

McEvelley Th: *The Shape of Ancient Thought*, New York, Allworth Press 2002
N Kazanas, Omilos Meleton, Athens: March 2004.

This book of 700 close-printed pages is remarkable for its range of erudition covering the ancient religiophilosophical thought and some aspects of the art of the diverse cultures from Greece through the Near East to Persia and India. It is the fruit of some 30 years of research. But it is also remarkable for many misrepresentations, some egregious errors of fact and, consequently, injudicious conclusions.

The book examines the development or 'shape' of thought from proto-historic times, down to the fourth century CE, by which time only the Indic, Persian and Greek cultures were still alive; the Egyptian one had ceased about a century before and the Mesopotamian one about 800 years earlier. It divides into two almost equal parts: the first half deals with thought prior to Alexander (last 3rd of the third century BC); the second with developments after Alexander and Aristotle. It was at about this time too that the Jain and Buddhist teachings begin to acquire the "shape" by which we know them today. The channels of diffusion become clearer thanks to the strong links established by Alexander (ch 14, p 349ff) and so the influences are more easily determinable. Yet, even here McEvelley cannot avoid slipping into sloppiness, as when he sees a temporal and doctrinal parallelism between the sophists in Greece and what he calls "the early skeptics in India" (p.429)

The book-jacket informs us that the author is a lecturer in Art History holding a Ph.D. in classical philology; in addition he has studied Sanskrit and taught many courses in Greek and Indian culture. With such a philological background one would expect many linguistic analyses and comparisons. There are not any, except some misdirected claims that certain Vedic words derive from Mesopotamian originals (p 257-9): one would expect that anyone making such claims would know that Vedic *āp* (water), *uma*- name of goddess and 'weaving' (*√ve*) and *taimāta* (water creature), have a perfect Indoaryan (and the first two, Indoeuropean) pedigree. Nor are there any close comparisons of themes and motifs in the mythologies of the cultures concerned. Thus there is no mention at all of the horse-sacrifice or the sun's travelling in a boat, which are common to both India and Mesopotamia (the latter to Egypt and Greece) nor of the god creator's eye running off and being brought back or the lotus-born one, common to India and Egypt. And when an attempt is made to give the parallel of the Seven Sages, only India and Greece are mentioned (p.89) but not the Mesopotamian and Slavic traditions. Even his attempt to link the Vaiśeṣika and Aristotelian philosophies (ch.20, p 519ff) is inadequate since in this he ignores the latter's world spheres and the differences in ethical concepts; at least he acknowledges the absence of reincarnation in Aristotle (p. 535).

McEvelley's relation with Sanskrit is not a happy one. He (mis-)translates for example *kuṇḍalinī* as 'awakening' (p 271) when the word means 'she who has rings/ coils'. Earlier he had referred to *Munḍaka Upaniṣad* II,1,1 finding that here "fire is seen as the source and goal of all things" (p 38). He does not see that this passage is a simile, an analogy, denoted by the correlatives *yathā ... tathā* 'as from a fire ... so from the Imperishable'; it is the Imperishable *akṣara* that is the source of all not the fire! Intent on fire being "the source and goal" and on connecting this with the Heraclitean fire in Greece, he cites *Ṛgveda* I, 164, 4b "That which is One the seers speak of in various terms: they call it [among other things] Fire" (p 38: square brackets original). Thus, he continues, the *Ṛgveda* "teaches the ultimacy of fire as a symbol of the One". Of course the *RV* does nothing of the sort: the stanza says "They call it Indra, Mitra, Varuṇa, Agni"- a very different proposition from ultimacy of fire. These are not mistranslations by someone whose Sanskrit is shaky. After all there are translations of these passages in many modern European languages. The reader finds similar misrepresentations in McEvelley's treatment of the Greek material as when, to give one of several examples, he writes that in Plato's *Phaidros* 246C the soul flies on high to "the place beyond the heavens... where true Being dwells"; Plato does not say this but only that the soul flies with the gods to the celestial limit and there gazes upon true Being which is beyond in the "supracelestial place". I suspect that the writer indulges

in such misrepresentations because he wants to push his own point of view.

“Diffusion” and its “channels” are very popular notions in our days. Undoubtedly there were diffusions at different periods from one people or culture to another but to insist on this when this cannot be demonstrated is foolhardy. McEvilley unfortunately belongs to this class of scholars. Thus, in writing about influences from India to Greece, he states rather dogmatically: “The transition from Jain missionaries to proto-Orphics, such as, perhaps, Pherekudes, is still largely invisible (except for glimpses such as Demokedes returning to Groton), though it must have occurred” (p 204). It should be noted that instead of “transition” perhaps one should read “transmission”, that Pherekudes (early 6th cent) was nowhere in the native Greek tradition mentioned as an Orphic and that Demokedes (late 6th cent) was one of several physicians who served in the Persian palace and, again, was not mentioned as an Orphic. Two more facts must be considered here. First, Jainism as such is not attested before, say, 550 BC whereas Orphism (even if we disregard other uncertain evidence which would place it c 1600 BC), is attested in iconographic and epigraphic material from c 600; so it is difficult to see how Jain missionaries, who would need some decades to arrive to North Greece and there convert the natives, diffused Orphism. Second, Orphism contains some indubitable Proto-Indo-European elements: the name “Orpheus” is cognate with Vedic *ṛbhu* (the three brothers who obtained divinity in the *RV*), Germanic *elf*, etc; Orpheus’ severed head continuing to give prophecies is parallel with Vedic Dadhyañc’s and Scandinavian Mimir’s severed head. So Jain missionaries are unnecessary: Orphism is a native Greek development from Indo-European inherited motifs.

McEvilley’s obsession with diffusion makes him see parallels and influences where none exist (and miss real ones). An early clear example is his view of the *puruṣa sūktā* (*RV* X,90). Calling this hymn “macranthropic” (from the Greek *makrus* + *anthrōpos*: ‘large man’), he sees it as “a major element of late Mesopotamian influence” and finds antecedents in the Egyptian Memphite Theology, which describes different gods as parts of Ptah and the great hymn to Amun-Re, and in Mesopotamian hymns to Inanna/Ishtar and Marduk (pp 24-27), all not earlier than 1500. He misses the fact that Puruṣa is *sacrificed* and from his members are engendered not only deities but also human beings and other parts of the world: it is not a “macranthropic” hymn (a term concocted by the writer) but a cosmogonic one. Nor does he see that the Marduk hymn, wherein Marduk is identified with other gods and appropriates their functions, is closer to *RV* II,1 and V,3 wherein Agni is identified with several other deities; for him, the two Agni hymns are presentations of fire, again, as “the underlying world-substance” (p 302). Then McEvilley finds Egyptian and Akkadian influences on *RV* X, 129 the *nāsadīya sūktā*, (p 29) and misinforms us that “the Vedic creation myth is also clearly based on Near Eastern antecedents” (p 112) when there is absolutely no creation doctrine/myth in Egypt and Mesopotamia even remotely resembling the *RV* X, 129. Unfortunately, these are by no means isolated examples.

McEvilley presents two main lines of diffusion, in the period before Alexander’s thrust to N-W India in 328 BC. One is that from Egypt and Mesopotamia to eastern Mediterranean and to India. This will be discussed below. The other is from India to Greece via the Persian court and Empire (ch 1). Many wise men, i.e. physicians, astrologers and the like, came to the Persian court from diverse countries, especially India and the Greek city-states. There were also shifts of different ethnic groups in areas where they might be less dangerous as potential or actual trouble-makers and more useful as labourers. It was through this channel that ideas like monism, reincarnation, the five elements and so on, travelled from India to Greece; an additional agent of transmission may have been Indian soldiers recruited into the Persian armies that invaded Greece in the 5th century. All this, I find unconvincing for several reasons. Iconographic material could have been transmitted by this means certainly, but not intellectual religious ideas that required both explication and repetition. Uneducated labourers would hardly be in a position to teach sophisticated doctrines. If wise Indians brought to the Persian court such doctrines as monism or reincarnation, or the 5 elements (p 301),

one would expect to find traces of them in the Persian and other Near-Eastern cultures (apart from Mesopotamian and Egyptian). McEvelley thinks he finds the monism of the Vedic Tradition in Plato, Egypt (the Amun-Re religious development) and elsewhere (pp 24, 30, 158, 285 etc etc). There is monism of a sort in Plato but the duality between the ideal and sensible/visible is much more pronounced while the Egyptian Amun-Re has a consort and a son and is worshiped in temples and statues. Reincarnation and the 5 elements are known in Greece but nowhere in the Near East until the Hellenistic period (i.e. after 300 BC). McEvelley finds reincarnation in earlier periods in Egypt (p 126ff) but this is wishful thinking (based on Herodotus II, 123), as there is nothing like it in the Egyptian texts themselves. All the passages cited show only the rise of the soul to the sky among the gods and the stars.

McEvelley's central theme, found also in many other writers, is that Egypt and Mesopotamia are the centres from which civilization radiated to the East (India), North (the various other Near Eastern cultures) and West (Greece). This view is wrong in, at least, two ways. First, there was civilization in other regions, long before 3000, when Sumer and Egypt come to the fore: there were urban structures, agriculture, metallurgy and a sophisticated religion in Shatal Huyuk in Anatolia (=Turkey), from about the 6th millennium, and the megalithic structures often aligned with the sun's movement in Malta from the 5th millennium. Then, there was the Minoan culture on Crete: its literacy and architecture owes nothing to Egypt, despite trade exchanges and its borrowing of certain other cultural elements; on the contrary its splendid wall-painting was transmitted to Egypt. Second, a careful examination of the evidence will show that while the countries of the shores of eastern Mediterranean absorbed cultural influences from Egypt and Mesopotamia, India was not affected to the same extent.

Repeatedly and without adducing any evidence, McEvelley tells us in easy generalizations how the Indoaryans received all kinds of influences c 1500. Thus, on p 112: "Indian religion and thought were in a state of meltdown... The Aryan establishment admitted tribal influences from Munda and Dravidian peoples along with renewed Near Eastern influences". This may be true, but there is not any firm evidence and, in any case, McEvelley does not give any to justify his view. Similarly, without adducing any sound data and although not an assyriologist, but heavily influenced by studies on shamanism, he describes the development of Mesopotamian religion as a "strategic conversion" of shamanic "primitive magic, accumulated from the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras into a new body of priestly myth that simultaneously tames it and puts it in the service of the state" (p 263). As evidence he offers the statement that a "residual shamanic figure is Atrahasis, the protoguru or father shaman who refuses, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, to initiate Utnapishtim": this is extraordinary because in no version of *Gilgamesh* does Utnapishtim go to Atrahasis for "initiation" or anything else since, in fact, the two are the same person, survivor of the flood, having a different name in two different texts (Atrahasis in *Atrahasis* and Utnapishtim in *Gilgamesh*). Obsessed as he is with shamanism, McEvelley then sees the battle between god Ninurta and the monster Anzu over the table of Destinies "an earlier story of shamanic duel involving control of the wind" (p264-5). He sees Zu (=Anzu) as a "freelance sorcerer who is not in the service of the state". He derives all this presumably from the 7 deadly winds which Ninurta uses against Anzu. This myth is, of course, an example of the worldwide theme "god/hero slays monster/dragon". Note too that Sungod Shamash also used the 7 winds against the monster Humbaba. Furthermore, before he stole the Tablet, Anzu was a servant of god Enlil and so definitely "in the service of the state".

McEvelley thinks also that "magic and witchcraft" enter into the Vedic Tradition at the time of the *Atharvaveda* thanks to shamanic, Dravidian and the Near Eastern influences; thus the *Atharvaveda* "represents the *asura* view as against the *deva*-oriented *Rgveda*" (p257-8). The *devas* are Aryan and their adversaries the *asuras* are native non-Aryan. Here our author displays confusion and ignorance. Magical practices are found also in *RV* I, 23, 21-2 and 133,3; V, 12, 2; VII, 104 etc. As for the *deva-asura* contradistinction, this comes in the very late hymns and post-rigvedic texts. In the early and

middle strata of the *RV* the two terms are interchangeable; e.g. *namóbhīr devám ásuram duvasya* 'do adore with salutations the deva asura[Rudra]' V, 42, 11.

Following as he does the Aryan Invasion/Immigration Theory and not caring much for the Indoeuropean culture, McEvelley would have us believe (*passim*) that the whole Indoaryan culture is influenced by nature animists and shamanists, Mundas and Dravidians (as if there is clear and secure attestation for all these) and, of course the Near Eastern cultures. However if he had bothered to examine even cursorily the ritual of the horse-sacrifice, common to Indoaryans and Mesopotamians, he would have seen that the similarities are such as to suggest influence from India to Mesopotamia. For the Mesopotamians have no horse-mythology of any kind and the horse arrives there c 2000. In contrast, the Indoaryans in common with other Indoeuropean peoples (Greeks, Celts, Scandinavians) have a rich horse-mythology and some kind of horse-sacrifice. It is therefore reasonable to take it that the Mesopotamians borrowed aspects of the Vedic horse-sacrifice (c 1600) rather than the other way round.

That McEvelley is highly prejudiced comes out in his statements about indigenism which he describes as "the revisionist Indian view". He states: "This whole pan-Indian or Indocentric construction may be viewed as a post-colonial reversal....[I]f those hands seem willful in their handling of the evidence, the reversal will only tend to reinforce the colonists' self-righteous sense that that there was real need for them to take charge in the first place" (p 660). This cheap outdated moralizing has no place in a study about the shaping of ancient thought. Otherwise I have no further comment except that McEvelley himself, as has been demonstrated in the preceding pages, shows repeated willfulness in (mis-)representing and (mis-)handling of the evidence. Nonetheless, this erudite book is worth consulting provided the reader can spot the author's facile assumptions, careless remarks, sweeping generalizations and unwarranted judgments.