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# On The Meaning of ἐφήμερος

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The account which Hermann Fränkel gave more than a quarter of a century ago of the meaning of the word ἐφήμερος has never to my knowledge been seriously questioned.<sup>1</sup> It has indeed won wide acceptance.<sup>2</sup> In Fränkel's view the word did not originally mean "lasting for a day" or "short-lived," but "subject to the changing day" or "variable."<sup>3</sup> Men are called ἐφήμεροι not because they are believed to be short-lived but because in the early archaic period men began to believe that their character or personality was at the mercy of the changes which each day brought.<sup>4</sup> Such an outlook on life was part and parcel of that feeling of helplessness in the face of fate which, it is held, was so pervasive in Greece in this period.<sup>5</sup> The belief that man's outlook on life in the early archaic period was radically different from his outlook in the so-called epic period, a view made fashionable by a number of German-speaking scholars, has recently been called into question.<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps time therefore to subject to a

<sup>1</sup> "Man's 'Ephemeros' Nature according to Pindar and Others," *TAPA*, 77 (1946), 131-145 = *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens*, 2nd ed., Munich, 1960, pp. 23-39 (slightly altered in German edition). Page references to the article in its *TAPA* version will be given before those to the German version. Fränkel also discusses the matter briefly in *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*, 2nd ed., Munich, 1962, pp. 148-150.

<sup>2</sup> For example, by M. Treu, *Von Homer zur Lyrik*, Munich, 1955, pp. 225 f.; R. W. B. Burton, *Pindar's Pythian Odes*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 191 f.; D. C. Young, *Pindar, Isthmian 7*, Leiden, 1971, p. 31; and most recently by G. M. Kirkwood, *Early Greek Monody*, Ithaca, 1974, p. 221, n. 35. W. J. Slater in his review of Young, however, in *Gnomon*, 45 (1973), p. 198, criticizes the inadequacies of Fränkel's account.

<sup>3</sup> P. 131 = p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Pp. 140 f. = pp. 33 f.

<sup>5</sup> P. 136 = p. 29. On this feeling of helplessness see Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*, 3rd ed., Hamburg, 1955, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> K. J. Dover in *Archiloque: Entretiens sur l'antiquité classique*, tome X, Geneva, 1964, pp. 197-212, argues that we should not assume, because Archilochus or some other early poet is the first person we know to give expression to a certain attitude, that he did not

reappraisal Fränkel's two propositions that *ἐφήμερος* originally meant "changing as the day" and that men are called *ἐφήμεροι* because their character was thought to alter with changing circumstances.

In this paper I shall try to show that the passages containing the word *ἐφήμερος* which Fränkel adduces in support of his interpretation of that word do not in fact lend such support. I shall argue on the basis of the evidence we have that there are no grounds for thinking that "varying as the day" is the basic meaning of *ἐφήμερος* and that men are called *ἐφήμεροι* because they are thought to vary as the day.

The first passage containing the word *ἐφήμερος* which Fränkel cites in support of his contention that the word when applied to men means "varying as the day" is Pindar, *Pythian* 8.95 f.<sup>7</sup> In his view the context lends no support to the rendering "short-lived" and, in fact, it is clear from the context that the word has nothing whatsoever to do with the brevity of human life. What Pindar is supposed to be saying in this passage is that the human spirit is subject to abrupt shifts—it is sometimes confident and sometimes despondent. So, Fränkel concludes, Pindar in calling men *ἐπάμεροι* at this point must be speaking of their variability. A second reason is given for taking the word in this way. It is that the words which follow *ἐπάμεροι*, *τί δέ τις; τί δ' οὐ τις; σκιᾶς ὄναρ/ἄνθρωπος* mean that men are everything in succession and that there is nothing which they are not. The fact that he is nothing fixed makes man "a dream's shadow," that is, something which changes rapidly. These words Fränkel believes are tantamount to a definition of what it is for a man to be *ἐφήμερος*.

A paraphrase of the poem from v. 75 onward is necessary. Those who think that men achieve success through their own devices are fools. That does not lie in man's control. A *daemon* sometimes raises a man's fortune up and sometimes depresses it. A list of the victories of the athlete whose fame Pindar is celebrating follows. That leads to a description of the unhappy homecomings of those whom he has defeated. In contrast to their wretchedness is the man whose spirit soars after some recent success. But that which gives joy to men lasts only a short time before it is shaken to the ground. Then comes the word *ἐπάμεροι* followed by, "What is anyone? What is anyone not? Man is a dream's shadow." Pindar's main theme in this passage is the inconstancy of human fortune. He illustrates that theme with a reference to the present success of the *laudandus*, Aristomenes, and

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have predecessors. H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971, pp. 36–54, shows that much of what is supposed to be peculiar to the early archaic age is to be found in Homer.

<sup>7</sup> Pp. 133 f. = pp. 25 f.

his opponents' misfortunes. Pindar does not say that that which causes men grief lasts for only a short time. Only that which gives joy is short-lived. This is in accord with the bleak view he expresses elsewhere about the prospects for uninterrupted human felicity.<sup>8</sup> It is wrong to say then that Pindar in this poem is writing about the abrupt shifts of mood to which men are subject. He is writing about the inconstancy of human fortune and the brevity of human felicity.

The parallels that we have for the words immediately after *ἐπάμεροι* lend support to this interpretation. The image of a dream's shadow is a way of talking about powerlessness and helplessness.<sup>9</sup> In the *Prometheus Vincitus* Prometheus is asked what help he expects from *ἐφημέριοι* and whether he does not perceive their dreamlike weakness.<sup>10</sup> Contemplation of Ajax's misfortunes in Sophocles' *Ajax* leads Odysseus to say that men are nothing but images or empty shadows.<sup>11</sup> By that he means that the gods can overturn human good fortune without the slightest difficulty. Cassandra laments that even a shadow can upset human prosperity in the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus.<sup>12</sup> As for the question, "What is anyone? What is anyone not?" it is better taken in this context to be another way of describing man's powerlessness in the face of fortune. Pindar does not mean by it that man is everything but that he is nothing at all. In the Sixth Nemean Pindar says that man is nothing at all.<sup>13</sup> He is at that point drawing a contrast between the power of the gods and the powerlessness of men. The Chorus in *Oedipus Rex* after seeing Oedipus' fall from great good fortune are moved to declare that they count the race of men as nothing at all.<sup>14</sup> Finally, Aristotle in the *Protrepticus* combines both ways of talking about man's feebleness when he says, "Everything which seems great to men is only shadow-painting (*σκιαγραφία*). Whence it is correctly said that man is nothing and none of the things of man are secure."<sup>15</sup>

What we have then in this passage of Pindar are some commonplace reflections on the nature of human fortune. There is nothing to warrant Fränkel's claim that *ἐπάμεροι* here means "with moods that vary as the day." If that is what the word means here, then Pindar is guilty of having introduced an irrelevant element into his train of thought. Thus the con-

<sup>8</sup> *Pythian* 3.85 f.

<sup>9</sup> J. Jüthner, *Wiener Studien*, 54 (1936), pp. 142 f., correcting the interpretation of L. Bieler, *Wien. St.*, 51 (1933), pp. 143-145.

<sup>10</sup> Aesch. *P.V.* 546 ff.

<sup>11</sup> Soph. *Aj.* 125 f.

<sup>12</sup> Aesch. *Ag.* 1327 ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Nv.* 2 ff.: *διείργει δὲ πᾶσα κεκριμένα! δύναμις, ὡς τὸ μὲν οὐδὲν, ὃ δὲ/ χάλκεος ἀσφαλὲς αἰὲν ἔδος/ μένει οὐρανός.*

H. Jurenka, *Philologus*, 58 (1899), p. 349, also compares these passages. *Pythian* 3.84 ff. also is relevant here.

<sup>14</sup> Soph. *O.R.* 1186 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Fr. 10a Ross.

text excludes Fränkel's rendering. It is true that the context does not compel us to take the word to mean "creatures of a day." However, that is a wholly appropriate way of referring to mankind under the circumstances.

A consequence of changing circumstances determining man's mood, according to Fränkel, is that man's perception of reality becomes blurred.<sup>16</sup> In this way Fränkel accounts for a number of passages in which men who are addressed as *ἐφήμεροι* are said to be ignorant or foolish. Semonides fr. 1 D. is paraenetic in tone. It begins with a boy's being addressed and told that Zeus controls everything and disposes of it as he pleases. Men lack knowledge but *ἐφήμεροι* we live as the beasts of the field completely ignorant of how god will bring each thing to fruition. But hope and confidence give nurture to all men as they attempt that which will not be fulfilled. Some men wait for the next day to come, some for the next year. There is no one who does not think that he will become rich. But old age, disease, war, drowning and suicide cut men down before they achieve their aims. So, the poet concludes, we should not love evils and torture our hearts by concerning ourselves with misery.<sup>17</sup> What we have in this poem is an exhortation to put aside long-term plans and to live for the moment. Fränkel's method of analyzing the meaning of *ἐφήμερος* in this poem and elsewhere is to assume that some word or words in the immediate vicinity of the term reflect some part of its meaning. This is a dangerous assumption. In the case of this passage it is almost certain that Semonides did not think that men's outlook on reality was blurred by emotional instability. The reason for their ignorance is that as men they can have no idea what Zeus or the gods intend for them since the purposes of the gods are inscrutable and they are given no clue as to what the gods will do. This is standard Greek theology.<sup>18</sup> In Pindar's Eleventh Nemean we are told that although no clear signs come from Zeus as to what will be, men nonetheless

<sup>16</sup> Pp. 136-138 = pp. 29-31.

<sup>17</sup> L. von Sybel, *Hermes*, 7 (1873), pp. 361 f., believes that the poet at vv. 20-24 is advising against the pursuit of the things which hope encourages a man to pursue and which turn out to be evils. But it may be that the poet is simply advising against persisting in mourning past misfortunes, just as Pindar does at *Isthmian* 8.5-15. So also D. Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry*, London and New York, 1967, p. 186, who compares Semonides Fr. 29.13 f. D. R. Reitzenstein, *Philol.*, 57 (1898), pp. 42-45, classifies the poem as *Trostgedicht*. Wilamowitz, *Sappho und Simonides*, Berlin, 1913, p. 273, sums up the poem's intent with the verses inscribed on the silver skeleton which graces Trimalchio's table: *Totus homuncio nil est. Ergo sic erimus cuncti postquam nos auferet Orcus. Ergo vivamus, dum liceat esse bene.* (Petr. *Sat.* 34.10).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hes. *Erg.* 483 f.; *Hom. hymn. ad Cer.* 250 f.; Solon. *Fr.* 1.63 ff. and 17 D.; Mimn. *Fr.* 2.1 ff. D.; Theogn. 133 ff.; Pind. *Ol.* 7.24 ff.; *Pyth.* 10.59 ff.; *Nem.* 6.4 ff.; Aesch. *Suppl.* 91 ff.; 1037 f.

are ambitious and desire to do many things as their limbs are bound by shameless hope.<sup>19</sup> This is the same point which Semonides makes.

It is difficult to determine how pointed *ἐφήμεροι* is when used in a passage such as this Semonidean one. It may be that it is no more than a synonym for *θηητοί* or *βροτοί*. However, the presence of the topic of the brevity of human life in a number of other poems dealing with the enjoyment of present pleasures and the avoidance of hopes for the distant future encourages one to think that *ἐφήμεροι* may be pointed in this poem and mean "short-lived." The brevity of human life is emphasized in Semonides fr. 29 D., a poem on the *carpe diem* theme. Bacchylides 3.73 ff. deals with these same themes, and significantly there men are referred to as *ἐφαμέριοι* (v. 76).

Of the other passages which Fränkel subsumes under the same heading as Semonides fr. 1 D., Pindar, *Nemean* 6.6 ff. does not help his case.<sup>20</sup> There *ἐφαμερίαν* very clearly means "by day" as against "by night." Two fragments of Pindar are too brief to give any indication of what *ἐφήμερος* means in them. In fr. 182 Snell it is lamented that *ἐφήμεροι* are deceived and do not know. It could simply be the condition of mortals who have no knowledge of what the gods intend their fate to be which is being lamented here. In any case there is no reason to think that what we have is a definition of some aspect of the word's meaning. In fr. 157 Snell Silenus addresses Olympus as a hapless *ἐφήμερος* who speaks foolishly in boasting of his possessions. Again there is no reason to think that there is any necessary connection between being *ἐφήμερος* and being foolish. After all, it would be foolish for a man as a creature of a day to boast of his possessions. The context in which Antinous insultingly addresses Eumaeus and Philoetius as *ἐφημέρια φρονέοντες* at *Odyssey* 21.85 as they weep at the sight of their master's bow does not exclude the possibility that the point of the insult is that the two servants can only think of that which is immediately at hand and are unable to take stock of the further consequences of their behavior. Their short-sightedness prevents them from seeing that their weeping will upset Penelope. But even if the expression does mean "thinking thoughts which vary as the day" it hardly follows that *ἐφήμερος* when used of a man will mean "varying as the day." Theognis 485 f. advises that in drinking a man should not let his belly master him as it does an *ἐφημέριος λάτρης*. The traditional rendering "day-labourer" is dismissed by Fränkel on the ground that it does not fit the context.<sup>21</sup> But the traditional rendering makes good sense. A day-labourer

<sup>19</sup> Vv. 43 ff. The conjunction of human hope and ignorance of the divine will is a commonplace, to judge from Semonides, Pindar, and Theognis, vv. 133 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Pp. 137 f. = pp. 30 f.

<sup>21</sup> P. 138 n. 25 = p. 31 n. 2.

is a man whose belly governs what he does. It is because he has to fill his belly that he is forced to undertake the demeaning tasks that he customarily performs.<sup>22</sup>

A further aspect of the way in which the meaning of *ἐφήμερος* develops from its original sense of "varying as the day," according to Fränkel, is its being used of voluntary adaptation to circumstances.<sup>23</sup> The context demands that we take the word to mean "short-lived" in two of the passages which are cited as examples of this aspect of the word's use. Theognis, 963 ff., advises against praising a man before knowing him well on the grounds that many men put on an *ἐφημέριος* spirit. But time, Theognis continues, shows the true character of each. That is, a man can give an impression for a day or a short time of being trustworthy, but his true character will be shown over a long period of time.<sup>24</sup> Theognis, 665 f., says, "We all grieve for you in your misfortune, Cyrnus, but another's troubles are something that is *ἐφημέριον*." This is a commonplace to judge from Pindar, *Nemean*, 1.53 f., "His own cares press upon everyone alike but straightway the heart is free of sorrow when it is another's care." What Theognis is saying, then, is that our concern for the misfortune of others lasts only for a short time.<sup>25</sup>

Fränkel places *τερπνὸν ἐφάμερον* at Pindar, *Isthmian*, 7.40, under the heading of voluntary adaptation to circumstances and takes the phrase to mean "joy that comes day by day."<sup>26</sup> David C. Young in his monograph on that poem adopts Fränkel's interpretation.<sup>27</sup> I shall argue that that is the correct interpretation of these words. At v. 39 of the poem Pindar prays that divine envy may not disturb the calm which now prevails and in the following line he gives as a reason his quiet progress toward old age and death pursuing *τερπνὸν ἐφάμερον* as he goes. Then, in contrast to this mode of life, he speaks of those who look to the far-distant and as an example of that sort of man cites Bellerophon and his unsuccessful attempt to fly to heaven. The moral that Pindar draws is that a most bitter end awaits that which is sweet but contrary to right. What has to be established is that such a train of thought is in harmony with what Pindar says elsewhere on the subject of what is the appropriate way for mortals to conduct themselves.

In speaking of the success of those whom he celebrates Pindar is wont to say that they have reached the limits of human felicity and that they

<sup>22</sup> So also B. A. Van Groningen, *Theognis, le premier livre*, Amsterdam, 1966, *ad loc.* It is Odysseus' shameless belly which forces him to beg and seek demeaning work (*Odyssey* 15.344 f.). Cf. Ap. Rhod. 1.1172 ff.

<sup>23</sup> Pp. 138-140 = pp. 32 f.

<sup>24</sup> So Van Groningen, *ad loc.*

<sup>25</sup> Van Groningen, *ad loc.*

<sup>26</sup> P. 139 = p. 32.

<sup>27</sup> Young, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

should neither attempt to go further nor should they even think that they can go further.<sup>28</sup> The far-distant thus becomes a figure for that which is forbidden to mortals. In contrast to it there is that which is at foot or nearby or close to home.<sup>29</sup> Things which belong to this category are what it is appropriate for mortals to pursue. That which is at foot seems to be identical with that which comes day by day. In the Tenth Pythian at vv. 61 ff. Pindar recommends seizing that which lies at foot since it is impossible to conjecture what will happen in a year's time and in the Eighth Isthmian at vv. 12 ff. exactly the same advice is given. In other words, what is at foot is that which circumstances present us with, which it is plausible to infer is another way of speaking of that which comes day by day. In the First Olympian at v. 99 f. Pindar declares that the good which comes day by day is the highest which comes to each of mortal men. The implication of the passage is clearly that any other kind of good is wrong. For these reasons I think that Fränkel's interpretation of *τερπνὸν ἐφάμερον* is correct, though I have reached that conclusion by a different route from that which he followed.

There are two other instances of the word which Fränkel relegates to an appendix, which should be dealt with here.<sup>30</sup> One of the consequences of the plague at Athens, according to Thucydides, 2.53.2, was that men thought it right to take a speedy enjoyment of that which they possessed as they believed that their bodies and possessions were *ἐφήμερα*.<sup>31</sup> "Short-lived" or "of a day" makes excellent sense in this context. Antiphon the Sophist, DK 87 B 50, says that the life of men is like a watch for a day (*φρουρᾶ ἐφημέρω*) and is in length like a single day, so to speak (*ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν*), in which we look up to the light and then hand it on to our successors. Fränkel claims that Antiphon uses *ὡς ἔπος εἶπεῖν* here to apologize for his novel use of *ἐφήμερος* meaning "short-lived," which Fränkel believes is a late development of the word's use. But what Antiphon is apologizing for is the boldness of his comparison of life to a single

<sup>28</sup> *Ol.* 1.113 f.; 3.43 ff.; *Pyth.* 10.27 ff.; *Nem.* 3.19 ff.; 9.45 ff.; *Isthm.* 4.29 ff.; 6.10 ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Ol.* 3.43 ff.; *Pyth.* 3.19 ff.; 3.59 ff.; *Nem.* 3.30 f.; 3.75; *Isthm.* 4.29 ff.

<sup>30</sup> Pp. 142-144 = pp. 36-39.

<sup>31</sup> In dealing with this passage and such passages as Eur. *Heracl.* 866; Diphil. Fr. 45 K.; Men. Fr. 324 Körte, and Plut. *Mor.* 1090 B. Fränkel (pp. 142 f. = pp. 36 f.) takes *ἐφήμερος* to mean "unstable," "uncertain," a meaning which he derives from the sense "variable." There is no need to posit such a meaning since it is possible to translate the word in all of these passages as "short-lived." Simonid. Fr. 527 *PMG*: οὐκ ἔστιν κακὸν/ ἀνεπιδόκητον ἀνθρώποις· ὀλίγω δὲ χρόνῳ/ πάντα μεταρρίπτει θεός, compared with Diphil. Fr. 45 K.:

*ἀπροσδόκητον οὐδὲν ἀνθρώποις πάθος,  
ἐφήμερος γὰρ τὰς τύχας κεκτήμεθα*

and with Eur. *Heracl.* 866, tends to confirm that the word in these passages means "brief."

day. This is the way in which *ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν* is normally used.<sup>32</sup> Antiphon's comparison of life to a day's guard duty which we then hand on to others is of obvious importance in determining why men are called *ἐφήμεροι* since it lends support to the view that they are so called because man's life was thought to be short.

In sum, what has been argued is that Fränkel has adduced no cogent reason for taking *ἐφήμεροι* when used of men to mean "creatures who vary as the day" and that the various passages which he brings forward in support of his contention that the basic meaning of the word is "varying as the day" do not in fact provide such support. The conclusions which, I think, should be drawn from the passages which have been analyzed is that *ἐφήμερος* may mean "by day," "from day to day," and "lasting for a day" and that no priority of meaning can on the basis of the evidence that we possess be assigned to any of these meanings. Even if it were possible to determine what the original sense of the word was, it does not follow that that would be of any help in establishing why men are called *ἐφήμεροι*.

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<sup>32</sup> Kühner-Gerth, *Gr. Gramm.*, 3rd ed., II, p. 508.