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Handout

**The Two Solons in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics***

**1A** (Aristotle, *NE* 1.9-10 1100a.5-11)

πολλαὶ γὰρ μεταβολαὶ γίνονται καὶ παντοῖαι τύχαι κατὰ τὸν βίον, καὶ ἐνδέχεται τὸν μάλιστ’ εὐθηνοῦντα μεγάλαις συμφοραῖς περιπεσεῖν ἐπὶ γήρως, καθάπερ ἐν τοῖς Τρωικοῖς περὶ Πριάμου μυθεύεται· τὸν δὲ τοιαύταις χρησάμενον τύχαις καὶ τελευτήσαντα ἀθλίως οὐδεὶς εὐδαιμονίζει.

   Πότερον οὖν οὐδ’ ἄλλον οὐδένα ἀνθρώπων εὐδαιμονιστέον ἕως ἂν ζῇ, **κατὰ Σόλωνα δὲ χρεὼν τέλος ὁρᾶν;**

Many changes and all kinds of contingencies befall a man in the course of his life, and it is possible that the most prosperous man will encounter great misfortune in his old age, as the Trojan legends tell about Priam. When a man has met a fate such as his and has come to a wretched end, no one calls him happy.

Must we, then, apply the term “happy” to no man at all as long as he is alive? **Must we, as Solon would have us do, wait to see his end?**

**1B** (*NE* 1.10 1100b.1ff)

βούλεσθαι τοὺς ζῶντας εὐδαιμονίζειν διὰ τὰς μεταβολάς, καὶ διὰ τὸ μόνιμόν τι τὴν εὐδαιμονίαν ὑπειληφέναι καὶ μηδαμῶς εὐμετάβολον, τὰς δὲ τύχας πολλάκις ἀνακυκλεῖσθαι περὶ τοὺς αὐτούς; δῆλον γὰρ ὡς εἰ συνακολουθοίημεν ταῖς τύχαις, τὸν αὐτὸν εὐδαίμονα καὶ πάλιν ἄθλιον ἐροῦμενπολλάκις, χαμαιλέοντά τινα τὸν εὐδαίμονα ἀποφαίνοντες καὶ σαθρῶς ἱδρυμένον. ἢ τὸ μὲν ταῖς τύχαις ἐπακολουθεῖν οὐδαμῶς ὀρθόν; οὐ γὰρ ἐν ταύταις τὸ εὖ ἢ κακῶς, ἀλλὰ προσδεῖται τούτων ὁ ἀνθρώπινος βίος, καθάπερ εἴπομεν, κύριαι δ’ εἰσὶν αἱ κατ’ ἀρετὴν ἐνέργειαι τῆς εὐδαιμονίας, αἱ δ’ ἐναντίαι τοῦ ἐναντίου.

μαρτυρεῖ δὲ τῷ λόγῳ καὶ τὸ νῦν διαπορηθέν. **περὶ οὐδὲν γὰρ οὕτως ὑπάρχει τῶν ἀνθρωπίνων ἔργων βεβαιότης ὡς περὶ τὰς ἐνεργείας τὰς κατ’ ἀρετήν**· μονιμώτεραι γὰρ καὶ τῶν ἐπιστημῶν αὗται δοκοῦσιν εἶναι…

We are unwilling to call the living happy because changes may befall them and because we believe that happiness has permanence and is not amenable to changes under any circumstances, whereas fortunes revolve many times in one person’s lifetime. For obviously, if we are to keep pace with a man’s fortune, we shall frequently have to call the same many happy at one time and wretched at another and demonstrate that the happy man is a kind of chameleon, and that the foundations [sc. of his life] are unsure. Or is it quite wrong to make our judgment depend on fortune? Yes, it is wrong, for fortune does not determine whether we fare well or ill, but is, as we said, merely an accessory to human life; activities in conformity with virtue constitute happiness, and the opposite activities constitute its opposite.

The question that we have just discussed [viz. Need we “look to the end”?] further confirms our definition. **For no functions of man possess as much stability as do activities in conformity with virtue**: these seem to be even more durable than scientific knowledge…

**1C** (Aristotle, *Met.* 982b.28-983a.5)

Hence [that σοφία has no extrinsic advantage] the possession of it [σοφία] might be justly regarded as beyond human power; for in many ways human nature is in bondage, so that according to Simonides ‘God alone can have this privilege’, and it is unfitting that man should not be content to seek the knowledge that is suited to him. If, then, there is something in what the poets say, and jealousy is natural to the divine power, it would probably occur in this case [σοφία]above all, and all who excelled in this knowledge would be unfortunate. But **the divine power cannot be jealous** [ἀλλ‘ οὔτε τὸ θεῖον φθονερὸν ἐνδέχεται εἶναι] (indeed, according to the proverb, **“poets tell many lies”** [πολλὰ ψεύδονται ἀοιδοί]), nor should any science be thought more honorable than one of this sort.

**2A** (Herodotus, *Histories* 1.32 ff)

Ὁ δὲ εἶπε· Ὦ Κροῖσε, ἐπιστάμενόν με τὸ θεῖον πᾶνἐὸν φθονερόν τε καὶ ταραχῶδες ἐπειρωτᾷς ἀνθρωπηίων πρηγμάτων πέρι. Ἐν γὰρ τῷ μακρῷ χρόνῳ πολλὰ μὲν ἔστι ἰδεῖν τὰ μή τις ἐθέλει, πολλὰ δὲ καὶ παθεῖν… Οὕτω ὦν, ὦ Κροῖσε, **πᾶν ἐστιἄνθρωπος συμφορή**.

Ἐμοὶ δὲ σὺ καὶ πλουτέειν μέγα φαίνεαι καὶ βασιλεὺς πολλῶν εἶναι ἀνθρώπων· ἐκεῖνο δὲ

τὸ εἴρεό με οὔ κώ σε ἐγὼ λέγω, πρὶν τελευτήσαντα καλῶς τὸν αἰῶνα πύθωμαι… πρὶν δ’ ἂν τελευτήσῃ, ἐπισχεῖν μηδὲ καλέειν κω ὄλβιον, ἀλλ’ εὐτυχέα…

 ὃς δ’ ἂν αὐτῶν πλεῖστα ἔχων διατελέῃ καὶ ἔπειτα τελευτήσῃ εὐχαρίστως τὸν βίον, οὗτος παρ’ ἐμοὶ τὸ οὔνομα τοῦτο, εὐχαρίστως τὸν βίον, οὗτος παρ’ ἐμοὶ τὸ οὔνομα τοῦτο, ὦ βασιλεῦ, δίκαιός ἐστι φέρεσθαι. **Σκοπέειν δὲ χρὴ παντὸς χρήματος τὴν τελευτὴν κῇ ἀποβήσεται**· πολλοῖσι γὰρ δὴ ὑποδέξας ὄλβον ὁ θεὸς προρρίζους ἀνέτρεψε.

“Croesus,” Solon replied, “when you asked me about men and their affairs, you were putting your question to someone who is well aware of how utterly jealous the divine is, and how it is likely to confound us. Anyone who lives for a long time is bound to see and endure many things he would rather avoid… [Solon calculates the average life to include 26,250 days.] It follows, Croesus, that **human life is entirely a matter of chance**.

“Now, I can see that you are extremely rich and that you rule over large numbers of people, but I won’t be in a position to say what you’re asking me to say about you until I find out that you died well… [Solon describes the difference between a wealthy man and a lucky man] But until he is dead, you had better refrain from calling him happy, and just call him fortunate…

“The person who has and retains more of these advantages [e.g. health, avoidance of disaster, fine children, etc.] than others, and then dies well, my lord, is the one who, in my opinion, deserves the description in question. **It is necessary to consider the end of anything, however, and to see how it will turn out,** because the god often offers prosperity to men, but then destroys them utterly and completely.”

**3A** (Solon, fr. 13)

χρήματα δ’ ἱμείρω μὲν ἔχειν, ἀδίκως δὲ πεπᾶσθαι

  οὐκ ἐθέλω· πάντως ὕστερον ἦλθε δίκη.

πλοῦτον δ’ ὃν μὲν δῶσι θεοί, παραγίγνεται ἀνδρὶ

  ἔμπεδος ἐκ νεάτου πυθμένος ἐς κορυφήν·(10)

ὃν δ’ ἄνδρες τιμῶσιν ὑφ’ ὕβριος, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον

  ἔρχεται…

**ἀλλὰ Ζεὺς πάντων ἐφορᾶι τέλος**… (17)

…οὐδ’ ἐφ’ ἑκάστωι(25)

  ὥσπερ θνητὸς ἀνὴρ γίγνεται ὀξύχολος,

αἰεὶ δ’ οὔ ἑ λέληθε διαμπερές, ὅστις ἀλιτρὸν

  θυμὸν ἔχει, **πάντως δ’ ἐς τέλος ἐξεφάνη**·

θνητοὶ δ’ ὧδε νοέομεν ὁμῶς ἀγαθός τε κακός τε,

  εὖ ῥεῖν ἣν αὐτὸς δόξαν ἕκαστος ἔχει,

πρίν τι παθεῖν· τότε δ’ αὖτις ὀδύρεται·… (35)

ἄλλοι Παιῶνος πολυφαρμάκου ἔργον ἔχοντες

  ἰητροί· **καὶ τοῖς οὐδὲν ἔπεστι τέλος**·

πολλάκι δ’ ἐξ ὀλίγης ὀδύνης μέγα γίγνεται ἄλγος,

  κοὐκ ἄν τις λύσαιτ’ ἤπια φάρμακα δούς· (60)

τὸν δὲ κακαῖς νούσοισι κυκώμενον ἀργαλέαις τε

  ἁψάμενος χειροῖν αἶψα τίθησ’ ὑγιῆ.

**Μοῖρα δέ τοι θνητοῖσι κακὸν φέρει ἠδὲ καὶ ἐσθλόν**,

  δῶρα δ’ ἄφυκτα θεῶν γίγνεται ἀθανάτων.

As for money, I long to have it, but to possess it unjustly

is not my wish: assuredly Justice comes at a later time.

Wealth that is given by the gods remains at a man’s side,

firmly planted from its lowest root to its crown;

but that which men pursue out of arrogance does not come to them

in orderly fashion…

**Zeus watches over the end of all things**…

Not at each single thing,

like a mortal man, does he prove quick to anger,

yet he is aware unceasingly of anyone whose heart

is wicked, **and he assuredly is revealed as such in the end**.

This the way we mortals think, noble and base alike:

each has the notion that he himself is thriving

before something happens to him, and then he laments in turn…

Others, who claim the task of Paian of many medicines,

are doctors – **form them also there is no end at hand**,

for often out of some small ache great anguish arises,

and one cannot loosen its grip by giving soothing medicines;

but a man disquieted by dire and cruel diseases

is made sound in health through a laying on of hands.

**But it is fate, of course, that brings mortals evil as well as good**,

and the gifts of the immortal gods prove inescapable.

**3B** (Solon, fr. 15)

Many bad men [κακοί] are wealthy, and many good men [ἀγαθοὶ] are poor; but we would not exchange wealth for virtue [ἀρετή], since **virtue is always stable** [ἔμπεδον αἰεί], but different men at different times have wealth [χρήματα].

**4B** (Simonides, fr. 542)

To become a truly good man (ἄνδρ‘ ἀγαθὸν μὲν ἀλαθέως γενέσθαι)

Is difficult, in hands and feet and mind

**Four-square, fashioned without reproach** (τετράγωνον ἄνευ ψόγου τετυγμένον)…

Nor does the saying of Pittacus

Have, in my view, the ring of truth, though spoken by

A wise man: he said that it is difficult to be good (χαλεπὸν φάτ‘ ἐσθλον ἔμμεναι).

Only a god could possess that prize; for a man it is

Impossible not to be bad

When irresistible misfortune grips him.

If he fares well, every man is good;

But he is bad, if badly…

**Translations –**

Aristotle: from Oswald, M. (Trans.) (1999) *Nicomachean Ethics*. Princeton Hall.

Herodotus: from Waterfield, R. (Trans.) (1998) *The Histories*. Oxford.

Solon and Simonides: from Miller, A.M. (Trans.) (1996) *Greek Lyric*. Hackett.

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