

BOOK REVIEW

The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India: A Historical Comparison. By Richard Seaford. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. Pp. 369 + xv. Hardcover \$39.99, ISBN 978-1-108-49955-2.



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In his adventurous monograph in comparative philosophy, *The Origins of Philosophy in Ancient Greece and Ancient India*, Richard Seaford offers to explain why philosophy, which on his account originated in the sixth century BCE separately in both Greece and India, took such a similar form in both cultures.

After an introductory summary, in chapter 2 Seaford rejects the explanations currently offered both for the origin of Greek philosophy (such as the development of monumental architecture, literacy, or democratic politics), and for the similarities between Greek and Indian philosophy (including shared Indo-European inheritance, or direct influence of one on the other culture). Specifically, he rejects G. E. R. Lloyd's hypothesis that the most important cause of Greek philosophy lies in certain political developments, and Johannes Bronkhorst's argument that Indian philosophy originated in the transmission of debating techniques to Buddhists in North-West India from Greeks travelling there during Alexander's campaigns (pp. 14-16). In contrast, Seaford argues that a certain complex of three ideas originated independently in Greece and India, influenced by the use of coined money and monetisation.

Seaford's account is limited to and focused upon these three fundamental ideas that he sees as forming a "complex" and as appearing at about the same time in two cultures remote from each other--and nowhere else. These ideas are: first, that despite appearances, all things are in fact a single entity, one that may be entirely abstract (an idea Seaford designates as "monism"); second, that knowledge of "the unitary incorporeal inner self" is central both to understanding the world and well-being; and third, that after death we acquire a new bodily identity (human or animal) whose desirability depends on the ethical quality of our previous existence (an idea Seaford designates as "ethicised indiscriminate reincarnation" abbreviated "EIR"). It is striking to think that "Greek metaphysical ideas are much closer to those found in India than to any found in the vast area (including Persia) between Greece and India" (p. 246), and even more striking to think that the source of their similarity

might be due to the introduction of coined money and associated phenomena of monetisation. But these are the bold claims of this book.

Seaford defines “philosophy” as “the attempt to explain systematically and without relying on superhuman agency, the fundamental features of the universe and the place of human beings in it” (p. 7). Seaford focuses his account of Greek philosophy on Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Plato, three thinkers who do not seem to fit his own definition of philosophy as well as, say, Democritus, Aristotle, Epicurus or even Pyrrho, none of whom form a significant part of his account. Seaford limits his period of comparison for Greece to “from Homer to Plato” but for India “from the *Rigveda* to 326 BC...when Alexander crossed the Indus” (p. 7). Had he used the same time frame, all of the above Greek thinkers would be included, and I think this could have served his case better.

Seaford argues that no current theory attempts to explain the near-simultaneous appearance of this specific complex of ideas in both India and Greece, or has much explanatory power to do so: “What has much more explanatory power is the fact that both societies were, in the crucial period, undergoing significant socioeconomic change, and in particular attaining a degree of monetisation that had at the time been attained by no other society (with the possible exception of China)” (p. 8).

The parenthetical remark here is important. Supposing that China attained the same degree of monetisation as both India and Greece, we need to know whether this specific complex of ideas also flourished there. If so, then the suggestion that monetisation is important in explaining the origin of this complex of ideas would be supported. On the other hand, if this complex of ideas does not appear in China, then this would cast doubt on the suggestion. In a concluding chapter, Seaford briefly suggests that *qi* may be “cosmisation” of money, or perhaps *dao*, and he strives to draw the conclusion that “the first three societies to be monetised in this sense (Greece, India, China) were also the first three societies to produce--at about the same time, and despite their profound *political* differences--the idea of a fundamental cosmic principle (entity or power) that is impersonal, abstract, all-pervasive, imperceptible, and interiorised” (p. 321). But Seaford does not offer a study of Chinese philosophy’s central concepts (e.g. *qi* and *dao*). Until such research is conducted, we will not know if monetisation causes the formulation of this complex of ideas and with it the origin of philosophy, or causes some other complex of ideas essential to philosophy, or in this case was incidental to the origin of philosophy.

In the meantime, Seaford has done impressive work comparing Indian and Greek texts, beginning in chapter 3, where he examines the earliest texts (the *Rgveda*, Homer, Hesiod), and shows that in both cultures the goodwill of anthropomorphic deities is elicited by sacrificial offerings against a background of pastoralism and agriculture with no money and little commerce. Seaford is ready to interpret *these* positive similarities (anthropomorphism, polytheism,

animal sacrifice) as due to shared Indo-European background, but he carefully points out things conspicuously absent from these texts: “philosophy” (as he defines it), urban situations, and money. In chapter 4, Seaford also presents a largely negative case: in the early texts we find no evidence of “the comprehensive, bounded inner self with which we are familiar, but which is in fact given to us not by nature but as a construction in some societies and not others” (p. 4); this inner self is not found in Homer, or the *R̥gveda*--except in its chronologically latest section, a major development and focus of Seaford’s study.

In chapter 5, Seaford compares Indian (Vedic) and Greek practices of sacrifice, pointing out important similarities, but also differences, the most important being the centrality of a communal meal to Greek sacrifice, and its absence in Vedic sacrifice. In this context Seaford describes the “individualisation” of Vedic sacrifice, which also affects Greek sacrifice, but differently. “Individualisation” in turn relates it to the processes of “interiorisation” and “automatisation,” processes which themselves “cannot be explained without taking into account the factor of monetisation” (p. 4). In chapter 6, Seaford describes “the construction of the unified inner self” in Indian texts that he sees beginning in the latest part of the *R̥gveda* (10.90). He sees a “movement from diversity (inner, cosmic, and political) to wholeness in the mythical-ritual complex of both cultures” (p. 4). In this context he offers a fascinating comparison of the disintegration and reunification of Prajāpati in the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, and the sacrificial dismemberment and reconstitution of Dionysius (and his followers) in Orphic and other Greek texts. But the development of the unified inner self (*ātman*), Seaford argues, appears already in the opening of the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, generally considered one of the earliest Upaniṣads. In chapter 7, Seaford interprets the introduction of new metaphysical doctrines in the early Upaniṣads as reflecting monetisation. He discusses several interesting dialogues involving individual autocrats. The social power that is “interiorised in the construction of the unified inner self” is in India mainly autocratic, whereas the situation in Greece is completely different, since there the relevant social power is already “monetary value” (p. 4).

Having focused in chapters 5-7 on psychological developments in the period after the *R̥gveda*, Seaford next focuses on cosmological developments. The first of these, in chapter 8, is what Seaford calls “monism,” of which he distinguishes four kinds: “material,” “personal,” “mental,” and “abstract.” In the early Upaniṣads, Seaford detects ritual identifications as collapsing into a single identification of subject with object “making for the prominence and coalescence of mental monism and abstract monism...under the influence of universal abstract *value*” (p. 5), in which value Seaford, as one now expects, perceives monetary value. In chapter 9, Seaford explains that early Indian beliefs about the afterlife were superseded by the idea of individually accumulated

“metaphysical merit” accompanied by the danger of repeated death, a development which prefigures the combination of individually accumulated “karma” and the cycle of reincarnation. In Seaford’s view, the individual accumulation and universal circulation of money was an important factor in these developments, in fact a decisive one. In chapter 10, Seaford critiques the best existing attempts to explain reincarnation in India and Greece. What is lacking from these accounts is monetisation (p. 201), which Seaford considers crucial to the notion of cyclicity in reincarnation and to the idea of individually accumulated “karma” that is necessary to explain EIR specifically.

In chapter 11, Seaford discusses “the interiorisation of the cosmic rite of passage” in India and Greece. In India the rite of passage is sacrifice, in Greece “mystic initiation,” but in both cases emphasis is increasingly placed on the soul (*ātman*, *psuchê*), and the cosmic rite of passage is “interiorised,” as in Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Plato. In chapter 12, Seaford argues that four kinds of monism identified in Indian texts are also present in the Greek sources, and this appearance of monism indicates a “transition from reciprocity to monism, which is closely associated with the new inner self” (p. 5). The treatment of fire as an element of both the cosmos and of the inner self in Heraclitus is interestingly compared to similar ideas in Zoroastrianism and Buddhism.

In chapters 13-15, Seaford presents his account of Greek philosophy, which is focused on Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Plato. In chapter 13, the factor of monetisation is brought into the comparison of the parallel developments in Indian philosophy just discussed. Seaford finds seeds of “the comprehensive inner self” already in Homer, but the most important passages in Heraclitus, who intensifies the focus on *psuchê* and further exemplifies the “interiorisation of unifying abstract value” (p. 6). In chapter 14, Seaford contrasts the ontological privileging “of (communal) circulation,” which he perceives in Heraclitus, and “of (individually owned) abstract value,” which he perceives in Parmenides. Since Aristotle it is common to oppose the flux of Heraclitus with the static monism of Parmenides; but Seaford interprets them both as offering “monisms” distinguished by what aspect of monetisation each chooses to reify: Heraclitus the continual process of circulation, Parmenides the relatively stable abstraction of ownership. In Seaford’s view, neither of these monistic abstractions can be explained unless we posit monetisation as the phenomenon Heraclitus and Parmenides were reflecting upon; these were not “developments purely internal to the intellect but rather as influenced by the practical necessity inherent in the (explicable) universal convenience of monetised exchange” (p. 254). In chapter 15, Seaford discusses various aspects of Plato’s conception of self (identified by Seaford with *psuchê*), especially the “interiorisation of controlling abstract value” (that is, of money), but also of the master-slave relationship. Seaford digresses here to provide a history of reflexivity in Greek and Sanskrit, in which he finds further evidence of “monetisation as a factor in

the emergence of the unitary inner self” (p. 6). This evidence is then interestingly compared with a passage of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*.

The final two chapters jointly constitute a “conclusion.” In chapter 16, Seaford lists the diverse factors that shaped the Greek and Indian revolutions and offers some more detail about the metaphysical consequences of a variety of perspectives on money. The rest of this and chapter 17 offer further discussion of philosophical matters, including a comparison of *brahman* and the “Parmenidean One,” and the relation of inner self and universe in various traditions.

These chapters are in fact less conclusionary and more a further application of the hypothesis to related questions in comparative philosophy. I would have appreciated a more thorough examination of some of these issues. For example, I do not understand the concept of *karman* enough to fully understand the question, which Seaford briskly answers in the very last section of his book (pp. 342-346), “Why did the Greeks not have karma?” On the other hand, I would have appreciated a more traditional conclusion summarizing what can now be said about “the origins of philosophy,” the new status of the question from which future researchers should set out. The clearest statement of the book’s conclusions appears on the back of the dust jacket:

These questions can only be answered by locating the philosophical intellect within its entire societal context, ignoring neither ritual nor economy. The cities of Greece and northern India were in this period distinctive also by virtue of being pervasively monetised. The metaphysics of both cultures is marked by the projection (onto the cosmos) and the introjection (into the inner self) of the abstract, all-pervasive, quasi-omnipotent, impersonal substance embodied in money (especially coinage). And in both cultures this development accompanied the interiorisation of the cosmic rite of passage (in India sacrifice, in Greece mystic initiation).

Having done my best to describe the thesis, contents, and limits of the book, and also having expressed my admiration for Seaford’s adventurousness and breadth of learning, I will now offer some criticisms. The first is about terminology. Seaford frequently uses the terms “projection,” and “introjection,” along with synonymous neologisms, such as “cosmisation” (a synonym of “projection” (p. 64)), “interiorisation” (a synonym of “introjection” (p. 65)), “individualisation,” and “automatisation.” As far as I know, these terms are not commonplace in the history of Greek or Indian philosophy, or comparative philosophy, or contemporary metaphysics. Upaniṣad scholars standardly refer to homologies between the microcosm and macrocosm, between the inner self and the cosmos. Seaford does not seem to mean the same thing precisely. I wish Seaford would more directly explicate his preferred concepts, given the central role they play in his method and conclusions. “Cosmisation” is explicitly defined as “the process through which *nomos* and *cosmos* appear to be coextensive” (p. 67; the Greek terms are set in plain type in the original). As applied, this seems

to mean that (in certain texts) both the cosmos and the inner self “appear to be coextensive” with money, an “abstract, all-pervasive, quasi-omnipotent, impersonal substance.” By the mechanism of “projection,” everything in the cosmos and the cosmos itself may appear coextensive with money, or even “reduced” to it (thus “monism”), and by the mechanism of “introjection,” the “inner self” may appear to be coextensive with, or reduced to, money (“individualisation”). These mechanisms thus seem to reduce the internal and external world, that is, the whole universe, to money (understood as the abstract metaphysical substance described above). Seaford denies that his account is reductionist (“there is no sense in which ideas can be reduced to money,” p. 318). But how exactly are we to understand these mechanisms, so often characterized as resulting in monism, which refer every entity in the cosmos and soul to “nomos” and specifically to money? According to what principles of logic or psychology do these mechanisms operate?

Without an answer to this question, I feel as if I have been given not so much an explanation of the origins of philosophy as a new set of cognitive phenomena and associated notions (projection and introjection, cosmisation and interiorisation) that need to be explained. And these are complicated notions, involving extremely controversial metaphysical assumptions (about “nomos,” “the cosmos” and “the inner self”). But such notions are here taken as the basis for explaining the origin of certain other metaphysical concepts, such as “monism,” incorporeality, and reincarnation. Some of these explananda, “monism” is perhaps the clearest case, are in fact synthetic concepts invented by later philosophers and historians of philosophy, and not literal views advocated by anyone like Heraclitus or Parmenides. And so Seaford’s choice of explananda, and his construction of their meaning, is bound to be controversial. But there is perhaps a deeper problem: working so hard to relate and, yes, reduce, ideas about sacrifice, soul, universe, etc., to money may discourage direct examination and comparison of the surface meanings of these texts; we might have to ignore the arguments of the texts themselves and instead concentrate on the metaphysical linkage of all these things to money. That might be worthwhile if we thought that socioeconomic factors somehow *determined* the invention and popularity of philosophical ideas, but I do not think that has been shown, and I think there is much to be said for taking the metaphysical claims in the texts at face value and not as reifications or sublimations of notions surrounding money. Perhaps all things really are in flux, as Heraclitus says, or maybe there really only is exactly one thing; and these ideas are not merely historical by-products of archaic attempts to come to grips with a new socioeconomic phenomenon.

To the extent that monetisation works to explain what is going on in otherwise obscure texts, I am all for it and will be on the lookout in my own reading. But I worry about the risk of trying to explain the obscure by means of

what is even more obscure. At times Seaford discusses how the metaphysical ideas “parallel” or “resemble” money (e.g. 161, 265); but Seaford definitely rejects the idea that he is discussing a mere metaphor (e.g. 208). And sometimes he seems to suggest that what he is exploring is an analogy (e.g. 267, 275), but elsewhere Seaford indicates that he is not discussing mere analogies (pp. 150, 199). His main idea is that monetisation was a causal “factor” (e.g. 87, 150) something that “promoted *new ways of thinking*” (pp. 126; 261). In the end I think that this way of putting it is very interesting and original and should, as I have already said, be researched further.

But how important a factor was it relative to the other factors? These factors Seaford acknowledges while admitting the impossibility of treating all potential factors in the scope of a monograph (pp. 317-318). I think it is important that none of the authors discussed by Seaford, Greek or Indian, ever made explicit any intention to “project” or “introject” the substance embodied in money, despite occasional references to money (and related ideas) in passages that have usually been interpreted as metaphorical or analogical. Seaford offers interesting readings of these passages, and it is useful to gather and compare them all across these traditions, but the result seems to show that there were interesting features of money that led some authors to try to explain more fundamental ideas by comparing them to money, not that the idea of money caused a revolution in their thinking on cosmological and psychological matters. The fact that money could be an equally useful notion to both a Heraclitean flux theorist and Parmenidean static monist suggests that reflection on monetisation can be put to utterly opposed and mutually exclusive purposes, which is a point acknowledged by Seaford: “there is not a single mode of projecting (cosmising) or introjecting money. In particular we have seen how the dual essence of money (value and circulation) contributes to differing (even opposed) conceptions of the universe and inner self” (p. 318). If so, then money might be a useful tool in thinking about deeper, darker, and more difficult truths about the cosmos and the self, but neither a necessary nor a sufficient tool in order to do so: the possibility remains that the truths could ultimately be discovered and conveyed without the conception of money.

There is a dilemma here: if we do not take the metaphysical speculations of Heraclitus and Parmenides about the soul and universe to be true and to relate to something real, then the fact that these ideas were based on money does not show that monetisation was a good influence on philosophy (assuming philosophy is about something true and real); if, on the other hand, we take these speculations to be true and to relate to something and real, then these truths and these things must exist naturally, and independently of money. In that case they could in theory be apprehended and conceived of in the absence of money, for example by natural science or even armchair speculation. Either

monetisation was a bad influence, or an inessential one (which is not to say an unimportant one).

As far as we know, none of the authors on which Seaford focusses ever bothered to offer an explicit account of money, including Plato. What Plato does say about money seems *prima facie* to go against the paramount importance that Seaford assigns it. Consider the use Seaford makes of the *Euthyphro*: “As for the Greeks, the holiness of sacrifice and prayer was in the age of money characterised in Plato as ‘a kind of commercial art between gods and men’ (*Euthyphro* 14e)” (p. 94). Seaford does not point out that this is a concept of holiness that Socrates (and Plato) mockingly reject as incoherent and absurd. Of course, “it is possible to reject money and yet be profoundly (if only unconsciously) influenced by it, rather as Plato separates the guardians of his ideal polis from the polluting circulation of money but requires them to be told that they have divine gold and silver coinage in their souls (*Republic* 416e)” (p. 24). However, Plato calls this classification of souls “a grand lie” and forbids his guardians from coming into contact with money because, far from being a source of fundamental metaphysical insight into their soul and cosmos, Plato considered money a source of corruption and injustice. Seaford subverts the surface meaning of the text by uncovering the subliminal metaphysical sources of Plato’s motivations, which he sees everywhere as connected with monetisation, going so far as to say that “Platonic metaphysics is constructed from ontologically prioritizing one of the opposed essences of money over the other” (p. 345).

Aristotle is the first philosopher on record to offer a systematic account of both the origin of philosophy and, separately, of money. And Seaford’s own account of the history of philosophy begins from Aristotle’s starting point, according to which the first Greek philosophers, Thales, Anaximenes and Heraclitus, were all “material monists” (pp. 235-236; *Metaphysics* 983b). Seaford also presupposes other aspects of Aristotle’s account of early Greek philosophy, but never reflects on Aristotle’s own hypothesis about the origin of philosophy, according to which the key factor was leisure (*Metaphysics* 981b)--i.e. freedom from work, and presumably from the necessity of dealing with and thinking about money. Further, Aristotle is very far from thinking “the substance of money” to afford insight into the essence of soul and cosmos--in fact Aristotle does not consider money to be a “substance” at all (much less an “all-pervasive” and “quasi-omnipotent” one). Aristotle distinguishes, for the first time ever, use and exchange value in the context of his discussion of the virtue of justice in the second common book of the *Ethics* (*Eudemian Ethics* IV = *Nicomachean Ethics* V). While Seaford refers to a part of this argument to support a claim that “as noted by Aristotle - money equalizes the parties to exchange (qua exchangers)” (p. 276), this is not exactly what Aristotle says, and Seaford does not address what Aristotle goes on to say after this, which is that money is a conventional,

not a natural, thing, whose very name (*nomisma*) means “convention” (*nomos*, 1133a). Money comes into existence because we humans have a use for commerce (cf. Seaford at 91: “commerce depends on quantified equivalence between the goods”). Specifically, money is employed as a conventional representative of something more fundamental, *chreia* (probably “use,” “advantage,” or “service,” rather than “need” or “necessity,” or “demand,” as many modern translations have). The existence of money is thus to be explained on the basis of something else, something like utility or the good, which would therefore be more fundamental both ontologically and explanatorily.

What is worse than the fact that Seaford essentially ignores this classical theory of the origin of money is the fact that Seaford ignores the enormous metaphysical problem about its conventional status identified by Aristotle, a problem which arguably undermines Seaford’s metaphysical account of the power of money. This is the fact that there is no possible way to make commensurate, and to translate into a quantity of commensurate units, metaphysically distinct substances such as food, shoes, and a house, much less souls and the universe: “Now in truth it is impossible that things differing so much should become commensurate, but with reference to *chreia* they may become so sufficiently” (1133a). Money itself does not and cannot ever possibly make any of these things commensurate or quantifiably equivalent. Even if we can relate them to money (sufficiently for exchange), and even if we could “project” the “substance” of money into shoes and houses, the problem remains that the objects themselves cannot actually be made commensurate, either with money, or with each other, or any other measure. Substances and quantities belong to different categories and cannot be reduced or reified into one another, but even two different substances (e.g. shoes and houses) cannot be converted into one another. Money does not have any such power, neither does anything else, including Heraclitus’ *logos*, if it should really be interpreted as “the quantitative formula that embodies (e.g. by determining that one vase is four drachmas) the new phenomenon of universal impersonal equivalence that enables the cyclical transformation of fire and money from and into everything else” (p. 264). For in fact nothing can so determine that one vase is four drachmas or five pairs of shoes a house. Money is not an all-pervasive, quasi-omnipotent, impersonal substance into which anything, including the universe and our “inner” selves, can be reduced, resulting in the “monisms” of the early philosophers: instead, money is a merely conventional representation, for purely practical purposes, of objects and values that are themselves independent, abstract, discontinuous, incommensurable, and natural. Of course, Aristotle may be wrong about all this, and missing the true metaphysical power and significance of money. Perhaps there is a solution out there to the metaphysical incommensurability of different substances. He may also be wrong about the early history of philosophy: I myself doubt that the term “material

monist” is an accurate or useful description of the views of Thales, Anaximenes, and Heraclitus. But the point is that the earliest philosophical reflection we have on the origin of both money and philosophy does not seem to cohere with Seaford’s account.

Despite such doubts, ancient and modern, Seaford’s research clearly has real value. I just prefer when he stresses “the complex diversity of factors that shaped the Greek and Indian philosophical revolutions” to the somewhat precipitous rejection of the other hypotheses in the introduction to his work (pp. 8-16). His own motivation comes out most clearly near the very end: “My emphasis on the factor of monetisation implies not that it was the *only* factor, rather that monetisation has been *ignored* (317, emphasis in original). Surely monetisation should not be ignored as one of the many factors for the origin of new philosophical ideas in the period; Seaford makes a strong and interesting case that it should, in fact, be emphasized.

Notes

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