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# Introduction: How to Do the Social Psychology of the Ancient World

*Luuk Huitink and Ineke Sluiter*

## 1 Introduction: Frisians in the Theatre

At some point during Nero's reign (54–68 CE), an embassy of the Frisians (part of the wider *Germani*), waiting for an audience with the emperor, toured Rome and ended up in the Theatre of Pompey. The anecdote is relayed to us by the Roman historian Tacitus (early second century CE):

Among the places that are usually shown to barbarians, they entered the theatre of Pompey, so that they might contemplate the size of the population. There, to kill time (in their ignorance they took no delight in the show), they were inquiring about the crowd seated in the auditorium (the distinctions between the orders—which were the knights?—where was the senate?) when they noticed a few men in foreign dress on the senatorial seats. They asked who they were, and, on hearing that this was a compliment paid to the envoys of nations distinguished for their courage and for friendship to Rome, exclaimed that no people in the world ranked before Germans in arms or loyalty, went down, and took their seats among the Fathers. The action was taken in good part by the onlookers, as a trait of primitive impetuosity and generous rivalry.

inter ea quae barbaris ostentantur intravere Pompei theatrum, quo magnitudinem populi viserent. illic per otium (neque enim ludicris ignari oblectabantur) dum consessum caveae, discrimina ordinum, quis eques, ubi senatus percontantur, advertere quosdam cultu externo in sedibus senatorum; et quinam forent rogitantes, postquam audiverant earum gentium legatis id honoris datum quae virtute et amicitia Romana praeccellerent, nullos mortalium armis aut fide ante Germanos esse exclamant degrediunturque et inter patres considunt. quod comiter a visentibus exceptum, quasi impetus antiqui et bona aemulatio. (Tacitus, *Annals* 13.54)

This vignette relates how the Frisians attempt to insert themselves into the Roman social order, navigating a socio-cultural environment with which they are quite unfamiliar. They show no interest in the theatrical performance at all, however important to Roman culture that was. They are, however, keenly interested in manifestations of social difference and they are able quickly to draw up a rudimentary social hierarchy based on limited information and contextual cues, such as the segregated seating arrangement and variations in attire. Having a clear sense of themselves as a brave and loyal ally of Rome, they then arrogate a seat of honour among the senators, the highest rank of Roman society, next to other ambassadors of valued allied peoples. We also get a glimpse of the intentions and reactions of their Roman hosts: the visit to the theatre seemed intended to impress the visitors ('barbarians', i.e. neither Greeks nor Romans) with the sheer magnitude of the Roman people.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the benevolent reaction to the appropriation of the seats of honour was itself based on social categorization, just as much as the behaviour of the Frisians itself had been. The Roman audience entertained preconceptions on the nature of their guests, which made it easy for them to be forgiving of a social *faux pas*.

Tacitus clearly presents us with a psychologizing narrative. He represents the mind states of the different actors, but from his own perspective, for instance in the way in which he explains the evaluation by the Roman audience of what had just happened: the Romans feel, he suggests, that the Frisians are somewhat primitive in their lack of impulse control (*impetus antiqui*), but they also ascribe a healthy sense of competition to them. So much for Tacitus' own psychological interpretation.

However, for us, as interpreters of this text, there are more layers to be explored. This story offers a scene from the ancient world that can be used as evidence (obviously in combination with other sources and materials) for the social and cognitive psychology of its time. As classicists, we usually base such inferences on a combination of methods and insights from the humanities and the social sciences. Humanities scholars are trained to analyse language, rhetoric, and narrative, not just for their surface meaning, but precisely for what lies underneath, what is taken for granted. The social sciences have long provided inspiration, concepts, and theories, for instance, in the study of emotions, motivation, rituals, etc. It is our aim with this volume to foster the productive interdisciplinary dialogue between classics and social psychology even further, and to show how such a dialogue may benefit both fields.

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<sup>1</sup> This intention can be derived from the combination of *ostentantur* (there was a guided tour) and *quo ... viserent* (since only the guides knew the mass audience the Frisians would encounter in the theatre).

In this volume, as in the conference that inspired it, we bring together classicists and social psychologists. Each Part will be introduced by a social psychologist or cognitive literary scholar setting the scene. They set out the wider conceptual and disciplinary framework and so introduce and contextualize the classical case studies that constitute each Part.<sup>2</sup> Psychological research informs each chapter, but, in turn, historical case studies provide opportunities to study (representations of) human behaviour within fully complex settings, rather than abstract experimental ones. Ancient literature, like all literature, ‘offers a virtually limitless archive of the ways in which human beings think, and how they imagine themselves and their world’, as Terence Cave puts it.<sup>3</sup> Obviously, this volume does not lay claim to exhaustiveness, neither for the issues studied by social psychology nor for those in classical studies. However, it does aim to show a wide range of both, to demonstrate the mutual advantages of combining forces, and, most of all, to offer careful reflections on the ‘how’ and the ‘what’ of the study of the social psychology of a historical period.

Tacitus’ anecdote belongs in the archive just mentioned. We could use it for different purposes, for instance, to bring out the influence of the positionality of the interpreter (see section 5 below); or to illustrate the power of the ‘search-light function’ of psychological theory, in combination with the importance of acknowledging situatedness, whether ancient or modern (see sections 3.2 and 3.3 below). It is also an apt illustration of the intellectual impetus of this volume, stemming from a large-scale research programme in Classics, called ‘Anchoring Innovation’.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 ‘Anchoring’ and Social Psychology

The ‘Anchoring Innovation’ research programme is concerned with the many different ways in which people in classical antiquity processed situations, ideas, objects, and procedures that struck them as ‘new’. How did relevant social groups (rather than individuals) manage (or fail) to connect (that is, to ‘anchor’) such things to something which they could somehow regard as already familiar?<sup>5</sup> The importance of anchoring (integrating, accommodating) the new in what is already cognitively available is brought out by Tacitus’ story as well. The Frisians are unfamiliar with theatrical performances in their own culture and society, and therefore they are completely oblivious to that aspect

<sup>2</sup> For a more elaborate overview of the different Parts and chapters, see section 6 below.

<sup>3</sup> Cave 2016: 14.

<sup>4</sup> <https://anchoringinnovation.nl>.

<sup>5</sup> General introductions include Sluiter 2017; 2021; Sluiter and Versluys 2022.

of their (new) surrounding: for lack of a suitable anchor, the performance fails to keep them interested.<sup>6</sup> The upside to this failed anchoring is that they have time on their hands (*otium*) to focus on other things, things for which they do have an anchor. For the Frisians have no trouble quickly to grasp the way in which seating arrangements were manifestations of social hierarchies, although they are in a new situation. They could relate to this instantly, since such hierarchies are, after all, a quite general phenomenon of human societies, including their own. However, the way in which they then translate this insight into social behaviour (usurping a place of honour that had not been formally assigned to them) marks them out as quaintly foreign to the Roman public. That public, in turn, anchors their assessment of the Frisians in the cultural stereotypes of a primitive impetuousness and a good kind of ambition; on these grounds, they let the Frisians' behaviour pass.

Clearly, there are significant socio-psychological aspects to 'anchoring'.<sup>7</sup> It is crucially concerned with how relevant social groups categorize (or fail to categorize), conceptually and linguistically, what they perceive as new; how they cognitively process new input and respond to it, intellectually, emotionally, and morally; and how all such processes are situated: they are affected by relevant social factors, including social context and setting, social norms, sense of self and social identity, and group influence. It is in full acknowledgment of

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6 For a contemporary example of 'failed anchoring', see Sluiter 2017: 21. Of course, what we get here is Tacitus' interpretation of the Frisians' behaviour; see section 3.2 below for other possible explanations of the Frisians' limited interest in the performance.

7 Our term 'anchoring' is an expansion of the term as used by Kahneman and Tversky, who reserve it for a subconscious phenomenon mainly related to the way in which people make numerical estimates (see Kahneman 2011: 119–128; Klooster, this volume (Chapter 8), uses the concept in this way, while Murnaghan (Chapter 2) also uses Kahneman's work. We also acknowledge the work by other psychologists, such as Moscovici 1976 (1961), who uses 'anchoring' for 'the naming and classifying of novel encounters, ideas, things, or persons' (Moscovici 1976: 172). Such labelling and classifying (see also Bauer and Gaskell 1999) is indeed one of the most important forms anchoring can take, but there are also other non-linguistic manifestations, such as visual familiarity (for an example of the persistence of architectural features, see Sluiter 2017: section 5) or geographical 'ancrage' (Debarbieux 2014). The concept of anchoring has the important affordance of facilitating interdisciplinary dialogues with disciplines that feature different, but related concepts, such as 'accommodation' (economics; Rogers 2003 (1962)); 'intertextuality' (literary studies; the term was coined by Julia Kristeva; see Kristeva 1969; influential application in Classics by Hinds 1998); 'belonging' (sociology; Duyvendak 2011), or 'common ground' (cognitive linguistics; Clark and Brennan 1991; Clark 1996; Kroon 2021). Without obliterating the important differences between such concepts, the language of 'anchoring' facilitates a dialogue between scholars from all of these disciplines.

the importance of all such aspects, and of the need to engage with specialist expertise on these issues, that this volume was designed.

'Anchoring' plays at least some role in many of the following chapters, but several also address the issue directly, particularly in Part 5, which deals with the accommodation of 'the new'. Thus, David Konstan demonstrates how the novel Christian concept of 'sin' was anchored in the traditional Greek religious lexicon (Chapter 12), and Thomas Martin discusses a whole range of anchoring strategies with which the Athenians at the end of the fourth century BCE tried to come to terms with the novelty of deifying a mortal man, Demetrius of Phaleron (Chapter 13). But the issue of 'anchoring' also plays a prominent role in Anne-Sophie Noel's exploration of how objects (props) in Greek tragedy can function as 'material anchors' for shaping individual and collective identity (Chapter 10, see pp. 271, 277). Jacqueline Klooster shows how in Euripides' *Ion* judgements about surprising events—are they a 'coincidence' or part of a divine plan?—are anchored in specific cultural and cognitive schemas (Chapter 8). And, finally, Karen Bassi argues that 'the prospect of death provides an impetus for "anchoring innovation" in Greek tragedy' (p. 287), by which she means that characters' awareness of human mortality is a precondition for imagining a future (Chapter 11).

In what follows in this introduction, we start from classics, also in the interest of colleagues from the social sciences interested in this volume. We first discuss the *status quaestionis* of psychological approaches in classical studies and the appeal to classicists of the most recent developments in cognition studies, including the importance of the notion of situatedness (section 3). Then we give a rapid sketch of the particular ways in which the humanities organize their research (section 4). It is clear that antiquity studies have benefited enormously from the insights developed in the social sciences. However, ideally, the benefit is mutual. In section 5 we set out the ways in which the study of classical antiquity (as an example of a particularly accessible and rich historical environment) complements insights from the social sciences, and contextualizes them in a new way. Section 6 provides an outline of the volume.

### 3 Classics and Psychology

#### 3.1 *An Ultra Brief History of Psychological Approaches in Classics and Their Appeal*

The materials that are the object of classical studies, the questions asked of them, and the methods by which classicists arrive at answers (see section 4 below for an explication of those) all contribute to the readiness with which

psychological approaches have long been embraced by classicists.<sup>8</sup> Without wishing to offer an exhaustive overview, we should mention here, for example, the stimulating work done on Greek notions of selfhood, which has firmly put the question on the table to what extent modern subjective conceptions of personal identity can be applied to the ancient Greeks.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, sustained work has been done on ancient emotions, including on how to ‘read’ them from archaeological evidence and literary and non-literary texts.<sup>10</sup> There are studies on affective regimes and on individual emotions in Greek culture, such as shame, anger, envy, and pity;<sup>11</sup> a recent addition is Konstan’s work on notions of forgiveness and sin, which also features in the present volume.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, classical scholarship on Greek religion has often shown an interest in its psychological and social dimensions. One notable example are Versnel’s studies of how people coped with inconsistencies in religion, which is informed by Festinger’s work on cognitive dissonance reduction.<sup>13</sup> The social aspects of rituals have also received ample attention.<sup>14</sup> As a final example, we mention that ancient value systems and the societal negotiations through which they are constituted have been central to a long-standing international research project, *The Penn-Leiden Colloquia on Ancient Values*.<sup>15</sup>

### 3.2 *The Cognitive Turn in Classics: Situatedness*

In the last decade or so, these and other efforts have increasingly been passing under the name of ‘cognitive classics’.<sup>16</sup> That label, to be sure, should not be taken to imply a fully unified field with a tightly focused research agenda.

8 See e.g. Cairns 2019: 18; Budelmann 2023: 2–3.

9 Thus, Gill 1996; 2006 has opposed ancient Greek ‘objective-participant’ and modern ‘subjective-individualist’ perspectives on selfhood, while Sorabji 2006 has argued that there are in fact significant continuities between ancient and modern notions. See Verheij 2014 for an attempt to find middle ground in the debate. The topic is taken up in Part 1 of the present volume.

10 For general overviews, see Chaniotis 2012; Chaniotis and Ducrey 2013; Plamper 2012; Braund & Gill 1997; Konstan 2006; Cairns & Nelis 2017; Hitzler 2011; Campeggiani and Konstan; Sanders 2021.

11 Affective regimes: see Chaniotis 2012, Chaniotis and Ducrey 2013; Van Nijf 2013; individual emotions: see Cairns 1993; Williams 1993; Kaster 1997; 2001; Kalimtzis 2012; Konstan 2001; Harris 2001; Braund and Most 2003; Konstan and Rutter 2003; Sternberg 2005; Munteanu 2011.

12 Konstan 2022, and see his contribution to this volume (Chapter 12).

13 Culminating in Versnel 2011. Festinger’s work also informs the contribution of Martin to this volume (Chapter 13).

14 E.g., Hüsken 2007; Chaniotis et al. 2010; Chaniotis 2011.

15 E.g. on *andreia* (manliness and courage) (Rosen and Sluiter 2003), free speech (Sluiter and Rosen 2004), ‘badness’ (Sluiter and Rosen 2008), and labor (Flohr and Bowes 2024).

16 Early ‘classics’ of the field are Fagan 2011 on crowd psychology at Roman games, and Struck 2016 and Larson 2016 on aspects of Greek religion. Budelmann 2023: 1–3 offers a brief lucid overview of the ‘cognitive turn’ in classics, on which we draw here.

Rather, cognitive classics represents a spectrum of diverse inquiries with their own distinct focal points. A number of wide-ranging edited volumes published in quick succession in the last five years or so showcase the breadth of research done under the banner ‘cognitive classics’, with an impact in areas ranging from linguistics and literature to ancient philosophy and science, material culture, and archaeology.<sup>17</sup> However, the umbrella term ‘cognitive classics’ is neither gratuitous nor superfluous. Amidst the diversity of approaches, certain common methods and theoretical frameworks are beginning to emerge, suggesting a shared intellectual project. This coherence, albeit nascent, is precisely why the term is valuable. It serves the purpose of definitively putting cognitive approaches on the map and staking a claim for them as a major new perspective on the interdisciplinary field of classical studies.

To a large extent, developments within the cognitive sciences themselves have in recent years significantly increased their appeal and applicability to the (historical) humanities. A first wave of studies into cognition in the second half of the twentieth century conceived of the human mind as a computational processing device and of cognitive processes as turning on the manipulation of abstract, amodal symbols or mental representations of a pre-given world. However, recent cognitively inflected work in classics takes as its much more relatable point of departure what has been called a ‘second generation’ of cognition studies. This approach challenges the computational model and seeks to replace it with a view of cognition as embodied or distributed over mind, body and environment.<sup>18</sup> One popular move here is to unpack cognition in terms of the ‘4 Es’.<sup>19</sup> It emphasizes that the mind is *embodied*, as opposed to the Cartesian mind-body dualism underlying the ‘mind as computer’ metaphor; *embedded* in its environmental, social and cultural contexts; *extended* into the physical world (relying, for instance, on memory being encoded in writing or the shape of tools); and *enactive*, that is determined by, and during, our interactions with the world. When the computational model is abandoned, the earlier bias towards higher cognitive functions associated with deliberate reasoning is no

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17 See Meineck et al. 2018 (a comprehensive handbook); Lauwers et al. 2018 (reflecting deeply on the manifold historical and current connections between the fields of psychology and classics); Anderson et al. 2019 (a somewhat more specialized endeavour, on notions of ‘distributed’ cognition in Antiquity); Clifford and Buxton 2023 (a partly cognitively inflected volume dealing with imaginative processes at work in Greek literature and art, which resonates with our Parts 4 and 5 in particular); two further volumes have appeared in the new series, *Cognitive Classics*, of Oxford University Press: Grethlein et al. 2020 on the cognitive effects of ancient narrative on recipients; Budelmann and Sluiter 2023 on cognition and Greek tragedy.

18 Precursors notwithstanding, Varela et al. 1991 is the foundational text. Wilson and Foglia 2017 offer an up-to-date account.

19 See Menary 2010; Newen et al. 2018. For applications in the realm of cultural and literary criticism, see, e.g., Kukkonen and Caracciolo 2014; Morgan et al. 2017.



longer warranted; some scholars therefore add two further 'Es', of *emotion* and *experience*. However, the precise articulation of theories of second-generation cognition studies matters less to us than the general acknowledgement that an adequate account of human cognitive processes cannot be limited to a description of what goes on 'in the mind'. Instead, we should think of cognition as always and fundamentally 'situated'. We will use 'situatedness' and 'situated cognition' as a comprehensive term for all aspects of 4E (or 5E, or 6E) cognition; for 'all forms of cognitive interaction between agents and the circumstances (in the widest sense of the word) in which they find themselves'.<sup>20</sup> Cognition is 'grounded', to use a term of Lawrence Barsalou, in our sensory experiences, bodily interactions, and the environments we navigate, including the cultural and social contexts we inhabit.<sup>21</sup>

Taking situatedness into account highlights the shaping force of both immediate situational and contextual factors and broader historical and cultural influences. For instance, if we return to the anecdote in Tacitus, a comprehensive description of the behaviour of the Frisians in the theatre should emphasize that their prioritization of the audience over the theatrical performance is probably informed not simply by their ignorance of the latter, but also by their current social role as ambassadors on a mission to gain influence in Roman society and politics—insights not fully evident in Tacitus' rendition of the events. An adequate description of how the Frisians 'read' the Roman social hierarchy should also point out the interaction between cognitive processes (which may be universal) and a highly specific socio-cultural environment. In particular, the general human tendency to make social attributions is here significantly aided by the fact that Roman theatres did indeed have separate seating areas for different classes: the seating arrangement serves as a 'cognitive scaffold', a visual and spatial representation of the Roman social order, which helps the Frisians in quickly organizing and understanding the new information.<sup>22</sup> The inherent situatedness of socio-psychological phenomena requires cultural-historical expertise of the analyst and an awareness of the pitfalls in applying ideas originating in a very different socio-cultural context. For social psychologists, the study of historical periods is a way to reflect on the historical and cross-cultural adequacy of their theories and concepts.<sup>23</sup>

20 Corthals and Sluiter 2023: 210. This encompasses all forms of so-called 4E-cognition (embodied, embedded, extended, and enactive).

21 Barsalou 2020.

22 See Ng 2019: 122–123, commenting on how the customary seating arrangement can be seen as 'a cognitive artefact that served as a scaffold for knowledge of Roman society'.

23 For brief discussions of the relationship between universality and cultural specificity, see Lauwers et al. 2018: 2–4; Budelmann 2023: 10–13. We fully subscribe to Budelmann's view that we should not regard the two as an either/or binary. Rather than regarding

The way in which current cognition studies emphasize and welcome the kinds of complexity of context evidenced in such a passage from Tacitus is precisely what makes them so appealing to the humanities in general, and classical studies in particular. Classical studies are frequently concerned with seeking to understand the origins, contexts, functions, and effects of products of the human mind, be they literary texts, material remains, or cultural and social institutions. This has also usually been true when classicists have engaged with approaches to literature that are technically strictly formalist, such as structuralist narratology. In classics, they were never entirely divorced from issues of audience response and of the effects of certain narrative choices on listeners and readers. It stands to reason that the newest insights from cognitive scientists about the embodied and situated nature of all psychological and cognitive processes are genuinely exciting to classicists: such insights into the workings of the mind provide a new and up-to-date contextualization for their interpretative work. The label ‘cognitive classics’ serves to channel energy in that direction, encouraging scholars to explore the intersection of cognitive science and classical studies more deeply and systematically.

### 3.3 *The Search-Light Function of Socio-Psychological Research in Classics*

The chapters of this volume all take serious account of current socio-psychological research. They draw on concepts and theories from modern social psychology, using them as the foundation for their analyses. In most cases, insights from modern social psychology serve to construct hypotheses about what is going on in our texts. More generally, they have what has been called a ‘search-light function,’ enabling our contributors to bring certain aspects of texts into sharper focus and to reveal features that may otherwise remain underappreciated or overlooked.<sup>24</sup> For example, we might consider the anecdote from Tacitus through the lens of social attribution theory, which suggests that people are generally prone to making rapid judgments and attributions about others in social situations, using only limited cognitive resources (and even cognitive shortcuts). This would help explain the rapidity and ease with which the Frisians establish a social hierarchy of Roman society based on only limited information.<sup>25</sup> It also sheds light on why

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‘universalizing perspectives ... as a threat’, we should consider them ‘a way of sharpening the grasp on specificity’ (2023: 10).

24 The term ‘search-light function’ is from Lauwers et al. 2018: 7. The concept is taken up in particular in the contribution of Huitink and Crone, p. 358.

25 Cf. Baumeister and Finkel 2010: 84–85. For social attribution, see also the Introduction to Part 1 by Jovchelovitch, and Chapter 3 by Van Emde Boas.

the Romans quickly attribute the Frisians' behaviour to cultural stereotypes without delving deeper into the ambassadors' specific motivations. In short, applying modern socio-psychological concepts and theories to the Tacitean anecdote and other historical texts helps classicists in understanding how those texts reflect fundamental elements of human social cognition. It also once again offers more insight to social psychologists on the situatedness of all socio-psychological phenomena.

#### 4 Classics as Exponent of Humanities Methodology<sup>26</sup>

It may be useful to make explicit some of the specific forms of research in classics (many of which apply to the humanities in general), in contrast to much modern cognitive and social psychological research. The latter often relies on the possibility to create laboratory conditions with controlled variables and on quantitative (statistic) data analysis, and it aims for generalizable results, even prognostic theories, establishing relationships of causality or correlation between dependent and independent variables. Classics (and, again, much of the humanities in general), on the other hand, often utilizes research designs that are qualitative, conceptual, and hermeneutical. This means that it is based on interpretation, with constant reflection on the very methods and validity of interpretation themselves. The sources used are historical documents, which, however, were not designed for the purposes for which scholars interested in the social psychology of the ancient world may wish to use them—a point to which we shall return presently.

This type of humanities research has, to be sure, a large empirical component. Classicists work with empirical data, mined from the rich 'archive' of written and material sources on which our knowledge of the ancient world depends. The data which we gather in this context are always human-made: they are products of the human mind and of individual or collective creative processes. In studying these, it is imperative to take into account both the specific conditions of their production, which might include historical context, cultural norms, and the artist's or author's personal background, and the specific conditions and contexts of our own interpretation (awareness of the interaction of these two is the basis of the hermeneutical method). This implies that the phases of data-collecting and interpretation cannot be radically separated. It is

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26 We thank the Anchoring Innovation consortium and the research group working on Global Dynamics in Antiquity for discussion of these methodological issues and permission to publish below the joint outcome of that discussion.

nearly always impossible, and, indeed, mostly undesirable, to abstract from the inherent complexity of these data in ways that much experimental research in the hard sciences, or quantitative research in the social sciences, needs to do. This type of research is designed to provide insight, rather than generalized statistical trends, and its results are often presented in a narrative argument.

The chapters in this volume all provide case studies, that is, focused examinations of a particular figure (real or fictional), literary work (or a part of one), or historical event.<sup>27</sup> Object selection in research of this nature is not based on (random) representative sampling of a statistical population. Instead, our authors have made an informed choice of objects based on their expected instructive potential: these might be especially well-preserved examples, hold unique historical significance, or offer a window onto a specific cultural phenomenon.

In this volume, we ask the question how we can study socio-psychological phenomena and processes in ancient societies. For this purpose, we have restricted ourselves to *literary* source material; even more precisely: ancient drama, satire, and historical prose narratives. Such literary texts usually represent human beings in the midst of situations of heightened tension: crises of various kinds in ancient drama, societal turmoil in historical texts (with ancient satire serving as, among other things, a bonding tool to release or divert tensions, as Ralph Rosen demonstrates in Chapter 6). Our focus on literary texts means that material culture only plays a role as reflected in text, as in Anne-Sophie Noel's study of the role of objects in make-believe play in Chapter 10.<sup>28</sup> This volume does not include non-literary texts, although it goes without saying that they, too, can provide a wealth of information, certainly not restricted to the *realia* of the ancient world, but also about the presentation of self and others and therefore about social psychology.

The literary character of the texts studied here poses its own demands on the interpreters and requires a good grasp of cultural and historical context, genre, and language. As we stated above, these highly sophisticated plays and prose narratives were obviously not designed as experiments in social psychology, and the questions we seek to answer are often not those that their authors put centre stage. To fully grasp the underlying socio-psychological dynamics, we must delve beyond the text's surface meaning and pay close attention to what it takes for granted or presupposes, rather than solely focusing on its overt statements. What is taken for granted gives us a fair indication

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27 For reflections on reasoning with cases, see Forrester 1996; Asper 2020.

28 The connections between objects and anchoring will be the topic of a future *Euhormos* volume.

of the common ground between the parties in the literary communication—although we always have to be aware that common ground management can be manipulative.<sup>29</sup> Genre is also important here. For instance, as we have been aware for at least 50 years, since Dover's seminal book,<sup>30</sup> ancient drama and ancient judicial speeches are rich sources for the study of popular morality. In each case, they are performed for a (very) large audience of Athenian citizens, and they are designed to win over that audience somehow. For the purpose of this volume, ancient comedy is especially important. The comic poet is always taking part in a contest, and tries to win first prize, which automatically entails the attempt to curry favour with the audience. Chapters 4 and 5, respectively by Xenia Makri and Alexandra Hardwick, analyse Aristophanic comedy for the social representations of groups and individuals underlying them. The case of tragedy is somewhat more complex, given that these plays are set in a mythical past and feature heroic characters that do not necessarily straightforwardly reflect fifth-century attitudes. Still, as becomes clear from Jacqueline Klooster's contribution (Chapter 8), audiences would seek to explain extraordinary tragic events in terms of contemporary religious views, while Evert van Emde Boas shows in Chapter 3 how later interpreters relegated (to the extent that was possible) the larger-than-life actions of tragic heroes and heroines to common patterns of social behaviour in an effort to make sense of them. Crowd reactions are also central in Chapter 13 by Thomas Martin on the deification of Demetrius.

As we confront our literary texts, we must at times actively read 'against the grain', navigating through the biases and perspectives of the original authors that shape their (re-)presentation of socio-psychological phenomena. Even in the case of a text like that of Tacitus' anecdote, which quite explicitly grapples with socio-psychological themes, it is essential to acknowledge Tacitus' complicity in perpetuating certain Roman attitudes towards 'barbarians' (note that Tacitus does not ascribe the use of the sobriquet *barbari* to the Romans in the theatre, but uses it in the narrator text). By recognizing Tacitus' alignment with the Roman public's complacent attitude and gently mocking tone, we can better comprehend his selection of details and why he overlooks alternative explanations for the Frisians' focus on the audience rather than the performance. The importance of this awareness of the positionality of the author will be further addressed in the next section.

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29 Kroon 2021.

30 Dover 1974.

## 5 Giving Back: Contributing to the Modern Study of Social Psychology<sup>31</sup>

If classics has a lot to gain from recent insights in cognitive and social psychology, the reverse is also true. This is the case in three ways in particular. First, psychological accounts by classical authors seem to anticipate the importance of the concept of situatedness in modern theory. Secondly, detailed analyses by modern classicists of psychological phenomena in the ancient world can be an eye-opener both to the similarities between historical minds and our own, and the important differences owing to vastly different socio-cultural and historical contexts. A grasp of the similarities restores, as Vlad Glaveanu puts it (p. 259), ‘a lost sense of historical continuity’, while understanding situated difference is an important warning against abstraction from contexts, and essentializing psychological phenomena *per se*.<sup>32</sup> The third point is that in studying ancient authors, it is usually relatively easy to become aware of their particular viewpoints and biases, their (sociocultural and historical) positionality. This is a helpful insight in raising awareness of our own positionality.

Let us elaborate on these three points, first of all the one about ancient psychological accounts: ancient discourses of cognition—or rather metacognition—provide accounts of how the Greeks themselves conceived of their own and other people’s psychological processes.<sup>33</sup> Such discourses routinely take account of socio-cultural and situational factors in assessing people’s thoughts and behaviours, that is their take on cognition is always situated and in a way 4E *avant la lettre*. This means that ancient conceptualisations of human mental functioning resonate in non-trivial ways with modern accounts of embodied cognition.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, as Habinek and Reyes have recently suggested, the real *explanandum* may be, not why notions of embodied cognition

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31 See also the section, ‘Two-way Traffic: Can cognitive criticism give back to cognitive science?’, in Felix Budelmann’s recent introduction to cognitive literary criticism (Budelmann 2023: 16–18). He rightly emphasizes the humanities’ embrace of complexity and holistic description as a caution against scientific reductionism and compartmentalization; he further points out that humanities scholars ‘own’ part of the evidence for human cognition, to the extent that that evidence is ‘stored’ in Cave’s ‘cognitive archive’ (see section 1 above). We wholly endorse these points and in this section offer some additional considerations.

32 The context-sensitivity of certain psychological effects has even been advanced as an important factor in the so-called ‘replication crisis’ in social psychology. See Van Bavel et al. 2016.

33 See Corthals and Sluiter 2023: 210.

34 Cairns 2019: 18–19; Budelmann 2023: 3. The volume of Anderson et al. 2019 is largely devoted to bringing this out.

are currently being re-introduced, but how and why, in the European philosophical tradition, cognition ever came to be considered 'as a singular, disembodied process'.<sup>35</sup> For example, the ancient commentators ('scholiasts') of Greek tragedy discussed by Evert van Emde Boas in Chapter 3 tend to explain characters' behaviour with reference to the situation in which they find themselves (rather than, or at least in addition to, some inner, inalienable character traits). Michiel van Veldhuizen demonstrates in Chapter 9 how the application of abductive reasoning, a form of logical inference, as portrayed in an episode in Herodotus' *Histories*, is determined by culturally engendered expectations about the way in which gods communicate with humans. As Huitink and Crone show in Chapter 14, while Xenophon displays a keen interest in the young Persian prince Cyrus' mental developments during puberty, he considers these developments, not as a decontextualized, biologically or neuropsychologically driven phenomenon, but in light of how they prepare Cyrus for his future role as king of Persia.

The second point mentioned above suggests that classics can make a contribution to modern cognitive and social psychology by showing ways in which to integrate historical insights. It is reasonable to expect similarities between ancient and modern subjects based on the fact that the human biological make-up and 'hardwired' aspects of psychology have not materially evolved in the centuries separating us from classical antiquity. We share with the Greeks and Romans the same bodily functions, perceptual, cognitive, and emotional capacities and innate patterns of (social) behaviour. This biological continuity provides the foundation for attempts to study the ancient world with the help of modern psychological concepts.<sup>36</sup> We use those concepts as a search-light, illuminating previously unexamined aspects of ancient texts (see section 3.3 above). However, the social, cultural, and material environments of the ancient world were vastly different from our own, allowing us to investigate how fundamental human capacities manifest in different contexts in order to gain a richer understanding of the interplay between biology and culture, or universality and specificity, in human experience.<sup>37</sup> This emphasis on situatedness

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35 Habinek and Reyes 2019: 226.

36 Cf. Van Duijn, this volume, p. 177: 'Given the relatively stable biological basis underlying our perceptive and emotional systems, our capacity for memorizing, inference, etc., the cognitive framework comes with a degree of universality that warrants its applicability to people inside and outside texts (i.e., characters, authors, readers), as well as across different cultural communities and time frames.'

37 One chapter that in particular addresses this balance is Chapter 7, in which Douglas Cairns argues that, on the one hand, certain responses to narrative are fairly basic and universal, such as 'shuddering' (*phrikê*) at the report of horrific events, while on the other hand, a seemingly basic concept like *phrikê* is at the same time culturally specific by

prevents undue generalization of the results of modern experiments. The ancient Greco-Roman world is a particularly felicitous laboratory for carrying out this type of historical research: its sources have been closely studied for centuries and are very well disclosed by digital and analogue search tools as well as a sophisticated tradition of scholarly work. They have been studied through the lens of a wide variety of (ever new) theories. This makes it readily apparent whether a new ‘search-light’ will indeed yield new insights.

The third way in which the historical study of psychological phenomena can support the progress of modern psychology as well as classics, lies in the awareness of positionality. Identifying the biases and perspectives inherent in the historical sources and linking them to the positionality of the author can serve as an invitation for classicists and social psychologists alike to reflect on their own positionality. Taking into account historical source material offers social scientists studying contemporary society an opportunity to critically examine the tacit assumptions and cultural preconceptions which have informed their own concepts and theories. Psychological explanatory models are just as much part of the global archive of the ‘ways in which human beings think, how they imagine themselves and their world’ as world literature, and this implies nothing derogatory about modern science.<sup>38</sup> This is true for modern psychology as well as for historical modes of explaining human behaviour (itself a universal human interest). There is also a distinct advantage to the use of modern psychological insights in a historical context: historical human agents mostly will not have access to modern theoretical concepts, and hence, their behaviour is not informed by them, whereas the self-understanding of contemporary subjects is sometimes premised on such concepts (the popular use of ‘repression’, ‘psychological trauma’, ‘passive aggression’, etc., comes to mind).<sup>39</sup>

## 6 The Social Psychology of the Ancient World

As briefly mentioned in section 1 above, the interdisciplinary dialogue which we seek to foster in this volume is reflected in its format. The volume consists of five Parts, each organized around a central concept or domain in social psychology:

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virtue of its typical association with religious experiences like initiation and epiphany. See also Cairns 2013.

38 To cite Terence Cave again (see section 1 above). See Corthals and Sluiter 2023, for instance, for a comparison based on this insight between a scenario in a Greek tragedy and the infamous Milgram experiments.

39 This phenomenon has been recognized for at least 50 years (see Gergen 1973: 313 ‘if a society is psychologically informed, theories about which it is informed become difficult to test in an uncontaminated way’).



selfhood (Part 1); social representation (Part 2); narrative meaning-making (Part 3); imagination, creativity, and innovation (Part 4); and the accommodation of new concepts (Part 5). Each Part begins with an essay by a member of our team of social scientists that introduces the social-psychological contexts relevant to the classical case studies that follow, outlining major concepts and methodologies within the respective domain and reflecting on how the ancient case studies presented by a classicist challenge or enrich these approaches. These introductory essays are printed on grey paper to distinguish them clearly. This present section serves a complementary role, considering each Part as a collaborative whole by classicists and social scientists, and now introducing the case studies for a wider audience and contextualizing them in the field of classical studies. While some overlap between the present chapter overview on the one hand and the individual Part introductions on the other is inevitable, they are designed to offer different angles on the same interdisciplinary discussions.

In Part 1, 'Character and Individual', an introduction by Sandra Jovchelovitch is followed by two chapters on Greek tragedy by Sheila Murnaghan and Evert van Emde Boas. Together, the three contributions demonstrate at once how cross-fertilization between social psychology and classics can help further fundamental debates in both fields. In her introduction Sandra Jovchelovitch explains that within social psychology the study of character and selfhood has been transitioning towards a new perspective. Instead of viewing human behaviour as mostly driven by the operations of a decontextualized and disembodied mind, the emerging paradigm emphasizes the critical influence of social context in shaping individual actions and identities. 'Individuation and socialization go hand in hand in human developmental history' (p. 38). For Jovchelovitch, the study of Greek tragedy can open our eyes to the dangers of isolating the individual from its surroundings, as it represents characters acting in richly contextualized settings, as imagined by playwrights and interpreted by audiences on the basis of folk psychologies potentially very different from our own.

The chapters by Murnaghan and Van Emde Boas integrate recent social psychological theory from the start, but they also receive their impetus from a long-standing debate in classics itself, about the alleged lack of psychological 'depth' in the characterization of tragic heroes and heroines (Shakespeare's supposedly round characters are usually the implicit contrast). To them, the recent emphasis in psychology on the situatedness of human behaviour suggests that classicists should adopt a different approach to characterization than they have often done: there is no need to look for some individual and partly mysterious 'core' that will 'explain' an Antigone or a Medea. In Chapter 2,

Murnaghan reconsiders the changing self-explanations of King Oedipus and Antigone in Sophocles' eponymous plays in the light of modern psychological models that do not assume such a coherent 'core'. Instead, she suggests that Sophocles paints a convincing picture of human action and decision-making that depends on a constant dialogue between individual and social aspects of selfhood (what Jovchelovitch has termed 'the dialogicality of the self' in her introduction). In Chapter 3, Van Emde Boas takes us to the world of ancient commentaries (or *scholia*) on Greek tragedy and the kinds of social attribution in which they engage. While *scholia* use the same types of explanations for characters' behaviour as we see in modern folk-psychological models, Van Emde Boas suggests that there is a salient difference in the type of explanation that is preferred: ancient commentators were more prone to explaining behaviour in terms of short-term mental states of characters in particular situations than in terms of longer-term dispositions. As Jovchelovitch highlights in her introduction, a strict separation between the individual and the social is to misunderstand their entanglement. While such entanglement can also be discerned in ancient reflections on personhood, the way in which this is articulated is a function of the perspective of the historical mind.

Part 2 'Social Representation in Practice' is introduced by Gordon Sammut, who offers an account of social representations, an important body of theory within social psychology. Social representations are cognitive structures that play a fundamental role in shaping how individuals comprehend the world around them and engage with it. One example which Sammut gives concerns the social representation of gender roles, which influences how individuals perceive and enact gendered behaviours and expectations within society. Social representations often pass for 'common sense' and are not widely questioned. However, they are not fixed and permanent structures, but are established through social interaction, can evolve over time, and adapt to changing circumstances and realities. Like Jovchelovitch in her introduction to Part 1, Sammut therefore underscores the notion that human understanding and cognition are deeply influenced by the social and cultural contexts in which individuals are situated. Sammut also discusses how social representations are formed and processed in social cognition, drawing on the concept of dual-process models. This framework suggests that social representations can be utilized in both automatic and controlled cognitive processes. Automatic processes rely on readily available social representations, shaping initial judgments and reactions. Controlled processes involve a more deliberate analysis, potentially revising these initial interpretations.

The case studies of this Part move from the world of Greek tragedy to that of comedy (Aristophanes) and satire. As Sammut emphasizes, Aristophanic

comedy is suitable for studying social representations in action, because it exposes and exaggerates shared understandings. By portraying characters in absurd situations or with outlandish traits, Aristophanes does not simply mirror 'common sense'. Instead, he challenges and lays bare the underlying assumptions and biases embedded in these social representations. This comedic exaggeration makes the audience conscious of these often-unquestioned ideas, prompting them to either laugh along with the absurdity or re-evaluate their own beliefs. Through laughter and satire, Aristophanes provides a platform for examining the social representations that shape Athenian society.

Central to Xenia Makri's discussion of Aristophanes' *Birds* in Chapter 4 are the questions of how shared social identities are shaped and social communities are created. The play centres around two Athenians who are fed up with their own city and persuade the birds to help them found a new, fantastical city in the sky. Using Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory as 'search-lights' (see section 1.4 above), Makri shows how the Athenians are able to gain control of the new city of birds by cleverly exploiting and manipulating their group identity. At the same time, Aristophanes invites Athenians to reimagine their own social order. Alexandra Hardwick's reading of Aristophanes' *Assembly-Women* in Chapter 5 also places significant emphasis on the dynamics within groups. In particular, she highlights how the protagonist, Praxagora, savvily uses different means of persuasion when dealing with a group of assembled women than when confronting her husband Blepyrus, playing to the impulsive emotions of the former and using more deliberative reasoning with the latter. In this way, *Assembly-Women* can be seen as a dramatization of the dual-process models highlighted by Sammut in his introduction, and as a commentary on differences in decision-making processes in groups and between individuals. In Chapter 6, finally, Ralph Rosen takes up the question of group behaviour by considering the thorny notion of 'derisive laughter', as elicited by satirical authors like Aristophanes and Horace when they single out specific people for mockery and scorn. Against prevailing assumptions that the laughter of derision has mostly negative psychological and societal effects, Rosen enlists the voices of ancient satirists to make a case for its prosocial character. In the process, he demonstrates how complex literary texts can be used to challenge the received distinction in scientific laughter research between spontaneous, joyful ('Duchenne') laughter and intellectual, cerebral ('non-Duchenne') laughter.

In Part 3, 'Narrative Meaning-Making', we shift our attention from social representations to another fundamental mechanism by which human beings make sense of the world, namely narrative. The introduction, written by cognitivist literary scholar Max van Duijn, explores narrative as both a psychological

and communicative phenomenon. Scholars have long pondered how narrative meaning emerges from stories, seeking to understand the cognitive processes involved in story comprehension and interpretation. Recent cognitively inflected work in narrative theory highlights how stories have the power to transport individuals into imagined worlds, eliciting mental simulations and emotional responses. At the same time, stories also serve as a means of conveying messages, values, and cultural norms to audiences. Van Duijn's introduction puts the relation between universal and socio-culturally situated aspects of story-telling centre stage. Some of the basic perceptual, emotional, and inferential capacities that underpin our engagement with narrative have remained more or less constant, but stories themselves, as well as the specific cultural values and messages they encode, are shaped by ever-evolving social, historical, and ideological contexts of production and reception.

Each of the chapters in Part 3 engages this issue. In Chapter 7, Douglas Cairns addresses a universal question with the help of ancient source material: what is the relationship between the emotions of characters and those of audiences in narrative? Cairns argues that recent attempts to cast that relationship in terms of a simple 'mirroring system'—perceived or imagined bodily expressions of emotions trigger a contagion response that makes audiences experience the same emotions as characters—are reductive and excise layers of complexity. Through a variety of examples he demonstrates that, by contrast, ancient Greek literary theorising and literary practice never assumed that audiences simply replicated the emotions of characters. While spontaneous mimicry may play a role, this is but the beginning of a more complex, layered response that depends on the audience's background knowledge and cultural frames of reference. In Chapter 8, Jacqueline Klooster turns to Euripides' *Ion*, a play that is notorious for the many 'coincidences' on which the plot turns. Klooster enlists a number of recent psychological accounts of how people react to coincidences, such as Tversky and Kahneman's 'conjunction fallacy', to explain how coincidence plots manage to command an audience's attention instead of being dismissed as a 'cheap trick'. However, in the process Klooster also poses the question what 'counts as' a coincidence in different communities: some unexpected occurrences in the *Ion* may seem 'simply' coincidental to modern audiences, but may have been tinged with divine providence for ancient ones. Chapter 9, by Michiel van Veldhuizen, moves in a similar direction. Van Veldhuizen analyses the episode from Herodotus' *Histories* (1.65–69), in which the Spartan Lichas, prompted by an oracle, searches and then finds the bones of the hero Orestes. On the one hand, he shows that mechanisms described in modern semiotic theory can be used to analyse ancient modes of reasoning (in the present case especially abductive reasoning). On the other

hand, he makes clear that the concepts with which signs are associated or the cultural background assumptions on the basis of which they are interpreted are by no means universal.

Vlad Glaveanu introduces Part 4, 'Imagination, Creativity, and Innovation', which otherwise comprises two further chapters on Greek tragedy, by Anne-Sophie Noel and Karen Bassi. The topic of this Part was chosen for its centrality to both the Anchoring Innovation research agenda and recent psychological theorising. Glaveanu starts by dispelling the idea that creativity and innovation are specifically modern notions, valued only in contemporary societies. If the 'cognitive archive' (see section 1 above for this concept) of world literature and other artifacts shows one thing, it is that imagination and creativity have always been at the heart of what it means to be human. Glaveanu suggests that the Greek plays which are studied in this Part's case studies and which form such a vibrant part of the 'cognitive archive' may help to recover a lost sense of historical continuity in our thinking about creativity and innovation. This is especially true because by portraying characters in action, they demonstrate how creativity does not merely depend on decontextualized mental processes, but on the interplay of pretense, play, imagination, and engagement with the material world. Such insights into the historical roots of creativity and innovation offer valuable perspectives for contemporary discussions and practices in these domains.

In Chapter 10, Noel explores the function of make-believe play and counterfactual imagination in Euripides' tragedies *Heracles* and *Ion*, especially in the protagonists' handling of objects (supplementing Klooster's analysis of the latter play's plot in Chapter 8 with a consideration of the role of props). Using Vygotsky's approach to play and Moreno's theory of psychodrama as 'search-lights', Noel makes the case that scenes in the plays under discussion, in which characters imagine alternative possibilities that will not materialize and act out roles which they will not in the end grow into, are far from superfluous, but crucially contribute to *Heracles'* and *Ion's* identity formation and dynamic and creative construction of the self. Objects (props) play a significant role in sparking imagination and guiding the creative process. In Chapter 11, Bassi confronts the question whether death can form an impetus for creativity through a close-reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. While death and creativity may seem at odds, Bassi shows how this play exemplifies the fact that awareness of one's mortality is a precondition for imagining a future in which other people will live.

Part 5, 'Accommodating New Concepts', continues the theme of 'the new'. Paula Castro's introductory essay highlights the importance of considering different levels of analysis in social-psychological research on innovation, ranging

from individual processes via group and inter-group processes to broader societal and socio-cultural processes. Castro emphasizes the need to integrate insights from research into these various levels of analysis to comprehensively understand how new concepts are accommodated and integrated into existing social structures. In particular, she advocates a socio-psychological perspective that recognizes the dynamic *interplay* between individual cognition, social interactions, and cultural contexts in shaping processes of meaning construction. In Castro's view, each of the case studies that follow bring out the need to focus on that interplay, providing what she calls a 'processual understanding' of complex anchoring mechanisms in progress; she therefore sees a clear place in socio-psychological research for the sort of 'thick' narrative arguments that scholars in the humanities can provide.

In Chapter 12, David Konstan poses the surprising question 'how the ancient world learned to sin'. He argues that new Christian values were anchored in a traditional Greek vocabulary. His discussion oscillates between tracing semantic shifts in key terms like *hamartia* and analysing the socio-cultural contexts in which these changes occurred. Through this approach, Konstan illustrates how meanings evolve within linguistic frameworks shaped by societal norms and practices, thereby demonstrating the mutual constitution of culture and individual subjectivities. In Chapter 13, Thomas Martin examines a radical innovation: the collective decision in ancient Athens to deify a military commander, Demetrius of Phaleron. Martin explores the mechanisms of cognitive dissonance reduction involved in this decision-making process. As Castro makes clear in her introduction, Martin's discussion shows that, although cognitive dissonance reduction is usually regarded as emerging from an individual desire for consistency, it is in fact better understood as a phenomenon at the intersection of individual mental processes and societal debates over contested meanings. The book ends fittingly, we hope, with a collaboration between a classicist and social psychologist. In Chapter 14, Luuk Huitink and Eveline Crone tackle the start of Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus*, which provides us with perhaps the most elaborate portrayal of an adolescent which Greek antiquity has left us. Their contribution is an exercise in 'looking both ways': on the one hand, they demonstrate that recent neuropsychological research into adolescent behaviour can shed light on hitherto badly understood parts of Xenophon's text; on the other hand, they emphasize the situatedness of Xenophon's treatment of Cyrus' adolescence, which is constrained both by general Greek background assumptions and by Xenophon's aim of painting a portrait of Cyrus as an 'ideal' leader and future king.

Together, the chapters in this volume illustrate three important principles in 'doing the social psychology of the ancient world'. First, by applying modern

concepts from social and cognitive psychology, it becomes possible to bring into focus and illuminate aspects of the ancient world easily overlooked without them. This is the search-light function of contemporary ideas. Secondly, in order to do full justice to the psychological aspects of the ancient world, it is imperative to study them in the full complexity of their socio-cultural and historical contexts: cognition is situated. Thirdly and finally, both ancient and modern perspectives on psychological phenomena should take full account of the biases, assumptions, and presupposition of the analyst: good interpreters will critically assess the influence of their positionality.

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