

An Analysis of the Theogony of Hesiod

by Lilburne

1. Hesiod and his Theogony

One ancient day, at the foot of Mount Helicon in Boeotia, a lowly shepherd named Hesiod tended his flock. Upon entering a clearing, he found to his astonishment nine unspeakably beautiful goddesses standing before him. These were the Muses, the divine patronesses of the rhythmical arts (that which we call "music" in derivation from their name). It is by the grace of the Muses that the choir sings, the flutist trills, and the dancer twirls. These beneficent goddesses impart their own divine abilities upon the mortals they favor. And on that day, they chose to favor a mere shepherd. The Muses gave Hesiod a staff of laurel to signify his new status, and literally inspired him by exhaling their "divine voice" directly into the shepherd's lungs. With the divine voice came not only the ability to sing, but the knowledge of songs themselves. And these were not short songs of love or worship. These were songs that told stories: true stories. Nor were these just brutish tales of kings and wars, but of *origins*: the genesis of man, the births of the gods, and the dawn of existence itself. Thus did Hesiod the shepherd become Hesiod the poet.

At least that is what Hesiod himself says happened. We may not take his word for it, but we should be glad that he (or one of his successors), unlike most of his poet contemporaries, took the trouble to learn how to write, and to write his poems down. His works, written some 2,700 years ago, are, along with those of Homer, the earliest surviving works of western

literature. But Hesiod's writings do not only give us a window into the superstitions of antiquity. For strikingly, in Hesiod's writings, situated as they are at the dawn of the western literary tradition, we have an artifact of ancient reason. His works evince a mind striving to work out the subtleties of natural and moral philosophy through the medium of mythology. This is especially true with his epic poem, the *Theogony*.

The *Theogony* is likely the work of poetry which made Hesiod's name. In his later poem *Works and Days*, Hesiod tells of how he won a prominent prize for poetry, and it is likely that he won by singing his *Theogony*. This performance must have been quite stunning. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod discloses the history of the cosmos, telling of the birth of each cosmic entity in its turn. He traces the passing of cosmic ages, characterizing them as a successive usurpations of divine royalty. The tale culminates in the ultimate holy order under the reign of Zeus, the final usurper, in which mankind finds itself.

2. Cosmology

A traditional synopsis of the *Theogony* might go as follows. The gods *Khaos*, *Gaia*, and *Eros* "come to be". Then *Khaos* gives birth to *Nyx* and *Erebos*, who in turn give birth to *Hemera* and *Aether*. *Gaia* gives birth to *Ouranos* and *Pontus*. *Ouranos* and *Gaia* beget the twelve titans, as well as the Cyclopes and the Hundred-Handed Giants. *Ouranos* entraps the latter two within *Gaia*. *Gaia* is enraged, and has *Khronos*, the youngest Titan, castrate his father (thereby separating earth from sky, after which he becomes master of the world. The Titans have their own children. To forestall a prophecy of his overthrow from coming true, *Khronos* devours

each of his children, except Zeus, who *Khronos's* sister-wife saves by feeding her husband a rock in swaddling clothes. When Zeus comes to maturity, he forces *Khronos* to vomit out his siblings. Zeus and his siblings then go to war with the Titans. With the aid of the Cyclopes and Hundred-handers, Zeus overthrows the Titans and entraps them in the underworld realm of Tartarus. Zeus later has a final duel with *Typhoes*.

In Hesiod's *Theogony*, as in much creation mythology, inanimate objects (like earth), forces (like love), and phenomena (like night) are presented to a large degree as acting beings: they are anthropomorphized. Thus, the story Hesiod tells might seem to be dismissed as a superhuman soap opera: an interpersonal saga, in which the characters happen to have outlandish powers. However, the *Theogony* can also be viewed in a vastly different way.

The great philosopher Aristotle, who wrote some 400 years after Hesiod wrote his *Theogony*, made a sharp distinction between two classes of thinkers: *theologi* and *physici*. The *theologi* impute the causes of phenomena to personal, mysterious gods, the knowledge of whom is only accessible through divine revelation. In stark contrast, the *physici* look to impersonal, discernible forces which can only be detected through careful observation and reasoning. The ranks of the *theologi* were supposed to be filled with poets, priests and prophets. The ranks of *physici* were populated by proper philosophers. However Aristotle made a possible exception for Hesiod. He surmised that the great poet showed his true *physicoi* colors in his cosmological formulations.

When Greek myths are translated into English, the names of the gods

are left in a transliterated version of the original Greek. Thus it can be easy to miss the fact that many (if not all) of Hesiod's gods in the *Theogony* are anthropomorphized representations of observable objects, forces, and phenomena. For example, *Gaia* is not simply the name of "the goddess of the Earth". "*Gaia*" literally means "earth" in Greek (it is the origin of our "geo-" prefixes in our words "geology" and "geography"), and *Gaia* was thought of as the earth itself. Thus, if you ignore the proper noun treatment Hesiod gives to his objects, forces, and phenomena, what at first might seem like a fairy tale of love and strife between gods begetting children and blood will seem more like an impersonal account of attraction and repulsion between natural objects begetting generation and dissolution.

So, a "naturalistic" telling of the *Theogony* might be as follows. First there was invisible air (Khaos). Then earth (*Gaia*) and attractive/generative force (*Eros*) came to be. Then out of air came a dark gas (*Erebos*) charged with its own motive energy (*Nyx*). Out of that came a bright gas (*Aether*) charged with its own motive energy (*Hemera*). A starry firmament (*Ouranos*) springs up out of the Earth, as well as salt water (*Pontus*). The firmament holds the earth down, and matter from the former is compelled by the attractive force to come down upon the latter. This process generates twelve entities, including: time (*Khronos*) and its motive force (*Rhea*), fresh water (*Okeanos*) and its motive force (*Tethys*), inquiry (*Koios*), intelligence (*Phoebe*), mortality (*Iapetus*), natural order (*Themis*), memory (*Mnesomyne*), and sight (*Theia*). The same process later generated storms (Cyclopes being the lightning and thunder and Hecatonshires being the winds), which became entrapped within the earth. Time itself brought a halt to this process. The twelve entities, as well as the motive energy of the dark

gas (*Nyx*) then engendered further entities. Some were abstract forms which would later be actualized in human affairs, such as strife, rumor, etc. Some were material beings such as rivers and mountains.

Taken thus, Hesiod's *Theogony* exemplifies many important strands in the history of thought regarding "natural history". In the *Theogony*, there is no one special creator, and no single instance of creation. Instead there is a gradual process of generation and change.

Of course for all his systematic and rational presentation, Hesiod still had his "Time" entity literally castrate his "Sky" entity with a flint sickle. His audience expected the interpersonal saga of epic poetry, and this necessitated that his cosmic powers have distinctly human characteristics.

3. History

The anthropomorphic aspects of Hesiod's cosmology are interesting in their own right as possible mythological tellings of actual events. (Herodotus and Plutarch took several myths to be as such) For example, Zeus's accession to the throne, establishing a new world order can be taken to represent mankind's shift from savagery to civilization and the state. After defeating Chronos, Zeus couples with *Themis*. Thus authority (of the state) is married to natural order, whose literal children are lawfulness (*Eunomia*), Justice (*Dike*), and Peace (*Eirene*). And through his coupling with Msemonyne, he begets the Muses (who can be thought of as the arts themselves). Thus the supposed boons of civilization and the state are born, after generations of savagery. Of course another of Zeus's children is Ares: war.

Did the accession of the state really bring these things about? Was life before the state, represented by Zeus, like the world of the earlier gods, where the only justice was revenge? In spite of Thomas Hobbes' contention that before the state, the life of man was nasty, brutish and short, there is strong evidence that that is not true. In fact, there is strong evidence that the first city-states to arise in Mesopotamia created a marked increase in violence. Was there no justice or lawfulness outside of the state? Medieval Ireland would be evidence that this was not the case. And the oral tradition represented by the Muses also pre-dated the state.

With Ouranos's shoving the cyclopes and hecatonshires into Gaia, we have an "original sin".

Another interesting "historical" event of the *Theogony* is the Prometheus "contract". Prometheus brokers a "settlement" between the gods and man. He puts before Zeus two piles of the body parts of an ox, and tricks him into choosing the one that was naught but bones and fat. Thus, was the law established that sacrifices to the gods would be burnt offerings of bones and fat, whereas the good meat was reserved for man (or at least the priests).

Zeus in revenge tried to keep the technology of fire away from mankind. Prometheus however managed to steal it away for them. This is one instance in a theme throughout world literature of the gods wanting to hold mankind back in their abilities and technology.

Then in revenge for the theft of fire, Zeus arranges for Pandora, the first woman to be created. Out of her, the "race" of women was created. This is

perhaps the earliest recorded instance of the "can't live with them, can't live without them" maxim: Hesiod says that women drive men to poverty (as man's eternal foil, a parallel with Biblical Eve), and yet without them, there will be no children to care for men in their old age.

4. Human Nature

The anthropomorphic aspects of Hesiod's gods also give the *Theogony* some interesting insights into human nature. We have male striving: an eternal quest for women and power, and a perennial resentment of the son toward the father. The nature of women according to Hesiod has already been outlined above. A further aspect of womankind is represented by Gaia and Rhea caring ultimately more for their children than for their husbands. We also have an analysis of the virtues of the *basileus* (king or magistrate). The *basileus* is said to be blessed by the Muses, and to engender justice (*dike*).

And an over-riding message is that the actions of man are impelled by qualities that are embodied in gods: Love, Strife, Jealousy, Hatred, etc. The fates of mankind are decided by Zeus's agents such as the Fates and the Furies.

5. Ethics

There are some ethical considerations for the gods themselves before the establishment of Zeus's new order discussed above. Again, *Ouranos* was the first to do "evil": perhaps it is simply unnatural for a father to entrap his children. Much less, then, is it natural for a father to eat his children as *Khronos* did. But then it is still unnatural for a son to rebel against his

father, as *Ouranos* proclaimed when he cursed his children and called them "strivers" (titans). Apparently this epithet doesn't apply to the Olympians for rebelling against their father. Perhaps this is because they were themselves victims (maybe it wouldn't have been striving for the Cyclopes and Hecatonshires themselves to revolt). Perhaps this was due to their clemency: Zeus imprisoned his father instead of castrating him, and according to Pindar and Aeschylus, later freed him.

The ethics of the *Theogony* is based mostly on the world order established by Zeus's accession, however. The will of Zeus is the decider of right and wrong. Zeus is all knowing: even Prometheus can't really get one by him (although "tricked", Zeus actually knew Prometheus's plan with the ox remains: he went along with it, and then punished Prometheus and mankind for it later). Because of his marriage with Themis, and birthing of Dike (justice), he is the lord of justice, and the one who decides what is just.

6. Epistemology: Divine Inspiration

Now that I've introduced Hesiod's teachings in his *Theogony*, let us consider the grounds upon which he establishes the truth of those teachings. Hesiod establishes his intellectual authority in the proem (introductory part of a poem) of his *Theogony*. In it he tells the tale, summarized above, of his magical initiation as a poet which occurred during an encounter with the Muses.

Assertions and arguments regarding particular topics (for example, ethics, economics, physics, etc) all rest on an **epistemology** (whether explicitly or implicitly): that is, a theory of knowledge, truth, and falsity.

Therefore, the first task of a thorough scholar is to make the case for his own epistemology." Hesiod shows himself to be a somewhat thorough scholar by at least addressing the question of epistemological credibility, if not satisfactorily answering it. In the proem of the Theogony Hesiod answers the fundamental question of "how do you know that?" with the perennial answer, "The gods told me so." Hesiod's teachings, according to the proem, rest on **divine revelation**.

In Hesiod's own words:

hai nu poth' Hêsiodon kalên edidaxan aoidên,

which is translated by Hugh Evelyn-White as

"And one day they taught Hesiod glorious song"

"Taught" is translated from "*edidaxan*", which is a tense of "*didaskô*" ("to teach"), from which the English word "didactic" is derived. What does it mean to teach someone song (*aoidên*)? One can teach the skill (*tekhne*) of singing well (tone, enunciation, etc). But this encounter was no mere singing lesson, for out of it Hesiod acquired the divine voice (*audên thespin*) of the Muses. What is this "divine voice" of the Muses?

The Muses themselves explain their power in the following:

*idmen pseudea polla legein etumoisin homoia,
idmen d', eut' ethelômen, alêthea gêrusasthai.*

or

"we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but

we know, when we will, to utter true things."

The power of the Muse is **divine persuasiveness** ("to speak many false things as though they were true") and **divine knowledge** ("to utter true things").

There are two instances of the adjective "true" in the above passage as translated by Evelyn-White, but they represent two different Greek words.

The first instance (from "false things as though they were true") is from the word "*etumoisin*", a tense of "*etumos*" which can also be translated as "real" or "actual". The second (from "to utter true things") is from the word "*alêthea*" a tense of "*alêthês*" which can also be translated as "unconcealed".

From this we can get the sense that the power of the Muses is to expound upon formerly concealed things: the mysteries of the universe.

Hesiod tells us exactly *how* the Muses they taught him song in the following:

enepneusan de moi audên
thespin, hina kleioimi ta t' essomena pro t' eonta.

or

"breathed into me a divine voice to celebrate things that shall be and things there were aforetime"

Here we see evidence of what I believe is a fundamental monist materialism in archaic Greek thought. The divine voice is not a purely psychic power: it is a material breath which can be transferred via literal exhalation of the Muse and literal inhalation of the poet. This process is

where we get our word "inspiration". Also in this passage, we get more detail as to the *kind* of mysteries that can be revealed by the inspired poet (and which Hesiod does reveal in his *Theogony*). The poet is a **prophet** ("things that shall be"); he is also a super-human **cosmologist** and **historian** who can miraculously recount events he did not himself witness, including the evolution of the entire universe and the prehistory of man ("things that were aforetime").

7. Epistemology: Deduction

Even though Hesiod pleads "for the Muses told me so" as his chief intellectual justification, a careful reader can glean attempts at non-divine inference in the *Theogony*. In fact an extremely careful reader did just that some 400 years after Hesiod: the brilliant philosopher Aristotle.

Hesiod begins his cosmic geneology by declaring that

"in truth at first *Khaos* came to be."

Khaos meant space, void, or air, which to the ancient Greek, forgiveably unfamiliar with vacuums, meant much the same thing. *Khaos* did not mean what the modern English word "chaos" means. Our word "chaos" was derived from misinterpretation (whether from carelessness or poetic licence) by later authors- especially Ovid:

"Ere land and sea and the all-covering sky were made, in the whole world the countenance of nature was the same, all one, well named Chaos, a raw and undivided mass, naught but a lifeless bulk, with warring seeds of ill-joined elements compressed together."

-Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book I

In other words, the primordial chaos, according to Ovid and later authors, is a mixed-up mass of solid, liquid, and gas: rather like a cosmic cappuccino.¹

But *Khaos* would be more appropriately translated, as Glenn W. Most did, as "chasm".

A chasm is not, strictly speaking, cracked earth, but the crack itself: the part where there is no earth. (Just as for the Chinese philosopher Laozi, the path (*tao*) was the place in the forest where there is no forest.)

Aristotle was impressed with Hesiod's placement of *Khaos* at the beginning of things.

Again, the theory that the void exists involves the existence of place: for one would define void as place bereft of body.

These considerations then would lead us to suppose that place is something distinct from bodies, and that every sensible body is in place. Hesiod too might be held to have given a correct account of it when he made chaos first. At least he says: 'First of all things came chaos to being, then broad-breasted earth,' implying that things need to have space first, because he thought, with most people, that everything is somewhere and in place. If this is its nature, the potency of place must be a marvellous thing, and take precedence of all other things. For that without which nothing else can exist, while it can exist without the others, must needs be first; for place does not pass out of existence

when the things in it are annihilated.

Aristotle, Physics, Book IV

In other words, before any thing existed there had to be a *place* for it to exist *in*.²

After *Khaos*, Earth (*Gaia*) next came to be, followed by Love (*Eros*). Aristotle was also impressed at Hesiod's placement of Love (*Eros*) near the beginning of things. In it, he recognized Hesiod as implying that "among existing things there must be from the first a cause which will move things and bring them together." (*Aristotle, Metaphysics, Book I*) In other words before any thing underwent change, there had to have been a cause or force to bring about the change. The first two entities were *Khaos* and *Gaia*. Note that Hesiod never said that *Khaos* gave birth to *Gaia*: the latter just kind of "happened". So nothing at that point had been born out of anything else yet: nothing has changed from one state to another. *Khaos* and *Gaia* might have gone on forever without creating anything unless they felt the **urge** to. This motive force, this "urge to create", had to exist first. And Hesiod called this "urge to create" "*Eros*" or "Love".

So, according to Aristotle, Hesiod may have thought that the pre-existence of "place" is a necessary implication of the existence of bodies.

And the pre-existence of "cause" or "force" is a necessary implication of the existence of change.

Aristotle called such reasoning (from the universal to the particular) a **deduction**, or **syllogism**.

"Place" is contained in the category of "Body", but not vice versa; therefore, "Place" must have preceded "Body".

"Cause" is contained in the category of "Change", but not vice versa; therefore "Cause" must have preceded "Change."

What's more, Hesiod's deduction is not merely a word game (like "All As are Bs; all Bs are Cs; therefore all As are Cs"). Rather it says something about the real world. Aristotle called a deduction that produces knowledge about reality a "**demonstration**." Aristotelean demonstrations have been the holy grail of rationalist thinkers from Parmenides to Descartes to Hans-Hermann Hoppe.

As much as I respect Hesiod as a thinker with more subtlety than classicists give him credit for, Aristotle does seem to have been a tad too generous in the deductive sophistication he is crediting to the great poet.

That is not to say that Hesiod only had divine inspiration as his epistemological foundation: for the careful reader can also glean **inductive** reasoning from Hesiod's beliefs.

8. Epistemology: Induction

As discussed above, Hesiod's *Eros* (Love) can be thought of as a motive force that brings entities to come together (much like gravity) and to create.

Khaos felt *Eros*, the urge or internal force that made it seek to give birth. And what did it first give birth to?

Erebos, or Darkness, was the first baby in the universe. You might ask

yourself, "how can darkness be "born" when darkness is just the absence of light?" But to Hesiod the materialist, Darkness was a black mist.

Erebos was born along with its own internal force, different from Love. The force that moves Darkness was *Nyx*, or Night.

Nyx was often thought of as the wife of Erebos and shown as a woman in a chariot who "wore" her husband (Darkness) like a great big cloak. When Night came to the land, riding her chariot, she would pull her husband (darkness) over the earth like a great big tent. Night brings darkness, literally. Erebos and *Nyx* then became the universe's first husband and wife, brought together by Eros.

Together, *Erebos* and *Nyx* had a son and daughter: Aether or Brightness and Hemera, or Day. Aether took after his father, in that he was a shapeless mist. But he was different in that he was a bright, glowing mist. As you can imagine, father and son had their differences. Hemera took after her mother, in that she was a chariot-driving force of nature. She felt that HER husband Aether deserved to cover the earth.

Thus began an eternal rivalry. Every morning, Day arises in the east, driving her chariot, and scattering the mists of Darkness, which she gradually replaces with the Brightness of daylight, which is pulled over the earth like a great big dome tent. As she finishes placing the Brightness of day in its proper place of glory, she completes her conquest over Darkness by driving it westward into the underworld. But her victory is temporary, for soon Night reemerges on the east in HER chariot, scattering the Brightness of daylight in revenge, and pulling her husband Darkness to reinstall him in

his rightful place. And so to Hesiod, the ongoing cycle of days and nights is really a cosmic battle between the first two married couples in the universe.

If we think of the mists of Daylight and Darkness as mindless masses, and knock Day and Night from their chariots and think of them as Aristotelean internal principles of change (forces), then Hesiod's cosmology can be seen as a perfectly respectable mechanical theory, worthy of a 6th century Milesian proto-scientist like Thales or Anaximander.

Let us assume that Hesiod and the other Greek poets who formulated this myth did not use Aristotelean demonstration to infer the above cosmic scheme. Is it then devoid of a reasoned basis? Is it pure madness, with no method? No. Almost all cosmic myths make some kind of sense in their own way, and Hesiod's is no exception. But it is the kind of sense humans more generally use in considerations of the natural world: induction.

Induction, as characterized by Aristotle, is reasoning from the particular to the universal. After a child burns his hand on a flame, he infers from that particular instance that similar *particular* flickering lights will *generally* burn his hand. He does not deduce "burned hand" from the universal category "flame". Similarly, after a careful ancient observer repeatedly notices that the moon progressively waxes, without waning, until it is full, and then wanes, without waxing, until it is new, he will confidently predict from these particular observations that the moon will always follow this process.

The "rotating mists" conception of day and night may have made sense to the ancient Greeks, because for all they knew, the canopies of the night and day skies were material bodies. They seemed to move, and they seemed

to meet each other at a threshold. In countless other particular instances of daily life, they have seen the movement of bodies be impelled by the movement of other contiguous bodies. Falling rocks strike water and make waves; waves in the ocean shove ships and capsize them. Why wouldn't the twin canopies of the sky follow the same basic pattern?

¹Ovid and the other writers may have confused *Khaos* with the primeval, undifferentiated mud of the rival theogeny attributed to Orpheus, which in turn may have been influenced by the Mesopotamian conception of the world's primal state as an undifferentiated mass:

When on high heaven was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsû, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both,
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called into being

-Enuma Elish, Babylonian poem from the 18th century BC

²Someone allegedly asked Thales (considered the first philosopher) what the biggest thing in existence is, to which he replied: "place, for it contains all things." (*Diogenes, Laertius, The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*)