

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:

ἡμεῖς δ', οἶά τε φύλλα φύει πολυάνθεμος ὦρη
ἔαρος, ὄτ' αἰψ' αὐγῆς αὖξεται ἡελίου,
τοῖς ἵκελοι πήχυιον ἐπὶ χρόνον ἄνθεσιν ἦβης
τερπόμεθα, πρὸς θεῶν εἰδότες οὔτε κακὸν
οὔτ' ἀγαθόν· Κῆρες δὲ παρεστήκασι μέλαιναι, . . .

The first three verses present no serious problems, but the phrase πρὸς θεῶν εἰδότες οὔτε κακὸν | οὔτ' ἀγαθόν, 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 κακά 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 ἀγαθόν 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 ἀγαθόν 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 *Otia*¹ 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 leur 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 Broccia's detailed treatment of the passage cited in n.5.

ne prévoient pas les conséquences de leur conduite.” Josserand asks whether *εἰδότες* 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. “Connaître le bien et le mal, c’est à la fois découvrir leur existence et les éprouver.” Pironet argues that *κακόν* refers ahead to the miseries described as attending old age and that *ἀγαθόν* 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.”

Babut² quotes Defradas³ 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 Sémonide, 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

² D. Babut, “Sémonide et Mimnerme,” *REG* 84 (1971) 17–43, esp. 33–40.

³ J. Defradas, *Les Élégiques grecs* (Paris 1962) 67.

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 Martinazzoli⁴ and in greater detail by Broccia.⁵ 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 | ὄκως ἕκαστον ἐκτελευτῆσει θεός. Mimnermus uses the same participle (εἰδότες), the ὄκως 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.⁶ That Mimnermus, however, is not referring to a future

⁴ F. Martinazzoli, *Ethos ed eros nella poesia greca* (Florence 1946) 194–96. R. Schmiel, "Youth and Age: Mimnermus 1 and 2," *RFIC* 102 (1974) 283–89, is essentially in agreement with Martinazzoli.

⁵ G. Broccia, *Tradizione ed esegesi* (Brescia 1969) 93–106.

⁶ Cf. also Theognis 141–42, ἀνθρωποι δὲ μάταια νομίζομεν, εἰδότες οὐδέν | θεοὶ δὲ κατὰ σφέτερον πάντα τελοῦσι νόον, 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 enjambements 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-

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) 135-36, argues that in fr.7.9 *οὐδὲ τῶν ἀμεινόνων* has "keine aktuelle, sondern nur rhetorische Bedeutung," vv.10-11, *τὸ μὲν γὰρ αὐτῶν εἶπε πολλάκις κακόν, | τὸ δ' ἐχθλόν*, show that in vv.8-9 both *κακῶν* and *ἀμεινόνων* must have equal significance. Verdenius sees the same "rhetorische Bedeutung" in the *κακόν* of fr.7.22-23, *οὔτε γὰρ κακόν | οὔτ' ἐχθλόν οὐδὲν οἶδε τοιαύτη γυνή*, 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 *κακόν* and *ἐχθλόν* 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. *Il.* 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 Mimmernus, the only one which commentators on the poet cite, is Sophocles, *Ajax* 552–55, where Ajax is speaking to his young son:

καίτοι σε καὶ νῦν τοῦτό γε ζηλοῦν ἔχω,
 ὀθούνεκ' οὐδὲν τῶνδ' ἐπαισθάνη κακῶν.
 ἐν τῷ φρονεῖν γὰρ μηδὲν ἠδιστος βίος,
 [τὸ μὴ φρονεῖν γὰρ κάρτ' ἀνώδυνον κακόν,]
 ἕως τὸ χαίρειν καὶ τὸ λυπεῖσθαι μάθης.

Similar too are Sophocles, *Trachiniae* 144–47:⁹

τὸ γὰρ νεάζον ἐν τοιοῖσδε βόσκεται
 χώροις αὐτοῦ, καὶ νιν οὐ θάλπος θεοῦ,
 οὐδ' ὄμβρος, οὐδὲ πνευμάτων οὐδὲν κλονεῖ,
 ἀλλ' ἠδοναῖς ἄμοχθον ἐξαίρει βίον . . .

and *Oedipus Coloneus* 1229–38:

ὥς εἶτ' ἂν τὸ νέον παρῆ
 κούφας ἀφροσύνας φέρον,
 τίς πλάγχθη πολὺ μόχθος ἔ-
 ξω; τίς οὐ καμάτων ἐνι;
 φθόνος, στάσεις, ἔρις, μάχαι
 καὶ φόνοι· τό τε κατάμεμπτον ἐπιλέλογχε
 πύματον ἀκρατὲς ἀπροσόμιλον
 γῆρας ἄφιλον, ἵνα πρόπαντα
 κακὰ κακῶν ξυνοικεῖ.

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

φρονῶ δ' ὁ πάσχω, καὶ τόδ' οὐ σμικρὸν κακόν·
 τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι γὰρ ἠδονὴν ἔχει τινὰ
 νοσοῦντα, κέρδος δ' ἐν κακοῖς ἀγνωσία.

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

οἱ γὰρ ἀτυχοῦντες τὸν χρόνον κερδαίνομεν
 ὅσον ἂν ποτ' ἀγνοῶμεν ἡτυχηκότες.

⁹ Cf. also Eur. *Med.* 48, *νέα γὰρ φροντίς οὐκ ἀλγεῖν φιλεῖ*, and *IA* 677, *ζηλῶ σε μᾶλλον ἢ μὲ τού μὴδὲν φρονεῖν*. In vv.1243–44 of the same play we find the opposite view: *αἴσθημά τοι | κἂν νηπίοις γε τῶν κακῶν ἐγγίγνεται*.

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:¹⁰

ὁ δ' οὐδὲν οὐδεὶς, διὰ τέλους δὲ δυστυχῶν
 τοσῶδε νικᾷ· τοῦ γὰρ εἶ τῆτώμενος
 οὐκ οἶδεν, ἀεὶ δυστυχῶν κακῶς τ' ἔχων.
 οὕτως ἄριστον μὴ πεπειρᾶσθαι 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.¹¹

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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."