Mimnermus, Fragment 2.4–5

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FRAGMENT Two of Mimnermus, on the brevity of youth and the miseries of old age, begins as follows:

ήμεις δ’, οὐ τε φύλλα φῶς πολυάθεμος ὄρη
ἐρασις, ὁτ’ αἰσθανόμενα ἥδεμα ἄθλοι,
τοῖς ίκελοι πήχυνοι ἐπὶ χρόνοις ἀνθεκὼς ἡβής
tερπόμεθα, πρὸς θεῶν εἰδότες οὕτε κακὸν
οὕτ’ ἁγαθὸν. Κυρεῖσ τε παρεστήκασι μέλαινα, ...

The first three verses present no serious problems, but the phrase πρὸς θεῶν εἰδότες οὕτε κακὸν | οὕτ’ ἁγαθὸν, although deceptively simple at first glance, has never received an explanation which has won general approval. Many scholars have tended to concentrate on κακὸν and to interpret the passage in the light of what follows in the rest of the poem. In other words, it has generally been held that the young, because of the carefree happiness that attends youth, give no thought to the κακὰ which await as soon as the brief period of youth is passed. They do not know that poverty, childlessness and disease (vv.11–16) are in store for them. The purpose of this paper is to argue that κακὸν and ἁγαθὸν have equal significance, that neither expression refers to a future allotment by the Keres or Zeus but only to the period of youth, and that it is their unawareness of κακὸν and ἁγαθὸν that constitutes the blissfulness of the young.

In recent years considerable attention has been devoted to the passage, and it may be useful if the interpretations which have been put forward are briefly outlined. In three successive volumes of Otia¹ readers were asked to submit their views on the passage; five scholars responded. Jéhu thinks the meaning is that the young, “prodigues de leurs forces, sont insouciants, imprévoyants, ils ne se rendent pas compte du mal—ou du bien—qui est en germe dans leurs actions, ils

¹ Otia 15 (1967) 131–32, 16 (1968) 27–28, and 17 (1969) 51–52. I have quoted at some length from these contributions since they contain most of the points of view that have been held concerning the passage and since their omission from L’année philologique may have resulted in their being overlooked by some students of Mimnermus. All earlier studies can be found in Br-occia’s detailed treatment of the passage cited in n.5.
ne prévoient pas les conséquences de leur conduite.” Josserand asks whether εἰδότης denotes “la notion de connaissance théorique” or “expérimentale,” rejecting the latter because “si c’est une disgrâce de faire l’expérience du mal, il est inconcevable qu’on en dise autant de l’expérience du bien.” He then quotes Sophocles, Ajax 552–55 (see below), which he feels contains essentially the same thought as that expressed by Mimnermus. “Connaitre le bien et le mal, c’est à la fois découvrir leur existence et les éprouver.” Pironet argues that κακών refers ahead to the miseries described as attending old age and that ἄγεθὼν refers back to the pleasures of youth. The young do not know what awaits them and they do not know that the period of their youth is the only period worth living. Crahay is largely in agreement with Josserand, but argues that the ignorance of youth is an evil. “Ils sont heureux, mais d’un bonheur fugace, et, malheureusement, les dieux ne leur ont pas révélé où est pour eux le malheur (qui les attend) et le bonheur (dont ils jouissent actuellement).” Finally, Stégen comments on the fact that Mimnermus “feint de croire que l’adulte ne pratique ni le bien, ni le mal, mais subit seulement les misères de la nature et du sort” and finds the Ajax passage only partially parallel, since his “confusion est due à la folie et non à l’ignorance.”

Babut⁸ quotes Defradas⁹ as an example of the interpretation commonly held, “les jeunes gens ne peuvent connaître que par leur opposition le bon et le mauvais: ne connaissant pas encore le mauvais, ils ne peuvent jouir de leur bonheur,” and notes that if this is correct “la phrase témoignerait d’un pessimisme total, car la suite démontre que le bonheur est également interdit à la vieillesse.” Such “pessimisme total,” however, is not only contradicted by several passages in Mimnermus, it is also contradicted by fr.2 itself, since vv.3–4 and 7–8 clearly state that “aussi longtemps que dure la jeunesse, l’homme peut jouir sans réserve de ce que lui offre la vie.” Babut feels that the key to proper understanding of the passage can be found in Semonides, who in fr.1 “opposait l’ignorance humaine à l’omniscience divine.” Mimnermus, however, realized that “l’ignorance du lendemain, la légèreté d’esprit, qualités propres à la jeunesse et dénoncées comme telles par Séémonide, à la suite d’Homère, étaient en réalité la condition même du bonheur que viendra détruire inévitablement la vieillesse.” Instead of denouncing “la folie irréfléchie d’une jeunesse

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qui rêve l’impossible sans savoir de quoi demain sera fait,” Mimnermus maintains that “l’ignorance du lendemain, véritable don des dieux (πρὸς θεῶν!) est la condition du seul bonheur auquel puisse prétendre l’homme.” According to Babut, therefore, Mimnermus develops the same themes as Semonides, but “leur confère une tout autre signification et une portée très supérieure, parce qu’il les intègre, pour la première fois, dans une conception originale de la vie, que l’on peut définir comme une éthique hédoniste.”

Finally, there is the interpretation proposed by Martinazzoli and in greater detail by Broccia. According to them the young are blissfully unaware of the existence of good and evil. For Mimnermus real happiness consists in not realizing that one is happy, in not knowing that good and evil exist as opposite categories. This view, it seems to me, does the least violence to Mimnermus’ language and, as will be illustrated shortly, is supported by similar examples in several poets. Before this is done, however, we should examine the interpretation, stated in one form or another by several of the sources mentioned above and in fact held by most critics of the passage, namely that the happiness of youth consists in the unawareness of what the future has in store.

One of the commonest themes of Greek literature is the theme of man’s inability to foretell the future, to know in advance what fate or the gods will bring to pass. We see this in the opening verses of Semonides fr.1, as Babut and many others have noted, and since Semonides was a contemporary or near-contemporary of Mimnermus and since there is a degree of verbal similarity between the two passages, it is often assumed that Mimnermus too is referring to the same general themes. Semonides says that Zeus holds the τέλος of all things, while mortals, lacking νοῦς and ‘subject to what the day brings’ (ἐπήμεροι), live like sheep, οὐδὲν εἰδότες | ὃς ἐκάστον ἐκτελευτήσει θεός. Mimnermus uses the same participle (εἰδότες), the ὃς clause might be assumed to include both κακόν and ἀγαθόν, and both poets speak of τέλος, i.e., the ‘end’ or ‘fulfillment’ which lies in the future. That Mimnermus, however, is not referring to a future

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6 Cf. also Theognis 141–42, ἀθρόμοι δὲ μάτισσα νομίζομεν, εἰδότες οὐδέν | θεοὶ δὲ κατὰ σφέτερον πάντα τελοῦσι νόν, where the same verbal similarities appear.
event which may turn out to have a τέλος that is κακόν or ἀγαθόν is suggested by two points.

First, from among the vast number of examples which illustrate the theme of the uncertainty of the future I have found none which does not make it absolutely clear that the reference is to the future. Mimnermus states simply that the young know neither κακόν nor ἀγαθόν, not that they do not know what will be κακόν or ἀγαθόν.⁷

Second, as Broccia has clearly demonstrated, the elaborate enjambments in vv.1–5 and the fact that the subject is unchanged from ἡμεῖς in v.1 to ἀγαθόν in v.5 show that from the beginning of the fragment to ἀγαθόν the thought is concentrated on the pleasure which attends youth, shortlived though it is. There is no suggestion that this pleasure is marred by an inability on the part of the young to know what awaits them in the future. The subject and the thought change with the introduction of the Keres, so that we have a sharp contrast between the two extremes, the total blessedness of youth and the total misery of old age, rather than a kind of transition from one to the other. Nowhere does Mimnermus state or imply that an inability to know what lies ahead detracts from the happiness of youth or indeed that anything at all detracts from it.

Since, therefore, a reference to the future is unlikely, Mimnermus must mean that the gods⁸ do not grant the young knowledge of either good or evil, but those who hold this interpretation have made little effort to find parallel passages in support of it. The Greek poets often speak not only of the happiness of youth, but also of the pleasure derived either from lack of knowledge in itself or from lack of knowl-

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⁷ Some have argued that in Mimnermus ἀγαθόν is merely an example of the Greek love of polarity, of rhetorical antithesis devoid of any real meaning, but I find this unlikely. Semonides has two passages involving the same or synonymous words, and in neither is polarity the correct explanation. Although W. J. Verdenius, “Semonides über die Frauen,” Mnemosyne 4.21 (1968) 133–36, argues that in fr.7.9 οὐδὲ τῶν ἄμεινόνων has “keine aktuelle, sondern nur rhetorische Bedeutung,” ν.10–11, τὸ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν εἶπε πολλάκις κακὸν, | τὸ δ’ ἐκθέντο, show that in vv.8–9 both κακὸν and ἄμεινόνων must have equal significance. Verdenius sees the same “rhetorische Bedeutung” in the κακὸν of fr.7.22–23, οὗτε γὰρ κακὸν | οὗτ’ ἐκθέντο οὖσών οῖδε παραφή γνώσι, but Semonides is characterizing the earth-woman as one who is totally lacking in knowledge, as one who is the epitome of stupidity, and in order to illustrate this both κακὸν and ἐκθέντο must be significant. This passage bears a certain specious resemblance to Mimnermus, and I had at first thought it might serve as a parallel to indicate that in Mimnermus too the reference is not to the future; but the context is so different that a comparison of this type seems inappropriate.

⁸ That πρὸς θεῶν denotes the source of knowledge rather than the source of good and evil is suggested by the word order. For the gods in this capacity, cf. ll. 18.420 and Od. 6.12.
edge of one of the opposite categories of good and evil. A particularly apposite parallel for the passage in Mimnermus, the only one which commentators on the poet cite, is Sophocles, Ajax 552–55, where Ajax is speaking to his young son:

κατ'οις σε καὶ νῦν τοῦτο γε ἴηλον ἔχω,
όθονε κ' οὐδὲν τῶν ηταθήν ψυχῶν.
ἐν τῷ φρονεῖν γὰρ μηδὲν ἦδιστος βιος,
[τῷ μὴ φρονεῖν γὰρ κάρπ' ἀνώδυνον κακόν,]
ἐὼς τὸ χαῖρεν καὶ τὸ λυπεῖται μάθης.

Similar too are Sophocles, Trachiniae 144–47:

τὸ γὰρ νεαζον ἐν τοιοῦδε βόσκεται
χώροις αὐτοῦ, καὶ νῦν οὐ θάλπος θεοῦ,
οὐδ' ὁμβρος, οὐδὲ πνευμάτων οὐδὲν κλονεῖ,
ἀλλ' ἱδώναις ἢμοσθον ἐξαίρει βιον . . .

and Oedipus Coloneus 1229–38:

ὡς εὖτε ἂν τὸ νέον παρῇ
κούφας ἀφροσύνας φέρον,
τίς πλάγχθη πολὺ μόχθος ἐ—
ξιῶ; τίς οὐ καμάτων ἐν;
φθόνος, εὐαίσθης, ἔρικ, μάχαι
καὶ φόνοι τον τε κατάμερπτον ἐπιλέοιξη
πῦματον ἀκρατές ἀπροκόμμιον
γῆρας ἄφιλον, ἵνα πρόπατα
κακὰ κακῶν ἔννοικεί.

The benefit derived from lack of knowledge, without this being confined to the period of youth, is made clear from Euripides, fr.205 Nauck:

φρονώ δ' ὃ πάσχω, καὶ τὸσ' οὐ εμπρόν κακὸν
τὸ μή εἰδέναι γὰρ ἰδονήν ἔχει τινὰ
νοεύντα, κέρδος δ' ἐν κακοῖς ἀγνωσίᾳ.

Cf. also Apollodorus of Carystus, fr.10 Edmonds:

οὐ γὰρ ἀτυχοῦστες τὸν χρόνον κερδαίνομεν
ὄσον ἄν ποτὲ ἀγνοῶμεν ἐγγυτηκότες.

*Cf. also Eur. Med. 48, νέα γὰρ φρονίς οὐκ ἰὴρισίν φίλει, and ΙΑ 677, ζηλῶ οὐ μᾶλλον ἦ 'με
to τοῦ μηδὲν φρονεῖν. In ν.1243-44 of the same play we find the opposite view: αἰσθημά τοι |
kαν νηπίοις γε τῶν κακῶν ἐγγύγεται.
Several passages illustrate the belief that constant misery is better than experience of both good and evil. Cf., for example, Euripides, fr.285.15–18 Nauck:

ο δ’ οὐδὲν οὐδείς, διὰ τέλους δὲ δυστυχῶν
tοσώδεν νυκτὶ τοῦ γάρ εὗ τητώμενος
οὐκ οἶδεν, ἄεὶ δυστυχῶν κακῶς τ’ ἔχων.
οὕτως ἄριστον μὴ πεπειράσθω καλῶν.

It would seem, therefore, that Mimnermus is stating a view commonly held, namely that youth is a time of happiness because the young do not yet have any knowledge of good or evil. They are unaware of the existence of good and evil and it is this unawareness which constitutes their blissfulness.

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10 Cf. also Eur. HF 1291–93 and Bacch. 1259–62.
11 Jebb in his commentary on OC 1229ff cites the parallels from Ajax and Trachiniae, and some of the other passages cited above appear in Pearson’s note on Soph. fr.86.3, where he also quotes the famous ending of Gray’s ode On a distant prospect of Eton College, ”Thought would destroy their Paradise. | No more; where ignorance is bliss, | ’tis folly to be wise.”