

Project outline

Title: For a history of depression in the Hellenistic world

Preliminary remarks on methodology

Project objective:

- Carry out a study of the perception of depressive moods within the Greek world during the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, based mainly on a linguistic analysis, but also more generally comprised of philosophical and cultural aspects.

Task description:

- Systematically examine the occurrence of some keywords from this semantic field (θλίψις, στενοχωρία, δυσθυμία, λύπη, ταλαιπωρία etc.) and isolate semantic and stylistic similarities and differences among the analyzed words.
- Study the stance of different philosophers on this topic (Stoics, Epicureans, Skeptics, Platonists and Aristotelians).
- Identify those aspects documenting the uniqueness of the ancient features of these attitudes, as well as any continuity of said attitudes in the modern world.

Expected results:

- An annotated repertoire of the main passages of authors and sources mentioning depression-related contexts;
- Tables reporting the frequency of occurrence of terms (nouns, adjectives, verbs);
- Information on the use of psych verbs (expressing emotion/cognition) in the active or middle voice;
- A general interpretation of depressive pathologies seen through the eyes of ancient and modern authors.

Conditions:

- Individual research, enhanced by discussion with other researchers and students, and by participation in seminars and conferences.

Abstract

The Greek perception of depression

Starting from the above-mentioned methodological basis, I have recently concentrated on the semantic fields of anguish, anxiety and depression. The precise starting point was my research on the meanings of θλίψις and στενοχωρία: through lexical and philosophical analysis I would like to sketch out the general outline of a history of depression and its manifestations during the Hellenistic and Imperial periods and assess the semantic import of said concept in Greek culture. Eric Dodds defined the II century CE as the *age of anxiety*: this impressionistic definition begs to be revisited to analyze the linguistic use of contemporary Greeks and compare it to that of previous and following centuries. Is modern depression comparable to that of the ancient world? The underlying metaphor expressed by the verb θλίβω (Latin *deprimo*) is actually still present within the word *depression* itself, represented by its cognates in many modern languages, just as the English term *stress* derives from the Latin base *strictitia*, based on a different metaphor realized also in the ancient Greek στενοχωρία.

In fact, it is often difficult to identify actual cases of depression in literary texts: Galen describes the episode about Philippides the grammarian who died of grief and depression because his library perished in a fire (*On Freedom from Grief* 7); this is one among many little known incidents Galen describes in highly effective language: apart from the more obvious λύπη, the change in mood is defined as δυσθυμία, whereas the wasting away that supposedly led him to his death is expressed by the verb συντήκομαι, already used in this sense by the Greek tragedians (King 2013). Artemidorus of Daldis is more innovative in his use of στενοχωρία (8x) and θλίψις (8x), charged with psychological meaning that can be interpreted along a

subjectification cline, whereas his contemporary Galen uses the two words always in their physical sense.

My aim is studying how Greeks from the Hellenistic and Imperial periods interpreted the phenomenon of depression (either as ‘pressure on’ or ‘tightness of’ the soul, as a change in mood, or an alteration in balance because of divine intervention etc.) through a systematic analysis of lexical occurrences in their context and of the semantic shifts that took place throughout the centuries.