Happiness, Stability and Transcendence in Western Religion, Philosophy and Poetry

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By

Nili Alon Amit

With a Foreword by Fiorenza Bevilacqua

Cambridge
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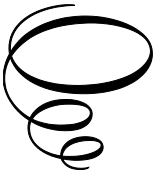

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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-7170-X
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-7170-9

לאמא

This book is dedicated with love and gratitude to my dear parents, Pnina, may she rest in peace, and Hanan Alon, and to my beloved Guy, Noga, Libi and Rani Rafael Amit.

I am grateful to Fiorenza Bevilacqua for her dedicated and enlightening foreword to this book. Professor Bevilacqua's original and interesting ideas on happiness in ancient literature are a significant contribution to this field of study.

A special thank you goes to my inspiring friend and colleague, Professor Deborah Court.

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FOREWORD

BY FIORENZA BEVILACQUA

To the memory of Prof. Aristide Colonna.

This is an uncommon book on a theme that today more than ever compels us to think: it is the theme of happiness and our ways of achieving it or at least pursuing it, because perhaps more than this is not given to us, and happiness lies in its pursuit. I say today more than ever, because the Corona pandemic that has broken and spread throughout the world leaves us stunned not only and not so much for the difficulties and inconveniences in our daily lives, not only and not so much for the terrible fear to get sick and die, or the even more terrible fear to see people we love getting sick and dying: it is from something more profound that our dismay arises.

This pandemic, which has befallen us suddenly with its grave implications of sorrow and death, has something unbelievable, nearly oneiric for us, men and women of the twenty-first century; we have the privilege of living in the Western world, which is rich, well-ordered and well-provided with outstanding scientific and technological knowledge that abolished diseases (so we thought) and distances and invented amazing means for connecting, studying and meeting. The major epidemics of the past seemed to us very distant - associated with a world very different from ours - unrepeatable and impossible in our time. Those remote epidemics constituted simply episodes of canonical literary texts of Western culture: from the plague of Sophocles' (5th century BCE) *Oedipus Rex* and the plague in Athens, described by Thucydides (5th century BCE) with a cold stare and by Lucretius (1st century BCE) as a triumph of death, till the plagues that arise in two great novels of the twentieth century: *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann (1912) and *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1947). Hence our dismay, which even if it does not arise from the lockdown, certainly grows stronger and becomes stable in this long confinement: despite the remote working, the online lectures and meetings, the video calls with relatives and friends, it gives us some time, to some extent, to remain alone with ourselves. It is something which we are not accustomed to, because without knowing, without realizing and

perhaps without even wanting it, we always tend to avoid remaining alone by ourselves, bringing to light our anxieties and our questions that remain unanswered.

This disposition does not belong only to us, men and women of the twenty-first century: with reasonable confidence we can affirm that it is ingrained in human beings, as it is shown by the words written two thousand years ago, by the Epicurean philosopher and visionary poet Lucretius (*c.* 99 – 55 BCE) and by the Stoic philosopher and statesman Seneca (*c.* 4 BCE – 65 CE); both writings I will quote are marked by many shadows and are deeply versed in the twists and turns of the human mind. In his philosophical poem titled *On Nature* (*De rerum natura* which translates the Greek generic title *Peri physeōs* - Περὶ Φύσεως, usually given to Presocratic philosophers' works), Lucretius describes the anxiety and the restlessness of a man who runs from place to place without finding peace of mind, finally asking for oblivion by sleep, so that he will not think about anything anymore. This happens, according to Lucretius, because all humans try to run away from themselves, but nobody can do so: therefore everybody unwillingly remains tied to himself or herself and ends up in self-hatred:[1]

He yawns, as soon as foot has touched the threshold
Or drowsily goes off in sleep and seeks
Forgetfulness…
Each human flees himself- a self in sooth,
As happens, he by no means can escape;
And willy-nilly he cleaves to it and loathes,
Sick, sick, and guessing not the cause of ail.

Oscitat exetemplo, tetigit cum limina villae,
Aut abit in somnum gravis atque oblivia quaerit….
Hoc se quisque modo fugit, at quem scilicet, ut fit,
Effugere haud potis est, ingratis haeret et odit
Propterea, morbi quia causam non tenet aeger.

Human sickness, Lucretius proceeds, is given by the agonizing fear of death and the refusal to think about death, to examine what death is and what it will be for us (Book 3, lines 1076-1079):

What evil lust of life is this so great
Subdues us to live, so dreadfully distraught

[1] Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things,* Book 3, lines 1065-1066; 1068-1070; Latin source for Lucretius' text, here and below: Conte, G. B., Canali, L. and Dionigi, I. (1990); translation by Leonard, W. E. (1916).

In perils and alarms? one fixed end
Of life abideth for mortality;
Death's not to shun, and we must go to meet…

Denique tanto opere in dubiis trepidare periclis
Quae mala nos subigit vitai tanta cupido?
Certa quidem finis vitae mortalibus adstat
Nec devitari letum pote quin obeamus.

This is even more true for us: besieged by images of death, we try to remove them, to think about them as little as possible, to avoid asking ourselves questions about death and our life itself.

Seneca sheds more light on this fear, or on our inability to remain alone with ourselves: at the beginning of his short philosophical treatise *On the Shortness of Life* (*De brevitate vitae*), he affirms that we do not take time to look and listen to ourselves and adds that, when we devote attention and effort to other people, we do so because we cannot be alone with ourselves (*On the Shortness of Life*, 2. 5):[2]

… But you never thought fit to look on yourself or to listen to yourself. And so you've no reason to expect a return from anyone for those attentions of yours, since you offered them not because you wanted another's company but because you were incapable of communing with yourself.

Tu non inspicere te umquam, non audire dignatus es. Non est itaque, quod ista officia cuiquam imputes, quoniam quidem, cum illa faceres, non esse cum alio volebas, sed tecum esse non poteras.

In these difficult days we are forced to remain alone with ourselves a good deal of time, to look inward, to face our fears and to search for the weak light of a possible hope beyond the anguish of death and the precarious and ephemeral nature of our lives. For this reason I find the poetic lines written by Nili Alon Amit at the outset of this book so wonderful in grasping the essential aspect of our life through three images put together: "*Gushing ocean*" -- the constant rhythm of nature in its incessant movement; "*A stable castle made of sand*" -- what we build in our aspiration for stability while being aware of its unavoidable fragility; "*A ray of light in the salty mist*" -- the hope for a ray of light that can light up the mist in which we live, a pungent mist that reflects our pain. We hope for something transcendent: so Alon Amit's lines can be our point of reference in a path that winds through

[2] Latin source: Castiglioni, L. (1968). Translation by Williams, G. D. Internet Archive Library.

the different fields where our pursuit of happiness takes place: religion, philosophy, mysticism, poetry, or more generally literature. Alon Amit leads us through texts of great interest and unusual depth: sometimes known, at least to some extent, to the Western readers and sometimes nearly unknown to them - and therefore even more precious because these texts allow us to look at cultures that are usually less familiar. Now, we are beginning to undertake a fascinating and suggestive journey.

***

This long and varied journey begins with a foundational text of Western culture, a text that is explicitly a beginning: *Genesis*. Alon Amit points out a compositional feature of this text that is common with two other texts that are placed at the origins of Western culture, the Homeric poems (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*): the *Book of Genesis* indeed is a text passed down orally from generation to generation and compiled from different written sources between the ninth and the fifth centuries BCE. It is divided into a mythical part (*Genesis* 1-11), which begins with the creation of the world and a historical part (*Genesis* 12 -50), which begins with Abraham the Patriarch. The world's creation is shown as the act of God that gives order to chaos (*Genesis* 1-2); similarly, in another fundamental text narrating the origin of the world and the gods, namely Hesiod's *Theogony* (slightly later than the Homeric poems), chaos is at the origin of everything (gods included). It is a poem very different from *Genesis* because there is neither creation nor a God as creator, but it shares with *Genesis* the theme of the primeval chaos: "*In the beginning there was the Chaos*" (*Theogony* 116). The book of *Genesis* begins so: "*In a beginning created God the heaven and the earth*" and Alon Amit appropriately quotes the Translation of the Seventy (translation of the Bible from Hebrew to Greek, believed to be the work of seventy Hebrew scholars in Alexandria, third to second centuries BCE), where "*In a beginning*" is translated as "*En archei* (Ἐν ἀρχῇ)". Alon Amit points out that in ancient Greek *archē* means "beginning", but also "primary substance" or "element" and raises the question whether, according to the Greek translation by Hebrew scholars, we could suppose that God created the world not "in a chronological beginning, but within a primary substance" (p. 9 in this book). It is a fascinating question, bringing to light a possible connection, probably perceived by the Hebrew scholars (who certainly knew Greek philosophy very well), between the concept of a chronological beginning and the concept of a primary substance, between the biblical narrative of creation and the search for the *archē* by Presocratic philosophers. We become aware of an unexpected meeting between texts

that, although in very different ways and with different aims, are placed at the origins of Western culture.

Alon Amit then adds a consideration of fundamental relevance, which can be regarded as the common thread of this book: the basis of the Western view of happiness is nothing other than "to mirror God's first actions in the Bible" (p. 10), that is to try – while we live in this chaotic world – to provide stability to our lives and to cling to something transcendent in order to maintain this stability. Alon Amit points out that in ancient Greek the word for happiness, *eudaimonia* (εὐδαιμονία), results from *eu* and *daimōn* and so indicates "an external positive spirit that affects our lives" (p. 10); in my opinion, a less optimistic interpretation of *eudaimonia* is possible, because this term can also imply that happiness is the work of a *daimōn* when the *daimōn* is propitious (a *daimōn* is not always so: I am thinking particularly of tragedy) and therefore happiness is something frail, precarious and altogether beyond our control. Regarding the historical part of the *Genesis*, which begins with Abraham, it is very interesting to read Alon Amit's approach to Canaan, the promised land which Abraham is ordered to reach: Canaan is a utopia, in the Greek meaning of the word: *ou- topos* or no-place, a place that does not exist, a symbolic abode of blessedness that we try to reach while living in this chaotic world, a hope for a transcendent force that may supplement our lives with stability and happiness.

***

Then Alon Amit, who has a thorough knowledge of Greek philosophy and literature, leads us to the meditation on happiness, which is central to ancient Greek culture as reflected in philosophy, from beginning with the so-called Presocratics. This term however is largely imprecise, because the first Greek philosophers were not a homogeneous group: some Presocratics (Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes) indeed lived more than a century before Socrates; others, (*eg*. Democritus) were his contemporaries. Some Presocratics (the Ionian philosophers) focused on the research of the *archē*, while others reflected on the theme of Being (Parmenides and the Eleatics, 6th-5th centuries BCE), of Becoming (Heraclitus), or of the gods (Xenophanes, 6th-5th centuries BCE). Alon Amit chose to speak about Heraclitus: unfortunately, we have only fragments of his book. Heraclitus wrote in prose, which was then an innovative structure highly suitable for expressing reflections and argumentations, even if the remaining fragments of his work appear mainly as aphorisms. Heraclitus hardly developed arguments (unlike Parmenides who wrote in hexameters), but rather made statements. This may be one of the reasons for his acquiring, already in

ancient times, the unenviable reputation of being unclear, and even more so to modern readers who can read only the remaining fragments of his book. Nevertheless, from these fragments we can grasp central themes of Heraclitus' thought - mainly the contradiction, which Alon Amit stresses effectively, between the ceaseless flowing nature of our world and the stability of *logos*, a complex term for translation and interpretation (as shown by the amount of studies spent on it). In the texts prior or contemporary to Heraclitus (who lived between the sixth and the fifth century BCE), *logos* essentially means "speech"; in Heraclitus' fragments, however, it becomes a particular kind of speech: he affirms indeed that human beings are unable to understand this everlasting *logos*, either before or after they hear it for the first time.

> Fragment D1LM (B1DK):[3]
>
> *And of this account (logos) that is -always- humans are uncomprehending, both before they hear it and once they have first heard it. For, although all things come about according to this account (logos), they resemble people without experience of them, when they have experience both of words and of things of the sort that I explain when I analyze each [scil. of them] in conformity with its nature and indicate how it is. But other men are unaware of all they do when they are awake, just as they forget all they do while they are asleep.*
>
> Τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ᾽ἐόντος ἀεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίγνονται ἄνθρωποι, καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκούσαι, καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον· γινομένων γὰρ πάντων κατὰ τὸν λόγον τόνδε ἀπείροισιν ἐοίκασι, πειρώμενοι καὶ ἐπέων καὶ ἔργων τοιούτων, ὁκοίων ἐγὼ διηγεῦμαι κατὰ φύσιν διαιρέων ἕκαστον καὶ φράζων ὅκως ἔχει. τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἀνθρώπους λανθάνει ὁκόσα ἐγερθέντες ποιοῦσι, ὅκωσπερ ὁκόσα εὕδοντες ἐπιλανθάνονται.

The reference to hearing seems to confirm that the *logos* is a "speech" (or, in Laks-Most's translation, "account"): but a speech that can be understood also *before* hearing it implies that this speech is a rational argument and, as such, common to all and accessible to all; this is also shown by other Heraclitean fragments, *eg*. fragment D2LM (B2DK):

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[3] Translations of Heraclitus' fragments in this foreword are by Laks and Most. *DK* and *LM* are modern collections and translations of Presocratic writings; respectively: Diels, H. and Kranz, W. (1903, 2004), and Laks, A. and Most, G. W. (2016).

But although the account (logos) is in common (xunos), most people live as though they had their own thought (phronesis).

Τοῦ λόγου δ᾽ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν.

If, as we read in fragment B1DK (D1LM), all things happen in accordance with this *logos*, *logos* is a universal argument that presents and explains the rules governing reality: it can be uttered as a word, but may also be formulated, without being uttered by anyone, as an objective explanation of the regulatory principles of the world. It establishes itself as a stable principle, not only in its detachment from the flowing nature of the world but also in its ability to explain it. Confronted with the ceaseless nature of becoming, which entails also our precariousness and therefore arouses anxiety and anguish in us, the detached and stable *logos* constitutes an external point of reference or even a lifebuoy. As such, it also seems to be, as Alon Amit suggests, a promise of happiness.

Reflections on happiness appear even before Presocratic philosophies (or partly at the same time with them), in the poetry of the so-called Archaic Age, from the eighth to the sixth century BCE. The first extant reflection on happiness or rather unhappiness, that is to different extents the destiny of all human beings, is found in Homer's epic poem *Iliad*, 24. 522 -551, in a sad and disconsolate reflection stated by Achilles in his speech to Priamus:

Lines 525-533:[4]

For on this wise have the gods spun the thread for wretched mortals, that they should live in pain; and themselves are sorrowless. For two urns are set upon the floor of Zeus of gifts that he giveth, the one of ills, the other of blessings. To whomsoever Zeus, that hurleth the thunderbolt, giveth a mingled lot, that man meeteth now with evil, now with good; but to whomsoever he giveth but of the baneful, him he maketh to be reviled of man, and direful starvation driveth him over the face of the sacred earth, and he wandereth honoured neither of gods nor mortals.

ὡς γὰρ ἐπεχλώσαντο θεοὶ δειλοῖσι βροτοῖσι
ζώειν ἀχνυμένους· αὐτοὶ δέ τ᾽ἀκηδέες εἰσί.
Δοιοὶ γάρ τε πίθοι κατακείαται ἐν Διὸς οὔδει
δώρων οἷα δίδωσι, κακῶν, ἕτερος δὲ ἑάων·
ᾧ μέν κ᾽ἀμμείξας δώῃ Ζεὺς τερπικέραυνος,
ἄλλοτε μέν τε κακῷ ὅ γε κύρεται, ἄλλοτε δ᾽ἐσθλῷ·

[4] Greek source: Mcleod, C. W. (1982); translation by Murray, A. T. (1924), with minor modifications by Bevilacqua.

ᾧ δέ κε τῶν λυγρῶν δώῃ, λωβητὸν ἔθηκε,
καὶ ἑ κακὴ βούβρωστις ἐπὶ χθόνα δῖαν ἔλαύνει,
φοιτᾷ δ᾽οὔτε θεοῖσι τετιμένος οὔτε βροτοῖσιν.

The theme of happiness emerges also in lyric poetry, even if implicitly. Sappho, a poetess who lived about a century before Heraclitus (between the seventh and the sixth century BCE), even without words meaning happiness (*eudaimonia* or *olbos/* ὄλβος), may have expressed her opinion on this theme in a statement made with deliberate polemic (not to say defiant) spirit. She makes this statement on a public occasion: Sappho's poems were written for ~~a~~ public performance by a solo voice accompanied by the lyre. This performance usually took place within the *thiasos* (θίασος), an association belonging to the cult of a god; from the evidence in Sappho's poems, the *thiasos* of which she was in charge was tied to the cult of Aphrodite~~s~~ and the Muses. But the *thiasos* was not only aimed at religious worship: the girls who belonged to the *thiasos*, probably coming from aristocratic families, learned music and poetry (the Greek word *mousikē* /μουσική indicates not only music but also poetry), dance and the art of dressing and adorning themselves gracefully and elegantly; it was an education that preceded their weddings and was mainly aimed at preparing them for marriage. Moreover, in the *thiasos* the girls received and lived a kind of emotional education. We may consider Sappho's poems, written for the *thiasos* and performed there, as expressive of Sappho's emotions and love experiences that were elaborated in her poems by images of exceptional visual intensity and evocative strength. Sometimes Sappho's elaboration took the form of a reflection: one poem in particular, which we can read nearly entirely, offers a reflection on happiness, or in Sappho's words, on "*the most beautiful thing*" (κάλλιστον; fragment 16 Voigt). This poem indeed intends not only to express Sappho's opinion on this subject, but also to demonstrate the soundness of her opinion. This expressed opinion is not founded on logical arguments but is stated along with a very famous myth which is reinterpreted and shown in its paradigmatic value. Not by chance, at the end of the poem this opinion is reestablished and presented as demonstrated (lines 17-20 – see below).

The poem begins with a rhetorical device that will later be classified as *Priamel* ("preamble"): the poetess mentions some opinions, setting the ground for fully and firmly expressing an opinion of her own:[5]

[5] Greek source for Sappho's fragment 16 Voigt: Colonna, A. (1982). All translations from Sappho's fragment 16 Voigt appearing in this foreword are by Bevilacqua.

Some say an army of knights
others an army of infantrymen
others an army of ships is on the black earth
the most beautiful thing, I on the contrary say
whatever one loves (lines 1-4).

Οἰ μὲν ἰππήων στρότον, οἰ δὲ πέσδων,
οἰ δὲ νάων φαῖσ᾽ἐπὶ γᾶν μέλαιναν
ἔμμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν᾽ὅτ-
τω τις ἔραται.

It is an unprecedented, provocative opinion; moreover, the poetess asserts with further taste for provocation that it is very easy to make what she said understood by all (lines 5-6) and then proceeds to demonstrate her statement through the myth:

Indeed the woman who by far exceeded
human beings in beauty, Helen, left her husband
a man of great worth
and went by ship to Troy
and neither about her daughter nor her parents
did she care at all, but Cypris led her astray
because she fell in love. (lines 6-12).[6]

Πάγχυ δ᾽εὔμαρες σύνετον πόησαι
πάντι τοῦτ᾽· ἀ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος ἀνθρώπων Ἐλένα τὸν ἄνδρα
τὸν μέγ᾽ἄριστον,
καλλίποισ᾽ ἔβα ᾽ς Τροΐαν πλέοισα,
κωὐδὲ παῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων τοκήων
πάμπαν ἐμνάσθ᾽ἀλλὰ παράγαγ᾽αὔταν
Κύπρις ἔραισαν.

Following in this poem are two very fragmented lines (lines 13-14), which make any attempt to integrate them very hard if not arbitrary. Then the poetess, who thinks she had shown effectively the validity of her opinion through the myth of Helen, applies to herself the same principle that led

[6] It is very probable that Sappho had in mind what Helen says about herself in *Odyssey* 4. 261-264 (and in some passages of the *Iliad*), but while the Homeric Helen recalls her getaway to Troy and her desertion of husband and child with evident repentance, Sappho's Helen is shown as a positive model or at least a blameless character; encouraged by Aphrodite~~s~~, she shows that really the most beautiful thing is whatever one loves. In this manner, Sappho is paying tribute to Homer, albeit with a clear polemical intention.

Helen's behavior, *i. e.* that the most beautiful, the most important thing is whatever one loves. It is the most important because in Greek the adjective *kalos/* καλός (*kalliston* is its neutral superlative) is provided with a very large range of meanings, *eg. excellent, noble*, and *important*. The immediately following lines (15-16) suffer from the lack of subject, probably expressed in the previous lines 13-14, but it is conceivable that the lacking subject is Aphrodite or *Eros*, as some scholars suggest.[7] So Aphrodite or *Eros*:

> *Recalls to my mind Anaktoria*
> *who is far away:*
> *I would like to see her lovely walking*
> *and the shining brightness of her face*
> *rather than the war chariots of Lydians and the infantrymen*
> *in their arms.* (lines 15-20).

> Κἄμε νῦν Ἀνακτορίας ὀνέμναι-
> σ᾽οὐ παρεοίσας,
> τᾶς τε βολλοίμαν ἔρατον τε βᾶμα
> κἀμάρυχμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω,
> ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κἀν ὅπλοισι
> πεσδομάχεντας.

As we can see, this poem, apparently so simple, reveals a dense network of complex arguments: statement of a thesis, demonstration of the thesis through a myth that is reinterpreted according to that thesis, analogy established between the myth and the poetess' biographical experience, an analogy based on the opinion stated at the outset. Beyond the emotions aroused by the wonderful image of Anaktoria, which dematerializes into the loveliness of her walking and the shining brightness of her face (a face that we readers do not see: we only see a dazzling light), this poem offers a significant reflection on a central theme of our life, by reevaluating the most beautiful and important thing that makes our lives worthwhile. Sappho literally states: it is "wathever one loves" (*kēn'ottō tis eratai* - κῆν' ὅττω τις ἔραται), where the neutral pronouns *kēn'ottō* indicate that it can be anything and any being, while the pronoun *tis*, which is either masculine or feminine, indicates it could be either gender. In this poem the reflection on happiness results in a statement on what is the most beautiful thing (on the emotional level) and at the same time the most important thing (on the axiological level), so as to justify our choices in life, even the most scandalous ones that

[7] For instance, Colonna, A. (1982), p. 132, suggests *Eros;* Ferrari, F. (1987), p. 107 and notes 1-2, suggests *Aphrodite.* On the nature of *Eros*, see pp. 22-27 below.

are exposed to censure. This poem shows how the words of a poet, not less than those of a philosopher or a mystic, can lead us through the uncertain paths of our lives and supplement them with hope and meaning.

***

The first set of complete works expressing aspiration for a stability that can elevate us over our chaotic world (afflicted with a ceaseless, unintelligible process of becoming), as well as over the unreliability of ever-changing and conflicting opinions, was that of Plato. Born in 427 BCE, the formative years of Plato's life were during very difficult times. It was the last phase of the Peloponnesian war, which ended with the defeat of Athens; the latter was forced to accept disastrous peace terms and to suffer the establishment of the oligarchic government of the Thirty, a government which Plato initially looked at hopefully, but very soon saw it as worse than democracy. The government of the Thirty lasted less than a year, but the following restored democratic government gave no hope: it prosecuted Socrates, Plato's beloved teacher, and sentenced him to death. This event affected Plato's life and, accordingly, his thought. Through Plato's writings, Socrates' execution by the state affected the whole history of Western philosophy and, more generally, Western culture. Socrates was portrayed as the archetype of the just man who is unjustly condemned, as well as the archetype of the master, master of right conduct in life and wisdom to his disciples, yet considered a "bad master", a dangerous corruptor of young men by his accusers. Beyond this myth it is difficult however to grasp the thought of the historical Socrates, who never wrote anything; as Alon Amit notices, we do not know whether the Socrates of Plato's and Xenophon's dialogues (the latter's collected in the *Memorabilia*, *Oeconomicus* and *Symposium*) is mainly or exclusively a fictional character, or whether he reflects (but to what extent?) the historical Socrates with his views, opinions, and philosophy. Scholars are still divided over this problem, as well as over the extant sources about Socrates. Two of these sources are by Socrates' contemporary dramatists, Aristophanes and Euripides. Socrates indeed is the protagonist of Aristophanes' *Clouds* (a comedy probably written between 420 and 417 BCE) and is the target of its merciless parody; beyond this portrayal imprinted with comic deformation, however, it is difficult to grasp the historical figure of Socrates. It is more enlightening to look at some polemical allusions we find in two tragedies by Euripides, *Medea* (performed in 431 BCE) and *Hippolytus* (performed in 428 BCE); in three passages (*Medea*, 1078-1080; *Hippolytus*, 358-359 and especially

Hippolytus 377-383),[8] Euripides seems to argue with Socrates about the so-called theory of virtue-science, attributed to Socrates by Plato and, to a minor extent, by Xenophon.

Hippolytus 375-390 (words of Phaedra):[9]

I have pondered… how it is that the lives of mortals are in ruins. I think that it is not owing to the nature of their wits that they fare worse than they might, since many people possess good sense. Rather, one must look at it this way: we know and understand what is noble but do not bring it to completion. Some fail from laziness, others because they give precedence to some other pleasure than being honorable. Life's pleasures are many, long leisurely talks—a pleasant evil—and the sense of awe. Yet they are of two sorts, one pleasure being no bad thing, another a burden upon houses. If propriety were always clear, there would not be two things designated by the same letters. Since these are the views I happen to have arrived at beforehand, there is no drug could make me pervert them and reverse my opinion.

… ἐφρόντισ᾽ ᾗ διέφθαρται βίος.
Καί μοι δοκοῦσι οὐ κατὰ γνώμης φύσιν
πράσσειν κάκιον· ἔστι γὰρ τό γ᾽ εὖ φρονεῖν
πολλοῖσιν· ἀλλὰ τῇδ᾽ ἀθρητέον τόδε·
τὰ χρήστ᾽ ἐπιστάμεσθα καὶ γιγνώσκομεν,
οὐκ ἐκπονοῦμεν δ᾽, οἱ μὲν ἀργίας ὕπο,
οἱ δ᾽ ἡδονὴν προθέντες ἀντὶ τοῦ καλοῦ
ἄλλην τιν᾽· εἰσὶ δ᾽ ἡδοναὶ πολλαὶ βίου,
μακραί τε λέσχαι καὶ σχολή, τερπνὸν κακόν,
αἰδώς τε· δισσαὶ δ᾽ εἰσίν, ἡ μὲν οὐ κακή,
ἡ δ΄ ἄχθος οἴκων· εἰ δ΄ ὁ καιρὸς ἦν σαφὴς
οὐκ ἂν δύ᾽ ἦστην ταὔτ᾽ ἔχοντε γράμματα.
Ταῦτ᾽ οὖν ἐπειδὴ τυγχάνω φρονοῦσ᾽ ἐγὼ
οὐκ ἔσθ᾽ ὁποίῳ φαρμάκῳ διαφθερεῖν
ἔμελλον, ὥστε τοὔμπαλιν πεσεῖν φρενῶν.

These assertions seem to argue with the Platonic (and partly Xenophontic) account of Socrates' theory of virtue, which identifies virtue with knowledge, and defines knowledge as a necessary and sufficient condition to act virtuously; those who commit evil, in Socrates' view, do not do so

[8] Euripides' *Medea*, 1078-1080 and *Hippolytus,* 380-383, are included in Laks and Most (2016, vol. 9: *Dramatic Appendix: Philosophy and Philosophers in Greek Comedy and Tragedy*) as T82 and T83 (pp. 364-365).
[9] Greek source: Paduano, G. (2000); translation by Kovacs, D. (1995).

voluntarily (while knowing they are doing wrong), but are propelled by an intellectual mistake that induces them to think that their actions are virtuous.

As mentioned before, we, dwellers of the twenty-first century, nearly two thousand and five hundred years after Socrates' death, are still deeply affected by his persecution by the democratic state and especially by the words that Socrates addresses to the judges who voted for his acquittal in Plato's *Apology*, a work which some scholars regard as a kind of historical document.[10] In this speech, Socrates accepts his death sentence and affirms that he does not know what awaits him after death, whether a very long sleep without dreams or a place where all the dead gather: and it is with this uncertainty that he departs, concluding his speech thus (*Apology* 42a):[11]

> *But by now it is time to go, you to live and I to die: which of us is going to the better thing is unknown to all except to the god.*
>
> Ἀλλὰ γὰρ ἤδη ὥρα ἀπιέναι, ἐμοὶ μὲν ἀποθανουμένῳ, ὑμῖν δὲ βιωσομένοις·ὁπότεροι δὲ ἡμῶν ἔρχονται ἐπὶ τὸ ἄμεινον πρᾶγμα, ἄδηλον παντὶ πλὴν ἢ τῷ θεῷ.

The uncertainty expressed by Socrates is the uncertainty of all human beings: but his peace of mind in accepting and confronting this uncertainty is a message of hope for us all.

Athens had sentenced Socrates to death, losing, according to Plato, the most just among the men of his time (Plato, *VII Letter*, 324d – 325a):[12]

> *And indeed I saw…how the Thirty treated my aged friend Socrates, whom I would hardly scruple to call the most just of men then living, when they tried to send him, along with others, after one of the citizens, to fetch him by force that he might be put to death — their object being that Socrates might be made to share in their political actions; he, however, refused to obey and risked the uttermost penalties rather than be a partaker in their unholy deeds.*
>
> Καὶ ὁρῶν δήπου… τά τε ἄλλα καὶ φίλον ἄνδρα ἐμοὶ πρεσβύτερον Σωκράτη, ὃν ἐγὼ σχεδὸν οὐκ ἂν αἰσχυνοίμην εἰπὼν δικαιότατον εἶναι τῶν τότε, ἐπί τινα τῶν πολιτῶν μεθ᾽ἑτέρων ἔπεμπον, βίᾳ ἄξοντα ὡς ἀποθανούμενον, ἵνα δὴ μετέχοι τῶν πραγμάτων αὐτοῖς, εἴτε βούλοιτο εἴτε μή· ὁ δ᾽οὐκ ἐπείθετο,

[10] *Cf.* Reale, G. (2000), p. 127-136.
[11] Greek source: Centrone, B. and Taglia, A. (2010); translation by Bevilacqua.
[12] Greek source: Del Corno, D. and Innocenti, P. (1986); translation by Bury, R. G. (1966), with minor modifications by Bevilacqua.

> πᾶν δὴ παρεκινδύνευσεν παθεῖν πρὶν ἀνοσίων αὐτοῖς ἔργων γενέσθαι κοινωνός.

In one of his most important dialogues, *Republic,* Plato outlines a city that is completely different from Athens (and from any Greek *polis*), a city where the rulers are the philosophers. Plato may have actually made the effort to turn this ideal city into reality, as shown by his historical journeys to Sicily; still, he makes it clear that even if this city does not exist anywhere in the present or future, it will always exist as a "paradigm in the sky" (ἐν οὐρανῷ ἴσως παράδειγμα; *Republic* 592b), therefore it is a model that is above or beyond physical or historical reality. Plato's work was mainly dedicated to a kind of paradigmatic reality: the perceptible and sensible world we live in is turbulent and it eludes a kind of knowledge endowed with certainty.

Plato responded in his works to the new intellectuals of his time, the Sophists, who claimed to possess knowledge, as it is shown in the relativistic view expressed by Gorgias and by Protagoras (5th and early 4th century BCE): according to the latter indeed *man is the measure of all things*.[13] As is common knowledge, Plato's solution will be to postulate that, beyond the chaotic and unstable perceptible world where we live, where true knowledge cannot exist, there is a stable reality called the world of the Forms or Ideas, a realm of immaterial and unchanging paradigms, which we will be able to fully acknowledge only when we break free from our material, temporary bodies and set our immortal souls free to roam the ideal world.

The immortality of our souls is explained in Plato's famous dialogue *Phaedo* (see chapter 4 below), while as long as we live, our soul's condition is similar to that of the prisoners in Plato's Myth of the Cave (*Republic* 7, 514a-518b), which Alon Amit narrates with great accuracy and effectiveness. Another wonderful myth which Alon Amit explains is from another fascinating dialogue by Plato, the *Symposium*. The myth concerns the birth of *Eros* and his nature (*Symposium*, 203b-204b): *Eros* is a *daimōn* (δαίμων), a being who is halfway between the gods and human beings, and therefore it is the mythical equivalent of the philosopher, who is neither wise nor completely ignorant: the philosopher indeed is aware of his own ignorance and therefore is constantly in search of wisdom, so he is really a lover of wisdom, a *philos* (φίλος) of *sophia* (σοφία). And it is *eros*, an erotic

[13] Protagoras, *Truth*, fragment B1DK (D9LM); quoted also in Plato, *Theaetetus* 152a; cf. also *Theaetetus* 161c.

impulse, that prompts us to the search of wisdom, of a knowledge that goes beyond the world of the perceptible appearances, toward the knowledge of the beautiful itself or the Idea of Beauty. Therefore *eros*, the desire of the beautiful, seems to be at the core of the noblest intellectual activity, the activity of the philosopher.

Another important source on Socrates, although not his contemporary, is Aristotle (4th century BCE). Aristotle's reliability as a historical source on Socrates is debated among scholars: some scholars deny Aristotle can be reliable because he did not know Socrates personally;[14] other scholars on the contrary maintain that Aristotle is an important source because he could hear detailed information on Socrates' philosophy inside the Academia, the school founded by Plato.[15] In my opinion, Aristotle's work shows thorough knowledge of both his master's (Plato) and his master's master (Socrates) thought, and while definitely departing from their views, as Alon Amit recounts through fundamental steps of his philosophical course, he still preserves some significant aspects of their theories. There is no doubt that Aristotle was a keen observer of reality: his treatise *Politics*, for example, is highly attentive to the features of the different forms of government and to the institutions of various cities and is far from any attempt of outlining a "paradigm in the sky". And yet, when Aristotle expresses his view on what is absolutely the best and happiest kind of life, he does not hesitate to indicate the life devoted to theoretical activity – or "life according to intellect" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, X. 7. 1177a12-1178a8), that is the life of the theoretical philosopher. This archetypal philosopher is not very different from the philosopher's figure that emerges in Plato's *Symposium* or from the image of Socrates himself in Plato's *Apology*. This is not surprising: ancient Greek philosophy, as stressed by Pierre Hadot,[16] is inseparable from a specific life style that identifies happiness with theoretical thinking, as Aristotle too confirms.

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Alexander the Great's conquest of the Greek cities, followed by the partition of his empire after his death (323 BCE), led to the end of the *polis*: Greek *poleis*, Athens included, were incorporated into the kingdom of Macedonia, one of the three states into which Alexander's empire was divided. Undoubtedly it was an epochal change: the inhabitants of the state were no

[14] *Eg.* Reale, G. (2000), pp. 39-40.
[15] *Eg.* Zeller, E. (1922), p. 105 ff. and Vlastos, G. (1991), pp. 91-98.
[16] Hadot, P. (1995) and Hadot, P. (2001).

more citizens, but subjects. Therefore it is not by chance that all the philosophies rising in this age, which will later be called Hellenistic, show a consolatory purpose: they seem to redefine happiness in terms of avoiding the fluctuating nature of the world and suggest possible ways for remaining balanced in a world where personal and political liberty becomes almost non-existent and human life is at the mercy of *tychē* (τύχη) *i. e.* chance. Alon Amit mentions three Hellenistic schools of thought: two of them, Skepticism and Epicureanism, were scarcely widespread; Epicureanism was at times looked at suspiciously, mainly because the Epicurean philosophers maintained that wiseman should keep away from public life. Stoicism became the most successful school, and in Rome it was the favorite philosophy of the ruling elite. Alon Amit, who is a very clever scholar of Stoic philosophy, explains the complex cosmology of Stoicism very clearly, along with the Stoic view on the soul and its happiness. Afterwards, she dwells on the reflections of two Stoic philosophers of the imperial age: Epictetus, a former slave (*c.* 50 - 135 CE), and Marcus Aurelius, the famous emperor (121-180 CE), the last of the well-reputed age of the Adoptive Emperors (beginning with Nerva in 96 CE). Marcus Aurelius, as Alon Amit mentions, does not write a treatise, but a series of notes, usually known as *Meditations*, even though the original title, *Ta eis heauton* (Τὰ εἰς ἑαυτόν) "Things to himself", seems to be of more significance. In this work Marcus Aurelius proves to be to some extent a follower of the most famous and original representative of Roman Stoicism, the aforementioned Lucius Anneus Seneca (see pp. xii-xiii above). Seneca was a man of power, not exempt from compromises, intrigues and even acquiescence to crime; tutor of Nero (by the will of the latter's mother, Agrippina) and then his adviser for a long time, when Nero decided that Agrippina should be murdered, Seneca, although he owed everything to her, made no attempt whatsoever to save her life. As Nero had become uncontrollable, Seneca took refuge in the *otium*, a term that in Latin indicates freedom from political activity, where he devoted his time to cultural activity and writing his last works. Lastly, suspected of being an accomplice of the Pisonian Conspiracy (65 CE), Seneca received Nero's order to commit suicide, and complied. Seneca was a complex, multifaceted and intriguing character, whose way of life was very different from that of the traditional image of the philosopher. Nevertheless, once he had withdrawn from politics, Seneca wrote 124 letters of great philosophical relevance to a younger friend, Lucilius, collected as *Letters to Lucilius* (*Epistulae ad Lucilium, c.* 61-65 CE). Scholars debated at great length whether these letters were actually sent to Lucilius, but this is irrelevant: the letters show that the author intended them for any human being of any time, but above all for himself. This purpose is confirmed by

the author's exceptional skill of visiting the most secret and disquieting places in the human mind, through a kind of ceaseless self-analysis and by his daily practice of soul-searching. Both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius exemplify in their lives and writings the image of people of political power who nonetheless constantly scrutinize their souls in a kind of spiritual self-testament; their meditations are aimed at maintaining self-balance and integrity, for the sake of the individual and for society as a whole.

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Another fascinating thinker who is portrayed in this book is Philo of Alexandria (*c*. 20 BCE – 50 CE). Provided with knowledge of both the Hebrew Bible and Greek thought, this philosopher makes a synthesis of great value between biblical theology and Greek philosophy, especially, as Alon Amit points out, Platonism and Stoicism. Philo may be regarded as an innovative writer for the substantial originality of his lines of thought, as he interprets the Bible allegorically, in the light of the contributions of the different Greek philosophical schools; even though he believed in the literal meaning of the Bible, he placed a higher value on its allegorical interpretation. The fusion made by Philo between Hebrew theology, (particularly the Torah), and Greek philosophy (particularly Stoicism), is a work of great originality; needless to say that it also opened the way to Christian thinkers who will try to read and interpret Christian theology through Greek philosophy.

Several scholars, like Giovanni Reale,[17] point out Philo's influence on Plotinus (204/5-270 CE), a later philosopher of great impact, whose thought, as Alon Amit remarks, may be regarded as fundamental to the development of mysticism in the Western world. Growing up in Roman Egypt and studying in the stimulating cultural environment of Alexandria, Plotinus arrived at Rome around the age of forty and founded his school; it was his disciple, Porphyrius, who compiled the philosopher's thought into writing in the *Enneades*. Plotinus' philosophy attempts a synthesis between different philosophical schools: first of all Platonism, but also Neo-Pythagoreanism, a blend of Eastern beliefs that reached the shores of Alexandria and Philo of Alexandria's thought. Plotinus' ideas present a complex system, the most fascinating of which may be the theme of *The One* and its relation with mystical ecstasy; striving for *The One* now becomes the guiding principle for human well-being. Plotinus' thought was

[17] Reale, G. (2004), pp. 35-36.

still in the realm of Greek philosophy, but its sources and influences go beyond Greek and Roman thought.

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The theme of *The One* will reappear in Sufism, a sect within Islam, which according to some scholars has its origin in pre-Islamic thought. Alon Amit stresses that Plotinus' Neoplatonism deeply influenced Sufism: indeed, Sufi poetry expresses the theme of a happy soul that joins with God, *i.e*. *The One*, through love, prayer and more; it is not by chance that Alon Amit quotes some poems of a Sufi poet, Jalaluddin Rumi (13th century). One of these poems seems to me especially noteworthy and important for us, men and women of the Western world. This poem from *The Divani Shamsi Tabriz* XXXI begins with the following lines:

> *...For I do not recognize myself*
> *I am neither Christian, nor Jew, nor Gabr, nor Moslem...*

These lines, resonating with uncommon poetical strength, convey a universal message of tolerance, so important in our age of religious fundamentalism. They exemplify the peaceful poetry that stands at the core of religious movements, thus reminding us of the unitary and enlightened aspects of religion, those that speak to the hearts and minds of all human beings and recognize the unique nature of the human condition.

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The chapter that Alon Amit dedicates to Jewish mysticism and Kabbalah begins with the philosopher Maimonides (1138-1204 CE) and his interpretation of the passage of *Genesis* (3:3-24) narrating that Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and therefore were banished from the Garden of Eden. According to Maimonides the task of the believers consists of reading the Torah, understood as the Tree of Life, and of dedicating their lives to an intellectual return to Eden. The main corpus of Maimonides' work is not mystical, but the mission he indicates for the believer provides the foundation for Jewish mysticism, whose history is long and complex; Alon Amit indeed quotes a poem by Solomon Ibn Gabirol, a Jewish poet and Neoplatonist philosopher who lived in Spain in the eleventh century, expressing the happiness of ascending toward unity with God (*'Tis joy to me to dwell in Thee…* p. 54 below).

The first lines of the *Book of Zohar*, considered the first fully developed work of late medieval Jewish mysticism (most probably written in Spain by

Rabbi Moshe de Leon, *c*. 1240-1305, but attributed to Rabbi Simon Bar Yochai, 2nd century CE), are explained within the same context of ascending toward divinity, along with a diagram of the kabbalistic spheres (or *Sefirot*) emanating from Infinity and depicted with their attributed colors and qualities. Two more Spanish thinkers that are presented and explained in this context are Abraham Abulafia (c. 1240-1291) and Moshe Cordovero (16th century). It is interesting, Alon Amit notices, to compare the former's experience of ecstasy (*ex-stasis*: standing outside oneself) with the ancient concept of knowledge (*under-standing* divine truth), and the latter's affirmation that "*all existence is God and the stone is a thing pervaded by Divinity*" (from Cordovero's *Shiur Komah*) with earlier and later pantheistic views. Undoubtedly this chapter on Kabbalah addresses themes that are unfortunately nearly unknown to many Western readers, and this makes them difficult to understand; exactly for this reason, however, this chapter gives us very interesting hints and constitutes an invitation to further explore a kind of mysticism not devoid of philosophical basis.

This glimpse on late medieval Jewish mysticism gives further context to the thought of the great 17th century philosopher Baruch Benedictus Spinoza (Netherlands, 1632-1677), whose vision, echoing that of Cordovero, is of nature pervaded by divinity. Spinoza plays a key role in the history of Western philosophy and in secularism. Spinoza maintains that God and nature are the same thing and constitute an inseparable unity, expressed with the famous Latin phrase *Deus sive natura* (God or nature); happiness, therefore, does not consist in a mystical journey culminating with the ecstasy of union with God (since God is everywhere and within us - as nature itself), but in the pursuit of understanding of *God or Nature* through rational knowledge. Happiness, therefore, is in a life dedicated to contemplation, or to the *Intellectual Love of God*. In his work on biblical exegesis, Spinoza maintains that it is necessary not to interpret the Scriptures literally, but in the light of reason: a correct reading of the Scriptures results in a moral law that has nothing in common with the religious and political structures of power.

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Spinoza's heritage is perceptible to some extent in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (Massachusetts, 1803-1882). Son of a Unitarian minister, Emerson was ordained in the same church, but after three years he left his congregation. Not unlike Spinoza, Emerson regarded institutional religion as a negative fact and was firmly convinced that a *Living Religion* was necessary, thus founding a religious and philosophical movement named

Transcendentalism. In his essay *The Over-Soul,* Emerson describes a meta-soul that is knowledgeable because it is shared by all human beings. An echo of this universal mind or universal soul can be found, as Alon Amit points out, in a metaphysical poem written by Emerson's contemporary poetess Emily Dickinson (1830-1886). It is a very beautiful poem, which exalts human mind, "*wider than the sky… deeper than the sea*" and coextensive with God.

A similar line of thought is expressed in the works of the early twentieth century movement, Harlem Renaissance, which had the poets and human rights activists James Weldon Johnson (1891-1938) and Langston Hugues (1901-1967) as its leading exponents. A poem by Johnson, quoted in this book, expresses the transcendentalist notion of happiness through the unity of all humans with nature (*Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing*):

Lift ev'ry voice and sing,
Till earth and heaven ring,
Ring with the harmonies of Liberty…

Departing for a short while from Europe and Northern America, we revisit Canaan, with the writings of pre-state and early state authors. Alon Amit introduces us with Hebrew poetesses of the twentieth century: this is a precious gift to many readers, mainly because even though major Israeli novelists such as Amos Oz, David Grossman, Abraham B. Jehoshua and Eshkol Nevo (just to name a few) are well known in the US and Europe, Israeli poetry is less known, due to fact that it is less translated into other languages. This makes this book even more important, for it includes the author's first-hand translations of poems that would otherwise remain unknown to English readers. Those who have ever tried to translate poetic texts know very well how difficult this task is. Alon Amit's translations are wonderful: they are effective in conveying emotions, evoking images and creating rhythms of great musicality. Among these texts, Rachel Bluwstein Sela's (1890-1931) poems are particularly moving: despite her harsh life as a pre-state Zionist pioneer, the arduous manual labor, and her serious illness with its death threat, Rachel's poetic works show great strength of character and the ability to find joy in tiny aspects of her daily life, in a spirit of communion with the landscape of Israel; in "*Tiny joys, joys like a lizard's tail*" (translated by R. Friend), for example, the mention of a living creature so small and humble in the vast landscape, yet so full of life and in many ways so similar to humans, is striking and moving. Moreover, Rachel finds solace in the figure of her biblical namesake, Rachel the Matriarch, with