

## How to Kill a Philosopher: The Narrating of Ancient Greek Philosophers' Deaths in Relation to their Way of Living

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There is a general interest in ancient biographies about death scenes, particularly about unusual, terrible, and strange deaths. Indeed, in the mind of ancient biographers the death scene is the last chance to confirm and glorify a character definitively, or to punish him for his way of life, and, if he is an intellectual, to reject the ideas expressed in his work. The topic of a philosopher's death might have been of great interest to antiquarians and biographers: indeed works about this topic were not rare, as the book presumably composed by Hermippus shows.<sup>1</sup> According to Riginos 1976, 194 this book was the origin of this traditional biographical rubric, which is almost always present in philosophers' biographies. Also Titinius Capito composed an *Exitus illustrium uirorum*, according to Pliny (*Ep.* viii 12). Furthermore, it seems evident that collections of examples of death were circulated and used by rhetoricians: Cicero (*Diu.* ii 22) apparently had one of these digests when he was writing some passages (see Ronconi 1966, col. 1259-1260). Rhetoric, thus, might have contributed to the development of this topic.

As is true for almost all literary deaths, especially for heroic characters, meaningful death is surprisingly simple and easy to explain for ancient Greek philosophers: their death scenes are almost always significant, and we can argue that everything written by a philosopher or, particularly, every detail of his way of living, can determine the exact form of his death. This assertion, defended by Chitwood 2004 regarding Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus, can be extended to any philosopher whose biography appears in the best known and best preserved biographical work about ancient Greek philosophers: the *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* by Diogenes Laertius. I shall classify and examine the way Laertian Greek philosophers die. I consider these forms of death not only in relation to the biographical approach of interpreting their words as autobiographical, as Chitwood does based on Lefkowitz's influential book about poets' lives (Lefkowitz 1981), but also as a popular reflection that attaches a way of dying to the philosopher based on his way of living. It is also a contribu-

<sup>1</sup> This is suggested by Leo 1901 [1990], 126. Indeed, some fragments are preserved by Hermippus about the deaths of Chilon, Democritus, Stilpo, Menippus, Heraclides Ponticus, Arcesilaus, Demetrius Phalereus, Chrysippus, Epicurus and Demosthenes (fr. 12, 31, 35, 39, 42, 43, 58, 59, 61, 73 Wehrli = *FGrHistCont* 1026 F 18, 66, 76, 80, 71, 72, 75, 81, 83, 51a). This is not supported, however, by Bollansée 1999, who believes that these death scenes were simply part of the philosophers' biographies

tion to define the popular stereotypes about Greek philosophers in the ancient mind.<sup>2</sup>

Like a hero in a battle, a wise man is not fully confirmed until the moment of his death. In a biography, a philosopher's death never happens randomly or in isolation from the rest of his life, like poets' deaths and the deaths of other cultural figures (see Lefkowitz 1981; Loraux and Miralles 1998). For this reason, classifying the different ways in which philosophers die in order to find out their meanings may make the philosopher's biographical image clearer. It is also important to focus on the statements that Diogenes Laertius makes in his epigrams and on the statements in other writers' epigrams that he reports on in almost all biographies: these statements always represent the most widespread, popular view about the philosophers' way of dying and its overall meaning in the context of their lives. According to Dover 1974, 7, 'when an epitaph makes a statement about the moral qualities of a dead person it must be remembered that the composer was aware of making this statement to all passers-by for an indefinite period of time'. The epigrams, then, are a useful tool to determine the version of the philosophers' death accepted by the biographical tradition, as well as the meaning given to a specific way of dying.

I begin by highlighting the fact that most philosophers reach a remarkable age. Although there are a few rare exceptions (Eudoxus and Crantor), which are explicitly indicated, most philosophers lived for seventy, eighty, or even ninety years, reaching a much higher age than the average life expectancy in that epoch. Here we see the first essential difference between philosophers' and other characters' ways of dying: heroes die young (including historical heroes, such as Alexander the Great); philosophers die old. It is also true, as Brelich 1958b, 90 says, that dying young is not a necessary characteristic for heroes, and there are even some heroes whose main characteristic is just old age, essentially Nestor or Tiresias (Hesiod, fr. 161 M-W). However, those eminent names enable us to understand why, in the popular mind, a philosopher attains such an age: there is a deeply rooted belief that a wise man reaches an old age, and even in the popular mind the wise man is often old, arguably because experience is gathered over time, an idea that is part of the folklore of all cultures.<sup>3</sup>

Life expectancy in Ancient Greece did not exceed the age of thirty-five, even without taking into account the slaves, whose life expectancy was much lower (Petit 1971, 251-258). Seneca observes that only very rarely did people reach the age of fifty or sixty (*De breu. uitae* iii 4; xx 4). For Aulus Gellius, those who are older than forty-six are elders (*Noct. Att.* x 28); Ieronimus states that Lactantius, who was seventy, had reached a ripe old age, *extrema senectus* (*De uiris* lxxx). By growing old one loses one's mental and physical faculties, as well as any desires for the things of life, as Pliny reports (*NH* vii 168). The philosophers, however, all reach a remarkable age in full possession of their mental and physi-

<sup>2</sup> An elaborated and complete study on these topics is offered in Grau 2009.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., the tales collected by Thompson 1955-1958, J151ff.: *Wisdom from an old man*.

cal faculties. The only exception is Theophrastus, who has to be carried about in a litter (DL v 41).

Old age is not at all perceived as an advantageous age by the ancient Greeks. Instead, they see the elder as a weak being, whose wisdom people listen to, but who is not envied at all. He is, in Orestes' words in Euripides, the old remains of a man, *παλαιὸν ἀνδρὸς λείψανον* (*Electra* 554).<sup>4</sup> In contrast, the maxims and apophthegmes of the philosophers themselves consider old age to be advantageous and respectable. One should prepare for old age by philosophing, and one should enjoy old age once it has been reached (see, e.g., DL iv 34, 48, 50, 51, 78, 92; v 21; vii 171, 174; x 122). Diogenes Laertius often talks about old age with great reverence in his epigrams (see DL ii 120; iv 78; vii 31; ix 65; and elsewhere). Philosophers are therefore presented in the biographical tradition with the desirable features of a venerable and lucid old age, as is characteristic of the wise men of all cultures. The elder men of this epoch might be a true decrepit ruin, as we have seen, but the philosophers of the biographies provide an idealised image that differs from their plausible historical truth, not only regarding age but also regarding many other areas.

### I. A typology of ancient Greek philosophers' deaths

I have tried to classify the philosophers' deaths as systematically as possible, with the expected variations. I have examined the widest possible range of philosophers, which Jerphagnon 1981, 22-26 fails to do in his study, which is the only attempt that has been made so far to systematise and explain philosophers' deaths as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In my study, the ways of dying are classified according to the positive and negative view of a philosopher's life in the biographical tradition.

It is worth noting that there are often various traditions regarding the death of a philosopher. Some of these are clearly contradictory, since some have a positive view, while others have a negative one. This duality is due to the overlapping of several traditions, as usually occurs in compilations. For this reason, certain philosophers inevitably appear in several sections. At the end of this classification, I try to elucidate the reasons why a philosopher dies in a certain way.

**a.** The most frequent death among philosophers is the **inglorious, ridiculous death** at the end of a complete and accomplished life. Thus, Alexinus of Elis, one of Eubulides' successors, died because he was pierced by the end of a reed while swimming in the Alpheus after he had intended to found a school that would be called the Olympian school (DL ii 109). Diogenes Laertius ii 110 explores this particularly absurd and ridiculous kind of death in one of his epigrams in order to verify the proverb according to which one day an unfortunate man pierced his foot with a nail while diving. The process may possibly have been in the other direction, of course: the story about the death of the character could have origi-

<sup>4</sup> Other examples of this conception about old age can be found in Aeschylus, *Persae* 155-195; 235-267; 1025-1061; *Agamemnon* 22-135; Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus* 1208-1248; and others.

<sup>5</sup> Other studies, such as Chitwood 1986, 1993, and 2004, focus only on three philosophers, whereas Fairweather 1973, Gill 1973, and Livrea 1987, 427-433 each refers to only one philosopher.

nated in the proverb. Indeed, the previous story about his failure to found a school in Olympia because of the unhealthiness of the place, which forced all his pupils to abandon him, is coherent with his bad luck, and so also with his ridiculous kind of death.

Xenocrates' death is no less ridiculous: he fell over a washbasin during the night in his 82nd year (DL iv 14). Thus, any hope of a glorious death that honoured his virtuous life was frustrated: it is tempting to interpret this hilarious death as some kind of punishment imposed by the biographical tradition on such a serious man, whom Plato used to advise to make sacrifices to the Graces (DL iv 6). Diogenes Laertius iv 15 mocks him in his epigram. Ariston, being bald, was killed by sunstroke. This death was also the subject of mockery in the epigram in Diogenes Laertius vii 164. In this case, the origin of the story may be comedy: Aeschylus' death is also parodied because of his being bald (see Piccolomini 1888, 102, and, more recently, Hadjicosti 2005 and Lefkowitz 2009).

As Zeno was leaving the school, he tripped and fell, breaking a finger. Striking the ground with his fist, he quoted a verse from the *Niobe* by Timotheus of Miletus (fr. 787 Page), 'I come, why dost you call for me?', (ἔρχομαι· τί μ' αὖεις;), and died on the spot through holding his breath (ἀποπνίξας ἑαυτόν, DL vii 28).<sup>6</sup> It is not clear whether Zeno died as a result of holding his breath, meaning he committed suicide, or whether he simply died when he ran out of breath, in which case his death would have been a result of his fall, and not desired by the philosopher.<sup>7</sup> In any case, it is a rather ridiculous death, but could be symbolic: according to Berrettoni 1989, Zeno's words answer a supposed call to death made by the Earth. Indeed, Stoics, and particularly Zeno, used complex symbolic gestures to represent some elements of his doctrine (see Dumont 1969, 1-9; Pachet 1975, 241). In these gestures, the finger was essential: the finger is both simultaneously the tool and the symbol of knowledge; so, breaking the finger is equivalent to being no longer capable of knowing or researching (Berrettoni 1989, 35). Following Stoic logic, which he had just invented, Zeno deduced that the breaking of his finger was a sign, sent by the Earth, that he should finish his philosophical career, and thus his own life. It is not very pertinent, then, whether Zeno committed suicide in response to the Earth's request, or whether he died a natural death. If this interpretation is correct, Zeno left philosophy only when he died, and furthermore, he left his philosophical vocation in the same way that he started: through an external, divine call (either an oracle or the providential reading of a book) belonging to the typical Stoic τύχη (see DL vii 5; for an analysis of this topic, see Grau 2008). Accordingly, Zeno's death should belong to a sec-

<sup>6</sup> See also Lucian, *Macrob.* xix, in which the broken finger is not mentioned and Zeno dies of starvation. DL vii 31 takes up this version again in his own epigram.

<sup>7</sup> The different translations of this passage reflect each translator's idea about Zeno's death: Hicks translates it as 'holding his breath'; Gigante and Reale as 'mancandogli il respiro'; Bréhier as 'il morut subitement d'étouffement'; Huebner and Cobet as 'se strangulans'; and Goulet as 'en retenant sa respiration'. It seems clear, however, that the tradition tends to assign suicide to the Stoics, as we will see further in section c.

tion dedicated to deaths intended by gods (see section j), which would somehow be a glorious way of dying. But for those not initiated in Stoic doctrines and teaching methods, Zeno's death may have been considered highly ridiculous.

Plato also died in a similarly anodyne and inglorious manner according to some versions (Riginos 1975, 194-198). Tertullian (*De anima* lii 3) states that Plato died while placidly sleeping; other accounts, however, state that he was sleeping due to terribly bad indigestion as a result of a wedding banquet that he had just attended (*Suda, s.u.*). This would seem to agree with one of the causes of death attributed to him by Diogenes Laertius iii 2 and 34, according to whom the philosopher died precisely during the wedding banquet (ἐν γάμοις δειπνῶν), as stated by Hermippus (fr. 41 Wehrli = *FGrHistCont* 1026 F 70). This kind of death must be considered alongside the accusations of gluttony with which the negative tradition attacks Plato (DL vi 25), something the clearly more positive tradition hastily refutes (Olympiodorus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem commentarii* 96). The reference to a wedding banquet could have been extracted from the apocryphal *Letter XIII* 361c, in which Plato writes to Dionysius the Younger, telling him that he should take care of the weddings of his four daughters; it is rather ironic that Plato, who remained celibate and did not believe in marriage,<sup>8</sup> ended up dying, of all places, at a wedding banquet. Thus, the tradition that kills Plato through sheer gluttony must be understood as clearly negative, *pace* Wehrli, who gives preeminence to death during sleep and considers it to be a good death, comparable to that of Thales and Chilon (Wehrli, *Hermippos der Kalimacheer*, 1974, 70-71); my own view, however, is that these are different types of deaths that are equally but differently regarded in the biographies (see section k). According to the *Suda*, Theophrastus also died during the wedding banquet of one of his disciples, in an anecdote that seems to have been constructed based on Plato's death.

Wine is also the cause of death of some philosophers. Arcesilaus dies after drinking too much unmixed wine: ἄκρατον ἐμφορηθεὶς πολὺν (DL iv 44); Lacydes reaches a state of paralysis after drinking excessively (DL iv 61); Stilpo uses wine as a means to commit suicide (DL ii 120);<sup>9</sup> and even Chrysippus dies after drinking unmixed wine during a sacrificial feast to which he was invited by his own disciples: he suffers a strong attack of vertigo and leaves the world after days in agony (DL vii 184). Another parallel account tells us that he dies from an attack of laughter after seeing an ass eating his figs. The idea behind this is practically the same, since Chrysippus then asks the old lady, who owned the ass, to give the animal some unmixed wine too to help it digest the figs, and this makes him laugh so much that he dies (DL vii 185).<sup>10</sup> Some dramatists also die in a similar way: Sophocles, for instance, dies choking on a green grape; Cratinus, in a variation of the same, dies from the pain caused by seeing his broken wineskin leaking and losing all the wine; while Anacreon's death is close to the obscenity of comedy: he dies after eating a grape (see Piccolomini 1888). This could sug-

<sup>8</sup> See *Suda, s.u.* However, this seems to be a later interpretation.

<sup>9</sup> Stilpo's fondness for drinking is mentioned by Cicero in *De fato* v 10.

<sup>10</sup> Lucian, *Macrob.* xxv assigns the same death to the Comic Philemon.

gest that these deaths take these characters into the Dionysian sphere, which is a predictable connection for dramatic poets. However, while for the comic and tragic poets this fact was rather pertinent,<sup>11</sup> the same connection does not apply to the philosophers. The fact that the same type of death attributed to Chrysippus is also attributed to Philemon, the comedian, makes it clear that there is a link with the death of the dramatists. The motives, however, do not seem to be identical. Furthermore, all deaths caused by drinking wine come from the same source, Hermippus, which would suggest that the invention of this kind of death for some philosophers can be attributed to him.<sup>12</sup> The three philosophers who die due to excessive drinking—Stilpo, Arcesilaus, and Lacydes—are Academics or Socratics. This means that, in the popular minds, they are part of the Socratic tradition of the symposium; in fact, one of the deaths attributed to Plato also refers, as we have seen, to the same symposiac context, the same context in which Socrates is described as Silenian (see Plato, *Symp.* 215b-c; Xenophon, *Symp.* iv 19 and v 7), and where wine is evidently present. The atmosphere is, no doubt, equally Dionysian, however the implications appear to be much simpler in common thought: those who enjoy banquets in the Socratic style die, ironically, due to an excess of wine, probably at the very moment in which they cannot consume great amounts of alcohol, like their teacher does.<sup>13</sup> It could be said that this is a death occurring once the character, due to his old age, has lost the faculties that made him famous.

It could be suggested that the end of Stilpo, although defined by Diogenes Laertius as a means of suicide, also responds to the same schema, especially since old sources, like Cicero (*De fato* v 10), refer to him as being fond of drinking. The philosophers of the Socratic tradition, therefore, are seen in popular thought as philosophers who enjoy banqueting and who, like their teacher, drink excessively, thus causing their death.

Chrysippus, the only non-Socratic in this group, is said to drink unmixed wine during sacrificial banquets. This context is therefore different from that of the others. Furthermore, his death is identical to that of the comedian poet Philemon, suggesting that, in this case, perhaps there is a typological proximity with the dramatists, who belong to a clearly Dionysian sphere. At this stage, we should remember the indignation and condemnation that the obscenities that appear in the works of Chrysippus cause in Diogenes Laertius vii 187-188. Perhaps the relation with the Dionysian sphere and the proximity to comedy must be sought in this direction, as we have already indicated happened in the case of Anacreon. In any case, Diogenes Laertius and the biographical tradition consider that these

<sup>11</sup> See the accurate study on the Dionysian symbology of the tragedians' death in general in Palomar 1998.

<sup>12</sup> This is supported by Wilamowitz 1881, 47n6, and Wehrli, *Hermippos die Kallimacheer*, 1974, 72.

<sup>13</sup> See the end of Plato's *Symposium*, in which Socrates is the only one who copes with drinking a large amount of alcohol without falling asleep. Significantly, DL ii 46 celebrates the hemlock as only the most literal of Socrates' many drinks (Wilson 2007, 10).

deaths caused by excess of wine are clearly ridiculous, as is shown in the epigrams that consecrate those who suffer such deaths. The following is said of Stilpo, for instance (DL ii 120): wine was his refuge against the evils of old age that besieged him. It could be said that Diogenes Laertius refers to him as an old drunk, an image that must have come, as usual, from the comedians, while Sophilus makes fun of him by using a complex play on words (fr. 3 Kassel-Austin):<sup>14</sup>

Στίλπωνός ἐστι βύσμαθ' ὁ Χαρίνου λόγος.

What Charinus says is just Stilpo's stoppers.

The criticism of Arcesilaus is blunter (DL iv 45), and equally ironic and bitter are the verses in Diogenes Laertius iv 61 dedicated to Lacydes; the verses he addresses to Chrysippus are rather hard too (DL vii 184). It is possible that the strong criticism the biographical tradition dedicates to the philosophers who do not practise a rigorous ascetism and who, instead, deliver themselves to gluttony and drink, has had some sort of influence, especially when considering the deaths caused by consumption of wine as ridiculous, which could even be taken as a parody of the much more glorious, Socratic-style death caused by ingestion of poison (see section i). This is made manifest, for instance, in the dialogue between two slaves at the beginning of the Aristophanic *Knights* (80-87):

ΟΙ. Β Κράτιστον οὖν νῶν ἀποθανεῖν.

ΟΙ. Α Ἄλλὰ σκόπει,

ὅπως ἂν ἀποθάνοιμεν ἀνδρικώτατα.

ΟΙ. Β Πῶς δῆτα, πῶς γένοιτ' ἂν ἀνδρικώτατα;

Βέλτιστον ἡμῖν αἶμα ταύρειον πιεῖν·

ὁ Θεμιστοκλέους γὰρ θάνατος αἰρετώτερος.

ΟΙ. Α Μὰ Δί' ἄλλ' ἄκρατον οἶνον ἀγαθοῦ δαίμονος.

Slave 2: It's best then to die.

Slave 1: But let us seek

the most heroic death.

Slave 2: Let me think, what is the most heroic?

Let us drink the blood of a bull;

that's the death Themistocles chose.

Slave 1: No, not that, but a bumper of good unmixed wine in honor of the Good Genius.

The death of Themistocles, which they refer to, was traditionally caused by ingestion of poison when, exiled in Persia, he preferred to commit suicide rather than help the Persians against his Greek compatriots (Diodorus ix 58); the fact that the slave, a complete drunkard, prefers unmixed wine to poison could lie in

<sup>14</sup> Roeper 1854, 14-15 believes that βύσματα, or 'nozzles', could refer to πύσματα, i.e., Stilpo's 'malevolent interrogations', with which he silences his opponents. Nevertheless, this would take away the scorn. For this reason, I suggest that, in the context in which Diogenes Laertius inserts the citation, there is a play on words with the wineskin nozzles, which, as we have seen, Stilpo was particularly fond of. This Charinus of the comic quotation is otherwise unknown, but he must be one of the *dramatis personae*.



the origin of this kind of death of the Socratics, with such a comical after-taste. We should not rule out the possibility that this sort of parody contains some reference to the usual practices of the symposia in the Socratic schools, as has been argued by Boyancé.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the deaths caused by misunderstanding are also considered to be ridiculous and inglorious. Anacharsis, for instance, was struck dead by an arrow shot by his own brother during a hunt while he was boasting that he had returned safe and sound to his home in Scythia from Greece thanks to his own ability with words (DL i 102). This account of his death contradicts the other, better-known, more glorious version that converts him into a sort of martyr of the Hellenic tradition when, on returning to his country, he wanted to export the customs he had learned from the Greeks; his people, however, did not follow him and, instead, sentenced him to death for practising Hellenic rituals (DL i 102).<sup>16</sup> The fact that Diogenes Laertius prefers the accidental and inglorious version of Anacharsis' death is shown, as always, in the epigram (DL i 103). Nevertheless, we find in this death in particular, but also in all the other deaths, the theme of the *φόνος ἄκουστος*, or sudden and undesired death, which can also be understood as a kind of heroic death, especially when taking place in the context of a horse race, a hunt, or in an agonistic manner (Brelich 1958b, 89). The cases touched upon here refer, however, to punitive and absolutely inglorious deaths that deny the life, and even the explicit desires for glory, of those who suffer them, and for this reason should be considered to fall within the negative biographical tradition. Furthermore, this is a habitual kind of death in the case of many poets, especially dramatists like Cratinus, Antiphanes, Philemon, and Aeschylus. The latter was killed by an eagle trying to crack open a turtle's shell by dropping it on his head, which it mistook for a rock due to his baldness (*Vita Aeschyli* 9; see Piccolomini 1888; Pörtulas 1994; Palomar 1998; Hadjicosti 2005). In the schemas of the popular interpretation, these deaths fulfill the same function in philosophers as they do in poets (Lefkowitz 1981, 97). Needless to say, all these forms of ridiculous deaths probably originated from comedy, and have been used later by various biographers.<sup>17</sup>

**b.** It is also typical that the words of the philosopher in his own works turn against him and end up causing his own death on the negation of his life or a

<sup>15</sup> Boyancé 1972, 3. The problem in this case is, as Boyancé says, that 'peu de chose subsiste de cette littérature à la fois sociale et morale, où ils discutaient, dans un esprit si foncièrement grec, de la façon dont il faut organiser un banquet, pratiquer la musique, user de l'ivresse, de la joie et de la détente des fêtes. Ainsi a-t-on le plus souvent méconnu l'esprit dans lequel ils ont envisagé ces problèmes'.

<sup>16</sup> This is the canonical version of Herodotus iv 76, and the traditional interpretation that, e.g., appears in Flavius Iosephus' *Contra Apionem* ii 269, according to which Anacharsis, who was so highly admired by the Greeks, was sentenced to death by his fellow countrymen on returning to his country because they thought he had been contaminated by Greek customs.

<sup>17</sup> This kind of ridiculous death can be found in Satyrus' *Vita euripidea* (Arrighetti ed. 1964; Schorn 2004), which has some information taken directly from Aristophanes. See also Lehrs 1895, 395ff.



**reversal of his own words.**<sup>18</sup> The deaths occurring this way are no less ridiculous than those described in the section above, even though they have the peculiarity that, in these cases, the biographical tradition clearly extracts the motives from the philosopher's own works; it is as if the doctrine of the philosopher turns against him and causes him to die in a horrible way. Although this is another type of vengeance of the biographers, it is nonetheless a variation of the one described previously. These are anecdotes that either illustrate ironically how surprising the philosopher's behaviour would be if he followed his own doctrine to the letter, or they are a negative tradition that aims to show how the life of the philosopher denies his own thought.

Thales is a paradigmatic case. While in some accounts he dies by falling into a ditch while observing the stars in the company of his old servant (DL ii 4), this is not the cause of his death in the more traditional version (DL i 34, nor in Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a). This reveals an interesting evolution of the topic of the philosopher whose attention is too focussed on the things that lie above his eyes and not focussed enough on those things that lie before his own feet. In this version, Thales dies as a direct consequence of being an astronomer, even for being a philosopher, although naturally this is a much later version in the biographical tradition. The philosopher appears here as a being who is alien to the everyday lives of mortals: it is this separation of the philosopher from ordinary life that is strongly sensed by the non-philosophers. In comic or satirical authors, philosophers are shown as odd eccentric characters and even dangerous (Hadot 2002, 267). The biographical tradition, by contrast, would like to return him to the world of the mortals in the very moment of his decease, making him suffer inglorious, ridiculous, absolutely common deaths, or even deaths that show once and for all that what he proposed has no meaning in everyday life.

The narrative strategies for capturing the reversal of the philosopher's life or words can vary. In the case of Thales, as we have seen, his way of living, of philosophising, is what causes him to die in this version. Likewise, the Cynic way of thinking of an absolutely natural life leads Diogenes to his death when he tries to eat raw octopus, as a result of which he contracts cholera (DL vi 76). This makes it clear that, for the biographical tradition, his way of living is impracticable. The other version of his death, where he dies by being bitten in the tendon by a dog when trying to share the octopus with it (DL vi 77), could also be understood as a reversal, even if this second version is naturally set upon a different background (see section h), in the sense that a figurative 'dog' dies when bitten by a real dog. It is as if reality has imposed itself, with all its weight, on the philosophical ideal. All these types of reversals show how what the philosopher postulates as a way of life is perceived as impossible in real, everyday life by the non-philosophers, that is, those outside any immediate philosophical circle.

It could also be the case, however, that at the very moment of dying, the philosopher himself retracts what he has believed all his life, which is even

<sup>18</sup> On this concept, that she defines as 'rebound', see Chitwood 2004, 6.

graver in the eyes of biographical tradition. Thus, when Bion, famous for his insults to the gods as well as for his indecent behaviour (DL iv 53-54), falls ill, he repents publically for his words and accepts all sorts of amulets and superstitions for fear of death, but he dies all the same (DL iv 54). For this reason, Diogenes Laertius dedicates his longest epigram to him. This particularly malevolent epigram stresses the embarrassment of this reversal (DL iv 55-57).

The reversal can still take place in a third fashion. The biographical tradition can turn the terms contained in the philosopher's work directly against him in order to kill him in the worst possible way, as defined by the philosopher himself. The vindictive intention thus becomes evident. Alternatively, his own doctrine can be followed to the letter. We then have a variation of the first type of reversal, namely, the one that asked what would happen if the philosopher were to follow literally what he himself postulated.

In the first case we find the death of Zeno, as analysed in section a, and especially the death of Heraclitus, which deserves an analysis of its own. In the first place, the very illness, dropsy (DL ix 3), seems to be a reversal of his doctrine on water: 'It is pleasure or death to souls to become moist' (DK22 B77); 'For it is death to souls to become water, and death to water to become earth' (B36); 'The dry soul is the wisest and best' (B118). In reality, the very fact that Heraclitus dies of illness is a malevolent reversal of his own words: 'The souls of those who have been defeated in battle are purer than the ones of those who have death by disease' (B136). Further, the anecdote of his encounter with the doctors, whom he speaks to in his usual enigmatic fashion such that they cannot understand him (DL ix 3), is a reversal of his own paradigmatically obscure style, which might have come from his hostility towards the medical profession: 'Physicians who cut, burn, stab, and rack the sick, demand a fee for it which they do not deserve to get' (B58). Finally, his attempts at caring for himself come from his own cosmic theory, according to which the human being is governed by the same principles as nature (B126). This is apparent in the question he poses to the doctors: 'He answers whether they were competent to create a drought after a heavy rain' (DL ix 3). Heraclitus tries, then, to ascertain what he expressed at the end of B36: 'It is death to water to become earth'. 'Now, the dung with which Heraclitus covers himself is a species of "earth", and it could be said to be intended to be death to the water (i.e. the dropsy) which is threatening to be death to his soul' (Fairweather 1973, 237). Even the reference to the dung could also have been extracted from his own work: 'Corpses are more fit to be cast out than dung' (B96). In fact, as Marcus Aurelius points out (*Med.* iii 3), it is rather ironic that a philosopher that taught on the subject of fire (ἐκπύρωσις) actually ends up dying due to an excess of water and his not being able to get dry and turn into fire, despite having postulated that this was possible in his doctrine (always interpreted, of course, at a popular level).<sup>19</sup> This process of general reversal from the

<sup>19</sup> This is how Wehrli (*Ariston* 1952) interprets Heraclitus' death, in his commentary on fragment 28.

Heraclitean doctrines is also made manifest in the especially ironic, sarcastic epigram that Diogenes Laertius dedicates to him (DL ix 4). This makes explicit reference to the contradiction existing between the philosopher's work and his way of dying: All his life, Heraclitus proclaimed that water is death to the soul (B36, 77, and 118), and this is precisely how he suffers his own death; furthermore, the last verse is an exact copy of the words spoken by the philosopher himself, according to whom death is caused by the extinction of fire inside the eyes (B26). Moreover, death took the philosopher to obscurity, especially if he had lived all his life in this same obscurity of proverbial style. How is it possible, Diogenes Laertius asks ironically, that the obscurity Heraclitus endured all his life caused his death? It is clear that the words of the philosopher have turned against him at the time of his death. Even the death caused by the dog bites, as much as it responded to other motives (see section h), could also have been extracted from his work by means of the same reversal process: 'Dogs bark at every one they do not know' (B97).<sup>20</sup> Heraclitus, then, would have died literally while trying unsuccessfully to apply his own doctrine. The biographical tradition ends up rejecting this doctrine, which in this particular case proves to be terribly malevolent.

The death of Empedocles also falls into this section, even if in his case the tradition is less vindictive. The biographical tradition interprets his verses, where he considers himself to be immortal, in a literal sense: 'Unto you I walk as god immortal now, no more as man' (DK31 B112). All the references in the biographical tradition to the philosopher's attempt to be deified upon dying stem from these verses. According to some less favourable versions,<sup>21</sup> Empedocles fell from a carriage on his way to a festival in Messene and broke his thigh. This led to an illness that caused his death (DL viii 73). According to another version, because of his age he slipped into the sea and was drowned (DL viii 74). Both versions attempt to discredit Empedocles' divine character, inspired by the philosopher's own work (B4),<sup>22</sup> and particularly to reject his ascension to heaven (DL viii 68).<sup>23</sup> Like Hippobotus, Diogenes Laertius viii 69 claims that Empedocles wanted to be considered a god, and that for this reason he plunged into Etna's crater and disappeared, but one of his bronze sandals was thrown up in the flames, and so his trick was discovered; the philosopher had given instructions to one of his servants for him to say that he had seen him going up into heaven in a light and surrounded by loud voices that called the philosopher (DL viii 68). Timaeus rejects all versions of this story and affirms that Empedocles died in exile in Peloponnesus (DL viii 71; *FGrHist* 566 F 6). In any case, Diogenes Laertius (as well as the more negative popular biographical tradition) clearly denies

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the effects of reversal in the death of Heraclitus, see Fairweather 1973 and Chitwood 2004, 79-93.

<sup>21</sup> This version is traditionally attributed to Neanthes (*FGrHist* 84 F 28), although Diogenes Laertius does not provide any source.

<sup>22</sup> See the accurate analysis by Chitwood 1986, further developed in Chitwood 2004, 48-58.

<sup>23</sup> The source for his deification is always Heraclides, fr. 83 Wehrli.

any kind of deification of Empedocles. And thus a plethora of alternative versions explain his disappearance in strictly human terms, or even state that he died in an inglorious way, as a kind of biographical punishment, which becomes, as we see, quite habitual. According to Chitwood 1986, 187: ‘these three deaths have in common the desire to punish Empedocles for his claims to godhood or for some part of his philosophy, either his denial of death as an absolute state or for his belief in the mutability of the elements’. It is evident, however, that Diogenes Laertius prefers the version in which Empedocles falls from the chariot. This is probably because, as I have said, this is the most inglorious death for the divine Empedocles, thus denying him any possibility of deification, simply because his tomb could still be visited at Megara (DL viii 75).

In the same way, according to his own doctrine on the elements, the fire of Etna where he would fall (DL viii 69) would make him equal to Zeus (B6.2-3): ‘Shining Zeus and life-bringing Hera, Aidoneus and Nestis, who lets flow from her tears the source of mortal life’. This is something Diogenes Laertius vii 76 comments on: ‘By Zeus he means fire, by Hera earth, by Aidoneus air, and by Nestis water’. Even the sea that in other versions he slips into and drowns in (DL viii 74) would, according to his own words, make him return to the original state of evolution (B117): ‘For I was once already boy and girl, thicket and bird, and mute fish in the waves’. Again according to his own thought, no being ever stops changing and being transformed into various elements (B17.6): ‘And this long interchange shall never end’.

Thus, according to his own cosmic theories, Empedocles, like Heraclitus, would have died transforming his soul into the elements.<sup>24</sup> The difference, however, is that while Empedocles follows his theories to the letter, Heraclitus, in following his own theories, proves them wrong. Both, however, like the others, suffer ridiculous and absurd deaths.

**c. Suicide** is a common form of death in philosophical biographies. Suicide generally reflects a vindictive biographical tradition, even though it is conceived as a dignified solution for the philosopher when he has begun to hate life and is no longer able to bear living, usually as a result of a long illness. Fairweather argues that the fact that philosophers choose suicide must respond to ‘the possibility that a man could have consciously imitated a famous predecessor’ (Fairweather 1974, 261).<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, the motives that lead philosophers to commit suicide are much more varied, as are the forms of suicide.

One of the most complicated and peculiar ways of committing suicide is the method chosen by Periander. As a tyrant, he did not want his tomb to be discovered, so he designed and carried out a complicated plot by which he ordered some men to go out at night and kill and bury the first person they met. He then ordered a larger group of people to pursue the first group and kill them. Finally, he ordered a third, even larger group of people to pursue and kill the second

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed account of Empedocles’ deaths by reversal, see Chitwood 2004, 48-58.

<sup>25</sup> His list is rather brief in comparison with the overall perspective I shall offer here. See Fairweather 1974, 260n149.

group. Periander then made sure he was killed upon meeting the first group, so that nobody could ever find out where he was buried (DL i 96). This is, of course, a manifestation of wisdom in the sense of *μῆτις*, the wisdom that is characteristic of the wise men of the tradition. This wisdom reserves a violent death that is fit for the tyrant, yet it is a desired death that allows him to escape natural death. Nonetheless, the motive of Periander's death is despair (see section e), as suggested in the epigram that Diogenes Laertius dedicates to him (DL i 97).

The suicide of Pherecydes is also rather peculiar. According to the most famous version, during a war between Ephesus and Magnesia, Pherecydes asks an Ephesian to leave him in the territory of Magnesia and gives the order that he should be buried once victory has been achieved. Events develop as the philosopher predicted (DL i 117). This suggests that Pherecydes wanted to help the Ephesians win the war: 'by dying in Magnesia and lying there unburied Pherecydes polluted the land and thus caused its defeat' (Schibli 1990, 8). It is also possible, of course, that the philosopher wanted to force the Ephesians to come and recover his dead body, and that for this reason he sends them the message. In any case, in the epigram dedicated to the philosopher, Diogenes Laertius seems to presuppose that Pherecydes knew an oracle and obeyed it (DL i 121). Pherecydes' suicide to help the Ephesians is thus very well regarded, and Diogenes Laertius suggests that it proves that the wise man is useful even after death. Other accounts offer a rather less altruistic suicide, describing the philosopher jumping from one of the hills of Delphos (DL i 118).

As I have suggested in the previous section, according to some versions, Empedocles commits suicide, by throwing himself into the crater of Etna with the aim of being considered immortal (DL viii 69). However, the issue of suicide is also taken up in less spectacular fashion in some other versions. According to Demetrius of Troezen, Empedocles simply hangs himself (DL viii 74). This account, of course, reveals once again the biographers' refusal to concede any expectation of immortality to the philosopher, making suicide appear in a manifestly punitive fashion.<sup>26</sup> Up to this point, then, I have analysed a series of suicides that could be considered to be special, in so far as they respond to very peculiar motives. Nevertheless, it can be argued that, parallel to the more special version, which is loaded with pretensions of immortality, there is always another, more ordinary everyday account that aims to discredit the spectacular nature of the first one, usually identifying the philosopher's despair as the cause of his suicide (see section e).

The most common form of death, however, is suicide in order to avoid the penuries of old age or to escape an illness that has become unbearable. This is how Speusippus dies. In his despair, he ends up taking his own life after falling victim to a terrible paralysis, or *phthiriasis* (DL iv 4) according to other accounts, that made his body lose consistency to such a degree that he could only be moved in a tiny carriage (DL iv 3; see also Philodemus, *Acad. hist.* vi 38). Diogenes

<sup>26</sup> This is also the view of Chitwood 2004, 49-50.

Laertius perceives Speusippus' suicide rather negatively, as is shown in the epigram dedicated to him, in which Laertius even denies that Speusippus is of the same mould as his teacher Plato, because he ended his own life over such a small matter (DL iv 3). Exactly the same occurs with Carneades, who, being attacked by lice, and following the example of the courageous Antipater, attempts to commit suicide by swallowing poison (*SVF* i Ant. Fr. 7), even though he ends up asking to be given mellifluous wine (DL iv 64). This is a clear allusion to the verses from Aristophanes, which even share formal similarities, and that I mentioned earlier when referring to philosophers who die because they drank too much wine (*Knights* 80-87; see section a). In this case, the link between wine and poison is rather explicit, as well as highly sarcastic. Moreover, the fact that Carneades is an Academic, like the other philosophers mentioned above whose deaths are caused by excess of wine, reinforces the hypothesis expounded above that death by consumption of wine is a parody of Socratic philosophers. In his epigram, Diogenes Laertius does not hide his disapproval of the philosopher (DL iv 65-66).

Furthermore, there seems to be an explicit reference to the suicide of the wise man in the Stoic tradition, represented here by Antipater. Indeed, the Stoics conceived suicide as a behaviour that, in most circumstances, contradicts the interests of the human being, but which, nonetheless, can be rationally justified in some cases, especially when one is confronted with a painful disease.<sup>27</sup> This is not, however, the popular view reflected in the biographical tradition, as demonstrated in the examples given here, in so far as the philosopher who chooses to end his life in such a fashion is more likely to receive disapproval and be ridiculed. Nevertheless, it is true that Zeno, founder of the Stoa, commits suicide by holding his breath after breaking his finger when leaving his school (DL vii 28), or by starving himself to death (DL vii 31; see also Lucian, *Macrob.* xix and *SVF* i 36). Death by self-asphyxiation—by holding one's breath (*ἀποκαρτερία*)—seems to be the most interesting form of suicide, for it reinforces the notion of suicide as a supreme example of *αὐτάρκεια* and *ἐλευθερία* in the wise man, especially if one takes into account how difficult it is to kill oneself by holding one's breath without any assistance other than one's own will. Further, the fact that a philosopher who considers air to be a vital principle dies, precisely, by asphyxiation offers the possibility of a reversal from the philosopher's doctrine, as I outlined earlier (see section b).

Some Cynics also die in this fashion, by Stoic influence.<sup>28</sup> Diogenes, for instance, despite often clearly stating his refusal of suicide,<sup>29</sup> ends up holding his

<sup>27</sup> See Long 1975, 201. Rist 1969 dedicates the whole of ch. 13 to the study of the views held by different Stoic philosophers on suicide. It is the Stoic influence that made suicide fashionable among wise men and the political class in Rome (see Gris  1982). For a general study of the phenomenon and the development of the issue of suicide in relation to the wise man, there is no better work than the old treatise by Hirzel 1908.

<sup>28</sup> This is the view of Goulet-Caz  1992, 3901. For an account of the strong Stoic influence in later Cynic doctrines, see Gugliermi 2006, 128-140.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g., the anecdotes described in DL vi 34 and Aelian, *VH* x 11.

own breath when he reaches old age in order to impose his own absolute freedom even on the time he had left to live (DL vi 77).<sup>30</sup> Metrocles also dies in a similar way, hanging himself at a very old age (DL vi 95). Menippus hangs himself too, although in this case we are once again informed that he was driven to suicide by despair after losing all the immense fortune he had made as a moneylender at the hands of malefactors (DL vi 100). This behaviour, of course, is radically contrary to the Cynic doctrine, and therefore denies the whole life of the philosopher and is the subject of ridicule in the epigram that Diogenes Laertius dedicates to Menippus (DL vi 100).

Interestingly, Epicurus seems to follow this tradition when dying. After spending fourteen days ill due to urine retention caused by kidney stones, Epicurus finally decides to have a warm bath, where he drinks unmixed wine and dies (DL x 15-16). Even though on this occasion Diogenes Laertius upholds the figure of the philosopher, something that is evident throughout book 10, the anecdote of the death of Epicurus also contains the elements of parody indicated earlier. Namely, the philosopher commits suicide because he is not capable of bearing the illness. Further, he does so by drinking wine. The fact that the source of this account is Hermippus suggests that the biographical tradition grants Epicurus' death the same level of importance as the other deaths (see section a). In this case, however, the wine, and the warm bath water, must undoubtedly be connected with the popular interpretation of the Epicurean doctrine of pleasure, that is, Epicurus dies surrounded by τρυφή, in the same way as he lived.<sup>31</sup>

Suicide, then, appears to be one of the most usual ways for philosophers to die. Unlike the cases of sudden death analysed in the previous two sections, here the philosopher freely decides to end his own life. This is interpreted by the biographical tradition as the philosopher's last act of freedom, and even courage, equal to the act that traditionally ends the life of some heroes and statesmen.<sup>32</sup> In the Greek tradition, suicide is certainly seen as a rather dignified way of ending one's life when one's sorrows become unbearable, and, as we have already seen, in some cases it could even reflect a desire for heroification. The Theognidean *corpus* contains some well-known verses in which suicide is considered to be a good option, preferable to a life full of penuries (cf., e.g., vv. 173-176; 181-182).

It is especially good to seek a good death that bestows glory upon he who chooses it, as is the case of the Euripidean Helen (v. 841): πῶς οὖν θανούμεθ' ὥστε καὶ δόξαν λαβεῖν; 'How then shall we die so as to gain fame?'. Moreover, in the tradition of the Stoic wise man—the probable origin of the wise man's general preference for suicide—the possibility of killing oneself situates the freedom of man over the freedom of the gods, as the words of Pliny suggest (*NH* ii 27). Nonetheless, the philosophers discussed by Diogenes Laertius do not die in a

<sup>30</sup> See Livrea 1987. Daraki 1986, 99-100 argues that Diogenes' suicide is an element of heroisation of the character in his biographical tradition. See also a more developed analysis in López Cruces 2004.

<sup>31</sup> With regard to the illness that affected Epicurus, see also section g.

<sup>32</sup> For the numerous examples, see Hirzel 1908.



heroic act of freedom and courage in the plenitude of their youth, like the characters of the tradition. Instead they die at an old age,<sup>33</sup> usually to escape from illness; or worse, because they have lost the vigour of their youth that made them superior to other men, thus manifesting a concrete failure at the end of their life, which is what finally leads them, in the style of Homer, to commit suicide (Heraclitus, B56). This is how the pseudo-Plutarch clearly defines it (*De uita Homeri* i 4) when he says that Homer died by despair, διὰ τὴν ἀθυμίαν ἐτελεύτησε. It is this ἀθυμία, more than the sorrows, that leads philosophers voluntarily to commit suicide, suggesting that suicide should be seen not so much as a triumph of personal freedom, as is held by the Stoic tradition, but rather as an ultimate failure. In the popular mind, the fact that the philosopher commits suicide is seen, by contrast, as the result of his shameful defeat in the face of the sufferings and setbacks of life, as is often shown in the epigrams. After Oedipus has unravelled the enigmas of the Sphynx, she threw herself from the citadel (Apollodorus, *Bibl.* iii 5, 8, 7), and the Euripidean Heracles is dissuaded by Theseus from committing suicide after enduring so much suffering (*Her. Fur.* 1246-1254), because he admits that committing suicide would be an act of cowardice: δειλία (*Her. Fur.* 1347). This suggests that, even though the suicide of the wise man is considered to be a way of dying that is more dignified than the other non-desired deaths, it must equally be understood as a death caused by failure, as the popular mind seems to show, according to Dover.<sup>34</sup>

**d. Death by starvation**, though seemingly accidental in a few rare cases, is usually self-imposed as a form of suicide. Thus, in his despair for failing to free his country, despite all his efforts, Menedemus of Eretria lets himself die of starvation (DL ii 143). We have already seen that in some versions Zeno also lets himself die of starvation as a form of suicide after breaking his finger (DL vii 31).<sup>35</sup> Other Stoics also choose this way of dying, such as Dionysius ‘the Renegade’, who commits suicide in this way for motives that we do not know (DL vii 167). Yet Cleanthes, another Stoic, suffers from gingivitis and is advised by doctors to refrain from eating for two days; after this period the doctors allow him to resume eating, but he says that they have shown him the way, and he does not eat again, starving to death a few days later (DL vii 176). This is, therefore, a unique form of suicide in which the person follows medical advice. As usual, Diogenes Laertius writes ironically about this form of suicide in his epigram (DL vi 100).

Starvation is not at all something that heroes, poets or any other ancient cultural agents die from. Instead, it is a kind of death that can be considered exclusive to philosophers. This could be a popular interpretation of the extreme ascetism of philosophers who are capable of enduring long periods of famine.

One of the versions regarding Pythagoras’ death seems to confirm this theory.

<sup>33</sup> This is precisely one of the critiques that Lucian dedicates to Peregrinus (*Per.* xxxvii).

<sup>34</sup> See Dover 1974, 167-169, given that ‘endurance of misfortune’ is a positive value in popular morality.

<sup>35</sup> See also Lucian, *Macrob.* xix and *Suda*, *s.u.* The different variations have been addressed in sections a and c.

According to Dicaearchus (fr. 35 Wehrli),<sup>36</sup> Pythagoras, the champion of asceticism, dies of starvation after finding refuge in a temple of the Muses at Metapontum, presumably to escape persecution after his house had been set on fire. Heraclides of Lembos,<sup>37</sup> however, explains that after Pythagoras buried Pherecydes in Delos (DL i 118), he returns to Croton, where he meets Cylon, who is about to offer a splendid banquet. Pythagoras refuses to attend the banquet, since he is already on his way to Metapontum, where he ends his days by abstaining from eating because he no longer wants to live (DL viii 40). The second version in particular makes explicit the contrast between Pythagoras and his enemy Cylon with regard to food. This seems to support the hypothesis of a popular interpretation of Pythagoras' asceticism, especially with regard to his diet, which leads him to his own death. Diogenes Laertius dedicates two epigrams to Pythagoras' dietary paradoxes, which must have seemed rather surprising to the non-initiated. The second of the two epigrams seems to refer explicitly to the second version mentioned above with regard to death by starvation (DL viii 44). As we just have seen, letting oneself die of starvation is not held in very high regard in the biographical tradition.

e. A very frequent form of death is **death by despair** or dejection (*ἀθυμία*) caused by some adverse event or personal situation. Like death by starvation, it tends to culminate in suicide and can therefore be considered a variation of suicide. We have already seen this in some accounts by despair (see section c). Anaxagoras could also be included in this section, given that he commits suicide as a result of being unable to bear the insult of his fellow citizens condemning him to death due to impiety—even though in the end he manages to avoid the sentence thanks to the intervention of Pericles, but, once he is free, he can not brook the indignity he has suffered and commits suicide (DL ii 13; see section c). Once free the philosopher is unable to bear the rejection of his fellow citizens and is finally driven to suicide by his own arrogance and haughtiness, which Diogenes Laertius seems to ridicule in the epigram dedicated to him (DL ii 15). The reason given that Anaxagoras is unable to bear the sentence passed against him by his own fellow citizens is *μαλθακίη*, or the excessive delicacy of his wisdom, as if somehow wisdom were not something to be given to pigs. Similarly, after repeatedly failing to free his country from King Antigonus, Menedemus of Eretria starved himself to death, as explained in the previous section (DL ii 143). According to Hermippus (fr. 38 Wehrli = *FGrHistCont* 1026 F 79), Menedemus died in identical circumstances, but for a different motive: because he was accused of stealing some golden cups from the shrine of Amphiarus, where he had found refuge while escaping the calumnies of Aristodemus, who accused him of treason (DL ii 142). In any case, despair causes his death in both versions.

We can clearly see, then, that the philosopher commits suicide when he becomes incapable of overcoming an adverse situation, or when he is not valued

<sup>36</sup> Despite his questioning the matter, this is the version that Porphyrius (*VP* Iv-lvii) seems to accept.

<sup>37</sup> Iamblicus (*Vit. Pyth. cclii*) gives this version, but attributes it to Nicomachus.

enough by those who live around him. This has bad connotations in the biographical tradition, especially bearing in mind that one of the characteristics of the philosopher is, precisely, his capacity to confront any adverse situation for his own benefit and for the benefit of those whom he wants to assist. This is expressed in the extremely malevolent epigram that Diogenes Laertius dedicates to the death of Menedemus, where he clearly accuses him of pusillanimity for the way he allows himself to die and, more significantly, for the motives that lead him to do so (DL ii 144).

Something similar occurs to Diodorus of Iassus, known as Cronus, who, incapable of solving the dialectic reasoning put to him by Stilpo during a banquet in the court of Ptolemy Soter, retires and, after writing a treaty on the problem that he has been queried about, commits suicide as a result of despair (DL ii 111-112). This kind of death, caused by the shame of a dialectical defeat, has an accentuated Homeric popular tone, as I first suggested in section c.<sup>38</sup> There was even a tradition, recorded only by the Syrian and Arabic biographies (Al-Mubashir), that made Aristotle die in the most Homeric style: out of despair for failing to solve the problem of the reflux of the River Euripus, near Chalcis, where he had retired towards the end of his life.

As can already be clearly seen at the end of the section I have dedicated to this topic, suicide is not well regarded, with the exception of a few cases that can be considered to be rather ambiguous. The bibliographical tradition perceives suicide as a philosopher's definitive defeat. It is not surprising that, specifically in this section, the question of despair (ἄθυμιά) is rather badly regarded in the biography of philosophers, especially if we take into account that in most schools, but especially in the Stoic and Epicurian schools, philosophy tends towards εὐθυμία, a state in which, according to Democritus, 'the soul continues calm and strong, undisturbed by any fear or superstition or any other emotion' (DL ix 45).<sup>39</sup> In the biographical tradition, the philosopher who falls victim to despair is not considered worthy of this name, as the epigrams clearly show.

f. Like many other characters of the Greek biographical tradition, philosophers **die of phthiriasis, also called pedicular illness**. In recent years, a whole legend has been created by scholars about this disease, which I shall briefly trace here. In the first place, φθειρίσσις is 'a lice infection of the human body, no part of which was excluded, although the head was sometimes mentioned as particularly susceptible' (Keaveney and Madden 1982, 87), in other words, lice infestation. The disease is often described in ancient sources,<sup>40</sup> although perhaps the most

<sup>38</sup> Indeed, 'dass das Motiv auf alte volkstümliche Tradition zurückgeht, lehren *Melampodie* (fr. 265 Bernabé) und Homerlegende, die beide den im Rätselspiel Unterlegenen sterben lassen' (Wehrli 1973, 194n4). For a study of this famous version Homer's death, inspired by the conception of wisdom as a contest and by his own work, see Levine 2002-2003.

<sup>39</sup> See also DL vii 116-117 and ix 20. The most well-known definition is that given by Seneca, *De tranqu. animi* 2.3-4. Regarding this fundamental feature in the figure of the wise man, regardless of the school, see also Hadot 1995, 334-339.

<sup>40</sup> For example, in Pliny, *NH* xi 114 and Galen xii 463. The most colourful description is Plutarch's account of Sulla's death (*Sulla* xxxvi-xxxvii). Like Aristotle, he gives a list of those who

famous passage is found in Aristotle's *Historia animalium* 556b24-557a4. In this description, however, Aristotle seems to have confused two different insects: lice and *sarcoptes scabiei*. As described by Aristotle, the *sarcoptes scabiei* digs microscopic tunnels in the skin, thus causing a disease that doctors know as *scabies* (Keaveney and Madden 1982, 88-89). Nonetheless, it must be said that neither of these two infectious diseases is capable of causing death by itself.<sup>41</sup> This aspect has led scholars to take different positions, from radically denying that any of the characters appearing on various lists of people infected has ever suffered this disease,<sup>42</sup> to more conciliatory positions that attempt to explain the deaths of some characters as a combination of different illnesses that ended up causing death, including lice infestation.<sup>43</sup>

More interesting, however, is the conception the Greeks themselves had of the absolutely biographical causes of this disease. Indeed, death by lice (both φθειρίασις and σκωλήκωσις), and death by madness (μανία), by tearing to pieces (σπαραγμός) or by shipwreck, seem to be reserved for characters who are considered impious, at least in authors such as Pausanias (ix 33; xx 7) and Aelian (*VH* iv 28). This idea filtered into the later Christian tradition, with many persecutors of Christianity dying precisely by being attacked by insects and worms.<sup>44</sup> Nestle 1948 laid down the basis for this interpretation of the presence of lice in the death of ancient characters, and the idea has been perpetuated in more recent works, such as the canonical work of Lefkowitz, which continues to accept that poets and philosophers receive a divine punishment for their impiety (Lefkowitz 1981, 162). Nevertheless, if we trace the list of characters affected by *phthiriasis* in the biographies, things are not so clear. Among the poets, it is difficult to ascertain what Alcman could have done to become the victim of divine ire,<sup>45</sup> in the same way that it is not completely clear in the case of the politicians, with the exception, perhaps, of Sulla.<sup>46</sup> With regard to our philosophers, it is also unclear what sort of impiety Pherecydes was found guilty of that made him appear on all the lists as a typical example of a character who dies by lice infestation. Diogenes Laertius i 118 and 122 and Aristotle *Historia Animalium* 557a and fr. 611 Rose describe nothing more than the symptoms suffered by the philosopher and the visit that Pythagoras paid him, during which, when the latter asked him how he was, Pherecydes simply slid his finger by the little gap of the door while saying:

suffered the illness in antiquity.

<sup>41</sup> See Chandler and Read 1966, 621-631; the conclusions are very specific: 'There is much more danger involved when man bites louse than when louse bites man' (631).

<sup>42</sup> The most prominent figure is Mommsen who argued that: 'such an account is entirely imaginary' (1869, iii 390).

<sup>43</sup> This is the case of the later studies, esp. Schamp 1991.

<sup>44</sup> See, e.g., Eusebius viii 16, Tertullian, *Ad Scapulam* iii or Lactantius' famous *De mortibus persecutorum*. The idea probably comes from *Maccabean* ii 9,9 or the book of *Acts* 12, 23, in which Antioch IV and Herod Antipater die by being eaten by worms. On this topic, see Africa 1982.

<sup>45</sup> See Keaveney and Madden 1982, 90-91; Schamp 1991, 154, esp. n53.

<sup>46</sup> See the accurate analysis of each case in the study by Keaveney and Madden 1982 and Schamp 1991.

‘My skin shows it’, ‘χροὶ δῆλα’. These symptoms, it must be said, appear not to correspond at all with those of lice infestation, as mentioned earlier; in fact, Diodorus of Sicily does not even mention the disease when explaining the same story (x 3, 4). It is only Aelian who, by contrast, describes religious impiety as the ultimate origin of the disease in the Delian irreverence of Pherecydes (*VH* iv 28), that is not mentioned anywhere: we should not rule out that the whole story was a mere invention of Aelian’s, especially if we bear in mind that biographers crave these kinds of stories, as we have seen throughout. In any case, we should rule out any connection between the philosopher’s disease and his alleged impiety.

The same can be said of other philosophers who, in the biographical accounts, also suffer from *phthiriasis*. Plato, to take an obvious example, is one of the most significant victims of the disease in one of the accounts of his death (*DL* iii 40). Although it is difficult to think that impiety could have been the cause of the disease in Plato’s case, the reference clearly seems to have been inspired by a proverb, as the explanation given by Diogenes Laertius shows: ‘Myronianus in his *Parallels* says that Philo mentions some proverbs that were in circulation about Plato’s lice, implying that this was the mode of his death’ (*DL* iii 41). This origin leads Novotný 1964, 168 to consider whether Plato’s death by lice infestation had been created on the basis of a proverbial image, given the rhetorical form Πλάτωνος φθειρῶν, which, ultimately, could have originated in *Sophist* 227b, where Plato mentions the capture of lice (φθειριστική τέχνη) as a form of hunting. Inspired in Plato’s own work, this image could, in turn, have inspired a comic poet to invent a death by *phthiriasis* for the philosopher (this is also the view of Riginos 1976, 196). This is a real possibility, since Plato does not explicitly appear on any of the lists that have been preserved of patients affected by lice. Some Academics, namely, Speusippus (*DL* iv 4) and Carneades (*DL* iv 65), also suffered from the same disease. This was possibly because they simply imitated their teacher, since neither of the two appears on the list. Thus, despite the fact that Diogenes Laertius iv 4 explains, in the case of Speusippus, that Plutarch, in the *Lives of Lysander and Sulla*, makes his malady to have been *phthiriasis*, this is an erroneous account.

None of those philosophers considered atheists by the biographical tradition, nor any of those accused of impiety, is listed as a victim of *phthiriasis*. Moreover, it must be said that the issue of lice as a punishment for impiety does not appear at all in the most ancient sources, nor does it appear in Aristotle, or even in Plutarch, which would suggest that it could easily have been a much later notion in the biographical tradition.<sup>47</sup> With regard to our philosophers, then, we can conclude that this is just one of many types of natural illnesses, though it is more frequent and perhaps more inglorious and ridiculous than the rest (see section g).

<sup>47</sup> Keaveney and Madden 1982, 95 also reach this conclusion when they argue that: ‘Contrary to what is generally believed, the disease is a real not an imaginary one. The ancients too regarded it in this way and only in very rare cases did they attribute it to the anger of a god’.

There are two possibilities that we should not rule out as probable popular origins of these kinds of deaths: the simple etymological play on words between φθείρες ('lice') and φθείρω ('to destroy'), identified by Galen (*Ad Pisonem* xviii); and, the well-known story on the death of Homer (Heraclitus, B56), in which lice also intervene, albeit indirectly, and which could have inspired the imagination when other similar deaths were created, this time with lice as direct agents (for a similar analysis, see also Schamp 1991, 162-163). Thus, according to the biographical tradition death by *phthiriasis* constitutes a new variation of death by failure, in the same sense as those deaths I have analysed up to now, and in exactly the same sense as those I analyse in the next section.

**g.** A variation of the above, then, is mere **death by illness**, which tends to lead to consumption (φθίσις), that is to say, to the deterioration and general loss of the organism as a result of long and grave illnesses. It is a death that could also be included in the description of death by failure. In some cases it could even be classed as a ridiculous death, as is the case of death by lice infestation, for the philosopher who suffers it is denied any possibility of glory in the moment of decease.

This contrast is clearly manifested in the satire that Lucianus dedicates to the death of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, caused by self-combustion, in imitation of Heracles' death. A few days before the spectacular suicide, Peregrinus falls ill due to a stomach condition. The doctor suggests that using a pyre is not necessary, since death by natural causes is already knocking on the door. Peregrinus protests, saying: 'But any one may die that way; there's no distinction in it' (Lucian, *Per.* xlv). This confirms, then, that while according to popular opinion the philosopher seeks to die in a spectacular, glorious fashion, the biographical tradition seeks to make him die in the least glorious way possible.

It follows from this idea that the biographical tradition that kills Pherecydes by mere illness (DL i 118)—whatever that illness might be (see section f)—with him in bed and completely emaciated also denies him the glory of death in the battlefield that other versions grant him, when he sacrifices his life to ensure the victory of the Ephesians (DL i 117; see section c). Similarly, Heraclitus dies of dropsy (DL ix 3), which, despite all the connotations we have already analysed (see section b), is still an illness; in fact, in other versions, the philosopher recovers from his dropsy, but, ironically, ends up dying of an unnamed illness (DL ix 5; the sources are Ariston [fr. 28 Wehrli] and Hippobotus [fr. 20 Gigante]). As we have seen, Heraclitus himself considered death by illness to be especially anodyne: 'The souls of those who have been defeated in battle are purer than the ones of those who have death by disease' (B136). Thus, Peregrinus' views apply also to Heraclitus. Crantor (DL iv 27) also dies of dropsy, as does Aristotle. Although, in the most common version, Aristotle dies a heroic, Socratic-style death after being condemned for impiety (DL v 6; see section i), in other versions he dies of a mere illness that Dionysus of Halicarnassus (*Epistula ad Ammaeum* v) and the *Suda* (*s.u.*) do not specify, but that Censorinus (*De die natali* xiv) identifies as stomach ache. Once again, it seems that death by illness threatened to

deny the sufferer the glory of his own death.

Lyco, another Peripathetic, is killed by gout (DL v 68). This is an especially interesting case, since the epigram that Diogenes Laertius dedicates to him is notably sarcastic, thus showing the hostility of the biographical tradition towards death by illness (DL v 68). Indeed, because the philosophical ideal is asceticism, it is only logical that death by gout, which traditionally originates in excessive food, but not vegetarian food, implies criticism. This is something that is easily associated with the death of Epicurus, who died of urine retention after suffering from dysentery (DL x 16), even though in other versions, as we have seen (see section c), he commits suicide after fourteen days of suffering in an attempt to avoid contracting the illness. It is ironic, of course, that someone who, according to popular opinion, thought that the source and root of all good was the pleasure of the stomach (Athenaeus 546f) ends up dying of excess food, which could be considered a reversal.

Finally, the death of Antisthenes allows us to confirm, once again, the biographical hostility towards those who die of mere illness. Indeed, Diogenes Laertius highlights that Antisthenes did not bear his illness well, with little courage, because he loved life so much: 'It was thought that he showed some weakness in bearing his malady through love of life' (DL vi 19); and even when Diogenes visited him and offered him a sword to end his pain, Antisthenes refused such an end, protesting that he wished to be set free 'from my pains, not from life' (DL vi 18). Being unable to endure the disease therefore contradicts the doctrine of most schools, including the Cynic school, as reflected in the Laertian epigram (DL vi 19). Antisthenes' death by illness is therefore another death by failure that undermines the philosopher's doctrine.<sup>48</sup>

**h. Death by dogs** tends to be traditionally reserved for those who are considered to be impious or not very orthodox in their religious beliefs. In mythology, these characters are devoured by dogs, or sometimes by horses, as this is the way some θεομῶχοι die. The most famous case is that of Acteon, who is devoured by his own dogs after a hunt because he saw Aphrodite naked while she was bathing (Pausanias ix 2, 3; Apollodorus, *Bibl.* iii 4, 4); or Linos, who was killed accidentally by the dogs of a shepherd with whom he was raised (Pausanias i 43, 7). This is a violent kind of death that, according to Brelich 1958b, 89, can be classified as a death of 'rent, torn heroes', like Orpheus (Apollodorus, *Bibl.* i 14) or Pentheus (Euripides, *Bacchae* 1125ff.). This comparison, especially in the case of Pentheus, would also characterise the death by dogs of historical characters (Nestle 1948, 585-586), the most famous case being that of Euripides (*Vita anonyma* 57-59; Satyrus, *P.Oxy.* 1176 fr. 39 col. xxi 20-25; see Lefkowitz 2009; Schorn 2004, 334-339). Besides the Dionysian implication of this kind of death, extracted from his own tragedy *Bacchae*, it is clear that, in the ancient popular thought, death by dogs constitutes a death that is adequate for the enemies of reli-

<sup>48</sup> Dio Chrysostomus (*Oration VIII*) is even more explicit, which shows Antisthenes' absolute disagreement with his own doctrine in relation to his own death.



gion (Stuart 1928 [1967], 146-147), as can also be seen in the mythological *θεομάχοι*. Euripides himself is killed in this way due to his relations with Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Protagoras, all of whom are consummate atheists (*Vita* 9-15; Lefkowitz 1987). Lucian also suffers this kind of death, for the same motives, as is made manifest by the *Suda*, from the Christian tradition, of course (*Suda*, *s.u.*).<sup>49</sup>

Contrary to what one might expect, only two of the philosophers discussed by Diogenes Laertius suffer this kind of death, though not in all the versions. First there is Heraclitus, who, according to Neanthes (*FGrHist* 84 F 25), becomes unrecognisable while being buried under dung in order to try to cure himself from dropsy, and is devoured by dogs (DL ix 4). Then there is Diogenes, who is bitten by a dog on the tendon of his foot while fighting with it over an octopus (DL vi 77, and continued in the epigram, DL vi 79). Both cases, however, seem to be later additions to the main stories regarding their deaths, for they keep some elements and simply amplify them by making dogs appear.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, these two deaths do not respond at all to the heroic paradigm of the *θεομάχοι*, even though both Diogenes (e.g., DL vi 73) and Heraclitus (e.g., DK 22 B5 and B14) can, on the basis of their doctrines, be considered to be impious and enemies of religion. Therefore, the addition of dogs should instead be seen rather as a later elaboration based on a mere play on words rooted, in the case of Diogenes, in the etymology of the Cynics. This appears to be similar to the usual anecdotal tone employed in the biography, in the style of ‘a dog that dies being bitten by a dog’. In the case of Heraclitus, this has been developed based on a reversal from his own words, in particular B97 (‘Dogs bark at every one they do not know’; see section b), as well as on his misanthropy and solitary isolation in the mountains, which is what connects him to Euripides’ famous isolation in a cave (*Vita anonyma* 60-64).<sup>51</sup> It is very possible that a biographer might have taken one of these options, or all of them, as the basis for the idea of the dogs, and then developed the stories of death later, amplifying them in the traditional fashion as punishment for the impious. A similar amplification, based only on an association of ideas, leads Aelian (*VH* xiii 28) to make Manes, the slave freed by Diogenes (DL vi 55), die by being devoured by dogs too, as Aelian himself explains, ‘paying the penalty for his action in a manner appropriate to his master’s name’, τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ δεσπότητος δίκας ἐκτίσας ἀνθ’ ὧν ἀπέδρα. This is a very interesting sample of how biographical creation works.

**i. The true punishment for religious impiety**, however, ends the life of the philosopher by making him drink aconite or hemlock, usually as a result of a

<sup>49</sup> This kind of death was probably inspired by his own words: ‘I was within an ace of being torn limb from limb by the Cynics, like Actaeon among the dogs, or his cousin Pentheus among the Maenads’ (*Peregrinus* ii), which would have been interpreted autobiographically.

<sup>50</sup> This is the opinion of practically all the critics: for Heraclitus, see Mouraviev 1987 and Fairweather 1973; for Diogenes, see Goulet-Cazé 1992, 3901.

<sup>51</sup> See also Philochorus, *FGrHist* 328 F 219 and Satyrus, fr. 39 col. ix Schorn. On Euripides’ *Vita*, see Lefkowitz 1979.

legal process. In this case, however, death is very well regarded in the biographical tradition, no doubt because it obviously originates in the Socratic model, of which Diogenes Laertius writes at length (DL ii 38-42). Socrates' death becomes the great paradigm of glorious death. It would perhaps be the most desirable of all for a philosopher, were it not for the accusations of atheism that accompany it, obviously believed false in the case of Socrates, as the biography repeatedly shows.<sup>52</sup> In fact, this is the only Laertian epigram in which the way of death turns against those who have administered it (DL ii 46).

However, even though many are accused of impiety,<sup>53</sup> very few are actually sentenced to death. Although Anaxagoras was initially accused and sentenced to death for affirming that the sun was an incandescent metallic mass, he was later freed thanks to Pericles' intervention, and then went on to commit suicide due to the outrage he suffered (DL ii 12-13). The biographical tradition seems not to have allowed Anaxagoras to share the glory of a dignified death with his disciple Socrates; we have already confirmed that suicide is not at all well regarded. The only one who definitely dies after being sentenced to death for impiety is Aristotle, in his case because he composed a hymn for his friend Hermias, portraying him as immortal (DL v 5, 7-8).<sup>54</sup> Aristotle embraced death by drinking aconite, as did Socrates (DL v 6), and it is for this reason that we should consider him an exact copy whose aim is to glorify the figure of the philosopher.<sup>55</sup> Rather unusually, the Laertian epigram also upholds him in this case (DL v 8). Nonetheless, the negative biographical tradition does not even want to grant him such a privilege. We have already seen that in other versions Aristotle dies of an ordinary illness, perhaps stomach ache (see section g). Furthermore, this stomach ache and Aristotle's dubious relation with Hermias provide Theocritus of Chios (Page 1981, 353-356; Lloyd-Jones and Parsons 1983, 738) with the opportunity to compose a malevolent epigram where he insinuates that Aristotle left Athens and went to the Macedonian court for pure gluttony, for this was a better place to eat. In this way, and according to the biographical tradition, Aristotle is imputed with

<sup>52</sup> Gill 1973, 28 compared the symptoms that appear in Plato's dialogues with the explanations given by ancient and modern medicine, and concluded that even the very description of the moment of agony and death of the philosopher, which is the object of Plato's *Phaedo*, could clearly have been idealised. His study, however, has now been proved to be wrong, because Plato was talking of another type of hemlock: see Bloch 2002 and Wilson 2007, 8-16.

<sup>53</sup> For an even more exhaustive catalogue and, above all, for the historical dates with regard to these kinds of processes, see Derenne 1930 and Marasco 1976.

<sup>54</sup> See also Athenaeus 696a. Wormell 1935 assumes that a eulogy to Hermias would have been composed for his funeral. However, Athenaeus refers to it as a *σκόλιον*, namely, a poem without specific religious connotations, which means that the hymn would not contain any sacrilegious element. For a discussion regarding these questions see Bowra 1938 and Santoni 1993. In any case, the hymn would have been used by his accusers as an excuse to sentence him, if we are to believe in his historical existence. Or, alternatively, it could have been used to establish a parallel between the deaths of Aristotle and Socrates in the biographical tradition, as I believe is the case.

<sup>55</sup> Düring 1957, 345 explicitly asserts: 'Eumelus transferred Socrates' age and the manner of his death to Aristotle, probably in order to glorify the head of his school'. The same view is also held by Jacoby in his commentary to Eumelus's fragment (*FGrHist* 77 F 1).

the highest ‘sins’ of a philosopher: gluttony, and the excessive sexual disorders that deny him glory in the moment of decease.

The tradition of death by accusation of impiety is therefore highly positive, since the imputations always turn out to be false—according to the biographers, of course—and are solely the fruit of the desire that the philosopher’s enemies have to get rid of him. This leads to a positive outcome, especially if the philosopher loses the trial and dies, thus becoming a kind of ‘martyr of philosophy’, in the style of Socrates. This is less frequent however, as we have already seen. Moreover, some biographers deny it, with the exception of Socrates of course. Furthermore, it must be said that accusations of impiety do not imply the same biographical punishment as for those considered to be atheists. The former die in the most dignified way possible, whereas a harder death usually awaits the latter. A clear example of this is the case of Theodorus the Atheist, who is sentenced to drinking hemlock (DL ii 101) as a clear punishment for his religious impiety (DL ii 97), but who is finally freed thanks to the intervention of Demetrius of Phaleron. Nonetheless, instead of the glorious death that awaited him, he suffers a terrible death, in exile. The death of Socrates, then, would become a model to imitate for any philosopher seeking to respond to the ideal. In response to the question regarding how Socrates died, Aristippus answers: ‘As I would wish to die myself’ (DL ii 76).

**j.** Unlike heroes and poets, there are not many instances in which a **philosopher’s death is desired by a god**. In general, the gods rarely appear as agents in the biographies of the philosophers discussed by Diogenes Laertius, except at the time of their conception and initiation (see Grau 2008). On the rare occasions that the gods do appear, they do so through oracles. Thus, the same divinity told Socrates of his own death through the curses of a magician arriving in Athens from Syria, who decreed that the philosopher would die a highly violent death (DL ii 45; see also Aristotle, fr. 32 Rose). To speak of a direct intervention of the gods in the death of philosophers would, by contrast, be rare. We can describe Bion’s death, whose final repentance and use of all kinds of amulets was of no help once he fell ill, as a punishment from the gods for his numerous insults (DL iv 54), as Diogenes Laertius makes clear in the epigram (DL iv 55-57; see section b). The snake that bites Demetrius of Phaleron’s hand could also be considered a divine sign, sent to him to end his despair (DL v 78), especially given all the symbolic tradition surrounding the figure of the snake, frequently the cause of human mortality and widely related with heroic mythology.<sup>56</sup> The philosophers who die bitten by dogs (Heraclitus and Diogenes) could likewise be included in this category, but with the nuances expressed above (see section h).

The death of Protagoras clearly falls within this schema of direct divine punishment—for atheism of course—that led the Athenians to expel him from the city and burn his work (DL ix 52). Philochorus (*FGrHist* 328 F 217) informs us

<sup>56</sup> See Nicander, *Theriaca* 343ff. This much older myth was already present in Ibycus and Sophocles, as Aelian informs us in *De natura animalium* vi 51. See also Brelich 1958b, 220-222, and esp. Brelich 1958a, 23ff.

that his ship was wrecked on its way to Sicily; others, through a less vindictive, but clearly later, account,<sup>57</sup> simply say that he died on board during the journey (DL ix 55). The shipwreck, however, seems to be a more fitting and appropriate death for an Athenian, as is clearly stated in the story about Diagoras of Melos, another atheist who dies during a shipwreck, explicitly due to his atheism.<sup>58</sup> He appears alongside Theodorus the Atheist, Socrates, and Protagoras himself on a list of those whose philosophical practice led to death precisely for having developed atheistic theories (Athenaeus 611a). All this, of course, stems from the mythical conception that also kills some θεομάχοι in this way.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, the epigram Diogenes Laertius dedicates to Protagoras does not leave room for any doubt regarding the difficult trial that the biographical tradition reserves for this kind of philosophers (for Protagoras, see Corradi 2007). The ironic charge centres here around a contrast that, as I have outlined, appears to be highly usual in these epigrams: Protagoras was able to escape the punishment for impiety that the Athenians had decreed against him, but he could not escape Hades during his journey, in the sense that the gods always settle old scores (DL ix 56).

The only example in which divine punishment appears to be evident is the death of Heraclides, who, in his attempt to be heroised, went as far as to bribe the Pythia and the envoys from Heraclea, who were on their way to consult her regarding a famine that was devastating the region to make her proclaim an oracle according to which Heraclides would have to be honoured with a golden crown while alive and be worshipped as a hero after his death, should they be set free from the plague. Everything worked out as the philosopher had planned, but just as he was being crowned in the theatre, Heraclides was seized with apoplexy, the guests were stoned to death, and the Pythia herself died by being bitten by a snake from the sanctuary (DL v 91). This story, however, seems to be a much more developed and spectacular variation of the other story regarding his death, in which, to ensure his venerability as a hero, Heraclides hides a snake in his clothes that he has been training for a long time. His plan, however, is discovered (DL v 89-90). Unsurprisingly, the epigram by Diogenes Laertius is very hard (DL v 90).

Thus, the gods mainly punish atheists, especially those who have dared to take advantage of the sacred for their own benefit. This kind of punishment seems to be popular and demonstrates the biographical tradition's strong hostility towards these philosophers.

Finally, only in one extreme case of the positive biographical tradition do the gods punish the enemy of a philosopher. Pollis, the Lacedaemonian commander of a fleet of ships, is killed for having the audacity to sell Plato as a slave. As

<sup>57</sup> Almost certainly in order to make the chronology coherent with Apollodorus' words (*FGrHist* 244 F 71), who extracts the details from Plato, *Meno* 91e.

<sup>58</sup> Indeed, the rhetorician Antiphon expresses the popular opinion on this matter (*De caede Herodis* lxxxii).

<sup>59</sup> For the mythological parallels and the details of the argument regarding the divine origin of shipwreck in general, and Protagoras' in particular, see the influential study by Nestle 1948: 582-585.

divine punishment for this act he was defeated at the hands of Cabrias in the Peleponnesian wars and was later swallowed by the sea. This is yet another example of shipwreck as divine punishment (DL iii 20).<sup>60</sup> This schema is very similar to the divine punishment that befalls the murderers of heroes, the most interesting example of which is Hesiod (see Miralles and Pörtulas 1998). Naturally, such sources belonging to the most positive biographical tradition suggest that Plato receives privileged treatment.

**k.** Not very frequent, but highly positive nonetheless, is **death during immense joy at an extremely old age**, often in the arms of or next to a young person, who tends to be the child of the philosopher himself. Thales, for example, weakened by his old age, dies while watching a gymnastics contest (DL i 39).<sup>61</sup> The Laertian epigram shows that Diogenes considers this death to be a beautiful one, almost a gift from Zeus (DL i 39).

In identical circumstances another of the wise men, Chilon, dies as a result of an excess of joy and due to the extreme weakness of his old age (DL i 72; see also Pliny, *NH* vii 119 and Tertullian, *De anima* lii) after embracing his son for winning a boxing contest in Pisa, near Olympia. Here, Diogenes Laertius lavishes praise in his epigram, explicitly affirming that this is the kind of death that he would wish for himself (DL i 73). Yet another wise man, Bias, dies in a similar way, after defending someone in a trial. Having finished his speech, Bias rests his head on his grandson's bosom and, before the proceedings are brought to a close, once the court has ruled in favour of the defence carried out by Bias, they realise that the old wise man has died (DL i 84). Once again, the Laertian epigram presents this death as a beautiful and tranquil way of dying, as a continuation of sleep (DL i 85).

According to some versions, Plato also dies in his sleep (Tertullian, *De anima* lii 3), after the joy of a feast: εὐωχίθη δ' ἐν ἑορτῇ καὶ ὑπῶν ἀπεβίω (*Suda*, *s.u.*). This seems to be a good, tranquil death, which Wehrli understands to be positively regarded by the biographical tradition (Wehrli, *Hermippos der Kallimacheer*, 1974, 70-71), although we have already seen how, in other more malevolent versions, Plato dies of gluttony after a wedding banquet (DL iii 2 and 45; see section a), thus showing that the biographical intentions are not so clear. In any case, the context of Plato's death lacks three of the characteristics of the deaths of the other wise men: (1) Plato does not die in a joyous moment after he or his son emerges victorious (this detail is also missing in the case of Thales' death); (2) Plato does not die among a crowd at a sports event or a public trial; (3) more importantly, he does not die in the arms of a young child, which would symbolise sweetness in the moment of death (this does not appear in the death of Thales either); (4) he does not die as a result of his body's weakness due to old age. These seem to be the characteristics of a good, placid death, described as a

<sup>60</sup> For an account of the defeat of Pollis and his fleet in Cyclades, see also Xenophon, *Hellenica* v 4, 61.

<sup>61</sup> There is, however, a more malevolent variation of death by reversal (DL i 34), which I referred to in section b.

tranquil, even sweet, passing away due to the proximity of one's children and the final, definitive joy that accompanies it. The detail about the sleep, which is what leads Werhli to connect the deaths of Chilon and Bias with the death of Plato, appears only as an anecdote in the case of Bias in order to highlight the placidity of death, thus making it a non-conclusive factor.

This is a particularly well regarded way of dying in the biographical tradition: it is shown not only in the Laertian epigram cited above regarding Chilon, but also by the fact that this is how two poets highly regarded by the biographers, Pindar and Sophocles, also die. The death of Pindar in particular—a sudden death on the knees of his young lover at a poetry contest (*Suda, s.u.*)—presents exactly the same structure as the deaths of the philosophers mentioned above. In the case of Sophocles, in addition to the well-known story in which he chokes on a green grape (see section a), there is another version in which he dies of joy as a result of the victory obtained with his last tragedy, in the midst of a multitude (*Vita Sophoclis* 14; Diodorus of Sicily xiii 103; Valerius Maximus ix 12 ext. 5). Hence, the phrase with which Palomar 1998, 97 describes the death of Sophocles can be applied to all these deaths: death arrives as a kind of exaltation for those who in life have reached a maximal fulfillment. Moreover, these deaths involve abandoning life among the multitude, who honour and venerate the dead during the event in which death occurs. This is how Pindar dies: καὶ συνέβη αὐτῷ τοῦ βίου τελευτῆ κατ'εὐχάς (*Suda, s.u.*; see also Valerius Maximus ix 12. ext. 7).

This death should therefore certainly be understood as a prize granted by the gods to help the philosopher escape the hardship of his old age. He is thus granted a sweet death, in the style of the Delphic legends on good death. Like the famous deaths of Cleobis and Biton (Herodotus i 31), or of Trophonius and Agamedes (Pseudo-Plutarch, *Cons. ad Ap.* 109a), this type of death occurs in the sweetness of sleep, a kind of divine prize awarded in the presence of multitudes that hail and honour the philosopher. In fact, Valerius Maximus clearly defines placid death as positive in the introduction to his *De mortibus non uulgaribus* (ix 12). Of these kinds of sudden deaths caused by excess of joy, he later says (ix 12, 2): *Vix ueri simile est in eripiendo spiritu idem gaudium potuisse quod fulmen, et tamen idem ualuit* ('It is scarcely plausible that joy had the same effect as a thunderbolt in snatching away life, and yet it was equally potent'). Indeed, he offers a full list of Roman characters who suffered this good death, including the consul Juuentius Talna, Tullus Hostilius, and a mother who dies when her son, who was believed to have died in battle, returns alive. Pliny also refers bluntly to these kinds of sudden deaths: 'This is life's supreme happiness', *hoc est summa uitae felicitas* (*NH* vii 180).

**I. Violent death**, which is especially reserved for epic heroes (Brelich 1958b, 89ff.), is used for positively regarding the lives of some philosophers, probably because it follows the classical model of a heroic death. The philosopher dies because he defends his convictions to the extreme, not yielding to the powerful. In addition to the Socratic model, which as we have already seen is the most glorious death possible for a philosopher (see section i), we also find the deaths of

those we could consider ‘martyrs of philosophy’, namely, those who express their beliefs without the tyrants’ tortures having any effect on them.

Having planned to kill the tyrant Nearchus, or Diomedon according to other sources, Zeno of Elea is arrested by the tyrant and interrogated about his accomplices. Zeno denounces all the tyrant’s friends in order to isolate him completely. After asking the tyrant to bring his ear close to his mouth so that he could whisper something important about his friends, the philosopher bites the tyrant’s ear so strongly that it cannot be removed from Zeno’s mouth until Zeno has been stabbed to death (DL ix 26); in other versions Zeno bites the tyrant’s nose (ix 27).

In a parallel version, Zeno is interrogated by the tyrant, and responds by insulting him to his face and provoking those present by accusing them of cowardice. He then cuts his own tongue off with his teeth and spits it in tyrant’s face. In doing so, Zeno stirs up the people’s anger, and they stone him to death (DL ix 27). This parallel version, however, is clearly based on the confrontation between Anaxarchus and Nicocreon, the tyrant of Cyprus, which is practically identical to this one. Anaxarchus is captured by the tyrant after being thrown overboard against his will off the coast of Cyprus. Nicocreon sentences Anaxarchus to death, but the philosopher responds with his most famous words: ‘Pound, pound the pouch containing Anaxarchus; you pound not Anaxarchus’. The tyrant then orders his tongue to be cut off, but Anaxarchus cuts his own tongue off with his teeth before spitting it in the tyrant’s face (DL ix 59).<sup>62</sup> It is difficult to know which of the two biographies first presented this story, but it seems plausible that the topical image originated in the story of Anaxarchus, where it fits perfectly, before being exported to Zeno’s story, where it does not make so much sense (with regard to this image, see Dorandi 1994).

In any case, Zeno of Elea and Anaxarchus fall into the group of philosophers that I shall call ‘martyrs of philosophy’, namely, those whose freedom of thought and philosophy leads them to die at the hands of the powerful, and whom the biographers extol for the purpose of propaganda (Ronconi 1966, col. 1261). This is a strong schema belonging to the cases of torture and stoning sentences issued at the time of death. Similar forms can be found in the *Acta martyrum*, which have been produced since ancient times, like the defiant behaviour of the prisoners and the taste for morbid details, as well as references to the death of Socrates and other pagan philosophers, which make manifest that the genre was sufficiently well-known in antiquity and that this was also seen as the best possible kind of death for the ancient philosophers.<sup>63</sup>

## II. Conclusions

We can put the kinds of deaths suffered by philosophers into six categories:

A. The philosopher dies in a sudden, usually ridiculous, manner. His death is

<sup>62</sup> This anecdote fits rather well with Anaxarchus’ personality, as transmitted by Alexander’s historians, esp. Arrian; see Bernard 1984.

<sup>63</sup> Regarding the tradition of the theme of philosophical martyrdom, as reflected in Christian martyrdom, see also Ronconi 1966, Simonetti 1956, and Ricci 1964.



often a reversal against his own doctrine or against the life he has led and his most profound convictions.

B. No longer able to bear the last period of his life, which is normally characterised by an illness or a disappointment due to a defeat, the philosopher chooses to commit suicide, usually by asphyxiation or by letting himself die of starvation.

C. The philosopher dies of an illness, the most common of which is *phthiriasis*.

D. The philosopher dies as a result of religious impiety, either by dog bites or following a court sentence, or even owing to direct participation from the gods.

E. The philosopher dies an ideal death that is slow, blissful, and joyful.

F. The philosopher suffers violent death, martyrdom at the hands of a powerful figure before whom the philosopher will not renounce his own convictions.

Of all the ways of dying, only the last two are clearly positive in the biographical tradition: death by excess of joy at an extremely old age, and violent death. Death desired by a god is, in some cases, ambiguous. The remaining deaths are clearly negative and contribute to making the life of the philosopher inglorious. In particular, as we have seen, the first three kinds comprise a single schema of death by failure that punishes the philosopher with an inglorious and/or anodyne death.

We must therefore consider which philosophers are positively regarded by the biographical tradition, and, above all, why. Those who suffer deaths that can be considered to be more blissful are a relative minority. They include Socrates, of course, who, as we have seen, died an exemplary, glorious death; Aristotle, at least in some favourable versions; undoubtedly, Zeno of Elea and Anaxarchus. All these suffer highly heroic, violent deaths. No less blissful are the peaceful and joyous deaths of Thales, Chilon, Bias, and perhaps Plato. These are fundamentally representative of the so-called Wise Men and, although not in all versions, of the philosophers whom the biographical tradition consecrates as constituting the great model of philosophical life: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, of whom only Socrates is glorified in all the versions.

By contrast, the biographies of the remaining philosophers who die badly, at least in some negative versions, contain the usual 'sins' that belong to the biographical tradition. According to their biographies, Alexinus of Elis, Xenocrates, Heraclitus, Zeno, Empedocles, Thales, Bion, Pythagoras, Periander, Anaxagoras, Pherecydes, Myson, Theodorus, Plato, Aristotle, Chrysippus, and Democritus are haughty, arrogant, eccentric, misanthropic, and/or solitary; Plato, Bion, Epicurus, Dionysius the Renegade, Lyco, Aristippus, Theodorus, Stilpo, Arcesilaus, Aristotle, Menippus, Zeno, Chrysippus, and Democritus are gluttonous, depraved, and greedy with regard to luxuries; Epicurus and Menedemus adulate tyrants; Bion, Heraclitus, Diogenes, Anaxagoras, Theodorus, Protagoras, and Heraclides are atheistic and impious; and, as I have shown, the biographies of some philosophers, like Heraclitus, Epicurus, Bion, and Theodorus the Atheist include nearly all these negative views, thus showing the extraordinary malevolence of the biographical tradition. The appearance of only one of these philosophical 'sins' in any version of a philosopher's biography is enough for one variation of his death to become inglorious and fall within the category of death by failure. Given, then,

that in the case of most philosophers these negative versions are probably the result of confrontations between schools (Owens 1983), it is easy to understand why there are not many philosophers who die blissfully.

Therefore, the question we should pose is: Does a philosopher die on the basis of the life he has led? The cases analysed so far clearly show that, in the biographical mind, the deeds considered to be ‘bad’, those which are contrary to the traditional idea of a philosopher set out in the biographies, are punished, while those deeds considered to be ‘good’ according to the biographies are rewarded at the time of death. Thus, the death of the philosopher is always retributive and therefore highly significant. In sum, the way a philosopher dies depends on whether he has lived his life according to the ideals of the ‘biographical narratives’.<sup>64</sup> Even the very notion of death is often presented, especially in epigrams, through the metaphor of opposite poles, thus making manifest the biographical tradition’s impression of death by failure: the philosopher hopes for one thing but gets the opposite, or unexpectedly dies an anodyne death. When this occurs, the interpretation is very simple: the philosopher did not comply with the ideal.<sup>65</sup>

Unlike the poets’ deaths, the philosophers’ deaths are more than overtly symbolic. Their deaths are absolutely humanising and attempt to make the philosopher more human in order to remove his hope of glory. If, in the words of Antisthenes, the height of human bliss is ‘to die well’, εὐτυχοῦντα ἀποθανεῖν (DL vi 5), the biographers seem to want to deny this bliss to most philosophers. Also, according to Dover 1974, 242, “‘Shameful”, “disgraceful” or “ignominious” death [in the popular imagery of the Greeks] is a special case. If a man dies in dignity at the end of a long, virtuous and enviable life, or if he chooses to risk his life and is killed in battle, he can be confident of posthumous “fame”. If he is treacherously murdered, however good a man he has been and however much his murderer may be reviled, the circumstances of his death are such as to confer no merit on him.’ Except in the few examples given by Dover, this is the biographers’ overall aim when they assign one kind of death or another to their characters, since this meets the expectations of their readers.

Tacitus offers a good example of how the biographers proceed in this way when he grants ridiculous deaths to those philosophers he does not like on the grounds that they only seek fame. He does so to provide an ironic contrast to the *mors ambitiosa* that they sought (*Annales* xvi 42; xvi 19).<sup>66</sup> The most interesting example, however, is the death of the false prophet Alexander, as seen through the ever satirical and malevolent eyes of Lucian (*Alex.* lix-lx): In this brief fragment about the death of Alexander, Lucian seems to unmask the typical biographical procedures often used in this sort of episode. At an extremely old age, following the footsteps of other miracle-workers like Empedocles, Alexander

<sup>64</sup> This image of the philosopher in ancient biographical texts and the ideals that I call ‘the biographical narratives’ or, as stated by Lefkowitz 2009, ‘the biographical mythology’, are analysed in Grau 2009.

<sup>65</sup> This type of contrast can be seen in most of the epigrams mentioned in this article.

<sup>66</sup> Examples of these deaths can be found in *Annales* xv and xvi.

seeks a *mors ambitiosa*, including divine approval; but he is rewarded with quite the opposite: a ridiculous death by failure. He develops the cruel illness of gangrene, and worms gnaw the affected part of his leg, which at the time had clear connotations of divine punishment. Moreover, the doctors discover that he is bald and that he has been wearing a wig, thus providing further proof that he was a deceiver and making him subject to further ridicule during his last moments. There is one final piece of information that helps us to grasp how the readers understood the reasons for the deaths of the characters in the biographies. Lucian is an indefatigable opponent of any kind of superstition, especially in this work. He attempts to make it clear that it is not Providence that made the false prophet die in this way, but rather pure chance. Clearly, then, the popular mind quickly interpreted the deaths by failure in the biographies as a clear expression of Providence that gave the characters what they deserved at the end of their lives.

It is evident, then, that the motives that lead the biographers to grant these kinds of deaths to philosophers are not as simple as Jerphagnon believed.<sup>67</sup> As I have suggested, the reasons why philosophers suffer these rather significant kinds of deaths lie in how the biographical tradition conceives their lives as a reward or as a punishment for their deeds, words, and general nature, always on the basis of the philosophical ideal, which has even become an integral part of the collective image held by the Greeks. There are indeed simple motivations, but from a psychological point of view: the popular mind needs to know that, even if it is only in the last moment of life, everyone receives what they deserve according to the kind of life they have led and, of course, according to the ideal life that one would expect them to lead, as well as on whether non-philosophers were sympathetic or opposed to their words. Analysing these final retributions, as I have done here, reveals what the ancient Greeks expected from their philosophers and what they disliked most about their peculiar behaviour. The narrative patterns of the deaths of the philosophers, at the same time, 'sought to convey the messages about human life inherent in ancient Greek religion, which warned of the inevitable failure that followed even the greatest achievements' (Lefkowitz 2009, 529). At the very least, this analysis gives us a clearer idea of the motives behind the particular interest that Diogenes Laertius shows in the kinds of death suffered by philosophers.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Jerphagnon 1981, 28 wrote as conclusion: 'On ne veut pas flétrir, encore moins honnir, la mémoire des philosophes: simplement on lui impose une touche de "pas sérieux"; on l'entache d'un rien de fumisterie, d'un soupçon de blague, comme si l'on tenait à refroidir d'éventuels enthousiasmes, à prévenir quelque excès d'influence'.

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