

A.C. Graham on Rationalism, Irrationalism, and Anti-Rationalism (“Aware Spontaneity”) W.J. Coats

This essay examines the views of the 20th century British sinologist-philosopher, A.C. Graham, on the differences between anti-rationalism” and (1) “irrationalism”, and (2) “rationalism” as well, as laid out in his major philosophic work, *Reason and Spontaneity* (1985).¹ Although Graham draws upon the insights of the classic 4th century BCE work *Zhuangzi* as inspiration, he does not make much of the comparison explicitly in *Reason and Spontaneity*, not wanting (one assumes) to detract from his philosophical arguments.

Although the latter is a wide-ranging work drawing upon comparisons and contrasts far and wide to make a case for what Graham calls “aware spontaneity” as the most appropriate mixture of reason and unreflective inclination, this brief essay will focus upon differences between what Graham calls the “Reason as Guide” approach (e.g. Zhuangzi, Graham) and the “Reason as a Master” approach (e.g. Kant, Descartes, Plato) to action, with both distinguished from a romantic, irrationalist approach cultivating spontaneous impulse for its sheer intensity (e.g. de Sade, Nietzsche). This seems a most fitting subject and focus for this series in Enlightenment criticism, and, in conclusion, a very brief comparison of similarities (and differences) in Graham’s treatment will be made with that of Michael Oakeshott, whose critique of rationalism was examined in the first volume of this edited work and who also drew upon ancient Daoist thought in constructing his critique.

Graham’s philosophic project in *Reason and Spontaneity*, a continuation of his earlier work *The Problem of Value*, 1961, is to articulate a general view of the ground of all values (moral as well as aesthetic) in the single imperative “be *aware* of all relevant factors” or as Zhuangzi would say “mirror things as they are.” Graham then applies this general claim analytically to a host of apparent polarities such as reason and spontaneity, rationalism and irrationalism, science and poetry, “Is and Ought,” and so on. This essay will focus on the rationalism – irrationalism divide, and use it to refer to some of the other Western dichotomies where relevant. Graham’s philosophic project and his academic focus on Chinese Daoist thought come together in his attempt to use the thought of a more naïve culture to attempt to repair some of the damage done to Western philosophy by the modern rationalist, analytic reduction of

human motivation to rule following, excluding spontaneous inclination as an important component. For Graham, logical analysis was both the West's contribution to human awareness, and in its contemporary form, its blindness, such that it can no longer insightfully address the question, "how should I live." To say all of this historically, Graham thinks that at about the same time that Greek civilization began to concentrate on logical analysis, Chinese culture moved in a different direction to deal with the chaos of conflicting values it was experiencing, and the contemporary Western world could profit from inspecting its insights, especially those of the composite, Daoist work, *Zhuangzi* (*Chuang-tzu*), in its disputations with other schools of thought, including Confucianism (moral, rule-following rationalism).

A good way of proceeding is to linger a bit over the first few pages of *Reason and Spontaneity* in order to get a sense of Graham's phraseology and watch him define the goals and terms of the book. He begins by asserting the "we men of reason have been misunderstanding the relation between reason and spontaneity," and, in particular, with the thought that "even our most deeply considered choices of ends are often ... choices between goals which are themselves spontaneous." (Graham, 1985, p. vli) He defines "spontaneous" as "all activity which is not the result of considered choices," and gives as examples of unquestionably spontaneous those aspects of life which reason criticizes and attempts to correct, but which are not initially chosen:

... the physical processes of birth, breathing, digestion, orgasm, death; the emotions; desires and aversions ..., reveries and fantasies, instances of love, mystical illumination, intellectual discovery, artistic creation and contemplation.
(Graham, 1985, p. 7)

And, he suggests that in spite of 18th and 19th century attacks upon conscious reason, we "*are not yet accustomed to thinking of ourselves as primarily spontaneous beings*, whose intellect ... can do nothing but choose between the directions in which we found ourselves being spontaneously pulled." Indicating this is clearly his own view, Graham goes on to say that many problems "reveal themselves as in a new light" by adopting this perspective, i.e., that the obligation "to be aware of things as they objectively are, will commit me to prefer the goal to which I am drawn when most aware." (Graham, 1985, p. vii) The plan of the book then is to follow the implications

of this idea through its various themes, including the differences among rationalism, irrationalism and anti-rationalism. “A simple idea defines itself most clearly when exposed to a rapid display from all angles.”

Let us turn now to Graham’s defense of the single imperative in human choice, “be aware of all relevant factors.” Part of his intent here is to deal with the long-standing Western rationalist critique of the role of spontaneous awareness in human conduct as “romantic” and “irrational.” The “irrationalist” as Grahams sees him/her is impressed with or drawn to the *intensity* of spontaneous choice, for its own sake, and, for the most part, is “aware” only in the single case where the irrationalist aspects of human choice are objectively present and relevant. (Here the rationalist view, is at a disadvantage in its inability to “mirror things as they are.”)

Graham wishes to distinguish the irrationalist (e.g. de Sade, Nietzsche) from the “anti-rationalist (such as himself.) who uses analytic reason to guide spontaneous impulse by taking into account all relevant factors, including the critical analysis of opposing views. (In this sense, the anti-rationalist is an egalitarian). As Graham says, the anti-rationalist reasons only so much, but no more, than will aid in achieving fuller situational awareness. The anti-rationalist thus follows the “Reason as Guide” approach in choosing appropriate action.

Graham also, obviously, wishes to distinguish the anti-rationalist from the “Rationalist,” (e.g. Plato, Descartes, Kant) who wishes to isolate logical thought and analysis from all physical process and causation, and follows what Graham calls the “Reason as Master” approach to choice and action. He has various criticisms of this approach, which he generally characterizes as that of an isolated rational ego pursuing “antecedently” formulated models and projects requiring rule-following as the instigator of action. (Graham, 1985, p. 159) He does not spend much time on the Rationalist or “Reason as Master” approach, since his major concern is to distinguish the anti-rationalist from the irrationalist in order to deflect the Rationalist critique of Daoist aware spontaneity as “romanticism.” However, his major criticism is that the Rationalist does not understand the origins of his own goals which are usually spontaneous pulls, and often invokes rationalist models and rules in the wrong context and at the wrong time, with destructive effects. Graham’s account of Rationalist “values” here is reminiscent of Max Weber’s account of the

mysterious and multifarious sources of human values, but unlike Weber, Graham thinks it profitable to analyze critically these sources from the standpoint of “awareness.” In this limited sense, Graham’s anti-rationalist is something of a rationalist, using logic and observation to investigate the origins and soundness of human goals, where a more skeptical person might simply let the mystery be. We might also observe at this juncture, that Graham’s account of the anti-rationalist view of using reason as critic, but not instigator, of action, bears similarity to the views of Michael Oakeshott on balanced morality and practical skill, (of which more below).

By way of delving more deeply into Graham’s account of both anti-rationalism and irrationalism, let us look at his lengthy accounts of Nietzsche as illustrative of the latter, and Zhuangzi of the former. Although Graham uses Nietzsche as illustrative of the irrationalist view of reason and truth, he concludes his lengthy analysis by suggesting that there are two conflicting themes in Nietzsche’s works, one actually pulling in the direction of anti-rationalism, the other toward irrationalism and eventually Nazism (an unambiguous instance of irrationalism). (Graham, 1985, p_)

Graham’s analysis relies primarily upon ideas from Nietzsche “mature” period, *Beyond Good and Evil*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, *Ecce Homo*, and *The Will to Power*. The first theme he identifies is the emphasis on primitive instinct or will to dominate which Nietzsche occasionally glorifies, and his criticisms of Christian and modern egalitarian moralities as psychologically unhealthy in their resentment and self-hatred. (“It is only among *decadents* that *pity* is called a virtue”) (Graham, 1985, pp. 171, 165) The other theme, especially in the *Genealogy to Morals*, is Nietzsche’s movement in the direction of scientific-like objectivity in the analysis of the historic causes for the decline of aristocratic values, and the rise of “slave moralities”, including democracy and socialism, an instance of a viewpoint bordering on anti-rationalism, not irrationalism.

What are, then, the irrationalist features for Graham of Nietzsche’s first theme (the instinct to dominate.)? There are two salient ones. The first is Nietzsche’s questioning of the value of truth itself (“why not rather untruth?”), as in his criticisms of the “free thinkers” of his own time who thought they had escaped morality by rejecting religion in the name of truth (“the

latest and purest expression of the ascetic ideal”). (Graham, 1985 p. 164) Also, in his citing of the esoteric teaching of the Society of Assassins who confronted the Christian crusaders:

‘Nothing is true’; everything is permitted.’ Here we have real freedom, for the notion of truth itself has been disposed of. (Graham, 1985, p. 164)

The other sin against awareness in Nietzsche’s first theme, is the caveat that the strong should insulate themselves, lest they be infected themselves with the “un-virtues” of pity and compassion, and come to doubt their right to healthy life affirmation. As Graham says here paraphrasing Nietzsche, the “proper relation of higher to lower is not sympathy, but scorn ... he is in favor of a *deliberate shutting off of awareness*.” (Graham, 1985, p. 165)

Now, what are the features of Nietzsche’s other, more “scientific” theme, when he appears to stand outside his subject and comment objectively (bordering for Graham on anti-rationalism rather than irrationalism)? First, in his final (and autobiographical) work Ecce Homo, Nietzsche defends truth (at least for philosophers such as himself) as the ultimate value:

... truth .. became for me more and more the real measure of value ... Yes to life is not only the highest insight, it is also ... the insight ... maintained by truth and knowledge (Graham 1985, p. 169)

As Graham notes, and as is obvious by inspection, this is a dilemma for Nietzsche because it implies that there is an aspect to pursuit of truth which is more than simply will to power and species preservation.

Another anti-rationalist (vs irrationalist) aspect of Nietzsche’s thought is his aware concession to the contributions made by “slave moralities” to knowledge and the deepening of the human soul, as in the idea of “Caesar with the soul of Christ”, or his comment that the Prussian aristocracy could use an infusion of both biblical and commercial values. And yet another instance of objective analysis over spontaneous instinct is Nietzsche’s implied expectation that slave moralities should defer to master moralities in the interest of species preservation, rather than follow their own local instincts and despise them. Graham concludes his

analysis of Nietzsche's two themes by observing that it was the more primitive, instinctive, irrationalist one which led to an unambiguous instance of irrationalism in the Nazi ideology.

As a lengthy illustration of anti-rationalism Graham gives us his academic specialty, the composite 4th century BCE Chinese Daoist work, *Zhuangzi* (also *Chuang-tzu*), a highly skeptical viewpoint which took shape in disputations with other classical Chinese schools of thought, notably Confucianism. Graham notes that all schools of ancient Chinese thought agreed upon spontaneity as the instigator of action, to be tempered or measured by wisdom, but differed over the nature of wisdom, with Confucianism emphasizing rule-following as the wise approach and Zhuangzi explicitly critical of this kind of moral rationalism. In brief, Graham depicts Zhuangzi as offering a view of appropriate action in any situation as deriving from the single imperative to "mirror things as they are," or as Graham likes to say, "be aware of all relevant factors." On Zhuangzi's skeptical view there are no fixed rules, given the shifting fluidity of experience and the limits of human language to capture it, even momentarily. Nor is there any clear border between self and other (non-self), nor between apparent polarities. (Graham, 1985, p. 187) The wise approach to action varies from case to case, relying on trained awareness to indicate appropriate choice of action to give measure to spontaneous pulls;

Within yourself, no fixed positions:
Things as they take shape disclose themselves.
Moving, be like water,
Still be like a mirror,
Respond like an echo.

Said differently, appropriate choice of action by the wise person is not a matter of the rational ego selecting from among antecedently established alternatives and/or moral platitudes, but of an immediate follow-on (such as an echo, so to speak) deriving from unhindered and undistracted clarity about each particular situation which arises. In fact, Graham notes, in Zhuangzi's vision, the sage does not even explicitly decide on courses of action, but is always only "about to" decide before acting in a seamless move from implicit to explicit. Zhuangzi often uses the experience of skilled craftsmen such as meat-carvers, wheelwrights and carpenters to

illustrate the “knack” for skills which can only be acquired (if at all) in patient apprenticeship, not through learning and applying general rules.

How, then, does Zhuangzi’s “anti-rationalism” differ from Nietzsche’s “irrationalist” side, according to Graham? He summarizes his summary of Zhuangzi by noting two stages in Zhuangzi’s thought: first the idea that all rules of conduct are themselves groundless; second that the closest thing to a “ground” for Zhuangzi’s skepticism is the “single imperative” to “mirror things as they are,” or to “be aware” of all relevant factors. He then contrasts this anti-rationalism with Nietzsche’s irrationalist mood, by noting that for Zhuangzi, without doubt, the world must be taken as it objectively is at any particular moment, not as it pleases one to see it, if one is to be in accord with “the way” (or the Dao). In contemporary terms (not Graham’s) this would be to say that Zhuangzi would reject Nietzsche’s “perspectivism” as not fully aware, in failing to appreciate the “neutrality of viewpoints which forbids one to give preference to my own,” except on critical grounds of greater awareness. (Graham, 1985, p. 188) Nietzsche, of course, might reply that his ground is to “be aware that the ‘will to power’ is the ground of all grounds, but, as we have seen, in his more reflective mood Nietzsche cannot sustain this view, and lapses back into analytic attempts in accounting for historical causality. (And even if Nietzsche were to reply that the “will to untruth” is only accurate for the masses, he cannot apply this to his own case and still believe in his own insights without reducing them to merely his own will to power).

By way of a critical assessment of Graham’s account of the differences among anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and rationalism, let us briefly look at its similarities to Michael Oakeshott’s critique of rationalism, which was examined in the first volume of this edited work on Enlightenment criticism. My general view is that Graham is soundest and most relevant where the two critiques overlap, although he also can be very interesting in exploring in detail issues which Oakeshott by-passes, such as the difference between anti-rationalism and irrationalism. (a subject Oakeshott does not explicitly discuss).

Both twentieth-century British thinkers (who apparently had no knowledge of one another’s work) think the bases of both healthy morality and practical skill, reside in the proper relationship between spontaneous pulls (Oakeshott’s “pursuit of intimations”) and critical

reflection on them. That relationship is one in which the implicit “pull” is the originator of action, with analytic intellect the critic of those “pulls,” except, as Oakeshott notes, in times of emergency when a tradition of behavior is forced to privilege critical reflection over implicit action, in the interest of the preservation of the tradition itself. (Oakeshott develops this theme in the 1949 essay “The Tower of Babel,” where he notes that Christianity started out as a living tradition of behavior, but was forced into primary reliance upon an explicit theology as barbarian invasions destroyed the coherence of both classical and Christian living traditions.) (Oakeshott, 1962, pp. 61-62) And both thinkers also see the healthiest approach to action as dependent on a fluid and minimalist self, fluctuating from moment to moment in an evolving relationship with each particular situation, versus the rationalist view of a largely contextless ego choosing among antecedently formulated projects and rules as the initiator of action. In my view, Graham is at his clearest and soundest on this subject, when his views coincide well with Oakeshott’s and with both drawing on Chinese Daoist thought and its criticism of moral rationalism. In my view, however, Graham is at his weakest in characterizing his own (Western) tradition as rigidly rationalist, and failing to appreciate and develop sufficiently in his account, its own appreciation of human creativity, understood as a fluid interaction between a “how” and “what” of activity and thought, with neither antecedent to the other. Let us unpack this idea briefly.

Implicitly throughout, Graham follows the characteristic view of Daoist scholars that the Judeo-Christian account of God as the unchanging and perfect primary causal agent is the source of the Western paradigm of the detached moral agent shaping his/her life in accord with purposes and designs. This is then typically contrasted with the classical Chinese commitment to a mutable, developmental process which assumes no separation of essence and attribute, and of a person understood as “the compounding narrative of what one does”²

Now, Oakeshott, drawing upon the distinction in late medieval theology between a created being or thing, and a crafted being or thing, would fall between the cracks of these two stark alternatives, and in my view Graham is remiss in not developing these medieval insights as a contribution, within the Western tradition, of what he calls the “Reason as Guide” approach. The critical distinction here in Western philosophy and theology is that in a created being or thing, existence is not accidental to essence, but adds to it, as in Anselm’s well-known

“ontological proof” for the existence of God. This idea also implies that a created being or object has no telos or purpose known independently and antecedently of its historical unfolding. This viewpoint eventually displaced medieval Aristotelian teleology, and cosmology, making possible the rise of modern science, which as a mixture of both Greek rationalist and biblical empiricist insights, can arguably be said to have advanced Western “awareness” beyond what either of those civilizational inheritances was able to achieve by itself. And of one were to search within the Western tradition for insight about the danger and destructiveness of rationalist Cartesianism, one could also discuss the well-known observations of Edmund Burke on the blindnesses of the French revolutionaries toward living traditions as embodiments and repositories of a fuller and more insightful wisdom than can be found in rationalist codes of any sort; or Vico’s criticisms of the effects of Cartesian algebraic geometry in the reduction of the mind (just to cite two examples).

In assessing the respective contributions of Graham and Oakeshott to the Western anti-rationalist critique of the blindness of abstract moral, political, and practical rationalism, we might say that while Graham goes more deeply into the Daoist critique in the composite work, *Zhuangzi*, Oakeshott manages to draw artfully upon certain Daoist and Confucian ideas about the unreflective springs of morality and practical skill without making them seem alien and exotic, in a fashion similar to Cicero’s accounts of Greek philosophy for a Roman audience. Oakeshott approximates the Daoist “situational self”³ (which Graham describes in detail) by polishing up the unreflective springs of the morality of a tradition of behavior; by critiquing the Cartesian view of the mind as a neutral instrument detachable from its historically acquired experiences; and by treating the border between “self” and non-self” as variable, depending on the particular way or mode of being active at the moment. And, arguably, Graham’s most original contribution to the critique of Western rationalism is his detailed account of the differences between anti-rationalism (“Reason as Guide) and irrationalism. Interestingly, Graham’s view here finds support in a mostly unlikely place (which Graham may not have known of) - - the reflections of the philosopher of science Alfred North Whitehead on human creativity. In his 1929 book, *The Function of Reason*, Whitehead argued that the biological function of speculative intellect and logical analysis is to contain and give order to the human creative impulse toward novelty. (Whitehead, 1929)

NOTES

1. For a lengthy, sympathetic yet critical review of *Reason and Spontaneity* see Yukio Kachi (1990, pp. 389-398), whose main criticism is that Graham so weakens the concepts of end, choice, reason and awareness that he cannot distinguish human (from non-human) ways of being aware. Kachi also cites sources which question some of Graham's use of *The Zhuangzi* in expounding his idea of aware spontaneity.
2. For an instance of this view, see Ames, 1998, p. 226.
3. See, for more on this, Botwinik (2011), especially p. 140: "The optimal self for Oakeshott is one characterized by a reduced self-consciousness that allows for the play of different impulses and an ongoing process of self-discovery." See, also, for parallels between Oakeshott and Zhuangzi (and Confucius) the essays by Cheung in Coats and Cheung, 2012.

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