

The Conditions of Happiness in the Archaic Age of Greece*

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The 7th and 6th centuries B.C. in Greece, usually called the 'archaic age', were a period of rapid change in many respects; with the development of the polis, the aristocracy was becoming increasingly uncertain of itself, conflicts developed not only between the poleis but also within the community itself. The coinage system, invented in Lydia on Asia minor, was quietly revolutionizing commerce in the Greek world. In literature, personal emotions and experiences replaced heroic myths such as those in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The subject of poetry was no longer the glorious past, but the immediate present.

In Homer, the gods are the blessed ones(μάκαρ, μάκαρες) who live at ease, free from toil, grief and death, while the mortals are the opposite in every respect; "among all creatures that breathe on earth and crawl on it, there is not anywhere a thing more dismal than man is"(*Iliad*, 17, 446f.). Men usually strive for honour or wealth through ἀρετή (excellence or skill). ὄλβος(happiness, prosperity) is closely connected with πλοῦτος(wealth), and those who have attained these objects are called ὄλβιος(happy); they may even be called μάκαρ(blessed) if they are held in high esteem like gods. However, they know that the achievement of ὄλβος and πλοῦτος are largely dependent on divine will.

In the *Iliad*, Achilles tells of two jars in the palace of Zeus, in which the god keeps good and evil gifts, giving some men a mixture of both and to others only evil(24,527ff.). There is no explanation why some people are favoured with a mixed gift while others receive only evil. In this insecure world, a man can only pray that the gods may allow the good things in his hand to prosper and last throughout his lifetime(*Odyssey*, 13, 41f.). The prayer is an echo of that found in *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*(105f.): let me live long and happily (δηρὸν ἐὺ ζῶειν), seeing the light of the sun, and come to the threshold of old

age, a man prosperous(ὄλβιος) among the people. However, if he suffers misfortune, the only thing he can do is to endure (*Iliad*, 24.549, *Odyssey*, 18. 155).

Hesiod was a poet-farmer in the early 7th century and told of the universe under the government of Zeus and how a man should live in this world. His notion of happiness or being happy(μάκαρ, ὄλβιος, εὐδαίμων), though essentially the same as that in Homer, is more closely connected with the actualities of life. The main theme running through one of his poems, *Works and Days*, is ὄλβος and how to obtain it. According to Hesiod, a man must above all work hard and also obtain the knowledge and technical skills to make his work most effective; there must also be peace in society as a whole, that is to say, wealth(πλοῦτος) must be attained by just means and disputes must be settled not through βίη(force) and ὕβρις (wanton violence) but through δίκη (law, justice). Hesiod is convinced that god-given wealth is much better than ill-gotten wealth.

For if a man takes great wealth (ὄλβος) violently and by force,
or if he seizes it through his tongue,
as often happens when gain deceives men's sense
and dishonour tramples down honour,
the gods soon blot him out and make his house low,
and wealth(ὄλβος) attends him only for a little time(321-6).

If a man desires enduring ὄλβος, it will be granted only on the condition that he work hard and live honestly, knowing what is right (δίκαια) and timely(ὥρια). For Hesiod, ὄλβος which can be gained without hard work belongs to the myth of the remote past. When he tells how the men of the golden race lived like gods, enjoying all good things without any work (109ff.), it is for contrast with his own age, the age of the race of iron, which is never free from labour, sorrow or death. In this age, however, there is some consolation; Hesiod says that some good things are mixed with evil, and in a just city, a life almost equal to that of the golden race will be realized, while an

unjust city will be visited by Zeus with famine and plague(225-47).

In one of his poems(fr.1 D.), Solon, an Athenian law-giver and poet, prays to the Muses that they may grant him ὄλβος at the hands of the gods. In the first half of the poem(1-32), he expresses a desire that he may attain ὄλβος, but never unjustly. For only god-given wealth will be enduring, while ἄτη (blindness, ruin) will soon mingle with wealth sought by ὕβρις; a man with a wicked heart cannot forever escape the eyes of Zeus. If the vengeance of the god is not carried out on every occasion and the wrongdoer himself is not punished, then his innocent children or his children's children will pay(27-32). On the whole, human sins are counter-balanced by Zeus' retribution which falls inevitably sooner or later. This means that a man must assume moral responsibility not only for his own destiny, but also for that of his future generations.

In the second half(33-76), Solon dwells on the uncertainties that beset human activities and reflects on the reason men usually overlook the boundary between good and bad fortune. Each man retains his own personal concept(δόξα) until he suffers, and gives himself cheerfully to vain hopes(κοῦφαι ἐλπίδες); whatever he does, he cannot be certain of the consequence.

Danger, for all, lies in all action, and there is no telling
which way the end will be after a thing is begun.

One may be trying to do well and fall unawares(οὐ προνοήσας)
into great ruin(ἄτη), while one

who acts badly may find a god gives him all that he asked for,
sheer good luck, that sets him free from the fault of his mind.

As for wealth(πλοῦτος), there is no boundary(τέρμα) clearly set down;
Those among us who have already the greatest wealth
try to get twice as much as they have...

Money(κέρδεα), when a man makes it, is the gift of the gods,
but disaster(ἄτη) can grow out of money, and when retribution
comes at the sending of Zeus, none can tell where it will light.(65-76).

(Translated by Lattimore, slightly altered)

According to Solon, desire for ὄλβος is deeply rooted in the very nature of man. The only means of discerning the boundary(τέρμα) which men are not allowed to cross while seeking ὄλβος is γνῶμοσύνη(sound judgment).. However, "it is very hard to tell the unseen measure(μέτρον) of γνῶμοσύνη, which alone has the ends(τείρατα) of all things"(fr.16 D.). The gods grant ὄλβος to men, but it is from their very gift that blindness, sin and ruin are born; the excessive desire for ὄλβος leads inevitably to ἄτη, which brings punishment by Zeus. Solon echoes Hesiod's verses (*Works and Days*, 320-6) when he says that ἄτη mingles quickly with wealth sought with ὕβρις(11-6), but more definitely than Hesiod, he identifies ὕβρις with the desire for ὄλβος implanted in human nature. So long as men have not yet learnt the means of controlling their desire, that is, γνῶμοσύνη, they will never be able to achieve enduring happiness. A man can only pray that the gods may grant him ὄλβος, while protecting him from ἄτη(blindness, ruin).

In the political world, too, unjust wealth will bring about great disasters just as in an individual's life. In his poem addressed to the citizens of Athens (fr.3 D.), Solon says that the present crisis of the city is due to the excessive desire of the leading citizens for wealth.

This wound comes inevitably and quickly to the whole city,
and the city falls soon into evil servitude,
which arouses discord and wakes sleeping war,
that destroys the flourishing life of many men(17-20).

Solon teaches that greed (ὕβρις) will inevitably bring ruin on all citizens through δυσνομία(bad government, anarchy), the opposite of εὐνομία(good government) which maintains everything in the city in the correct order. As an experienced statesman, Solon sees the primary cause of δυσνομία in man's inborn desire for wealth. (These reflections of Solon on man are still operative in Thucydides' *History* of the Peloponnesian War).

For Theognis(more correctly, for the authors of the collection of the poems under his name), no living man is rich(ὄλβιος) in the true sense of the word

(167f.); when one man is rich and another poor, it is a gift of a δαίμων(god, destiny) (165f.). For most people, only one virtue(ἀρετή), wealth, has great power, but the poet believes that the greatest blessing the gods bestow upon humans is judgment(γνώμη), which has the ends(πείρατα) of everything, and whoever has it will be a happy man(μᾶκαρ)(1171-3). Connected with this notion of happiness is his advice that one should not attempt anything excessive (μηδὲν ἄγαν σπεύδειν)(335). In Theognis, the term σώφρων(prudent, moderate), absent from early lyric poets, acquires importance. While ἀρετή is the positive virtue shown in achievement, σωφροσύνη(that is, to be σώφρων) is the negative virtue which restrains one from doing anything excessive.

The poets of the late archaic age also saw a fundamental difference between gods and men. Simonides says that only a god can have the privilege of being truly good(ἀγαθός, ἐσθλός), while men will be overtaken by bad luck that cannot be remedied(ἀμήχανος); "any man is good while his luck is good, bad when bad, and for the most part they are best whom the gods love" (4 D.). Simonides does not speak simply of misfortune, but of conditions which render men utterly helpless. Men who eat the fruits of the earth cannot be blameless like the gods. So he, Simonides, will not cast his portion of life profitlessly away on an empty hope, by going in quest of what cannot be. He will rather be a friend of anyone who of his own will does nothing shameful. Man may be able to acquire excellence with divine favour, but he must not cherish any illusion that he can enjoy enduring happiness.

If you are a mortal man, never say what tomorrow will bring,
nor when you see a man happy(ὄλβιος), how long he will be happy.
For swift is change, — no, not so swift is
the changing course of the wide-winged fly(6 D.).

In another fragment(8 D.), Simonides tells of the horrible Charybdis, a legendary whirlpool, which swallows all things, including great achievements (ἀρεταί) and riches.

Pindar, the younger rival of Simonides, seems to suggest the same thing when he says that man's delight flowers for only a brief moment, then swiftly falls to the ground, shattered by adverse doom(*Pyth.*8. 92ff.); man is "a creature of a day" and "a dream of a shadow". However, Pindar does not forget to add that when a gleam of sunshine comes as a gift from heaven, a radiant light rests on men and a gentle life is possible. Men and the gods have their life from one mother; and although men live a mortal life, separated from the gods, they can still claim some likeness with the gods(*Nem.*6. 1ff.):

There is one
race of men, one race of gods; both have breath
of life from a single mother. But sundered power
holds us divided, so that the one is nothing, while for the other
the brazen sky is established
their sure citadel forever. Yet we have some likeness in great
intelligence, or strength, to the immortals,
though we know not what the day will bring, what course
after nightfall
destiny has written that we must run to the end.

(Translated by Lattimore)

Success in actions such as the Olympic games can bring glory, the greatest happiness a man may aspire to, and though he cannot become immortal, he comes close to the gods; "To be without grief of heart is to be god; but happy (εὐδαίμων) and worthy of a poet's song is the man whose skill of hand and foot wins for his strength and daring the highest prize of victory"; "he cannot climb the brazen heaven, but as for all the bright achievements which men attain, he reaches the utmost limit of that voyage"(*Pyth.*10.21-9).

However, Pindar knows that when man becomes overconfident, he is in danger of crossing the line between mortal and immortal and rivalling the gods. Therefore, the poet warns a successful athlete not to seek to become Zeus (*Isth.*5.14). Also, he seems to believe that the gods punish men just because they are successful, hence he prays for the house of the successful athlete that the

gods may not envy them and change their fortune(*Pyth.*10. 20f. cf. *Isth.*7. 39f., where the poet speaks of the envy (φθόνος) of the gods). A man must have no illusions about the security of the human condition or the chance for enduring happiness; if he can go as far as possible with his excellence (ἀρετή) which is the gods' gift, he must be content with that; at least he will in this way avoid the ὕβρις which brings on him the vengeance of the gods.

In Herodotus' *History*, which, though a work of the classical age(the 5th century B.C.), shows many features of the archaic Greek outlook, there is a report of the conversation which presumably took place between Solon and Croesus, the powerful and wealthy king of Lydia(1.30-32). Croesus believes himself to be the happiest man(ὀλβιώτατος) in the world, but when he asks Solon who, in his view, is the happiest, Solon first names Tellus from Athens who after a happy life died in battle for his country and was honoured by a public funeral. Second place, Solon gives to Cleobis and Biton, the young men from Argos, who put their mother in a cart and drew it to a festival at the shrine of Hera. When the mother prayed that the goddess would reward her sons with the highest gift, they fell asleep and woke no more. On Croesus' complaint that he, the king, is wholly ignored, Solon replies that, since a human is all συμφορή(chance, disaster), one must look to the end before judging him a happy man; the man who unites the greatest numbers of advantages, and retains them to the day of his death, then dies in peace, that man alone is entitled to be called "happy(ὀλβιος)"; before that, one may call him "fortunate(εὐτυχής)", but not "happy"(1.32).

Not long after this conversation, Croesus loses not only his son but is also defeated in the war against the Persians and made captive by their king Cyrus. Later Herodotus makes Croesus compare human fortune to a revolving "wheel" whose movement never allows the same men to be always fortunate(εὐτυχεῖν) (1.207). Importance is attached not to the absolute height of fortune(how great is one's fortune), but its duration(how long is one's fortune); the higher one rises on the wheel, the deeper one falls and the more difficult it is to stabilize one's success. Herodotus suggests that in practice, it is best to stabilize one's prosperity on a moderate level. This is, as we noted above, the ethical

notion of σωφροσύνη(prudence, moderation) or μηδὲν ἄγαν (nothing in excess).

Herodotus himself, however, seems to think that once initiated, this process of rise and fall continues forever. Whether an individual or a nation, the revolving "wheel" does not allow one to remain at a constant level. After reaching the highest point, the inevitable fall begins. Polycrates, the powerful tyrant of Samos, was warned that his excessive prosperity(μεγάλαι εὐτυχίαι) might one day bring ruin on him. Thus, he took the best measures he could think of against it, but in the end suffered a miserable death through betrayal (Bk.3). It was to no avail, that Xerxes, the king of Persia, together with his advisers, considered every aspect of the contemplated expedition to Greece (Bk.7); he decided wrongly and thereby brought on himself and his empire a great disaster. However carefully a man may plan, he cannot stop the revolving "wheel". There often exist clearly visible boundaries in the form of rivers or seas (straits) which a man should not transgress (as in the case of Croesus, Cyrus and Xerxes). Yet knowingly or unknowingly, he oversteps them and thus accelerates the process of rise and fall. In other words, desire for ὄλβος infallibly leads men to excessive prosperity and this in turn brings on ἄτη (blindness, ruin).

Where does this notion of the process of rise and fall come from? Herodotus seems to have gotten it from the Presocratic philosophers(Anaximander and others) who conceived of the universe as a cosmos subject to the rule of law; man's behaviour, with its consequences, follows a pattern which is essentially that of the world as a whole. However, this view in no way prevents Herodotus from thinking that when the order of nature is disturbed, the gods themselves intervene in the affairs of men; excessive wealth or happiness provokes divine envy (φθόνος), which will in the end destroy or harm its possessors.

Anyone who, like Tellus or Cleobis and Biton, has no excessive desire for ὄλβος is certainly free from a spectacular change of fortune such as we saw in Croesus' life. However, what interested Herodotus most is not a quiet and happy life but the constant process (or "pattern") of rise and fall, whether in the

life of an individual or the history of a nation. On the whole, he seems to be convinced that without desire for ὄλβος and striving to attain it there will be no memorable actions either for an individual or a community. Xerxes says, when he is warned against the expedition to Greece, that if his ancestors had been cautious the Persian empire would never have been won(7.50). The history of men or nations consists of "what men have done", above all their "great and wonderful actions"(1.proem); where there are no actions, or where none is known, there will be no history either.

In Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, a Greek tragedy of the classical age, the hero who is bound to a rock in the desert explains to the chorus why he is visited by Zeus with cruel punishment; he not only saved men from destruction planned by Zeus but also made them cease foreseeing their own death, that is, he gave them "blind hopes", which the chorus calls a "great gift to men"(235-51). Prometheus continues to name another gift to men, fire, from which men will learn many "skills"(τέχναι); these "skills" explicitly refer to his speeches enumerating many gifts of civilization he gave men(436-71, 476-506). "Blind hopes" and fire—these were the great gifts which finally freed men from a beast-like existence and brought them civilization and happiness. According to the poets of the archaic age, hopes arise from excessive desire and as such are the main cause of human sufferings; as Solon says, men rejoice open-mouthed in vain hopes until they suffer and cry out (fr. 1. 35f. D.). In Aeschylus' *Prometheus*, however, human striving for happiness seems more valued than the negative virtue of σωφροσύνη; there are no traces of caution against deceptive hopes and the process of rise and fall in human history.

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