Scientific Method in Ptolemy’s Harmonics

The science called ‘harmonics’ was one of the major intellectual enterprises of Greek antiquity. Ptolemy’s treatise seeks to invest it with new scientific rigour; its consistently sophisticated procedural self-awareness marks it as a key text in the history of science. This book is the first sustained methodological exploration of Ptolemy’s project. After an analysis of his explicit pronouncements on the science’s aims and the methods appropriate to it, it examines Ptolemy’s conduct of his complex investigation in detail, concluding that despite occasional uncertainties, the declared procedure is followed with remarkable fidelity. Ptolemy pursues tenaciously his novel objective of integrating closely the project’s theoretical and empirical phases and shows astonishing mastery of the concept, the design and (it is argued) the conduct of controlled experimental tests. By opening up this neglected text to historians of science, the book aims to provide a fresh point of departure for wider studies of Greek scientific method.

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Preface

During the 1970s and 80s, it was my regular habit to take Philosophy undergraduates at the University of Warwick on a guided tour around a selection of Platonic and Aristotelian texts; and I generally found myself placing issues about the nature of knowledge, and about the procedures by which it may be pursued, firmly at the centre of our agenda. I became more and more fascinated, in the course of this annual pilgrimage through *Meno, Phaedo, Republic, Theaetetus, Posterior Analytics, Physics* and *Nicomachean Ethics*, by their intricate negotiations between what we would call ‘rationalist’ and ‘empiricist’ conceptions of the route towards knowledge in a variety of different fields of enquiry. In 1976 the University of Warwick allowed me to accept an invitation to spend two years teaching in the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge; and it was there, with my mind full of these matters, that I first stumbled, largely by accident, into the thickets of the Greek musical sciences. As I worked backwards from Aristoxenus to Plato and the early Pythagoreans, and then forwards into later antiquity, I discovered that the surviving texts of that unfamiliar tradition can be read as a record of continual controversy, not so much over musicological details as over the general character of the understanding sought by scientists in this field, the methods by which it is to be pursued and secured, and the relations that hold between the propositions of this science and those belonging to other domains. The attempt to unravel the complexities of these debates has occupied me, with a few intermissions, ever since. I translated Ptolemy’s *Harmonics* during the late 1980s as part of the material for the second volume of my *Greek Musical Writings*, and the more I studied it the clearer it became that it is a landmark of major significance in the contentious and quarrelsome history of reflections on scientific method. I realised that it called for much fuller examination, from a methodological perspective, than I could possibly give it in the context of that book.

I set out on the project in 1991. A period of leave from the University of Warwick gave me the opportunity to take up a Visiting Fellowship in the Department of Classics at the University of Queensland, where I had the
leisure to work out the plan for this study and to write some extensive
drafts. Over the next eight years, as I abandoned the philosophers at
Warwick to join the classicists at the University of Otago, and later left
Otago for Birmingham, among the distractions of administrative duties
and the seductions of other research enterprises that came my way, the
book progressed only by fits and starts; and it was not until the turn of the
millennium that it was ready to be dropped into the lap of its amazingly
tolerant publishers.

I am very grateful to the Cambridge University Press and its sta-
especially Pauline Hire, for the patience they have shown, as well as for their
familiar diligence and efficiency. Many thanks also to my admirable copy-
editor, Muriel Hall, who read the long typescript with meticulous atten-
tion, and alerted me to a number of potentially embarrassing mistakes
and obscurities. I have done my best to eliminate the former and resolve
the latter; responsibility for those that remain should of course be laid at
my own door. I am grateful, too, to my colleagues and students in all the
universities I have mentioned for their friendship, for the conversations I
have had with them over the years, and for their willingness to take an
interest in my sometimes esoteric obsessions. Issues investigated in this
book have been the subject of papers I have delivered at conferences and
seminars in England, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, France and Italy,
and I owe a great deal to the scholars who took part in discussions on
those occasions. Special thanks are due to Geoffrey Lloyd, Malcolm
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ing encouragement of my work in this field. The intellectual stimulation
and personal support I have drawn from the experience of sharing my life
with my wife, Jill, has been worth more to me in this and all my other
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