CHAPTER TWO

GENERIC ETHICS AND THE PROBLEM OF BADNESS IN PINDAR

KATHRYN MORGAN

1. Introduction: Why bother with Pindar?

The Penn-Leiden conference, which focused on the articulation of concepts of badness in the ancient world, has provided an opportunity to reconsider a familiar theme: badness and the bad in Pindaric epinician. It might perhaps seem that this is a topic that needs no reconsideration. Not only has the search for authorial values largely been discredited, but even when such a search was in progress, Pindar was seen as a rather uninteresting player. For Bowra, Pindar was unconcerned with moral goodness or badness in the case of the gods, reserved about these qualities in the case of heroes (whose actions he might personally deprecate while never saying so too loudly), and although ‘he has his own ideas on how men should behave … he is not a moral philosopher and does not trouble to explain his opinions, which he takes for granted, still less to analyze the nature of the “good man” as Simonides does to Scopas’.1 In Fränkel’s analysis, Pindar is an exponent of aristocratic values, according to which ‘no distinction was made between fortune and merit … [m]isfortune brought disgrace … [h]e who was not “good”, i.e. great and powerful, was automatically “bad”’. Simonides’ Scopas poem (PMG 542) is again the foil for this unreflective outlook, first expressing, and then modifying the idea that ‘it is not possible for a man not to be bad, whom resourceless misfortune seizes, for every man is good when he fares well and bad if he fares badly’.2

2 Fränkel [1962]/1975, 307, with n. 8 making the connection to Pindar. As Hutchinson 2001, 292 points out, the ethics of the piece and its abstraction make it an unsuitable candidate for occasional praise poetry.
Not only the question of badness, then, but the poet himself and his oeuvre (in this area) run the risk of appearing merely conventional. Yet the contrast between Pindar and Simonides may be overdrawn. Matthew Dickie has shown how the famous Scopas poem shares many epinician motifs familiar from Pindar and Bacchylides, and argues that all three poets share a pessimistic view of the human condition based on vicissitude. On this reading, Simonides is no radical theorist of a new kind of aretē, but a practiced manipulator of topoi who takes the discussion of aretē to a more sophisticated level. Of course, this is no argument for the originality of Pindar, but it does perhaps indicate that we are too quick in the attribution of radical and conservative agendas to ancient poets. If scholarship on Pindar has taught us anything in recent decades, it is that investigation of convention may illuminate the way the symbolic grammar of Pindaric epinician interacts with the social context of his poetry. It may be true that ‘Pindar … is no theologian’ and no theorician of ethics but one thing he does theorize is poetics. It is here that we may look for clues to understand the way the vocabulary and concepts of ‘badness’ are deployed in his poetry.

In the pages that follow I propose to explore the rubric of ‘badness’ in terms of some familiar features of the genre of Pindaric epinician. In particular, I wish to examine the constraints this genre puts on the construction of badness. Praise poetry is obviously meant to praise, as the victor emerges from a dark background to stand in Pindar’s famous god-given gleam (P. 8.96–97). As many have stated, Pindar’s task is to negotiate the problem of praise in such a way that the victor gets his due, while the audience of citizens, friends, and gods is not irritated by the amount of praise heaped on one man. The threat to the task is potential envy on the part of the audience (of both deeds and poetry). These are the people who speak ‘bad’. How does this generic picture connect with broader questions of the good and the bad? I suggest that Pindaric epinician presents a deliberately restricted vision of the bad, predicated by the awareness of vicissitude. Focus on standards of judgment and their function in both poetic and civic speech means that we are presented with a world where the struggle of the good and the bad plays itself out at the level of speech, and where the proper functioning of human society is based upon what we might

---

3 Dickie 1978.
5 For a recent treatment, see Mackie 2003, 9–37.