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## Herodotus and the Vulnerability Ethic in Ancient Greece

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HERODOTUS WAS a narrative pioneer, and his literary trek begins with the story of Croesus. More legend than history, the Croesus Logos, as it's sometimes called in the literature, draws the reader in with its concentrated drama of family ambition, riddling oracles, prophetic irony, and the fated tumble of its hero.

The aim of my essay is to explore some important dimensions of this story that have been overlooked in Herodotean scholarship and in prevailing accounts of Greek ethical thought. First, the story of Croesus gives shape and dramatic form to an ethic of vulnerability occupying an important place in Greek thought. A chief point of reference in this consideration of the vulnerability ethic will be, in a rather full discussion, Aristotle's own reaction to the Croesus story in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. Aristotle's complex, perhaps inconsistent, discussion of a core maxim from the story reveals a real ambivalence about its ethical message.

Since this message from the Croesus story has much in common with the message of tragedy, Aristotle's ambivalence also has relevance for his famous definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*, and in general expresses more resistance towards the message of tragic vulnerability than Martha Nussbaum allows in her portrayal of an Aristotle who recognizes the fragility of goodness.

There is also an important dimension to Solon's (or rather Herodotus') vulnerability ethic that Aristotle does not consider, since it lies outside the scope of the ethical life as he conceives it.

Lastly, I will argue that Homer's *Odyssey* presents an earlier version of a vulnerability ethic similar to that in



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Herodotus, an ethic that respects the beggar, coexisting with and supplementing the competitive ethic that Adkins and others, following Nietzsche, have misleadingly depicted as the sole and sovereign ethic of the land.<sup>1</sup>

Since Herodotus' achievement, however, is due in large part to the literary and dramatic virtues of the Croesus story, I begin by reviewing some of these literary qualities, in the process of preparing the basis for the discussion of the vulnerability ethic that follows. My discussion assumes a familiarity with the story; those readers not familiar with the basics of this tale may wish to consult my own translation of it online (edited of digressions), where the original Greek text can also be found.<sup>2</sup>

## THE CROESUS STORY AS IMAGINATIVE LITERATURE

GREEK AUTHORS did not typically give their works titles, and Herodotus' monumental narrative organized by the conflict between East and West is no exception. The titles of English translations—most often *The Histories* or *The Persian Wars*—assign the work, as do modern curricula, to the genre of history. This is perhaps as good as any genre by which to categorize it, but this should not blind us to the fluid, novel, and uncategorical qualities of the work. Herodotus' subsequent reputation as the “Father of History” encourages a similar interpretative constraint, placing him in a genre that developed after him and setting the standards by which he is commonly judged and interpreted. In an influential and oft-cited passage from the *Poetics*, for instance, Aristotle distinguishes the genres of philosophy, history, and poetry, and provides a good example of the misreadings that can occur under the influence of a retroactive imposition of genre:

The historian and the poet differ not by the presence or absence of verse in their writing (you could put the work of Herodotus into verse and it would still be a type of history, regardless of whether it was written in meter or not). The real distinction is this, that the

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one writes about what *has* happened, and the about what *would* happen. This makes poetry more philosophical and profound than history, since poetry deals with universals and history deals with particulars.

(*Poetics* 9, trans. by author)

Herodotus can't win. Later writers would criticize Herodotus for his inaccuracy—Plutarch for instance calls him the Father of Lies, and Thucydides specifically distinguishes his own scrupulous concern for accuracy from Herodotus' retailing of entertaining myth—but here Herodotus gets it from the other side of the street: Aristotle finds him lacking philosophical depth because his narrative sticks to the particulars. But despite Herodotus' frequent attention to detail and his efforts to sift through differing historical accounts to acquire the truth, Aristotle's criticism is more accurately applied to later historians such as Thucydides (with qualifications) and Xenophon. There is no better way to illustrate that Aristotle's criticism and later expectations of genre miss the point of much Herodotean narrative than to note that the two crucial protagonists of the Croesus story, Croesus and Solon, although well-documented historical figures, almost certainly never met in real life, and certainly did not meet under the circumstances described by Herodotus (Herodotus has Solon visiting the palace of Croesus shortly after instituting his famous laws in Athens, which occurred in the 590s BCE, whereas Croesus assumed the throne in or after 560). One might argue that Herodotus thought he was being historically accurate, but it is clear from a reading of the Croesus episode and numerous others in his work that his standards for a successful or meaningful narrative go far beyond establishing the historical particulars of what *did* happen. The dialogue Herodotus composes for many of his characters—the scene with Candaules and Gyges at the beginning of the Croesus story is an excellent example—is further evidence that his work is frequently not a historical narrative focused on established and more or less verifiable particulars, but a narrative of universals, of what

*would* happen or what *would* be said, given certain characters in certain circumstances, or given a theme or universal principle that needs to be illustrated in his text.

Aristotle's banishment of Herodotus from the universal heights of Helicon deserves further qualification. The poets of Greece, especially Homer and the tragedians, do in fact inform Herodotus' narrative in major ways, as many scholars have noted. Most blatantly Homeric is the scope and intent of Herodotus' work, which, as he says in his opening sentence, is intended to memorialize past achievements with the lasting fame of words. (There is already a hint of the vulnerability ethic in these words, since it is only humankind's ephemeral nature that requires this aid of words to gain some measure of lastingness.) More significantly (in regard to the poetic qualities of Herodotus), the narrative drama of his Croesus story closely resembles Greek tragedy and especially Sophoclean tragedy, an affinity aptly expressed by the traditional biographical detail that Herodotus and Sophocles were friends. The first step in appreciating Herodotus' narrative about Croesus is to read it as poetry (in Aristotle's sense above), and not as history.

A noticeable shift in literary style, in fact, directs the expectations of the reader towards the poetic genre as the Croesus story begins. From the moment Herodotus begins to narrate the story, which includes the story of Gyges as the crucial ancestor of Croesus, he shifts into a voice distinct from the reflective, investigative persona that began the work. After carefully parsing accounts of the great war's origins and self-consciously mediating between differing versions of events, the narrative voice gives way without warning or narrative break when Herodotus, in his work's first direct dialogue, puts us in the front-row seat of a theater to watch and listen as a king says to his trusted subordinate: "I suspect, Gyges, that you are not totally convinced when I tell you how beautiful my wife is. . . . I want you to see her naked somehow, with your own eyes!" Gone is the narrator who anticipates a question like "Are you *sure*

about this, Herodotus? Are there no competing accounts for what really *did* happen in the king's private chambers?" This is obviously the wrong question to ask, and our expectations of the narrative need to shift accordingly, as we are confronted not with the particulars that for Aristotle distinguish history, but with artfully contrived details of literary fiction, deserving the treatment we accord to such detail in imaginative literature.

Although Herodotus' story of Croesus is not a stage-tragedy in prose—it is too eclectic an assemblage of dramatic narrative, historical background, and discursive reflection—some of its elements are remarkably similar to Sophocles' narrative style. Consider first the connectedness of the story, which is Sophoclean not only in the way some of the details are manipulated and the narrative is paced, but in the fearsome manner in which divinity, and a hounding divinity at that, is implicated and made manifest in the story's intense connectedness of detail and pacing. As in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, this involves an economy of plot development that can seem suspiciously contrived if the story's dramatic drive cannot sustain the artifice—though cleverly, in both Sophocles and Herodotus, any seeming surplus of narrative artifice can be attributed to divinity's influence within the story rather than to a blatant authorial contrivance. In *Oedipus*, for instance, Sophocles considerably simplifies the action and staging by having the servant who witnesses the murder of Oedipus' father be none other than the man who exposed the unwanted Oedipus so many years earlier. As if this coincidence were not enough, Sophocles applies an identical economy to the messenger from Corinth who announces the death of Oedipus' putative parents: he is the very man who had saved the infant Oedipus and brought him down to Corinth. We accept these shortcuts, justifying them because they provide other rewards, although literal plausibility, the life-blood of some fiction, is not one of them. Rather, the coincidences not only contribute to the relentless pace of the drama at this point, they

contribute to the sense that divinity is at work, shaping our ends. The literary devices work as fearsome signs of divine presence, as if here too it is not the author but the gods and fate who are behind these coincidences and exhibit such powerful economy in our destruction.

A similar economy and drive is present in Herodotus' story once divinity is engaged in bringing Croesus down. This occurs directly upon the departure of Solon, whose wise advice Croesus rashly ignores, thus incurring divine wrath: "After Solon's departure, a devastating Nemesis sent by god seized Croesus, probably because he thought he was the most prosperous man on earth. A dream vision soon visited him and accurately revealed the disaster that would befall one of his children." In these two sentences, Croesus' hubris leads directly to Nemesis, and Nemesis, we infer, is involved in producing a dream revealing the fate of his son. As with Oedipus, this prediction of the future generates avoidance-behavior that ends up delivering the victim to his appointed doom. The other ingredients are quickly added, although their connections to one another and to the guidance of Nemesis are left for us to draw. First, the narrative supplies the killer of his doomed son: "While Croesus was busy with plans for his son's wedding, there arrived in Sardis a man who, as the result of an accident (*symphorê*), had blood on his hands." This is heavy with irony; the rich young man who arrives (Adrastus, related to King Midas, in fact) is a perfect illustration of Solon's warnings about vulnerability. Ironic too is Herodotus' allusive vocabulary: Adrastus (whose name means Inescapable) arrives *symphorê*, "by chance, unexpectedly," the very word Solon had used to characterize the condition of human vulnerability that, in an earlier scene, was implicitly denied by Croesus. The occasion for the killing quickly follows: "And so Adrastus took up residence in Croesus' palace. No sooner had he done so, however, than a wild boar of unnatural size appeared on Mt. Olympus in Mysia. Charging down from its mountain lair, this boar began to devastate the crops." Al-

though presented in naturalistic detail, this boar is in equal parts animal and divine visitation, as is rather distinctly suggested by the animal's origins on a doublet of Mt. Olympus in Asia Minor.

Other features of Herodotus' plot construction, or rather further evidence that the episode has a plot constructed according to the rhythms of artful drama rather than aiming at fidelity to events in sixth-century Lydia, will be examined below as part of my discussion of the ethical content of the story. But before turning to these ideas and their significance, a few words on Herodotus' portrayal of character in the Croesus story. Here too, in character portrayal, Herodotus can be seen exploiting a basic feature of a drama to give power and life to his ideas, and in particular to his ethic of vulnerability.

Act One, as it were, of Croesus' reversal culminates in the death of his son Atys. What is needed to close the net on Atys (and Croesus), in addition to the chain of events mentioned above (the dream, Adrastus, the boar), is the father's permission to let his son go on the fatal boar-hunt. Herodotus elects to tell this part of the story in a rather extended scene of dialogue between father and son. Again, it is safe to assume that Herodotus has imagined the entire scene (or reimagined an earlier poetic or dramatic version) and its dialogue. In the scene, after Croesus has anxiously attempted to sequester his son from the threats of the world, his son elicits his father's reasons for sequestering him, and then persuades the father that his anxieties are groundless. Victorious in the debate with his father, the son marches off to his appointed doom.

What, we should ask, is gained by the creation and inclusion of this scene between father and son? For one thing, the theme of children and their importance in human happiness had figured earlier in the story, in Solon's descriptions of the good life: one of the defining characteristics of Tellus the Athenian's prosperity is that he had children, and his children had children, all of whom survived him. The story of

Cleobis and Biton also involves the bond between parent and child. Admittedly, these references to the role of children are unobtrusively introduced, like a bell tolling in the distance, and Solon does not explicitly refer to them again in his discourse on human mutability. But it is of course precisely on this point that Croesus, focused on his wealth and power, will be made acquainted with his fragility. The dialogue between father and son gives this recurring theme (the importance of children in the happy life) the dramatic weight that the story, and the vulnerability ethic, need.

Significantly, however, at the beginning of his account of retribution, Herodotus included some curious details that differentiated Croesus' two sons: one was handicapped, and the other was a high-achiever. We are also told that Croesus places much more importance on Atys, the high achiever (the other son remains anonymous), who, as Croesus expressly says, is the only one of the two that really counts. How are we to read this? Again, since Herodotus has not included this information in fidelity to historical particulars, as Aristotle in the *Poetics* would have us believe, but is creating these details, our proper response is to ask why Herodotus is giving us this information.

One reason for this differentiation of characters becomes evident near the end of the story. In a sort of mini-reversal of fortune inside the major reversal, the unnamed mute son, defying human expectation and fulfilling an obscure oracle, manages to save his father's life, in contrast to his more successful brother, who is good for nothing at this point, having died ignominiously in the boar hunt. Herodotus, however, is after more than the ironically charged frisson of a plot-reversal. Croesus' attitude towards these boys is important for the story and supports its major themes. This is why Herodotus includes the scene in which Atys confronts his father for permission to go on the hunt. We see the favored son reveling in his status, in his power and privilege. As Atys reminds his father, he is a representative of both his father's and his culture's highest values; he is an exponent of the

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proud competitive culture that has placed Croesus on top of his kingdom, and Atys on top of his peers and above his disabled brother. The scene of persuasion itself is a slice of this competitive culture, as the son confronts his father and then uses the arts of rhetoric and debate to conquer him (precisely the arts that his brother, of course, being without speech, could not engage in). Croesus, with loaded language, admits that he has been “conquered”; one can almost sense his pride that his son has confronted and bested him with his skills in debate.

Since my purpose in this essay is not to exhaust the Croesus story’s literary dimensions, these indications of its artfulness and use of traditional literary resources will have to suffice as I focus on the message to which these effects add power and emotional depth, and on the story’s significance in the expression and development of some key ideas in Greek thought.

#### SOLON’S MAXIM

WHAT POSSIBLE ethical depth or even philosophical food for thought can be found in Solon’s admonition to Croesus that until a man dies, we should not call him prosperous, but simply lucky? And, turning from the bland to the perverse, what are we to make of the narrator’s surmise that “after Solon’s departure, a devastating retribution sent by god seized Croesus, probably because he thought he was the most prosperous man on earth.” Elucidating the connection between these two events (between Croesus’ mental attitude, on the one hand, and retribution as a consequence of this attitude, on the other) will go halfway toward explaining the significance of the maxim.

There are several layers to this connection, and one of them, the most shocking, is as primitive as it is enduring. The conception of a divinity that would and could contrive external disasters to punish someone for particular thoughts and behaviors has a prominent place in the religious beliefs of many people even today, and still casts its shadow on

popular customs as well: the apotropaic knock on wood echoes this ancient fear that a force exists that is both aware of our thoughts and ready to punish presumptions of prosperity. So deeply and pervasively is this fear engrained in human thought throughout history (and presumably earlier), that it is tempting to locate and explain its origin. "This apprehensive regard for excessive good luck is probably agrarian in origin," writes Charles Beye in an insightful analysis of some of the psychology behind the Croesus story.<sup>3</sup> For people accustomed to natural disasters, "a prolonged absence of bad luck makes for anxiety." Or one can go further back to locate the origins of the evil eye in our lengthy evolutionary development as a hunted creature, when a presumption of security increased the likelihood of finding one's neck in the jaws of a swift and silent stalker from behind. But whatever the origins and whatever features of experience preserve this atavistic uneasiness as an impetus for rectitude or as a perfunctory expiating gesture, its primitive charge packs considerable dramatic power.

Solon seems to acknowledge this conception of deity when, before launching into his sermon on mutability, he calls divine nature jealous and fond of causing trouble (*phthoneron te kai tarachôdes*), with no suggestion that they operate this way from anything but amoral spite or sport. But the following sermon, as well as the larger context of the Croesus episode, itself a paradigm for the forces that Herodotus' sweeping narrative reveals as universal, make it clear that this primitive fear is here in the service of a more complex conception of divinity. This conception is not something that originated with Herodotus, and is consistent with the prevailing belief of the Greeks that some scholars conveniently label "Homeric religion." The term refers to a religious attitude, by no means limited to Homer but finding its first and most illustrious literary example in his epics, that stresses the gulf between gods and humans. More precisely put, it is a gulf between mortals (*thanatoi*) and immortals (*athanatoi*). This polarizing terminology expresses

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the essential distinction from which the terms of the relationship derive: whatever particular powers, privileges, and values the gods may have, they are above all and most essentially the *a-thanatoi*, beings not subject to mortality. This is also to say that they are not essentially subject to time and change, but rather a form of being that exists a realm beyond the radical mutability of humankind.

In such a context, then, by presuming he has a lock on prosperity, what Croesus is doing, as Solon's analysis makes clear, is claiming for himself a position beyond chance and sudden reversals. In other words, he is claiming the status of a god. And in numerous mythic narratives, this over-reaching beyond the allotted sphere of mortals invariably provokes a retaliation from jealous gods: such a usurpation of divine prerogative, this trespass by a mortal into their domain, will not be allowed to go unpunished. Croesus, like so many mythical characters before him, is put in his place: "a devastating retribution sent by god seized Croesus, probably because he thought he was the most prosperous man on earth." While perhaps not up to our standards of divine justice, such a conception of retribution at least provides a rationale and justification for divine jealousy that goes beyond sheer spite animated by human prosperity.

Although, as mentioned, Solon prefaces his sermon to Croesus with a reference to this world of mythic gods fond of overturning human happiness, he spends far more time on the other end of the divine-mortal polarity, describing the essence of the human in its own most immediate terms and parsing experience with insights grounded the arithmetic of a human life span: if you run the numbers, you'll realize that bad things *will* happen to you, and *really* bad things *can* happen. This account dispenses altogether with the gods, whether conceived as agents of our destruction, or simply as a different order of being that illuminates our own by contrast. Boiled down to its temporal terms in Solon's "secular" analysis, the message is that as long as

one is alive, one is subject to change and misfortune. If one is called on to evaluate, as a spectator, another person's life, or if we take an attitude towards our own life, judging (as we naturally do) our own life narrative, we cannot accurately call a person prosperous (happy, blessed), or know ourselves as prosperous, until we have seen the whole story. Hence, let no man be called prosperous until he is dead.<sup>4</sup>

To some extent, then, Solon's discourse on time and reversal on the one hand, and the Nemesis sent by the gods on the other, are complementary, the one reading as a demythologized version of the other. Solon's message is simply the insistence that one *will* suffer change and chance; it is inevitable, it is natural, it is an essential feature of human existence, and no gods are invoked as a necessary causal agent. This is not to argue that this demythologized version of mutability expressed by one of his characters encapsulates Herodotus' understanding of the role of divinity, justice, and causality in human affairs. The gods, allied in a general way with a principle of balance that governs history, play a considerable role in the lives of individuals and in history, and even the story of Croesus involves the gods in numerous explicit and implicit ways. Because Solon's discourse dispenses with much of this divine machinery, it has been argued that Herodotus uses Solon to represent a defective or inadequate viewpoint, expressed by a character who is unaware of the true workings of history and divine involvement in events. Nothing, however, in Solon's account is incompatible with divine causality; the observation that unexpected and unwanted things happen does not preclude that they happen for a reason perhaps unknown to the one who experiences them. Furthermore, the poet Solon himself (as distinguished from his character in Herodotus) claims in his poetry that divine justice worked in mysterious ways and across generations. This further reduces the likelihood that Herodotus is using him here as a character who doesn't see the full picture of divine involvement.

That said, there is indeed something “progressive” about Solon’s explanation of human mutability, with its confident and rational analysis of the human life-span and its concern to rely on the observable facts and to appeal to experience rather than traditional beliefs. Herodotus in fact introduces Solon to the story in the context of other Greek sophists (*sophistes*) who visited Sardis in its heyday. Although the term and profession of sophist had not yet been subjected to Plato and Aristotle’s hatchet-job that would relegate them to the status of money-grubbing frauds, by Herodotus’ time they were clearly associated with a culture that offered new and unsettling perspectives. Herodotus’ work, especially in its study and analysis of various cultures, both built upon and furthered the intellectual ferment of his day. Numerous passages show his openness to ideas often associated with the sophistic movement, even as his outlook remains grounded in what is often called the archaic Greek world-view.

This Janus-faced multiplicity of perspectives is one of the reasons why Herodotus’ treatment of happiness was a significant moment in Greek thought on the subject. His narrative looks backward into deeply-rooted traditions of myth and literature, and forward into the conceptualized realm of philosophy. Herodotus explored and expressed the story of Croesus from the traditional perspective of tragedy, with a gripping and moving narrative, and yet provided through Solon’s meditation a more rational, discursive perspective reaching much the same conclusion about vulnerability. With this combination of qualities—a powerful and popular story partly digested with proto-philosophical analysis—it is no wonder that it engaged Aristotle a century later. Solon’s maxim, in fact, presents a significant challenge to Aristotle when he is constructing his definition of happiness in the first book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Aristotle’s discussion is curious and complex, and his debate with Herodotus’ Solon is like a lengthy wrestling match with some surprising moves but no clear victor.

## ARISTOTLE'S INTERPRETATION OF SOLON'S MAXIM

SCHOLARS ARE in general agreement that the Solon who figures in book 1, chapter 10 of the *Ethics* is Herodotus' Solon; that is, it is Herodotus' tale, rather than Solon's own poetry or some other story about him that provides Aristotle with the well-known reference point and popular example of the attitude he wishes to debate.<sup>5</sup> This encounter with Herodotus occurs in the middle of Aristotle's attempt to define true happiness for humans (1.5–10; following most translators, I will retain "happiness" as a translation for *eudaimonia*, Aristotle's usual term for human flourishing). This whole section is interwoven with assertions and hesitations that inform his discussion of Solon's maxim, and a review of these will be useful before I focus on chapter 10 in particular.

In book 1, chapter 5, Aristotle surveys various commonly-held opinions about what makes for happiness—pleasure, honor, and wealth being the chief contenders—before dismissing them as inadequate. Chapter 6, in which he takes issue with Plato's Idea of the Good, is something of a digression, though it supports his rejection of what Nussbaum calls the "good condition" theory of happiness, which, contrary to Aristotle's views, denies external goods an important role in the attainment of happiness. Chapter 7 contains Aristotle's first attempt at a satisfactory definition, which he arrives at by asking what the unique function of a human being is. This approach leads him to define happiness as an activity, rather than a state—a distinction which will have significant consequences for his quarrel with Solon's maxim. Even before Solon enters the discussion, however, Aristotle's preliminary definition is followed by a significant qualifier that begins his engagement with the central concerns of the Croesus story: happiness, Aristotle famously defines it, "is an activity of the soul in accordance with excellence," to which he adds "over the extent of a complete life. For one swallow does not make it springtime, nor does any single day. Likewise, one day or a brief amount of time

does not make a person blessed (*makarion*) and happy (*eudaimona*)” (1098a16–17).

In chapter 8, Aristotle tests his definition by examining how it harmonizes with the evidence, which primarily consists of commonly held opinions about happiness and which will include Solon’s maxim. Each of the main components of Aristotle’s definition finds corroboration in this canvassing of “second opinions”: happiness resides in the soul, not in external goods or the body, and it is an excellence realized in action. Here again in chapter 8, he appends a qualification, which, while not explicitly expressed in terms of time and mutability, treads the same general ground: “Nonetheless, happiness clearly requires external goods in addition, as we said, since it is impossible or certainly difficult to do fine actions if we lack the resources” (1099a31–33).

Chapter 9 deals with some of the unsettling consequences of this last admission, mirroring the admissions and reservations that will characterize his discussion of Solon: is happiness, Aristotle asks, something learned through habituation, something dispensed by the gods, or a thing of chance? Aristotle praises the gods, and then essentially dismisses them from the discussion. Clearly Aristotle prefers that it be attainable by some kind of learning or practice (“to anyone not handicapped in relation to excellence,” he qualifies (1099b20), with relevance, unexplored by Aristotle, for Croesus’ handicapped son), for that would make it attainable by human effort and put it in our control. “To hand one of the greatest and noblest things over to chance would be too much out of tune.” The difference between happiness dependent on the gods’ blessings, and dependent on chance, is not something Aristotle explores, and one suspects that they may represent different ways of expressing much the same thing (much in the way Herodotus’ Solon used both divine mythology and mathematical reasoning to explore vulnerability, as discussed above). At any rate, Aristotle is again attempting both to acknowledge the necessity of external goods, which are most clearly subject to chance, while at the

same time lodging happiness as much as possible beyond the reach of chance.

At the end of chapter 9, Aristotle affirms again that happiness is an activity, not a state, and this leads him to deny that children can be called happy, since they are not yet doers of the appropriate activities. But because of the long time that remains for an apparently happy child to suffer reversals, this mention of children leads him to reflect again on vulnerability, like a nagging issue he hasn't explored yet to his satisfaction: children can't be called happy because

happiness, as we said, requires both complete excellence and a complete lifetime. For many reverses and vicissitudes of all sorts occur in the course of life, and it is possible that the most prosperous man may encounter great disasters in his declining years, as the story is told of Priam in the epics; but no one calls a man happy who meets with misfortunes like Priam's, and comes to a miserable end.<sup>6</sup>

It is not surprising that these thoughts, reminiscent of Solon's words in Herodotus ("In the length of a life there is much to see that one would rather not see, and much to suffer as well," he tells Croesus), that lead directly into his lengthy discussion of Solon's maxim.

It is hard to excerpt Aristotle's discussion and preserve the full sense of Aristotle's complex interaction with Solon's maxim in *Ethics* 1.10; indeed, the curious indirections and digressions of his argument are expressive, I believe, of his difficulties in reconciling Herodotus' story with features of his own ethical project, and the stylistic result is perhaps the closest Aristotle's remaining writings come to the lost dialogues so highly esteemed by Cicero. For this reason, rather than simply summarizing chapter 10, I will follow the sequence of Aristotle's thoughts and quote him liberally.

X. [In light of Priam's example,] are we then to count no other human being happy either, as long as he is alive? Must we obey Solon's warning, and "look to the end"? [2] And if we are indeed to lay down this rule, can a man really be happy after he is dead?

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Surely that is an extremely strange notion, especially for us who define happiness as a form of activity!

The first thing to note is that, although Aristotle engages Herodotus' Solon as the figure providing the locus classicus for the viewpoint he wants to examine, he substitutes the still more famous and prestigious story of Priam as his model for the persons who suffers a tragic reversal. He is not concerned with bringing up the specific story of Croesus, though no doubt he expects his reader to know it quite well. As is customary with his method, Aristotle, in his frequent quotations of Greek literature, does not want to engage the often complicated contexts of his quotations, but primarily seeks a well-known passage both to encapsulate a point, and to show that whatever idea it expresses has the required cultural weight to be a partner in his conversation.

“Are we then to count no other human being happy (*eudaimonisteon*) either, as long as he is alive? Must we obey Solon's warning, and ‘look to the end’ (*telos horan*)?” This is Aristotle's rewording of the gist of Solon's lesson to Croesus and is really quite close to what Solon says in Herodotus (*tên teleutên . . . horan*, I.33). It also accesses the Croesus story at its most rational point, at its greatest distance from oracles, family guilt, and the avenging god who sets killers and wild boars in motion. Even so, unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for the discussion that Solon's precept provokes in the *Ethics*, the meaning of the aphorism, “Until a man dies, do not call him happy,” admits of a number of interpretations. Some of the statement's ambiguity hinges on its requirement of a spectator or judge (in this case Solon) who will or will not confer the predicate of happy. Are we to hold off calling someone happy because they are beyond experience and reversals of fortune intrinsic to it, or are humans themselves not able to experience happiness until they are dead? Another way of asking this question pertains to the injunction to “look to the end,” as both Solon and Aristotle phrase it: does it mean we should recognize the inherent instability of our life, now and as long as we live, or

should we look to the afterlife beyond this vale of misfortune, as being the only possible experiential state in which we might secure happiness?<sup>7</sup>

It will strike close readers of Herodotus' story about Croesus that Solon is in each case concerned almost exclusively with the first option, the recognition of vulnerability. One is tempted to say that the complexity of Aristotle's dissection of this maxim is created by the absence of context, since, taken in its entirety, Solon's message and its thrust are clear in Herodotus. But the notion of the "happy dead" is not unknown in Greek ideas of the afterlife, as Aristotle's discussion in chapters 10 and 11 demonstrates. Further, Solon's description of the deaths of Cleobis and Biton—"The deity also used this occasion to show how much better it is for a human to be dead than to go on living" (Herodotus 1.31)—while capable of other interpretations closer to the vulnerability message, leads the reader to think of death as a state in which the dead are more capable than the living of experiencing happiness.

After this false start involving the happy dead, Aristotle entertains the correct interpretation of the maxim, only to take it into the perplexing region of the afterlife again:

[3] While if on the other hand we refuse to speak of a dead man as happy, and Solon's words do not mean this, but that only when a man is dead can one safely call him blessed as being now beyond the reach of evil and misfortune, this also admits of some dispute; for it is believed that some evil and also some good can befall the dead [. . .]; he may still have many vicissitudes befall his descendants, some of whom may be good and meet with the fortune they deserve, and others the opposite; [. . .] Now it would be a strange thing if the dead man also were to change with the fortunes of his family, and were to become a happy man at one time and then miserable at another; [5] yet on the other hand it would also be strange if ancestors were not affected at all, even over a limited period, by the fortunes of their descendants.

Aristotle's critique of Solon is confusing and subtle, in part because his first tack in testing the validity of Solon's maxim

is, curiously, to weaken the first, and dominant, notion (that humans are always subject to the possibility of radical reversals while alive) by refuting the claim that the dead are in fact immune to reversals. Aristotle begins his discussion with the argument that the dead *do* experience things, and more importantly, what they experience can shift and change, can improve or worsen, depending on things out of their control (descendants can besmirch the family name, suffer tragic lives, or succeed wildly). This is to say that death itself does not put an end to vulnerability. Therefore, Solon, technically speaking, is wrong in making the end of life some sort of crucial marker in our susceptibility to accidents, change, and chance.

Although Aristotle and many Greeks of his time evidently found this view of the afterlife plausible, and although beliefs about the existence of a sentient afterlife can be powerful factors in our conception, pursuit, and experience of happiness, the discussion about the afterlife strikes me as oddly tangential to what in the end he decides *is* the real meaning of Solon's maxim: that it concerns the vulnerability of the living (as Priam's return to the discussion makes clear), not post-mortem perplexities. And to confuse things still further, after he does get down to the task of wrestling with the implications and truth of Solon's message, Aristotle returns (at the beginning of chapter 11) to the question of whether and how the dead experience things, and ends his discussion rather weakly, at least when judged as a response to Solon's maxim, by concluding that, even if events of life on earth continue to affect the dead, the impact is so superficial that it cannot make a dead person happy or miserable—a conclusion that essentially nullifies his earlier caveat that death doesn't end our vulnerability to reversals. Death *is* after all a significant cut-off, he concludes, beyond which reversals do not in any truly significant way affect happiness. To give Aristotle the benefit of the doubt, it is possible that, although his discussion of the afterlife was motivated by the issues of vulnerability and happiness, the topic of the afterlife, once raised, brought with it the recognition of its

potentially momentous consequences for ethics (witness Lucretius' concern, in his formula for *eudaimonia*, to deny the existence of an afterlife, and the concern of other faiths to confirm it). Independently of the Solon maxim, that is, perhaps Aristotle had reason to grapple with the afterlife and its possible relevance for the ethics of the living.

In what follows (to continue with *Ethics* 1.10), Aristotle gets down to what I take are the substantive issues between his ethical project and the vulnerability ethic:

[6] But let us go back to our former difficulty, for perhaps it will throw light on the question we are now examining. [7] If we are to look to the end, and congratulate a man when dead not as actually being blessed, but because he has been blessed in the past, surely it is strange if at the actual time when a man is happy that fact cannot be truly predicated of him, because we are unwilling to call the living happy owing to the vicissitudes of fortune . . .

Aristotle's complaint here ("surely it is strange") is much like Croesus' objection to Solon's maxim in Herodotus' account: "Solon's speech did not find favor with Croesus, and the king sent him off without showing him respect: only a foolish person would tell him to dismiss the good things in hand and to look instead to how things turn out in the end." Croesus', and Aristotle's, objection misreads the thrust of the maxim, again taking it out of context. The recommended deferral of judgment about a person's happiness is mainly a thought-technique that, in order to work, requires a spectator who stands outside the experienced moment to assess the totality of life and to account for the structure or limits of human experience. It also arises from the dramatic narrative of the story: Croesus in his pride is specifically asking for an external reviewer to pronounce upon his happiness. Still, Aristotle is probably right to sense here something discordant with his own ethical project. Solon is trying to destabilize Croesus' sense of happiness as he enjoys his prosperity; the vulnerability ethic only works by making a person aware of instability and, to a degree, fearful of the

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future. Aristotle does not specifically object that the vulnerability ethic, by substituting or at least qualifying that which *exists* in the present with that which *might* occur in the future, robs people out of the only prime-time experience of the present they will ever have. Nonetheless, the vulnerability ethic's destabilization of the present is certainly at odds with Aristotle's insistence that it is fortitude, not fear, which will best secure our happiness.<sup>8</sup>

[8] For it is clear that if we are to be guided by fortune, we shall often have to call the same man first happy and then miserable; we shall make out the happy man to be a sort of "chameleon, or a house built on the sand." [9] But perhaps it is quite wrong to be guided in our judgment by the changes of fortune, since true prosperity and adversity do not depend on fortune's favors, although, as we said, our life does require these in addition; but it is the active exercise of our faculties in conformity with virtue that causes happiness, and the opposite activities its opposite. [10] [ . . . ] None of man's functions possess the quality of permanence so fully as the activities in conformity with virtue. [ . . . ] [11] The happy man therefore will possess that element of stability in question, and will remain happy all his life; since he will be always or at least most often employed in doing and contemplating the things that are in conformity with virtue. And he will bear changes of fortunes most nobly, and with perfect propriety in every way, being as he is "good in very truth" and "four-square without reproach." [ . . . ] [12] Even in adversity nobility shines through, when a man endures repeated and severe misfortune with patience, not owing to insensibility but from generosity and greatness of soul [*megalopsychos*].

Here we get down to Aristotle's most serious reservations about the vulnerability ethic. The first actually goes back to his remarks in chapter 9 touched on above, where he says that for something as vital to humans as happiness to be subject to chance is "too much out of tune." Out of tune with what? Most generally, out of tune with the best of all possible worlds. If happiness that can be secured by human effort "is superior to the notion that we are happy through chance, then it is reasonable to suppose that we secure it through hu-

man effort” (1199b20). He has an optimistic expectation that human nature and the world are concordant such that the most important things for humans can be gained by most people if they live correctly, and his *Ethics* is his attempt to identify the best path to a secure happiness. The notion that the whole effort can be thwarted by chance and that all human effort can be rendered futile is out of tune with this harmony between human desires and the world.

Aristotle’s second reservation with Solon’s maxim relates to character development. Aristotle envisions happiness as the result of elaborate training a character formation; it is a struggle and an art. The world may be in harmony with our desires, but is not so constituted as to yield happiness without a lengthy effort that requires both individual and communal dedication to the endeavor. And one of the requisites is courage in the face of adversity. Adversity and reversals of fortune that effect external goods will occur in life; Aristotle accepts this. But Aristotle hopes that proper training and good character will be able to reduce the ability of these reversals to affect our happiness. A good character will not crumble, and be dislodged from happiness (as he defines it) but bear up nobly and courageously.

The vulnerability ethic’s emphasis that disaster may be around the next corner, and its elevation of this insight to an important, even essential part of one’s outlook on life, threatens Aristotle’s elaborate ethic in at least two ways. First, it is potentially demoralizing. The prospect that all human effort may be powerless and for naught draws into question the value of strenuous character formation. Second, it underestimates the value of courage and fortitude in keeping the emotion of fear (itself a diminishment of happiness) at bay and in helping us face the future with the confidence that we can cope with inevitable adversity. The vulnerability ethic bows overmuch to fear.

Aristotle’s solution is a complex weave, and it is here that his insistence that happiness is an activity of the soul has a crucial bearing on the argument. He locates happiness in

what is presumably the most secure area, where we have the most control: “none of man’s functions possess the quality of permanence so fully as the activities in conformity with virtue.” Much can be taken away from us, and Aristotle acknowledges that our activities along the lines of excellence can be curtailed by misfortune, but it is much harder to eradicate *all* vestiges of virtuous action, provided that one has the requisite spirit. Those whose happiness varies with the vagaries of fortune he compares to chameleons and houses built on sand, clearly expressing his disapproval of those who either misconstrue the prime source of happiness, or have not the soul to face adversity.<sup>9</sup> “And he will bear changes of fortunes most nobly, and with perfect propriety in every way, being as he is ‘good in very truth’ and ‘four-square without reproach.’” A better translation for Rackham’s “with perfect propriety” is “in perfect harmony.” Aristotle returns here to his earlier metaphor of harmonious music, applied in this case not to the harmony of an idea (that happiness is not a matter of chance, discussed above) but to the character of the person properly trained to face hardship.

[13] And if, as we said, a man’s life is determined by his activities, no supremely happy man can ever become miserable. For he will never do hateful or base actions, since we hold that the truly good and wise man will bear all kinds of fortune in a seemly way, and will always act in the noblest manner that the circumstances allow; even as a good general makes the most effective use of the forces at his disposal, and a good shoemaker makes the finest shoe possible out of the leather supplied him, and so on with all the other crafts and professions. [14] And this being so, the happy man can never become miserable . . .

Here Aristotle is at his most confident rejection of the vulnerability ethic (and is closest to the “good condition” ethic of Plato), exploiting to its limit his definition of happiness as an activity rather than a state or mood. So long as we can exercise our body or mind in some virtuous activity (for contemplation too is a form of activity), we have the essential

ingredients for happiness at our disposal. We also, however, seem to be at our farthest remove from that which caused the most suffering for Croesus, and from one of the essentials of the happiness of that happiest of mortals, Tellus: the life—or death—of a child. In fact, there are shades of Herodotus' pre-tragic Croesus in Aristotle's lemonade-making general and shoemaker in the just-quoted passage. When confronted with the tragic experiences of Adrastus, exiled by his father for having killed his brother, Croesus advises that, "under the circumstances, the best thing you can do is to take this unfortunate accident as lightly as possible."

But Aristotle's dialogue with Solon's maxim is not over:

It is true [a person] will not be supremely blessed (*makarios*) if he encounters the misfortunes of a Priam. Nor yet assuredly will he be variable and liable to change; for he will not be dislodged from his happiness easily, nor by ordinary misfortunes, but only by severe and frequent disasters, nor will he recover from such disasters and become happy again quickly, but only, if at all, after a long term of years, in which he has had time to compass high distinctions and achievements. [15] May not we then confidently pronounce that man happy [*eudaimona*] who realizes complete goodness in action, and is adequately furnished with external goods? Or should we add, that he must also be destined to go on living not for any casual period but throughout a complete lifetime in the same manner, and to die accordingly, because the future is hidden from us, and we conceive happiness as an end, something utterly and absolutely final and complete? [16] If this is so, we shall pronounce those of the living who possess and are destined to go on possessing the good things we have specified to be supremely blessed [*makarios*], though on the human scale of bliss.

So much for a discussion of this question.

Despite all his insistence on the security of happiness and despite the discord he hears in Solon's maxim, Aristotle cannot quite get around the example of Priam (which is to say, Croesus); after all his objections and hesitations noted above, in the end he has to return to Priam, to human tragedy. For most hardships, he insists, a good character can

rise above the ability of fortune and accident to substantially alter true happiness. The possibility, however, of an extremely bad fortune such as Priam's forces Aristotle to admit that happiness can be compromised close to its core, by hindering even our ability to engage in virtuous activity.

Aristotle's wording reveals his reluctance to admit this. Up until now he has used two terms for "happy" more or less interchangeably: *eudaimôn* and *makarios*, often translated as "happy" and "blessed" respectively. As he discusses Priam near the end of chapter 10, however, he draws a difference between the two to bolster his claim that happiness can be secured: even after a person suffered disasters of Iliadic proportions, he would, if well trained in ethics, continue to be *eudaimôn*; he would just not be *makarios*.

What has been gained by Aristotle in his discussion of Solon's maxim? Although formally, in regard to his definition of happiness, we might say that no progress has been made from his discussion of it in previous chapters—external goods, subject to accident and chance, still figure as a (subsidiary) component of the good life, and fortune has the power (in extreme cases) to play a determinative if unclear role—Aristotle has nonetheless expressed some significant reservations about Solon's maxim, and has argued that an extreme sensitivity to vulnerability has potential complications and drawbacks, at least for his own ethics. It should be noted, however, that, in the process of revising and exploring Solon's maxim, Aristotle has taken Solon's position quite seriously, even allowing it to qualify his definition of human happiness. This is not to say that only in Herodotus could Aristotle find the thought expressed, or that it was specifically Herodotus' story that provoked him to examine his position on human happiness—as noted, Aristotle typically quotes famous poetry and maxims because they are a counter for commonly held opinions, and such opinions play an important role in his manner of doing philosophy. But at the very least, in searching for a classic example of the point of view that emphasizes human vulnerability, he relied



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on Herodotus' compelling portrayal of the Croesus story to elevate Solon's maxim to such a status. It was also the unique blend of Herodotus' presentation that gained it this position. The qualities of his story-telling, its mythic qualities similar to tragic narrative, made the story and Solon's role in it memorable and famous, but it was the more rational analysis and reformulation of mythic nemesis into logos and mathematical calculation, into a reasoned argument, that rendered it useful for Aristotle in the presentation of his ethics. Human vulnerability, in contrast to divine invulnerability, was a commonplace in Greek literature. Herodotus, however, played a significant role in the process of rationalizing and presenting it in argumentative form. This is to give Herodotus an important role in the process that Aristotle saw as the job of philosophy.

THE VULNERABILITY ETHIC  
AND  
ARISTOTLE'S DEFINITION OF TRAGEDY

IT WOULD not be surprising if Aristotle's ambivalence towards Solon's maxim extended to his evaluation of Greek tragedy, which so often dramatized the extreme reversals for which the lives of Priam and Croesus were legendary. I believe an argument can be made that this is indeed the case, and that it finds expression precisely in his famous and much debated definition of tragedy in the *Poetics*: "tragedy . . . effects, by the arousal of pity and fear, the catharsis of these emotions" (*Poetics*, chapter 6).

Admittedly, this portion especially of Aristotle's laconic definition of tragedy has generated numerous interpretations and disputes, above all over the meaning of catharsis in this and other contexts. Stephen Halliwell, one of the closest readers of the *Poetics*, confesses to an agnosticism that I share when it comes to the meaning of these terms: "It had better be said at once that we do not really know what Aristotle meant in this context by *katharsis*."<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, I

don't think that either Halliwell's conjectures on what we *can* say Aristotle meant by catharsis, or Nussbaum's influential discussion of Aristotle and fragility, including her interpretation of the term catharsis in this context, take into account Aristotle's resistance to Solon's maxim. Nor do they consider how this resistance is possibly relevant for tragic drama and might illuminate Aristotle's discussion of it in the *Poetics*.

Clearly Halliwell and Nussbaum are right in seeing Aristotle's definition of tragedy as a response to Plato's condemnation of its emotional effects on the audience. Whatever Aristotle meant by catharsis, he means to attribute some quality or effect to a tragic performance that defends it against Plato's claim that its arousal of emotions (including pity and fear) is harmful to our psychological well-being. The range of possible meanings of the term is still considerable. Remaining closest to Plato are readings which Halliwell calls the "pathological view . . . established by mid-nineteenth century German scholarship and . . . prevalent ever since."<sup>11</sup> In this interpretation, the arousal of pity and fear by tragedy serves to purge or discharge them from our system. Just how this is accomplished is still open to any number of interpretations, but at its core is the claim that Aristotle too saw these emotions as potentially unhealthy, and that tragic catharsis somehow cured the spectator of their unhealthy effects, effects which are "purged" like a disease.

At the other end of the spectrum are the interpretations of Halliwell and Nussbaum, who stress that tragic catharsis is a release of emotions that are salubrious to our moral understanding. Halliwell tentatively conjectures that catharsis is "a powerful emotional experience which not only gives our natural feelings of pity and fear full play, but does so in a way which conduces to their rightful functioning as part of our understanding of, and response to, events in the human world."<sup>12</sup> Nussbaum's Aristotle gives a similar welcome to these emotions: "For Aristotle, pity and fear will be sources of illumination or clarification, as the agent, responding and attending to his or her responses, develops a rich self-under-

standing concerning the attachments and values that support the responses.”<sup>13</sup> For Nussbaum, catharsis in the *Poetics* involves the positive creation of illuminating emotions, and it provides an important emotional dimension that corroborates and supplements the work of intellectual cognition applied to ethical matters. Speaking for Aristotle, she finds that “tragedy contributes to human self-understanding precisely through its exploration of the pitiable and the fearful.”<sup>14</sup> This interpretation is of a piece with her larger discussion of how Greek tragedy and its portrayal of human vulnerability influenced Aristotle to accord luck and chance a role in human happiness. Nussbaum praises Aristotle’s stance here as an advance upon Plato’s insistence on the self-sufficiency of the good life and on its invulnerability to fortune, just as Aristotle’s *catharsis* is an advance on Plato’s psychology of tragic performance and his condemnation of the emotions aroused by tragedy.

Halliwell’s dismissal of the “pathological view” is grounded by his claim that “the idea that pity and fear were considered in any way morbid by Aristotle is wholly without foundation.”<sup>15</sup> But both he and Nussbaum fail to account for Aristotle’s ambivalence in confronting the tragic wisdom as boiled down to its cognitive essence in Solon’s maxim.<sup>16</sup> In the *Poetics* he acknowledges, as he did in his discussion of Solon’s maxim, that disastrous reversals of fortune, and their portrayal in literature and on stage, have a profound affect on spectators, resulting in the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle attributes the arousal of these emotions to the spectator’s sense of identity with the characters who suffered. This is to say, the spectators are moved to fear for themselves by the awareness that their own condition is marked by the same fragility and vulnerability suffered by Oedipus, Priam, and other tragic figures.

As the *Ethics* demonstrates, however, Aristotle is not entirely comfortable with the effect of such emotions on one’s moral life and on one’s sense of control (more precisely, loss of control) over happiness. The catharsis that he sees as the end

result of a tragic performance can be understood as Aristotle's positive spin on an emotional experience that has, in daily life, the potential to invade our sense of moral independence, but which, in the proper tragic performance, is somehow purged of this potentially damaging influence or reach.

In this interpretation, then, Aristotle's definition of tragedy in the *Poetics* accords closely with his discussion of Solon's maxim in the *Ethics*. Each of them is a response to the literary portrayals of extreme vulnerability, each of them acknowledges that these expressions have a serious claim on our moral life, and each of them shows Aristotle concerned to establish some limits on this claim. In the case of Solon's maxim, his uncertainty over how to draw the line between recognition of and resistance to Solon's maxim manifests itself in the curious indirections of his argument and in his waffling acceptance and rejection; in the case of tragedy, he affirms the value of tragedy in provoking pity and fear, even as he hopes it is precisely the tragic performance that will limit or purge the potentially harmful effect of these emotions with their potential to undermine or destabilize happiness, which requires courage and confidence for its stability. The pity and fear aroused by the tragic performance neither contaminates (*pace* Plato) nor enlightens the mind (*pace* Holloway and Nussbaum); somehow their arousal in tragedy regulates their potentially excessive influence in daily life.

#### THE VULNERABILITY ETHIC AND THE TREATMENT OF OTHERS

A fuller assessment of Herodotus' vulnerability ethic, however, should not be limited by the treatment Aristotle gives it. There is, in fact, an important ethical dimension to Herodotus' story that neither Aristotle nor Herodotus' Solon himself, for that matter, ever considers. It is a dimension that goes beyond the ken of Aristotle's ethics and has implications that have not been explored by commentators

on Herodotus. Thus far the discussion of Solon's teaching has been limited to its significance for the happiness of individuals, to its consequences for thinking correctly about the true conditions of one's own life and one's proper relationship to divinity. What Herodotus does in addition, however, is to dramatize what possible impact this consciousness-raising, this personal illumination of vulnerability, might have on our treatment of other people.

After Solon's dismissal from the court of Croesus, we hear nothing more of him as the tragedy goes its course, costing Croesus first his son and then his kingdom. It is only when this man, who was in supreme control during Solon's first visit, is about to be burned alive before the eyes of his enemy that the name of Solon returns, explicitly bringing back into the story the reflections and maxim of Solon's sermon. Here, however, the point of the story is not simply that Croesus, in a moment of self-awareness and illumination, recognizes the truth of Solon's message. The point of the scene is to demonstrate that this awareness of vulnerability can have a profound effect on the way one person treats another. The spectator with a front-row seat to this display of human vulnerability in this case is Cyrus. The Persian king has just defeated Croesus. Now the one in supreme control, he subjects his defeated rival to a humiliating and painful death:

But when Cyrus heard through his translators what Croesus had said [about his encounter with Solon], he reversed his decision: here he was, a mortal man himself, having a fellow human being burned alive who once was no less blessed by fortune than he was now. And so, fearing retribution on his own head, and with a full awareness now that nothing in human life is invulnerable to change, Cyrus ordered his men to quench the flames. (1.86)

Herodotus could not be more pointed in demonstrating that Solon's earlier reflections about human vulnerability have ethical consequences; here they are shown to inspire a radical alteration in the way one person treats another. Before Solon enters the picture, Cyrus is ready to exercise the

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traditional right of victor over vanquished, secure in his superiority and confirmed in his sense of the great difference between himself and his foe. The existence and awareness of such a difference justifies as natural and fit the violent treatment he is ready to inflict on his defeated enemy. Solon's reflections serve to break down this difference between the fortunate and the unfortunate, defining both men, traditionally on the opposites ends of the spectrum of competitive ethics (which basically deals with opposites and polarities) as essentially similar, similar in their vulnerability and mortality. The sense of essential difference is replaced with a sense of essential identity. Here this insight inhibits the stronger from taking advantage of the weaker, although traditional warrior or competitive ethics demands no such move. Whether we call this compassion, or simply fear that one will get caught and punished by the gods, it is at any rate behavior that the narrative portrays as grounded in something universally human and recognized as such by Cyrus.

In Aristotle's philosophy, there is no room for this particular ethical dimension. There, our treatment of others and our own ethical development are situated and made sense of only in the context of our own community. Our obligation to others is based on this shared community, and on a shared language with which to express and understand our obligations to one another. It is significant that Herodotus' story not only has as its three main protagonists a Greek, a Lydian, and a Persian (with Adrastus from still another community), but that the difference in languages is made explicit when Cyrus, at the very point where Solon's wisdom establishes an identity between Croesus and Cyrus, needs to learn about Solon's message through translators. The importance the Greeks attributed to language as a definer of cultural boundaries and as an indicator of otherness is apparent in their use of the term "barbaroi" to refer to all non-Greek speakers; though lacking the negative connotations of its English derivative, by lumping all others together (much like our word "foreigners") the term does denote a clear division

between insiders and outsiders. Here, however, the vulnerability ethic is shown to have its characteristic power precisely in a zone beyond traditional boundaries, whether that be conceived of as the Homeric competitive ethic, Aristotle's polis-centered ethic, or the linguistic differences dividing cultures. If Aristotle's ethic can be said to be polis-centered, the vulnerability ethic might be called a universalist ethic, expressly capable of operating across cultures and language barriers. Aristotle's ethics requires carefully cultivated, life-long practice and reflection, woven into everyday life and involving the entire community to see it through. It is not capable of thriving or grounding itself outside this web of associations. Solon's vulnerability ethic, however, is grounded on the mortality that all humans share, and thereby grounded on an insight into something that the story suggests is universal.

In the drama of the Croesus story, the vulnerability ethic is seen to operate more as an epiphany rather than relying upon tradition, training, and careful reflection. The narrative suggests that just a few conceptual underpinnings, or convictions, are needed to produce the epiphany. For Cyrus, and the tragedy of Croesus in general, the most important conviction the epiphany relies on is that if we don't conceive of ourselves as in some sense identical with the person who has suffered a reversal, the gods will hurt us, and we will suffer. A great Nemesis seized Croesus because he didn't perceive this identification, and Cyrus acts "fearing retribution." Again, however, Herodotus provides a more rational mode, a more conceptual underpinning to the insight: Cyrus alters course, fearing retribution but also "with a full awareness now that nothing in human life is invulnerable to change." Here we are back into Solon's sermon grounded in thought experiments about time and change, and in the awareness of human limitations and reversals that are not just imposed by the stronger and jealous gods.

It is important to stress that (as both the immediate context of this "conversion" and subsequent deeds of both men in

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Herodotus' narrative make clear) the vulnerability ethic does not replace the competitive ethic, the traditional ethics in which people and cultures vie for superiority over one another, helping friends and hurting enemies. It is seen here, significantly, as operating in an extreme situation of that competitive ethic, where one man is ready to burn another alive. It presents a radical alternative to this, touching on something felt and thought to be fundamental and universal. It does not, however, displace the competitive ethic by creating or envisioning a whole new way of life (a pattern characteristic of the very different Saul-to-Paul conversions) but rather co-exists with it and on occasion moderates its extremes.<sup>17</sup>

#### THE VULNERABILITY ETHIC IN HOMER

The vulnerability ethic that I have identified in Herodotus has an interesting and I believe overlooked importance in the epics of Homer as well. This may at first be surprising, since the competitive ethic of warriors and of aristocratic culture based on wealth and physical dominance has its most famous literary representation in his epics. No one to my knowledge has identified in these epics the formulation of anything like Herodotus' vulnerability ethic, although, in light of Homer's portrayal of the extremes of the competitive ethic, it should not be totally surprising if there too the pattern holds, of a vulnerability ethic co-existing with and mitigating, on occasion even over-riding, the demands of the competitive ethic. And this, I will argue, is the case, not just implicitly, as might be argued for the confrontation of Achilles and Priam at the end of the *Iliad*, but most explicitly and pointedly in the second half of the *Odyssey*.

In his influential work on Greek ethics, A. W. Adkins characterizes early Greek society as "a society whose highest commendation is bestowed upon men who must successfully exhibit the qualities of a warrior, but must also be men of wealth and social position; men, too, who must display their valour both in war and in peace to protect their

dependents.”<sup>18</sup> These are the men who receive the highest term of approval in this culture—they are the *agathoi*, the “good” or “noble” or “virtuous” men: “Were there any word of censure strong enough to override the claims of the *agathos* to do as he pleases, they would surely have used it. But there is no such word: society’s need of the *agathos* is too strong.”<sup>19</sup>

Adkins does allow for an alternative ethic in the Homeric poems. This alternative ethic comprises what he calls the “quiet virtues” of thoughtfulness or circumspection. But he identifies this alternative as an ethic of the feminine world, with no direct impact upon the wealthy, powerful warrior. These nobles, Adkins argues, are portrayed as doing what they want unhindered—not necessarily taking advantage of another’s weakness (they are to protect dependents and the weak), but not checked or restrained in their behavior by the demands of any ethic other than the competitive.

For Adkins, a good example of how the noble man acts from a position of strength and to whom discredit is due when he cannot project this strength, appears in the treatment accorded to beggars—in this case to Odysseus disguised as a beggar:

When Penelope chides Telemachus for allowing the “beggar” to be thus maltreated, . . . both the situation and the rebuke are the same. The “beggar” and Telemachus are each discredited, for each has in his own way fallen short of *aretê* [virtue]. The suitors are not reproached at all: to do *kaka*, to do harm, is not to be *kakos* [bad, shameful]; to be *kakos* is to be the sort of person to whom *kaka* may be done with impunity, since he cannot defend himself: and it is this condition which is *aischron* [base, shameful] (42).<sup>20</sup>

This ethical world, as Adkins conceives it, is not open to any claims beyond those constructed and projected by the ones in charge; the beggar has no independent claims to decent treatment by those above him, nor do the stronger have any imperative to moderate their behavior towards the beggar, except in defense of their pride and status as a protector.

According to Adkins, the suitors, whose treatment of the beggar is such a primary theme in the second half of the *Odyssey*, “are not reproached at all.”

Adkins is right to note the beggar is indeed a key figure in the *Odyssey*, but has entirely overlooked that precisely in the treatment of the beggar there is an ethic in play altogether different from the competitive ethic that is the ruling basis of Homeric behavior. This alternative ethic is different too from the “quiet virtues” that Adkins finds expressed especially by the women in the epic, who do not have the scope for action that men do. Throughout the second half of the epic, and as long as Odysseus disguised as a weaker man, this ethic with similarities to the vulnerability ethic of Solon is persistently put forth. I will briefly review some of the more significant moments of this “beggar ethic” in Homer before comparing it with Herodotus.

First, Homer explicitly signals that a character’s particular treatment of Odysseus-as-beggar will be a touchstone of morality in the epic, and he does so during Odysseus’ first encounter with another person after landing in Ithaca. After his loyal swineherd Eumaeus (a servant of the family who, significantly, had himself been a nobleman before he was kidnapped) offers hospitality to his disguised master, Odysseus thanks him for his kind treatment, and Eumaeus responds: “Stranger: it would not be right (*themis*) for me to disrespect a stranger, even if someone less worthy (*kakion*) than you came along. For all strangers and beggars come from Zeus” (14.56–58). Later, in striking harmony with terms of the discussion above between Herodotus and Aristotle, Eumaeus says he respects the beggar, not because of any favor the beggar might do him, but because he fears the Zeus of Strangers, and pities the beggar (14.389: *Dia xenion deisas auton t’ eleairôn*).

If this were the end of it, one might simply call the beggar ethic a sort of nascent slave morality, restricted to those who matter least and have little power. At the very least, however, the stature and centrality of the swineherd and cowherd in

the epic elevate the values associated with them. But this theme of the proper treatment of beggars is also further developed and more explicitly presented as the action of the epic proceeds to the palace, implicating the aristocratic suitors in its scope alongside slaves and beggars.<sup>21</sup>

In a long section in the middle of book 17, Homer expressly says that Athena moved Odysseus “to mix with the suitors and gather scraps of bread, so he might find out who was decent and who was lawless” (17.363; the word for “lawless” is *athemistoi*, the opposite of those who observe the *themis* cited by Eumaeus in his treatment of the beggar). Most of the suitors respond by showing pity (*eleairontes*, 17.367) and giving him food. Antinous, however, the leader of the suitors who has already distinguished himself as the worst of the suitors (by planning to kill Telemachus, for instance), responds with rude and threatening behavior, as does the goatherd Melanthius, one of the most despicable figures in the epic. Odysseus’ response is to press the issue further by filling in his background with the story of how he came to be a beggar: “I too once was prosperous (*olbios*, 17. 420), lived among others in a rich house, and often gave to wanderers who came my way anything they might need. I had numerous servants, and an abundance of everything. But Zeus dashed it all to nothing—such, somehow, was his wish—putting me in the hands of pirates.” Antinous replies to this tale of reversal with a rude threat, and when the beggar reproaches him for being stingy even with someone else’s property, Antinous throws a footstool that hits the beggar. Odysseus’ response identifies the precise nature of the injustice he feels has been done to him: he has been wounded by Antinous, not fighting in defense of his possessions, but because of his hunger, which is to say, for something that has befallen him through misfortune and accident. Odysseus then prays, “If there be gods for beggars, if there be avenging Furies, may Antinous die before he can marry” (17.475–76).

Antinous counters by threatening to strip the skin off the beggar, but the other suitors are appalled that Antinous even

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struck him with a stool. They also provide some divinely-grounded reasons for treating unfortunate wanderers with respect and restraint: the gods, they warn him, sometimes come down to earth in the guise of wandering strangers, precisely to test whether men will commit hubris by mistreating a beggar, or will keep to proper bounds (17.487).

To drive home this message—that the unfortunate wanderer, the person with no status at all in the community, no claim to protection by ties to a stronger person or any recognized communal dependency, nonetheless does have some claim to decent treatment, in part because of undeserved and certainly unforeseen reversals of fortune—Homer repeats the scene and the message later in the epic. When Odysseus the beggar is mistreated by the disloyal suitor-loving serving girl Melanthe (19.75), Odysseus responds with the same words of caution he gave to Antinous (“I too was once prosperous”).

The proper response to the beggar, patterned for us by the good Eumaeus’ treatment of Odysseus in disguise, is also prominently portrayed and modeled in various places as a touchstone of character. In striking contrast to Melanthe and Antinous, the essential goodness of the cowherd Philoetius is economically expressed by his expression of pity for the beggar: “The poor man,” he says to Eumaeus, “he looks like he could have been royalty. But the gods can plunge a man in misery and set him wandering, even if the one to whom they portion pain has been a king” (20.194). Then he turns to the beggar: “Stranger, may prosperity come to you in the future. But for now you are held by numerous evils” (20.199). Among the various sentiments and ideas expressed here, what stands out is the feature of mutability: kings can turn into beggars, and today’s misery may be followed by prosperity.

We can see already in Homer, then, the critical elements of the vulnerability ethic as presented in Herodotus. First, we have examples of great men enjoying prosperity who suffer a reversal, including Odysseus himself (who, while not a real beggar, is forced by circumstance to play a beggar and so, to

survive, must be a beggar if only temporarily), as well as examples of the proper treatment towards others who have suffered such a reversal. We are shown suitors who, like Cyrus, realize that a similar experience could befall them through the vicissitudes of time, and who react with pity. There is also fear. And as in the Croesus story, the impetus to avoid hubris, and to stay within the bounds proper to humans, comes from the divine world. For Homer's characters, this is still more anthropomorphically conceived than the vague "god" who is offended at Croesus' transgressively high attitude. In Homer, the gods are conceived as appearing in the guise of a beggar to walk among mortals, such that one's treatment of a beggar is potentially one's treatment of a god. This is an economical way of grounding the ethic, in this case not with Solon's arguments that have the effect of positing an essential identity of superior and inferior with respect to a common vulnerability to the changes of fortune, but by substituting, in the place of a weak person from whom one has nothing to fear, a powerful god, towards whom rough treatment is intuitively sensed as wrong and dangerous. Just how the gods take vengeance is not expressed by the characters. Note though that in Odysseus' invocation of these avenging powers, he calls upon the Erinyes, the fearsome Furies. And the later action of the epic makes the mechanisms of vengeance quite clear: Antinous, the arch-violator of the beggar, in full confidence of his invulnerability ("Bloodshed was the furthest thing from his mind," Homer tells us, 22.111), is lifting a cup of wine to his lips on the feast-day of the Archer-god, when Odysseus, aided by Apollo and Athena, kills him with an arrow through his offending throat. Melanthius himself is tortured to death—his genitals are fed to the dogs, his hands and feet chopped off—and Melanthe is strung up to die "most piteously" with the other disloyal serving women.

How people treat the beggar becomes the vital measure of the people who help or oppose Odysseus; it can characterize and elevate the lowest (cowherd and swineherd) and con-

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denn the most aristocratic (Antinous) as well as other servants (Melantho). It is an ethical standard that creates a communal solidarity based on treatment of the beggar, of the one who has suffered misfortune, in contrast to a community simply comprising the dominant people acting in accordance with heroic virtues. And it is not the case that the only proponents of this vulnerability ethic are those who are weak, those who would out of weakness most benefit from adopting such an ethic in an attempt to ward off the stronger; the suitors who espouse it are the privileged aristocracy of Greek society. It is not an ethic of the weak in contrast to the strong, but an ethic enjoined on all, and specifically directed at those who have more power. While not presented as a wholesale or thorough replacement for hierarchies of nobility, wealth, and power and those codes of behavior developed in that aristocratic context, it is presented as a significant moral modification of it. It is based on a common humanity and held to be effective, as it was in Herodotus, across different communities and cultures and backed by the utmost moral sanctions and dire consequences conceivable.

The reach that Herodotus envisions for Solon's vulnerability ethic, as well as the related version in Homer, should not be exaggerated. As noted earlier, Solon (Herodotus) makes no attempt to develop it into an elaborate code of conduct, or to undermine the validity of the competitive ethic. In fact, Solon's views on happiness presume traditional communal values and competition. What makes Tellus the Athenian and the brothers from Argos the happiest of mortals is, yes, the fact that their lives could no longer suffer reversal, but once this has been accounted for, the more positive and traditional indicators of good fortune are what win them first and second place in happiness. It is also a traditional, conservative touch that, in each case, the Greek polis and not simply Solon is involved as the judge and ratifier of their lives. Each story culminates with exceptional communal honors given to the paradigms of happiness upon their deaths. In addition, Solon makes clear that each from the

start was lucky to have been born in a polis that provided vital support for their material and cultural well-being. The contents of happiness are also traditional, and in line with most of the common opinions about happiness that Aristotle himself catalogs in various contexts. Finally, note that Solon accepts without question the competitive spirit so characteristic of the ancient Greek world: not only does the entire discussion of happiness take place in the context of a competition for first place in the contest of happiness, but the evidence that ratifies his winners in this competition is that their communities recognized their preeminence over others—a burial mound for Tellus where he died, and statues at Delphi for Cleobis and Biton.

The vulnerability ethic that Solon develops, and that Herodotus weaves into his narrative, operates on a different level, not invalidating the traditional contents of happiness, but putting especially the one who enjoys these contents into a new attitude toward their life. It urges an awareness that breaks the sense of an ownership over success and prosperity, that breaks the firm boundaries between those who are privileged with goods and those who are deprived. This attitude in turn can lead to a modification of one's behavior, as it did in the case of Cyrus and of those who showed the beggar respect in the *Odyssey*.

#### HERODOTUS' ACHIEVEMENT

That human life was a thing of chance, and that the gods, in various ways, would punish those foolish enough to deny it, was a commonplace in Greek poetry and drama before and after Herodotus. And I have argued that Homer long before gave expression to an ethic that shares its core components—that a universal mortal vulnerability brings with it obligations towards others that are grounded by divine imperatives—with Herodotus' story of Croesus. Herodotus' achievement, in addition to creating a compelling dramatic vehicle for the ethic, was twofold. First, he combined the

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more traditional mythical and oracular elements involving avenging deities and fate with a parallel rational assessment of vulnerability, concentrated in Solon's arithmetical reflections and maxim. He never dispenses with the divine realm as an explanation for cause and effect and as a check on behavior, but at the same time he employs the power of rational reflection to achieve a similar result. The means may be simple, and in isolation the insights of Solon may seem banal truths involving calendars, the everyday experience of change, and the traditional markers of happiness, but as the response of Croesus suggests, the import of these "secular" observations calls for a self-awareness that can meet deep psychological resistance. Aristotle's reflections on similar concerns are of course much more challenging and rigorous, and he probes in addition some of the possible consequences of the vulnerability ethic that Herodotus never considers. But Herodotus preceded him in the non-mythical conceptualization of the issues, credit for which the philosopher does not explicitly grant the mere historian, even as he pays him the respect of a lengthy debate in the *Ethics*. Herodotus, in addition, explored a dimension of Solon's maxim (how it can influence our treatment of others) that Aristotle does not consider in his focus on a polis-centered paideia.

A second achievement, closely related to the first, is that the characters are also given a non-mythical context, and the story is given application in the historical world that is the subject of Herodotus' investigations. Croesus and Solon certainly had legendary status and Herodotus shapes their stories for literary ends, but they are part of a world about which Herodotus "knows something for certain," as he says. Furthermore, Solon's illustrations of happy men (Tellus, Cleobis and Biton), while partaking of legendary status, are non-mythical Greek citizens set in the real-world context of specific Greek communities. He thus is an important figure in the formation of a new means of expressing contemporary concerns, applying these concerns (traditionally expressed through the medium of myth) to a world rich in

contemporary detail, even as his use of unmeasured language brings his style closer to the language spoken by the men and women engaged in that world. For this combination of imaginative detail, character portrayal, thematic complexity, and a more realistic or contemporary setting than traditional myth, the story of Croesus more accurately earns Herodotus the title Father of the Novel than Father of Lies.

## NOTES

1. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge 1986); Arthur Adkins, *Merit and Responsibility: A Study in Greek Values* (Chicago 1975).

2. Readers unfamiliar with the story can consult my translation on-line (edited of Herodotean digressions): [www.bu.edu/arion](http://www.bu.edu/arion). My translation includes Herodotus' "proem" and the introduction prior to the Croesus story, since this is important to the story and my essay. I also vary conventional formatting so that the dialogue appears the way dialogue is presented in novels today—a simple and seemingly superficial alteration that nonetheless alters the story's reception in accordance with the dramatic qualities of the narrative.

3. Charles Beyé, *Ancient Greek Literature and Society* (Ithaca 1987), 215.

4. This, most readers would agree, is the primary way to interpret Solon's aphorism. Complications for interpretation, however, exist, as Aristotle will demonstrate with his usual thoroughness. Perhaps most of the confusion arises because the insight about human vulnerability involves not just the consciousness of the one experiencing life, but requires an evaluator or spectator of that same consciousness, an observer asked to render judgment. The aphorism, and the insight, is not that a person cannot experience true happiness until death delivers us to a better place, but that we cannot render our judgment about a life's prosperity until we have seen the whole story. Solon is not devaluing one's present experience of happiness and prosperity; on the contrary, its value is presupposed by the fear over the loss of happiness, and by the importance of its measure in our lives.

5. For a discussion of the similarities and differences between Solon the poet and Solon in Herodotus, see C. C. Chiasson, "The Herodotean Solon," *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 27 (1986), 249–62. After noting how Herodotus' Solon is plausibly built on an informed understanding of Solon's own poetry, Chiasson identifies precisely the Herodotean Solon's emphasis on the need to observe the end of human life as the chief Herodotean element with no parallel in Solon's extant poetry.

6. The translation of this passage and of chapters 10 and 11 that follow is by H. Rackham in *Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* (Cambridge, MA 1934).

7. S. Broadie, in her commentary on *Ethics* 1.10, envisions a different interpretation of Solon's argument. According to Broadie, Solon "insists that no part of a life, however good, counts as happy if the end is unforeseen disaster. But why," she asks, "insist this and deny oneself the possibility of pointing out live examples of happiness?" I think this misses Solon's primary meaning (and Aristotle's main concern with it, though he too gets sidetracked) by putting too much emphasis on the spectator's role of assigning and judging happiness, rather than on the analysis of the conditions of life and human agency that affect us as we experience life. Solon is not denying the importance of experiences of happiness as they happen; he confirms their importance, as the sum of human happiness. The whole complication of the spectator as the one assigning human happiness arose from the dramatic form of the argument as it appeared in Herodotus' narrative. True, the awareness that one's present happiness—a great community reputation, healthy children, plenty of money—could all disappear in a moment can conceivably cloud our present happiness, but this shadow of caution is ultimately a device to secure happiness by dissuading the overreaching that can destroy it. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe (Oxford 2002), 285.

8. This aspect of the vulnerability ethic—that it runs the risk of taking one out of the fullness of the moment—is given moving expression by Lee McConaughy Woodruff, in her account of the disaster that struck when her husband Bob Woodruff, reporting in Iraq shortly after his promotion to co-anchor of CBS, was seriously wounded by a roadside bomb. Her account begins:

"It's human nature to desperately believe that we, ourselves, are immune to the worst of life's vagaries. I subscribed to the naive theory that if I lived a good life, recycled, was kind to people, put my head down and worked hard, I just might reach the end of my days relatively unscathed. Oh sure, I was prepared for the obvious things like aging parents, run-of-the-mill disappointments, a friend's nasty divorce, a child's lackluster performance. But I think most of us nurse a quiet hope that the horrible things, the really bad things, aren't going to happen to us. *If we lived life waiting for the other shoe to drop, we'd never fully engage in the world*" [italics mine].

—From "A Circle of Healing," *The Colgate Scene* (July 2007), 12.

9. T. H. Irwin, in "Permanent Happiness: Aristotle and Solon," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 3 (1985) 89–124, while agreeing with Aristotle on the inadequacy of Solon's position, misinterprets the meaning and nature of the "prosperity" envisioned by Herodotus' Solon. Irwin confines it to the more material forms of prosperity, thereby more easily critiquing it as a rather unattractive "flexibility" in the face of adversity, as contrasted to Aristotle's more stable conception of virtue and happiness. Admittedly, Aristotle's problem with the Solon's position is that it is indeed not stable enough, but there is in Aristotle's discussion no sense that he limits the reversals and vulnerability to external material goods or even to "success" in life. Certainly Herodotus' Solon does not portray his ideally happy individuals as flexible people who identify happiness with the acquisition of material goods and are willing to adapt their behavior to worldly success and

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prosperity. Material prosperity, as noted, figures in the good life of Tellus and the twin athletes, but more important components are honor and the health and safety of other people, especially children. And Solon allows that poor people can be happier than rich people, precisely because things like personal suffering, rather than material goods, have such power. The vulnerability Solon envisions, and which I believe Aristotle does grapple with, is more radical than the loss of material possessions (though this may characterize *Croesus*' conception of happiness).

10. Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle* (Chapel Hill 1987), 89–90.

11. Halliwell (note 10), 90, n.1

12. Halliwell (note 10), 90.

13. Nussbaum (note 1), 388.

14. Nussbaum (note 1), 390.

15. Halliwell (note 10), 90.

16. It should also be noted that especially Sophocles (as to be expected) has people in his plays give expression to the vulnerability encapsulated in Solon's maxim. In the opening scene of *Ajax*, for instance, Odysseus refuses to gloat over Athena's humiliation of Ajax because he recognizes something similar could happen to him. A closer parallel still ends *Oedipus Tyrannus*, where the chorus concludes that we should "consider no mortal happy until he has crossed the border of life."

17. A modern parallel corroborates some of the essential features of the vulnerability ethic's co-existence with a more competitive and divisive ethic. At the height of the cold war, during a brief period after the Cuban missile crisis, prominent U.S. military leaders were advocating a first strike against the Soviets, even as Kennedy and Khrushchev were pitted against each other on an international stage of brinkmanship. The Kennedy administration, shaken by how close the two powers had come to starting a nuclear war, lowered its pitch about the evils of the Soviet Union and set about preparing the American public for a less bellicose stance to the Soviets, creating space for more tempered options even as it signaled its determination to oppose and combat communism. In the summer before his own tragic ending made him relevant to this discussion in a different way, Kennedy delivered one of his most moving speeches, in which he schooled the public on the proper attitude to have to our adversary:

So let us not be blind to our differences—but let us also direct attention to our common interests and to the means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children's future. And we are all mortal.

—Commencement Address at American University (June 10, 1963)

The parallels are striking. Two foes, in this case nations, with competing interests and disparate cultures are locked in a competitive struggle that is

and will continue to be the dominant ethic of their relationship. This competition brings them to the brink of an act of violence that is in some ways consistent with the competitive ethic, but is sensed as well to be a violation of some universal. And while Kennedy's first appeal to create a living emotional sense of this universal relies on a new space-age awareness of a common planet, the emotional climax of his speech—our children's vulnerability and our common mortality—is familiar Herodotean territory. As in the world of Herodotus, however, the zero-sum game of competition is not abandoned; Cyrus continues the expansion of his empire with conquest, and the Americans would continue to oppose the Soviet Union until its dissolution.

18. Adkins (note 1), 34.

19. Adkins (note 1), 38.

20. Adkins (note 1), 42.

21. It will be clear to those familiar with Nietzsche's characterization of Greek ethics that the appearance of the vulnerability ethic in Herodotus and especially Homer seriously qualifies his genealogy of morals. Though such a discussion is outside the scope of my essay, I'll simply note here that the following characterizations of a master morality that Nietzsche finds exemplified in the Homeric aristocratic ethos are all qualified or violated by the vulnerability ethic. According to Nietzsche's scheme, we will find in Homer:

a) an acceptance and cultivation of an unbridgeable distance between high and low: "The noble human being separates from himself those in whom the opposite of such exalted, proud states finds expression: he despises them. . . . One feels contempt for . . . the doglike people who allow themselves to be mistreated, the begging flatterers, above all the liars" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 260);

b) no limitations on behavior towards those in a lower rank: "Against beings of a lower rank, against everything alien, one may behave as one pleases or 'as the heart desires'" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, 260);

c) a condemnation of pity: "One loses force when one pities. . . . One has ventured to call pity a virtue; in every noble morality it counts as a weakness" (*Antichrist* 7).

The first two quotations are from Walter Kaufman, trans., *Basic Writings of Nietzsche* (New York 1992), 394–95, 396; the third is from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale, trans. (London 2003), 130.