

## Hesiod Notes

LART602

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### Poem and Poet

- It is important to recognize that Hesiod's *Theogony* originates in an ancient, religious/poetic tradition. The *Theogony* derives from a religious cult tradition, itself part of the broad, polytheistic religion of the Ancient Greeks. In some respects, our knowledge of the period in which the *Theogony* was laid down in writing – somewhere around 800-600BCE – is extensive; in others, it is fragmentary and limited.
- We do know that the narrator of the poem refers in some detail to a homeland located in western Boeotia, near Mt. Helikon. We do not know, however, whether there was an historical figure, Hesiod, who first placed the poem in writing. Given the oral tradition that must have preceded its writing, it seems unlikely that any single person should be regarded as the original author of the poem. On the other hand, the distinctive references to Hesiod's family in *Works and Days*, suggest some connection to an actual, historical individual. (See the Lombardo introduction for further discussion.)
- We do know that there was an important nearby cult devoted to worship of the Muses, and it is reasonable to suppose that the Hesiodic poems were an important part of their ritual practices. Indeed, it would seem no coincidence that such a cult should be home to the poem in which the identity of "poet", as self-conscious individual, first makes its appearance in western history.
- We do know, too, that the cult practices of the ancient Greeks varied considerably from one village or *polis* to another. Each had its patron (or matron) gods; each had its particular version of the myths associated with these gods, particularly as they involved the location and its inhabitants. And we know that despite such local variety, the general mythology of the Greeks was shared, and that the several general accounts were frequently at odds with each other as to the particular acts and relationships of the gods.
- A useful general expression of the nature of ancient Greek religion is offered by Walter Burkert:

Ritual and myth are the two forms in which Greek religion presents itself to the historian of religion. There are no founding figures and no documents of revelation, no organizations of priests and no monastic orders. The religion finds legitimation as tradition by proving itself a formative force of continuity from generation to generation. Ritual, in its outward aspect, is a programme of demonstrative acts to be performed in a set sequence and often at a set place and time – sacred insofar as every omission or deviation arouses deep anxiety and calls forth sanctions. As communication and social imprinting, ritual establishes and secures the solidarity of the closed group; in this function it has doubtless accompanied the forms of human community since the earliest of times. Sacred ritual involves the invocation of invisible powers which are addressed as a

personal opposite: they are called gods, *theoi*, as soon as we have texts. Myth, a complex of traditional tales, has more to say of these gods, but among the Greeks these tales are always taken with a pinch of salt: the truth of a myth is never guaranteed and does not have to be believed. But quite apart from the fact that mythology is at first the sole explicit form of intellectual activity and the sole mode of coming to terms with reality, the importance of the myths of the gods lies in their connection with the sacred rituals for which they frequently provide a reason, an aetiology, which is often playfully elaborated. The art of poetry then gave individual myths a fixed and memorable form, and the recitation of this poetry became in turn an essential part of every festival. Greek myth, complex in essence and actuality, therefore eludes all one-dimensional classifications and analyses.

– Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Blackwell Publishing, 1985), pp. 8-9

As We have Seen:

- Humans employ *logoi* to replace chaos with cosmos.
- To the extent that *logoi* are primary, broad, higher-order descriptors, we may call them *archia* (pl. of *arche*) or principles.
- So, what *archia* dominate the Hesiodic cosmos? What general mechanisms or forces exist to bring about change? What basic categories of being are identified in his account?

Anthropomorphism

- Anthropomorphism is representing a (presumably) non-human entity or phenomenon in human form or terms.
  - o From Gk. *anthropos*, meaning “man” and *morphos*, meaning “shape” or “form”
- Hesiod’s primary explanatory principles are anthropomorphic. Most change is a product of human-like process (sexual reproduction; deliberative, voluntary action) and inspired by human-like motivations (emotional, practical, etc.). Similarly, the very being of the natural world is anthropomorphized: earth is a woman; heaven a man; etc.
- Anthropomorphism brings the advantage of a known or knowable commodity: we can bring intellectual order to our universe by representing its contents in human terms. In one sense, this makes Hesiod’s universe in principle knowable by us (but see below).
- Technologically, however, the merits of anthropomorphism are slim to non-existent: there is little or no evidence that we can control the environment by representing it in human terms. (E.g., sacrifices to appease the gods don’t seem to work. Thinking of famine or drought as a punishment doesn’t help us to avoid either.)
- Moreover, such a worldview faces these *epistemological concerns*:
  - o First, it is difficult to obtain any evidence of the truth of this worldview.
    - This is not necessarily a *principled* objection: we might not be able to know in advance that such a worldview fails to admit of evidence.

- But it does so happen that we are unable to find clear evidence of any principal feature of the anthropomorphic worldview. These include the following:
  - Natural phenomena have mental states like ours (e.g., desire, discursive thought);
  - Natural phenomena have personalities (e.g., bellicose; wise);
  - Natural phenomena are explainable by reference to human-like motivations (e.g., anger, jealousy);
  - Natural phenomena have a form or state similar to the physical form or state of humans (e.g., male or female genitalia).
- Second, the absence of such evidence is good reason to think that these features in fact fail to obtain.
  - All that we regard as human or human-like is discovered by us in either of two ways: by introspection, and by sense observation.
  - This suggests that human phenomena as such are of a kind open either to introspection or sense observation.
  - Consequently, if nature did in fact have any of the above human-like qualities, these qualities should be evident to us in either introspection or sense observation.
  - But we can detect no such qualities by either means.
  - So, probably, there are none.
- Third, a more likely interpretation of the Hesiodic worldview is that such accounts describe only ourselves, not the natural world-order.
  - The *Theogony* provides a rich representation of humanity as driven by powerful urges and emotions, even while attempting to bring rational order to its sphere.
  - One important criterion of correct interpretation is *fruitfulness*: if an interpretation yields its intended result, then we have reason to believe it correct or accurate; if it stubbornly fails to yield its intended result, we have reason to think it wrong-headed or mistaken, somehow.
    - In this case, interpreting Hesiod's worldview as an explanatory description of the natural world fails to produce one of its intended outcomes: technological utility.
    - By contrast, interpreting Hesiod's worldview as descriptive of humanity yields an intended outcome of such a theory: a valuable portrait of human being. (See esp. the progeny problem.)

### Supernaturalism

- Supernaturalism involves reference to, belief in, or especially explanation of natural phenomena in terms of non- or extra-natural beings, powers, or phenomena.

- The natural and the supernatural differ:
  - The natural order includes objects or phenomena located in space and/or time. The supernatural are not necessarily spatiotemporal. Some deities, e.g., may not (always) be located in space; some may be a-temporal.
  - The natural order is preëminently a material order (though this leaves open the question of the status of the mental). The supernatural is not necessarily material.
  - Natural order objects are subject to physical law. The supernatural are not – their activities supersede such laws as gravitation, etc.
  - In general, natural order objects are open to sense observation. But in most cases, the supernatural is not.
  - The natural order includes rivers, lakes, trees, humans, dogs, the sun, etc. The supernatural includes deities, nymphs, spirits, souls, etc.
- Epistemological concerns:
  - It is difficult or impossible to verify the existence of a supernatural being or power. In principle, the designation ‘supernatural’ places a thing beyond the normal human capacity of observation. Consequently, belief in the supernatural likely requires suspending a central tenet of rationalism: that belief in existence should be supported by evidence.
  - In addition, if the behavior of the supernatural outstrips the natural and its usual laws of behavior, then we confront the possibility that the supernatural in principle be beyond human understanding. I.e., we may not hope to understand or predict its behavior because it is not “logical”. This would require accepting an a-rational worldview.

### Logic and Chaos

- To what extent is Hesiod’s world (like that of Homer) “logical” and to what extent is it arbitrary, a cosmos vs. a chaos? To what extent is Hesiod’s a *rationalistic* world view?
- To a considerable extent, Hesiod’s world is logical, a cosmos, insofar as we can put a word to the given phenomenon, owing primarily to anthropomorphism. The winds blow and rain falls because of Zeus; the earth shakes because of Poseidon. The descent of Persephone into the underworld leads to fall and winter; her emergence, to spring. Further, we find logical relations among various divine affinities: Night sires doom, fate, grief, sleep, etc.
- On the other hand, Hesiod’s world is also rife with arbitrariness. Why does Gaia bear twelve Titan young? Why not eleven, or twenty? Any fact that lacks an explanation, such as the number of offspring, in this case, constitutes a lack of order, chaos. Consider also Gaia’s emergence from the void, along with that of Erebus and Night. There can be no explanation for *ex nihilo* creation, it would seem.

Hesiod’s account of change: Change falls into several kinds: generation, destruction (i.e., of whole beings); alteration (i.e., of existing beings). Some of the principles (*archia*) of change referred to by Hesiod are the following:

- Generation:
  - Sexual reproduction: e.g., Night + Erebus yields Aether and Day (ll. 124-5), Gaia + Ouranos produces the Titans (ll. 134-136), Rheia + Kronos produces the primary Olympic gods (ll. 456-463), etc.
  - Non-sexual reproduction, of several kinds:
    - Parthenogenesis (asexual or spontaneous generation of a new creature): e.g., Gaia's production of Ouranos (heavens; l. 126), the mountains (l. 129), and Pontos (sea; l. 131); Night's production of Blame, Grief, etc. (ll. 213f).
    - Sex-related generation: e.g., Ouranos' blood, falling on earth (Gaia), yields the Furies, Giants, and tree Nymphs (ll. 184-187); and his severed testes, falling into the sea, yields Aphrodite (ll. 188-192).
  - *Ex Nihilo* (from nothing) becoming: Gaia, Tartaros, Eros, Erobus, and Night come into existence (evidently) without cause or explanation (ll. 116-123).
- Destruction: it appears that all the gods are indestructible, immortal, as none is reported going out of existence in the *Theogony*, though many are variously buried, reduced, banished, etc.
- Alteration:
  - The general vehicle of change (alteration) in *Theogony* is human-like *action*, where *action* is *deliberative* and *voluntary*.<sup>1</sup>
  - The general motivation for change (alteration) in *Theogony* is human-like *emotion* or *interest*. These include the following:
    - Lust (sexual desire): see the influence of Aphrodite (lns. 203f) and subsequent promiscuity of gods (211ff)
    - Love (both amorous and maternal): Night and Erebus make "sweet intercourse" (124); Rheia grieves for her children (472)
    - Fear/jealousy: Ouranos fears his children (155); Kronos wishes to rule alone (465); the Olympians are jealous of the Titans' power (Titanomachy)
    - Hatred: Kronos hates his father, Ouranos (139)
    - Disgust: Ouranos for the monsters (155)
    - Anger/vengeance: Gaia plots to castrate Ouranos (161); Zeus punishes men for receiving fire from Prometheus – by creating women (Pandora).
  - Another apparent influence on change is *justice* or a sense of moral propriety or law. This sense is evident where anger arises due to a perceived injustice (as in Kronos against Ouranos, or in Zeus against Prometheus). See also the consequence of breaking an oath at 799f.
- *Eros*: More generally, note the introduction of Eros at the outset of the theogony (120). Eros is a broad concept, embracing any creative urge, including but by no means limited to the sexual impulse. One can extend this concept to include all

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<sup>1</sup> An act is *deliberative* just in case it results from contemplation of different possible actions and a decision to pursue one of these; and an act is *voluntary* just in case it is undertaken "freely" – i.e., the agent could have chosen otherwise under the same circumstances.

human action, insofar as an action brings about a new thing, namely the act itself. Note Lombardo's identification of *eros* as a primary philosophical principle, included by Hesiod to explain subsequent erotic couplings and their issue (pp. 13-14).

- *Causal Likeness*: Another basic principle organizing change, in Hesiod, is *similarity* among *cause* and *effect*. Where beings or phenomena share some property or feature, we have a similarity; and where cause and effect share some feature, so that we may say that *like* causes *like*, we have *causal likeness*.
  - See, e.g., the offspring of Night, which include Doom, Death, Sleep, the three Fates, Grief, etc. (ll. 211-225).
  - Similarly, from Zeus's mating with Themis (custom, propriety) arise the ordered seasons, Justice (Dike), Peace (Eirene), and Good Laws (Eunomia) (ll. 906-908); Zeus is thus the God associated with wisdom and order.