

A Literary, Philosophical  
and Religious Journey  
into Well-Being



# A Literary, Philosophical and Religious Journey into Well-Being:

*Fulfilled Lives*

Edited by

Nili Alon Amit

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*In memory of my mother, Pnina Alon. May her memory be a blessing.*

לזכר אמי, פנינה אלון. יהי זכרה ברוך.



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**Deborah Court** is Professor of Education at Bar-Ilan University, and research advisor at the Arab Academic College in Israel. With a background in cultural anthropology, her research centers on educational cultures, the nature of cultural knowledge, and qualitative research methodologies. In addition to academic writing, she has published four novels and maintains an active blog about writing and the quirks of language.



**Stefania Giombini** is an Associate Professor of History of Law at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (Spain). She is Director of ‘Eleatica’, International Session dedicated to Eleatism, Council Member of the International Association for Presocratic Studies, and member of International Societies and Editorial Boards of journals on philosophy and classical studies. She is deputy director of *Ius Fugit - Journal of Legal Culture*, co-director (with Massimo Pulpito) of *Eleatica Series* and *Supplementa Eleatica*, and co-director (with Francesca Gambetti) of *Axiothéa Series* on ancient philosophy. Her studies and publications encompass Ancient Greek Law, Ancient Rhetoric and Ancient Philosophy.

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**Hagar Shalev** is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Department of Asian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, as part of the European Research Council (ERC) NEEM project. Her Indological studies focus on understanding the expression of religion and philosophy in India. Her current research deals with the understanding of the body in the context of Haṭhayoga. In her work, she combines reading texts in Sanskrit and ethnographic fieldwork in India. Her forthcoming publication based on her PhD dissertation theorizes the perception of the body in liberation according to medieval Haṭhayoga texts. She has three more publications in academic journals regarding the religious experience among the believer of deity Mahāsū (*devtā*), which is the common name of four brother-gods dwelling and ruling in certain parts of the Indian Western Himalaya.

# FOREWORD

## What is happiness?

### *From Two to One*<sup>1</sup>

*Separated at Eden,  
thrown back into One;  
one cluster of body and soul,  
of humans and God.  
As nature prevails,  
happiness ensues from the grasping of all.*

This volume brings together researchers who analyse and describe the concept of happiness in its various appearances in the history of thought, from the very first writings in Greek literature and historiography (Homer, Hesiod and Herodotus – 8<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), through early Greek philosophy (the Presocratics, 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE), Classical, Hellenistic and Neoplatonic philosophers (5<sup>th</sup> century BC-3<sup>rd</sup> century CE), early and late medieval mysticism (Sufism and Kabbalah – respectively at their height in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), 10<sup>th</sup> century Christian manuscript writings, medieval Hindu philosophy of liberation (the Haṭhayoga tradition in its formative period - 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), early modern philosophy (Baruch Benedictus Spinoza - 17<sup>th</sup> century) and contemporary Positive Psychology.

Happiness appears in many forms, all connected with the human sense of approaching oneness with the world and/or with the divine. The very first terms for happiness appearing in Greek literature and discussed in the two opening chapters of this volume, are *olbos* (ὄλβος, material fulfilment), *makaria* (μακαρία, feeling bliss), and *eutuchia* (εὐτυχία, good luck). The early Greek writers sought with these concepts to define the place of humans in relation to the divine, finding happiness in the wealth or luck provided by the gods. A term elaborated in the more developed, classical Greek philosophy (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) is *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία); the literal meaning of this term is “a good demon” (or having a well-meaning divinity dwelling upon us), but its actual meaning is simply well-being, or

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<sup>1</sup> Poem by Alon Amit; see chapter 4 in this volume.

**remaining well and stable amidst the fluctuating and unpredictable conditions of human existence.**

We set out on our quest for human happiness with **Fiorenza Bevilacqua**, who in the first chapter, *Human Happiness: from Homer to Herodotus*, presents to us the first appearances of “happiness” in Greek thought. These are discussed through Homer’s epic poem *Iliad* and Herodotus’ historiographic essay *Histories*, with further examples from Greek drama. In these writings the happy persons are described as those who lived life as best as they could in the short time allotted to them, for human existence is totally subject to chance and to the gods’ envy.

The second chapter by **Stefania Giombini**, *Happy City: Justice, Law, and Happiness in Pre-Platonic Thought*, considers various authors of the pre-Platonic era who dealt with happiness through the prism of social or communal wellness. Giombini walks us through different literary genres of this early period: tragedy and lyrical poetry, the fragments of Thales’ and Heraclitus’ philosophy, the writings of the Sophists, myths of human creation, and the fragments of the Pluralists’ writings - all showing that in pre-Platonic thought the happiness of individuals is inseparable from the happiness of the community, both tied in through the pivotal concept of justice (*dike*, δίκη).

*Eudaimonia* is discussed in the third chapter (*Eudaimonia – Happiness in Classical Greek and Hellenistic Philosophy*) by the editor of this volume, regarding the classical and Hellenistic philosophers of happiness. Even though Plato’s philosophy is defined as dualistic in nature (separating between the temporary realm of human existence, and the eternal realm of the divine ideas), this chapter shows how the Classical and Hellenistic conceptions of *eudaimonia* still portray the human strife for oneness: the happy persons are those who grasp the divine ideas, and manage to live life with a full awareness of divinity or pure thought (*logos*, λόγος) that guides them through.

With the rise of Neoplatonism in western philosophy alongside mysticism in the early monotheistic traditions, we observe this quest for oneness in full force (the fourth chapter of this volume: *Happiness: From Neoplatonism to Spinoza, through Medieval Mysticism*, by the editor). The Neoplatonists broke the platonic linear paradigm separating between heaven and earth, and created a new spherical paradigm where a divine One is constantly emanating down, and we humans are equipped with the skills to ascend and finally merge with the divine. The Neoplatonic *eudaimonia* becomes the

basis for Sufi (Muslim) oneness with God, as well as Kabbalistic (Jewish) ascension in the *Sefirot* (spheres), toward *Einsof* (אֵינְסוֹף, the unlimited). This chapter ends in the early modern period, with the Jewish philosopher Baruch Benedictus Spinoza (1632-1677) who created an eminent system of philosophy where God and Nature are one, and happiness ensues from loving and rationalizing the whole – or the *intellectual love of God or Nature*.

The fifth chapter by **Martina Lamberti**, *Penitence and Redemption in the Vercelli Book: towards Hyhta Mæst*, discusses the conceptions of happiness in the 10<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-Saxon codex - the Vercelli Book. This Old English manuscript, containing homilies, poems, and hagiographies, was designated to instruct the Christian devotee on a life of penitence, observance, and abstinence to gain what was considered as the greatest of joys (*hyhta mæst*). The concept of real happiness, which actualises in heaven, is emphasised in the codex through the motif of journeying – *sīþ* – representing, according to the medieval mind, the metaphorical path towards eternal salvation.

The sixth chapter by **Hagar Shalev**, *The Notion of Happiness in the Medieval Haṭhayoga Tradition*, zooms out of the Mediterranean and European world, and into India of the 11<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, following the development of happiness in Hindu Haṭha Yoga tradition. Happiness is described in terms of freedom from the cycles of life – *mokṣa* (liberation) and *samādhi* (meditative absorption); this freedom is presented either as external to the body, or, as stressed by Shalev, in terms of *embodied liberation* - having our souls liberated during our earthly existence through various yogic practices. Here too, we see the strife for happiness as a quest for oneness – mentally breaking the boundaries between ourselves and the cosmos, and, for an instance or longer, becoming one.

The final chapter of this volume by **Deborah Court**, *Creative Fulfilment*, gives us a glimpse into contemporary positive psychology, where happiness and fulfilment are tied in with creativity: the creative persons make a statement in this world, fulfil their unique potentials, and find meaning in our otherwise unfathomable realm of existence. The creative mind in its state of inspiration, may, if we go back in the centuries of human culture and thought – be allotted the short term of blessing by the gods, grasp the divine ideas or the cosmic *logos*, participate in the mystical ascension toward *the One*, or experience *embodied liberation*, or *intellectually love God or Nature*; it is in the work of a community guided by justice (*dike*), or the work of individual humans – exemplified by the Herodotean anti-hero,

the Sufi and Kabbalistic mystic, the Christian devotee, the yogic practitioner, the rational philosopher and the inspired artist – that we discover, again, the creation of happiness by means of unity with a higher idea, by moving toward oneness with a higher realm.

Let us delve into the history of happiness and fulfillment from Homer to Positive Psychology, through literature, philosophy and mysticism, East and West.



# CHAPTER 1

## HUMAN HAPPINESS: FROM HOMER TO HERODOTUS

FIORENZA BEVILACQUA

The theme of human happiness is central in both Greek philosophy and in the profound and disquieting reflection underlying Greek tragedy, but it appears also in other contexts: two Greek texts are particularly relevant because they can be regarded as a starting point for further developments and elaborations in Western thought. The former is a passage in Homer's epic poem – *Iliad* (8<sup>th</sup> Century BCE), where we find for the first time a view on happiness or rather unhappiness to which human life is destined; this view is not elaborated, but simply expressed through a meaningful metaphor and two examples in a speech given by the hero, Achilles, during his meeting with King Priamus (*Iliad* 24.522-51). The latter is a dialogue in Herodotus' *Histories* (5<sup>th</sup> century BCE), where the main character, Solon, a wise man (*sophistēs* - σοφιστής), explains his view on human happiness to King Croesus (*Histories* 1.30-32). The latter text constitutes a significant innovation, both in form (it is the first example of a literary genre, the philosophical dialogue, that will be greatly developed in classical philosophy) and in content - for the first time, a view on human happiness is not only stated, but debated and argued. These two fascinating texts, therefore, take the form of two literary archetypes; from this point of view, they are of major interest.

## 1. *Iliad* 24.522-51<sup>1</sup>

*But come, sit thou upon a seat, and our sorrows will we suffer to lie quiet in our hearts, despite our pain; for no profit cometh of chill lament. [525] For on this wise have the gods spun the thread for wretched mortals, that they should live in pain; and themselves are sorrowless. For two urns are set upon the floor of Zeus of gifts that he giveth, the one of ills, the other of blessings. To whomsoever Zeus, that hurleth the thunderbolt, giveth a mingled lot, [530] that man meeteth now with evil, now with good; but to whomsoever he giveth but of the baneful, him he maketh to be reviled of man, and direful starvation driveth him over the face of the sacred earth, and he wandereth honoured neither of gods nor mortals. Even so unto Peleus did the gods give glorious gifts [535] from his birth; for he excelled all men in happiness and in wealth, and was king over the Myrmidons, and to him that was but a mortal the gods gave a goddess to be his wife. Howbeit even upon him the gods brought evil, in that there nowise sprang up in his halls offspring of princely sons, [540] but he begat one only son, doomed to an untimely fate. Neither may I tend him as he groweth old, seeing that far, far from mine own country I abide in the land of Troy, vexing thee and thy children. And of thee, old sire, we hear that of old thou wast happy; how of all that toward the sea Lesbos, the seat of Macar, encloseth, [545] and Phrygia in the upland, and the boundless Hellespont, over all these folk, men say, thou, old sire, wast preeminent by reason of thy wealth and thy sons. Howbeit from the time when the heavenly gods brought upon thee this bane, ever around thy city are battles and slayings of men. Bear thou up, neither wail ever ceaselessly in thy heart; [550] for naught wilt thou avail by grieving for thy son, neither wilt thou bring him back to life; ere that shalt thou suffer some other ill."*

ἀλλ' ἄγε δὴ κατ' ἄρ' ἔζευ ἐπὶ θρόνου, ἄλγεα δ' ἔμπης ἐν θυμῷ κατακεῖσθαι ἔασομεν ἀχνύμενοί περ: οὐ γάρ τις πρῆξις πέλεται κρυεροῖο γόοιο: [525] ὡς γὰρ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι ζῶειν ἀχνυμένοις: αὐτοὶ δέ τ' ἀκηδέες εἰσὶ. δοιοὶ γάρ τε πῖθοι κατακαίεται ἐν Διὸς οὐδεὶ δῶραν οἶα δίδωσι κακῶν, ἕτερος δὲ ἑάων: ᾧ μὲν κ' ἀμμίζας δῶη Ζεὺς τερπικέρανος, [530] ἄλλοτε μὲν τε κακῷ ὅ γε κύρεται, ἄλλοτε δ' ἐσθλῷ: ᾧ δέ κε τῶν λυγρῶν δῶη, λωβητὸν ἔθηκε, καὶ ἐ κακῇ βούβρωστις ἐπὶ χθόνα διὰν ἐλάυνει, φοιτᾷ δ' οὔτε θεοῖσι τετιμῆνος οὔτε βροτοῖσιν. ὡς μὲν καὶ Πηληϊθεοὶ δόσαν ἀγλαὰ δῶρα [535] ἐκ γενετῆς: πάντας γὰρ ἐπ' ἀνθρώπους ἐκέκαστο ὄλβω τε πλούτῳ τε, ἄνασσε δὲ Μυρμιδόνεσσι, καὶ οἱ θνητῷ ἐόντι θεῶν ποίησαν ἄκοιτιν. ἀλλ' ἐπὶ καὶ τῷ θῆκε θεὸς κακόν, ὅτι οἱ οὐ τι παίδων. ἐν μεγάροισι γονὴ γένετο κρειόντων, [540] ἀλλ' ἕνα παῖδα τέκεν παναώριον: οὐδέ νυ τόν γε γηράσκοντα κομίζω, ἐπεὶ μάλα τηλόθι πάτρης ἦμαί ἐνὶ Τροίῃ, σέ τε κήδων ἠδὲ σά τέκνα. καὶ σέ γέρον τὸ πρὶν μὲν

<sup>1</sup> Greek source and translation (with minor modifications by Bevilacqua): Murray (1924).



ἀκούομεν ὄλβιον εἶναι: ὅσπον Λέσβος ἄνω Μάκαρος ἔδος ἐντὸς ἐέργει [545] καὶ Φρυγίη καθύπερθε καὶ Ἑλλησποντος ἀπείρων, τῶν σε γέρον πλούτῳ τε καὶ υἰάσι φασι κεκάσθαι. αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τοι πῆμα τόδ' ἤγαγον Οὐρανίῳνες αἰεὶ τοι περι ἄστου μάχαι τ' ἀνδροκτασῖαι τε. ἄνσχεο, μὴ δ' ἀλῆστον ὀδύρεο σὸν κατὰ θυμόν: [550] οὐ γάρ τι πρήξεις ἀκαχήμενος υἱὸς ἧος, οὐδέ μιν ἀνστήσεις, πρὶν καὶ κακὸν ἄλλο πάθῃσθα.

These reflections, expressed by Achilles during his meeting with King Priamus, who had come to Achilles' tent to redeem his son Hector's corpse, are innovative in the context of the poem: for the first and only time, the poem expresses general considerations on human life with regard to the crucial theme of happiness,<sup>2</sup> although the technical word used for happiness in later literary and philosophical works, *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία), does not occur in them.<sup>3</sup> This novelty is more easily understood in the light of a thesis, recently resumed and persuasively demonstrated by G. Cerri (1986 and 1999), according to which book 24 was composed after the composition of the rest of the poem.<sup>4</sup> The speech that Achilles addresses to Priamus contains some themes that will later become typical of the literary genre of consolation, as has been often pointed out;<sup>5</sup> but focusing our attention on the consolatory purposes and tones that are evident at the beginning and the end of this speech may misguide us from grasping its most relevant aspects. It is indeed true that at first Achilles urges Priamus not to indulge in wailing, because it is useless (24.522-4), but immediately afterwards the fundamental point occurs: Achilles explains that wailing is useless because the destiny

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<sup>2</sup> Two fleeting mentions of the unhappiness of human condition appear in a speech of Zeus (17.445-7) as well as in a speech of Apollo (21.463-6), but they are of implicit nature. The former reads:

*Was it that among wretched men ye too should have sorrows? For in sooth there is naught, I ween, more miserable than man among all things that breathe and move upon earth.*

ἢ ἵνα δυστήνοισι μετ' ἀνδράσιν ἄλγε' ἔχητον; οὐ μὲν γάρ τί πού ἐστιν οἷζυρότερον ἀνδρὸς πάντων, ὅσσα τε γαῖαν ἐπι πνεῖαι τε καὶ ἔρπει.

Greek source and translation: Murray (1924).

<sup>3</sup> The term that occurs here is *olbos*/ ὄλβος (24.536); see also the adjective *olbios*/ ὄλβιος (24.543). As we shall see later, also Herodotus' lexicon for happiness remains fluctuating.

<sup>4</sup> This thesis is maintained by Cerri on the basis of the different status of the body of the killed enemy in *Iliad* 24: see Cerri (1986); see also Cerri (1999), pp. 82-9.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Macleod (1982), pp. 131-2 with bibliography; Mirto in Paduano (1997), p. 1504; Gostoli in Cerri (1999), pp. 1278-9; and Brügger (2017), pp. 196-7 with bibliography.

established<sup>6</sup> by the gods for unhappy mortals (*deiloisi brotoisi* /δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι) is to live in suffering (*achnymenois* /ἀχθυμένοις), while they are free from pains (*akēdees* /ἀκηδέες; 24.525-6).<sup>7</sup> This statement reaffirms the radical difference between gods and human beings, who are not by chance referred to as *brotoi*, mortals. This tragic contrast, the ineradicable difference between immortal gods and mortal human beings, is a *Leitmotiv* of the whole *Iliad*;<sup>8</sup> but in this passage a new element is added: gods are called free from pains (*akēdees*), while in the rest of *Iliad* they can feel pain (also physical pain), though for a limited time. In this passage, the possibility that gods can feel pain is eliminated, perhaps because any pain is casual and temporary for them; the gods are presented as free from suffering and griefs, living in perpetual peace of mind.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the unhappiness of mortals stands out even more and it is shown by Achilles as an unavoidable condition. Achilles affirms indeed that in the house of Zeus there are two jars, one full with bad things and the other with good things.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In Greek *epeklōsanto theoi*/ ἐπεκλώσαντο θεοί, literally: “the gods spun”, i.e. “the god established”. The verb *epiklōthein*/ ἐπικλώθειν in its metaphorical meaning occurs several times in the *Odyssey*, but only in this passage in the *Iliad*; this could be a hint of a later composition of this book.

<sup>7</sup> Needless to stress the strong opposition between *achnymenois*/ ἀχθυμένοις and *akēdees*/ ἀκηδέες: *achnumenois*, referring to human beings, expresses a condition of heavy pain, while *akēdees*, referring to the gods, means that they are devoid not only of any pain or suffering, but also free of any worry, distress, anxiety or care (*kēdos*/ κῆδος).

<sup>8</sup> For example, cf. the threatening words that Apollo addresses to Diomedes in *Iliad* 5.440-2:

*“Bethink thee, son of Tydeus, and give place, neither be thou minded to be like of spirit with the gods; seeing in no wise of like sort is the race of immortal gods and that of men who walk upon the earth.”*

ῥφράξο Τυδείδη καὶ χάξο, μηδὲ θεοῖσιν ἴσ’ ἔθελε φρονέειν, ἐπεὶ οὐ ποτε φῦλον ὁμοῖον ἀθανάτων τε θεῶν χαμαὶ ἐρχομένων τ’ ἀνθρώπων.’

Greek source and translation: Murray (1924.)

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Iliad* 6.138: *theoi reia zōontes* (θεοὶ ρεῖα ζῶοντες), “gods living an easy life”.

<sup>10</sup> As Mirto in Paduano (1997), p. 1504 suggests, the metaphor of the two jars probably comes from a folkloric motive, as well as the tale of Pandora’s box (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 90-105):

*For previously tribes of men used to live upon the earth entirely apart from evils, and without grievous toil and distressful diseases, which give death to men. [For in misery mortals grow old at once.] But the woman removed the great lid from the storage jar with her hands [95] and scattered all its contents abroad – she wrought baneful evils for human beings. Only Anticipation remained there in its unbreakable home under the mouth of the storage jar, and did not fly out: for before that could happen she closed the*

Zeus gives both bad and good things to some men,<sup>11</sup> but only bad things to others; the latter are despitefully treated, wander all over the earth urged by a terrible hunger, and are despised by gods and mortals (24.531-33).<sup>12</sup> Then Achilles gives two examples<sup>13</sup> of men who received both good and bad

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*lid of the storage jar, by the plans of the aegis-holder, the cloud-gatherer Zeus. [100] But countless other miseries roam among mankind; for the earth is full of evils, and the sea is full; and some sicknesses come upon men by day, and others by night, of their own accord, bearing evils to mortals in silence, since the counsellor Zeus took their voice away. [105] Thus it is not possible in any way to evade the mind of Zeus.*

Πρὶν μὲν γὰρ ζῶεσκον ἐπὶ χθονὶ φύλ' ἀνθρώπων νόσφιν ἄτερ τε κακῶν καὶ ἄτερ χαλεποῖο πόνοιο νοῦσων τ' ἀργαλέων, αἶ τ' ἀνδράσι κήρας ἔδωκαν. [αἶψα γὰρ ἐν κακότητι βροτοὶ καταγεγράσκουσιν.] ἀλλὰ γυνὴ χεῖρεσσι πίθου μέγα πῶμ' ἀφελοῦσα [95] ἐσκέδασ', ἀνθρώποισι δ' ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρὰ. μούνη δ' αὐτόθι Ἑλπίς ἐν ἀρήκτοισι δόμοισιν ἔνδον ἔμμενε πίθου ὑπὸ χεῖλεσιν, οὐδὲ θύραζε ἐξέπτῃ· πρόσθεν γὰρ ἐπέμβαλε πῶμα πίθιοιο αἰγιόχου βουλῆσι Διὸς νεφεληγερέταο. [100] ἄλλα δὲ μυρία λυγρὰ κατ' ἀνθρώπους ἀλάληται· πλεῖη μὲν γὰρ γαῖα κακῶν, πλεῖη δὲ θάλασσα· νοῦσοι δ' ἀνθρώποισιν ἐφ' ἡμέρηι, αἱ δ' ἐπὶ νυκτὶ αὐτόμαται φοιτῶσι κακὰ θνητοῖσι φέρουσαι σιγῆτι, ἐπεὶ φωνὴν ἐξείλετο μητιέτα Ζεὺς. [105] οὕτως οὐ τί πη ἔστι Διὸς νόον ἐξαλέασθαι.

Greek source and translation: Most (2006).

See also Aiolos' bag of winds (*Odyssey* 10.19-22); for the opposition between good and bad, see the two gates of dreams (*Odyssey* 19.562-7): cf. Brügger (2017), p. 197 with bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> The theme of human life as an alternating or mixing of good and evil occurs several times in the *Odyssey* and can be found also in Hesiod and Archilochus (fragment 130 West); the latter reads:

*All things are easy for the gods. Often out of misfortunes they set men upright who have been laid low on the black earth; often they trip even those who are standing firm and roll them onto their backs, and then many troubles come to them, and a man wanders in want of livelihood, unhinged in mind.*

τοῖς θεοῖς τ' εἰθειάπαντα· πολλάκις μὲν ἐκ κακῶν ἀνδρας ὀρθοῦσιν μελαίνηι κειμένους ἐπὶ χθονί, πολλάκις δ' ἀνατρέπουσι καὶ μάλ' εὖ βεβηκότας ὑπτίους, κείνοισ <δ'> ἔπειτα πολλὰ γίνεται κακὰ, καὶ βίου χρήμηι πλανᾶται καὶ νόου παρήγορος.

Greek source: García Romero (1995), p. 179; translation: Trzaskoma, Smith & Brunet (2004), p. 58.

Cf. Brügger (2017), p. 198 with bibliography.

<sup>12</sup> It is needless to point out that being despised is an outstanding source of unhappiness in a shame culture.

<sup>13</sup> Examples are a topic motive in consolatory literature: cf. Brügger (2017), p. 200 with bibliography.

things from Zeus: his father Peleus and Priamus himself, united by the same destiny (24.534-48).<sup>14</sup> Peleus received magnificent gifts from the gods: since his birth he had excelled for *olbos* and wealth (24.534-6), where *olbos* means a happiness based mainly on material prosperity; moreover, he ruled over Mirmidons (24.536); lastly, the gods have given him, a mortal man, another wonderful gift - an immortal wife (24.537). But later, an evil befell Peleus: he has no sons who can inherit his kingdom; his only son, destined for an untimely death, is not able to support him in his old age because he is far away, at Troy, where he vexes Priamus and his sons (24.538-42). Although Achilles does not say so explicitly, Peleus is a father who, like Priamus,<sup>15</sup> lost his only son: at present because he is far away, later because he will die. Regarding his interlocutor, Priamus, Achilles begins by saying that he heard that in the past Priamus was *olbios*, happy (24.543); also in this case it is a happiness that includes material prosperity: Priamus indeed excelled<sup>16</sup> for wealth and sons (24.546). But afterwards the gods sent him the torment of war and now around his city there are always battles and slaughters (24.547-8). Finally with a typical ring composition, Achilles again exhorts Priamus not to give in to his grief, which is useless because it cannot give him back his son (24.549-51).<sup>17</sup> Though still regarded as a consolatory speech, it is however based on a deeply pessimistic view of human life, and this - for three reasons. First of all, if Zeus gives only bad things to some human beings, there are no human beings for whom he reserves only good things: therefore bad things are the unavoidable prerogative of the human condition, and though it is not explicitly stated, those who obtain by lot both good and bad things can be regarded as lucky. Secondly, if we look at the two quoted examples of lucky men, Peleus and Priamus, the good things in the first part of their lives are afterwards followed by evils from which there is no escape: there is no change for the better, no happy end, but a tragic plunging into suffering and ruin, so much

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<sup>14</sup> As is common knowledge, the overlap of these two characters plays a fundamental role in this episode.

<sup>15</sup> Priamus indeed, in a process of absolutization induced by his grief, announces in a previous line that Hector, his killed son, was the only son for him (24.499).

<sup>16</sup> It is not by chance that the same verb that occurs just before for Peleus (24.535: *ekekasto* /ἐκέκαστο: “had excelled”) is now employed for Priamus (24.546: *kekasthai* / κεκάσθαι).

<sup>17</sup> This is a topic motive that occurs several times in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*: cf. Brügger (2017), p. 205 with bibliography.

so that the previous happiness ends up appearing a mocking illusion.<sup>18</sup> If we choose to adopt the criterion suggested by the Herodotean Solon (see below), according to which we should wait until after a human being's death to establish whether he or she was happy, we could add that the death to be met by Peleus and Priamus will certainly not define their lives as happy. Lastly, I think that a pessimistic view of life stands out also with regard to Achilles himself. Achilles always knew, as he confirms in this speech, that death is hanging closely on him, but he never worried about this impending death because he chose to avenge Patroclus by slaughtering Trojans and above all killing Hector. But this keen desire, worth dying after fulfilling it,<sup>19</sup> now appears to him in a different light: if this desire found its fulfillment

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<sup>18</sup> Also the Herodotean Solon, as we will see later, says that often the fleeting happiness granted by the gods preludes to complete ruin (1.32.9). Cf. p. 17 and note 42 below.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Iliad* 18.94-116:

*Then Thetis again spake unto him, shedding tears the while: [95] "Doomed then to a speedy death, my child, shalt thou be, that thou spakest thus; for straightway after Hector is thine own death ready at hand." Then, mightily moved, swift-footed Achilles spake to her: "Straightway may I die, seeing I was not to bear aid to my comrade at his slaying. Far, far from his own land [100] hath he fallen, and had need of me to be a warder off of ruin. Now therefore, seeing I return not to my dear native land, neither proved anywise a light of deliverance to Patroclus nor to my other comrades, those many that have been slain by goodly Hector, but abide here by the ships. Profitless burden upon the earth — [105] I that in war am such as is none other of the brazen-coated Achaeans, albeit in council there be others better— so may strife perish from among gods and men, and anger that setteth a man on to grow wroth, how wise soever he be, and that sweeter far than trickling honey [110] waxeth like smoke in the breasts of men; even as but now the king of men, Agamemnon, moved me to wrath. Howbeit these things will we let be as past and done, for all our pain, curbing the heart in our breasts, because we must. But now will I go forth that I may light on the slayer of the man I loved, [115] even on Hector; for my fate, I will accept it whenso Zeus willeth to bring it to pass, and the other immortal gods.*

τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε Θέτις κατὰ δάκρυ χέουσα: [95] ὠκύμορος δὴ μοι τέκος ἔσσειαι, οἷ' ἀγορεύεις: αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἴκτορα πτόμος ἐτοῖμος. τὴν δὲ μέγ' ὄχθησας προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς: αὐτίκα τεθναίην, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλον ἐταίρω κτεινομένῳ ἐπαμύναι: ὁ μὲν μάλα τηλόθι πάτρις [100] ἔφθιτ', ἐμῆιο δὲ διῆσεν ἀρής ἀλκτῆρα γενέσθαι. νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ οὐ νέομαι γε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν, οὐδέ τι Πατρόκλω γενόμεν φάος οὐδ' ἐτάροισι τοῖς ἄλλοις, οἷ' δὴ πολέες δάμεν Ἴκτορι δίῳ, ἀλλ' ἤμαί παρὰ νηυσὶν ἐτώσιον ἄχθος ἀρούρης, [105] τοῖος ἐὼν οἶος οὐ τις Ἀχαιῶν χαλκοχιτώνων ἐν πολέμῳ: ἀγορή δέ τ' ἀμείνονές εἰσι καὶ ἄλλοι. ὧς ἔρις ἔκ τε θεῶν ἔκ τ' ἀνθρώπων ἀπόλοιτο καὶ χόλος, ὅς τ' ἐφέηκε πολύφρονά περ

in revenge, it turned up also in bringing grief to Priamus and his sons (24.542).<sup>20</sup> Achilles realizes that the intoxication of revenge has a price, a counterpart in the suffering of others. Looking at the situation from this viewpoint, Achilles seems to discern an aspect of his actions that now appears in the foreground and casts a kind of shadow on his life: even regardless of his sorrow for his dear friend Patroclus and his old, unhappy and faraway father Peleus, Achilles' life now appears as much richer in bad things than in good things, in grief than in happiness.<sup>21</sup> In Achilles' words we can see lucid and disillusioned pessimism that is paradoxically, beyond the intentions of the character, devoid of any possible consolation.

## 2.1. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.30-32<sup>22</sup>

1.30: *So for that reason, and to see the world, Solon went to visit Amasis in Egypt and then to Croesus in Sardis. When he got there, Croesus entertained him in the palace, and on the third or fourth day Croesus told his attendants to show Solon around his treasures, and they pointed out all those things that were great and opulent. [2] After Solon had seen everything and had thought about it, Croesus found the opportunity to say, "My Athenian guest, we have heard a lot about you because of your wisdom and of your wanderings, how as one who loves learning you have traveled much of the world for the sake of seeing it, so now I desire to ask you who is the happiest man you have seen." [3] Croesus asked this question believing that he was the happiest of men, but Solon, offering no flattery but keeping to the truth, said, "O King, it is Tellus the Athenian." [4] Croesus was amazed at what he had said and replied sharply, "In what way do you judge Tellus to be the*

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χαλεπήναι, ὅς τε πολὺ γλυκίων μέλιτος καταλειβομένοιο [110] ἀνδρῶν ἐν στήθεσσιν ἀέξεται ἢ ὅτε καπνός: ὡς ἐμὲ νῦν ἐχόλωσεν ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγαμέμνων. ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτετύχθαι ἐάσομεν ἀχνύμενοί περ, θυμὸν ἐνὶ στήθεσσι φίλον δαμάσαντες ἀνάγκη: νῦν δ' εἴμ' ὄφρα φίλης κεφαλῆς ὀλετήρα κίχαιώ [115] Ἴκτορα: κῆρα δ' ἐγὼ τότε δέξομαι ὀππότε κεν δὴ Ζεὺς ἐθέλη τελέσαι ἢ δ' ἀθάνατοι θεοὶ ἄλλοι.

Greek source and translation: Murray (1924).

<sup>20</sup> See also Macleod (1982), pp. 11 and 26-7.

<sup>21</sup> Already in his mother Thetis' words, Achilles' life appears not only destined to a premature death, but also full of suffering (see *Iliad* 18.61-2):

*And while yet he liveth, and beholdeth the light of the sun, he hath sorrow, neither can I anyhow help him, though I go to him.*

ὄφρα δέ μοι ζῶει καὶ ὄρα φάος ἠελίου ἄχνηται, οὐδὲ τί οἱ δύναμαι χραισμῆσαι ἰοῦσα.

Greek source and translation: Murray (1924).

<sup>22</sup> Greek source: Colonna (1996); translation (with some modifications by Bevilacqua): Godley (1920).

*happiest?" Solon said, "Tellus was from a prosperous city, and his children were fine and good. He saw children born to them all, and all of these survived. His life was prosperous by our standards, and his death was very glorious: [5] when the Athenians were fighting their neighbors in Eleusis, he came to help, routed the enemy, and died very finely. The Athenians buried him at public expense on the spot where he fell and gave him much honor."*

*1.31: When Solon had provoked him by saying that the affairs of Tellus were so happy, Croesus asked who he thought was next, fully expecting to win second prize. Solon answered, "Cleobis and Biton. [2] They were of Argive stock, had enough to live on, and on top of this had great bodily strength. Both had won prizes in the athletic contests, and this story is told about them: there was a festival of Hera in Argos, and their mother absolutely had to be conveyed to the temple by a team of oxen. But their oxen had not come back from the fields in time, so the youths took the yoke upon their own shoulders under constraint of time. They drew the wagon, with their mother riding atop it, traveling five miles until they arrived at the temple. [3] When they had done this and had been seen by the entire gathering, their lives came to an excellent end, and in their case the god made clear that for human beings it is a better thing to be dead than to be alive. The Argive men stood around the youths and congratulated them on their strength; the Argive women congratulated their mother for having borne such children. [4] She was overjoyed at the feat and at the praise, so she stood before the image and prayed that the goddess might grant the best thing for man to her children Cleobis and Biton, who had given great honor to the goddess. [5] After this prayer they sacrificed and feasted. The youths then lay down in the temple and went to sleep and never rose again; death held them there. The Argives made and dedicated at Delphi statues of them as being excellent men."*

*1.32: Thus Solon granted second place in happiness to these men. Croesus was vexed and said, "My Athenian guest, do you so much despise our happiness that you do not even make us worth as much as common men?" Solon replied, "Croesus, you ask me about human affairs, and I know that the divine is entirely envious and troublesome. [2] In a long span of time it is possible to see many things that you do not want to, and to suffer them, too. I set the limit of a man's life at seventy years; [3] these seventy years have twenty-five thousand, two hundred days, leaving out the intercalary month. But if you make every other year longer by one month, so that the seasons agree opportunely, then there are thirty-five intercalary months during the seventy years, and from these months there are one thousand fifty days. [4] Out of all these days in the seventy years, all twenty-six thousand, two hundred and fifty of them, not one brings anything at all like another. So, Croesus, man is entirely chance. [5] To me you seem to be very rich and to be king of many people, but I cannot answer your question before I learn*

*that you ended your life well. The very rich man is not happier than the man who has only his daily needs, unless he chances to end his life with all well. Many very rich men are unhappy, many of moderate means are lucky. [6] The man who is very rich but unhappy surpasses the lucky man in only two ways, while the lucky surpasses the rich but unhappy in many. The rich man is more capable of fulfilling his appetites and of bearing a great disaster that falls upon him, but the lucky man surpasses the other in these ways: he is not so able to support disaster or appetite as is the rich man, but his luck keeps these things away from him, and he is free from deformity and disease, has no experience of evils, and has fine children and good looks. [7] If besides all this he ends his life well, then he is the one whom you seek, the one worthy to be called happy. But refrain from calling him happy before he dies; call him lucky. [8] It is impossible for one who is only human to obtain all these things at the same time, just as no land is self-sufficient in what it produces. Each country has one thing but lacks another; whichever has the most is the best. Just so no human being is self-sufficient; each person has one thing but lacks another. [9] Whoever passes through life with the most and then dies agreeably is the one who, in my opinion, like a king deserves to bear this name. It is necessary to see how the end of every affair turns out, for the god promises happiness to many people and then utterly ruins them."*

1.30: αὐτῶν δὴ ὧν τούτων καὶ τῆς θεωρίας ἐκδημήσας ὁ Σόλων εἶνεκεν ἐς Αἴγυπτον ἀπύκετο παρὰ Ἄμασιν καὶ δὴ καὶ ἐς Σάρδις παρὰ Κροῖσον. ἀπικόμενος δὲ ἐξινηζέτο ἐν τοῖσι βασιλῆιοισι ὑπὸ τοῦ Κροῖσου: μετὰ δέ, ἡμέρη τρίτη ἢ τετάρτη κελεύσαντος Κροῖσου τὸν Σόλωνα θεράποντες περιήγον κατὰ τοὺς θησαυροὺς καὶ ἐπεδείκνυσαν πάντα ἐόντα μεγάλα τε καὶ ὄλβια. [2] θεησάμενον δέ μιν τὰ πάντα καὶ σκεψάμενον ὡς οἱ κατὰ καιρὸν ἦν, εἶρετο ὁ Κροῖσος τάδε: 'ξεῖνε Αθηναῖε, παρ' ἡμέας γὰρ περὶ σέο λόγος ἀπίκται πολλὸς καὶ σοφίης εἶνεκεν τῆς σῆς καὶ πλάνης, ὡς φιλοσοφῶν γῆν πολλὴν θεωρίας εἶνεκεν ἐπελήλυθας: νῦν ὧν ἕμερος ἐπειρεῖσθαι μοι ἐπῆλθέ σε, εἴ τινα ἤδη πάντων εἶδες ὀλβιώτατον.' [3] ὁ μὲν ἐλπίζων εἶναι ἀνθρώπων ὀλβιώτατος ταῦτα ἐπειρώτα, Σόλων δὲ οὐδὲν ὑποθαπεύσας ἀλλὰ τῷ ἐόντι χρησάμενος, λέγει 'ὦ βασιλεῦ, Τέλλον Αθηναῖον.' ἀποθουμάσας δὲ Κροῖσος τὸ λεχθὲν εἶρετο ἐπιστρεφῶς: [4] 'κοίη δὴ κρίνεις Τέλλον εἶναι ὀλβιώτατον;' ὁ δὲ εἶπε 'τέλλω τοῦτο μὲν τῆς πόλιος εὐ' ἠκούσης παῖδες ἦσαν καλοὶ τε κάγαθοί, καὶ σφι εἶδε ἅπανι τέκνα ἐκγενόμενα καὶ πάντα παραμείναντα, τοῦτο δὲ τοῦ βίου εὐ' ἤκοντι, ὡς τὰ παρ' ἡμῖν, τελευτῆ τοῦ βίου λαμπροτάτη ἐπεγένετο: [5] γενομένης γὰρ Αθηναίοισι μάχης πρὸς τοὺς ἀστυγείτονας ἐν Ἐλευσίνι βοθηήσας καὶ τροπὴν ποιήσας τῶν πολεμίων ἀπέθανε κάλλιστα, καὶ μιν Αθηναῖοι δημοσίη τε ἔθαψαν αὐτοῦ, τῇ περ ἔπεσε, καὶ ἐτίμησαν μεγάλως.'

1.31: ὡς δὲ τὰ κατὰ τὸν Τέλλον προετρέψατο ὁ Σόλων τὸν Κροῖσον εἶπας πολλά τε καὶ ὄλβια, ἐπειρώτα, τίνα δεύτερον μετ' ἐκεῖνον ἴδοι, δοκέων πάγχυ δευτερεῖα γῶν οἴσσεσθαι. ὁ δὲ εἶπε 'Κλέοβιν τε καὶ Βίτωνα. [2] τοῦτοισι γὰρ εὐοῦσι γένος Ἀργείοισι βίος τε ἀρκέων ὑπῆν καὶ πρὸς τούτω



ρώμη σώματος τούηδε: ἀεθλοφόροι τε ἀμφότεροι ὁμοίως ἦσαν, καὶ δὴ καὶ λέγεται ὅδε ὁ λόγος. εὐσύνης ὀρθῆς τῆ Ἥρῃ τοῖσι Ἀργείοισι ἔδεε πάντως τὴν μητέρα αὐτῶν ζεύγει κομισθῆναι ἐς τὸ ἱρόν, οἱ δὲ σφι βόες ἐκ τοῦ ἀγροῦ οὐ παρεγίνοντο ἐν ὥρῃ, ἐκκληρόμενοι δὲ τῆ ὥρῃ οἱ νεηνία ὑποδύντες αὐτοὶ ὑπὸ τὴν ζεύγλιν εἴκον τὴν ἄμαξαν, ἐπὶ τῆς ἀμάξης δὲ σφιν ὠχέετο ἡ μήτηρ, σταδίους δὲ πέντε καὶ τεσσεράκοντα διακομίσαντες ἀπίκοντο ἐς τὸ ἱρόν. [3] ταῦτα δὲ σφι ποιήσασι καὶ ὀφθεῖσι ὑπὸ τῆς πανηγύριος τελευτατῆ τοῦ βίου ἀρίστη ἐπεγένετο, διέδεξε τε ἐν τούτοις ὁ θεὸς, ὡς ἄμεινον εἶη ἀνθρώπων τεθνᾶναι μᾶλλον ἢ ζῶειν. Ἀργεῖοι μὲν γὰρ περιστάντες ἐμακάριζον τῶν νεηνίων τὴν ῥώμην, αἱ δὲ Ἀργεῖαι τὴν μητέρα αὐτῶν, οἷων τέκνων ἐκύρησε. [4] ἡ δὲ μήτηρ περιχαρῆς εὐόσα τῷ τε ἔργῳ καὶ τῆ φήμῃ, στάσα ἀντίον τοῦ ἀγάλματος εὐχετο Κλεόβι τε καὶ Βίτωνι τοῖσι ἐωυτῆς τέκνοισι, οἳ μιν ἐτίμησαν μεγάλως, τὴν θεὸν δοῦναι τὸ ἀνθρώπων τυχεῖν ἀριστόν ἐστι. [5] μετὰ ταύτην δὲ τὴν εὐχὴν ὡς ἔθυσάν τε καὶ εὐωχῆθησαν, κατακοιμηθέντες ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ ἱρῷ οἱ νεηνία οὐκέτι ἀνέστησαν ἀλλ' ἐν τελείῳ τούτῳ ἔσχοντο. Ἀργεῖοι δὲ σφῶν εἰκόνας ποιησάμενοι ἀνέθεσαν ἐς Δελφοὺς ὡς ἀνδρῶν ἀριστῶν γενομένων.'

1.32: Σόλων μὲν δὴ εὐδαιμονίης δευτερεῖα ἔνεμε τούτοις, Κροῖσος δὲ σπερχθεῖς εἶπε ὅτι ξεῖνε Ἀθηναίε, ἡ δ' ἡμετέρη εὐδαιμονίη οὕτω τοι ἀπέρριπται ἐς τὸ μηδέν, ὥστε οὐδὲ ἰδιωτέων ἀνδρῶν ἀξίους ἡμέας ἐποίησας; ὁ δὲ εἶπε ὅτι Κροῖσε, ἐπιστάμενόν με τὸ θεῖον πᾶν ἐὼν φθονερόν τε καὶ παραχῶδες ἐπειρωτᾶς ἀνθρωπῶν πρηγμάτων περὶ. [2] ἐν γὰρ τῷ μακρῷ χρόνῳ πολλὰ μὲν ἔστι ἰδεῖν τὰ μὴ τις ἐθέλει, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ παθεῖν. ἐς γὰρ ἑβδομήκοντα ἔτεα οὖρον τῆς ζῆς ἀνθρώπων προτίθημι. [3] οὗτοι ἐόντες ἐνιαυτοὶ. ἑβδομήκοντα παρέχονται ἡμέρας δικησίας καὶ πεντακισχιλίας καὶ δισμυρίας ἐμβολίου μηνὸς μὴ γινομένου: εἰ δὲ διῆ ἐθελήσει τούτερον τῶν ἐτέων μηνὶ μακρότερον γίνεσθαι, ἴνα διῆ αἱ ὥραι συμβαίνωσι παραγινομένη ἐς τὸ δέον, μῆνες μὲν παρὰ τὰ ἑβδομήκοντα ἔτεα οἱ ἐμβόλιοι γίνονται τριήκοντα πέντε, ἡμέραι δὲ ἐκ τῶν μηνῶν τούτων χίλια πεντήκοντα. [4] τούτων τῶν ἀπασέων ἡμερέων τῶν ἐς τὰ ἑβδομήκοντα ἔτεα εὐσεῶν πεντήκοντα καὶ δικησιέων καὶ ἐξακισχιλιέων καὶ δισμυριέων ἡ ἐτέρη αὐτέων τῆ ἐτέρῃ ἡμέρῃ τὸ παράπαν οὐδὲν ὅμοιον προσάγει πρηγμα. οὕτω ὦν Κροῖσε πᾶν ἐστὶ ἀνθρώπος ξυμφορῆ. [5] ἐμοὶ δὲ σὺ καὶ πλουτέειν μέγα φαίνεται καὶ βασιλεὺς πολλῶν εἶναι ἀνθρώπων: ἐκεῖνο δὲ τὸ εἶρέ με, οὐκ ὡς ἐγὼ λέγω, πρὶν τελευτήσαντα καλῶς τὸν αἰῶνα πύθωμαι. οὐ γὰρ τι ὁ μέγα πλούσιος μᾶλλον τοῦ ἐπ' ἡμέρην ἔχοντος ὀλβιώτερός ἐστι, εἰ μὴ οἱ τύχη ἐπίσποιο πάντα καλὰ ἔχοντα εὐ τελευτήσαι τὸν βίον. πολλοὶ μὲν γὰρ ζᾶπλουτοὶ ἀνθρώπων ἀνολβοὶ εἰσι, πολλοὶ δὲ μετρίως ἔχοντες βίου εὐτυχέες. [6] ὁ μὲν δὴ μέγα πλούσιος ἀνολβος δέ, δυοῖσι προέχει τοῦ εὐτυχέος μόνον, οὗτος δὲ τοῦ πλουσίου καὶ ἀνολβου πολλοῖσιν: ὁ μὲν ἐπιθυμίην ἐκτελέσαι καὶ ἄτην μεγάλην προσπεσοῦσαν ἐνεῖκα δυνατοῦς, ὁ δὲ τοῖσδε προέχει ἐκείνου: ἄτην μὲν καὶ ἐπιθυμίην οὐκ ὁμοίως δυνατοῦς ἐκείνω ἐνεῖκα, ταῦτα δὲ ἡ εὐτυχίη οἱ ἀπερύκει, ἄπυρος δὲ ἐστὶ, ἄνουσος, ἀπαθῆς κακῶν, εὐπαις, εὐειδής. [7] εἰ δὲ πρὸς τούτοις ἐτι τελευτήσαι τὸν βίον εὖ, οὗτος ἐκεῖνος, τὸν σὺ ζητεῖς: ὀλβιος κεκλήσθαι

ἄξιός ἐστι: πρὶν δ' ἂν τελευτήσῃ, ἐπισχεῖν μὴδὲ καλέειν κω ὄλβιον, ἀλλ' εὐτυχέα. [8] τὰ πάντα μὲν νυν ταῦτα συλλαβεῖν ἄνθρωπον ἐόντα ἀδύνατόν ἐστι, ὥσπερ χῶρη οὐδεμία καταρκέει πάντα ἐωυτῇ παρέχουσα, ἀλλὰ ἄλλο μὲν ἔχει ἐτέρου δὲ ἐπιδέεται: ἢ δὲ ἂν τὰ πλείστα ἔχη, αὕτη ἀρίστη. ὥς δὲ καὶ ἀνθρώπου σῶμα ἐν οὐδὲν αὐταρκές ἐστι: τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἔχει, ἄλλου δὲ ἐνδεές ἐστι. [9] ὃς δ' ἂν αὐτῶν πλείστα ἔχων διατελέῃ καὶ ἔπειτα τελευτήσῃ εὐχαρίστως τὸν βίον, οὗτος παρ' ἐμοὶ τὸ οὖνομα τοῦτο ὡς βασιλεὺς δίκαιός ἐστι φέρεσθαι. σκοπέειν δὲ χρῆ παντὸς χρήματος τὴν τελευτήν κῆ ἀποβήσεται: πολλοῖσι γὰρ δὴ ὑποδέξας ὄλβον ὁ θεὸς προρρίζους ἀνέτρεψε.'

The conversation between Croesus and Solon is the first example of a kind of dialogue that will recur several times in Herodotus, between a “wise adviser” and a man of power who usually does not take (to his detriment) the advice given to him.<sup>23</sup> This dialogue, however, is particular because Solon neither gives real advice, nor suggests a choice as an alternative to another, but expresses considerations on happiness and human life, which actually constitute an indirect warning to Croesus.

Before the beginning of the dialogue, Solon is introduced by Herodotus as a wise man, one of the Greek *sophistai* (σοφισταί) who have gone to Sardis (1.29):<sup>24</sup>

*...all the sages from Hellas who were living at that time, coming in different ways, came to Sardis, which was at the height of its property; and among them came Solon the Athenian, who, after making laws for the Athenians at their request, went abroad for ten years, sailing forth to see the world, he said....*

...ἀπικνέονται ἐς Σάρδις ἀκμαζούσας πλοῦτα ἄλλοι τε οἱ πάντες ἐκ τῆς Ἑλλάδος σοφισταί, οἱ τοῦτον τὸν χρόνον ἐτύγχανον ἐόντες, ὡς ἕκαστος αὐτῶν ἀπικνεόιτο, καὶ δὴ καὶ Σόλων ἀνὴρ Ἀθηναῖος, ὃς Ἀθηναίοισι νόμους κελεύσασι ποιήσας ἀπεδήμησε ἕτεα δέκα κατὰ θεωρίας πρόφασιν ἐκπλώσας ...

We should keep in mind that the term *sophistēs* (σοφιστής), as confirmed by other occurrences in Herodotus (2.49.1; 4.95.2) and in other works,<sup>25</sup> means simply a wise man: it is a synonym for *sophos* or better *sophos anēr* (σοφὸς ἀνὴρ).<sup>26</sup> Other expressions also characterize Solon as a wise man: in 1.29.1 Herodotus says that Solon undertook his journeys *kata theōriēs*

<sup>23</sup> Cf. the classic article by Lattimore (1939).

<sup>24</sup> Greek source: Colonna (1996); translation: Godley (1920).

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed examination of the occurrences and meanings of *sophistēs* in the texts of 5<sup>th</sup> century see Edmunds (2006), particularly pp. 418-22 and 424-5.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Ramirez Vidal (2016), p. 120.

*prophasin* (κατὰ θεωρίας πρόφασιν), with the stated intention of *theōriē*, i.e. of seeing, knowing. The term *theōriē* will reappear immediately afterwards, when Herodotus (1.30.1) confirms that Solon left Athens *tēs theōriēs ... heineken* (τῆς θεωρίας ... εἵνεκεν), in order to see, to know. Then this expression will be resumed by Croesus in his first words to his guest (1.30.2). In this first speech of Croesus other two terms emphasize the image of Solon as a wise man: one, rather obvious, is *sophiē* (σοφίη), wisdom, whose fame has reached also Croesus' country (1.30.2); the other, quite unexpected, is *philosopheōn* (φιλοσοφέων), present participle of the verb *philosophēin* (φιλοσοφεῖν) which occurs here for the first time (1.30.2). The meaning of this verb will not be discussed here: it will suffice to clarify that in this passage its meaning is very different from the one it will later assume in Plato's writings. Here Solon is *philosopheōn* in the sense that he is motivated to travelling by his love of knowledge, that however has nothing in common with the philosopher's pursuit of knowledge, but should be understood as an intellectual curiosity driving him to know new countries and cultures.<sup>27</sup> Not by chance in Croesus' words *philosopheōn* and *theōriēs heineken* are placed on the same level as motivations that prompted Solon to visit so many countries: what *philosopheōn* adds to *theōriēs heineken* is simply the ability to reflect on what one sees and observes. As Rossetti rightly notices,<sup>28</sup> Solon is introduced not only as a curious traveler, but also as a thoughtful person who is able to elaborate intellectually the facts and situations that he experienced. In my opinion, it would not be arbitrary to suppose that Herodotus entrusted the task of explaining his own views on human happiness to Solon, a man characterized by sharp intellectual curiosity and by being a thoughtful traveler, and therefore so close to Herodotus himself. The meeting between Solon and Croesus appears therefore as a confrontation between wisdom on the one hand and wealth and power on the other, between the thoughtful moderation of the former and the dull arrogance of the latter; the opposition suggested in the past by some scholars, where Western freedom is represented by Solon and Eastern

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<sup>27</sup> On Solon's intellectual curiosity see especially Solon's fragment 13 Diehl (17 Gentili-Prato; 23 West):

*Happy who has beloved boys and horses with unclown hooves, and hunting dogs, and a foreign guest coming from another land.*

ὄλβιος ὃ παιδῆς τε φίλοι καὶ μώνυκες ἵπποι καὶ κύνες ἀγρευταὶ καὶ ξένος ἄλλοδαπός.

Greek source: Colonna (1982); translation: Bevilacqua

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Rossetti (2018), pp. 273-4.

despotism is represented by Croesus, does not find any confirmation in this text.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2. Human life and divinity

The dialogue between Solon and Croesus deals with the subject of happiness, or better - who can be regarded as the happiest human being. Solon's two answers establish a ranking that puts Tellus the Athenian at the first place and two young Argive brothers, Cleobis and Biton, at the second: this ranking is based on a clearly defined view on human life, closely related to an equally stated view on divinity. The decidedly pessimistic view of human life is expressed by Solon with a categorical phrase: *pan esti anthrōpos xymphorē* (πᾶν ἐστὶ ἀνθρώπος ξυμφορῆ), which we could translate as “the human being is totally at the mercy of chance”,<sup>30</sup> but in the Greek text it is far more straightforward and blunt: “the human being is totally chance” or “the human being is only chance” (1.32.4).<sup>31</sup> In the strict sense of the word, *xymphorē* means what happens, what comes about to the human being; to make his statement clear, Solon explains that if we establish seventy years as the human lifespan (1.32.2),<sup>32</sup> this includes 26,250 days

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Asheri (1988), p. 282.

<sup>30</sup> Translation: Bevilacqua.

<sup>31</sup> Another wise adviser, Artabanus, will explicitly state that it is *symphorai*, fortuitous events, that dominate human beings, and not the other way around. (7.49.3):

*Since there are no harbors able to receive you, understand that men are the subjects and not the rulers of their accidents.*

Οὐκ ὄν δὴ ἐόντων τοι λιμένων ὑποδεξίων, μάθε ὅτι αἱ συμφοραὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἄρχουσι καὶ οὐκὶ ἀνθρώποι τῶν συμφορέων.

Greek source: Colonna (1996); translation: Godley (1920).

<sup>32</sup> Solon indeed in a famous elegy (19 Diehl; 23 Gentili-Prato; 27 West) established seventy years as the average lifespan; however, addressing a polemic answer to Mimnermus, who had expressed the hope to die at the age of sixty (fragment 6 Diehl; 11 Gentili-Prato; 6 West), Solon hopes for a lifespan of eighty years (fragment 22 Diehl; 26 Gentili-Prato; 20 West):

*But if you let be again persuaded by me even now, delete your sentence and do not be jealous because I worked out a better one: change, o offspring of gentle poets, and sing so: “may the fate of death grasp me at the age of eighty”.*

ἀλλ' εἴ μοι κἄν νῦν ἔτι πείσειαι, ἔξελε τοῦτον, μηδὲ μέγαυρ' ὅτι σεῦ λῶον ἐπεφρασάμην, καὶ μεταποίησον, Λιγυαστάδῃ, ὧδε δ' ἄειδε: “ὀγδῶκονταῆτι μοῖρα κίχοι θανάτου”.

Greek Source: Colonna (1982); translation: Bevilacqua.

(1.32.3-4) and none of these days brings the same things as another (1.32.4). In other words, the human being is subject to the work of time, which day by day brings things that are always different from those already experienced; therefore, fortuitous and unpredictable events dominate human life, escaping human beings' control and causing an unavoidable uncertainty.

Moreover, in addition to the unpredictability of events and circumstances, the human being is subject also to divinity, which is *phthoneron*/ φθονερόν - envious, and *tarakōdes*/ ταραχώδες - fond of derangements (1.32.1). If we confine ourselves to the *tarakōdes* only, the divinity seems to negatively reinforce the continuous changes that human beings are subject to, by adding *tarachē*/ ταραχή - derangement or disorder. But the divinity is also envious. Much critical discussion has been dedicated to the concept of *phthonos theōn*/ φθόνος θεῶν - envy of gods;<sup>33</sup> it is difficult to find a definitive meaning to this concept, since, on the one hand, the *phthonos theōn* is not the only (and not even the prevailing) way in which the divinity acts and, on the other hand, it appears in conflict with other ways of intervention enacted by divinity. If we confine ourselves to Croesus' vicissitudes, we could rely on what Herodotus himself states, though with some caution,<sup>34</sup> about the death of Atys, Croesus' son, as being a terrible divine punishment (*ek theou nemesis megalē*/ ἐκ θεοῦ νέμεσις μεγάλη) due to Croesus' regard of himself as the happiest (*olbiōtaton*/ ὀλβιώτατον) of all human beings (1.34.1). Here the divinity<sup>35</sup> seems to act to inflict a punishment caused by a fault, in this case Croesus' arrogance of thinking of himself as the happiest of all human beings. Not very different is the reference to Croesus' defeat by Cyrus, shown as a punishment inflicted on him for the fault of his dynastic forefather, Gyges (1.13.2; 1.91.1-2).<sup>36</sup> In some other cases, the punishment of an individual or a collective fault by the divinity is stated quite openly,<sup>37</sup> while in other cases, e.g. the story of

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<sup>33</sup> The bibliography is nearly endless: I will confine myself to quote the commendable considerations in Corcella, 1984, pp. 152-4. Corcella also points out that the *phthonos theōn*, which causes lucky and powerful men to be destined to a sad end, is in Herodotus a fundamental "legge storica", a historical law or a regularity that can be observed empirically (p. 226).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. below, note 56.

<sup>35</sup> In Herodotus not only to *theion*/ τὸ θεῖον, but often also *ho theos*/ ὁ θεός (cf. also, eg. 1.31.3; 1.32.9), indicates the divinity in a depersonalized meaning; the same applies to *tou daimoniou*/ τοῦ δαιμονίου in 2.120.5.

<sup>36</sup> Gyges indeed had become the king of Lydians by murdering their king, Candaules (1.7.1-1.14.1).

<sup>37</sup> It is the case of Pheretime (4.205) or of the Trojans (2.120.5); in the latter passage, Herodotus points out twice that he is stating his own opinion.

Polycrates (3.39-45; 3.54-6; 3.120-5), his atrocious death is not related to some deplorable actions of his (3.39.4; 3.44.2; 3.45.4) but only to his great fortune and success (3.40.1-2) that exposed him to the risk of a bad end (3.40.3) – and this, precisely because the divinity is envious (3.40.2):<sup>38</sup>

...for I know divinity, how envious it is...

...τὸ θεῖον ἐπισταμένῳ ὡς ἔστι φθονερόν...

The concept of an envious divinity is restated in the words of the wise adviser Artabanus (7.10ε and 7.46.4); the latter reads:

*As life is full of pains, death has become the most desirable refuge for the human being; the god is found to be envious in this, giving us only a taste of the sweetness of living.*

οὕτως ὁ μὲν θάνατος μοχθηρῆς εὐούσης τῆς ζόης καταφυγὴ αἰρετωτάτη τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ γέγονε, ὁ δὲ θεὸς γλυκὸν γεύσας τὸν αἰῶνα φθονερός ἐν αὐτῷ εὐρίσκεται ἐών.<sup>39</sup>

Facing these undeniable fluctuations about the ways in which divinity acts upon human affairs, it is useless to persist in looking for an expected consistency: it seems more reasonable, as well as methodically correct, to acknowledge two different views that are flanking and intertwining: the former showing a tendency to ethicize to some extent the intervention of the divinity, while the latter showing it as devoid of any ethical value and totally unrelated to human behaviors.

Even those who are less exposed to the *phthonos theōn* cannot forget that the divinity is also *tarakōdes*, fond of derangements, and hence human life is subject to an unavoidable instability. Good fortune, therefore, is always precarious and temporary; nobody, as Solon explains to Croesus, should regard himself as happy (*olbios*) until he does not come to the end of his life<sup>40</sup> peacefully, but only as lucky (*euthychēs* – 1.32.7: “call him ... lucky” / καλέειν ... εὐτυχέα).<sup>41</sup> Therefore Solon does not hesitate to conclude his

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<sup>38</sup> Greek Source: Colonna (1996); translation (with modifications by Bevilacqua): Godley (1920).

<sup>39</sup> Greek Source: Colonna (1996); translation (with modifications by Bevilacqua): Godley (1920). On Artabanus, cf. above, note 31.

<sup>40</sup> “*Nobody among the living is happy*”: thus indeed Croesus will remember Solon’s words while he is going to die at the stake (1.86.3).

<sup>41</sup> The fundamental opposition is between *olbios* and *eutychēs*. We cannot however forget that even in this dialogue the lexicon of happiness is not firmly set: if the term