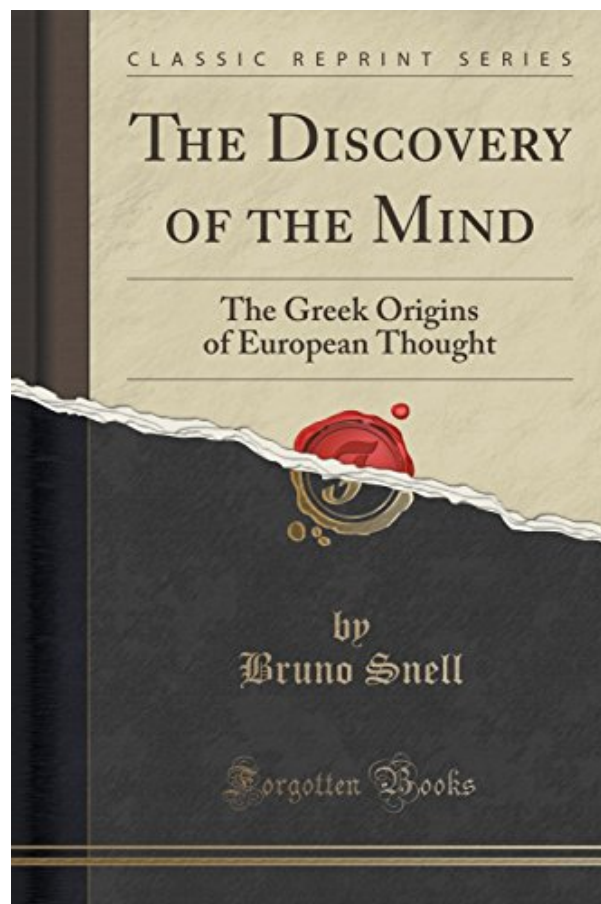
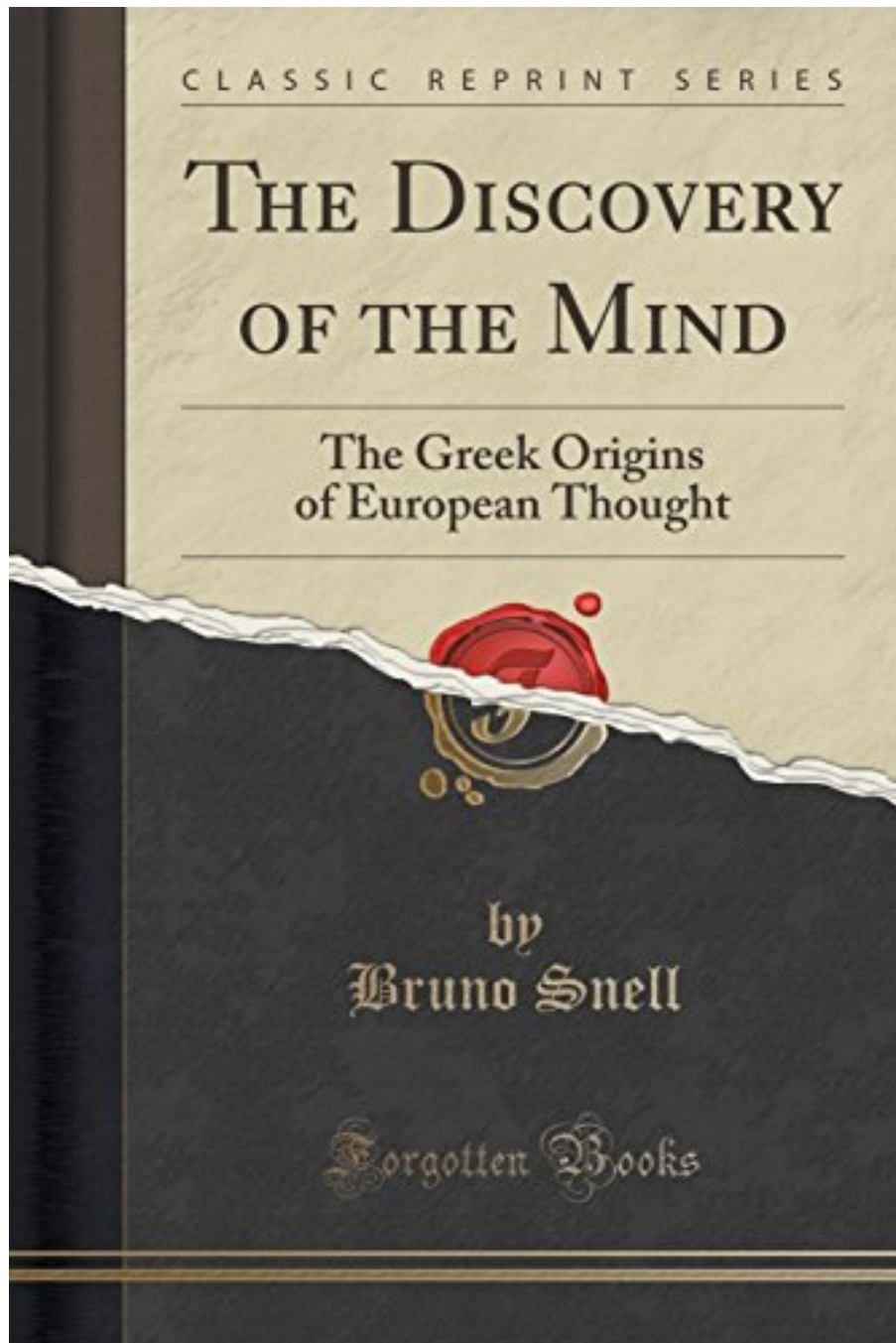


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Excerpt from The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought

At this point we encounter two terminological difficulties. The first arises from a philosophical problem: in spite of our statement that the Greeks discovered the intellect we also assert that the discovery was necessary for the intellect to come into existence. Or, to put it grammatically: the intellect is not only an affective, but also an effective object. It must be obvious to anyone that we are here using a metaphor; but the metaphor is unavoidable, and is in fact the proper expression of what we have in mind. We cannot speak about the mind or the intellect at all without falling back on metaphor.

All other expressions, therefore, which we might use to outline the situation, present the same difficulty. If we say that man understands himself or recognizes himself, we do not mean the same thing as is meant by understanding an object, or recognizing another man. For, in our use of the terms, the self does not come into being except through our comprehension of it. If, on the other hand, we say that the intellect reveals itself, we regard this event not as a result of man's own doing but as a metaphysical happening. This again differs in meaning from the statement: 'a man reveals himself', i.e. He drops his disguise; for the man is the same after the change as before it, while the intellect exists only from the moment of its revelation onward, after it makes its appearance through an individual. If we take the word 'revelation' in its religious significance the same is true once more: the epiphany of a god presupposes that he exists, and that his existence is by no means dependent upon the revelation. The intellect, however, comes into the world.

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Dated but good general reading on the influence of Greek thought

By E. M. Dale

To paraphrase an observation Whitehead made over and over, something wonderful happened between the 8th and 5th century BCE in Greece. Why the circumstances came together in such a way as to produce what we glibly know as "classical Greece" no one may adequately explain, but Snell's book makes the quest for understanding pleasant reading and interesting (if dated, in places) intellectual fare.

This side of modernity, it is easy to pan this book (written in the war years early in the 20th century) as antiquated modern humanism, and indeed it does tend to go on and on about the "individual" (often in isolation from the community) and the genius of the Greek mind, perhaps ignoring that there were other cultures before and after 5th century Greece. But precisely these throwbacks are the book's greatest strengths, when the context of its writing is taken into consideration. In pre- and wartime-Germany, an unfortunate interpretation of Hegel's dialectical phenomenology allowed an entire intellectual culture a collective amnesia about the worth and power of the individual, in favor of the State as fulfillment of the "outworking of Spirit." For Hegel, this State was Prussia; post-Weimar Germany, however, interpreted it differently. But Snell does not use his book as an anachronistic justification for German superiority as heir to the best of classical Europe, as so many authors of his time certainly did. Rather, he points out that the "discovery" of the individual mind, acting in concert with others and pointed towards "the good" as benevolently seen by Socrates, was the greatest achievement of classical Greece bequeathed not only to Europe but to all the world. That Snell could bring out this aspect of Greek thought, and emphasize it, speaks well of him and the book.

The small volume is great reading for "cultural literacy," since to breathe in the West (now, almost everywhere, culturally) is to breathe air exhaled by Greek writers long ago. There are serious problems with this, no doubt. But coming to terms with Western canon means coming to terms with Greek literature and philosophy. This book helps one do just that.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A precious survey of ancient Greek writers

By Jordan Bell

This is a magnificent book. The writing is honest and clear and it talks about great ideas. Although the author shows massive learning, the book is understandable by those who are not scholars of classics or philosophy. It is worth reading by people who care about the history of ideas in ethics, religion, psychology, art, literature, epistemology, metaphysics (causality), ontology, and natural sciences.

Snell's book is the most solid presentation I have found of early Greek intellectual history before the natural philosophers. Before we can develop techniques for studying systems and substances, we have to pick out what systems and substances we are going to talk about. The words we use make it more natural to talk about some things than other things. One of the big points of the first chapter is that Homer does not have a word for the human body. Homer speaks about a sword piercing one's skin or about limbs becoming feeble. "Of course the Homeric man had a body exactly like the later Greeks, but he did not know it qua body, but merely as the sum total of the limbs." After talking about the body, Snell tells us that Homer does not have words for the soul or the mind. The words closest in meaning to soul and mind are psyche, thymos, and noos. This does not mean that it would be impossible to explain our idea of a soul to Homer, but it does mean that

we would not be able to explain it using a single word. And if it is cumbersome to say something, we may think about it less than if it is easy to say it. This chapter is a brilliant example of a contribution from classical philology to the history of ideas.

There are statements from early poets that seem to belong to the same stream of ideas as early philosophers like Heraclitus. For example, Anacreon, "Again I love and love not; I rave, nor do I rave." Snell has many insightful assertions about Heraclitus. He gives the most coherent explanation I have read of fragment 52: "when Heraclitus calls time a child at play, he implies that time has no proper action of its own."

Two chapters that are especially useful for the history of natural science are the ninth chapter, "From myth to logic", and the tenth chapter, "The origin of scientific thought". Snell mentions the sorites paradox: is there a minimum number of grains to be a heap of grains? Connected with this, "The relativity of properties is first stated as a fact by Xenophanes (fr. 38): 'If the god had not created pale honey, the figs would be said to be much sweeter.'"

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

A Classic in the dynamics of ancient through that far outshines the more well known book by Julian Jaynes  
By Rossharmonics

Certain books are experiences that stay with us for a lifetime. I read this in either the late 60s or early 70s and it opened my eyes to many things. In the 80s, Julian Jaynes published his book on the origin of consciousness and the breakdown of the bicameral mind. Jaynes says in his preface or introduction (I no longer own his book) that he had not read Snell prior to writing the book and their viewpoints are different. Both books talk about changes in consciousness that took place in ancient times. Jaynes' book became quite popular and I have encountered quite a few people who refer to it and even give me a mini-lecture of the contents although I tell them initially that I am familiar with it. When I suggest they read Snell, it usually doesn't register. Snell traces what took place in meticulous detail without spending much time in trying to attribute conjectured some cause of these changes in consciousness that had taken place over the centuries that are well documented through the ancient Greek classics. Jaynes spends more time proposing a theory of why it happened. I don't buy Jaynes theory and don't think such a theory is very valuable unless one can come up with something profound and enduring. When we look at great achievements in theory, they are always the product of years of careful, detailed research. Jaynes seemed more interesting in promoting his theory than in testing his hypothesis to be sure it really holds up. It's the type of book that would be discussed at cocktail parties, if such things still exist. Snell seemed to be after truth and was willing to accomplish what he could verify through careful philological evidence.. He is the type of giant that Newton spoke of when the great physicist said that he accomplished what he had by standing on the shoulders of giants. If someday someone does come up with a truly convincing, enduring theory of these changes in consciousness, they may likely be well-versed in the approach to early intellectual history that Snell pioneered in.

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