



The Adventure of The Human Intellect

*Self, Society, and the Divine in
Ancient World Cultures*

Edited by Kurt A. Raaflaub

WILEY Blackwell

The Adventure of the Human Intellect

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Editorial Offices

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Contents

Notes on Contributors	vii
Series Editor's Preface	xi
Preface and Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>Francesca Rochberg and Kurt A. Raaflaub</i>	
1 A Critique of the Cognitive-historical Thesis of <i>The Intellectual Adventure</i> <i>Francesca Rochberg</i>	16
2 <i>The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man</i> : Revisiting a Classic <i>Peter Machinist</i>	29
3 The World of Ancient Egyptian Thought <i>James P. Allen</i>	73
4 On Speculative Thought in Ancient Mesopotamia <i>Benjamin R. Foster</i>	89
5 Self, Substance, and Social Metaphysics: The Intellectual Adventures of Israel and Judah <i>Ryan Byrne</i>	105
6 Ancient Greece: Man the Measure of All Things <i>Kurt A. Raaflaub</i>	127
7 The Thought-World of Ancient Rome: A Delicate Balancing Act <i>Robert A. Kaster and David Konstan</i>	149

8	Self, Cosmos, and Agency in Early China <i>Lisa Raphals</i>	167
9	Vedic India: Thinking and Doing <i>Stephanie W. Jamison</i>	185
10	“Chronosophy” in Classic Maya Thought <i>Stephen Houston</i>	198
11	The Word, Sacrifice, and Divination: Aztec Man in the Realm of the Gods <i>Guilhem Olivier</i>	216
12	Night Thoughts and Spiritual Adventures: Native North America <i>Peter Nabokov</i>	239
	Index	260

Notes on Contributors

James P. Allen is the Charles Edwin Wilbour Professor of Egyptology at Brown University and past president of the International Association of Egyptologists. He is the author of numerous books and articles on ancient Egyptian language, literature, history, and religion, including *Genesis in Egypt: the Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (1988); *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (2005, 2nd ed. 2015); and *The Debate between a Man and His Soul, a Masterpiece of Ancient Egyptian Literature* (2011).

Ryan Byrne has taught at the Johns Hopkins University, University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and Rhodes College, where he directed the archaeological institute. A former archaeologist with the Israel Antiquities Authority, Byrne co-directed the excavations at Tel Dan in Israel and Ames Plantation in Tennessee. He is the co-editor of *Resurrecting the Brother of Jesus: The James Ossuary and the Quest for Religious Relics* (Chapel Hill 2009) and the author of the forthcoming *Statecraft in Early Israel: An Archaeology of the Political Sciences*.

Benjamin R. Foster is Laffan Professor of Assyriology and Babylonian Literature at Yale University and Curator of the Babylonian Collection in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. His research interests focus on Mesopotamian, especially Akkadian, literature and the social and economic history of Mesopotamia. His publications include *Before the Muses* (3rd ed. 2005), an anthology of translated and annotated Akkadian poetry and prose, two books on Sumer in the Sargonic period, and *Iraq Beyond the Headlines: History, Archaeology, and War* (2005) and *Civilizations of Ancient Iraq* (2009, both co-authored).

Stephen Houston teaches at Brown University, where he serves as Dupee Family Professor of Social Sciences and Professor of Anthropology. A MacArthur Fellow, Houston specializes in Classic Maya civilization and comparative studies of royal courts and kingship. His book publications include *Royal Courts of the Ancient Maya* (co-ed., 2001); *The Decipherment of Ancient Maya Writing* (co-ed., 2001); *The First Writing Script Invention as History and Process* (ed., 2004); *The Classic Maya* (co-auth., 2009); and *The Fiery Pool: Maritime Worlds of the Ancient Maya* (co-auth., 2010).

Stephanie W. Jamison is Distinguished Professor of Asian Languages and Cultures and of Indo-European Studies at UCLA. In her research, she has concentrated on Indo-Iranian, especially (Vedic) Sanskrit and Middle Indo-Aryan languages and textual materials, on literature and poetics, religion and law, mythology and ritual, and gender studies in these languages, and comparative mythology and poetics. Her books include *The Ravenous Hyenas and the Wounded Sun: Myth and Ritual in Ancient India* (1991); *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in ancient India* (1996); *The Rig Veda between Two Worlds* (2004); and, in collaboration with Joel P. Brereton, *The Rigveda: The Earliest Religious Poetry of India* (2014: a new English translation of the entire *Rigveda*).

Robert A. Kaster, Professor of Classics and Kennedy Foundation Professor of Latin Language and Literature at Princeton University, has written mainly in the areas of Roman rhetoric, the history of ancient education, Roman ethics, and textual criticism. His books include *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (1988); *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (2005); a critical edition of Macrobius's *Saturnalia* (2012); and *The Appian Way: Ghost Road, Queen of Roads* (2012).

David Konstan is Professor of Classical Studies at New York University and Professor Emeritus of Classics and Comparative Literature at Brown University. Among his recent publications are *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (2006); "A Life Worthy of the Gods": *The Materialist Psychology of Epicurus* (2008); *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (2010); and *Beauty: The Fortunes of an Ancient Greek Idea* (2014). His many edited volumes include *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks* (2014).

Peter Machinist is Hancock Professor of Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages at Harvard University, serving both in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations and in the Harvard Divinity School. His work lies in the intellectual and cultural history of the ancient Near East, focusing on the ideology of imperialism and other forms of group identification, ancient historiography, mythology, prophecy, Assyrian history, and the history of modern biblical and other Near Eastern scholarship. Among his publications are *Letters from Priests to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (co-ed., 1998); "Kingship and Divinity in

Imperial Assyria” (2006); “How Gods Die, Biblically and Otherwise. A Problem of Cosmic Restructuring” (2011); and “Cities and Ideology: The Case of Assur in the Neo-Assyrian Period” (2016).

Peter Nabokov is Professor of Culture and Performance in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA. An anthropologist and writer, he has conducted ethnographic and ethnohistorical research with Native American communities throughout North America and has become interested in the vernacular architecture of South India as well. His books include *Native American Architecture* (1989); *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (2002); *Restoring a Presence: American Indians and Yellowstone National Park* (2004); *Where the Lightning Strikes: The Lives of American Indian Sacred Places* (2006); and *How the World Moves: The Odyssey of an American Indian Family* (2015).

Guilhem Olivier is a professor and researcher at the Institute of Historical Research at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). His book *Mockeries and Metamorphoses of an Aztec God: Tezcatlipoca, ‘Lord of the Smoking Mirror’* was published in 2003. He has edited or co-edited six anthologies – including *Símbolos de poder en Mesoamérica* (2008) and *Deviner pour agir. Regards comparatifs sur des pratiques divinatoires anciennes et contemporaines* (2012). His book, *Cacería, sacrificio y poder en Mesoamérica. Tras las huellas de Mixcoatl, ‘Serpiente de Nube,’* was published in 2015.

Kurt A. Raaflaub is David Herlihy University Professor and Professor Emeritus of Classics and History at Brown University. His main fields of interest are the social, political, and intellectual history of archaic and classical Greece and of the Roman republic, the history of ancient warfare, and the comparative history of the ancient world. His books include *The Discovery of Freedom in Ancient Greece* (2004); *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece* (co-auth., 2007); *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (ed., 2007); and *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World* (ed., 2014). He is currently working on a book on *Early Greek Political Thought in Its Mediterranean Context*, and editing the *Landmark Caesar*.

Lisa Raphals (瑞麗) is Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California, Riverside, and Visiting Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the National University of Singapore. She is the author of *Knowing Words: Wisdom and Cunning in the Classical Traditions of China and Greece* (1992); *What Country* (1993, a book of poems and translations); *Sharing the Light: Representations of Women and Virtue in Early China* (1998); and *Divination and Prediction in Early China and Ancient Greece* (2013).

Francesca Rochberg is Catherine and William L. Magistretti Distinguished Professor of Near Eastern Studies in the Department of Near Eastern Studies and a member of the Office for the History of Science and Technology as well as the

Graduate Group in Ancient History and Mediterranean Archaeology at the University of California, Berkeley. She is the author of *Aspects of Babylonian Celestial Divination: The Lunar Eclipse Tablets of Enuma Anu Enlil* (1988); *Babylonian Horoscopes* (1998); *The Heavenly Writing: Divination, Horoscopy and Astronomy in Mesopotamian Culture* (2004); and *In the Path of the Moon: Babylonian Celestial Divination and Its Legacy* (2010). *Before Nature: Cuneiform Knowledge and the History of Science* is in press.

Series Editor's Preface

The Ancient World: Comparative Histories

The purpose of this series is to pursue important social, political, religious, economic, and intellectual issues through a wide range of ancient or early societies, while occasionally covering an even broader diachronic scope. By engaging in comparative studies of the ancient world on a truly global scale, this series hopes not only to throw light on common patterns and marked differences, but also to illustrate the remarkable variety of responses humankind developed to meet common challenges. Focusing as it does on periods that are far removed from our own time, and in which modern identities are less immediately engaged, the series contributes to enhancing our understanding and appreciation of differences among cultures of various traditions and backgrounds. Not least, it thus illuminates the continuing relevance of the study of the ancient world in helping us to cope with problems of our own multicultural world.

The present volume picks up a topic tackled 70 years ago in a visionary project by members of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute: the world view of three important Near Eastern civilizations (Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Israel). Under the title *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, the contributors used the extant texts produced by highly developed, sophisticated, and literate societies to reconstruct their views on the place of human beings in society and state, in nature and cosmos, in space and time, in life and death, and in relation to those in power and the world of the divine. This book proved highly popular and successful. Although it is still in print, it is badly outdated. The present volume reassesses the book's accomplishments and shortcomings, establishes a theoretical foundation for such a project in the twenty-first century, and offers insights into what a new version, up-to-date not only in theoretical underpinning and approach,

evidence and scholarship, but also in scope, might include. Much broader in its coverage, it encompasses not only the “original three” but many other eminent civilizations around the globe and illustrates the variety of ways by which these ancient or early societies embarked on their unprecedented intellectual “adventures” of discovering and defining their place in the world and dealing with the challenges posed by this world.

Earlier volumes in the series are listed at the very beginning of this volume. *After Slavery and Social Death* (eds John Bodel and Walter Scheidel) is in preparation.

Preface and Acknowledgments

Several years ago, Francesca Rochberg and I discovered that we both had independently thought of preparing a modern version of a classic but outdated book, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (see this volume's Introduction). We decided to collaborate on this project and to initiate it by inviting potential contributors to a workshop at Brown University. This workshop, at which early versions of most chapters were presented and discussed, took place in March 2008, under the aegis of the Program in Ancient Studies (now Program in Early Cultures). Chessie participated with her typical critical intelligence, broad knowledge, and enthusiasm in the preparation and realization of this workshop and in the early phases of the editorial process; the volume's title, only minimally modified, is her suggestion as well. I regret deeply that personal circumstances forced her to withdraw as a co-editor and am grateful that she was still willing to share the introduction and contribute a crucial theoretical chapter. The preparation of this volume has taken far too long, and I wish to express my sincere thanks to all contributors (not least those who joined the project after the workshop: Benjamin Foster and David Konstan) not only for their valuable chapters but also for their patience and cooperation. I am also deeply grateful to Haze Humbert at Wiley for her enthusiastic endorsement of this volume, and to her staff for their help in producing it.

The 2008 workshop was sponsored and funded, apart from the Program in Ancient Studies, by Faith and Frederick Sandstrom, the C.V. Starr Foundation Lecture Fund of Brown University, the Department of Classics, the Department of Egyptology and Ancient Western Asian Studies, the Program in Judaic Studies, and the Royce Family Fund for Teaching Excellence. I express my sincere thanks for all this support and especially thank all those without whose assistance this project could not have been realized, most of all the Program's Administrator, Maria Sokolova.

Introduction

FRANCESCA ROCHBERG AND KURT A. RAAFLAUB

In 1946, Henri Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin, eminent scholars at Chicago University's renowned Oriental Institute, published lectures they had given in the university's Division of the Humanities, under the title *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*. The book contains a substantial introduction and conclusion by Frankfort and his wife, H.A. (Groenewegen-) Frankfort, and chapters on Egypt (Wilson), Mesopotamia (Jacobsen), and the Hebrews (Irwin). Penguin published a shorter version (omitting the chapter on the Hebrews) in 1949. The full volume came out in paperback in 1977, was a staple in Western Civilization and other introductory courses taken by generations of college students, and is still in print.

This book thus has had an amazingly long and successful life. No wonder: it represents a rare attempt in Near Eastern studies to step back and look at the big picture not in one but three major civilizations. In this case, the big picture is nothing less than a world-view, reconstructed from the texts of literate complex societies, concerning the place of human beings in society and state, in nature and cosmos, in space and time, in life and death, and in relation to those in power and the world of the divine. At least parts of this book are brilliant and useful as well, for comparative purposes, to other disciplines (such as Classics). Naturally, though, by now, 70 years after its first publication, it is badly outdated in theoretical approach, use and interpretation of evidence, and geographical limitation. But the idea that prompted its production in the first place is still valid and exciting.

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The present volume does not exactly replace *The Intellectual Adventure* but it offers at least a big step toward a new version, up-to-date in theoretical underpinning and approach, evidence and scholarship, and much broader in scope, including other eminent ancient or early civilizations.

To begin with evidence and scholarship, recent wars in West and Central Asia have drawn international public attention to the cultural devastation caused by such wars: the plundering of archaeological museums in Kabul and Baghdad and the ravaging of archaeological sites in Iraq which have caused looting and destruction of untold numbers of precious artefacts and texts. Even so, Assyriologists and Egyptologists have for decades been faced with the daunting task of publishing enormous quantities of newly discovered and often fragmentary texts. Although the task is far larger than the capacity of the specialists to handle it, increasing numbers of publications keep improving and changing our knowledge and understanding of almost every aspect of Egyptian and, even more so, Mesopotamian civilization. Recent years have seen the publication of many texts relevant to the questions at hand, and an increasing number of collections provide accessible translations. Except for Israel, where the Hebrew Bible provides a canonical text, the massively increased amount of textual evidence and great advances in its interpretation alone would thus suffice to warrant a new version of *The Intellectual Adventure* even in its original limitation to the ancient Near East.

Second, there is the question of scope. In the mid-twentieth century, a focus on three Near Eastern civilizations that were in close cultural and political contact especially in the first millennium BCE was perfectly justifiable. In the meantime, regionalism has given way to globalism; scholars and teachers have become increasingly interested in relations and interactions between civilizations; and comparative history, both ancient and modern, has gained ground. Western civilization courses find strong competition in world history courses that look at developments in all parts of the globe. Hence it makes sense to broaden the scope of such a volume and to include not only the civilizations that were in intense contact with the ancient Near East throughout, that is, Greece and Rome, but also other highly developed ancient or early civilizations: China and India in the East, and the Maya and Aztecs in the Americas.

Antiquity is not “the same” worldwide in a chronological sense. Nor do we hold that all cultures should or even can be measured against the standards and norms of the modern West. What prejudices we unconsciously bring to our investigation of other historical cultures are, or at least it is hoped they are, also different from those of Frankfort and his colleagues. Comparison between the thoughts and world-views of cultures that developed independently from each other will help bring into sharp profile the characteristics and achievements of each one of them. Again for the sake of comparison, this volume also includes a chapter on a non-literate early society whose world of thought and concepts is accessible by other means: native North Americans.

A third set of problems concerns theory and approach. The assumption, pervading *The Intellectual Adventure* from its first page, that human intellection was first

engaged on a level of emotion, subjectivity, and the concrete, and then evolved to a higher level of abstraction and objectivity is now recognized as outmoded, based more on general presuppositions than on a close reading or comparison of ancient texts. Long ago, Clifford Geertz called the idea that ancient peoples were not sufficiently cognitively developed for the higher levels of thought a “tissue of errors.” Still, specific analysis of ancient intellectual culture has rarely dealt with this issue since the publication of Frankfort’s introduction. The first two chapters of this volume (by Francesca Rochberg and Peter Machinist) place *The Intellectual Adventure* in its intellectual and especially theoretical context and offer an incisive critique of its assumptions.

To explain, the present collection stems from the desire to reconsider and restate some of the same questions raised by the original *The Intellectual Adventure*, that is, of how in ancient cultures the physical (that has to do with the environment and the cosmos) and the metaphysical (that deals with existence, cultural values, and the gods) were construed. If the motivating questions are similar to those of the original work, however, the inquiry generated by these questions is different. Apart from evidence and scope, the present book does not proceed from the idea that antiquity represents the childhood of human history, or that ancient is the equivalent of “primitive.” The questions we pose concerning world-view, cosmology, religion, and society in the ancient world bear relation to those of the original work, but stem from the vantage point of an intellectual climate that differs markedly from that which produced the original. The answers to these questions that Frankfort and his colleagues offered can now be reformulated because so many of the old assumptions about “how ancients thought” have been given up and revised.

In fact, we would suggest, the reasons why such views have been rethought has much to do with the revolution in thinking signaled by the passing of “The Scientific Revolution,” “The Grand Narrative,” and so on. We are revisiting *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* because so much that underpinned that work has been found to be illusory, namely cognitive and social evolutionary schemes with some of their concomitant beliefs, for instance, in progress or in scientific knowledge as embodying universal natural truths. Despite the fact that these ideas were already profoundly challenged by the time the book came out in the late 1940s, at least in some anthropological circles, such reappraisals did not find a consensus until much more recently. Reflected in the make-up of the present volume is a notion of cultures not as great and canonical traditions to be received and transmitted as such, but as conditioned by history and reflective of the continually changing societies within which literature, religion, and science are variously produced. It is to be hoped that our engagement with ancient cultures will reflect a historiographical attitude more inclusive, more nuanced, less essentializing, less restricted with respect to non-elites, gender, and local variations, all of which are key to a revision rather than simply an extension of the original *The Intellectual Adventure*.

This volume considers cultures from many regions of the world, from the Old World to the New and within these cultures a diversity of sources representing a

wide array of particular responses to particular environments and circumstances. This is precisely our interest, namely, the multifarious response of ancient human beings to the world as they conceived it, both in physical as well as imaginative terms. What unifies us collectively as people in history also divides us, that is, the impulse to relate oneself to the world, to the cosmos, to the divine. Where the original contributors to *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* attempted to fit “speculative thought” into a framework, wholly modern and Western in imprint, in which science and religion were mutually exclusive and the place of the human in the universe was a matter for mythological speculation, we, more than 60 years on, focus on the ancient response to the environment as it is found in forms of social practices and cultural products in which mutually permeable relationships between religion, science, cosmology, and politics are evident and therefore should be understood.

On a practical note, the volume’s expanded scope inevitably required a reduced word limit for each chapter, which made it impossible for the authors to cover their topic in as much breadth and detail as would seem desirable (and was possible in *The Intellectual Adventure*). In order to establish a common platform, indispensable for any attempt at comparison, they were asked to include in their chapters, to the extent possible in their field, answers to at least some of the following questions: How did individuals in ancient or early societies think of their place in social structures and hierarchies? How did they relate to family, clan, tribe, village, town, and state, to officials, leaders, and kings? What social and communal values influenced their perceptions, behavior, and actions? How much freedom of action did the individual have? To what extent was there a notion of “the individual” at all? How were values and perceptions connected with economic and political conditions? Where were individuals and their society placed in their geographical environment, in relation to other peoples, and to the world at large? What was their place and function in the cosmic and divine order? How were perceptions of divine and human order coordinated? How did the individual interact with the divine? How did performance in life relate to life after death? Finally and fundamentally, what kinds of evidence survive and what possibilities do these offer to answer questions such as those posed above? To what extent do extant texts, which are often mythical or literary and were mostly composed by, or reflect the perspectives of, elites and professional scribes/scholars working in their service, represent more general attitudes? In other words, do extant sources permit generalizations?

From this rather large and ambitious catalog of questions, contributors chose variously, depending on possibilities and limitations in their field, and their own interests. The resulting picture offers fascinating insight into the thought world and, in many cases indeed, “intellectual adventure” of early societies that, despite all differences, had to grapple with similar problems and challenges and found their own highly original answers. Of course, other civilizations could have been included as well, and we deeply regret that for various reasons Gary Urton, who at the initial workshop had read a fascinating paper on “Views of the Cosmos from Cusco to Huarochiri: Interpreting the Intellectual Traditions of Inkas and Other Andeans,”

and Dismas A. Masolo, who had agreed to contribute a chapter on precolonial African aspects, were in the end unable to produce their chapters for this volume.

We add here summaries of the individual chapters.¹

The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man, says James P. Allen, “marks a watershed in our understanding of the ancient world. It was the first coherent effort to appreciate ancient thought on its own terms.” As Peter Machinist explains, it had great merits in popularizing history while maintaining highest scholarly standards; it established that the ancient civilizations concerned represent very significant episodes in the history of human intellectual development and that their ideas are profound and relevant enough to justify our attention. Accordingly, the book had an exceptionally broad and lasting impact on both scholars and lay readers. Overall, it is thus eminently worthy even now of our careful scrutiny and reassessment – although, of course, cultural assumptions and theoretical approaches at the time of its publication differed markedly from today’s. Accordingly, the first two chapters offer incisive reappraisals of this book.

Chapter 1: A critique of the book’s “cognitive-historical thesis.” To emphasize one main line of her argument, Francesca Rochberg shows how the authors derived the world-views of the societies they discussed from their extant texts, but in their interpretations were heavily influenced by specific assumptions (as formulated by the editors, Henry Frankfort and H.A. Groenewegen-Frankfort): that no philosophy or science comparable to anything known in the western tradition existed in these societies which lacked the capacity for abstraction and fully rational reasoning and in this sense were “pre-scientific” or even “primitive.” Such assumptions were shaped by schools of thought, prominent in anthropology at the time, that saw cultural, intellectual, and cognitive history as a steady advancement and intellectual culture as an evolution from myth through religion to science. The Frankforts were particularly impressed by theories on the function of myth that, as a product of the human mind, was considered unfettered by logic or physics and thus both earlier and “primitive” in comparison with the intellectual achievement of science. Since, they thought, in the view of these early civilizations the individual was embedded in society, society in nature, and nature was simply a manifestation of the divine, *The Intellectual Adventure* tried to answer the question of the place of humans in relation to the world, nature, and the divine on the basis of myth and religion. Hence the Frankforts contrasted “scientific” with “speculative” thought as a means to distinguish between modern and ancient ways of explaining, unifying, and ordering experience. Although they thought of ancient patterns of thinking as alternatives to modern ones (and thus not a priori as inferior), they took it for granted that developmental progress in the history of ideas led from myth and religion to reason and science. In the last few decades, all these views have undergone profound and multiple revisions or have been completely abandoned. To a large extent, the theoretical foundations of *The Intellectual Adventure* are thus no longer valid.

Chapter 2: Revisiting a Classic. Peter Machinist broadens the perspective by discussing the contributions of *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* from three angles: the book's origin and authors; its content, structure, governing ideas and aims, and intellectual background; and the extent to which it is still useful. This comprehensive, penetrating, detailed, and differentiated reappraisal places the book in its intellectual, scholarly, and academic environment and helps us understand its roots in the views of its time and the limitations imposed on it by these views – here Machinist complements Rochberg's chapter – and by the personalities, traditions, and aims of the institute in which it originated. Machinist's chapter goes beyond Rochberg's by explaining carefully the book's specific merits (partly mentioned above), how it was received both at and after the time of its publication, to what extent the main criticisms leveled against it (focusing mostly on the book's sharp distinction between “speculative” and scientific thought and its exclusive emphasis on “mythopoeic” as opposed to abstract or rational thinking) were justified, and in what ways its insights endure. One of these ways, Machinist concludes, “is a recognition of the fundamental problem to which Near Eastern mythopoeia threw all its wisdom – nature: what is it, how can humans relate to it such that it becomes an ally and not an enemy to human life and achievement? The ancients' answers, even their mode of apprehension, may not always be ours, but the problem and their goal to seek harmony with nature are issues that remain to all humanity, and with which all humanity must struggle.”

Chapter 3: The Egyptians. *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, James P. Allen comments, made crucial contributions to Egyptology by recognizing a subjective understanding of the world as filled with sentient forces endowed with their own wills (gods as ways of conceptualizing forces that govern the universe, natural world, and human society) and by appreciating the logic of Egyptian thought that, in contrast to modern belief, accepted an inclusive and multivalent logic and the validity of divergent explanations. More recently, Egyptology has come to recognize that it is less the thought processes as such but the ways to understand the world (less the form than the content of thought) in which the ancient world differs from our own. Egyptian texts and art served practical purposes and thus did not explicate the reasoning behind them, but this does not mean that Egyptian thought lacked such reasoning. Allen illustrates this with cosmology and cosmogony and related issues (the representation of the gods, the role attributed to individuals in Egyptian thought, and order and chaos). Complementary Egyptian systems of cosmology and cosmogony abound in abstract conceptualization and reveal a remarkably coherent and increasingly sophisticated understanding of the creation. The multivalent logic of Egyptian reasoning is reflected in the multitude of Egyptian gods who mostly represent a single primary element of nature or human society, but often overlap, offering complementary explanations of natural phenomena. Behind such onomastic multiplicity stands the recognition that all gods are forms of a single underlying deity – which eventually found expression in the term “god” or the description of one god with three natures. While this did not exclude other gods, true monotheism,

together with religious intolerance, was invented in the short-lived theology of Akhenaten's intellectual movement that is also "the first instance of univalent logic." While individuals initially valued their place and role in society only by their closeness to the king, later periods showed increasing appreciation of individual self-worth and individual relations to the gods that were no longer mediated through the king. Overall, Allen concludes, Egyptologists now understand the nature and evolution of Egyptian thought and the concepts behind the terms and imagery used in ancient texts much better than they did 70 years ago. This in turn enables them to place Egyptian ideas (such as those discussed here) in their intellectual context both synchronically and diachronically and recognize them "not as isolated from our own but as ancestral to it."

Chapter 4: Mesopotamia. According to *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, Benjamin R. Foster explains, the "civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia offered infinite potential for speculative thought,... but never achieved anything worthy of that name." Inherent limitations, common before the Greeks, "did not distinguish humanity from nature and so could not think objectively. Restricted to individual instances and subjective reactions to them, hence only to free association and emotion, Mesopotamian thought knew no 'it' and no impersonal, universal laws of causality." Although the authority of this view, supported by other scholars as well, long discouraged further analysis of Mesopotamian speculative thought, it misses essential aspects. Foster exemplifies this with agricultural management and planning that required hierarchical structures and prompted the conceptualization of authority, rank, and the division of tasks, making the universe resemble a hierarchical society or polity, even a state. The spread of mathematics and quantification, grounded in essential activities of everyday life (especially in agriculture), was a consequence of their role in management. The interpretation of quantified schemes as conceivable rather than probable goals has a parallel in legal thinking that invites reasoning from improbable cases, challenging the students to stretch further. Application of this method in less practical or even irrational contexts included mathematical astronomy, which produced calculations of amazing precision, or theology. Mesopotamian thinking used myth as a mode of argument and explanation but it did separate humanity from nature by considering human civilization a victory over and ordering of nature. As conditions changed and new, centralized state structures emerged, Mesopotamian thinking shifted from planning and management to authority, rule, and power, and notions such as fairness or justice. Through works of literature, this thrust of thinking developed explanations for, and illustrated the consequences of, issues such as the creation of the human race and its relation to the gods, or the emergence and durability of absolute monarchical power (realized in the figure of Marduk). Other thinkers focused on the justice and moral foundation of authority and ways to cope with its failure. From early on, the resourcefulness of rulers and their ability to resolve baffling problems attracted much attention; so did innovation or even technological invention that could be signs of superior leadership and intelligence. In fact, technology and quantification required no mythological explanation or rhetoric: they were pure human achievements.

In divination too (“the queen of Mesopotamian sciences”) nature directly communicated with individuals or governments. Language, writing, and literature provoked human speculation, and the systematic observation and recording of celestial phenomena boasted “the longest sustained research project in the history of the human race.” Finally, contrary to the assumptions of *The Intellectual Adventure*, Mesopotamian written tradition offers much evidence for the notion of a person, understood as a legal, social, and moral being, and for a sense of self. Overall, Foster concludes, the “scattered remnants of Mesopotamian thought do not lend themselves to a grand scheme or even to suggest a lack of one. In different minds, the human will, spirit, and intellect sought both to understand and to control the circumstances and phenomena they knew... Understanding and knowledge, rather than speculation, were among the most consistently upheld and esteemed aspects of Mesopotamian literate culture.”

Chapter 5: Israel. Ryan Byrne begins by emphasizing the difficulty of defining ancient Israel. Here lies “the real intellectual adventure, an adventure often centered on complex identitarian projects of self-discovery, self-recovery, and communitarian crisis. What did it mean to be Israel? These and other ontological concerns wend their way through the cultural texts that became the Hebrew Bible, concerns of being a *human*, being a *god*, and being a *state* served by human and god alike.” Byrne begins by sketching what little we know of the history of Israel and Judah and the eventual emergence, out of exile, of a nation consisting of a coherent people no longer defined by political borders but by a communal identity, a common literature, and shared beliefs in a specific religious concept we call monotheism – the concept rather than the state of Israel. The origins of Judean epic, myth, and law disappear in the mist of second-millennium cuneiform traditions, internalized and customized by the Judahite intelligentsia. The West-Semitic invention of alphabetic script revolutionized communication, record keeping, and literary efforts; it was adapted by a local scribal culture which survived in the Judean literature later collected as biblical books. These scribal classes eventually “came to understand their national script as an identitarian tool of state and community.” Byrne illustrates this by discussing the transformation of widespread West-Semitic theogonies and cosmogonies into an explicitly anthropocentric account of cosmic origin that elevated the state deity Yahweh to original creator of humans and their terrestrial habitat by adapting a previously unlivable world to accommodate human life. The way this god is imagined (well into the sixth century still anthropomorphic and even later and only gradually endowed with monotheistic exclusiveness) allows constant reassessment, physically, psychologically, and socially. Divine-human homology encourages penetrating thinking about social contracts, relations, and dependencies, human responsibility and, ultimately, the human condition. Packed into an ideologically tight pseudo-historical construct (the “Deuteronomistic History”), tradition turned into “national history” can serve as universal lesson for human life. “The Judean compendium we call the Hebrew Bible,” Byrne concludes, bequeathed us an Israel that resembles a device. “As Judah deployed it, this device could inject a powerful dose of imagination, perhaps as much as empathy,

into the sacred pursuits of self-discovery. This Israel permitted a living community to admire itself at its best, to fear itself at its worst, and to strive toward a future in which humankind might make peace with its place in the cosmos... This same human species, now poised to imagine its collective potential or self-immolation as a global community, may find these concerns to represent the only kind of civilization that matters in the end.”

Chapter 6: The Greeks. Lacking guidance and control by strong and divinely sanctioned monarchies and initially living far beyond the reach of the great Near Eastern empires, the ancient Greeks, Kurt A. Raaflaub emphasizes, realized early on that they themselves were responsible for their own and their communities’ well-being. Their main challenge was to gain control over the world surrounding them and to create a communal order that, supported by firmly established institutions and based on citizen participation, enabled those who counted as citizens to debate and resolve their problems publicly and collectively. The result was the “polis,” a substantially egalitarian citizen community, that over centuries of exploration and emigration spread along many coasts of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. As the earliest literary works (Homer’s and Hesiod’s epics) show, competitiveness was this society’s hallmark, on all social levels within and among poleis. Politics was performed publicly, and in these open societies political thinking, focusing on communal issues, was a widely shared responsibility. The highly developed Near Eastern civilizations offered the Greeks many valuable cultural impulses, but their political structures and ideas were too different to be useful. Great challenges needed to be overcome: how to stabilize the polis; how to control competition, elite abuse, and the clash between elite ambitions and communal needs; and how to define institutions, communal relations, and the obligations of leaders, elite, and citizens. Arbitration provided a tool to resolve conflicts, laws enacted by the polis an instrument to shape the communal order and to regulate communal decision making processes. The discovery, in political thought, of an entirely social-political and rational causality, based on empirical observation, largely eliminated the need to rely on divine agency and empowered human action and reform. The remedy for social and political crisis was found in broadening the polis’ foundation and involving more citizens in political decisions and the administration of justice. This trend toward increasingly egalitarian structures eventually produced the first polis democracies. The most radical version of democracy was realized, in an exceptional combination with empire building, in fifth-century Athens, where large numbers of citizens were in multiple ways and extraordinary intensity tied into running the community. As a result, they developed a primary “political identity” and a “collective character” as “political activists” that determined their lives, attitudes, and policies. All this caused profound and rapid changes, multiple challenges to established traditions, and uncertainties that required new understanding and orientation. Not surprisingly, therefore, social and political developments went hand in hand with remarkable cultural accomplishments that were widely shared in the Greek world but eventually converged especially in fifth-century democratic and imperial Athens: the development of abstract, theoretical, and philosophical

thinking and of new genres of intellectual, literary, and scientific as well as artistic expression (drama, rhetoric, historiography, geography, ethnography, medicine, architecture, painting, and sculpture). With few exceptions, all these political and intellectual experiments and innovations happened in public, discussed and reflected upon in assemblies, the theater, and other public spaces, encouraged, tolerated, and rarely condemned by the community. Although stretched to the limits of their capacity and eventually overwhelmed by their limitless ambition, for a long period of time the Athenian people (without restrictions imposed by descent, wealth, or education), ultimate “political beings” in the Aristotelian sense and running a unique experiment of truly collective governance, were fully in charge of life, politics, culture, and thought in their community.

Chapter 7: The Romans. As Robert A. Kaster and David Konstan point out, the Romans had reason to boast about great cultural achievements in many fields: law, architecture and engineering, calendar, poetry, history, and much more. In their own view, though, statecraft and the formation and management of a world-empire by many generations of leaders was their greatest accomplishment. Hence in this chapter the authors focus on “the evolution and rationalization of the moral qualities that, in the Romans’ own view, made their empire possible and were the basis of their political culture.” Briefly sketching the structure, development, and history of Roman society and then limiting themselves to the last centuries BCE (the period of greatest expansion and transformation), they emphasize the tensions characterizing this society: between cosmopolitanism (due especially to the enfranchisement of huge numbers of manumitted slaves) and the effort to create a specific national identity, between elite and non-elite, citizens and non-citizens, integration and subordination, and between a militaristic ethos and the need to maintain internal peace and order. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to a differentiated, thorough, and penetrating analysis of the Roman value system that, at the same time, defines Rome’s collective ideology (for example, justice within also demanded that Romans fight only just and thus defensive wars, protecting their country, property, citizens, and allies). In view of the fact that Rome was almost constantly at war (expanding its sphere of control from Italy over the entire Mediterranean), military virtues are discussed first, followed by the virtues and behaviors expected and observed in the political sphere, in relations with peers and those of a higher or lower class, in overseeing an extended household, in representing Rome abroad and being a Roman citizen among foreigners, in maintaining “peace with the gods,” etc. Moreover, this chapter illuminates the delicate balance in social and political relations and concepts that determined the individual’s place in the social hierarchy, tied higher and lower orders together for the good of the common enterprise that the Romans simply called *res publica* (public affairs, that is, the state), and demanded the shared efforts of all – despite ample space for individual ambition and achievement and increasing differences in wealth, status, influence, and power. “Rome’s value system was in many respects an intellectual construct, carefully elaborated to express and reinforce an idealized way of life” that was continually challenged by fierce personal competition and violence – the very tensions, the authors conclude, that

were responsible for great intellectual achievements as well. This value system worked amazingly well for a very long time, until it was strained beyond endurance by the almost unlimited opportunities and temptations offered to the ruling elite by the growing empire. When the limitations required by this system were no longer respected and the ruling oligarchy proved incapable of imposing the necessary reforms on society and themselves, the republic dissolved in a spate of civil wars, and the ultimate victor erected a military monarchy, albeit under the guise of a restored republic that continued to foster most of the very same values.

Chapter 8: China. Because the sheer size, regional diversity, and very long history of ancient China prohibit a comprehensive survey of intellectual developments, Lisa Raphals chooses to focus on three major aspects: social constructions of self, cosmology and its implications for government and society, and the methods of individual agency and prediction. These three themes, each important for its own reasons, are well illuminated by long-known textual traditions and increasingly rich new textual evidence discovered in ancient tombs. In contrast to the received tradition that was the result of deliberate selection especially in the Han period, the newly discovered texts were not subject to such selection and have thus greatly enhanced our knowledge of scientific traditions and philosophical as well as religious discourses, “transforming our understanding of early China.” Both types of texts deal not least with cosmological speculation. Chinese notions of the cosmos, though diverse, neither attribute the origin of the cosmos to the actions of gods nor divide the cosmos into dichotomies such as that between matter and spirit or mind and body, nor attribute the ultimate cause of action to any kind of “unmoved mover” or antecedent action. “There is no creation *ex nihilo*; rather, change is spontaneous and natural, but evolving from an imagined beginning in undifferentiated chaos to increasing specificity and complexity.” Raphals discusses five fundamental concepts that informed early Chinese cosmological thinking and that, developed largely by technical experts, were also used to correlate natural and religious phenomena to the human world, permitted new kinds of understanding, and provided an “alternative to a world-view in which only the king could serve as the ‘pivot’ of communication between the divine and human worlds.” Rather than on individuals, Chinese thinking focused on groups that extended from patrilinear families (including the ancestors) to clans, villages, and states; families were also fundamental for political alliances and analogized with the state. In family- or state-centered value systems, all actions are interactions. Accordingly, western commentators often emphasize Chinese “selflessness” or “non-individuation,” which is contradicted by the stress many ancient thinkers placed on the individual’s self-cultivation. The question of how to achieve this triggered numerous answers presented competitively by philosophers and technical experts dealing with ethics, medicine, metaphysics, and even cosmology. Furthermore, debates on the nature of self and agency were also absorbed into discussions about fate and fatalism, prediction or divination, predestination and determinism, and moral agency, all richly documented in the extant text corpus. “Chinese views of both the individual and cosmology,” Raphals concludes, “presuppose a world of spontaneous and continuous

change... which constitutes persons, things, and the cosmos as a whole.” Such patterns of change were understood in abstract and sometimes even mathematical terms. Individuals could use mantic and other technologies to optimize their relationship to cosmic patterns or fate. Notions “of flexibility and complementarity also applied to family and other social relationships that presupposed less an isolated, narrowly autonomous self than a range of changing or overlapping ‘selves’ in complex webs of relationships to others.”

Chapter 9: India. Stephanie W. Jamison focuses on the Vedic period (circa 1500–500 BCE), the earliest in ancient India’s rich cultural history, documented by a corpus of religious texts that were transmitted entirely – and with extreme accuracy – orally over this entire period and beyond. This corpus lacks records concerning history, government, or economic, social, or political life, but consists of ritual texts and instructions for the performance of these rites as well as theological exegesis of and philosophical speculation on their deeper meaning – all from the perspective of priests and poets, kings and elites. The oldest part of that corpus is the *Rig Veda*, a collection of more than a thousand hymns to various deities, complex, highly artful, and deliberately obscure. Yet, despite these limitations, this poetry, composed probably in the mid-second millennium BCE, offers profound insights into the highly sophisticated intellectual achievement of a very early civilization. Jamison uses two Rigvedic hymns to illustrate the nature of this poetry and the need to interpret it on its own terms. The “Creation Hymn,” she suggests, “posits human thought as the creative force in the world, and also centers mental speculation, the creation of alternative cosmic models, as one of the chief enterprises of thought.” The “Hymn of Man” “pronounces man, or a cosmic model of man, as the origin of everything and as encompassing everything, both past and future.” These poems are more than praise hymns: “they are deeply serious attempts to capture truths about the structure of the universe and man’s relation to it, and not only to capture this structure, but in some sense to create it.” Truth formulations bestow on the speaker power, even over impersonal forces: words effect actions. Despite their praise for the all-powerful gods, the “mental universe” of these hymns centers on humans. The divine and human worlds converge in the sacrifice in which the gods are expected to participate and in exchange for which they are expected to offer protection, prosperity and long life. The gods do not form a society, as they do in other civilizations; they are connected only through their relationship to humans. The reciprocity visible here is echoed in reciprocity between the hierarchically arranged human classes that are sharply separated from each other but at the same time depend on each other “in an equalizing economy of value exchange.” These vertical relations are complemented by a network of horizontal ones (household, clan, tribe, all within an overarching commonality provided by ancient customs) that shift constantly between independence and collaboration (especially for war). In this grid of relationships each individual has a clearly defined position that allows proper and prohibits improper activities. “How much,” concludes Jamison, “these built-in social constraints limited a person’s own view of his ‘freedom of action’ is impossible to say, but the occasional flashes

of personality revealed by particular poets, not to mention the exuberance and creativity they exhibit in composing poetry... that is de facto severely constrained by subject matter and by traditional techniques and formulas, would indicate that they, like us, felt themselves to be far freer than they, or we, really were/are.”

Chapter 10: the Maya. Stephen Houston discusses a particularly sophisticated concept of time developed by the Maya. “During a period from circa 250 to 900 CE, the so-called ‘Classic’ period, they articulated ideas about human existence that situated being and action within materialized time. Temporal structure and human essence came together in tight bonds. To describe this as ‘philosophy’ is either too vague or too culturally specific... Another coinage comes to mind: ‘chronosophy,’ a set of core beliefs conditioned by time-sense and time-meaning. ‘Chronosophy’ centralizes the collective wisdom that arose from thoughts about time and allows exploration of its subtle, sometimes varied expressions during the Classic period.” By now, Houston explains, extensive progress in the decipherment of Maya glyphs has made it possible to complement archaeological evidence with great amounts of textual information that reveals widespread beliefs about human existence in its social and political setting. “The most basic belief situated humans within time – time that influenced destiny and appropriate action, time as embedded within and merged with cycles of great complexity. More than mere framework, neutral in meaning, time had a physical, concrete quality that linked chronological structure and narrative content. Human activity was in part a product of that linkage, structure and substance bonded in ways that require subtle exposition.” The relevant evidence is rich, often contradictory, and exceptional in early American cultures because it offers access to important patterns of thought – although such patterns are limited to the highest levels of society. What Houston provides in this chapter is precisely this subtle exposition, focusing on a great variety of ways to represent and understand time, calendars, and cycles from day and year counts to “long counts” covering hundreds and thousands of years (in fact, counting from a starting date in 3114 BCE that preceded the historical Maya by a very long period). Such time frames expressed multitudes of meaning and even had a physical quality. They tried to harmonize lunar and solar cycles, bringing agricultural, life time, and cosmic cycles into correspondence. Human beginning, ending, and renewal were made to fit with grander schemes. If “there was an intellectual adventure for the Classic Maya,” Houston concludes, “it concerned, among other matters, their fascination with time as a palpable entity, at times bloody, often concrete, a thing to be cosseted, buried, and a dense evocation of multiple layers of meaning.”

Chapter 11: the Aztecs. As Guilhem Olivier points out, the Aztecs lacked an official theology based on a unified textual tradition. Although scattered, sadly decimated, and largely collected by Europeans often driven by hostile intentions, the extant indigenous mythical accounts are enormously varied and permit a detailed approximation of pre-conquest autochthonous thought. “Myths,” Olivier emphasizes, “illustrate and explain the place of humans in the creation and their role, together with that of the gods, in the functioning of the universe... [T]hey establish guidelines for the relations of mortals with their creators based on the