

RATIONALISM OR REVELATION?

*Are there appropriate limits to the application of rational choice in political decision making? Does rationalism in politics lead to absolutism? Is there a "pressing threat" to liberal democracy "posed by the irreverent conviction of the hegemony of reason"? In the June 1987 issue of this Review, Darrell Dobbs drew lessons from Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*, to argue the limits of rationalism in politics. In this issue, Robert Grafstein has argued that Dobbs's case against rationalism is not proved. Dobbs, in turn, holds here to his construction of the relevance of *Odysseus'* nod to sacred values.*

.... In my essay on reckless rationalism and heroic reverence in the *Odyssey* (Dobbs 1987) I called attention to a discrepancy in the poet's evaluation of two rational, strategically dominant choices. Homer condemns as utterly reckless the decision of *Odysseus'* crewmen to slaughter *Helios'* cattle, but he certifies the wisdom of *Odysseus'* formally identical decision to conceal his identity. I argued that this discrepancy is neither an artifact of editorial patchwork nor a "Homeric nod" but is instead indicative of a distinction that remains obscured by an exclusively rationalistic orientation, the distinction between foolhardy recklessness and discerning wisdom. The recklessness of *Odysseus'* crewmen lies in their treatment of the divine sanction of *Helios'* cattle as if it were merely a price that might be weighed in a common balance with other circumstantial considerations, such as their hunger. Their confidence in the boundless range of commensuration is, I suggested, the hallmark of a rationalistic cast of mind. The wisdom of *Odysseus*, by contrast, is manifest in his tempering a superlative intellect with respect for the limits of commensuration. *Odysseus'* reverence, according to my account, is established upon an insight or revelation that occurred in the course of extraordinary conversation with the shade of *Achilles*. In

this encounter *Achilles* declares his preference for even the most miserable of lives over his current station as king of the dead. I pointed out that *Achilles'* speech is incongruous with his irreproachably courageous deeds, incongruous, that is, unless one sees that life itself is sacred. As indicated by *Achilles'* choice, the "value" of human life is not arrived at via rational commensuration in a nexus of exchange. As *Odysseus* learns, the sanctity of human life defies commensuration; it demands respect on its own terms, not by virtue of comparison with, or analogy to, anything else in this world (cf. Mt 16:26). *Odysseus* consequently rejects the boundless competitive ambition of his past, which he recognizes as nothing more than reckless commensuration in heroic guise. His remarkable change of heart disposes him to respect even the sacred cattle of *Helios*. For *Helios*, the sun-god, is sovereign over the days and seasons that measure the limits of our mortality. *Odysseus'* reverence for this god manifests itself in a proper respect for these limits, including the limits of human reason.

I suggested that we are in no way exempt today from the pitfalls of reckless rationalism. Our situation is precarious in that it is the commercial character of our own polity that inclines us toward such

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recklessness. For commercialism is merely rationalism in a three-piece suit. With its exclusive orientation toward "bottomline" comparisons, commercialism takes for granted that everything has its price, including the very principles that make commercial freedom, to say nothing of our other freedoms, possible. As against rationalism, I suggested that *reverence* for common-law liberties and the equal rights with which we are endowed by our Creator may well prove to be our most reliable support in the struggle to keep the republic we have been given. Now Grafstein, in response, maintains (1) that the case I make against rationalism "is based on a misunderstanding of decision theory and rational choice"; and (2) that "even if the verdict against rationalism is nonetheless true, this does not by itself justify the endorsement of revelation as a higher or supplementary means to wisdom." He devotes only a concluding paragraph to the latter charge, directing his greatest effort toward establishing the former.

Rationality and Dominance

Grafstein lodges three objections to my use of decision theory in interpreting Homer's *Odyssey*, contending (1) that "decision theory . . . does not recommend the principle of dominance in this kind of case"; (2) that my representation of the crewmen's choice situation is faulty; and (3) that my emphasis on commensurability as the crux of reason is inaccurate, at least as concerns modern decision theory. Let us consider these objections in order.

Is my use of strategic dominance in describing the crewmen's irreverent decision appropriate "in this kind of case"? Notice that the issue here calls for an interpretation of the specific circumstances presented in the *Odyssey*. The critical question, as

Grafstein agrees, concerns the independence of the gods' decision to cooperate in punishing the crewmen from the crewmen's decision to slaughter the cattle. Grafstein addresses the issue of independence but his volleys miss their mark and, as we shall see, merely trace tangents to the central point. The problem is that Grafstein shows little interest in the specific circumstances that constitute this case. He dismisses specific textual evidence, which I cited to support my formulations, as "unclear to this nonexpert"; and he asserts, without any reference to the relevant data -- the speeches in Homer's poem -- that the necessary independence between the decisions of the gods and the crewmen is "difficult to imagine." Now, the independence condition is satisfied, in plain English, as long as it is not the crewmen's decision itself that causes divine cooperation, or more strongly, if other gods are as likely not to cooperate as they are to cooperate with Helios in punishing Odysseus' crewmen. This, I submit, is not at all difficult to imagine. Cooperation is under no circumstances to be taken for granted among Homeric gods. On the contrary, factiousness is their most notorious characteristic. But we need not leave the disposition of this issue at the level of imagination. There is, as I have already indicated, specific textual evidence to support a positive claim for independence (p. 507). In the lines I cited, Helios delivers a powerful threat to Zeus, chief of the gods. Helios declares that unless the other gods cooperate and punish Odysseus' crewmen to avenge his cattle, he will leave his appointed station and go instead into Hades and shine for the dead. Now, it seems to me self-evident that Helios would not have resorted to threats had he expected the gods to cooperate in the punishment of the crewmen's sacrilege. Helios supposes the gods' cooperation is not to be taken for

granted, *regardless of what the crewmen have done*. In other words, he sees the gods' decision to cooperate with him as independent of the men's action. This conclusion is confirmed by Zeus's response in the sequel. For Zeus takes Helios' threat seriously. He urges Helios not to depart and promises him in exchange that he will punish the Ithakans immediately by hurling a thunderbolt to split their ship into little pieces. It is finally Helios' threat, not the crewmen's sacrilege, that invokes Zeus's punishment (see *Odyssey* 12.382-88).

By Grafstein's own admission, the demonstration of independence suffices to undermine his objection to the use of strategic dominance of this case. But a miracle intervenes. From the ashes of Know-Nothingism concerning the plain speech of Helios and Zeus there arises a veritable phoenix among decision theorists. Grafstein rehearses at length (and with full *apparatus criticus*) his misgivings with the scholarly literature on Newcomb's Problem. If Grafstein is more interested in Newcomb's Problem than he is in Homer's *Odyssey*, that is, of course, his privilege. But if in opposition to my argument he means to assert the *relevance* of Newcomb's Problem (with its inherent violation of the independence condition) to the case of Odysseus' crewmen, then he assumes the responsibility for a more careful study of the substantive details of Homer's story than he has thus far undertaken. Certainly, if one does not understand the "kind of case" *presented by Homer*, one is in no position to dictate appropriate theoretical devices for its analysis.

Representation of the Problem

Next, Grafstein claims that I misrepresent the crewmen's choice situation by leaving all but secular considerations out of

their calculus. I expressly stated that I constructed the decision matrix describing the crewmen's choice situation "directly out of the alternatives and consequences as they are formulated in the text" (p. 496). Thus Grafstein's quarrel is really with Eurylochos and the rest of the crewmen, who all assent to Eurylochos' formulation of the problem. The real problem, however, is that Grafstein fails to grasp the significance of this assent. He considers the crewmen's assent merely a tactical blunder. As a result, he holds that "the crew could reveal their preference but not their reverence" -- as if the matter of their reverence remains unsettled. I maintained, however, that it is precisely the crewmen's assent to Eurylochos' characterization of their decision problem, *as being amenable to commensuration in the first place*, that testifies conclusively to their culpable irreverence. The crewmen err in treating the divine sanction of Helios' cattle as though it were simply a signal of the price charged by the gods for Thrinakian roast beef. They carelessly transgress the limits imposed by the sacred upon rational commensuration. This rationalistic cast of mind, which recognizes no bounds to commensuration and thus holds nothing sacred, is what Homer condemns as reckless.

Commensurability

In a third attempt to establish his thesis, Grafstein opposes my observation that commensuration is central to modern as well as classical conceptions of reason. Although he has no quarrel with the accuracy of this observation as it bears upon ancient thinkers, he is vehement in his denial of its validity for modern decision theorists. His argument, however, supports neither the denial nor its vehemence. For I agree that the "assumption of commensurability" is

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questioned by some of the most thoughtful decision theorists. The problem is that Grafstein misconstrues the point of their questioning. He mistakenly supposes that it somehow concerns whether commensuration is, in fact, the characteristic *modus operandi* of reason. He has confused what the "assumption of commensurability" means. The authors he cites do not, in fact, deny the role of commensuration in reason but only whether all objects of human choice should be assumed to be commensurable. In other words, the authors Grafstein cites are pointing out the fallacy of imposing a scheme of commensuration upon matters that are not amenable to commensuration. In this respect these decision theorists are to be applauded for avoiding precisely the recklessness for which Homer blames Odysseus' crewmen. I accordingly credited Elster (1979, 125) and others for accepting the existence of incommensurability "as defining limits to their rational choice theory of politics" (p. 508).

Grafstein counters by pointing out that incommensurability does not "imply limits on rational thinking about the world." His argument is that choice without commensurability is not irrational. Now if one stipulates a different, and considerably scaled down, conception of rationality from the one I argued for in my essay, it would indeed follow that choice without commensuration is not irrational. But what is new in this? I already made this point in reference to Achilles' preference for the most miserable of human lives over being king of the dead: "Achilles' preference, like all lexicographic orderings, does not violate transitivity. Lexicographic preferences are rational in this purely ordinal sense, though they preclude rational comparisons in the more meaningful sense of reason as commensuration" (p. 507). One may indeed

say that "rational thinking" about the world remains possible apart from commensurability, if one is interested in maintaining a thesis at all costs. But it should give us pause to note that the cost paid for this stipulation is by no means insubstantial; "thinking" is now to be understood as restricted to checks for transitivity or consistency. As against my observation that commensuration is the hallmark of reason, this view would imply that the enforcement of consistency is reason's characteristic function. In short, it seems to me that Grafstein's defense of rationalism rests, ironically, upon a conception of reason that does not give reason its due credit. I hold reason in higher esteem, notwithstanding my criticism of rationalism.

Revelation

Grafstein in a final paragraph elaborates his contention that "even if the verdict against rationalism is nonetheless true, this does not by itself justify the endorsement of revelation as a higher or supplementary means to wisdom." He notes that claims about the sacred should not be accepted as true "just because reason is unable to prove or disprove them." I heartily agree. Moreover, if this is what Grafstein means by "automatic," then his assertion that revelation is "no automatic antidote to the real limits of reason" strikes me as singularly uncontroversial. Who, really, would disagree? Why this failure, then, to join any serious issue? The problem is that Grafstein is operating here with a surprisingly crude notion of revelation. Consider his *coup de grace*, the contention that science provides a better account of creation than does revelation. Note that in promoting this contest, Grafstein assumes without argument (1) that the questions that

science seeks to answer are the same as those toward which biblical revelation is directed, and (2) that the interpretation of Scripture that he finds antagonistic to science is the correct interpretation. There is ample reason, it seems to me, to dispute these assumptions. Grafstein's view of the opposition between science and faith presupposes a degree of convergence of purpose that simply does not exist. Broadly speaking, modern science aims at prediction and control; while faith, it may be said, is directed toward discerning God's providence and will. This difference in purpose should be kept in mind in any attempt to pit modern science against the Bible. Besides, even the most literal reading of Genesis need not conclude, against the scientifically established geological record, that all of creation took place in six solar days. After all, the sun was not itself created until the fourth "day." Thus the meaning of "creation day" in Genesis is unclear and requires interpretation, an interpretation obviously different from the one presupposed in Grafstein's account.

I will resist the temptation to delve further into the serious issues to which Grafstein's concluding remarks merely nod a distant greeting. My essay, after all, is an interpretation of the *Odyssey*, not the Bible. I suggested that a revelation, or noetic insight, brings about a decisive change of heart in Odysseus. Homer presents this change of heart and the reverence that accompanies it as the critical factor in Odysseus' heroic return to home and throne. Nevertheless, Odysseus remains for Homer, and for Homer's audience, the quintessential man of reason. Thus the very fact that it is *Odysseus* who acknowledges the limits of commensuration stands as an impressive, though admittedly not a conclusive, argument for the existence of these limits. It would be as wrong, however, to close one's

mind to the impressiveness of this argument as it would be to suppose that it, taken alone, is conclusive. In this spirit, and with the tools of decision theory, I recounted the story of Odysseus as the Homeric case of (to paraphrase Hume) a thinker "turning the weapons of reason against the rationalists." I hoped as well to warn against the self-destructive rationalistic tendencies present in our own commercial republic. But, in the last analysis, it must be admitted that what Homer taught and what we find beneficial are not, for these reasons alone, to be certified as true (though once again the evidence is impressive). Nevertheless, I consider the truth of Homer's teaching -- once we correctly grasp what that teaching is -- to be the most important question. It is all the more regrettable, therefore, that Grafstein's comments do not more successfully join this issue.

DARRELL DOBBS

Marquette University

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