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RICHARD SEAFORD: *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India—A Historical Comparison*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020. XV, 369 pp. ISBN 978-1-108-49955-2. £ 29,99.

FREIBERGER (2018) has proposed manners of classifying (i) the configuration of comparative studies and (ii) the comparative process. He compares the “illuminative mode” with the “taxonomic mode”. The former is asymmetric in that it uses the illuminating item mainly for that purpose, but without describing it as detailed as the illuminated one. In contrast, the taxonomic mode is symmetric in describing two or several items that shed light on each other in similar detail. SEAFORD’S new book is written in the taxonomic mode as the title of his book indicates.

That the book undertakes such a symmetrical method says something about the overall ambition and style of SEAFORD’S project. SEAFORD has a long and distinguished career as a classicist of Greek culture. But he resists the urge to play to his strengths and thereby read ancient Indian texts through the conceptual and methodological lenses of the western heritage. In fact, such an “illuminative” approach wouldn’t serve SEAFORD’S wider ambition to link the origins of philosophy to the socio-economic emergence of money. To advance this wider thesis, the Indian

texts would have to offer independent support for a discernable relationship between the emergence of money and the origins of philosophy. Simply illuminating the Greek context further with analogies to India won't do. SEAFORD has to take the longer and steeper approach of reading Indian texts on their own terms, and the resulting book is the culmination of years of effort to do so.

Any reader of SEAFORD's book will see how careful the author develops his theses. This emeritus professor of Ancient Greek has spent several years reading (translations of) the Indian sources and the secondary literature. With regards to India, his book is a very deep engagement with the writings of Jan HEESTERMAN, Johannes BRONKHORST, and others.<sup>1</sup> However, the reader is to be warned that SEAFORD's book is very difficult. On the positive side, classicists and indologists are likely to learn a lot or, at the very least, will get very interesting perspectives. Whatever one's views on the execution of specific arguments, the core project itself represents a bold but responsible model of comparative studies.

In the first line of the "Preface", SEAFORD positions this new book as a follow up to SEAFORD (2004), "Money and the Early Greek Mind". Specifically he regards his prior socio-economic explanation of the emergence

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<sup>1</sup> While SEAFORD has discussed important issues with eminent indologists (such as Patrick Olivelle or Stephanie Jamison), he should have engaged a Sanskritist to correct some typos. SEAFORD consistently writes *yajāmana* for correct *yajamāna*. His anglicisation of only a few Sanskrit terms seems inconsistent. SEAFORD writes "atman" and "prana" for *ātman* and *prāṇa*, respectively. Then, one obtains passages like "more about prana, *manas* and atman as alternative embodiments of the subject" (p. 118).

of philosophy in archaic Greece as “vindicated here by its power to explain the striking similarities (and differences) between the Greek and Indian intellectual revolutions.” (p. ix) Thus in order to evaluate whether this book succeeds on its own terms, one needs a basic familiarity with SEAFORD’S overarching project.

But new readers need not first undertake a study of SEAFORD’S many earlier works prior to reading the new book. Throughout the book SEAFORD weaves in elements of his earlier studies of Greece and summarizes his key conclusions. “Part A: Introductory” (Chapters 1 and 2) and “Part E: Conclusion” (Chapters 16 and 17) as well as “Part B: “The Earliest Texts” (Chapters 3 and 4) all specifically compare Greek and Indian texts, contexts, and ideas. “Part D: Unified Self, Monism and Cosmic Cycle in Greece” (Chapters 11-15) concentrate on the Greek context with occasional reference to India. Similarly, “Part C: Unified Self, Monism and Cosmic Cycle in India” focuses on India with occasional reference to Greece. But as the parallel titles of the respective sections on India and Greece indicate, SEAFORD is not after a side-by-side juxtaposition of the two traditions; rather he offers a genuine comparison in order to draw out of each tradition themes and insights that would otherwise be overlooked but here stand out in bold relief either by their similarity or difference to the other tradition.

What this comparative reading of the two ancient traditions yields is the following bold idea: one important driving force behind the development of philosophy in ancient Greece and ancient India is “monetisation”, i.e., the “development towards a single entity (money) whose only or main function is to be a general means of payment and exchange and a general measure and store of value” (p. 17). This is indeed the common

understanding of “money” by economists. SEAFORD (p. 319) explains that monetisation may be “*endogenous* (i.e. developed within a society with little or no external influence)”. In contrast, exogenous monetisation refers to “traders, settlers, literature and art [...]”. SEAFORD is careful to note that the connection between the origins of philosophy and the emergence of money at issue in his project specifically concerns endogenous money (pp. 319-320, see also p. 31 and p. 52). Such a focus on endogenous monetisation contrasts SEAFORD’s specific interest in the connection between money and philosophy with other studies that might otherwise appear similar, like PARRY AND BLOCH’s *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, which by and large concerns exogenous monetisation.<sup>2</sup>

Likewise, SEAFORD’s specific attention to the *metaphysical* rather than the *moral* aspects of early Indian and Greek philosophy further delimits the scope of his project. SEAFORD defines the relevant sense of “philosophy” as “the attempt to explain systematically, and without relying on superhuman agency, the fundamental features of the universe and the place of humans in it” (p. 7).<sup>3</sup> Unlike the definition of money on which economists are largely in agreement, SEAFORD is well aware that “philosophy” is a highly contested term. Nevertheless he defines the term in such a way that “is the most revealing for our period” (p. 7). And it is the definition of “our period” that provides the final delimitation of SEAFORD’s project. Importantly, SEAFORD restricts himself to the roughly contemporaneous

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<sup>2</sup> PARRY AND BLOCH 1989.

<sup>3</sup> SEAFORD (2004, 175) associates “philosophy” with the ideas of (1) the universe as an intelligible order, (2) subject to the uniformity of impersonal power, which is (3) a single substance underling the plurality of things manifest to the senses.

periods from Homer to Plato and from the Rigveda to Alexander's crossing the Indus (p. 7).

Thus SEAFORD narrows his scopes to specific geographical regions (e.g. the Ganges, not the Indus valley) and historical periods (7<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), and he works with particular definitions of money and philosophy. These parameters are important because SEAFORD wants to argue that money and philosophy arose in Greece and India independently of each other and not because of the influence of one culture on another or because of another, common cause (pp. 8-16). Thus it is within these clearly defined parameters that SEAFORD makes his boldest claim: monetisation and philosophy emerge independently in ancient Greece and India "and nowhere else" (a claim made on pages 3, 7, 8, 194, and 195). (China is treated as a possible exception.) Such a conclusion is audacious and has many repercussions if it is true. For the same reasons that SEAFORD's conclusions are greeted with enthusiasm by devotees, they are also often met with hostility by critics. It is especially important then, to take a sober look at specific steps in the argument.

While detailed analysis of any one of the book's many arguments and textual interpretations is beyond the reach of a general review, to indicate the substance and style of argument we can select as representative a key intellectual development found both in India and in Greece at this particular historical juncture, namely, a philosophical shift from polytheism to monism. In his 2004 book, SEAFORD attributes this shift in philosophical orientation to the underlying socio-economic conditions of monetisation: "there is indeed, if our argument is correct, an explanation of the sixth-century adoption of monism—in the *monetisation* ... at the heart of ... economic change" (SEAFORD 2004, p. 218; see 2020, p. 320). In

this earlier book SEAFORD offers an extensive interpretation of Greek texts to track the emergence of philosophical monism at the same places and same times as the spread of money. Thus the new book attempts to do the same for India (for example, 4§E and 4§F, pp. 62-9), thereby offering independent support for the thesis that money and monism develop together. How are monetisation and monism linked in theory and where does SEAFORD find this relationship documented in the ancient Indian texts?

SEAFORD adopts the classical economic claim that money's four functions—store of value, medium of exchange, unit of account, and means of payment—bring together in one entity different processes that are otherwise distributed across various social practices. But what he adds to this familiar thought is that this social consolidation amounts to a kind of “monism”: the functions formerly fulfilled by different items, such as cows, gold, or clothes, are now performed by only one entity, perhaps stamped gold or silver coins (“money”). The question is what kind of change in worldview was associated with this change in social practice? For SEAFORD it is thus important that at the same time and in the same places as endogenous monetisation is occurring, somewhat similarly, monism came to reign Greek and Indian philosophical thinking (p. 320). As just one of many quotations in the Greek context, SEAFORD (p. 237) cites an Aeschylus fragment as an example of “personal monism”:

Zeus is aither, Zeus is earth, Zeus is sky.

Zeus is all things and whatever is above them.

Similarly, SEAFORD adduces many Indian sources that he analyzes with great care, for example “abstract monism” in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad 1.8 (p. 155):

*Brahman* is OM. This whole world is OM.<sup>4</sup>

How should we evaluate these claims and their purported textual support? Let us now revisit FREIBERGER. Under the heading of “scales of comparison”, he is concerned with how a comparative study “zooms in on the comparands”.<sup>5</sup> Central comparands in SEAFORD’s book are monetisation and philosophy as monistic developments in Greece and India. On the one hand, SEAFORD goes down to the micro levels when he discusses the textual sources in astounding detail. On the other hand, the author takes a macro-level perspective when he claims that “sacrifice” or the “power of money” is “interiorised” (p. 95). Each of these levels of analysis—the macro and the micro—are challenging, to say the least. SEAFORD’s project requires readers to navigate both at the same time: the macro-level provides an interpretive framework for the ancient texts while a careful micro-level reading of particular passages is meant to provide anchoring and textual proof for the overarching views. The result is a rich but demanding text.

Because the text is so ambitious and demanding, most readers will encounter statements that they do not find obvious. For one of us, a philosopher with a prior familiarity with SEAFORD’s earlier work on money but no background in classical India, evaluating the exegesis of the Vedas was particularly challenging. For the other, a specialist in economics

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<sup>4</sup> OLIVELLE 1998, pp. 296-297.

<sup>5</sup> FREIBERGER 2018, pp. 5-6.

with a background in Indian literature but without a prior study of SEAFORD's earlier works, it was not clear why money promotes "the development of individual property" (p. 22) or why money "tends to dissolve distinctions between groups" (p. 24). This second reviewer finds SEAFORD's definition of reciprocity (pp. 90–91) surprising. Isn't it the case that reciprocity lies at the heart of economic (or social) exchange whereas reciprocity seems to mean gift-exchange for our author? Here, so the first reviewer observes, is an instance of where SEAFORD's large body of work is both a resource and an obstacle for the reader. In the background is a notion of reciprocity treated at length in his 1994 monograph "Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City State."

Readers may have a difficult time making up their minds about whether to become a supporter of SEAFORD's theses or not. There are many insightful and convincing passages like the following one on karma and money where the author (pp. 202–203) explains:

- (1) They both have *universal power*. Karma might even be regarded as the cause of everything. [...]
- (5) Both karma and money are – despite their universality – normally acquired, owned, accumulated, exhausted and inherited by *individuals* [...].
- (6) The power of money and karma is *impersonal*. They generally influence the well-being of their owner without the intervention of any other agent, human or divine. [...]

These passages combine a tight internal logic with a creative but careful reading of ancient texts. But also, despite the caveats discussed by the author himself (chapter 16), one might try to find additional arguments against his theses. How about this one: If money was one factor behind



monist philosophies, how come that we modern people, in our thoroughly monetary world, do not, by and large, subscribe to monist philosophies (see specifically p. 319)? Indeed, such a question about “us moderns” is not addressed directly in a book about ancient India and ancient Greece. But there are indications of what SEAFORD’s answer may be:

Once money has been established (whether exogenously or endogenously), its unthinking usage is enabled by previous usage. But during the initial phase of endogenous monetisation, and during the first use of endogenous coinage, a certain mental operation may be required: to imagine the abstract value-substance – ubiquitous, permanent, omnipotent – embodied in the money (as its only or main purpose). This mental operation may, in engagement with pre-monetary cosmology, be conducive to monism. (p. 320)

The two reviewers are likely representative of the many different kinds of readers this book will appeal to in the sense that we have different intuitions about what such an argument entails and how convincing it is. For now, we will not stop trying to find arguments for and against SEAFORD’s bold, sweeping, and tremendously well-argued claims. Some of these arguments may be found by following SEAFORD’s lead into a renewed and deeper study of ancient Indian and Greek texts. But some other arguments may be available by looking elsewhere, perhaps using material from the Old Testament or the ancient Near East. Expanding outwards the comparison beyond Greece and India would bring SEAFORD’s work into contact with other ongoing scholarly work which grounds the emergence of a distinctive philosophical enterprise within a sophisticated analysis of socio-economic conditions, such as, for example, MARC VAN MIEROOP’s (2016) “Philosophy before the Greeks: The

Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia”. Such comparisons could corroborate SEAFORD’S overarching thesis that money and philosophy emerge together, but it may complicate the claim that they do so in India and Greece “and nowhere else”.

## References

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