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An Introduction to Hesiod's *Works and Days*

Robert C. Bartlett

Abstract: The present essay sketches the outline and the intention of Hesiod's *Works and Days*. Hesiod's principal task appears to be the identification (and praise) of the best way of life for his wayward brother Perses, but in carrying out this task, Hesiod speaks of justice and its human and divine supports in such a way as to go well beyond what would be of benefit to his brother. For in the course of his analysis of justice, or as a result of it, Hesiod praises also the life of autonomous understanding, the life that appears to be the poet's own. In crucial ways, then, Hesiod explores the chief themes of what was to become political philosophy, and for this reason, among others, he deserves the attention of all those who are also concerned with it.

> "Do you know of any tribe," he said, "more foolish than rhapsodes?"
> "No, by Zeus," Niceratus said, "I think I don't!"
> "For it's clear," Socrates said, "that they do not understand the hidden meanings [of the poems]."
> Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.6.

The most manifest purpose of Hesiod's *Works and Days* is to teach its principal addressee, the poet's lazy and rather dishonest brother Perses, both that and how he must improve his life. Hesiod's instruction includes high praise of the life of work, especially that of farming and its ancillary activities (the "works"); remarkably specific directions for carrying out many of these activities, including the auspicious times for doing so (the "days"); and, perhaps most prominent of all, repeated exhortations always to choose justice over injustice. Whether dealing with foreigners or comrades, orphaned children or aged parents, servants or kings—and, of course, brothers (328, 707; compare 371 with 184)—Perses must always take the superior path of justice (e.g., 216–17).[1] Chief among the reasons for doing so are the rewards and punishments meted out by Zeus to the just and unjust, respectively. In the end (218, 474, 669), the just always prosper, the unjust or hubristic always suffer: "There is no way to avoid the mind [*noos*] of Zeus" (105). And not only Perses' own well-being but also that of his familial line and his political community depend on his being just (consider 240–47 and 282–85). In thus answering for his brother

[1]Unless otherwise indicated, all references in the text are to verses of the *Works and Days* in the edition of M. L. West: *Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); for the *Theogony* (*Th.*), I have again used the edition prepared by M. L. West: *Theogony* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966). Translations are my own.

the fundamental human question of how best to live, which is at the same time the fundamental moral-political question, Hesiod perforce explains the consequences for human beings of the existence of gods, of the "gods who hold Olympus." Hesiod's moral-political teaching rests on a specific theological one.

This statement of the purpose of the *Works and Days* might well prompt one to conclude that the poem is, at best, a relic of so ancient and enchanted a world that it can be of serious interest only to unserious antiquarians. One might well conclude, that is, that if Hesiod's central question of how best to live retains its importance for us, his answer to it cannot. So certain, for example, is Hesiod's belief in the providential agency of the Olympian gods that it blinds him to the existence of what we know to be the natural order: in the *Works and Days*, it is the supraterrestrial god Zeus who makes it rain and the subterranean goddess Demeter who brings forth grain. Even the passage of the seasons is marked by the status of the heavenly bodies understood as living divinities: Sirius, Arcturus, Dawn (Eos), Sun (Helios). In other respects, too, the world Hesiod inhabits is a strange one. The lowliest creatures there, from the spider and the ant ("the provident one," 778–79) to the octopus ("the boneless one who gnaws his foot") and snail (the "house-carrier," 524, 571), are endowed with a significance that appears nothing less than magical, which is to say ridiculous; there birds in general (801, 828), and the crow in particular (679, 747), are means for human beings to discern the best course of action. As for the poem's moral teaching, one might well conclude that, however laudable Hesiod's praise of the just life of work may be, his moralistic hectoring of his brother soon grows tiresome.

These conclusions would be justified only if the poem's principal addressee were its sole addressee and its most manifest teaching its only serious teaching. In fact, Hesiod explicitly addresses himself in the *Works and Days* not just to Perses—whom he calls a "fool" and even a "great fool" (397, 286, 633)—but also to the Muses (1), to Zeus (9–10), and to certain "kings," both those who gulp down bribes and so pass unjust judgments (263; 38–39) and (if, indeed, they constitute a separate category) those who can "take careful note of" or "themselves understand" certain things (248–49, 202). This last formulation recalls Hesiod's statement of the tripartite division among all human beings, the importance of which for the interpretation of the *Works and Days* cannot be overstated: altogether best is he who "himself understands all things"; fine, too, is he who in turn is persuaded by (or obeys) one who speaks well; but he who neither himself understands nor takes to heart what he hears from another is altogether useless (293–97). Hesiod thus addresses himself both to those who "themselves understand" and to a "great fool"—that is, to those who fall into the first or (insofar as they require Hesiod's words) second category of men, as well as to one who might (by reading the *Works and Days*) ascend to the second but who, thus far, richly deserves his place in the third. Hesiod himself belongs in the first

category: he should like to tell "true things" or "verities" (*etētuma*, 10)[2] to Perses and does tell him good or noble things because he understands them (286); Hesiod understands nothing less than the days, which "few" know (814, 818, 820, 824), and the mind of Zeus, which is "difficult" or "vexatious" for mortal men to understand (661–62, 483–84).

To be sure, not all the truths Hesiod conveys are due to his own reflection or experience. He claims to know the mind of Zeus, for example, because the Muses, the daughters of Zeus, have taught it to him (661–62); Hesiod consistently presents himself as a devoted student and follower of the Muses. What does it mean to be a student of the Muses? As we learn from the *Theogony*, the Muses know how "to tell many lies which resemble truths" as well as "to sing true things, when [they] wish to" (*Th.* 27–28). The Muses can sing in such a way as to make the false indistinguishable from the true, and we who hear their songs wrongly believe that we are hearing only the truth when, in fact, we are hearing also (or only) falsehoods. It is unclear what might prompt the Muses to exercise so peculiar a power; the Muses go about at night veiled in thick air, that is, invisibly (*Th.* 9–10). But we may at least wonder whether this power and its proper use were among the things they taught Hesiod on the day they transformed him from shepherd into singer (*Th.* 22–34). Is Hesiod, too, able to make the false appear true, to mix his truth-telling with lies? That he might have an incentive to do so is clear enough. For what Perses can be expected to understand surely differs from what the more impressive sort of "king" understands: Hesiod draws no explicit lesson from the brief and enigmatic "tale" he addresses to "kings who themselves understand," and the exhortation he gives to Perses shortly thereafter to hearken to justice does not depend on that tale (202–11; compare 213 with 274–75, for example). Hesiod states only that he "should like" to tell the truth to Perses, not that he can do so in fact (10). And if there are truths that Perses cannot grasp, Hesiod will be compelled to substitute for them falsehoods that may pass for or take the place of truth.

The possibility that Hesiod follows his Muses in mixing lies with truths makes of the *Works and Days* a potentially much more complex and richer poem than it would otherwise be. For whether or not one takes this possibility into account, one cannot help being struck by the poem's many puzzling passages, puzzles that include self-contradictions. For example, Hesiod's revelation of the two-fold character, good and bad, of Strife (*Eris*) with which he all but begins the poem, prepares us for the contradictory presentation of several ideas central to it: work is at once a harsh punishment meant to supply grievous woes to mortals and a great boon from which all wealth and prosperity stem (compare 91 and context with, e.g., 308); envy is

[2]For helpful remarks concerning the meaning of *etētuma*, especially in its difference from *alētheia*, see Jenny Strauss Clay, *Hesiod's Cosmos* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 60–61.

both a helpful spur to better one's condition and the "ill-sounding," "horrible" companion of "all wretched human beings" that "delights in evil" (compare 23 and 312 with 195–96); and shame is both the final protection for men against evil and "not good" for "a man in need" (compare 197–201 with 317).[3] The possibility, then, that Hesiod is as much a master of deceptive song as are his "musical" teachers, permits one not merely to register the presence of the poem's many puzzles but to begin to understand them: the puzzles may be a part of Hesiod's inspired skill or his intentional design, one that goes well beyond a concern for his ne'er-do-well brother.[4] The following remarks are intended to sketch the outlines of that design.[5]

The Proem (1–10)

Hesiod begins by calling upon the Muses to sing a song of their father, Zeus, and in so doing, he attributes to "great Zeus" the general power to make mortal men famous or not famous, spoken of or not spoken of. In particular, Zeus "easily" performs three deeds or pairs of deeds: on the one hand, he makes a man mighty, on the other, he crushes one who is mighty; he brings down the conspicuous and raises up the obscure; he "straightens the crooked and withers the proud" (5–7). All three statements stress Zeus's power over mortals to make of them what he wishes. Hesiod fails to mention explicitly here either the goodness or the justice of Zeus. By what, if anything, is Zeus's exercise of his great powers governed or directed? We note to begin with that Hesiod breaks from the pattern suggested by the first two enumerated sets of powers by failing to affirm in the third that Zeus straightens the crooked and makes crooked the straight: surely it is impossible to say of Zeus that he would ever make

[3]Jacques Péron notes Hesiod's conflicting presentations of *aidōs* (shame), but he attempts to explain away that conflict by suggesting that Hesiod means by the term both "individual conscience" and "the state of mind characteristic of the indigent" ("L'analyse des notions abstraites dans les Travaux et les Jours d'Hésiode," in *Revue des Etudes Grecques* 89 [1976]: 266, 272–74). Apart from the fact that Hesiod himself failed to supply such a gloss on the term, this explanation is the less convincing the more one sees Hesiod's contradictory presentation of several key terms in the poem—and the importance of those intentional contradictions to the poem's teaching as a whole.

[4]As Jacques Péron has noted, the *Works and Days* "has an infinitely vaster meaning" than the quarrel between Hesiod and Perses might suggest: it relates not only "realities valuable to the whole of the society of the time" but also the poet's reflection on, among other things, "the existence of great laws that permanently govern human existence" ("L'analyse des notions abstraites," 265).

[5]For a helpful survey of scholarly opinions concerning the presence or absence of Hesiod's intentional design, see Richard Hamilton, *The Architecture of Hesiodic Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1989), 47–52; Hamilton himself notes "occasional hints of a grand design" (50).

crooked the straight. The chief lesson of the poem, after all, depends on the justice of Zeus or the divine support for justice. One might say, then, that justice is the standard existing prior to Zeus to which he refers and defers in his actions pertaining to human beings. And yet justice—Dikē—is the daughter of Zeus who, as such, cannot be prior to him (256); or, as Hesiod also tells us, justice is the "law" given to human beings by Zeus (276): Zeus himself determines what justice is. It is important for us eventually to discover what guides Zeus either in his actions or—if we must take the answer to this to be justice—in his prior determination of what justice is. In the proem, Hesiod speaks of what happens on account of or through the agency of Zeus (*hekēti*, 4), without, however, tracing here such acts to his mind or intellect (compare 105, 483, 661), and we know that Zeus sometimes acts out of anger (47, 53, 138). Is the "father of men and gods" (59, 173b) prone to an obstinate, unthinking rage? In accord with this possibility, Hesiod calls directly on Zeus to "hearken"—that is, to look and to listen—and to pass "straight judgments by means of justice" (9–10). Does Zeus's attention sometimes wander or his judgment sometimes falter?

The purpose of the poem as a whole remains somewhat unclear on the basis of its proem. To repeat, Hesiod calls on the Muses to sing of their father and on Zeus both to hearken and to judge (justly); Hesiod himself should like to tell the truth to Perses. Because the lesson Hesiod offers proves to be a comprehensive moral one that, as such, requires some account of the relation between human life and divine governance, the first and most obvious purpose of the next section (11–380) will be to clarify the connection between the Muses' song of their father the judge and the truths that Perses ought to hear. As for Hesiod's request of the Muses to sing (in praise) of their father, the many passages of the poem that describe Zeus presumably fulfill it. But given that the Muses are experts in deception, we must ask whether their song will be wholly truthful; truth-telling belongs here to Hesiod, praise to the Muses. Indeed, Hesiod first asks them to "tell" or "speak of" (*ennepete*, 2) their father, and what one tells need not be true or "straight," as the only other appearances of this verb in the poem suggest: a bad man, like an unjust king, may "tell" or "speak of" things that are "crooked" (194, 262). That the Muses are to tell of Zeus by means of a song of praise (*hymneiousai*, 2) hardly settles the matter. The proem as a whole, then, prompts us to expect the next section also to explore the delicate question of whether the Muses's portrait of Zeus, and in particular that of his perfect justice, is true.

The Political-Theological Foundation (11–380)

Introduction: 11–46

We learn now of the immediate occasion or cause of the *Works and Days*. Perses has cheated Hesiod out of a portion of his agreed-upon inheritance

by bribing certain "kings," and Hesiod means both to warn his brother that he will not be able to act in this way again and to encourage him to settle their dispute by means of "straight judgments," which are "best from Zeus" (34–41; also 396–97). The rehabilitation of Perses depends on his taking to heart (27, 297), if not also on his understanding (12), a theological truth that had been concealed in the *Theogony* but that the poet now reveals, presumably in his desire to tell the truth[6]: there is not only bad Strife in the world that leads to "terrible war and battle" (14), but also another, prior one that the son of Kronos settled in the roots of the earth, very much to the benefit of men (compare *Th.* 225–26 and context). For it is this good Strife that prompts us to work, out of envy of our neighbor's wealth, and Perses must now earn rather than steal his living. (The brothers' inheritance may have been quite small: consider 633–40). Perses, then, ought to embrace the good Strife that will prompt him to enrich himself by working and shun the Strife that "delights in evil," in the grip of which he now is; hence, his cheating, his laziness, and his proclivity to watch and listen to quarrels in the marketplace (29). Yet how hopeful can we be that anything, let alone the *Works and Days*, will effect this rehabilitation? For even apart from Perses' own limitations, Hesiod tells us that "under the press of necessity, through the wishes of the immortals, [mortals] honor burdensome Strife" (15–16): can any mortal overcome the necessity constituted by the wishes of the gods and so fail or refuse to honor the evil Strife? Are not wars and battles, quarrels and disputes, a permanent feature of human life? If this is so, then Hesiod cannot seriously hope to bring about much of a change in Perses. Just as the poem's principal addressee is not its only addressee, so the poem's most immediate purpose is not its only, or most serious, one.

That Hesiod is after bigger game becomes apparent gradually. In order to prompt Perses to accept not only the necessity but also the goodness of work, Hesiod does not rest content with the promise of future riches. Rather, he turns eventually to explain, and at considerable length, its justice: the goodness of the life of work rests ultimately on its justice, and its justice rests apparently on the fact that the gods in general (42) and Zeus in particular (47) forced us to work when they hid away our sustenance (*bios*). This appeal to justice suggests that Perses is not altogether deaf to justice, to

[6]Consider M. L. West, "Commentary," *ad loc.* in *Works and Days* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978): "Hesiod has the genealogical background of the *Theogony* in mind." So also Hamilton, *Architecture*: "The *Works and Days* explicitly alludes to the *Theogony* in its reference to the (incorrect) doctrine that there is only one Eris . . ." (52). As Seth Benardete notes, "The *Works and Days* begins with an admission of a mistake; he now realizes that the goddess Strife is not merely the mother of Bloodshed and Lies but also of rivalry and competition without which there would be no progress in the arts" ("The First Crisis in First Philosophy," in *The Argument of the Action* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000], 4).

moral concerns. At the same time, Hesiod cannot assume that Perses is certain of the goodness of justice itself; to convince Perses of the justice of a life of work may be to convince him (to say nothing of other readers) of the wisdom of fleeing it! Accordingly, Hesiod's argument that the life of work is good because it is just (27–212) broadens and deepens to become an argument that justice, justice simply, is good, injustice bad (213–98). The poem would not be as searching as it is if its nominal addressee had never been tempted by injustice. Thus, Hesiod takes the opportunity afforded by his brother's crookedness to give a comprehensive account of the goodness of justice, one that depends ultimately on the justice of the gods. The *Works and Days* is Hesiod's *Theodicy.*

The Theological-Political Case for the Justice of Work: 47–212

There was a time when human beings were, if not altogether free of work, then able to accrue in a day enough sustenance to last for a year. But as we learn from Hesiod's complementary accounts, in the *Theogony* and *Works and Days*, of the episode that proved so fateful to mortals, the ease with which we sustained ourselves ended when wily Prometheus first "utterly deceived" Zeus. Prometheus once offered Zeus the choice of mere bones covered in rich fat or the choicest cuts of meat concealed beneath a stomach; by choosing what he thought best for himself, as Prometheus knew he would, Zeus inadvertently left the better share for mortals (*Th.* 521–61). It was at this point, according to the *Theogony*, that Zeus hid fire from human beings (*Th.* 562–64) and compelled Prometheus to endure having an eagle peck away at his ever-regenerating liver (*Th.* 521–34). But here, in the *Works and Days*, Hesiod omits all mention of this latter punishment; here it appears as though Zeus punished Prometheus solely by punishing his beloved human beings: on account of Prometheus' deed, Zeus "contrived grievous sufferings for human beings" (49). Yet Prometheus would not be deterred: "for human beings," the "noble son of Iapetus" stole fire back again (50–52). Prometheus, as distinguished from Zeus, acts consistently for the benefit of human beings (51, 88). In return for fire—which he does not bother to remove again—Zeus promises "great woe for you yourself and for men to come" (56–57) in the form of Pandora[7] and the jar from which she scattered troubles over the world. More unambiguous than the first punishment of Prometheus, this one consists entirely in the punishment of mortals. What is worse, the promise of the suffering of men that so pains Prometheus is a source of delight to the "father of men and gods": Zeus laughs at the prospect (59).

[7]For a comprehensive overview of the reception of the Pandora myth, see Immanuel Musäus, *Der Pandoramythos bei Hesiod und seine Rezeption bis Erasmus von Rotterdam* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

Hesiod attempts to explain the necessity of work to his lazy brother by explaining that it is our punishment as handed down by Zeus himself: work is, indeed, a punishment, a hardship, but it is in accord with the wishes of Zeus. To establish the necessity of work, however, is not yet to establish its justice. And although Hesiod had mentioned the just judgments of Zeus immediately before turning to the story of Prometheus (36), in the present context he never calls Zeus's actions just; Dikē is not among the immortals whom Zeus will order to create Pandora. As Hesiod presents it, the work imposed on us is but a means to punish Prometheus for his philanthropic deeds, which, it should be said, he undertook unbidden by human beings. The actions of Zeus in regard to human beings are either calculatingly cruel or capricious. Here as in the proem, Zeus's power is more in evidence than his justice.

In the immediate sequel, Hesiod gives us reason to wonder about even the power of Zeus. For when one compares Zeus's detailed instructions to four gods (Hephaestus, Athena, Aphrodite, and Hermes), concerning the construction and adornment of Pandora and the manner in which these are to be carried out, one is struck by the liberties the gods take. Aphrodite, for example, plays no part at all in the adornment but is replaced by the Graces, Persuasion, and the Seasons (compare 65–66 with 73–75; that a being unacquainted with the "works of Aphrodite" may be very desirable appears from 521 and context); Hephaestus fails to instill either the voice (*audēn*, 61) or strength of a human being in Pandora; and Hermes, who does bestow on her a certain voice (*phōnēn*, 79), also replaces the "dog's mind and a thievish character" desired by Zeus with "lies, wily speeches, and a thievish character" (compare 67 with 78): dogs may speak, but they do not make speeches, and Hermes thus equips Pandora with a potent tool to wheedle and seduce. Most striking, perhaps, is the name that Hermes gives the woman they have created: he calls her "Pandora" because "all [*pantes*] who have their dwellings on Olympus" gave her a gift (*dōron*). Pandora's very name, then, reminds us that all the Olympians took it upon themselves to do what Zeus had instructed only four of them to do! The discrepancy between Zeus's commands and the execution of them suggests that the world is of defective orderliness or that chaos may, indeed, be its first and decisive principle (*Th.* 116). And since the gods' deviation from the letter of Zeus's instructions has the effect of making Pandora a still more alluring "snare" or "trap" (83) than she might otherwise have been, that deviation does not tend in the direction of philanthropy. The beginning of the Prometheus-Pandora story compels us to question first the justice and subsequently even the power of Zeus in his dealings with human beings. Is the being in charge of the human world truly just? Indeed, is there any being "in charge" at all?

The story of Prometheus and Pandora is relevant to Hesiod's primary task ostensibly because it explains why we were and are condemned to work for our sustenance. It is surprising, then, that Hesiod mentions work only once in this context (91) and speaks at greater length of illnesses and of hope

(92, 102–4; 96–99). In fact, the story of Pandora is best known for its presentation of Hope (*elpis*), the precise meaning of which has puzzled commentators from antiquity.[8] Hope is included in Pandora's jar of evils, but in what sense is it one of them? Furthermore, since human beings do hope, how can Hesiod say that it did not fly out but remains enclosed in an "unbreakable" vessel?[9]

The account of the punishment of Prometheus in the *Theogony* (507–616) stresses rather more than its counterpart in the *Works and Days* that Pandora represents woman (see especially *Th.* 590–603). Putting the two accounts together, we conclude that womankind brings to mortals (especially to mortal men, 56, 82, 92) a certain hope. We are keenly aware of this hope but can never see it realized. Hope almost flew out of the jar and is now just under its lip; hope is as close as possible to being among us without, in fact, being so. One might, perhaps, say that we now have hope regarding hope, a condition brought about by Pandora. More adequately stated, the hopeful characteristic of mortals is caused by the sight of "Pandora's" great beauty (62–63, 71–76), which arouses in us "vexatious longing" (66), and by her capacity for speech. (Epimetheus' perception of her beauty as beauty must be bound up with giving and receiving a *logos*, with reflection on or speech about the promise of beauty, for a being without *logos*—a dog, say—could experience attraction but not attraction to beauty.) This love or longing, aroused by beauty properly speaking, constitutes the hopefulness that mortals most certainly do experience. But what is the object of that longing or hope? As we are told in this context, Zeus's punishment of us included "grievous illnesses that brought doom [death, *kēras*] to men" (92; compare *Th.* 211). The hope in question is bound up with our mortality: Pandora's beauty, modeled on that of "immortal goddesses" (62) and adorned by all the immortals, fills us with the hope that we may overcome our "doom." The voicelessness that Zeus contrived in illnesses (102–4), which permits them to come upon us day and night "in silence," hence without forewarning, conspires with the voice given to Pandora, for each in its own way encourages us to believe that we might avoid our doom.

As for the specific harm (*kakon*) that Zeus has in mind for us, he tells Prometheus that it will consist in our embracing with love (*amphagapontes*) the very being in whom our spirit delights (58); Pandora is a *kalon kakon* (*Th.* 585). This embrace is a punishment because it arouses a hope that will not and cannot be fulfilled: the hope we mortals have is an "empty" or "vain" one (consider 498 and 500, the only other appearances of the noun in Hesiod's extant writings). The hope that is not empty or could be fulfilled remains locked away in an "unbreakable" jar. To speak literally rather than

[8]See West, "Commentary," *ad loc.*

[9]As West puts it, "How is it that they [the ills] are among men because they came out [of the jar], while Hope is among men because it was kept in?" ("Commentary," *ad loc.*). See also Strauss Clay, *Hesiod's Cosmos*, 102–3.

metaphorically: love fills us with the hope that we may conquer the doom or death to which we are born as human beings (*kēritrepheōn anthrōpōn*: 418), but it fails to fulfill that hope. The *Works and Days* thus contains a two-fold teaching concerning women. One conveys directly much hard-nosed practical advice concerning one's wife (373–75, 405–6, 695–705).[10] The other teaching suggests indirectly the deceptiveness of the hope we glimpse in and through the beauty of Pandora and so does what it can to work against our succumbing to that hope, despite the intention of Zeus. Yet, in just this respect, we must not succumb to vain hope, for Hesiod concludes the Prometheus-Pandora story by asserting that "there is no way to avoid the mind of Zeus" (105). It is the lot of mortals, then, always to hope that we might conquer our mortality and so live forever, like gods—and always to be disappointed in that hope.

That we did, in fact, once live "like gods" (112) is among the more startling revelations contained in Hesiod's account of the five ages of man, which follows immediately (106–201). Indeed, this account contains several surprises or puzzles. For example, Hesiod begins by offering a *logos* to explain, "well and knowledgeably," how or that "gods and mortal human beings have come into being from the same source [*homothen*]" (106–8). But, of what relevance is this to the argument Perses needs to hear concerning the necessity of work? It is not enough to say that Hesiod means merely that gods and men "started on the same terms" (West, "Commentary," *ad loc.*) and that he tells the story of our decline—from beings who once had a spirit free of cares, removed from toil and misery (111–12), to the sorry creatures we now are—in order to teach Perses (and us) how dire our circumstances truly are. For even apart from the fact that the account of the five ages of man is not simply one of decline—the fourth race is superior to the third (158), and Hesiod anticipates an improvement in the sixth age to come (175)—Hesiod speaks explicitly of the shared origin of men and gods.[11] Nonetheless, Hesiod makes clear that (the Olympian) gods and mortals arose from different sources: the Olympian gods "made" the first race of mortal human beings, the golden race (109–10), but Earth and Heaven brought the Olympian gods into being (*Th.* 43–47 and context). How, then,

[10]We may note in this context that, according to the poem's final section, there are two days on which it is inauspicious for girls to be born but none for boys (782–84, 785–86); and there are four or five auspicious birthdays for boys but only two for girls (783, 788–89, 794–95, 812–13, together with 792–93; compare 794–95 and 812–13).

[11]At a minimum, one must agree with Verdenius that it is "far from clear" that *homothen* means no more than that gods and men "started on the same terms": W.J. Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod: Works and Days, vv.* 1-382 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985, *ad loc.*). David Grene (in Stephanie A. Nelson, *God and the Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil* [New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998] *ad loc.*) renders the line as follows: "how the gods and mortal men spring from the same beginnings."

can Hesiod claim for both a common origin? To answer this, it is best to read the account of the five ages of man by focusing especially on how mortals came into being: each of the successive stages contributes something to the creation of the being that we of the fifth race, at least, understand by the name "human being."

The golden race of mortals must have lived prior to the creation of Pandora, for Kronos still ruled the heavens then, and they lived apart from "all evils," including, therefore, illness. Hesiod immediately thinks in this context of death: the race in question was, after all, mortal, however much they may have lived "like gods," and they were without the (false) hope concerning their end that "Pandora" seems to supply. How, then, did the golden race face their death or grapple with their mortality? It seems that they did not: "They died as though having been overcome by sleep" (116). That is, the golden race died a painless death that overtook them unawares, a death presaged neither by illness nor even by aging, for they lived "ever alike in feet and hands" (114). The god-like character of these mortals consisted not, of course, in their freedom from death but in their obliviousness to it; they were as unconcerned with death as truly deathless ones would be. Such needs or longings as these creatures had—only those of the belly are suggested—they satisfied easily while at rest: the rich land brought forth its plentiful harvest spontaneously or of its own accord (*automatē*). The agency of Demeter is not mentioned here, and though these mortals were "dear to blessed gods" (120), they are not said to have worshiped or sacrificed to them. The easy satisfaction of extremely limited needs and a gentle, unforeseen death combine to make such worship unnecessary, not to say unthinkable.

The earth "hid" or "covered over" the golden race of mortals, presumably because there could have been only one generation of them that had to perish in due course: if no women were present, no procreation was possible, and had they seen some of their fellows fail to wake from sleep, they would have eventually gained awareness of their own mortality. When the golden mortals did awaken from their final sleep, so to speak, they found themselves on the earth still (123) but transformed, through the wishes of "great Zeus," into *daimones*, guardians of mortal human beings and bringers of wealth (122–26)—presumably to subsequent races, including perhaps our own (consider 254–55 and context). To be mortal here means to undergo a change in the manner of one's existence rather than to cease to be altogether. And with the introduction of Zeus, Hesiod glosses over without comment Zeus's violent overthrow of his father Kronos (*Th.* 71–73, 390–96, 453–506). It is undeniable, however, that the passing of the golden age coincides with the ascension of Zeus.

The second, "much worse" race of silver, also created by the Olympians, differed from its predecessor in both stature and intellect (129). (It is not necessarily the case, however, that the difference in stature or intellect constituted the decline in question.) In sharp contrast to the golden race,

which was "ever alike" in feet and hands and so knew neither infancy nor senescence, those of the silver race lived in childhood for one hundred years alongside their "caring mother": there are now mothers and, hence, women in the world, just as there are now households (130–31); the Olympians "made" the first silver generation, but procreation was responsible for the subsequent ones. Pandora, if not yet all her ills, must have been in the world. Although the childhood of the silver race seems as carefree as the whole of the lives lived in the golden age—each in the silver race played at home for a century, a "great fool"—the members of the silver race also reached maturity and then experienced, as a result of their foolishness, pains or sufferings for the short time they were to live. They were unable to keep one another from "wanton hubris," and they were unwilling to serve the immortals or to worship at their sacred altars. Among the sufferings of this race must have been the necessity of work, for the world was now one of scarcity. Parents would have had to provide for their children for a century, and though the earth evidently no longer gave spontaneously of its rich bounty, they did not worship the gods, not even Demeter. Their refusal to worship is connected, perhaps, with Hesiod's silence here concerning both illness and old age; those of the silver race appear to have died in the course of their brief maturity, i.e., in the midst of their vigor (132–33). Lacking the easy contentment of the golden mortals, the silver race might well have been prompted to plead with the gods for aid and so to worship them. But being, at most, only slightly more aware of death than the golden race—would even century-old children understand fully the death of their parents?—they did not grasp their condition.[12]

Knowing what we now do of Zeus, we cannot be surprised that he hid away this race because he was angry, not at what their hubris led them to do to one another, but at what it led them to fail to do for the gods: they failed to honor them (compare 138–39 with 134–36). Yet this second race, too, is honored; they are called "blessed mortals" and live below the earth. These mortals, too, die, but they do not thereby cease to be.

[12]Jean-Pierre Vernant, too, brings out the presence or absence of old age and of an awareness of death in the successive ages ("Le Mythe hésiodique des races," in *Mythe et Pensée chez le Grecs* [Paris: François Maspero, 1966, 41–42). The chief difference in our respective approaches appears from the following remark especially: "Pourquoi Dikē occupe-t-elle dans les préoccupations d'Hésiode et dans son univers religieux cette place centrale? ... La réponse ne relève plus de l'analyse structurale du mythe, mais d'une recherche historique visant à dégager les problèmes nouveaux que les transformations de la vie sociale, vers le VIIe siècle, ont posés au petite agriculteur béotien ..." (44). As will become evident, I cannot agree that Dikē finally occupies a central place in the poem, just as I cannot agree that Hesiod was finally much concerned with the problems of small-time Boeotian farmers.

Zeus then created his first race of mortals, the bronze race, made of ash-trees. Although Zeus had removed fire from the wood of which they are made (*Th.* 563), nonetheless, they must have had fire in order to work their bronze—they are the first mortals said to work (151; compare *erga* at 119 and West, "Commentary," *ad loc.*)—and so must have profited from Prometheus's theft. Zeus surely sought to create them such that they would be free of the defect that so greatly angered him before, and in a manner they were. For rather than refuse to worship any god as a result of their hubris, they instead paid heed to one god known especially for his hubristic deeds (145–46): they were practiced in the works of Ares. Terrible and violent, with a mighty, adamantine spirit, they ate no grain—hence they were not dependent on Demeter—but presumably ate what they killed. They killed one another in great numbers; if they also ate one another, then there was no justice among them (consider 276–80). Yet Zeus is not said to have been displeased with this race, and they perished not through his action but their own. Is such a race adequate from Zeus's point of view? There are several respects in which the bronze race is the most human one thus far: they were the first whom "black death" is said to have seized; they knew of death directly, for they were the first to bring it about with their very own hands (152), rather than succumbing to it unawares by means of sleep or silent illness; and they were the first to enter the dank abode of chill Hades, the place that now awaits all mortals. An afterlife, that is, a continued existence, was (and is) in store but it was (and is) the least attractive of the afterlives thus far described. Whatever their defects, the beings of the Bronze Age had the greatest awareness of *the* truth for mortal human beings.

Perhaps because there were no mortals left to honor the gods, Zeus created the fourth race of mortals and the second for which he bore responsibility, that of the "hero-men," who are called "demigods" (157–59). Their partial divinity would seem to consist, not, of course, in immortality, but in their justice: they were "more just and better" than the bronze race. Their justice is connected with the fact that, although both the silver and bronze races lived in households (131, 150), only the heroes are identified as having lived in cities; justice comes into its own in the *polis*, in the political community. Those who fought over the flocks of Oedipus below seven-gated Thebes—an allusion, perhaps, to the civil war of Eteocles and Polyneices (West, "Commentary," *ad loc.*)—and those who fought over fair-haired Helen in Troy perished in war for political reasons and not because of mere "wanton hubris," to say nothing of the needs of the belly. Like those beings of the golden age, the heroes enjoyed the plentiful bounty of the land (compare 172 with 117–19), but unlike them they were not contented; and, like those beings of the Bronze Age, they fought and died violently. Unlike them, however, they did so for the well-being of their communities or for what might be called a "moral cause." In accord with the greater justice of this race, they know a far better afterlife than did their immediate

predecessors, for Zeus provided some of them with sustenance and abodes at the ends of the earth, where they dwell with carefree spirits—again like the golden race (compare 170 with 112)—on the isles of the blessed alongside Oceanus. Among the benefits they enjoy is the kingship of Kronos and living "far from the immortals," that is, from the other immortals.[13] Hesiod thus indicates clearly the defective character of the reign of Zeus in the fifth and present age.

The afterlife of each of the four races appears to correspond perfectly with its merits: from a continued life on the earth, to one below it, to dwelling in dank Hades, to an existence on the isles of the blessed. There is only one difficulty. Hesiod states explicitly that Zeus settled only some of the heroes on these isles (167–72); other heroes, whose justice and goodness we have no reason to doubt, were simply "covered over" or "engulfed" by the "end [*telos*] of death" (166). About their condition, Hesiod is perfectly silent. Hesiod hints for the first time at the possibility that the mortality of mortals does not mean merely a change of place in which to live but the end of life altogether. Did the superhuman heroism of the demigods consist, above all, in their willingness to face death for a "cause," uncertain whether a blessed existence or annihilation awaited them?

When Hesiod turns finally to describe the fifth and present age, the Iron Age, he does so by devoting almost all his remarks to predicting the cause of its future demise at the hands of Zeus. Zeus will destroy us when we are born "gray at the temples," when, as a result, justice is replaced by the "justice" of the stronger, and when bonds of family, society, and city accordingly break down (181–201). There are and will be cities and hence also awareness of justice (together with injustice); the present age in its decline will bear a slight resemblance to its heroic predecessor. We will be distinguished from all our ancestors chiefly because we will be born "gray at the temples": whereas the golden race never aged and the silver race remained children for a century before dying in the midst of their brief maturity, we will be born old and hence always near to death. The increasing awareness of our mortality, which the five-fold chronicle of man tracks, can lead to a knowledge of our finitude that is enervating or debilitating. We will be constantly reminded, by the aged whom we contemn (185–89), of mortality. As Hesiod presents it, this omnipresence of mortality, so to speak, results in the triumph of injustice and the ignorant disregard of the gods' vengeance (*opin*, 187 and context). Those who are consumed by the knowledge that they were born to die cease to restrain themselves for the sake of either the rewards or the punishments awaiting them in the next life; to judge at least by their actions, they believe that the fate of some of the heroes will be the fate of all mortals or that there is no afterlife. Recalling the chief theme of

[13]Oceanus is, perhaps, not to be understood as an immortal Olympian. This might seem to be contradicted by *Th.* 21 and context, but note there that the Olympian gods are set apart from the cosmic or natural "gods": compare *Th.* 11–18 with 19–20.

the Pandora story, we suggest that the awareness of our mortality, when combined with the hope of enjoying a continued existence elsewhere, leads to the worship of and sacrifice to gods. When that hope falters, when it is too frequently and manifestly disappointed by the world, we run the risk of being overwhelmed by the awareness of our mortality and so of abandoning pious observance together with the justice that depends on it.

Hesiod's account of the generation of mortals, an anthropogeny that complements his theogony, is an account of the roots of pious worship. These roots include what might be called "economic scarcity," the increasing awareness of and reflection on individual mortality, the concern for justice, and the rise of political life. But Hesiod had presented this account in order to explain the common origin of gods and mortals. One might say that Hesiod points instead to the origin of all gods in the opinions of human beings; he even notes in this context that worshiping at the sacred altars of the blessed ones is "lawful" or "righteous" (*themis*) for human beings, for human beings as such, "according to their customs."[14] What and how human beings worship changes from place to place because these are dependent on custom, that is, on opinion, but it is the opinion of all human beings that the worship of immortal beings is morally obligatory. (The universality of this calls the humanity of the golden race further into question.) At a minimum, Hesiod's promise to tell us of the common origin of gods and mortals forces us to puzzle over the question of the origins of gods and men and alerts us to his treatment of it throughout his corpus. In this regard, we note that, just as Hesiod has already said that it is earth which "hides" or "covers" us when we die (121, 140, 156), so he later calls earth "mother of *all* things" (563, emphasis added). In the *Theogony,* it is earth that gives birth to the Olympian gods: neither (the Olympian) gods nor mortals are the first things simply, that is, the fundamental causes, and the birth of both Olympian gods and mortals can be understood solely in terms of "earth," in terms of "this" world.

Hesiod turns abruptly to tell a "tale" or "fable" to "kings who themselves understand." A mighty hawk speaks in a lordly or domineering way to the nightingale that it clutches in its sharp talons:

> Wondrous Creature [*daimoniē*], why are you crying out? One who is much superior now holds you.
> You go wherever I lead, singer though you are.
> And if I wish to, I will make a dinner of you or let you go.
> But foolish is he who wishes to contend against the stronger;
> he is deprived of victory and, in addition to the shame, suffers pains besides. (207–11)

The hawk attempts to "teach" the nightingale the superiority of strength to song or to whatever claim to merit the nightingale might adduce by means of

[14]See Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod, ad loc.*

its song. If it is true that the hawk represents kings and the nightingale Hesiod the "singer," as commentators generally agree, then the point of merit claimed by Hesiod is surely his knowledge of the truth (10; 293–94); the fable that Hesiod tells concerns the conflict between political power and the wisdom specific to poetry. But what does Hesiod expect the kings to infer from this tale told specifically to them?

First, by including this episode in his song, which is told from the point of view of the hawk and offers no rebuttal from the nightingale, Hesiod acknowledges to the kings their greater strength; he is fully aware of what the hawk has to say. Hesiod does not deny—no one can deny—that the hawk is capable of making good on his boasts. We have, of course, already seen evidence of the vulnerability of the singer in the conflict between Hesiod and crooked Perses, who has had his way not because he is one of the kings but because he has bribed those who are kings. The fraternal conflict is but a lesser example of the conflict now at issue between hawk and nightingale, king and poet. This conflict ultimately concerns not so much power as the status of justice: why be just? Why should the strong not make a meal of the weak, beginning with the singer? Hesiod does supply, after all, some incentive for the kings to do so, inasmuch as he will sharply rebuke the bribe-swallowing ones and exhort them to change their ways. If the nightingale remains silent, Hesiod does not. But Hesiod's full response to the question of why one should be just, or his defense of justice, proves to be complex. He proceeds gradually, addressing himself explicitly at times to Perses, at times to the kings. By understanding each of these elements in his response, the differences between them, and the necessity dictating their use, one understands the core of the poem.

The Theological-Political Case Against Injustice and in Favor of Justice: 213–298

Hesiod begins by addressing Perses directly—"O Perses!" (213)—and he exhorts his brother to hearken to justice and to shun hubris. The arguments that follow fall into three parts: the badness of injustice and hubris (213–24); the goodness of justice (225–37); and the badness of injustice and hubris (238–47). The case against injustice thus receives greater emphasis than does the case in favor of justice. The foundation of his argument is emphatically theological—the divine beings Atē (Ruin), Horkos (Oath), and Dikē (Justice) will punish the unjust—but he turns immediately to political considerations: there is an uproar whenever bribe-swallowing men drag Dikē about by passing unjust judgments, and she follows to the city and abodes of the people as she cries out, bringing evil to those who drive her out and do not deal in a straight manner (220–24). Hesiod goes so far as to say, when he returns to the case against injustice, that often even an entire city will perish on account of the transgressions and wanton actions of a single

bad man (240–41). In contrast, then, to the God of Abraham, Olympian Zeus (245) will destroy an entire city in order to punish one unjust man. Whereas the prophet Abraham referred and deferred to a standard of justice evidently independent of revelation or of God's will, a standard to which God Himself deferred in the end and so apparently altered His will, Zeus does not balk at the destruction of innocents, women and children included (243–45; Genesis 18:23–32). In addition, we note that although Hesiod begins by painting a vivid picture of the destruction of the unjust themselves, he concludes by suggesting that the unjust will also ruin families and cities; in this way, he appeals to Perses' (surely latent) concern for the well-being of others.

Justice, by contrast, promises all good things, political as well as theological, not only for the just but for the entire community: the city of the just will thrive, and the people in it will flourish, Eirēnē (Peace) will be there, Limos (Famine) and Atē (Ruin) will not, sustenance (*bios*) will be plentiful, women will bear thriving children who resemble their parents, and the land will be so bountiful that no one will need to travel on ships. Hesiod seems to suggest that we would be free of the necessity to work, to which we are now condemned by Zeus, if only our city in its entirety were just. Indeed, the practice of justice promises a return to the golden age (compare 231 with 119 and 237 with 117) or to the pre-Pandoran epoch, and, perhaps, to something even better: whereas mortals would have had to sail, albeit briefly, even if the gods had not hidden our *bios*, the just will apparently never have to sail (compare 45 with 236–37). As Hesiod presents it, justice is the necessary and sufficient condition for human happiness, for the happiness of the just themselves and that of the community as a whole.

Hesiod now calls on the kings—"O Kings!" (248)—and exhorts them to "take careful note of" (*kataphradzesthe*) "this" justice, in imitation, perhaps, of the immortals, who take note of (*phradzontai*) the unjust. (The human kings may pay closer attention to human things than do the immortals, near to humans though the immortals are.) Yet, as we see at the end of this section, the arguments constituting it (248–73) are addressed also to Perses: "O Perses, you take these things to heart" (274). What first appears to be Hesiod's lesson to the kings, then, proves to be instead a lesson to be conveyed to Perses. We suggest that Hesiod here presents to the kings the kind of argument they must make to Perses, to men of his ilk; it is largely an object lesson in political speech. In it Hesiod not only repeats several of the aforementioned theological-political arguments against injustice but does so in terms even more striking or exaggerated. We learn now of the 30,000 ("thrice myriad") immortal and invisible guardians of Zeus that watch over, and threaten, mortals everywhere; we meet again Dikē, now identified as the virgin daughter of Zeus, who gains her father's attention whenever any human being conceives of any unjust intention; and—in what constitutes a transition to another direct call upon the kings—we are

again warned that it is the people (*dēmos*) who will pay for the wantonness of kings.[15]

After thus addressing the kings again, however, Hesiod makes a brief assertion of a different sort (263): the man who harms another harms himself as well, and an evil or bad plan is worst for the planner himself (265–66). Hesiod's arguments to this point, in addition to having depended entirely on the intervention of the gods, have looked to a combination of the good of the just and the good of others; the present argument looks solely to the good of the just: it is bad to harm another because in doing so you will harm yourself. One might well object that such an argument is purely selfish and thus, properly speaking, falls beneath the level of moral argument. But for those who take their bearings chiefly by their own good, such an argument is essential. It must be said that Hesiod is among those who do so, whatever may be true of kings or Perses:

> Now I myself would indeed not be just among human beings,
> Nor would a son of mine be—since it is bad for a man to be just,
> If the more unjust one will attain a greater right [*dikēn*]. (270–72)

What guides Hesiod in his own life is his concern to attain the greater share of right, on the ground that right is best for himself; if injustice were to become better for him than justice, he admits or insists that he would practice injustice. The good, one might say, is a standard higher than the just. To be sure, Hesiod's conception of the proper path includes concern for the well-being of his son, to whom he would recommend injustice in the circumstance outlined. But this should not obscure Hesiod's admission of what it is that principally concerns him.

To return for a moment to Hesiod's fable, we note that the nightingale cries out but does not condemn the hawk; the hawk is not an evil or unjust hawk for doing what it does. It is, after all, the law of Zeus that there is no justice among animals, as is evidenced by their eating one another (276–78). The relation between hawk and nightingale is nonmoral or extramoral. One might then expect Hesiod's argument in favor of justice also to be extramoral, especially when he addresses kings—that is, to defend justice strictly in terms of one's own good or in selfish terms: justice profits the just. Indeed, this is precisely the criticism that Adeimantus levels against "well-born Hesiod" in Plato's *Republic*. The poet does not praise justice for its own sake but for the sake of the many good things that the gods give the just as a reward (*Rep.* 363a5–b4,

[15]Seth Benardete suggests taking this phrase, on the model of Homer, φ 235, to mean "pay back the kings' wickedness (with wickedness.)" ("Hesiod's *Works and Days*: A First Reading," *Agon* [1967]: 172 n. 15). But neither Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod, ad loc.*; West, "Commentary," *ad loc.*; nor Grene, *Works and Days, ad loc.* takes the phrase in this way, and the more obvious reading is fully in accord with 240 and context.

citing *Works and Days* 232–34). Adeimantus wishes to know that the practice of unrewarded justice is, nevertheless, choiceworthy. It must be said that Hesiod does not fulfill this wish. To the contrary, Hesiod goes so far as to admit, as we have seen, that if Zeus were ever to cease to reward the practice of justice, he himself would not be just. At the same time, however, Hesiod's account is not simply utilitarian or calculating, for it contains elements that surely deserve to be called moral: the unjust must consider that they will bring about the ruin of whole cities. And this appeal is only to be expected, for even the hawk shows himself to be concerned with a quasi-moral consideration: the nightingale should submit to superior strength in part because failing to do so will subject it to shame (211). To judge at least by the arguments addressed to them, neither Perses nor, perhaps, even the kings are simply beyond moral concerns and hence beyond the reach of moral argument. Hesiod alone comes closest to this; he presents himself as being more devoted to justice than they because he knows better than they how profitable it is.

In what sense, then, is justice profitable for the just themselves and injustice harmful to the unjust? After considering the possibility that "it is bad for a man to be just / If the more unjust one will attain a greater right," Hesiod observes: "But I expect that counselor Zeus will not yet bring these things to fulfillment."[16] Again (267–69):

> The eye of Zeus, seeing all things and understanding all things,
> Even now beholds these things, if he wishes to, and it does not escape him
> What sort of thing this justice is that the city keeps within.

The badness of injustice (or the goodness of justice) depends *entirely* on Zeus: one cannot speak of the inherent goodness of justice apart from its rewards or punishments. Nevertheless, the message of the poem thus far is that Zeus is neither perfectly just nor all-powerful nor particularly philanthropic. In the present context, too, Hesiod hesitates, as he must: Zeus sees and understands all—"*if* he wishes" to do so (273, emphasis added). If there are times when Zeus is unwilling to behold the affairs of mortals, is it then sensible to be just, according to Hesiod?

That Hesiod himself does not finally take his bearings by justice becomes explicit in the following verses (274–380), the climax of both this section and the poem as a whole. Here the poet offers to tell Perses the "fine things" (*esthla*) that he himself understands; perhaps, these are the very *esthla* that are mixed in with the evils of our Iron Age (compare 286 with 179). It is easy to take hold of viciousness or badness in abundance; the path to it is an easy one that lies very near. Before virtue, however, immortal gods have placed sweat; the path to it

[16]Other translations are possible: "But I do not yet [do not at all] expect [hope] that counselor Zeus will bring these things to fulfillment."

is long and steep, and at first it is difficult. But once one ascends to its peak, it is easy, difficult though it was. Hesiod does not charge the gods with having made the path to vice easy—pleasure, for example, may suffice for that—but he does contend that they have placed an obstacle before virtue (*aretēs*, 289). We can understand what the obstacle or "sweat" in question consists of by focusing on the "peak" in question: "[H]e is altogether best (*panaristos*) who himself (*autos*) understands all things, noting the things that later on are more profitable (*ameinō*),[17] in the end" (293–94). The highest human excellence consists in the intellectual grasp of "all things," independently arrived at (*autos*); the untroubled or naïve idleness of the golden age may have been best in the eyes of the gods, but it cannot be such to Hesiod. The obstacles to virtue so understood must be many. Not all, for example, are equally equipped to attain it, as Hesiod's tripartite division here reminds us. In addition, whereas Hesiod had earlier insisted to Perses that the "path" leading to "the just things" is the superior one, he here identifies as best the way leading to the correct understanding of all things (compare 216–17 with 288–91). There are, then, two fundamentally different paths or ways, each of which presents itself as best and between which one must choose. The chief obstacle on the path to (true) virtue is the difficulty in seeing that its proper destination is not the performance of the just things but the understanding of "all things." Furthermore, because the gods are the principal supporters of justice or the just life, as the *Works and Days* as a whole insists, they have placed or even themselves constitute a roadblock on the path to virtue. Accordingly, they or their influence must be overcome if one is to follow the better path to its conclusion. That Hesiod does not expect Perses to grasp this is clear: he begins the section by calling him a "great fool," and he concludes it by reminding him of what he must do (286, 298–99): work!

It follows from this ambiguity in the nature of the better "path" that the fundamental choice of life, as Hesiod initially presents it in the *Works and Days*, cannot be his last word—the choice between an idle, hence unjust life and a diligent, hence just one. It now appears that there is a third way of life superior to that of both worker and idler, namely the life of the singer, the servant of the Muses who is concerned, above all, with understanding the truth.[18] To put this another way, the concern peculiar to mortals is not "works" (*erga*)—gods and beasts, too, are concerned with works (146, 521; 46)—but is instead speech or truth-telling song, *logoi* or *mythoi* or *aoidai*.[19] Perses should concern himself with "works and days,"

[17]The translation suggested by Verdenius, *A Commentary on Hesiod, ad loc.*

[18]Compare Leo Strauss, "The Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy" in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 36.

[19]Consider 106; 10, 194, 206, 263; 659 (compare 583), 662. That *logoi* may be wily is clear: 78, 789.

but Hesiod is ultimately concerned with "songs and nights," that is, with such songs as are taught by those who go about at night (*Th.* 9–10).[20] From the point of view of the diligent worker, the singer belongs in the company of a beggar (consider 25-26); it falls to Hesiod to reveal for the first time that Night, the "kindly time," is truly benevolent or philanthropic (17, 560, 730).

The remainder of this section (299–380) hammers home to Perses the need both to work and to be just. The apparent crudity or vulgarity of Hesiod's arguments here is striking: as he explains at length, we should treat well suppliants, guest-friends, brothers, orphans, fathers, and indeed the gods—in order that we may become rich! Good neighbors are useful; give in order to get. Far from being "good in itself" or the sum and substance of human happiness, justice is now a mere means to the end, money. If Hesiod and Perses do not disagree as to the superiority of the good to the just (should Hesiod bring his brother to see clearly what it is that he most wants), they surely do disagree as to the character of the good itself: as Hesiod notes later, "money is soul [life]" only for "wretched mortals" (686).[21] Hesiod adapts himself to his immediate audience by speaking here as though the increase in wealth is the proper aim of human life, to which aim justice is essential but subservient. And yet, the agreement indicated between the brothers also permits Hesiod a certain freedom to speak from the point of view of the "peak" of virtue that he has just stated; to understand Hesiod, one need only substitute "understanding all things" for "money." Hesiod's chief concern is that one be "measured" in one's works (306; 349–50; consider also *metra* at 648, 694), and that measure is determined by the calculation in all things of the greatest profit or "addition" (*epithēkē*: 380); he warns against "bad profits" (352), which is to say that he warns against things that only appear profitable but are not; the truly profitable is to be sought out by all means.

Confirmation of this suggestion is found in some remarks of Socrates that have been preserved by Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.2.56). Xenophon tells us that, according to an unnamed accuser, Socrates used to pick out the basest or nastiest things (*ponērotata*) from the most renowned poets and, using these things as supporting evidence, he would teach his associates to be evil-doers and tyrannical. Among the nasty lines he used to cite was the following, from the section of the *Works and Days* now under consideration: "And no work is a disgrace, but idleness is a disgrace" (311).

[20]Compare Leo Strauss, Letter to Jacob Klein, October 10, 1939, in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 3, ed. Heinrich and Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart/Weimar: J. B. Metzler, 2001), 582: "Du warfst einmal die Frage auf, was der Titel [of the *Works and Days*] bedeute. Die Antwort: ersetze nur jedes Glied durch sein aus dem Gedicht selber nachweisbares Gegenteil: epē kai nyktes, d.i. verhüllte Reden."

[21]This is the only appearance of the word "soul" in the *Works and Days*; see Johannes Paulson, *Index Hesiodeus* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962), s.v.

According to the accuser, Socrates would interpret this line as follows: the poet here bids us to abstain from no work, be it unjust or shameful, but rather to do it for the sake of profit. In his rebuttal, Xenophon maintains that Socrates would quite agree that being a worker, on the one hand, is both profitable and good for a human being and that being an idler, on the other, is both harmful and bad. Therefore, working is good, but being idle is bad, and those who do something good both work and are good workers. He used to call idlers those who play at dice or do some other base and unprofitable thing. Xenophon's defense concedes to the accuser that Socrates looked above all to the good and the profitable; in fact, whatever is profitable or good for one is "work," whatever is not is "idleness." Xenophon is silent about justice in particular as a standard superior to profit by which to judge of the various works. In keeping with this spirit, Hesiod teaches us, six lines after the controversial line in question, that shame does not provide well for a man in need (317). Shame—like envy, strife, and work itself (pp. 3–4 above)—is fundamentally ambiguous; its goodness or profitable character cannot be known "categorically" but depends on one's circumstances.[22]

The Works (381–764)

Having established that it is necessary for Perses to work, Hesiod now turns to discuss what the specific works in question are and how to carry them out.[23] The section comprises three main parts:

1. the importance of good management (*euthēmosunē*) (383–492), including a general introduction to the *erga* assigned to mortals by the gods (397) and by Demeter (393) in particular (383–413), the preparation for plowing (414–47), the season for plowing (448–72), and the results of good management (473–92);
2. *erga* according to their seasons (493–764), including matters of general husbandry (493–617), sailing (618–94), and marriage (695–705); and
3. *erga* related to others (705–64), including comrades (706–14), guest-friends (715–23), and gods (724–64).

Hesiod's enumeration of the various works is what it appears to be, a sometimes quite detailed guide to the management of household and farm. But since it is also part of a whole that has thus far culminated in an

[22]It is true that, when Hesiod returns to speak of Strife toward the end of the poem, he does so in the singular (compare 804 with 11–26). But the latter remark is clearly attributed to the Muses (*phasin*, 803), who sang deceptively about Strife also in the *Theogony*.

[23]Note the emphatic use of words related to "work" with which this section begins: *hode erdein, kai ergon ep'ergōi ergadzesthai* (382).

examination of the justice of Zeus or, more broadly stated, of the nature of the guidance of the human world, we expect Hesiod also to continue this examination in some way.

To begin with, he takes his bearings less by the Olympians than by such things as the position of the Pleiades, the number of days and nights that pass, and the year itself. These considerations, which we are tempted to call "natural," Hesiod calls the "law [*nomos*] of the fields," which pertains to farmers and nonfarmers alike (388 and context).[24] There are, therefore, two fundamental laws for human beings: the law of Zeus, which takes the form of Dikē (276–77), and the law of the fields, that is, of the heavens and earth as this law is observable to everyone, a law not said to have been ordained by anyone. If the absence of cannibalism among mortals is proof of the existence of Zeus's law among us—itself a controversial point—the *Works and Days* gives the impression that that law is all but constantly violated. The law of the fields, by contrast, is observed with unfailing regularity. Hesiod will, henceforth, vacillate between these two sources of guidance, between the law of Zeus and the law of the fields, between the Olympian gods and what might be called the cosmic gods, who are prior to the Olympians and known to all human beings (see again *Th.* 43–47 and context; Plato *Laws* 886a2–5 and context). Our task will first be to observe and then to attempt to explain this vacillation.

Given that the overarching theme of this first subsection is "good management"—that is, the things that human beings can and so ought to do by their native powers, including their ingenuity and zeal or perseverance—the guidance of the Olympians largely fades from view: the cessation of the sun's scorching heat, the position of the star Sirius overhead, and the fall of leaves, all mark the time to prepare for plowing. Only the autumnal rain is attributed (commonly in Greek) to Zeus (414–19), and a worker, insofar as he possesses skilled knowledge, is said to belong to Athena (430). In keeping with this stress on the humanly knowable, Hesiod states with great precision the dimensions of the plow one is to build. And Perses should avail himself of two plows, one whose joint or curve is manufactured, the other whose curve appears so to speak on its own (*autoguon*, 434). Both the natural and the man-made can and should be harnessed for our use. Similarly, knowledge of oxen and men is essential, and it, too, admits of great precision: Perses should purchase a nine-year-old ox and employ a forty-year-old man (436, 441). These recommendations might well appear to be excessively precise, for surely certain eight- or ten-year-old oxen, for example, would serve equally well. Even the most complete or detailed

[24]Whether one takes *houtos* at 388 to refer back to 381–87 as a whole, as I am inclined to do partly on the model of 682 and 697, or to look ahead to 391–95—see Hesiod, *Works and Days*, ed. T. A. Sinclair (London: MacMillan, 1932) *ad loc.*; and M. L. West, "Commentary," *ad loc.*—the "law" in question nonetheless takes its bearings by the seasonal necessities.

rules issuing from genuine knowledge or skill will fail to anticipate all eventual particulars—an unusually sensible thirty-five-year-old man, for example—and so such rules must be supplemented or supplanted by independent, prudential judgment carried out on the spot. Yet we can have no confidence that Perses is capable of such judgment; Hesiod will even tell him exactly how to dress in cold weather (536–58). Hence, Hesiod here enjoins him to purchase only a nine-year-old ox. What is true of these rules is true of more general rules, that is, of the law. If the law of the fields is inviolable and the law of Zeus too often violated, the law that human beings formulate for themselves, while not in fact adequate for every circumstance, should for Perses' sake be treated as perfectly adequate, hence, as absolutely fixed and inviolable.

When Hesiod turns to discuss the plowing season proper, he looks only to a natural being (a crane) and the course of the year itself; even the rain that he speaks of is no longer attributed to Zeus. After reiterating the need to attend to things natural (the oxen) and man-made (the cart) and making clear that one must take such measures as are humanly possible (instilling zeal in oneself and one's workers, for example), Hesiod praises extraordinarily the summer fallow: it will not deceive you—in contrast, we recall, to Prometheus's deception of Zeus (48; consider also 373 and 323)—and it will act as protection from harm (literally "from Ares") for you and your children (461–64).[25]

The tendency these remarks suggest leaves us unprepared for Hesiod's exhortation that follows immediately: "Pray to native Zeus and to pure Demeter" (465; the only other explicit exhortation to pray is at 738). For now we learn that one's corn will bend to the ground in abundance, "*if* the Olympian himself subsequently grants a good end" (474, emphasis added). Neither the careful observance of and adherence to the law of the fields, then, nor all the human ingenuity and care-taking possible will guarantee a successful harvest. For, "the mind of aegis-bearing Zeus is one way at one time, another at another/Difficult for mortal men to understand" (483–84). Whether Zeus will reward the farmer who harvests when he should is as unknowable as whether he will punish the farmer who is late in doing so. There is an antidote (*pharmakon*) available to aid the late harvester, namely the proper amount and right timing of the rain, but these depend entirely on Zeus (485–90). Having held out the prospect of the human mastery of the world, Hesiod now contends that only prayer can bring about such changes in the highly changeable mind of Zeus as are amenable to our needs and wishes.

[25]Departing from West's conjectural reading and following the text of Friedrich Solmsen (Hesiod, *Opera*, 3rd ed. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990]); Evelyn-White (*The Homeric Hymns and the Homerica* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press/Loeb Classical Library, 1914); and Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (*Hediodos Erga* [Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1962 (orig. publ. 1928)]).

When Hesiod turns to treat of the various *erga* according to their seasons, including matters of general husbandry and sailing, the importance of prayer recedes from view and with it the governance of the Olympians once again. Hesiod follows, instead, the course of the seasons, winter (493–563), spring (564–70), summer (571–608), and autumn (609–17); references to the constellations and to the winds far outnumber references to the Olympians, and these latter manifest themselves here in the form of their mundane gifts, in sexual desire (Aphrodite, 521), grain (Demeter, 597), and wine (Dionysus, 614).[26] This reference to, and indeed deference to, the natural world and its signs continues when Hesiod turns to discuss sailing. Zeus appears here only as the bringer of rain, which may rot one's boat if one does not take the necessary precaution, and as the one who gives poverty to men, which, of course, one must strive to overcome (626, 638; compare 718).

The question of the governance of Zeus does return in this section, however. For, as Hesiod states in the context of noting the preparations that we must undertake in order to sail, we will do so safely,

> Unless Poseidon the earth-shaker is determined
> Or Zeus king of the immortals wishes to destroy [you].
> For with them rests the end of the good and bad things alike (667–69).

This is the very "mind of Zeus" that Hesiod here claims to have been taught to understand by the Muses and of which he promises to tell. The final outcome of things both good and bad depends on the mind of Zeus. As far as Perses is concerned, this fact should prompt him to a complete submission to justice, the law of Zeus, and so, we assume, to pray in good hope.[27]

At the same time, the very fact that Hesiod traces this statement concerning the mind of Zeus to the Muses suggests that we should be wary of its truth. At a minimum, we must reflect on Hesiod's teaching somewhat more than Perses is likely to do. The goodness or badness of all things—our happiness, in brief—depends on the mind of Zeus, but that mind is, as we have seen, fundamentally subject to change. Will obedience to the law of Zeus necessarily reward us as we wish to be rewarded? To be sure, and to repeat, the poem does emphatically teach that Zeus will reward us unfailingly "in the end" if we are just and pray to him. But this is not the

[26]The sole exception to this, if I am not mistaken, is the mention of Zeus, who completes the days (565)—but this is balanced or outweighed by the mention in this context of the turning of the sun, i.e., the solstice, the star Arcturus, and Oceanus, none of whom belongs among the immortal Olympians (see also n. 2); on earth (*gē*: 563), see p. 191 above.

[27]That belief in Zeus and hopefulness go together is suggested by the two occasions on which Hesiod himself speaks of hoping for or (as the verb may also be translated) expecting certain things: see 273 and 475.

only teaching of the *Works and Days*. Apart from the fact that virtue consists in understanding according to Hesiod, Zeus does not consistently defer to any humanly comprehensible (and hence any humanly relevant) understanding of justice; precisely the surface of the poem teaches that our fundamental predicament is traceable to his cruel punishment of us, in which punishment he takes delight. From the human point of view, the only point of view to which we have access, Zeus appears finally as a mysterious tyrant against whom we must take precautions.[28]

Throughout his discussion of the "works," Hesiod points to two alternatives: guidance by the natural world or guidance by the Olympians. The latter alternative is not finally satisfactory. What, then, of the former? Hesiod stresses the extent to which we can make use of natural beings to help us and can contrive devices to aid us in doing so; he counsels recognizing the various seasons and their importance for us. There is a season best for both men and women to marry, for example, and the advice that he offers in this regard stems from reasonable reflection on readily available information. It is best to marry a girl who lives nearby and so is known to you and yours, lest you become a laughingstock to your neighbors (695–705). Similarly, though there is another season, spring, for sailing, Hesiod himself—referring here emphatically to himself (*egōge*: 683) and, hence, no longer to the Muses—strongly warns against it, in part as a result of his reflection on what it would be like to die at sea. The natural world is certainly not in every respect amenable to human beings, for both winter and summer, for example, can be very harsh (493–563; 586), though both also have their attendant pleasures (493–95; 585). To come now to the most important consideration, Hesiod still nowhere guarantees that mortals will prosper, however much they may obey the law of the fields. Put another way, the sway of chance in the world is ineradicable, and our happiness is fundamentally exposed to it. One who seeks to understand all things will somehow understand this harsh fact. To those who cannot endure it, Hesiod, in his generosity, will offer consolations of a kind in the remainder of the poem.

The Days (765–828)

The turn to the auspicious and inauspicious days for mortals is prepared by the final section treating of *erga* relating to comrades, guest-friends, and gods, that is, how one ought to treat or what one owes to others. The guiding premise of that treatment is the vengeance of the gods (706; compare 187, 251). The section concludes with a wide-ranging list of the

[28]In addition, the rewards and punishments allotted by Zeus depend on the voluntariness of our actions (282; see also *Th.* 232), and yet at least those of our actions that can be traced to evil Strife are the product of necessity, itself traceable to the wishes of the gods (15–16 and context).

proper rites of purification necessary for us to avoid their "nemesis" (741). Some of these rites surely also aid communal life—the regulations concerning procreation and bodily hygiene, for example—and those that appear to be without rhyme or reason—the proper placement of a ladle on a bowl—would, at least, bestow on those who comply with them a sense of hopeful or expectant purity.

The purpose of the discussion of the "days from Zeus" with which the poem ends is to reconcile Perses, to the extent possible, to the sway of chance or uncertainty in human affairs. Far from being an extraneous accretion, then—Wilamowitz-Moellendorff and Nicolai, for example, go so far as to excise it entirely[29]—this concluding section performs a most important function. Hesiod sketches a world from which uncertainty appears to be absent: there are specific days on which to undertake specific tasks with predictable results. That such specificity is possible is a daily reminder of the providential care of the gods. Although it is true that Hesiod defers somewhat to the growth cycle (West, "Commentary," 347–48), his discussion of the days abstracts entirely from the chief consideration that had guided his treatment of the *erga*, that of the seasons: it may well be best to bed plants on the "middle sixth" of the month, but surely this is not true of any or every month. We are now as far as possible from the "law of the fields." In keeping with this, the advice he gives here concerning marriage differs completely in spirit from that seen previously: a groom should bring home a bride on the first fourth of the month—never on one of the fifths—after having consulted the requisite birds of omen (800–801; compare 695–705). Only hints remain of the tension between immortals and mortals that had run throughout the poem. The sacred days are contrasted with those appropriate for the "works of mortals" (765–772), and the two days especially friendly to human beings are not sacred days. What the gods require is different from what we require. One must strive to avoid becoming the object of rumors or malicious gossip (*phēmē*), for it is very difficult to free oneself of such talk once it has begun. Whether we deserve it or not, *phēmē* will punish us, and she, therefore, deserves being called "a sort of goddess" (760–64).

By also including in this section a discussion of days that are changeable because they are "without fate" or bring nothing to human beings—sometimes these days will be to mortals a mother, sometimes a stepmother (825)—Hesiod does seem to usher in chance once again (823–26). Yet if misfortune should befall Perses on one of these days, which constitute about one-third of every year,[30] he can give at least a kind of explanation of it: a given event fell on one of the unpredictable days. Similarly, in the light of

[29]See the place cited in the editions of each: Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, *Hediodos Erga* (Berlin: Weidmannsche, 1962 [1928]) and Walter Nicolai, *Hesiods Erga: Beobachtungen zum Aufbau* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1964).

[30]Benardete, "A First Reading," 169.

his new knowledge of the days, Perses must accept his inferior rank as fated or allotted (consider again 293–97), for we must assume that Hesiod but not Perses was born on one of the days good for the birth of males, to say nothing of the "great twentieth," when a "knowing mortal" (*histora phōta*: 792) with a keen mind will be born. This section, and hence the poem as a whole, concludes with a final exhortation or prediction:

> Happy and prosperous is he who,
> Knowing all these things, works, blameless in the eyes of the immortals,
> Judging by means of birds of omen and avoiding transgressions.

Within the limits of what can be said in the context, Hesiod reminds us of the true peak (*panta eidōs*), even as he urges Perses to defer to the entrails of birds.

Conclusion

The *Works and Days* emphatically teaches the necessity of the devotion to justice, if there is to be healthy political life, and the necessity of supporting such devotion by recourse to mighty and all-knowing gods (or a god) who will see to it that, now or in the end, the just are rewarded and the unjust punished. Yet the poem quietly teaches also that understanding is superior to justice and the defective manner in which Zeus treats human beings, just or unjust. It is a question, then, whether in Hesiod's final view of the world deserves the name *kosmos*, an ordered whole, or that of its contrary. The *Works and Days* suggests that the intervention of the singer and of his (deceptive) Muses is required in order for us to maintain our hope that justice will be unfailingly rewarded with, above all, individual immortality. In this fundamental respect, then, we cannot be altogether at home in the world as it is, in the world from which is absent such poetic intervention. It is certainly true that Hesiod undertook the considerable task of writing the *Works and Days* and that he, therefore, thought it worthwhile to do everything in one's power to promote not only a good communal life but also, in those capable of it, the understanding of "all things." Such understanding is then possible according to the poet. If not our every hope, then, at least our desire to know—including, of course, the desire to know the truly good or profitable things—can be satisfied here and now. It remains unclear whether the experience of the satisfaction of this desire is adequate compensation for the sacrifice of what would appear to be our guiding hope.

In keeping with this ambiguity, Hesiod notes of the present Iron Age only that its evils are mixed with certain unspecified fine or good things (179). Perhaps, there is some consolation in the very possession of iron, for it is the strongest of the four metals, and the bronze race would have used it had it been available to them (151). We have at our disposal the means to devise mighty tools for ourselves. But among the greatest goods we enjoy

is surely the poetry that Hesiod sings. He tells us, in a beautiful passage from the *Theogony* (98–103), that,

> [I]f someone, sorrowing in his recently grief-stricken spirit,
> Has his heart dry up in woe, and then
> A servant of the Muses sings of the glories of human beings of old
> And of blessed gods who hold Olympus,
> Quickly he forgets his cares, and none of his troubles
> Does he remember; but soon the gifts of the goddesses turn him from them. (98–103).

It is a most important function of Hesiod's poetry to help us "forget" our troubles, especially those connected with mourning. Now we understand why the golden race, having lived under Kronos and, hence, prior to the Muses,[31] could have been content without the poetry that those goddesses make possible: being unaware of death, they had no need of poetry. For all the potential and actual evils of our age, we are consoled by the gifts of the Muses. Moreover, we are not yet born "gray at the temples," for the very song that teaches us the grim truth of our mortality also consoles us by simultaneously concealing it. Hesiod's song tells us also, and far more obviously, of the glories of human beings of old and of the Olympian gods—of the just who live on in blessed happiness and of the gods who watch over us, punishing us, to be sure, but rewarding us, too. The daughters of Memory (*Th.* 53–54) are unusually skilled in fostering forgetfulness in those who hear their singer's song.

What of the singer himself? It is chiefly the singer who can—as we witness in Hesiod's recitation of the five ages of mortals—bestow on preceding generations a glory that extends beyond the grave. The singer determines what the dead "are called," whether they are "nameless" or named (141, 159, 154); the power that Hesiod had attributed to Zeus to make mortals spoken of or not spoken of (3–4) actually belongs to the singer himself. If the worship of gods is characteristic of human beings everywhere, the greatest singers, at least, can determine which gods are worshiped and how they are worshiped (consider Herodotus 2.53). Surely, there is some measure of glory in all this for the singer himself. One might even say that, in thus exercising one of the gods' own powers, the singer enjoys the only immortality available to human beings. When judged against what Hesiod himself presents as our greatest hope, however, this immortality, this immortal glory, so to speak, is finally a counterfeit. Perhaps, then, the poet is most akin to certain of the heroes or demigods: he sings a beautiful song partly for the benefit of others while knowing full well that the "end of death" will overtake him.

[31]Compare Strauss, "Liberalism of Classical Political Philosophy," 37.