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The Absence of Archaic Altruism: Hesiod's Greek Deities and Their Effect on Humanity

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*As Greece emerged from the Dark Ages following the invasion of the Sea Peoples, farmers and townspeople of the early first millennium B.C.E. faced the task of rebuilding a shattered society. Few written records remain from the era, but historians continue to turn to Hesiod for assistance in reconstructing the cultural and societal norms. More of a pessimist than his contemporary Homer, Hesiod's works depict a Greek society run by the whimsical and self-serving nature of a pantheon of deities, most of whom have little regard for humanity. As a result of this morality—or perhaps immorality—displayed in *Theogony*, Hesiod then provides advice to fellow Archaic Greeks in *Works and Days* that reveals a society concerned with survival at the hands of merciless gods. Thus, despite the lack of a historical analysis of civilization that might come with authors such as Thucydides, Hesiod's text continues to aid in a reconstruction of ancient Greek culture.*

In Thucydides' record of the Peloponnesian War, he relates to his readers the chaos that resulted from the plague of Athens:

...Athens owed to the plague the beginning of a state of unprecedented lawlessness. Seeing how quick and abrupt were the changes of fortune which came to the rich who suddenly died...people now began openly to venture on acts of self-indulgence which before then used to keep dark....As for the gods, it seemed to be the same thing whether one worshipped them or not, when one saw the good and the bad dying indiscriminately....¹

Though Thucydides writes from a viewpoint that disregards the role of the deities in daily life, his underlying theme about the Athenians' response to tragedies shares striking similarities with Hesiod's: Humankind suffers from a gross lack of control over their circumstances. For the Athenians facing the plague, this manifested itself in the way that nothing they did could heal them from the brutal effects of the sickness. For Hesiod and the Archaic Greeks, the attributes of the gods and the way that the gods respond to humanity forces mortals into a cycle of helplessness.

¹ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. by Rex Warner, (New York: Penguin Books, 1954), 155.

The vengeful and self-seeking nature of the gods made it impossible for humans to control anything in their lives, as the immortals acted and reacted based on their own selfishness. Whereas the actions of immortals in *Theogony* lack any boundaries, uncontrollable circumstances bind the actions of man. The immortals abuse their power and lack morals. This general credo applies not only to the original deities of Ouranos and Gaia, but also to the later and more powerful deities of Zeus and even Demeter. None of these deities operates under any sense of altruistic tendencies. As such, humans live under constant fear of what they will suffer at the hands of the immortals. While on one level, some of the gods' actions appear to help others, at the core these actions still retain a deep motivation for revenge. As a result, the humans of Hesiod's *Works and Days* do not have any semblance of control over their own work or existence; they live and work at the mercy of the deities who command crops and seasons.

As posited in Hesiod's *Theogony*, the helpless state of humanity stems from the self-interest of the gods. Though the cunning nature of the gods manifests itself in different forms depending upon the deity, the stories of both Zeus and Gaia share certain distinct similarities that support this. Both deities face oppression in some form, and yet rise up in opposition for their own self-serving purposes. Both provide a pretense for altruistic tendencies that might contradict the aforementioned selfish attributes, but ultimately continue to serve themselves. Finally, neither deity harbors any qualms about hurting others in their path of self-advancement, which in turn leaves immortals with power over circumstances that humans then cannot control.

Multiple characters within Gaia's story live up to Hesiod's view of the gods. While Gaia, or "broad-bosomed earth" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 117),² remains one of the prime examples of this, Ouranos continues the trend. Given the context of Ouranos' oppression of Gaia, the self-seeking nature of the gods immediately emerges. Ouranos "was driven to hate [their children] from the beginning. So

² All quotations from Hesiod are taken from Hesiod, *The Poems of Hesiod*, trans. by R. M. Frazer (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983).

he hid them away, each one, as they came into being” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 155-157). Hesiod does not describe any threat these children posed to Ouranos. Ouranos’ mere dislike of these children serves as enough motive for him to seek their oppression. As a result, Gaia herself suffers; the “pain in her heart” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 163) reflects the psychological and emotional pain that she experiences as a result of Ouranos’ selfish decisions.

But Gaia responds in kind toward Ouranos for his actions. Though she cannot take vengeance herself, she was able to convince one of her children to execute her violent plan in response to Ouranos’ actions. At the outset, Gaia seems to speak words of altruism and love for her children, saying that “if you will follow as I advise you, we shall avenge this wicked dishonor” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 164-166, emphasis added). Her motivations truly stem from the goal of selfish gain. Previously in the text, Hesiod describes how “huge Gaia was groaning within and feeling constrained, and so she contrived an evil device” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 159-160). Hesiod makes no mention here of Gaia’s sense of grief over her children. Later on, her children even suffer as a result of their actions in helping Gaia rebel against Ouranos, as their father threatens that since “they had committed a terrible criminal act...*tisis*, ‘vengeance,’ was destined to follow” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 209-210). Gaia, therefore, harbors no remorse over sending her children into destruction as long as she can rest in the knowledge that her vengeance will be served. Her altruistic tendencies only result in fleeting thoughts for her own advancement, a pattern substantiated later on in the text: She helps Rhea to deceive Kronos about the birth of Zeus and “received him [Zeus]...in order to nurse him....And she swaddled a great stone and put it into the hands of Ouranos’s son...who...sent it down into his stomach” (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 480-487).

These examples of ruthlessness coming from the goddess intended to symbolize the Earth hold menacing implications for those living on that Earth. If such a being cares not even for her own children and only utilizes them in an effort to free herself from bondage, then there can be no hope for a

peaceful life for humans. The only gifts that Gaia ever bequeathed upon humans included “the high mountains,” which prevented quick travel through Greece, and “the exhaustless sea that rages with waves,” which brought the Greeks the Sea Peoples and other dangers (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 129 and 132). As a result of her trickery, the Greeks can never see Gaia as a giver of things, merely a deceiver. It is not until the introduction of Demeter in *Works and Days* that this new perception of the Earth begins to produce crops to humans, with the fruit of Demeter providing for the Greeks on a yearly basis (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 32). At the same time, though, even with this shift to a slightly more benevolent Demeter, the Greeks held little to no control over their farming circumstances, as will be discussed later.

In response to the power of the gods and the examples of trickery exhibited in the Gaia story, Greeks also strive to gain control over their circumstances through deceit and selfish ambition. Unfortunately, the formula does not work so productively for the Greeks. Whereas Gaia is able to trick Kronos by sending a boulder down his gullet, every time the Greeks attempt to achieve self-advancement, Zeus thwarts their efforts. Hesiod addresses this pattern in his “Exhortation to Justice” in *Works and Days*. The inclusion of this passage serves as an indication of trickery and selfishness among the Greeks, in some ways reflective of how the Greeks might try to mimic the gods. At the same time, though, Hesiod reminds his fellow farmers what happens when they engage in such selfish behavior: “...upon those who are lovers of hubris and hard-hearted deeds far-seeing Zeus, son of Kronos, dispenses his punishing justice. Often even a whole city pays for the wrong of one person” (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 238-240). Hesiod sharply reminds the Greeks that while the gods capably function under a selfish attitude, the lack of control that the Greeks face under the power of Zeus makes it impossible for them to do likewise. Gaia, in all of her power and violence, will do nothing to help the Greeks, leading to a sense of frustration and helplessness in life for the Archaic Greeks.

These attributes emerge even more clearly throughout accounts of Zeus' story. At the very beginning of the tale, Hesiod relates how "Great Kronos swallowed each of these [his own] children as each of them came out of the holy womb of their mother...For he had learned of the future...how he was destined to meet with defeat at the hands of his son..." (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 459-464). Kronos knows beforehand of the likelihood of his own offspring overthrowing him. His actions of "swallowing" each of his children show, rather than a desire to rule justly, a desire to preserve his own power. This violence and oppression of others depicts the selfish nature so prevalent in all of Hesiod's Greek deities—performing actions to advance their own ambition. As a result, Greeks have no reason to think that these gods will bestow gifts upon them if the immortals have only ever sought their own power.

Even more so, though, the actions of Zeus himself represent a deity determined for self-preservation. Zeus releases Kronos' brothers from bondage—and "in return for this kindness they showed themselves grateful to him by giving him both the crash of the thunder and the smoldering bolt and flash of lightning..." (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 503-505). Zeus will eventually use these weapons to exercise dominion over "all immortals and mortals" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 506), thereby strengthening his own position as authority, a self-seeking motive. Though upon obtaining kingship, Zeus "fairly apportioned their honors" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 885) to those who had assisted him, he has no reason to initially rise up against Kronos and the Titans other than vengeance. It is only through this motivation that he is able to rally others around him, since he had "freed [them] from bondage secure" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 659). Therefore, though Zeus may have appeared to be a more benevolent ruler than past supreme deities, motivations of vengeance and self-preservation still drove his rebellions and desire for power more than anything else.

The story of Prometheus continues this trend with another vibrant example. Intent upon outwitting Zeus, Prometheus lies and deceives the superior god. When Zeus confronts Prometheus, the deceiver proceeds to lie to Zeus. In response, Zeus "planned in his heart evil which he would bring to

fulfillment for mortal men" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 551-552). As Prometheus continues to insult Zeus, Zeus responds in several ways: he "made as the price of fire an evil for men" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 570), and "created women as an evil for men and conspirers in troublesome works" (Hesiod, *Theogony*, line 600-601). Though Prometheus never truly threatens Zeus in all his power, Zeus feels his image and reputation have fallen under attack by the impunities of the Prometheus. This necessitates revenge.

This interaction between Prometheus and Zeus serves as a multi-layered example of the consequences of an attempt to benefit human interest. Though Prometheus falls under the category of deity, his actions classify him as a friend of humans: "[Zeus] hid fire, which the goodly son of Iapetus [Prometheus] stole back...to give it to men, secretly carrying it in a fennel stalk's hollow" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 49-52). However, because of Prometheus' deceit, Zeus then punishes humans more with the creation of Pandora. Ironically, the desire to prevent men from obtaining fire is not what angers Zeus. Rather, the intent with which Prometheus deceives Zeus causes Zeus to punish humanity, saying that "you [Prometheus] rejoice in your theft of my fire and in having deceived me, being the cause of great pain to yourself and mean in the future" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 55-56). In his actions, Prometheus merely harms Zeus' pride, but even for this, Prometheus and all of humanity suffers. This cost of humanity's gain counteracts the initial benefit. Thus, whenever humanity tries to control fate to create a favorable outcome, the effort results in more harm, leading to a feeling of helplessness.

Hesiod's discussion of the human existence in *Works and Days* perpetuates this sense of helplessness. Since no altruistic effects result from the actions of the deities, Hesiod has no reason to suppose that the gods might do anything for humans out of benevolence. The gods, who theoretically rule everything, look after only their own concerns. If benefitting humans would help them gain revenge on a rival deity, then perhaps the humans will be blessed. But this rarely occurs. More often than not, Hesiod feels that humans suffer from merely being caught in the middle of the gods and lacking any control at all, which in turn leads to a repetitive, pointless existence on the part of humanity. For Hesiod,

“the earth is abounding in evils and so is the sea. And diseases come upon men by day and by night, everywhere moving at will, bringing evil to mortals silently” (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 101-103). This view emerges prominently throughout *Works and Days*, both in Hesiod’s references to Zeus and even in the existence of “The Farmer’s Calendar.”

Zeus’ role as perpetuator of human helplessness continues throughout the entirety of *Works and Days* as the character referenced the most by Hesiod. Not all of these references are negative. The opening lines of *Works and Days* compose “An Introductory Hymn to Zeus” in which Zeus is cited as the being “through whom mortal men are both dishonored and honored; they become famous and do not become famous as almighty Zeus wills. Easily he strengthens the faltering, easily shatters the strong, easily makes the flourishing fade, the faded to flourish...” (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 3-7). These lines reflect the tone of a person who not only feels himself subject to Zeus’ decisions, but also holds little control over what happens. The fact that through Zeus all of this happens leaves little room for humans themselves to impact the events in their own lives.

More often than not, though, the effects of Zeus’ control manifest themselves negatively in Hesiod’s view. Practically every instance of a hardship is accompanied by an explanation of Zeus’ actions that resulted in the hardship. Because of Prometheus, “Zeus hid our livelihood when he was angered at heart” (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 47). Resultantly, life on earth becomes much more difficult. The human beings of Hesiod’s day had no control over this occurrence—they merely continued to live their lives and struggle for survival in response. Further along in the text, Hesiod reminds his audience that “Zeus...sends terrible suffering from heaven upon them, famine together with plague, and makes the people perish” (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 242-243). These events significantly affect the people of Hesiod’s community, and yet the people can only respond to the decisions of Zeus. The most that the Greeks can do is hope that their attempts to avoid hubris result in a less wrathful Zeus: “sometimes he makes them pay by giving their broad army defeat or bringing their wall down, or he, Zeus, son of

Kronos, destroys their ships on the sea" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 240-241). Thus, most if not all references to Zeus depict Hesiod's feeling of humanity's helplessness in the face of all-powerful Zeus who overthrew his father.

Clearly, Zeus controls the cosmos for the typical Greek farmer. Any negative event that happens results from the actions of Zeus, whether or not the Greek actions warrant it. Any positive event takes place merely because it advances Zeus' own agenda. Therefore, Hesiod's belief that humanity lacks any semblance of control over circumstances culminates in a feeling of insignificance and inadequacy. Nothing that humanity does will actually result in the bettering of circumstances. Nothing that humanity does not do will ultimately affect the broad scheme of the cosmos. The resulting attitude creates an apathetic attitude toward life. Hesiod summarizes these emotions in his description: "we live in the age of the iron race, when men shall never cease from labor and woe by day, and never be free from anguish at night, for hard are the cares that the gods will be giving" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 176-178). The only thing a human can do, then, is farm without hope of circumstances changing.

The tone of Hesiod's sections titled "The Farmer's Calendar" finalizes this conclusion. The calendar sections outline for Hesiod's readers the times and ways to farm during the year. In his introduction, Hesiod lays out several guidelines for his fellow farmers: "The following law applies to the plainsmen: strip to sew, strip to plow, strip to reap. So do if you want to care for all the works of Demeter each one in its season, that they each may seasonably grow..." (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 388-394). Here, Hesiod's outline of a law shows how a farmer must do whatever he can to achieve the best growing season possible. Hesiod's reasoning for this rests in the fact that "he who puts off his work is wrestling with ruin" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 414). Humans can try to counteract their lack of control by working, but even then, surprises can happen.

Within the text of "The Farmer's Calendar," Hesiod again depicts gods who are ultimately in control. Hesiod encourages farmers to "pray to Zeus Chthonian and to the holy goddess Demeter that

the holy grain of Demeter will grow to fulfillment..." (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 465-466). As much as a person works, Demeter still maintains ultimate power in what grows from her soil. Demeter, in stark contrast to Gaia, produces crops for humans that they then survive on. In one sense, this could be seen as a god showing benevolence for humanity. However, Demeter also runs on her own calendar: "So do if you want to care for all the works of Demeter each one in its season, that they each may seasonably grow..." (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, lines 392-394). Demeter's produce may be good, but farmers must still abide by her schedule. This furthers the conclusion that the fact that Hesiod even feels that he can credibly write a guide for farmers concerning what to do and when to do it reflects yet again the inherent feeling of helplessness in the face of the gods. With Zeus, "hard it is for mortal men to fathom his thinking" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, line 484). Therefore, mortals such as Hesiod strive to take what they *can* understand—the seasons—and formulate them into a code for possible survival.

Other texts of Hesiod's day and later Greek society confirm Hesiod's view of human lack of control amidst the selfish and vengeful nature of the gods, thereby sealing the fate of the Archaic Greeks. In "On the Folly of Humanity," Rhianos of Bene states that "truly, we humans have minds that err and senselessly endure the uneven distribution of the gods' gifts..."³ Even these opening lines mirror the lack of care the gods have given to their mortal counterparts. Rhianos claims an uneven distribution. Such a downfall would likely result from either the gods lack of caring or a desire for the gods to see their favorites triumph over others. The mindset of helplessness that the Greeks have continued with is reflected even earlier in the opening words, how they have "senselessly endured." This feeling, reminiscent of helplessness, reflects a feeling that humans felt they could not change their outcome.

In *The Greeks and the Irrational*, E. R. Dodds draws a similar conclusion about the mindset of the Archaic and even Bronze Age Greek societies. Dodds bring to light the development of the concept of

³ Rhianos of Bene, "On the Folly of Humanity," from *Ancient Greece: Documentary Perspectives*, ed. S. V. Spyridakis and B. P. Nystrom (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall-Hunt, 1985), 182.

“ate,” or “that experience of divine temptation or infatuation.”⁴ The intent of this Greek word meshes perfectly with the sense of helplessness that Hesiod’s writing embodies. For Hesiod, events take place as the result of the actions of the gods, based on their vengeful and selfish nature, meaning that humans are merely tossed around in the cosmos. Dodds carries this development a step further in his discussion of the *Iliad*. For Agamemnon, the king not only lacked control of his environment, but he also lacked control over his own actions:

“Not I,” he declared afterwards, “not I was the cause of this act, but Zeus and my portion and the Erinys who walks in darkness: they it was who in the assembly put wild *ate* in my understanding, on that day when I arbitrarily took Achilles’ prize from him. So what could I do? Deity will always have its way.”⁵

Such a depiction aligns wholeheartedly with Hesiod’s views of the helplessness of humanity. Agamemnon claims he had no option other than obeying the gods, just as Hesiod feels he has no option other than living under the events the gods decree.

The society that Hesiod lived in, though having recently emerged from the Dark Ages of Greece, did not view its circumstances as much better than the previous centuries. Though the Greeks were recovering from the attacks of the Sea Peoples and were slowly repopulating the towns, their outlook on life continued to be bleak. They thought themselves ruled by the whims of self-seeking and vengeful deities. Nothing that the humans could do would effectively alter the courses of these deities’ actions. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the Archaic Greeks looked to their own polises for their survival, with the people of each polis trying to help each other survive while at the same time denying neighboring polises any form of friendship. On the basis of this assumption, the Corcyrans appealed to the Athenians for aid against the Corinthians: “We must therefore convince you first that by giving us this help you will be acting in your own interests, or certainly not against your own interests.”⁶ The

⁴ E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 2.

⁵ Homer, *The Iliad*, 19.86 ff., quoted in E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 3.

⁶ Thucydides, 54.

Greeks learned from the examples of their deities. If the gods would not display kindness for the sake of kindness, than neither would a Greek polis extend kindness to another if there were a chance of their own polis members suffering.

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