370c)

13. "The very few Ancient writers who mention division of labor at all do so in a context and from a point of view which are essentially different from Adam Smith's. They were interested in the *quality* of manufacture, *not in quantity or efficiency*. Indeed, the *very notion* of "efficiency" is one of the best examples of a modern concept which, though taken as self-evident, turns out to be *missing* (in such contexts) throughout Antiquity" (Finley 1963: 29-30).

14. "That which is common to the greatest number of owners receives the least attention; people care most for their private possessions, and for what they own in common less, or only so far as it falls to their own individual share; for in addition to the other reasons, they think less of it on the ground that someone else is thinking about it, just as in household management (*oiketika diakoniais*) a large number of slaves sometimes give worse service than a smaller number."  
ἤκιστα γὰρ ἐπιμελείας τυγχάνει τὸ πλείστων κοινόν· τῶν γὰρ ἰδίων μάλιστα φροντίζουσιν, τῶν δὲ κοινῶν ἥττον, ἢ ὅσον ἐκάστῳ ἐπιβάλλει· πρὸς γὰρ τοῖς ἄλλοις ὡς ἐτέρου φροντίζοντος ὀλιγοροῦσι μᾶλλον, ὥσπερ ἕν ταῖς οἰκετικαῖς διακονίαις οἱ πολλοὶ θεράποντες ἐνίοτε χεῖρον ὑπηρετοῦσι τῶν ἐλαττόνων.  
(Aristotle, *Politics* 1261b31-36)

## **The Greeks and the Rational: The Discovery of Practical Reason. Five Conclusions.**

1. *The “Discovery of Practical Reason” = The formalization of a “Greek Folk Theory” of instrumental rationality.*

The Sophists did not invent instrumental rationality, but they formalized it, taught it to elites in strong, “weaponized” forms, as a norm & skill set. Philosophers and historians (among others) sought to better understand and further formalized the elements of the Folk Theory. By the classical period, self-consciously strategic reasoning, from preferences plus beliefs, to choice plus action, aimed at maximizing expected advantage, was widespread, *at all levels*: individual, state, interstate. Practical reason was not only for elite intellectuals alone: Instrumental rationality was manifest in the economic behavior of ordinary Greeks.

2. *Theories of Rational Choice have a very long history.*

Elements of the Greek Folk Theory antedate the Sophistic and Socratic formalizations: There was no “innocent age” of pre-rational Greek thought and practice. Rational Choice Theory (as a philosophical rather than mathematical formalization of human behavior) was NOT a unique product of uniquely modern, 20<sup>th</sup> century, conditions of nuclear weapons and advanced capitalism: There was no “innocent age” of pre-RCT western thought and practice. The gap between evaluative-normative *theories* and behavioral-psychological *practices* has also long been recognized and explored.

3. *Ancient Greeks are less foreign than we might think.*

If the ancient Greek “past is a foreign country” it is a country whose language of rationality, choice, and behavior is quite readily translated into our own, as Bernard Williams pointed out, in re. *Shame and Necessity*, 30 years ago.

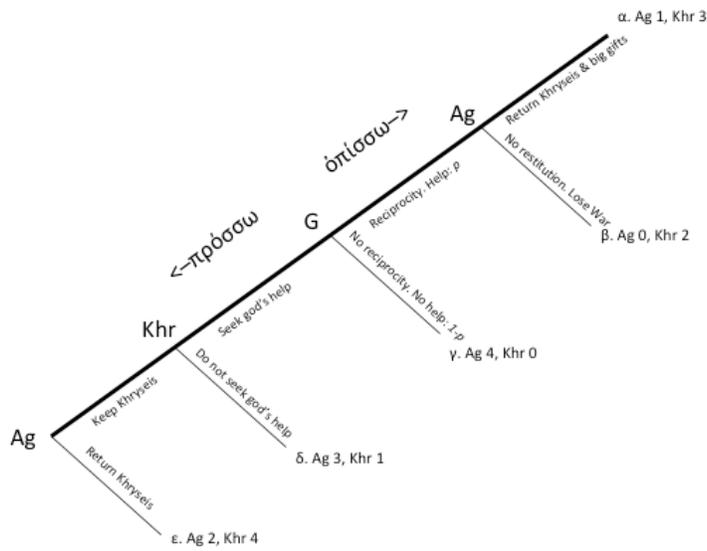
4. *Instrumental Rationality was a critical target of philosophical eudaimonism.*

Practical reason, when formalized as instrumental rationality, threatened to undermine conventional Greek ethical commitments. *And* it threatened to impede the development of higher, specifically philosophical forms of ethical reasoning: the rational choice of the right preferences (for “the good” or “the fine”), true beliefs (metaphysical or based in observation of nature), and thus the consistent choice of virtuous actions consistently aimed at the highest human ends. Therefore, one of the primary purposes of eudaimonistic philosophy was demonstrating what was wrong with instrumental rationality.

5. *Instrumental Rationality was a foundation for ancient eudaimonists & for us.*

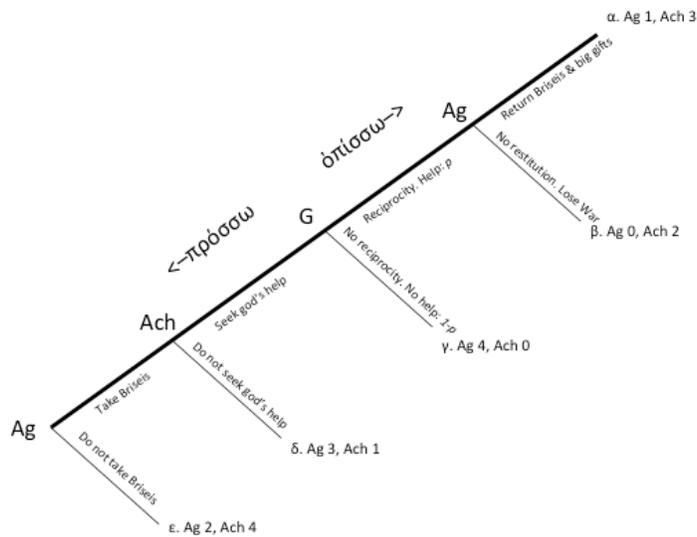
Greek eudaimonists accepted basic tenets of the Folk Theory: People are self-interested (although not necessarily narrowly egoistic). Rationality requires orderly, ranked preferences and coherent beliefs (including estimates of likelihood and predictions of others’ behavior). Social organization must address the challenge of rational non-cooperation. States can be rational, but only if they have rational leaders and/or institutions and norms that incentivize (with praise, blame, punishment) cooperative and non-cooperative behavior. Rationality is limited – especially in the practical realm of inter-state relations. Therefore, for good or ill, instrumental rationality was built into the very foundations of Greek ethical thought... and Western civilization.

Figure 7.1a. Agamemnon and Khryses



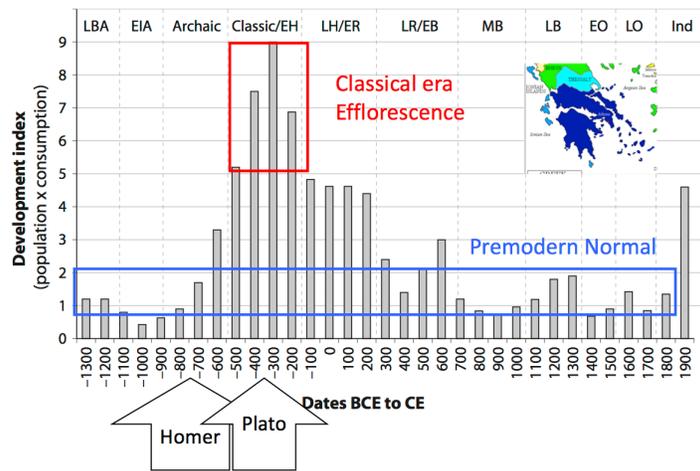
Notes: Ag = Agamemnon Khr = Khryses G = God (Apollo).  
Payoff quantities indicated ordinal preference ranking.

Figure 7.1b Agamemnon and Achilles



Notes: Ag = Agamemnon Ach = Achilles G = God (Thetis + Zeus).  
Payoff quantities indicated ordinal preference ranking.

**Core Greece. Development index, 1300 BCE to 1900 CE.**  
(Population in millions x consumption in multiples of bare subsistence)



In more detail...



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