Croesus and Solon – What is True Happiness? By Thomas Shields  
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Week 18, Argumentative Essay

Men have always sought after answers to the question of happiness, and Croesus was no exception. The wealthy king of Lydia invited Solon to his courts and showed him all of his treasures and the vast expanse of his kingdom. Expecting Solon to be impressed, Croesus then asked him who the happiest man in the world was. Solon shocked Croesus by listing the names of two common folk and explaining that happiness is not made of temporary blessing or great wealth, but of a life well lived in glory and permanent blessing. It is Solon’s belief that defines true happiness.

Men have formed many concepts as to happiness, and few have really hit the mark. Croesus was deluded like many of his day into thinking that true happiness is feeling or state that can come or go with riches. He thought that because he was the wealthiest and greatest that his condition necessitated happiness. Solon, however, thought differently. Croesus was right in saying that Solon had traveled far and seen much, and Solon had indeed seen that a person’s happiness cannot be determined until after their death, for happiness consists of the greater blessings that one has through his entire life. Solon asserts that it is “he who unites the greatest number of advantages, and retaining them to the day of his death, then dies peaceably, that man alone, sire, is, in my judgment, entitled to bear the name of ‘happy.’

Croesus thought that his wealth brought him happiness, but it is those things that last that are of greater value. Temporal blessings are just that: temporal, and oftentimes are reliant either upon other causes or upon fortune. It is better to retain small, meaningful blessings for a lifetime than for a few moments to grasp insignificant wealth.

Croesus’s definition of happiness was based on the idea happiness is something to be experienced right here, right now, with no concern for the future. As a result, he had no real plan for attaining this happiness except to get what he thought were the constituent parts of happiness: wealth, riches, and fame. He had no goal except selfish carnal desire, and as a result his happiness was tainted and unreal. Solon, however, claimed that happiness was a kind of true or false value; that one’s life was either happy or it wasn’t. He knew that happiness consisted of valuable and often worldly things, but that those things were united and retained over a lifetime. His goal was for the good of others and himself, and as a result his happiness wasn’t just an empty desire, but a very real thing with real benefits and purpose.

Of course, Croesus’s base idea of what happiness was didn’t rule out the possibility that he could be happy. Solon himself suggested this when he told Croesus that he did not yet know if Croesus was happy; that he had to see whether he closed his life happily. Croesus’s primitive desires can lead to happiness, but the plausibility of it happening is slim, for those who rush into every and anything that gives them pleasure rarely emerge with much to show for it, and even if they do it is even less likely that they can hold onto it. Solon’s plan is much more feasible. He suggests not a raving, fanatical rush at pleasure, but a strategic collection of good things that can be retained for a lifetime. Out of the two plans, Croesus’ wide path can occasionally stumble into the goal, but Solon’s narrower path leads almost inevitably to success.

When discussing happiness it would be foolish not to turn to Aristotle, who said “the happy life for a man is a life of the conscious following of a rule.” If this is true, that one’s happiness is dependent on moral behavior, surely then happiness cannot be temporary, for consciously following rules is something one does his entire life long, and character cannot be limited to time. Solon is not conjecturing wild fancies, but rather steeping himself in the doctrines of wise philosophers.

Solon told Croesus of Tellus, an Athenian who lived his life in a flourishing country and lived to see his grandchildren grow strong and full of vigor. Tellus finally died in a valiant and successful attempt to assist fellow Athenians in battle, and was buried with honor. Solon declares that for all Croesus’s wealth and power, he cannot be more happy than Tellus, who retained many and good things until the day he departed in glory. C.S Lewis has said “Aim at heaven and get earth thrown in, aim at earth and get neither.” Striving after higher ways, after lasting wealth, is true happiness.

*The Histories,* Herodotus, Book I. 30, “Croesus Visits Solon”, reprinted in *Classical Writing Herodotus*, Lene Mahler Jaqua, pg. 191

*Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle, Book X, cited in *Classical Writing Herodotus*, Lene Mahler Jaqua, pg. 305

*Mere Christianity,* C.S Lewis, Book III, Ch. 10