

Walter Burkert:

How to Learn about Souls.
The Derveni Papyrus and Democritus.
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The Papyrus of Derveni has been called the most important discovery for Greek philology in the 20th century: a burnt papyrus scroll from the 4th century B.C., one third of which has been preserved in a carbonized state. The discovery has happened nearly 50 years ago; and for 45 years I have been working on this fascinating text. Yet it is only 4 years since a real edition has appeared (2006), not in Thessaloniki where the papyrus is kept, but in Italy, thanks to the diplomacy of Maria Serena Funghi.

It was clear from the first fragmentary publication of 1964 or rather 1965, that this is mainly a commentary on the theogony of Orpheus, based on the philosophy of Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia, i.e. Presocratic. The name of Heraclitus has turned up later (IV 5). My first study appeared in 1968. I stated, and I think this still holds, that the ‚Presocratic’ author was writing about 400 B.C., dealing with a sixth century text. The quotations from the Orphic theogony have laid a new foundation for Orphic Studies (Fr. 2-18 in Bernabé’s new *Orphicorum Fragmenta*, 2004). My interpretation of this strange yet highly interesting text has been published in 2006. The quotations start in column 7. Fragments of the first 6 columns have successively accumulated, but, forming the outside of the scroll, they are badly damaged and desperately lacunose. No wonder modern judgments as to this part of the text are widely, or wildly, divergent. Still this would be the beginning of the book and should tell us about the author’s intention, interest, and strategy. Suggestive catchwords to be read are *Erinyes* (I, II, III), *Hadou deiná* (‚terrors of the Underworld’, V), *daimones* (III, VI), *oracles* (V), *mystai* (VI), – but what does the author say about these? Is he preaching, is he criticizing, is he just reporting? Is he an Orphic initiation priest or even a *mágos* himself, is he an ‚Anaxagorean’, a ‚Presocratic’

rationalist, is he kind of a historian? Col. IV quotes Heraclitus by name with two famous fragments which are now linked together (B 12; B 94); but what is the point?

Let me first sketch the author's position on the basis of the better preserved later columns. I find the author has a concept of 'reality', *prágmata* (XIII 5), *eónta*, which can be adequately transmitted by speech: an *ónoma* can be 'adequate', *prospherés*, or even *prospheréstaton* (XVIII 8). This 'reality' of our world is described in the terms of Anaxagoras/ Diogenes/Leucippus: The world of reality always was there, there is no real *génésis*; but things were mixed, in fine particles (*leptomerés*), dominated by air which can also be called 'god' or 'Zeus', or 'Intelligence' (*Noûs*); thus there has evolved the structure of our world, and corresponding 'names', in accordance with the changing interrelations of real things (*eónta*). The author is quite sure as to his own 'knowledge' about reality, he is looking down at those 'many' people who do not know, who misunderstand, who suffer from *amathía*; these people do not know even what they are practicing themselves (XX), they do not know the full meaning of their own words (XVIII 5). The author will help to 'learn' and 'recognize' (*manthánein, ginóskein*).

But what about those catchwords about underworld, mysteries and *mágoi* in the earlier columns? I start from Col. V, where I find at least a few consecutive sentences with clear meaning: „... they disbelieve, not recognizing dreams nor the single instances of other realities by which examples they might believe. For overcome by gluttonness and other pleasure, they do not learn nor believe. Disbelief and ignorance are the same thing. For if they do not learn nor recognize, it is impossible that they should believe, even when seeing...“ 'Disbelief' recurs in the following line, and 'it appears' is what is left from the last.

I presume the author is speaking here in his own name. His insistence is on 'learning', 'knowledge', and 'belief', in contrast to 'ignorance' and 'disbelief' (*amathie, apistie*). People, 'normal' people, fail to get knowledge on account of disbelief: The fault is theirs, motivated by an unruly life. In contrast to this,

there is a chance for knowledge, through dreams, and by other ‚examples’ or ‚single facts’ (*paradeigmata*).

In contrast to this, people use oracles; this is mentioned before: People go there to ask, and to ask again, in relation to ‚terrors of Hades’. These people are disregarding the real sources of ‚belief’.

It is helpful to realize that the author is applying, with slight variation, a sentence of Heraclitus (B 86), about ‚the Divine’ (τὸ θεῖον): „on account of disbelief it escapes so that it is not recognized,“ ἀπιστίη διαφυγάνει μὴ γινώσκεσθαι. These are nearly the same words, for the same effect: through ἀπιστίη men block their own chances of knowledge; they should just look instead, and pay attention. We may confer the sentence of Heraclitus B 1, the invective against normal people who ‚prove to be unexperienced while they do experience’ reality as Heraclitus is going to describe it. Evidently for Heraclitus ‚the Divine’ is there, perhaps everywhere, everything is full of gods, according to the saying of Thales (A 22) which Heraclitus quotes in another place (A 9). The Heraclitus parallel suggests a similar understanding even for our author: There are things to be seen and to be learned which escape many people on account of disbelief.

‚Disbelief’, ἀπιστία also makes its appearance also in a famous text of Plato’s *Gorgias* (493a-d; cf. E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, 1951, 209 n.5). It is an allegorical interpretation of an underworld myth, of an Orphic myth, probably. Plato, or Socrates, refers to somebody else who ‚has spoken’ to Socrates; it is about pouring water from sieves into a leaky vessel (*pithos*), as certain souls are said to do in the underworld; this means, the explanation goes, the futile exertions of a ‚leaky’ soul that, dominated by pleasures, cannot ‚keep’ and retain knowledge, on account of ἀπιστία and forgetfulness, λήθη. This allegorizer changes the mythical Beyond into an image of reality. The word ἀπιστία has been found odd here (Dodds), but seems to recall Heraclitus B 86 once more, and is now supported by the Derveni text. Heraclitus, the Derveni text, and the Plato passage form a closely connected group about ‚non-believing’ and ‚knowledge’. I do not claim that Plato is quoting the Derveni book, but the

warning against pleasure makes a strong link. Unfortunately, in the Derveni text what could or should be learned, in contrast to disbelief, has disappeared in the following lacuna. It should be some part of reality, not immediately obvious, but attainable through observation, including dreams, and also by other 'examples'. It is 'the divine' in Heraclitus, 'the soul' in Plato. Remembering those catchwords mentioned above, we conclude it is about souls even in the Derveni text.

The following column (VI) deals with rites and teachings of *mágoi*. It leaves us at a loss whether these *mágoi* are priests of the Medes and Persians, as in Herodotus, or even Zoroastrians, or else *magos helléniséés* as treated by Cumont, or even – which has been suggested by Betegh – a group of the author himself and his like. This is about rituals and their explanation, concerning 'souls'. The author mentions 'prayer and sacrifices' and states: „The incantation of the magoi can make *daimones* who stand in the way to change place; *daimones* are in the way...“ the following words indicate some correlation between *daimones* and souls; unfortunately the lacuna of 8 letters can be filled by different supplements.

Here the enlightening parallel comes from the account of Diogenes Laertios (1,6) on the *mágoi*: „*Mágoi* are concerned with the cult of gods (and not with magic), with sacrifices and prayers, claiming that they alone are perceived“ by the gods. This is the very privilege which the Derveni text states in more detail: *Mágoi* have the power to clear the way towards the gods from some blockade, wrought by *daimones*. This shows that the *magoi* of the Derveni text belong into Greek discussions, after Herodotus; the chapter of Diogenes Laertios probably goes back to Aristotles' *Peri philosophias* and/or to the book *Magikos* ascribed to Aristotle or even to Antisthenes (Arist. Fr. 32-36 Rose). Our author goes on: „Innumerable cakes with many knobs (πολύμφαλοι) they – the *mágoi* - sacrifice, because the souls too are innumerable“ (VI 7 f.). For confirmation, the author adds: „Initiates (*mystai*) make a preliminary sacrifice to the Eumenides in the same sense as the *mágoi*; for the Eumenides are souls“ (VI 8 f.). Note these are no longer the *mágoi*, but other Greek sacrificers

compared to, and thus distinguished from the *mágoi*. Our author states that rituals of *magoi* and rituals of Greek *mystai* follow the same reason: They deal with a plurality of souls. We have no other testimony of such a ritual in the context of Greek mysteries, naming Eumenides; closest seems to be the cathartic ritual performed in the grove of the Eumenides in Sophocles, *Oedipus at Kolonos* (465-492). At any rate, the rituals described and explained imply a doctrine, imply knowledge about ‚innumerable souls’: innumerable souls, between human prayer and gods, this is taken as unquestioned reality. It seems to have the full approval of the author.

It is here that our own ‚disbelief’ will start: Shall we ‚believe’ into the reality, nay activity of *daimones* and ‚innumerable souls’, whom the *magoi* do handle? For the sake of this, should we even believe in dreams? Doesn’t this make the author a sectarian Orphic, or a *mágos* himself, rather than a Presocratic philosopher?

It might be the case that we are victims of our own tradition. The great movement of ‚enlightenment’ more than 200 years ago has cured us from beliefs in demons, spirits, or spectres. Science is to replace superstition. We take the Presocratics to have been activists of Greek enlightenment, elaborating the concept of ‚nature’, *physis*. Hence we see a fundamental divide between the ‚Presocratic’ world picture which we read in the main part of our book, the commentary on Orpheus, based on Parmenides and Anaxagoras, and, on the other hand, religious ritual of *mágoi* and mysteries with ‚belief’ about souls and warnings against ἀπιστία.

Yet I propose to turn to Democritus, the father of atomism, hence apparently the most modern of all Presocratics. It is just Democritus who developed strange theories about souls and spectres.

Democritus taught that „in the air there is a great number of those things which he calls mind and soul“ (*noûs, psyché*: A 106 = Arist. 472a6); with every breath, he said, they enter the animal, and they prevent the soul inside to fly out. So there is continuous interaction of an individual life-soul with the air around which is full of souls (cf. Heraclitus A 6 = Sext. M.7,129). We are of

course reminded of Thales (A 22), ‚everything is full of gods’, changed to ‚everything is full of souls’ (Pythagoreans: Diog.Lart. 8,32 = VS 58B1a).

Diogenes of Apollonia seems to be relevant here. For him Air, thinking and divine, is also to be found in every single being; this air is ‚soul and thinking’ for the individuum; so every living being is a ‚particle of god’ (VS II 56,3). The Derveni author, with his equation of Air, Zeus, and *Noûs*, is quite close to Diogenes. They could even be identical; Diogenes wrote more than one book.

More special is the theory of Democritus that phantoms, *eidola*, are produced constantly; they spontaneously separate themselves from existing things, they move around, they make us see things, but also have certain effects beyond what enters the eye. *Eidola* is a word for the souls of the dead in Homer; in pictures these *eidola* appear as tiny winged humans; but for Democritus *eidola* are not confined to Hades, they are present everywhere, in all kinds of shapes.

Democritus declared that such *eidola* „dive into the bodies through the pores, that they come up and produce appearances in sleep“ (A 77); they thus become visible, or audible, they even indicate future events (B 166). So here we have the activities of dream, and at the same time the hypothesis of the reality of the objects which appear in dream. Note there is no place for fantasy in the atomistic system; even visions and spirits do not come from nothing, they must somehow be the effect of *eonta*. It is also possible, Democritus says, that humans, full with envy, send out *eidola* tinged with evil, who then will affect those who have become the object of envy, and „they will procure trouble and damage for both body and mind“ (A 77). He was praying, Democritus said, „to meet with well-sorted (*eúloncha*) *eidola*“ (B 166)

Democritus would stay at tombs for the night, we are told (A 1 = Antisthenes in Diog. Laert. 9,38), to get knowledge through experience, to ‚test fantasies’. This would correspond to ‚examples by which you could believe’ about souls, besides dreams, as our Derveni text puts it.

This is „unlimited superstition“, Plutarch cries out (Aem.Paul. 1,4; not in Diels-Kranz); Plutarch was one of the last who still read Democritus. And moderns will agree: a world of ghosts right in atomism? Democritus apparently starts from traditional tales and certain experiences, which he does not dismiss as nonsense, but provisionally accepts, trying to find an *aitologia*. This includes visions, even predictions and prophecies in dream, and quasi-magical harm, e.g. by envy.

Two titles among the works of Democritus stand out in this perspective: „On eidola or on providence“, Περὶ εἰδώλων ἢ περὶ προνοίας (B 10a), and „On what is in Hades“, Περὶ τῶν ἐν ἄιδου (B 0c). This book even was famous, as it enters the tales of Democritus among the Abderites (Ath. 168B = VS II 130,13). We may speculate that this was transferring the ‚terrors of Hades‘ into realities of atoms that act as ‚souls‘ in our world.

It may come as a surprise, but we might seriously consider the possibility that the Derveni text is just Democritus‘ book Περὶ τῶν ἐν ἄιδου. There is even a scrap of proof for the philologist: Right at the end of the text preserved, in col. XXVI 14, we read ἐν τῇ συγ..., and this hardly allows another supplement but ἐν τῇ συγγονῆι – we need a female noun beginning with γ κ χ - and behold, this uncommon noun is attested for Democritus: συγγονή· σύστασις. Δημόκριτος (B 137, Hesych). The meaning σύστασις would apparently fit the context in col. XXVI. Add that one sentence of the Derveni text is practically identical with a sentence of Democritus – the universe is being called ‚Zeus‘ (XIX 2 – Democritus B 30); and there is a sizable group of testimonies about Democritus and *mágoi* (Diog. Laert. 9,34 = A 16). Is this the solution to the riddle of the Derveni text?

The answer will be a resounding no. The world picture as developed by the Derveni author in the commentary, a world established by a ruling god who is ‚Intelligence‘, *Noûs*, - quote: „The thinking of Zeus has settled what is, what was, what will be“ (XIX 6) -, this is the very picture which Democritus is explicitly fighting; he made fun of the *Noûs* of Anaxagoras (Diog. Laert. 9,35). Our author is an Anaxagorean, he declares the identity or mixture of Zeus and *Noûs* (XXVI 1). Democritus tried to do without *Noûs*, relying on a principle of

self-organization: see the pebbles at the shore (A 128) - without an intelligent designer.

We shall go on to deal with an anonymous author, somehow between Diogenes and Democritus. The very catalogue of Democritus' writings, or of Antisthenes' writings, and the fairly contemporary collection of Hippocratic writings show, what a hubbub of books was already around by that time, about and after 400 B.C. Still the example of Democritus is not irrelevant. It shows the possibility of integrating traditional beliefs and practices of religion into the realities of *physis*. Our author is not a missionary of Orphism, whatever that may be, not a priest of some sect nor a dealer in underworld ritual, not a practicing Iranian *mágos*,. He is writing on *tà eónta*, the true face of reality, in the wake of Anaxagoras, Diogenes and somehow parallel to Democritus. He is a bit naïve, proud of his own knowledge and far from Socratic irony, but still an interesting writer among those earlier, pre-Platonic thinkers of Greece.

Editions

S.G. Kapsomenos, 'Ο Ὀρφικὸς Πάπυρος τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης, Arch. Delt.19 (1964) (published 1965) 17-25

Der Orphische Papyrus von Derveni, ZPE 47 (1982) Appendix 1-12

R. Janko, The Derveni Papyrus: An Interim Text, ZPE 141 (2002) 1-62

F. Jourdan, Le Papyrus de Derveni, Traduit et présenté, Paris 2003

G. Betegh, The Derveni Papyrus. Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation, Cambridge 2004

Th. Kouremenos, G. M. Parássoglou, K. Tsantsanoglou, The Derveni Papyrus Edited with Introduction and Commentary, Firenze 2006

A. Bernabé, Papyrus Derveni, in: Poetae Epici Graeci II 3, 2007, 169-269

W. Burkert, Orpheus und die Vorsokratiker, Antike und Abendland 14 (1968) 93-114 = Kleine Schriften III, Göttingen 2006, 62-88

W. Burkert, Die altorphische Theogonie nach dem Papyrus von Derveni, in: Kleine Schriften III, 95-111

Readings different from Kouremenos-Parassoglou-Tsantsanoglou and Bernabé:
V 4 *παρίμεν*, not *πάριμεν* (*πάρεστιν/ἕθος*] *αὐτοῖς παρίμεν*). There is no ‚we’ in the Derveni text.

V 8 *ὕπὸ τ[ῆς γαστρι]μαργίης* (corresponding to ‚other pleasure’)

The first announcement of the discovery appeared in *Gnomon* 35, 1963. 222 f. by S.G. Kapsomenos, already with the title: *Ein Kommentar zur Orphischen Theogonie*.

Then Kapsomenos published 7 columns in *Deltion* 19, 1964, 23-25 which appeared de facto in 1965. I read it at the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington DC. I had just finished my book on Pythagoreans, in which the distinction between ‚Presocratic‘ and post-Platonic texts plays a major role. Martin West had already finished major parts of his book on Orphism; he had shown it to me in 1965. So we both were highly interested in the new text. I published an analysis of the text, ‚*Orpheus und die Vorsokratiker*‘, in 1968; I used it also as a test lecture in Zürich in 1968.

I got a photo of a new column from E.G. Turner in London, in 1969; this resulted in a paper ‚*La genèse des choses et des mots*‘ in 1970.

Much more important was that Martin West went to Thessaloniki in the autumn of 1972, and he succeeded to copy, in 11 hours of intense work, what was on exhibition there in the Museum. Martin communicated his texts with me. Thus we had 4 more columns and, in addition, 10 smaller pieces. In combination with a photo in the *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* I could put together another column. In this form I discussed the papyrus in a Seminar at Berkeley, in 1977. Decisive progress came in the next year, when Kapsomenos died, but his successor Kyriakos Tsantsanoglou sent his text to E.G. Turner in London, whence it got to Martin West and from him to me. An improved and more complete text was brought by George Parassoglou, colleague of Tsantsanoglou, to Turner in 1980. Turner did not prevent this piece from getting xeroxed and hence distributed among colleagues and friends; I got my copy from Martin West once more. It was then that I found this situation impossible: Such an important discovery should be limited to private xeroxing? I talked to Reinhold Merkelbach, editor of *ZPE*, and Merkelbach decided to print the text even without authorization from Thessaloniki. Thus

the main text has been available since 1982. Turner felt obliged to protest, in *Gnomon* 1982; he knew of course that the text had come from his desk. He declared that the real publication was about to appear. This was still to last 24 years. I think scholarship must be grateful to Merkelbach for his courage. There was a congress in Princeton, in 1993 (published in 1997); two commentaries have appeared, by Fabienne Jourdain in French, by Gábor Betegh in English, until finally, in Firenze 2006, the real edition has come out, with Theokritos Kouremenos joining Parássoglou and Tsantsanoglou.. The text is now also to be found in the 3rd volume of Bernabé's new *Orphicorum fragmenta*, 2007.