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UNCOVERING THE TRUE “WEALTH” OF HAPPINESS  
—EXAMINING THE LIMITATIONS  
THAT GOVERN CRÆSUS’S QUESTION ABOUT HAPPINESS  
AND ARISTOTLE’S SUBSEQUENT REPLY

Abstract

The goal of the article is to present the context in which we, modern readers and scholars, make meaningful use of the words “happiness,” “luck,” and “fortune.” This discussion starts by examining Cræsus’s question to Solon, who is the happiest man on earth, and then continues by analyzing Solon’s reply that a man can only be called happy after his death. Next, it aims to show what is implied and meant in Solon’s obscure reply. As the article explores, it turns out that Solon is talking about the transient fortune (ετυχη) and the permanent fortune (ολβος), measured after the number of fortunate moments in one’s lifespan, and not about the subjective disposition of being happy, as the modern speaker uses this term. At this point, the article offers Aristotle’s reading of Solon and his alternative interpretation of Solon’s concept of happiness. According to Aristotle, happiness is more a matter of character, of quality rather than quantity. The article continues by isolating the term “happiness” from the quantitative

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factor which still plays a role for Aristotle. In conclusion, the article presents a paradox that stems from conceiving happiness as a quantitative matter; that is, that not even death can serve as an ultimate final stage after which we could conclusively declare someone to have been happy or not.

**Keywords:** Aristotle, Solon, Herodotus, happiness, luck, transient fortune, permanent fortune

As an undergraduate student I was struck by Solon's response to the Lydian King Cræsus' question, which asks who is the "happiest man" in the world? Solon contends that in order to state that one is blessed, the individual in question must already be dead, for as long as one is alive, his fortunate condition can change for the worse at any possible moment. Thus Solon tells us that until a man has arrived at the hour of his death, we can, at best, say that he is fortunate.

I first encountered Solon's peculiar reply in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* book 1, where Aristotle painstakingly aims to solve the problem of the "blessed dead." I was a bit uncomfortable with Aristotle's approach to this problem, although I could not identify what exactly made his response awkward. I then encountered the whole story in Herodotus' *Histories*, which Aristotle refers to in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. My reoccurring uneasiness with how to interpret Aristotle's interpretation of the "blessed dead" led me to examine how other scholars treat this text. In researching other responses to the conversation between Solon and Cræsus, I came to the conclusion that not only are Solon's response and Aristotle's argument insufficient in assessing the topic of happiness, but the question itself seems to be completely devoid of meaning. This lack of signification occurs when we translate the term "happiness" into our modern application, namely, as long as we take "happiness" as the sum of lucky moments in one's life rather than a subjective disposition.<sup>1</sup> In addition to my concerns about the question

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<sup>1</sup> David Asheri shows us that "happiness" and "good fortune" both have an innate reference to "luck" in any given case. This, however, does not render the meaning of happiness as a subjective disposition. Asheri explains: "The terms for human well-being that recur in the dialogue are four ολβος, ευτυχη, ευδαιμονη, μακαριζω, but the fundamental distinction is between permanent 'happiness' (ολβος) and transient good luck (ευτυχη), see 32,7. In Herodotus, ολβος can also mean 'wealth' (30,1), and is not associated in any way with spiritual, subjective or mystical happiness, etc., as opposed

itself, I was disappointed by the way other scholars approached the text. Their *accumulative* way to look at happiness was weak and lacked sufficient analysis.<sup>2</sup> They treated the text as if “x” number of happy units (days, minutes, seconds, etc.) have the capacity to make up the concept of complete bliss or happiness. According to this approach to the text, the “fragility of the goodness” stems from the swinging balance between these aforementioned good and bad units. In direct contrast to these scholarly interpretations of the text, I believe that, if we are to render this question to be meaningful in a modern context, we must first identify and flesh out the form and structure of the question put up by Cræsus before we can point our attention to any other aspect of the meaning behind this conversation between the two men. By commencing with an examination of the question, we realize that it can be only about luck and chance; a meditation on happiness is not the purpose of this initial question according to a more thorough examination of what specifically the question is asking.<sup>3</sup> In this analytical approach, we achieve a meaningful distinction between “happiness” and “luck,” but the question

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to the material and objective pleasures of this world. The two terms, *ὀλβος* and *εὐτυχία*, are not mutually exclusive: the ‘lucky’ man can become ‘happy’ if he does not incur misfortune before his life ends in a glorious (Tellus) or a peaceful death (Cleobis and Biton). Both *εὐτυχία* and *ὀλβος* signify the sum of the same series of material goods: good health, good children, good looks, physical strength and a good income. The only significant distinction is that between a temporary state of well-being and a secure, permanent one, immortalized in the memory of future generations.” D. Asheri, A. Lloyd, A. Corcella (2007), *A Commentary on Herodotus, Books I–IV*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 97–98.

<sup>2</sup> For an example of this textual approach, see R. C. Solomon’s (1976), “Is there Happiness after Death?” *Philosophy* 196: 189–193. The common type of argument that states that the value of a series is not simply achieved by going through all of episodes in one’s life succeeds only in ultimately degrading itself to an accumulative discussion. For a further example, see A. Kenny’s (1992) *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 23ff. On page 27, he discusses the strange example of the best breakfast to illustrate his claims. For a further treatment of this matter, see the discussion in N. P. White’s (2006), *A Brief History of Happiness*. Malden: Blackwell, 75–115.

<sup>3</sup> In his masterful study of the text, Christopher Pelling points out the need for indirect language which stems from the uneasiness involved in speaking to a despot with the implicit intention of educating him. Solon’s purpose is to instruct Cræsus about his *ὕβρις* and the dangers caused by it as these factors have the capacity to lead to his destruction. This is the lesson that Cræsus passes forward to Cyrus, who is about to execute him on the pyre. Ch. Pelling (April 2006), “Educating Cræsus—Talking and Learning in Herodotus’ Lydian *Logos*”. *Classical Antiquity* 1: 141–177.

originally posed by Cræsus transpires as a question about two sorts of *objective* fortune—one permanent (ὀλβος) and the other transient (εὐτυχίη), but not about the *subjective* happiness or the individual disposition of being happy.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, we can suggest another context in which the question can be applied to happiness as well, but then we distance too much from the original text. My aim is to avoid conflating the terms of happiness and luck and instead to illuminate what could be the true intent of the question posed by Cræsus, and how it can be understood in a modern context.

In order to detail my proposition, I will start with a critical discussion of Solon's response to Cræsus' question. Then, I will move to a critical discussion of Aristotle's interpretation of this conversation between Solon and Cræsus, concluding with my own interpretation and reading of Solon's answer.

There are two methodological difficulties that I encountered in treating this subject. There is, first of all, the question about the Greek origin of the text and how meaning is dependent on the original text and its subsequent translations. For this purpose, I rely on philological studies of the text. Contrary to the Continental trend that started with Heidegger and was continued in Gadamer, Derrida and Agamben, for example, I do not think that hyperbolized etymological efforts lead to an ameliorated understanding of ancient texts for our modern times.

The second methodological difficulty concerns the *unity* of "happiness." Are we speaking about one united phenomenon when we say "happiness," or rather are we referring to several phenomena? And if it is several phenomena, are they related to each other, and if they are, by what means? A great deal of philosophical literature has been dedicated to the question about the equivocalness and simultaneous precision of Aristotle's use of εὐδαιμονία in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.<sup>5</sup> This difficulty is a serious one, because it

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this article, *objective* means something that is public. *Subjective* means an individual or unshared disposition, such as a headache, happiness, depression, etc.

<sup>5</sup> See A. Kenny, "Happiness". *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*. New Series (1965–1966) 66: 93–102; J. L. Ackrill, "Aristotle on Eudaimonia". In: A. Oksenberg Rorty (ed.). (1980). *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, 15–33; T. H. Irwin, "The Metaphysical and Psychological Basis of Aristotle's Ethics". In: Rorty (1980), 35–53; J. McDowell, "The Role of *Eudaimonia* in Aristotle's Ethics". In: *ibid.*, 359–376.

threatens the validity of any potential interpretation.<sup>6</sup> I believe, however, that it does not undermine the core of my project, which is to shed light on both the meaningful and meaningless uses of “happiness” and “bliss,” even if its subject be a potentially ambiguous one.<sup>7</sup>

## Solon

In the first book of his *Histories*, Herodotus unfolds the story of Crœsus, the King of Lydia. Having lead Solon through his palace’s treasuries, Crœsus asks Solon who is the happiest man he has ever seen, expecting to hear Solon tell him that he himself is the happiest one. Solon, however, turns him down in telling him the story of Tellus, who was far less rich than Crœsus. Tellus was prosperous in his native state, saw his sons and grandsons doing well, and ended his life with a glorious death in the battlefield. In response to Crœsus’ subsequent inquiry about “who is the second happiest man,” Solon tells the story of two brothers, Cloebis and Biton, who were not as rich as Crœsus. They were financially stable and of good health. Both brothers were endowed with bodily strength and gained prizes at the games in which they participated. Solon continues by explaining that at the feast for Hera, their mother had to be brought to the temple by a cart. But because the oxen were nowhere to be found, the brothers put themselves under the yoke and carried their mother to the temple. The crowds accepted them with extol and honor for their devotion. After they sacrificed and feasted in celebration of Hera, they went to sleep in the temple and never woke up, dying in their sleep. Solon concludes that while living, a man can only be said to be fortunate, assuming he has had a prosperous life. Since fortune is as volatile as the crops of any given year, *one can be said to be blessed or happy only after*

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<sup>6</sup> This problematic prompted Kant to remove happiness from the scope of morality, for happiness is an empirical and hence ambiguous concept, while the idea of morality should be conceived a priori. See I. Kant (2008), *Grundlagen zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 49ff.

<sup>7</sup> Related to this topic is the question of whether any feeling following the satisfaction of need, desire, etc. can justly be called happiness. An example of this is the feeling of “happiness” that a drug addict feels immediately following the use of his drug of choice. As Plato sarcastically describes in *Gorgias*: “Tell me now whether a man who has an itch and scratches it and can scratch to his heart’s content, scratch his whole life long, can also live happily” (494d). See N. P. White (2006), *A Brief History of Happiness*. Malden: Blackwell, 9.

*his death*. Hearing Solon's response, Cræsus sent him away as worthless, since he had not declared the King to be the happiest of all men, referencing instead the genuine happiness of men who were not judged according to their material wealth.<sup>8</sup>

Herodotus continues to explain how Cræsus' fortune turned over, beginning with the loss of his son, Atys, at the hand of his guard, Adrastos.<sup>9</sup> Shortly thereafter the ill-fated Cræsus loses his kingdom to Cyrus, the king of Persia and is nearly executed on the pyre.<sup>10</sup> He was saved after he told Cyrus about the response he once received from Solon.<sup>11</sup> Herodotus details that these disasters are Gods' retribution for Cræsus' ridiculous claims that he is the happiest man.<sup>12</sup> At the end of the story of Cræsus, Herodotus confirms his belief in fate and the mythological gods, straying away from a more historical interpretation of the story.

For the modern reader, the first and main concern that arises from Herodotus' description of Cræsus' life stems from the *accumulative* approach toward happiness. Solon explains this through a detailed description of man's lifespan: "The limit of life for a man I lay down at seventy years. These seventy years give twenty-five thousand and two hundred days."<sup>13</sup>

We can of course measure person's lifespan by counting the temporal units of month, day and minute. However, in determining a person's quality of life, the modern reader would never primarily refer to temporal unity to define this person as vicious, happy or extravagant. In order to say, for example, that Orson Welles' career was glamorous one does not need to know how many years he has lived. Furthermore, in saying that his career knew ups and

<sup>8</sup> Herodotus (2004), *The Histories*. Introduction and notes by D. Lateiner. Trans. by G. C Macaulay. New York: Barnes & Noble, §§ 29–33. See Pelling (2006: 146–147): "In telling Cræsus of Tellus and of Cleobis and Biton (1.30–31), Solon deploys a variety of Greek ideals to set against Cræsus' own estimation of himself: values which center on parenthood and children, on a simple sufficiency, on avoiding the disasters which hang over any human, on a good death in the service of one's city (Tellus) or one's family and the gods (Cleobis and Biton), on the desirability of a long and contented life (Tellus) or—not quite so good—of an early death (Cleobis and Biton)."

<sup>9</sup> Herodotus (2004), §§ 34–43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, §§ 46–94.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, § 86.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, § 34.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, § 32.

downs, one does not necessarily feel obliged to count days, months or years in order to determine these fluctuations in his lifespan. The same holds for every *quality*, such as *hubris*: Cræsus being hubristic cannot be traced back to the number of days or years in which he was considered to be arrogant. (All the same, we can still say that in his old age he became humble.)

Similarly, there arises the following question: How many moments of good fortune are required to signify happiness at the time of a person’s death? That is, how could moments of good fortune accumulate in order to indicate happiness? From Herodotus’ text, one gathers that there can never be a complete lifespan, as far as happiness is concerned. As Herodotus puts it: “And Cræsus paid the debt due for the sin of his fifth ancestor, who being one of the spearman of the Heracleidai driven by the treachery of a woman, and having slain his master.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, fate stretches in both directions beyond the lifespan of the individual. To the modern reader, the main difficulty lies in the accumulative approach toward happiness. There is hence need to enhance Solon’s description of happiness.

## Aristotle

Long before modern scholars and readers were concerning themselves with Solon’s response to Cræsus’ question, Aristotle was disquieted by Solon’s accumulative approach to happiness and offered his own alternative. His is only a partial alternative, for in his *Eudemian Ethics*, Aristotle supports Solon’s accumulative approach.<sup>15</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, on the other hand, Aristotle only partly endorses Solon’s accumulative approach as he brings forward his alternative reading of Solon’s description of happiness, which criticizes Solon’s beliefs. Let us begin with his alternative and then see how he wants to integrate Solon’s accumulative approach into this present argument.

For Solon, happiness depends on *external* factors and their constancy during one’s lifespan. External factors immediately yield an impression of fragility, as the individual himself is not in control of the forces that can potentially affect his happiness. Aristotle, conversely, wants to disconnect the concept of happiness as much as possible from external factors, making

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, § 91.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle (1973), *Ethics*. Trans. with introduction J. L Ackrill. London: Farber, 198.

it immune to the shifts of fate and independent of the external factors of wealth, honor and fame.<sup>16</sup> Happiness is willed for its sake, Aristotle claims, and not for the sake of something else. Thus, it is defined as a condition of self-sufficiency.<sup>17</sup> Aristotle explains: “Happiness, then, is something final and self-sufficient, and is the end of action.”<sup>18</sup> Human essence, or reason, is the most independent of and the least threatened by external changes.<sup>19</sup>

Now, in the case that happiness does not consist in contemplative solitude alone—as Aristotle sometimes implies<sup>20</sup>—then reason or state of mind alone is not enough to distinguish between the happy and unhappy man.<sup>21</sup> The most independent and thus stable action turns out to be *virtue*, for virtue is supposed to be done for its own sake, and not for the sake of something else: “For no function of man has so much permanence as virtuous activities.”<sup>22</sup> Hence, “happiness is an activity of the soul in accordance with perfect virtue.”<sup>23</sup>

And yet, being virtuous also implies the external factors of resources, friends, abilities, good physical condition, social surrounding, etc.; in one word—good fortune. This is the *quantitative facet* in Aristotle’s teaching: “... the happy man can never become miserable—though he will not reach *blessedness*, if he meet with fortunes like those of Priam.”<sup>24</sup>

By shifting the emphasis from fate and the quantity of moments of good-fortune to virtue and character, Aristotle succeeds in finding a much

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<sup>16</sup> See Aristotle (1969), *Nicomachean Ethics*. Trans. and introduced by D. Ross. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11f. For this matter see T. H. Irwin. “Permanent Happiness—Aristotle and Solon”. In: N. Sherman (ed.) (1999), *Aristotle’s Ethics—Critical Essays*. USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1–33.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle (1973), 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* From here stems the ambiguity of Aristotle’s concept of happiness, that is, whether it is something completely spiritual—as book 10 and parts of book 1 of the *NE* as well as the *EE* suggest—and can therefore be completely independent, or whether it is rather a matter of virtue and practical attitude, implying its dependency on and reference to material reality and other people.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle (1973), 12ff.

<sup>20</sup> See footnote 18.

<sup>21</sup> Aristotle (1973), 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.



more appropriate and meaningful way to relate to happiness as an example of *quality* rather than *quantity*. “Happiness” is no longer a product of the sum of moments of good fortune. It is rather a matter of *meaning*, a core around which one’s whole life is arranged.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle explains that even in hard times and struggles with life’s misfortunes, “nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.”<sup>26</sup> The happiness of the good man, Aristotle believes, is not made up of “x” fortunate moments in his lifespan, but rather of his character and deeds. Aristotle offers the following explanation:

If activities are, as we said, what determines the character of life, no blessed man can become miserable; for he will never do the acts that are hateful and mean. For the man who is truly good and wise, we think, bears all the chances of life becomingly and always makes the best of circumstances.<sup>27</sup>

Character and meaning cannot be *quantitatively* measured, as Aristotle shows in *NE* book 10, chapter 4. He concludes with the following, explaining how happiness cannot be measured as one would measure time:

... of pleasure the form is complete at any and every time. Considered in simple terms, pleasure and movement must be different from each other, and pleasure must be one of the things that are whole and complete. This would seem to be the case, too, from the fact that it is not possible to move otherwise than in time, but it *is* possible *to be pleased*; for that which takes place in a moment is a whole.<sup>28</sup>

Here Solon’s accumulative approach proves to be completely meaningless, for happiness and pleasure cannot be measured.

Statements of quality such as “I am pleased” or “I am happy” cannot be quantitatively measured, as Aristotle correctly claims, for they are *experienced meaningfully* and not as a sum of attributes. We must still explore whether it makes any sense at all to evoke a third person’s external

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<sup>25</sup> For this matter see Th. Nagel, “Aristotle on Eudaimonia”. In: Rorty (1980), 7–14.

<sup>26</sup> Aristotle (1969), 21.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 255 (emphasis mine).

perspective in order to determine one's personal condition. "To be pleased" looks grammatically similar like "to be pained" or "I have a headache," in that they all refer to one's subjective disposition and *not* to something that can be objectively and publically assessed. I do not learn about my headache, its intensity or its location from somebody else, and neither do I infer it. "I have terrible headache in the left side of my head" means that I am in this condition, I am conditioned by it, I am immersed in it. Could it then make any sense to ask somebody whether I have headache?

As we have just seen, Aristotle claims that pleasure is not something that takes place within a span of time that is measured quantitatively. Would it then make sense to claim that the feeling of happiness *arrives* one second after I am told by, for example, a new age priest that I am the happiest man in the world, or would it be more plausible that he would gradually convince me that I am happier now than I was two weeks ago?

### Critical discussion

We have just seen that Cræsus' question apparently turns out to be meaningless; happiness and pleasure are not *objective* data that we infer from or learn about from a third party, but they are rather *subjective* dispositions. I will now demonstrate to what extent this question can be considered in a wholly logical way. Each one of the following alternatives reformulates the question about happiness and affects the basic presumption of Solon and Aristotle, thus illuminating a new and unique way to present Solon's initial response to the question posed by Cræsus to the modern reader.

Solon and Aristotle agree on three things:

1. They have no contention with Cræsus' question; they do not find it meaningless and instead are willing to treat it as a valid starting point for a discussion on the meaning of happiness.
2. Aristotle (in the *EE* and partly in the *NE*) and Solon agree that luck can be measured or counted.
3. They both share the same contradicting perspectives on life. On the one hand, they consider life to be a whole and complete process; i.e. it begins with one's birth and ends with his death. On the other hand, we have seen Solon claim that Cræsus pays for the sin of his fifth ancestor. Similarly, Aristotle claims: "It would be odd, then, if the dead man were to share in these changes and become at one

time happy, at another wretched; while it would also be odd if the fortunes of the descendants did not for *some time* have *some* effect on the happiness of their ancestors.”<sup>29</sup>

Herodotus’ Solon and Aristotle disagree, however, about the nature of happiness. Solon argues that happiness consists of an “x” number of fortunate events and zero unfortunate events during the whole lifespan. On the contrary, Aristotle claims in the *NE* that happiness is a matter of character which persists continuously throughout hard and misfortunate times, although it is not entirely indifferent to them, as we have seen.

As this article has already suggested, there is normally no purpose in asking somebody else about the state of my own happiness, for it is not a matter we learn of or infer from what somebody else tells us, from external perspective, but rather a condition in which a person finds himself, similar to the physical ailment of a headache or that of depression. There exists, on the other hand, the need to inquire about one’s luck or good fortune, such as if he has just been the recipient of the free trip giveaway that his employer was offering, for example. I can, in other words, collect information about events that have meaning for me.

And yet, when we inquire about happiness in a different context, the question receives a completely separate meaning. We can ask, for example, whether the American people were *happy* under President Bush Jr., *happier* under President Bush Sr., and *happiest* under President Clinton. This formulation obliterates the distinction between luck and happiness. We are no longer considering the state of happiness as it relates to the entire lifespan of the individual, but rather submitting it to the fluctuating and endless change of *luck*. The same question about the level of satisfaction among Americans according to these three presidents could be posed again in the next millennium, and furthermore it could be referred to an infinite number of American presidents and citizens. Now, it is very unlikely, but if this is what Solon implies when referencing the three dead happy people (Tellus, Cloebis and Biton), then their “happiness” can still change along with the context in which they will be considered. This does not seem, however, to be the case based on the limitations that Solon puts on his consideration of the state of happiness, for he states that the person can be *conclusively* called

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 20. Glorious and peaceful deaths are indispensable for what would be dubbed in the ancient times as a “happy life.” See Asheri et al. (2007), 97–98.

“happy” only after he has terminated. Thus, he must have been forced to abandon the question of happiness as a futile and meaningless effort.

Ultimately, the problem is not with the answer, as Aristotle contends, but rather with the question itself. By working out this question as we have done in this article, we realize that we can treat Cræsus’ original question in two ways: We can either pose it in such a way that the distinction between luck and happiness is lost (i.e., both become subjected to fluctuating and endless changes of differing contexts and perspectives), or alternatively, we can declare Cræsus’ question meaningless while still maintaining the distinction between happiness and luck. That is to say, happiness in the principal sense—as a kind of psychical or psycho-physical condition akin to being in the condition of depression, headache, etc.—cannot be learnt or inferred by asking a third party about it, as Cræsus does in posing his question to Solon. Thus, Cræsus’ inquiry cannot refer to the principal sense of “happiness.” On the other hand, in its secondary sense, happiness can be inquired after, as for example when we ask about the “happiness” of the American people under certain presidents. As Asheri demonstrates, Herodotus’ Solon talks here about permanent and transient happiness (ολβος and ευτυχη).<sup>30</sup> This means that the question about the subjective disposition of happiness does not occur here at all. If Asheri is correct, we are still left, however, with the problem of “happiness” being interpreted as either transient or permanent. That is, how could somebody ever be called happy if the context and perspectives are always changing? Happiness as a subjective disposition can serve as a solution to this paradox. But if happiness is more understood in terms of *reputation*, namely, the way a person appears through the eyes of others, it seems that this aforementioned paradox is unavoidable.

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<sup>30</sup> Asheri et al. (2007), 97–98.