This essay sets out to examine whether it is possible to identify a semantic equivalence in ancient Greek to the modern use of the word ‘depression’. To that end, I retrace the metaphorical path that led the lexical family of the verb θλίβω, ‘to press’ and the abstract noun θλῖψις to gain the emotional and psychological meaning of ‘pressure’, ‘affliction’, alongside the original concrete meaning of physical pressure. An analysis of all the data harvested, often traceable back to the *Septuaginta* and the New Testament, leads one to conclude that a similar valence may be found in Hellenistic and Imperial Greek, especially in the common language of the people. However, it is disregarded by those authors who have greater stylistic ambitions. Even physicians such as Galen continue to use θλῖψις in a physical and concrete sense, without ever accepting the metaphorical meaning which was probably habitually used at a popular level. Conversely, the conceptualization in the singular of the word ‘de-pression’, with its required prefix, is lacking in ancient Greek. On a formal level, one may identify an antecedent in the formation of the prefixed verb καταθλίβω and in the derived noun κατάθλιψις, found only from Late Antiquity onwards, but it still has a fairly concrete valence.

On the other hand, one may ask whether it makes sense to assume a full equivalence between the μελαγχολία of the ancients and the modern condition of depression. One must operate within precise limits when comparing Bellerophon’s condition and, in general, every kind of psychological illness of the ancient Greeks, with our depression. Recent studies have helped to define these limits increasingly clearly.[[1]](#footnote-1)

For an in-depth survey of modern studies on mental health, depression and madness in Greek civilization, see Thumiger 2017, 1-16. Here I will limit myself to citing, amongst others, Pigeaud 1981 (in part. 31-118 on the psychopathology of Greek doctors), Toohey 2004, Harris 2013, Puliga 2017. On ancient conceptions of boredom, linked to depression, see also Toohey 1988. Konstan 2006, 244-258 includes pain in his analysis of emotions but does not, understandably, consider depression, which is, according to the Hippocratic definition, rather than a fleeting emotion, the description of a lasting psychological condition of protracted sadness (*Aph* 6.23 Ἢν φόβος ἢ δυσθυμίη πουλὺν χρόνον διατελέῃ, μελαγχολικὸν τὸ τοιοῦτον).

In the following pages I intend to trace the history of the metaphor of (de)pression, which originally held a meaning that was concrete and tangible in scope but later took on a psychological dimension through widespread semantic analogy. [[2]](#footnote-2) This metaphor is at the root of the common use of the term ‘depression’ in many modern languages, and of the Greek θλίβω, ‘to press’ and καταθλίβω ‘to depress’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The first record of the root of θλίβω, a verb that has been regarded as the result of the fusion of θλάω and φλίβω, is to be found in a passage of the Odyssey (17.221), where Melanthius speaks scornfully to Odysseus, who, in the garb of a poor traveler, has been led to the palace by Eumaeus. According to the goatherd, the beggar introduced by the swineherd is a troublesome vagabond.

The most convenient hypothesis is that which sees the substitution of the original form φλίψεται, alliterating with φλιῇσι, consistent with the style of insults delivered by Melanthius, with the new and more regular θλίψεται, required by Zenodotus.[[4]](#footnote-4)

One gets the impression that, in the case of both φλίβω and θλίβω, it must have been a verb drawn from the practical language of everyday life. Epic language could easily avoid such words as they dealt with completely separate themes, as subsequent evidence confirms.[[5]](#footnote-5) For the second, indeed, apart from a realistic fragment by Thespis (fr. 4.2 Sn), one has to await Aristophanes (7x) and the comedic genre to encounter a more reasonable level of documentation. And even here it is always deployed in its physical, concrete meaning, although there is the occasional suggestion of ambiguity caused by the use of the motif with reference to the body.

However, the Sophoclean motif of heaviness of heart cannot be found in Aristotle, even from a psychosomatic perspective.[[6]](#footnote-6)

An area of great success is historiography, always in the middle/passive voice, with Polybius (5x) and Diodorus (11x). On these occasions, the meaning is linked to physical pressure, or to the pressure of circumstances. Polybius is explicit in 2.48.1-2 (θλιβομένους ὑπὸ τῆς περιστάσεως), a meaning that is particularly useful in relation to economic or military contexts, according to the uses already documented in Aristotle (see for instance Diod. 12.66 Μεγαρεῖς θλιβόμενοι τῷ πολέμῳ). One may see in idioms of this kind traces of the literary koine of the time, which would not have survived the Atticist filter: Diogenes of Halicarnassus let the expression θλίβομαι τῷ πολέμῳ (*ad Amm.* 9.13 περὶ δὲ τὸν αὐτὸν χρόνον Χαλκιδέων τῶν ἐπὶ Θρᾴκης θλιβομένων τῷ πολέμῳ) only slip once, and it was otherwise absent from his historical oeuvre and was later avoided entirely by Cassius Dio and Herodian.

To trace a shift to more emotional meanings, one must go to the *Septuagint*, as amply proved by Schlier, also in relation to the various Jewish concepts behind it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

With the meaning ‘fear’, it most often appears on its own, for example in *Gen.* 42.21 with a meaningful pinpointing of the subject of the oppression (τὴν θλῖψιν τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ), but it is in two verses of the *Psalms* that θλῖψις is declined close to the synonym ὀδύνη: in *psalm* 106, 39, 2 (καὶ ὠλιγώθησαν καὶ ἐκακώθησαν ἀπὸ θλίψεως κακῶν καὶ ὀδύνης) and in *psalm* 114, 3, 3 the relationship of subordination transforms into an hendiadys, which demonstrates the semantic closeness of the two concepts (περιέσχον με ὠδῖνες θανάτου, / κίνδυνοι ᾅδου εὕροσάν με· / θλῖψιν καὶ ὀδύνην εὗρον).

A reflection of the extensive use of the verb and its corresponding corradical noun can also be found in epigraphic texts, mostly from the Hellenistic age onwards, epigraphic documentation which does, however, present significant differences.[[8]](#footnote-8) At first, it is mostly a matter of material constraints, such as in the honorary decree for a certain Posidonius from Caria, dated to 127 B.C. (*OGIS* II p. 551, 1. 23 συνέ[β]αινεν θ[λ]ίβεσθαι τήν πόλιν), or in the text of the agreement between Cretan cities dating to 112/111 B.C. (Chaniotis, *Verträge* 49, l. 39 θλιβόμενοι κατά τινα̣ς καιροὺς ὑπὸ τῶν παρορόντων Πραισίων), in the Rhodean text of 99 B.C. (*Lindos* II 2 col. D 10-12 ἔστε οὗ διὰ τὰν σπάνιν τοῦ ὕδατος τοὶ Λίνδιοι θλιβόμενοι διενοεῦντο παραδιδόμειν τοῖς ἐναντίοις τὰν πόλιν) or again in the honorary decree for Diogenes, Mithridates’ strategos, carved upon a marble stela found in Histria and dated to 90/89 B.C. (*SEG* 47:1125 [τ]οῦ τε δήμου θλιβέντ[ος).

The honors bestowed upon a certain Menippus are recorded on an inscription found in the sanctuary of Apollo in Claros, dating to 120/119 B.C. He had taken care of his city’s expenses at a time when it had been struggling (*SEG* 39: 1244, l. 34 θλιβομένης τῆς πόλεως). A text from the city of Tomi, dating to 100 B.C. is typical (*IScM* II 2 II.2-3 β̣[αρέως] [ἀπ]ο̣ρῶν καὶ θλιβ̣όμενος ὁ δ̣ῆμος ἐν̣ τ̣ῆ[ι] μεγίσ̣τ̣[ηι καθέ]-[στ]η[κ]εν δυσελπιστίαι καὶ μάλιστα πάντων ἠ̣γ̣ω̣[νία]κε). On the other hand a Macedonian epigraph dating to 118 B.C. relates to a military context (*Syll.³* 700, l. 15 θλιβομένων τε διὰ τὴν αἰτίαν ταύτην τῶν στρατιωτῶν), in which we also see the oppression of the city under the requirement to provide supplies (l. 25 διὰ τὸ μὴ βούλεσθαι θλίβειν τὰς πόλεις τοῖς ὀψωνίοις). In *IG* V, 2 515B, an inscription found in the Arcadian city of Lycosura and dating to after 14 A.D., the use of the subjunctive θλίβηται to describe the difficult conditions that can affect a city in the event of food shortages proves a brilliant combination (ὁσάκις ἂν ἁ πόλις θ[λίβη]τ̣αι [καρ]πῶν ἐνδίᾳ). There is no shortage of evidence for the presence of θλῖψις, as in a well-known civic decree from Tocra in Cyrenaica referring also to the distress of the citizens during the current war (τὰν τῶν ἰδίων συνπολιτᾶν θλῖψιν, *SEG* 26:1817), or in an inscription found in Troas and datable to 77 B.C. (*IMT Skam/NebTäler* 170, l).

In light of the discussion so far, it is fair to ask if θλῖψις is ever found in funerary epigraphs in order to point out the pain of mourning: the answer is yes, but it is a *hapax*. A Thessalian stela dating to the 2nd c. A.D. found in the ancient location of Euhydrion, bears an epigraph (*I.Thess* I 39) that commemorates the young Epictetus, who predeceased his mother at the youthful age of 18. I here quote the final lines, which are stylistically original due to the link θλῖψιν ἐχοῦσα τέκνου, which refers to the boy’s mother:

ἔστησεν τόδε σῆμα ὑπὲρ

μνήμης φιλοτέκνου μη-

τὴρ Ἀλεξάνδρα θλῖψιν

ἐχοῦσα τέκνου.

In another Christian inscription, from Panticapaeum and dating to 306 A.D., the selection of θλῖψις is linked above all to life’s hardships (*CIRB* 64 (ὁ πολλὰ ἀποδημήσας καὶ ἀποστατήσας ἔτη δέκα ἓξ καὶ ἐν πολλοῖς θλίψεις γενόμενος), although there is an error in the declination of the noun in the dative.

It is clear that the offical space of epigraphs was not considered the most appropriate for expressing the difficulties of life and every other type of pain to which the human soul is subject. For such a quest, documentation coming from private writings contained in papyruses is far more suitable and here we may obtain some very interesting data, albeit relating only to Egypt and dating above all to the imperial age. Indeed the oldest text comes from the nome of Arsinoe and dates to 147-136 B.C. It refers to a situation of material poverty (*p.erasm* 1 6 διὰ̣ [τὴ]ν̣ περιέχουσάν με ἐν τῶι ἔτει θλῖψιν), which is also the meaning expressed in *BGU* 4 1139, a petition on behalf of kidnapped little girl, in which, significantly, θλῖψις is further qualified by the adjective βιωτικός meaning ‘practical’, ‘linked to sustenance’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Turning back to literature, the wide semantic range conveyed by θλίβω and its corradicals during the imperial age is well documented in the New Testament, also thanks to the abundance of corroborations (45), that can be grouped as follows.

Lucian seems to be less selective and provides only three examples of θλίβω in the middle/passive and one in the active voice, in a somewhat realistic passage of the *Nigrinus* that repeats the stereotypical association with the synonym στενοχωρέω (13 Macleod: ὀχληρὸς ἦν θλίβων τοῖς οἰκέταις καὶ στενοχωρῶν τοὺς ἀπαντῶντας).[[10]](#footnote-10)

This does not mean that doctors of the imperial age and Galen did not use the word at all. Quite the contrary: in Soranus of Ephesus alone, we find 38 examples of the root, and as to Galen, θλῖψις occurs at least 121 times. Nonetheless, Galen, who is strongly committed to his psychosomatism, does not contradict himself: there is not a single passage in which he interprets the term in a metaphorical sense. He uses the term mostly in the singular as well as in the physical and realistic sense (95x as compared to 26x in the plural), as, in a certain sense, did Aristotle (10x only in the singular).[[11]](#footnote-11)

A scientific justification for this choice is proffered: according to Galen, the heart has never been subject to physical suffering, either when the body is sick or when the soul is ailing.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Rather, the technical notion of pressure, applied in the field of medical treatment, frequently entails pain, as for example with regards to teeth and gums in *de compositione medicamentorum* (12, 849, 11 Kühn αὐξανομένης τῆς ὀδύνης διὰ τὴν θλίψιν) or in the commentary on the hippocratic book *de fracturis* (18b, 387, 7 Kühn ἡ μὲν γὰρ ἰσχυρὰ θλίψις ὀδύνην τε καὶ φλεγμονὴν καί ποτε καὶ νέκρωσιν ἐπιφέρει).

It is important to note that this lexical *vacuum* does not mean that the Pergamenian was not interested in ailments of the soul, indeed he was very sensitive to them. During his time in Rome, Galen encountered many personages from Roman society, who displayed various kinds of restless or hypochondriac behavior. In them, Galen recognized a wide variety of passions and vices, most of which led back to the worst of them all, which is to say insatiability (ἀπληστία).[[13]](#footnote-13)

After all, the metaphor coexisted for a long time with its practical meaning. A passage from the *Problematica ethica* attributed to Alexander of Aphrodisias clearly explains the semantic vagueness of the notion of θλῖψις, applicable both to the body and to the soul: Ὁ μὲν γὰρ πόνος σωματικήν τινα θλῖψιν ἐμφαίνει, ἡ δὲ λύπη ψυχικὴν συστολήν (p. 126, 16 Bruns). Shortly after, the appropriate term for defining the opposite of pleasure is λύπη not πόνος, which contains a more obvious physical reference, while the θλίψεις may refer to both aspects (ἡ μὲν γὰρ λύπη καὶ ἐπὶ ταῖς θλίψεσι τοῦ σώματος καὶ αὐτῆς τῆς ψυχῆς ἐφ’ αὑτῆς, ὥσπερ καὶ ἡ ἡδονή, ὁ δὲ πόνος ἐπὶ σώματι μόνον).

In any case, from the 4thc. A.D. onwards, the stylistic scruples of authors of the imperial age would be swept away by the theological reflections of Christian authors, readers and commentators on the many passages from the Old and New Testaments rich in references to the tribulations of both body and soul. In the homily *In illud: diligentibus deum omnia cooperantur in bonum*, John Chrysostom sets out a useful formulation for understanding the synonymic connection between the archaic concept of ἀλγεῖν and θλίβεσθαι: Μὴ τοίνυν ἀλγῶμεν, ἐπειδὰν θλιβώμεθα, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον χαίρωμεν (*PG* 51, 170, 36).

However, it is the documentation on papyrus, as usual, which provides details otherwise neglected by high literature. In a letter found in the demus of Arsinoe, dated to the second half of the 6thc. A.D. (*CPR* 25 21), a message of condolence is expressed in the following terms: πάνυ δὲ ἐθλίβην δι̣ὰ̣ τ̣ὸ̣ μικρὸν π̣[αιδίον. A petition from the archive of Dioscorus is also of interest due to the presence of a synonymic association with καταπονέω (*P.Lond.* 5 1675 μὴ παρορᾶν ἡμᾶς θλιβομένους καὶ καταπονουμένους).[[14]](#footnote-14) There remains, however, the original reference to all kinds of straits in an appeal from a father to his son in a letter dated to the 3rdc. B.C. ((*P.Oxy*. 1 120): ἀλʼ(\*) ὅρα μὴ καταλιψῃς(\*) μαι(\*) θλιβόμενον. And even more icastic is the picture painted by a letter addressed to a doctor, from Hermopolis and dating to the 5thc. A.D. The patient complains of not having received any further visits and of being unable to bear the balm applied to their skin, which forces them not to wash, with predictable and unpleasant olfactory consequences: ἀφῆκέν̣ με μετὰ τῆς ἐμπλάστρου θλιβόμενον ἡ σὴ παί[δευσις] καὶ πρὸ πολλῶν ἡμερῶν οὐκ ἐπεσκέψατό με (*PSI* 4 297 a).[[15]](#footnote-15) It is clear that here we are dealing with a situation not of sadness but fundamentally of physical discomfort. Research into the use of the perfect participle in the middle/passive τεθλιμμένος also reserves some surprises, as the original meaning of ‘oppressed’, also takes on the metaphorical meaning ‘sad’, which is the translation of θλιμμένος with the apheresis of the double syllable, in medieval and modern Greek.[[16]](#footnote-16) In this case too, the *Septuaginta* record an important intermediary phase: in *Isaias* 18.7 there is a reference to τεθλιμμένος λαός, following a practice that is also found in the *Exagogè* (4 λαὸν κακῶς πράσσοντα καὶ τεθλιμμένον), and that continues as far as the romance of Joseph and Aseneth (3x, of which twice with reference to God, τῶν τεθλιμμένων βοηθός, and in one case with reference to God’s magnanimity towards man’s sins τεθλιμμένου ἐν καιρῷ θλίψεως, 11.11.2 Fink).

Beyond the Judeo-Hellenistic literature, this time an original choice comes from a noted epigram by Leonidas, which defines life, encompassed between the infinite time before birth and the time after death, as brief and τεθλιμμένη (*AP* VII, 472), with a participle that is a *hapax* in the *Anthologia Palatina*.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Christian literature of the first few centuries provides a dense network of comments on Gospel sayings τί στενὴ ἡ πύλη καὶ τεθλιμμένη ἡ ὁδὸς ἡ ἀπάγουσα εἰς τὴν ζωήν (*Mt*. 7.14), but when the adjective refers to the soul, instead of to a tangible element, the meaning clearly fades into a different one, as in the following passage from the *Acta Sanctippae et Polyxenae*, a hagiographical dossier dating to the 3rdc. A.D. (24,13 James):

Πέτρε, αὔριον συναντήσει σοι πλοῖον ἐρχόμενον ἀπὸ τῆς Ἱσπανίας· ἀναστὰς οὖν ὑπὲρ τῆς ἐν αὐτῷ τεθλιμμένης ψυχῆς προσεύξαι

The much-cited evangelical motif produces a certain creativity in some sources, such as in a eulogistic passage of the life of Saint Alipius, dated to the 7thc. A.D. (21.29-36 Halkin), in which he is originally defined as ὁ τεθλιμμένος τῆς τεθλιμμένης ὁδοῦ ὁδοιπόρος, probably with a deliberate juxtaposition of metaphorical and material meaning.

In reality, even for τεθλιμμένος it is hard to establish the moment in which the metaphorical meaning became predominant, to the point of obscuring the original, more tangible and concrete translation. Certainly when, from the 12th c. the apheretic form θλιμμένος appears in literary sources, the meaning is solely the emotional one of ‘afflicted’, ‘sad’, which is in line with the metaphor that θλῖψις by now holds.[[18]](#footnote-18)

1. **La κατάθλιψις**

In order to have a semantic equivalent of the modern concept of *de-pression*, theoretically from the imperial age, Greek may avail itself of the compound κατα-θλίβω. The oldest attestation, in reality, can already be found in Theophrastus’ *de igne* (fr. 23 Coutant) in a translation that, however, is still entirely concrete and that exemplifies the expressive function of the κατά prefix typical of the popular language of the koine.

σβέννυται δὲ καὶ ἐάν τις ἀποστεγάσῃ πανταχῇ καὶ ἐὰν μηδεμίαν ἀναπνοὴν διδῷ, διὸ καὶ ἐν τῇ τέφρᾳ ἐγκρύπτουσι τοῦτ’ εὐλαβούμενοι. κωλυόμενον γὰρ ἀπορρεῖν αὐτὸ ἐν αὑτῷ φλίβεται. καὶ ἐάν τις καταθλίβῃ τοὺς δαλοὺς ἢ τοὺς ἄνθρακας ὥσπερ καὶ τοὺς λύχνους, ἀποσβέννυσιν.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In Plutarch (5x) one also finds a use tied to a rather restricted range of meanings, mostly tangible and concrete. [[20]](#footnote-20) The metaphorical dimension becomes progressively more visible in Christian authors, as in the following text, taken from the homily *de gratiarum actione*, in which Basil of Caesarea lingers on the definition of the passions from a Christian perspective:

Τὸ μὲν γὰρ δάκρυον, ὥσπερ ἐκ πληγῆς τινος, τῆς προσβολῆς τοῦ ἀβουλήτου τὴν ψυχὴν τύπτοντος καὶ συστέλλοντος, καταθλιβομένου τοῦ περικαρδίου πνεύματος, ἀποτίκτεσθαι πέφυκεν· ἡ δὲ χαρὰ οἷον σκίρτημά τί ἐστι τῆς ψυχῆς ἐπαγαλλομένης τοῖς κατὰ γνώμην.

Basil asks himself how one can respect the Pauline rule Πάντοτε χαίρετε (*Phil*. 4.4), given that joy and tears do not derive from the same principle. The latter, in fact, are created by a kind of wound, a blow that strikes and constricts the soul in an unexpected way, together with a compression of the spirit around the heart. The idea conveyed is still that of a pressure that has a physical origin and involves the περικάρδιον πνεῦμα[[21]](#footnote-21). Basil’s formulation provides valuable evidence of the transition between a concrete and denotative level and a metaphorical and connotative one, that involves the heart understood not only at an organic level but also as the seat of the emotions. The oppression that crushes the heart is ceding its place to something that is less physical and more allusive, in an arena that is still however, polysemic. The same Basil, in fact, in his homily on fasting clearly demonstrates the persistence of a decidedly realistic meaning of the action.[[22]](#footnote-22) We find the same thing in a passage on astrology by Hephaestion (2.25) relating to the circumstances of his death, taken verbatim from the previous one of Ptolomy (IV 9, 1-15). Here it is interesting to note the dual possibility offered by the manuscript tradition, oscillating between κατὰ θλῖψιν (Ptolemy) e καταθλίψει (Hephaestion), dative of a newly minted abstract κατάθλιψις:

ὁ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ Κρόνου τὸν Ἥλιον παρὰ τὴν αἵρεσιν τετραγωνίσας ἢ διαμηκίσας ἐν μὲν τοῖς στερεοῖς ποιεῖ αὐτοὺς καταθλίψει ὄχλων ἢ ἀγχόναις ἢ στραγγουρίαις ἀπολλυμένους (Pingree 1973, 187)[[23]](#footnote-23)

The *Metaphrase of the psalms* also dates to the 4thc. A.D., and presents a clearer metaphorization of the compound in the following passage (41.22-24):

εἶπα θεῷ· „τί μευ ὧδε λελασμένος αἰὲν ἐτύχθης;

τίπτε κατηφιόων μετανίσσομαι ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα

ἀνδρὸς δυσμενέος με καταθλίβοντος ἀνίῃ;”[[24]](#footnote-24)

The emotional power of the oppression expressed here by καταθλίβω is further underlined by resorting to the noun ἀνία, but the psychological breakdown is already made clear by the previous verses and by the image of wandering with lowered eyes (κατηφιόων).

A survey of subsequent attestations demonstrates the persistence of the primary meaning: in the sermon *De ieiunio et eleemosyna* attributed to John Chrysostom, one finds the concept of the oppression of the flesh (*PG* 48, p. 1059 τί τὴν σάρκα καταθλίβεις;). We owe a large number of attestations (16x) to Cyril of Alexandria, especially in his commentaries on the books of the prophets. Here the warlike meaning of ‘to oppress’ prevails in the active voice, tied to Old Testament contexts, for example in the case of Nebuchadnezzar (*in Isaiam prophetam*, *PG* 70, 672 πολιορκοῦντος τοῦ Ναβουχοδονόσορ ἐγκειμένου τε καὶ καταθλίβοντος τὰς τῆς Ἰουδαίας πόλεις).[[25]](#footnote-25) In order to find evidence of the abstract noun κατάθλιψις in the written record after Hephaestion, one must await Theodore the Studite.[[26]](#footnote-26) Finally, in the absence of the long awaited past perfect with doubling (κατατεθλιμμένος), we have the form καταθλιμμένος forming a *hapax*, at least in the surviving literature. An example can be found in the late Byzantine decapentasyllabic romance *Imperius et Margarona* (v.862) where its use appears almost modern.[[27]](#footnote-27)

It is worth noting that during the 4thc. A.D. the definition of another concept, close to modern depression, had taken root, that is to say the notion of ἀκηδία, whose appearance was as sudden as it was fascinating, according to Peter Toohey.[[28]](#footnote-28) In a passage from the *de instituto christiano* in which Gregory of Nyssa lists in detail those afflictions of the soul which arise from wickedness, significantly, βάρησις, ‘heaviness’ as well as ἀκηδία καὶ ὀλιγωρία appear but there is no trace either of θλίψεις or of the even later κατάθλιψις. [[29]](#footnote-29) Even βάρησις was a novelty in the Christian literature of the 4thc. A.D., ultimately not too dissimilar conceptually from the idea of depression, although in general it refers to the body.

ὕπνος καὶ βάρησις σώματος καὶ ψυχῆς μαλακία καὶ ἀκηδία καὶ ὀλιγωρία καὶ ἀνυπομονησία καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῆς κακίας <πάθη καὶ> ἐνεργήματα, δι’ ὧν ἀπόλλυται ψυχὴ κατὰ μέρος ἁρπαζομένη καὶ αὐτομολοῦσα πρὸς τὸν ἐχθρὸν αὐτῆς (Jaeger 1963, vol. 8.1, p. 81)

1. **Final remarks**

In light of this examination, the answer to the question of whether it is possible to identify in Greek a semantic equivalent to the concept of depression, similar to that of *depressio* in modern Latin and its derivatives in other languages, is ultimately in the negative. The practical verb θλίβω ‘to press’ took on a metaphorical meaning back in the 4thc. B.C., although it was still linked to the concrete world of material difficulties. Unfortunately, we cannot know the exact context in which the pioneering use of the metaphor – if one may call it such – of heaviness of the heart (θλιβομένης τῆς καρδίας), recorded for the first time in a Sophoclean fragment, was used. From the 4thc. B.C. onwards, one may also find the abstract θλῖψις, serviceable both in its practical and in its metaphorical meaning, and abundantly documented in the *Septuaginta* and later in the New Testament.

What they did newly bestow was a theological and, at a certain point, eschatological caliber of meaning, although not without significant differences between the Old Testament reworking and the Christian experience.

Medical language, on the other hand, fundamentally tied to a psychosomatic understanding of the world which linked every ailment to a kind of physical injury, completely ignored the metaphorical uses of θλίβω and its derivatives and restricted itself to a concrete understanding of the meaning of ‘to press’ and ‘pressure’. During the Hellenistic age, moreover, both the verb and its corradicals became branded as stylistically low and common, as documented by Artemidorus of Daldis. Perhaps for this reason too the vulgar afflictions and preoccupations of the masses did not interest intellectuals such as Marcus Aurelius and Aelius Aristides, whose psychological ailments enjoyed a far more refined philosophical vocabulary. The only Greek philosopher who seems to have been receptive towards the metaphorization of θλίβω is Epictetus, who was well known for the humble origins and popular tone of his philosophy.

On the other hand, a more precise semantic correlation with the idea of ‘depression’ is provided by καταθλίβω, a prefix that already appears in Theophrastus, but is afterwards extremely rare. It is from the 4thc. A.D. that one sees its more frequent appearance, above all in Christian literature, in a system that is still fundamentally polysemantic. If Basil of Caesarea treads on ambiguous ground when he describes the origins of sadness (καταθλιβομένου τοῦ περικαρδίου πνεύματος), even a formulation like ἀνδρὸς δυσμενέος με καταθλίβοντος ἀνίῃ in the *Metaphrasis Psalmorum* shows a gradual association of the idea of oppression with that of distress. However, one must await the Byzantine Middle Ages to see the achievement of the complete shift whereby in modern Greek θλίψη means not only ‘affliction’ but also the emotional condition of ‘sadness’, while the use of κατάθλιψη with the psychological meaning of ‘depression’ is purely modern.

1. “When we address concepts of mental life and health, can we rely on the universality of human mental functioning and disorders? Or should our main object be taken as entirely culturally and socially determined?” (Thumiger 2017, 23). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As is well known, cognitive theory in current thinking on metaphor is tied to the work of Lakoff and Johnson, starting with *Metaphors we live by* (1980). The universality of certain metaphors is at the root of the attainment of similar semantic shifts in different languages, a phenomenon also known as the semantic parallel, see also Zalizniak 2018, 773; on the genesis of semantic change, see also Vanhove 2008 and, for the so called “polygenetic semantic parallels in semantic change”, or simply “polygenesis”, Koch 2000. “The crosslinguistic study of common paths of lexical semantic change is just beginning. Perhaps with more data about change in diﬀerent languages, more tendencies in lexical semantic change can be identiﬁed” (Bybee 2015, 205). Cases of terms or entire expressions arising from an original meaning bound to the real world but later used metaphorically with psychological meaning are frequent in various languages and have been explained through the theory of *subjectification* by Elizabeth Traugott; see for instance Traugott 1989, Traugott-Dasher 2002, Athanasiadou-Canakis-Cornillie 2011. As to metaphors in ancient Greek concepts of emotions, see also Cairns 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For a study on the metaphorical uses of θλίβω and its derivatives, see also Schlier 1938, who however favors biblical texts. As for the shift of *depressio* in Latin and *depression* in English, see *OnEtD*. The synonym πιέζω, on the other hand, failed to undergo any metaphorical shift. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This is the interpretation of van der Valk 1949, 101, Shipp 1972, 344, Russo 20047, 169. It is intriguing that Apollonius the Sophist, in his *Lexicon* records φλίψεται, which he reads as ἀποθλιβήσεται (Bekker 1833, 164), as Hesychius would also have done φ 620 Cunningham- Hansen. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The evidently more expressive and dialectical form φλίβω seems destined to vanish, except for a few isolated instances, for example in the Hippocratic *de locis in homine* 13.22 Littré and in Theocritus’ *Siracusane* (v. 76 φλίβεται Εὐνόα ἄμμιν: in the crowd that builds up to enter the royal palace of Alexandria for the Adonia, the handmaid Eunoa, in the retinue of Gorgo and Prassinoa, risks getting crushed; in this regard, see also Gow 1965, 285). The phenomenon is explained by Eustathius 102.1 van der Valk: ἰστέον δὲ ὅτι ἡ τοῦ θ μετάληψις εἰς τὸ φ καὶ Ἀττικῆς ποτε διαλέκτου ἐστίν. ἐκεῖνοι γὰρ τὸ θλᾶν φλᾶν λέγουσι. τὸ μέντοι φλίψεται τὸ ἐν Ὀδυσσείᾳ [17.221] καὶ τὸ παρὰ Θεοκρίτῳ ἐν Ἀδωνιαζούσαις Αἰολικὸν καὶ αὐτό. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Clear information on the subject comes from *De partibus animalium* 667a 30. From an analysis of the animals’ insides, revealed for the sacrifices, it turns out that the heart is always unharmed, unlike the other internal organs. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Schlier 1938, 140-142, who points out, in ἀνάγκη and ὀδύνη, two frequent synonyms. As regards στενοχωρία, this is another example of the process of metaphorization, as it changed from having a concrete meaning (‘lack of space’ in Thucydides), to the emotional sphere (‘distress’) which is the meaning of the word in modern Greek. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For θλῖψις in epigraphical material, see also Horsley 1981, 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the circumstances and customs described in the petition, see also Montevecchi 1985. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. On Lucian’s portrayal of melancholy, as a disease that typically affects ‘great spirits’, in relation to the cultural and medical idiom of his time, see also Kazantzidis 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. This last is the sole cause of all afflictions, a pronouncement that appears frequently in the treatise *De propriorum animi cuiuslibet affectuum dignotione et curatione* (μίαν πασῶν λυπῶν αἰτίαν, *anim*. 5.49.3 Kühn). Galen «riconosce anche con lo stoicismo che il repertorio emozionale è una costruzione non solo biologica perché i modi in cui gli esseri umani sperimentano le emozioni sono plasmati oltre che dalla natura anche dalla storia individuale di ognuno e dalle norme sociali» (Becchi 2012, 30-31). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Fournet 330. In this case too, the chronology refers back to the 6thc., specifically to the period between 566 and 573 A.D. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See also Kotsifou 2012, 55 n. 95, and Horsley 1987, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In Byzantine literature one may find θλιμμένος one time only in the *Digenis Akritis* of the Escorial (v. 1807, καὶ πρὸς Θεὸν ἐλάλησεν φωνὴν πολλὰ θλιμμένην “and addressed a voice of great grief to God” transl. E. Jeffreys) and in the ptocoprodromic poems (1.55), and later with notable frequency in the decapentasyllabic romances (e.g. *Libistrus and Rodamne, Bellum Troianum*). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. “Tuttavia mi pare singolare, o almeno espressa con una efficacia singolare, la visione della vita compressa o schiacciata tra quei due infiniti. Così infatti interpreto il participio τεθλιμμένη con riferimento non tanto alla riduzione della lunghezza quanto all’annientamento del suo valore” (Barigazzi 1985, 196). I think it would be difficult to surpass such a reading. On Leonidas, see also Klooster 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The data provided in the *Digenis* demonstrate the achieved metaphorization: θλῖψις recurs 13 times in the Grottaferrata (G) version and 9 in the Escorial (E) always with the meaning of ‘pain’. The web of synonomic associations also proves it, as is very clear in the following passage (E 1179-1180): δι’ αὐτοὺς μὲ κόπτει ὁ πόνος / καὶ ἡ λύπη νὰ μὲ συνταφῆ καὶ θλίψιν νὰ τὸ ἔχω. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ‘Fire is also extinguished if it is sealed off on all sides and left unvented. To avoid this fire is covered with ashes. For if the fire is prevented from flowing out, it suffocates itself. Also, if we snuff out fire brands or lamps, they are extinguished’ (transl. Coutant). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. For example in the *Life of Aemilius Paulus* 14.5. It is also worth highlighting its use in the medical field by Soranus (2.7.4), in combination with the other compound ἀποθλίβω. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. This is an idea that Basil shares with his brother Gregory of Nyssa. In the first sermon *de creatione hominis* (Hörner 1972, 4), on the subject of the structure of the human body and the studies devoted to it, he also cites the κίνησιν διαρκῆ τοῦ περικαρδίου πνεύματος. The *iunctura* appears otherwise decidedly rare in Greek literature: it will be taken up again, for example by the anonymous commentary on the Aristotelian *de anima* attributed to Simplicius and by Theodore Prodromos (*de manganis* 8.26). In *de libris propriis* (XIX 28 20 Kühn), Galen had used the link περικάρδιος θυμός to report on a topic that had been the subject of the physician Marinus’ work. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Βαρουμένη γαστὴρ οὐχ ὅπως πρὸς δρόμον, ἀλλ’ οὐδὲ πρὸς ὕπνον ἐπιτηδεία· διότι, καταθλιβομένη τῷ πλήθει, οὐδὲ ἠρεμεῖν συγχωρεῖται, ἀλλ’ ἀναγκάζεται πολλὰς ποιεῖσθαι τὰς περιστροφὰς ἐφ’ ἑκάτερα (*PG* 31,192,11). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. «Saturn squared or opposed to the Sun in fixed signs of the other sect causes death in crowds, either by hanging or by strangulation » (trad. Feraboli): Please translate in English [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. “I said to God, ‘Why did you thus forget me? / Why do I go about downcast, / While my enemy oppresses me with grief?” (transl. Faulkner). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The only case in which it is employed in the passive is in *PG* 70, 252, 14 (ἀγρίῳ τε καὶ μακρῷ καταθλίβεσθαι λιμῷ). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. In only two cases; see e.g. ἐπιλανθανόμενοι τῶν παρουσῶν στενώσεων καὶ καταθλίψεων (*Magna Catechesis* 93, Papadopoulos-Kerameus 1904, 668). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Εὑρίσκουσιν τὴν ρήγαιναν πολλὰ καταθλιμμένην, / θλιμμένα καὶ πολύπονα ἀπὸ καρδίας λυπᾶται (ed. Kriaràs). The context here helps us to unequivically grasp the emotional power. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. “The sudden apparition during the fourth century of the enervating spiritual condition sometimes termed acedia evokes abiding fascination” (Toohey 1990, 339). Its creation was in fact older, having already been found, for example, in the *Septuaginta*. It was Evagrius Ponticus who bestowed upon it a moral meaning, in terms of one of the so-called eight evil thoughts, which form the basis of the seven deadly sins. On the interpretation of ἀκηδία, originally linked to the solitude of Egyptian monks, in the history of the conceptualization of depression, see also Jackson 1986, 66-67; Krämer 1994, 404-405; Kristeva 1987, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The attribution of the treatise to Gregory has been challenged by Marriott 1918. This has caused a heated debate that has seen Werner Jaeger take a stand in favor of Gregorian paternity in light of similarities with the *De virginitate*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)