EUDAIMONISM: A BRIEF CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

FRITS GÅVERTSSON

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY, LUND UNIVERSITY

Room 312 Kungshuset, Lundagård, 222 22 Lund, SWEDEN

e–mail: frits.gavertsson@fil.lu.se • Phone:+46768482707

The ancient discussion centres on the notion of *eudaimonia* (a compound word comprised of the adjectival prefix *eu* (well; good) and the noun *daimon* (spirit)), which sees widespread usage both in early times and at the height of Athenian influence as well as in later antiquity.

We are here dealing with a semantic field[1] denoting happiness in ancient Greek comprising words such as the central *eudaimonia* (happiness) and its sometime synonym[2] *makarios* (blessed; happy; blissful) as well as *olbios* (blessed; favoured)*, eutychia*[3] (lucky), and the phrase *eu zên* (living well; good life).[4] The Latin literature uses *beatus* (blessed)[5] and, occasionally, *felicitas* (good luck;

---

[1] See de Heer, Cornelius, *Makar, Eudaimon, Olbios, Eutychia: A Study of the Semantic Field Denoting Happiness in Ancient Greek to the End of the Fifth Century B.C.,* Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1969, McMahon, Darrin M, "From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C. – A.D. 1780", *Daedalus* Vol. 133, No. 2, 2004: 5-17, Lauriola, Rosanna, "From eudaimonia to happiness. Overview of the concept of happiness in the ancient Greek culture with at few glimpses on modern time" *Revista Éspaço Acadêmico*, No. 59, 2006. Avaliable online: www.espacoacademico.com.br/059/59esp_lauriola.htm

[2] W. D. Ross argues for a substantial distinction between *eudaimonia* (activity in accordance with virtue) and *makarios* (*eudaimonia* plus the blessings of fortune) in Aristotle (see Ross, W. D., *Aristotle*, London: Methuen & Co., 1923: 192, see also Joachim, H. H., *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951). Martha Nussbaum goes explicitly against Ross's reading by pointing to *NE*1099ᵃ33-ᵇ8 and by citing Kantian influence as an explanation for Ross' (and H. H. Joachim's) *eisegesis* (see Nussbaum, Martha, *the Fragility of Goodness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986: 327ff.). In addition to the reasons provided by Nussbaum one should note (as is done by Irwin, see Irwin, Terence, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics,* 2ⁿᵈ ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1999: 318) that the argument given by Aristotle at *NE*1100ᵇ34-1101ᵃ22 is difficult to follow if the two terms are not meant to be interchangeable. Annas also takes the two to be interchangeable but notes loftier and more stylistic pretentiousness of *makarios* (Annas, Julia, *The Morality of Happiness*: 44). Cf. also Arius 48.6-11. There might however be a *de facto* distinction in Epicurus, whom is more prone to use *makarios* in place of *eudaimonia* (See Annas, Julia, *The Morality of Happiness*. 345n34, which in turn also references Decleva, Caizzi, F., *Felicitá e Immagine del Filosofonel Pensiero Antico,* Cooperativa Universitaria Studio e Lavoro, Universitá degli Studi di Milano, Facoltái Lettre e Filosofia, 1988: 286-288). In the case of Epicurus' *Letter to Menoeceus* 127-130 (LS, 21B) it would seem like a technical distinction is drawn, but on the other hand the terms seem to be used interchangeably at the beginning of the letter (*Letter to Menoeceus* 122, See also Caizzi, Decleva, F. "The Porch and the Garden: Early Hellenistic Images of the Philosophical life" 303-329 in Bulloch, Anthony et al. (eds.) *Images and Ideologies: Self-Definition in the Hellenistic World,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994: 323-326). That the loftier pretentiousness with a more direct connection with the gods gradually takes on a more significant role when it comes to *makarios* in the Hellenistic era is evidenced by the fact that it is this word that is chosen by the translators of the Septuagint for the *Ashrel*, as well as the term used in the Greek original text of the beatitudes (from the Matthean Vulgate Latin section title *Beatitudines*) of Mt. 5:3-11 and Lk. 6:20-22 (if, as I take as probable, they are both stemming from the *Q-source,* and this in turn is a single document written in Greek, the use of a unified terminology could be explained by a common source).

[3] It should be noted that luck (*tuche*) does not imply randomness. It implies causal connections beyond human control; it is, as Nussbaum puts it "what just happens" (Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: 89n*). See also ibid. Ch. 1, and McMahon, Darrin M, "From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C. – A.D. 1780", *Daedalus* Vol. 133, No. 2, 2004, 5-17: 7-8, and idem, *Happiness: A History*, New york: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006: 10-12.

[4] *Eu zên* is used interchangeably with *eudaimonia* in the Hellenistic era. Cf. DL VII. 87-88, see also *NE*1098ᵇ22, *EE*1219ᵇ1, although Sarah Broadie argues that *eu zên* and *eudaimonia* are not true synonyms in Aristotle, see Broadie, Sarah, Commentary to *Aristotle: Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Christopher Rowe, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 286 n.

[5] Cf. Seneca, *De vita beata,* Cicero, *De Fin.* I. 14, TD V. 40, for example.

fortune)[6]. In the Latin Stoic literature *de vita beata* is sharply distinguished from *gaudium* and *laetita* (joy).[7]

A full charting of the conceptual shifts we are here dealing with is an insurmountable task given the scope of the present inquiry, but even if such extensive contextualisation is beyond the scope of our present endeavour we do not have to resort to analysing the philosophic texts that we are here dealing with wholly abstracted from the historical and cultural contexts that ground the discourses that they belong to. The recognition of socio-political changes in the period – such as the establishment of the city-state (*polis*)[8], the development of codes of law[9] and the discovery and spread of an alphabetic system of writing[10], as well as the dramatically increased interaction due to trade, war, colonisation[11], Panhellenic festivals[12] and sanctuaries[13] – are of vital importance in order for us to understand these developments. In addition, the development of systems of coinage—which brought with it the possibility of the conceptualisation of a *universal equivalent*—is obviously of great importance to ancient value theory.[14]

That these developments are gradual cannot be stressed enough. Even if it is nowadays commonplace to detest *the Greek miracle of rationality*-story of 'Ionian Enlightenment' – a miraculous advent of a new 'rational' mode of thinking that is radically different from the otherwise mythic mentality of Greek culture – there still persists a tendency to separate the early Ionian development from the later development regarding the rise of moral philosophy in Athens, for example.[15] It is true that it is possible to distinguish even at an early stage,

---

[6] Cf. Seneca *Ep.* 76.10, for example.

[7] Cf. Seneca, *De vita beata* 15.2, Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes* IV. 13. See Miller, John, "A Distinction Regarding Happiness in Ancient Philosophy", 595-624 in *Social Research* Vol. 77 No. 2, 2010 for some insightful but brief remarks concerning the Latin terminology.

[8] Scholars influenced by the structuralist anthropology of Claude Levi-Strauss such as Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant focused almost exclusively on this aspect. Vernant, for example, claims that "If we wish to document the birth of this Greek rationality, […] we must compare it and contrast with its Mycenaean background, that turning-point, from the eight to the seventh century, where Greece made a new start and began to explore paths that were peculiarly its own: a period of decisive mutation that laid the foundations for the government of the *polis* […] which ensured the advent of philosophy by secularising political thought." Vernant, Jean-Pierre, *The Origins of Greek Thought*, New York: Cornell University Press, 1982: 11. For a more nuanced argument following the same lines see Lloyd, G. E. R., *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science*: 78-83.

[9] See Lloyd, G. E. R., *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science*: 78ff. See also *Laws* 758a-d for a conservative strain. Aristotle, by contrast, recognises the need for revision as at *Politics* 1269a1-9.

[10] The intricacies of this development, such as the role of tablets, mathematical systems of notation, and the possibility of both hindrance and incitement for rational critical scrutiny, is briefly but insightfully discussed in Lloyd, G. E. R., *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science*: 70-78.

[11] As among others Rosalind Thomas points out, we must be wary of modern Athenocentrism, which sees Athens as not only the foremost cultural centre (which it most certainly was) but in addition seriously underestimates the importance of east Greece. We should acknowledge that the tradition of Ionian natural philosophy still thrives in the latter half of the fifth century as the home of Hippocratic medicine and origin of many of the famous sophists, even though these areas seems to have been politically, culturally and economically dependent upon Athens. See Thomas, Rosalind, *Herodotous in Context*: 9-16. For an account of how such Athenocentric explanations have penetrated the study of Greek sculpture see Sismondo Ridgway, Brunhilde "The Study of Greek Sculpture in the Twenty-first Century", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 149, No. 1, 2005: 63-71.

[12] Although they are not to be regarded as historic accounts, the Platonic dialogues that feature the visit of traveling thinkers to Athens for such an occasion must have had at least some credibility and thus testify to the mobility of the times. See *Parmenides* 127b, for example.

[13] This list is taken from Wilson Nightingale, Andrea, "The Philosophers in Archaic Greek Culture", 169-198 in Shapiro, H. A. (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: 171-172.

[14] See Wilson Nightingale, Andrea, "The Philosophers in Archaic Greek Culture": 172. The coin-metaphor and ideas connected with it has obviously had an enormous influence on western thought and examples abound throughout the period here concerned: The character Creon in the *Antigone* frequently employs financial imagery and Cicero uses it to make a point about Stoic value theory (*De Fin.* III 44-45), for example.

[15] One classic example when it comes to the earliest developments of philosophical thought is John Burnet's *Early*

geographically and dialectically, movements such as Ionian cosmologists, Pythagoreans, Eleatics, Atomists, and Sophists that pave the way for the organised schools of the Hellenistic era. It is also possible to discern a wide variety of shifting interests and methodological approaches, and such categorizations can, at times, be very helpful. It is still the case however, in the words of A. A. Long, that "[i]n order to interpret the work of any early Greek philosopher, reference to the whole period is indispensable".[16] Due to this complexity I have chosen to present the different factors here accounted for semi-thematically rather than strictly chronologically even though I realise that this potentially creates some confusion with regards to the chronology of events portrayed.

It is important to take the role played by the intellectual into account in this narrative. Developments from a wide range of (what we today would regard as distinct) disciplines interconnect with, and influence, each other[17] and it is telling, with regard to this, that the application of the term *sophos* (wise man; sage) in the seventh through fifth centuries BCE had an enormous range without picking out a particular kind or area of expertise or wisdom.[18] The application of the term did however provide a forum of contestation between different fields of expertise[19], and the applications of the term to poets along with statesmen seem to have been especially prominent.[20] It has even been suggested that it is the plasticity of this term that provides the conceptual space for the eventual development of philosophic thought as a form of expertise leading to the formation of philosophy as a specialised discipline of human enquiry starting with the early cosmologists.[21] The term *sophoi* thus appears to have been highly contested.

Greek Philosophy (London: A & C Black, 1910), where Archaic philosophy is characterised as a miracle of transcendence over culture.

[16] Long, A. A., "Introduction", 1-21 in Long, A. A., *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 2.

[17] For an example of how the concept of causality gradually develops within philosophy, history and medicine see Vegetti, Mario, "Culpability, responsibility, cause: Philosophy, historiography, and medicine in the fifth century" in Long, A. A. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 271-289.

[18] Wilson Nightingale, Andrea, "The Philosophers in Archaic Greek Culture": 173. See Also Lloyd, G. E. R., *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989: 83ff. where Lloyd notes "[f]rom the seventh century onwards, many different kinds of leader gained a reputation for *sophia* in general. They included seers, holy men, wonder-workers. Men such as Epimenides, Aristeas, Hermotimus, were consulted in crises or disasters, plagues or pollutions, which shows how wise men may be not just spokesmen of traditional lore but called in where that knowledge faces an impasse — though, to be sure, in offering a way forward any wise man may represent himself as the true exponent of tradition as much as the mediator of knowledge that goes beyond the common store. But already in the sixth century the variety of [*sophoi*] is considerable" (Ibid. 83-84).

[19] Cf. Xenophanes *fr.* 2, where Xenophanes complains about the undeserving praise placed upon athletes in comparison to his own efforts: "[A]lthough he [a skilled horseman] is not as deserving as I. For my expertise (*sophia*) is better that the strength of men or horses. But this custom is quite irrational and it is not right to give strength precedence over good expertise." (Trans. Douglas E. Gerber, Loeb Classical Library)

[20] Lloyd, G. E. R., *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science*: 86n128 provides a list of examples.

[21] See Lloyd, G. E. R., *The revolutions of wisdom: studies in the claims and practice of ancient Greek science*: 87. It is also telling, argues Andrea Wilson Nightingale (Wilson Nightingale, Andrea, "The Philosophers in Archaic Greek Culture": 174-175) that the picture we get of Thales of Miletus if we consider sources other than Aristotle (who, even though he mentions an episode involving entrepreneurial cunning on Thales' behalf (*Politics* 1259a) places great emphasis on the identification of the *arche* with water) such as Herodotus (I.74-75; 170) and Diogenes Laertius (DL I.25) is one of a *Sophos* with diverse practical and theoretical insights rather than a specialised philosopher. The difficulty in placing Herodotus' *Histories* within any more or less specific genre might be another case in point. For an argument to the effect that Herodotus is to be regarded as a *Sophos* in this sense see Fowler, Robert L., "Herodotus and his contemporaries", *Journal of Hellenistic Studies* Vol. 116 (1996): 62-87. It has even been suggested (Hartog, François, *The Mirror of Herodotus. The Representation of the Other in the writing of History*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988: 361) that Herodotus occupied a position halfway between the sophist and the *rhapsode* (professional performer of epic poetry).

The facts that the demarcation lines between different *technai* (crafts; arts; sciences)[22] where muddled in the early stages of this development and only started to emerge more firmly in the late fifth century[23] must, I think, be seen in connection to the debate over the application of the term *sophoi.* This debate over the role of the intellectual, at least in part, initiates the debate over what constitutes a *techne. Techne,* together with the closely related notion of *episteme* (science; knowledge; scientific knowledge)[24], as distinguished from mere *doxa* (belief), seems to have had a scope of application that matched *sophoi.* Eventually these terms were provided with more or less formalized requirements for their application.[25] Four features of *techne* are stressed: universality (a person of *techne* has the ability of making a systematic unity of seemingly disparate elements); teachability (the universality of a *techne* makes it possible to teach); precision (*techne* brings precision (*akribeia*), often in the form of a measurement or standard), and; concern with explanation.[26]

The notion of *techne* becomes important for our present undertaking not only through the role of the intellectual but also because moral philosopher's in the Socratic tradition puts forward what has been called "the skill-model of virtue".[27] According to this model virtue is a form of, or is at least structurally similar to, practical skill(s). This makes moral philosophy a teachable discipline of human inquiry, thereby making moral philosophers capable of claiming the title of *sophoi.*[28]

The notion of *techne* continues to have a profound impact on this development well into the Hellenistic era as well as in later Roman developments both in medicine and philosophy and the two *technai* are often seen as treating body and soul respectively.[29] As such philosophy becomes the soul's art of life (*techne biou*) which ultimate aim (*telos*) is the attainment of *eudaimonia.*[30] The analogy between philosophy and medicine is, in Nussbaum's words, not simply a "decorative

---

22 The Greek word is more inclusive than the English words here suggested and examples include both house building and flute playing as well as mathematics.

23 See Wilson Nightingale, Andrea, "The Philosophers in Archaic Greek Culture": 174, Thomas, Rosalind, *Herodotus in Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000: esp. 153-161, Nussbaum, Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness*: 94ff.

24 There would appear to be no general or systematic distinction at least through Plato's time and the terms are used interchangeably even in some of Aristotle's writings (Cf. *Metaphysics* I, but see also *NE*1140^{b}2ff). For an informative discussion with additional references see Nussbaum, Martha, C., *The fragility of goodness*: 94.

25 The intricacies of this development are much discussed in the literature and it seems as if the earliest discussions are to be found in medical writers of the period (as shown by the earlier treatises of the Hippocratic corpus, probably to be dated late in the fifth century, where we find arguments to the effect that medicine is to be considered a *techne*). To be sure, larger societal changes play a role here. Nussbaum suggests, in line with her overall interpretation, that the newfound hope of overcoming the "ungoverned contingencies" of luck through progress finds an expression in a *tuche/techne* dichotomy and accompanying narrative. (Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: 89).

26 This list is taken from Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: 95-96, whom in turn builds upon the works of E. R. Dodds, W. K. C. Guthrie L. Edelstein, and R. Sachaerer among others (see (Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: 89n2 for a full list of references). For a narrower account that takes *techne* to include an external and individually specifiable end or product as part of the notion (much like the English 'craft'), see Irwin, Terence, *Plato's Moral Theory,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977: esp. 73-74, See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Translated with Introduction, Notes, and Glossary, by Terence Irwin, 2ed. Hackett, 1999: 321). For Nussbaum's critique of Irwin's proposal see Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: 97ff.

27 For an influential attempt at a recovery of this ancient idea see Annas, Julia, "Virtue as a skill", *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2: 227-243.

28 The most obvious example is of course the *Protagoras.*

29 Cf. Sextus Empiricus *Adversus mathematicos (Against the Professors)* 11.169=Us. 219 for a concise epicurean statement of the general formula. Chrysippus explicitly makes the connection between medicine and philosophy (Cf. Galen, *De Placitis Hippocratis et Platonis (On the Views of Hippocrates and Plato)* 5.2.22, 298D=SVF III.471), as does Cicero in *The Tuscalan Disputations* 3.6, for example.

30 This view of philosophy's role in life is common to all the major philosophical schools both in the Hellenistic era and during Roman times. An exception can be found in the Skeptics, who, strictly speaking, denies that pilosophy can be a *techne biou.* For more on this see Nussbaum, Martha, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton University Press, 1994:14n3, Ch. 8.

metaphor; it is an important tool both of discovery and of justification"[31] and much of the debate between different schools is best understood through the frameworks established by the common acceptance of this analogy.

That poets seem to have held a prominent placing among the *sophoi* gives us reason to place special emphasis on the connections that exists between literature, in particular poetry and tragic dramas, and the new forms of philosophical writing that emerges with the increasing specification of different sub-fields of inquiry. Before Plato's time distinctions between philosophical and literary texts concerned with ethical issues as well as distinctions between writers to be regarded as serious ethical writers and others were alien to the Greeks.[32] Herodotus and Thucydides touched upon ethical matters such as value and virtue.[33] In a similar manner The Hippocratic corpus contains ethical discussions. Democritus was often seen as a pioneer with regards to eudaimonistic ethical theory in the Hellenistic era. From a modern perspective we are faced with the scarcity of material as well as doubts about the authenticity of fragments[34], and it is uncertain whether this picture of Democritus as advancing a primitive form of eudaimonistic ethics holds any truth or whether it is the result of anachronistic readings of later thinkers[35], however it has been argued by some scholars that Strobaeus (some 700 years later than Democritus), or his source, seem to be using an anthology of poetry for his collection of Democritean sayings.[36] And, as Nussbaum points out:

> "[I]n a very revealing conflation of genres that a modern reader would usually keep far apart, [Heraclitus] writes' information about many things does not teach understanding; if it did, it would have taught Hesiod and Pythagoras, and also Xenophanes and Hecataeus' (B40). In our terms, he has named a didactic poet, a seer and an oral philosopher, a philosopher who wrote in verse, and a writer of prose geographical and ethnographical treatises; the interesting fact is that they are criticized together (by this aphoristic writer) as searchers for understanding."[37]

Such dynamic spread of interest is exactly what we should expect from scholars working in disciplines in formation. There are proto-ethical debates occurring in a range of sources but there is, I think, a good case to be made for the thesis that it is to a large extent from, and in opposition to literature that specifically philosophical modes of writing arises.

This more general thesis (concerned with philosophical modes of writing as such and not just with ethical inquiry) has been forcefully argued for by Martha C. Nussbaum. Nussbaum argues that the dialogue form constitutes a new form of writing[38], sprung from poetry and dramas together with Socrates' famous refusal to write due to his belief that the real value of philosophical investigation can only be arrived at via the interaction of student and pupil.

---

[31] Nussbaum, Martha, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*: 14.

[32] Nussbaum, Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*: 123.

[33] Herodotus is one of the earliest writers to use the term *elenchus* in the context of an epistemic debate. (Herodotos, *Histories* II 23-24). See also Lloyd, G. E. R., *Magic Reason and Experience. Studies in the Origin and Development of Greek Science*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979: 253, and Thomas, Rosalind, *Herodotus in Context*: 168; Ch. 6. For a discussion concerning how this relates to other early uses such as the ones to be found in Pindar (*Olympian* 4.22; *Nemean* 8.21) see Thomas, Rosalind, *Herodotus in Context*: 208.

[34] Diels, in FVS 2.154, notes: "Die inhaltliche Prüfung der Demokratessammlung gestattet weder alles kritiklos für echt noch alles für unecht zu halten."

[35] See Striker, Gisela, "*Ataraxia:* Happiness as Tranquillity", *The Monist* Vol. 73 No. 1, 1991 pp. 97-99: 98, and, Sidgwick, Henry, *Outlines of the history of ethics for English readers,* London: Maximilian, 1885: xviii.)

[36] See Stewart, Zeph, "Democritus and the Cynics", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, Vol. 63, 1958: 179-191. It could even be that the doubts concerning the authenticity of some fragments are due to the usage of these sayings made by later philosophers, Cynics in particular, prompted revisions of the originally poetic language to fit new philosophical modes of writing.

[37] Nussbaum, Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*: 123.

[38] Nussbaum, Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy*: 122. Note, as Nussbaum also does, that even Aristotle is at a loss when it comes to categorizing this form of literary expression (Cf. *Poet* 1447b9-11).

In the Archaic and Classical periods developments can, somewhat crudely, be said to rest more prominently upon the sacral connotations of the concepts involved than does later philosophical developments in the Hellenistic era. If the poetic literature is taken into regard it becomes even more evident that *eudaimonia* is something of a plaything of the gods. In the hands of the poets and playwrights, especially in tragedy, it becomes from the perspective of mortals a state that is dependent upon fortune and change.[39]

There are shifts occurring even in earlier times that pertain to *eudaimonia* and its cognates and related terms, and we must be aware of the complexities involved in the choice of words. Consider the following quote from the very ending of Hesiod's *Works and Days,* which is the first time it is employed in the extant literature:

> That man is happy (*eudaimon*) and lucky (*olbios*) in them who knows all these things and does his work without offending the deathless gods, who discerns the omens of the birds and avoids transgressions.[40]

Granted, as Anna Nilsson points out, this passage is obscure when it comes to both the relation between "*olbios*" and "*eudaimonia*" as well as their dependence upon "the deathless gods".[41] Nevertheless, Nilsson continues, we can here discern a cluster of closely related terms[42] and it is clear that the word *eudaimonia* emerges as a central term as early as in the time of Herodotus.[43] Darrin M. McMahon argues that given the etymology of *eudaimonia* the sacral dependence is evident in the pre-Socratic world:

> In colloquial terms, to be *eudaimon* was to be lucky, for in a world fraught with constant upheaval, uncertainty, and privation, to have a good spirit working on one's behalf was the ultimate mark of good fortune. Even more it was a mark of divine favour, for the gods, it was believed, worked through the *daimones*, emissaries and conductors of their will.[44]

From a mortal perspective, McMahon argues, these workings of divine powers and their emissaries could only appear as random events, something that is expressed through the close links that exists etymologically between happiness and luck in Indo-European languages as they developed in the Middle-ages and early Renaissance.[45] Thus McMahon argues, "[h]appiness, in a word, is what *happens* to us."[46] That this aspect of *eudaimonia* is of vital importance is clear but I do believe that this picture is a little too simple. We must not forget that we are dealing with source material from primarily poetic expressions subject to their own literary conventions. Happiness must in this context be seen as part of a series of interrelated concepts that features prominently

---

[39] Cf. Pindar, *Pythian* 3. 84-89, Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, 1528-30 Euripides, *Medea* 1228-1230. See also Lauriola, Rosanna, "From eudaimonia to happiness. Overview of the concept of happiness in the ancient Greek culture with at few glimpses on modern time".

[40] Hesiod, *Works and Days* 826-828. (trans. Hugh G. Ewelyn-White, Loeb Classical Library). Note that the translation of *olbios* as lucky is somewhat odd.

[41] Nilsson, Anna, *Lyckans betydelse: sekularisering, sensibilisering och individualisering i svenska skillingtryck 1750-1850*, Agerings bokförlag, 2012: 14.

[42] Ibid. 14.

[43] Herodotus' usage of terms belonging to this semantic field is treated in McMahon, Darrin, M., *Happiness: A History*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006: 1-9.

[44] McMahon, Darrin M, "From the happiness of virtue to the virtue of happiness: 400 B.C. – A.D. 1780": 7.

[45] The early Middle English *happ* which means chance or fortune forms the root of 'happiness', the Middle High German *Glück* is still the German word for happiness, The old French *heur* is the root of *bonheur*, the Spanish *felicidad,* the Italian *felicitá* and the Portuguese *felicidade* are all derived from the Latin *felix* (luck). A notable exception is Welsh where the word used initially meant wise. Other related words have gone through more considerable changes in some languages. The modern English 'silly', from the Old English *gesælig* (happy; related to *sæl* (happiness), from West Germanic *sæligas*) shifts from "blessed" to "pious," to "innocent" (c.1200), to "harmless," to "pitiable" (late 13th century), to "weak" (c.1300), to "feeble in mind, lacking in reason, foolish" (1570s). By contrast, the Swedish *salig* still means 'blessed' or 'blissful' and is the word standardly used in translations of the beatitudes.

[46] Ibid. 7-8.

in Athenian tragedy and Archaic Greek poetry organized into a schema: the "tragic formula" (sometimes seen as an archaic Greek predecessor to the Aristotelian notion of tragic reversal (*peripeteia*))[47]. The formula is comprised of four stages, each signified by a term, that should not be read as a linear series of events but rather as a set of linked states, each implied by the other. The four stages are: i) *koros* (excess), excessive wealth, power, good fortune, etc. that can breed; ii) *hubris*[48] (arrogance), errant disregard for another resulting in (violent) action, which comes with; iii) *ate* (delusion), the delusion that come over the wrongdoer in acting in a way that leads to ruin, and; iv) *dike*, (justice) the higher order that corrects the wrongdoing, the punishment. The formula is beautifully distilled in the following quote from Solon:

> For excess (*koros*) breeds insolence (*hubris*), whenever great prosperity follows those men who are not sound of mind.[49]

In light of this we can see that to portray the ancient understanding of happiness prior to the rise of *eudaimonia* as a philosophical term of art (see below) as a form of luck solely in the hands of erratic divine powers would be a simplification since at least part of what leads to the agent's ruin is within her control. In Rosanna Lauriola's words: "a certain degree of human participation and responsibility at least in being able to keep whatever happiness has been granted is contemplated in the ancient mode of thought."[50] The reactions to abundance of good fortune, the *hubris* and the violent and unjustified acts that it gives rise to thus seem to be, in an important sense, up to the agent. The link to the supra-human is still with us here however since the primary virtue that enables the keeping of the happiness (or at least not actively determining the loss thereof) granted by divine powers is reverence (*eusebeia*) towards the gods. This should not be taken as lacking in ethical significance since *eusebeia* carries with it, by extension, respect and reverence for elders, rulers, and conventions, as well as responsibility on behalf of the agent since it is also connected, in an important sense, to wisdom (*phronesis*) and self-constraint (*sophrosyne*).

Even if human action plays a part in happiness it is still subject of the vicissitudes of luck (*eutyche*). In light of this the most that we can hope for is periods of fleeting prosperity (*olbos*). True happiness (*eudaimonia*) can only be ascribed to someone *post-mortem*, when one is no longer vulnerable to the changes of fortune. It is this line of thought that underlies the following quote from Euripides *Medea,* which also illustrates the close connections of the concepts involved*:*

> In wit most keen of men, most subtle of speech,
> Even these pay heaviest penalty of all;
> For among mortals happy (*eudaimon*) man is none.
> In fortune's (*eutyches*) flood-tide might a man become
> More prosperous (*olbos*) than his neighbour: happy (*eudaimon*)? No![51]

Another example comes from Herodotus *Histories*, where Solon, answering Croesus' inquiry, claims that no man can be called *eudaimon* whilst alive since:

> We must look to the conclusion of every matter, and see how it shall end, for there are many to whom heaven has given a vision of blessedness, and yet afterwards brought them to utter ruin. [52]

---

[47] *Poet* 1452ᵃ21ff.

[48] In Plato, at times, *hubris* is also linked to *mania*. See *Republic* 400ᵇ2, *Cratylus* 404ᵃ4, Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: 204f.

[49] Solon *fr*. 6, 4-5. (trans. Douglas E. Gerber, Loeb Classical Library).

[50] Lauriola, Rosanna, "From eudaimonia to happiness. Overview of the concept of happiness in the ancient Greek culture with at few glimpses on modern time".

[51] Euripides, *Medea* 1226-1230. (trans. Arthur S. Way, Loeb Classical Library).

[52] Herodotus *Histories* I 29-33 (trans. A. D. Godley, Loeb Classical Library, [1920] 1975). It is also interesting to note that Solon's emphasis on longevity and stability stands in sharp contrast with the choice ultimately made by Achilles (Homer *Il*. 9.410-416; 18.95-106), which highlights another tension in the ancient conception of happiness. For more on this see also Irwin, Terence, *Plato's Ethics*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995:32-33.

Thus the bulk of the words denoting happiness in ancient Greek were in general applied to a whole life. This is perhaps most obvious when it comes to *eu zên* but it goes equally for *eudaimonia* and *makarios*.

On a general level I agree with Martha C. Nussbaum's[53] characterisation of the developments pertaining to luck as being possible to schematize as a movement from a strong insistence upon the irreducible role played by luck in fifth century tragedy and poetry followed by Socrates' and Plato's attempts to present an account of happiness that is immune to such influences followed by Aristotle's return to some of the insights of the earlier dramatists and poets[54], which is again reacted against, we should a further dialectical step in the Hellenistic era constituted by the Stoics return to Plato's insistence on self-sufficiency in contrast to the Aristotelian conception.

As Nussbaum points out[55], this schematized picture need to be nuanced due to the fact that the relevant works in virtue of their dialectical nature contain several positions on the issues involved, thereby complicating the picture.[56] Furthermore, Plato's position is not uniformly presented nor necessary coherent if the entire corpus is to be taken into account.

In light of the above we can see that Lauriola has some credence in concluding that the ancient conception of happiness exhibits three features, namely being a) a condition dependent upon a favourable disposition of a *daimon*, b) a condition subject to fortune and chance, and c) a condition reliant on good sense on behalf of the agent.[57] The lack of such good sense and the disaster that follows in its wake is a frequent theme of ancient poetry and drama. The exode of Sophocles' *Antigone* tells us:

> Good sense (*phronein*) is by far the chief part of happiness (*eudaimonia*); and we must not be impious towards the gods. The great words of boasters are always punished with great blows, and as they grow old teach them wisdom (*phronein*).[58]

The *Antigone* has been read as exhibiting in its major conflict the tension between the traditional, pre-Socratic, reverence of the gods, nature and law exhibited by Antigone and Creon's[59] embrace of Sophistic doctrines such as man's conquest of nature and its severance from law. While it is nowadays[60] rather uncontroversial to claim that Sophocles, like Pindar, and possibly even

---

[53] Nussbaum Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness*: 8-9. I do in no way mean to suggest that Nussbaum is in any way insensitive to the intricacies hiding behind this schematization.

[54] The fifth century conception of happiness as an end of life evaluation is echoed in the *NE* where Aristotle asserts that "Happiness requires both complete virtue and complete life" since "life includes many reversals of fortune, good and bad, and the most prosperous person may fall into terrible disaster in old age, as the Trojan stories tell us about Priam. If someone has suffered these sorts of misfortunes and comes to a miserable end, no one counts him happy." (*NE*1100ª5-10; For the whole passage dealing with these issues see *NE*1099ᵇ9-1101ᵇ10) Aristotle then goes on to explicitly address and expand upon Solon's line of thought in his famous account of post-mortem effects on happiness (*NE*1101ª-1101ᵇ9).

[55] Nussbaum Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness*: 8.

[56] Ancient tragedies characteristically expose both ambitions of transcendence as well as subsequent downfall whereas Plato's dialogues focus on a conflict of positions and Aristotle's methodology similarly starts by cataloguing conflicting positions. See also Nussbaum Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness*: 8. Nussbaum here also brings attention to conflicts within the Platonic corpus.

[57] Lauriola, Rosanna, "From eudaimonia to happiness. Overview of the concept of happiness in the ancient Greek culture with at few glimpses on modern time".

[58] Sophocles, *Antigone* 1348-53. (trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Loeb Classical Library).

[59] The names of the characters have an almost Brontëesque significance. Creon means 'ruler' as he is the ruler of Thebes, but perhaps also perceives himself as ruling over nature.

[60] For a different understanding that places Sophocles as "the last great exponent of the archaic world-view" (Dodds, E. R., *The Greeks and the Irrational*, Berkeley: University of California Press, [1951] 2007: 49) see e. g. Dodds, E. R., *The Greeks and the Irrational,* Nestle, Wilhelm, "Sophokles und die Sophistik", *Classical Philology* Vol. 5 No. 2, 1910: 129-157. For an extensive bibliography of scholars holding this "classical" view see Rose, Peter W., "Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and the teachings of the Sophists", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology,* Vol. 80, 1976: 49-105n3. Rose sets the tone of much modern scholarship by acknowledging the positive treatment of Sophistic

Aeschylus[61], seem to have been rather prone to incorporate new intellectual developments into his work, the precise nature of sophistic as well as pre-Socratic influences upon Sophocles is a matter of continuing debate among scholars. Regardless of the finer points of this debate the Sophists in their discussions of laws and conventions (*nomos*) and their relation to nature can be seen as the real originators of systematic Greek ethics and the *Antigone* is thus in position of providing us with valuable insights.

Read as such the play becomes important to our understanding of the development of Greek though in general and moral philosophy in particular. The *Antigone* is also of special interest to our present concerns since it is a play in which, it has been argued, a main theme is practical deliberation and as such it highlights a connection between the ancient conception of happiness with what is to develop into a central idea behind the eudaimonist project: what Julia Annas has called "the entry point of ethical reflection".[62] According to a by now classic reading of the play by Martha C. Nussbaum from her *The fragility of goodness: Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* that differs significantly from the classical reading summarised above but not obviously in conflict with it, the uncertainty that plagues human existence that was outlined above prompts attempts to be made to minimize the possibility of conflict.[63] Even if unforeseen catastrophes such as the ones that befall Agamemnon and Eteocles[64] cannot be guarded against then at least one can presumably organize one's life and commitments in such a fashion as to steer clear of serious conflict by simplifying the structure of one's value-commitments.[65] This is done by Creon in the *Antigone*. Nussbaum comments upon Creon's strategy as follows:

> The recalcitrant features of the world can be mastered by practical ethical rationality itself: by a constructive rearrangement of practical attachments and ethical language. Creon cleverly effects this adjustment by using the city itself as a standard of the good.
>
> What would it take to make such a strategy work? First, the final good must itself be single or simple: it must not contain conflicts or oppositions within itself. If oppositions between conflicting claims are present within the welfare of the city, properly conceived, then Creon's strategy will have solved nothing. Second, the end must genuinely offer a common coin to which all of the agent's actual interests and values can be reduced. There must be nothing that he sees or loves that cannot be regarded as a function of it, *cashed out* (to use Creon's financial imagery) in terms of it. The end must be protean enough to turn up in everything of value, in such a way that it can plausibly be regarded as the only source of that value. And yet it must be one thing in all the many cases, generating no internal conflicts. (The Socrates of the *Protagoras* will suggest that the parts of virtue are like the parts of gold: qualitatively homogenous, a single common coin of value.)[66]

thought in the *Philocletes*.

[61] See Rösler, Wolfgang, *Reflexe vorsokratischen Denkens bei Aischylos,* Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1970. As is pointed out by Megan Jennell Arp (in her Dissertation in Classics from the University of Pensylvania, *Pre-Socratic thought in Sophoclean tragedy,* 2006) this reading challenges the conventional picture of Aeschylus as presented by Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, where Aeschylus is depicted as a stark traditionalist. In comparison with Sophocles, however, the amount of allusions made to pre-Socratic thought is much more limited in Aeschylus.

[62] Annas, Julia, *The Morality of Happiness,* p. 27ff, Ead., *Intelligent Virtue,* Ch.8.

[63] Nussbaum's reading of the play thus bears a resemblance to Hegel's. According to Hegel's reading of tragedy the hardships faced by the tragic hero is a means to reconciling conflicting moral claims. Hegel's account of Greek tragedy holds that the true conflict is not between 'good' and 'evil' but rather between goods that make too exclusive claims. By adhering to a one-sided ethical system and letting it be the basis of their personal identity the heroes must by necessity come into conflict with the claims of others, thereby initiating the plot and its eventual catharsis – the reconciliation. Hegel's reading contrasts sharply with Aristotle's: If Aristotle holds that tragic actors should follow a middle path, then Hegel has them too preoccupied and entangled with a particular good to be able to face the world and survive. On Hegel's picture, then, it is not a tragic flaw of the hero or external circumstances that provides his or her undoing but rather the one-sidedness of their world-view which, taken in isolation, is justified. For Nussbaum's own view's on her relationship to Hegel see Nussbaum, Martha C., *The fragility of goodness*: Ch. III, where she makes continuous remarks concerning Hegel's reading of the play.

[64] The examples are Nussbaum's own. For her reading of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and *Seven against Thebes* see her *The fragility of goodness*: 25-50.

[65] Ibid. 51.

[66] Nussbaum Martha C., *The Fragility of goodness*: 60.