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Rationalism or Revelation?

Author(s): Robert Grafstein and Darrell Dobbs

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## RATIONALISM OR REVELATION?

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**A**re 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 Controversy, Robert Grafstein argues that Dobbs's case against rationalism is not proved. In turn, Dobbs holds to his construction of the relevance of *Odysseus'* nod to sacred values.

**A**ccording to Dobbs (1987), Homer's *Odyssey* offers us a valuable lesson about the limits of reason and, more specifically, about the limits of rational choice approaches in politics and political science. The lesson apparently extends to both rationally guided action and belief. These limits, moreover, are avoidable. Once, Dobbs argues, we recognize matters inaccessible to reason, the sacred, and recognize non-rationalistic means to apprehend them, revelation, we will be able to recognize with Homer the degree to which many of our intellectual and political problems are self-imposed.

These are very important conclusions and if true would have far-reaching implications for political science. Rather than argue that they are false, which I think they are, I will argue that Dobbs has not presented a persuasive case for them. Specifically, his argument is based on a misunderstanding of decision theory and rational choice. The premises of his negative argument are thus faulty. Furthermore, 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.

### Rationality and Dominance

The crew on *Odysseus'* boat decides to eat the sacred cows, reasoning by the rational choice principle of dominance that regardless of what the gods do, the consequence of slaughtering is always better than the consequence of refraining. Homer condemns the crew's decision as reckless, implying, according to Dobbs, that the sacred must be respected even if doing so is irrational. Rationality has reached its limits.

Decision theory, however, does not recommend the principle of dominance in this kind of case (see, e.g., Levi 1980, 107). For this principle to apply, the alternative states of nature must be independent (causally or statistically, depending on the decision theorist) of the act chosen by the crew. It is difficult to imagine that the decision of the gods to cooperate and punish is independent of the crew's decision to do something punishable. Dobbs (1987, 507) concedes that expected utility considerations may indeed conflict with the dominance principle. One of his responses is that such conflict is "rare." Yet its rarity is not obvious; and even if such cases are rare, the story of the slaughtering of the cattle may still be one;

and even if rare, such cases may still be important. Jeffrey (1983, 2, 8-9), for example, illustrates the relevance of the conflict to arguments over nuclear deterrence and disarmament.

Dobbs believes, in addition, that it would be reasonable to construe the crew's decision problem so as to meet the independence requirement and thus restore the relevance of the crucial dominance principle. He cites textual evidence that, in translation, is unclear to this non-expert. More strongly, Dobbs suggests that even if there are problem cases, they can be reformulated to exhibit the requisite independence. His illustrative case is Newcomb's Problem. While this problem has political analogs (see Brams 1976, 197-212; Frydman, O'Driscoll, and Schotter 1982) I will briefly describe it in its original form. You are presented with two boxes and a choice between the contents of the first box or both. In the second box there is one thousand dollars. As for the first, which is opaque, there is someone or something that puts one million dollars in it if that being predicts you will choose only the first box; it puts in nothing if it predicts you will choose both. The being, by the way, is an excellent predictor. In more than one million trials, it has been correct 90% of the time. What is your choice, given the apparent conflict between the principle of dominance (choose both boxes) and expected utility (choose the first box)?

Following Brams (1976, 200-203)—who in turn follows a suggestion by John Ferejohn—Dobbs (1987, 506) believes the problem can be solved “by recasting its gaming elements into independent decisions.” Specifically, interpret the two states of nature not in terms of whether the being put the money in or not but as *being is correct* and *being is incorrect*. Note, however, that as a result of this reformulation there is no longer any dominant choice; so the implications for Odysseus' crew are unclear. In any case

there are at least two problems with this kind of proposal.

First, correctness and incorrectness are not so much states of nature as characterizations of states of nature; and work by logicians such as Alfred Tarski suggests that mixing the two can be perilous (see Grafstein 1983). Second, conflict between dominance and expected utility may be obviated in this particular case, but I do not see that independence—which allows us to apply dominance when relevant—has been secured. Suppose the being has been correct 900 thousand times when one box was chosen, correct ninety times when two boxes were chosen, incorrect ten times when one box was chosen, and incorrect 100 thousand times when two boxes were chosen (this example is inspired by Levi 1975). The being has been correct 90% of the time yet the states of nature are not statistically independent of the choices. Nor, it seems, is the being's correctness causally independent of what the decision maker does.

One can in fact always reformulate decision problems to ensure causal independence, although, as Newcomb's Problem illustrates, one cannot always additionally guarantee statistical independence (see Luce and Krantz 1971). To complicate matters further, there are incorrect ways to secure causal independence, at least in the eyes of those focusing on this form of independence (see Skyrms 1980, 128-39). What rationalism recommends for the crew, it turns out, transcends any reflexive reliance on dominance.

## Representation of the Problem

Since the dominated choice of the crew—respect the cows—leads to the same consequence regardless of the state of nature, one might still argue that by coincidence the dominance principle produces the correct rational choice with or

without independence: no juggling of probabilities will make the dominated choice preferable. This objection, while correct, simply highlights another problem—Dobbs's representation of the crew's decision problem.

To see this, note that the crux of Dobbs's argument is that dominance would be correct (as in the Penelope example he cites) were it not for the role of the gods, their commands, and the sacred. But it is not rational choice theory that ignores these additional elements. Rather, the fault lies with Dobbs's depiction of the choice situation: the crucial differences between the Penelope and crew examples do not receive appropriate recognition in his characterization of the consequences for the crew, which are described by Dobbs in purely secular terms. And note that the crew's preferences and choices, as Dobbs sets up the decision problem, range over these possible consequences, not over the states of nature themselves.

If, in short, there is more to killing the cows than the possibility of a quick death, namely the violation of the sacred, that fact ought to be reflected in the consequences the crew considers. Their recklessness does not lie in their choosing rationally but in their accepting Eurylochos' characterization of their decision problem, which Dobbs reinforces. Given this characterization, the crew could reveal their preference but not their reverence.

### Commensurability

The preceding diagnosis is wrong-headed, Dobbs would argue, insofar as it still does not confront the fundamental failure of rationalism, its insistence that everything, sacred and profane, is commensurable: "Whatever their other differences, ancients and modern alike acknowledge commensuration as the characteristic *modus operandi* of reason" (1987,

506). If this is true of the ancients, so much the worse for them. It decidedly misrepresents modern decision theory. In the marketplace, commensuration does indeed describe the way people typically behave. Some would argue that as a matter of fact, this is the way nearly all people behave in general (e.g., Rothenberg 1961, 234–35). This is one reason why the assumption of commensurability has been so widely adopted for specific empirical models of rational choice. Another is a technical consideration: without commensurability, preferences cannot be represented by a real-valued utility function. Yet this does not mean that choice without the assumption of commensurability—lexicographic preferences—is seen by theorists as irrational or nonrational.

Is there any consensus among the "moderns" for treating commensurability as a cornerstone of rationality? Not for von Neumann and Morgenstern (1953, 630) who describe that assumption as "probably desirable." Chipman (1960) even argues that lexicographic preferences, which induce vector-valued utility functions, are the most general and genuine basis for rational choice theory, with commensurability constituting just a special case. Taylor's (1973) analysis of politics employs the lexicographic assumption. Its use by Rawls (1971) is well known. Finally, Dobbs simply misunderstands Elster (1979) on this point. In some special cases, what appear to be lexicographic preferences are better understood, according to Elster, as constraints on decision making. But contrary to Dobbs (1987, 508) he does not mean that these constraints represent limits on rational thinking about the world. Rather, they represent limits on our ability to change the world. On the other hand, in cases when there truly are lexicographic preferences, Elster observes, the failure of commensurability to apply, "of course, does not mean that [those cases] are unamenable to rational analysis" (1979, 127).

## Revelation

I do not suggest that reason has no limits. Any instance of deductive reasoning involves assumptions that are not themselves deduced. Gödel's Theorem tells us no consistent set of assumptions can generate all truths; although this does not mean there are truths no consistent set of assumptions can generate (Quine 1976, 66). Inductive reasoning faces fundamental challenges (Goodman 1965). And what is the rational choice is not always clear. So in these senses there are limits to reason apart from any problems in using or relying exclusively on reason or in treating it as the whole of science.

Yet this admission falls far short of the conclusions Dobbs recommends. For even if reason cannot confirm every "self-evident" or revealed truth, the converse is not necessarily correct: no claims about the sacred, the self-evident, or anything else become true just because reason is unable to prove or disprove them. (Tocqueville's consequentialist argument for faith, cited by Dobbs [1987, 492], is irrelevant to the question of truth.) Revelation, in sum, is no automatic antidote to the real limits of reason. By the same token, in response to Leo Strauss's observation, "Philosophy has never refuted revelation," I would ask, To whose satisfaction? Dobbs certainly gives practitioners of reason no reason to question their understanding of the way knowledge of the world comes about, an understanding that has survived confrontations with revealed biblical truths about creation and other matters. Those, on the other hand, who have faith in an epistemology of revelation even when it conflicts with or transcends reason have thereby insulated themselves from the commands of rationality. What could a refutation of revelation possibly look like in their eyes?

ROBERT GRAFSTEIN

University of Georgia

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 recklessness. For commercialism is merely rationalism in a three-piece suit. With its exclusive orientation toward "bottom-line" 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.

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## Rationalism or Revelation?

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### 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 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 to not more successfully join this issue.

DARRELL DOBBS

*Marquette University*

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