

Hesiod Introduction Part 6

The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Theogony* & the *Works and Days*

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You'll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. Do you want to support the Cave's mission? Let's talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

"Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. ... The advice of Hesiod is good." — Aristotle

"Lampon ... greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons."
—Pindar

The Classics Cave • www.theclassicscave.com

Hesiod Introduction Part 6

The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Theogony* & the *Works and Days*

Thanks for supporting The Classics Cave.

Please visit and support our sponsors.

This reading comes from the Cave's
The Best of Hesiod's Theogony & Works and Days.

CHAOS. CITING APOLLODORUS the Epicurean, the ancient biographer Diogenes Laertius explains that Epicurus "turned to philosophy thanks to his contempt for teachers who were unable to explain the meaning of *chaos* found in Hesiod."¹ It has been an ongoing problem ever since. What exactly did Hesiod mean by chaos (or Chaos)?

First, a point of caution. In English, the term *chaos* means confusion and disorder. This may or may not be what Hesiod had in mind. If we look to Hesiod alone for what Chaos is, we find the following basic points. One, "in the beginning" Chaos "came to be"; he is "the god who came into being first" before all other gods. Does this mean that Chaos did not exist

before "the beginning"? It would seem so, but Hesiod doesn't explicitly say. Nor does he tell us how Chaos came to be. Rather, Chaos is more of an assertion, a necessary beginning. Two, Chaos is a source. Specifically, Chaos is the origin of the gods Darkness (Erebus) and Night (Nyx), who are in turn the source of other gods. Three, Hesiod seems to view Chaos as something that can catch fire and be engulfed with "burning heat like that of the sun." We know this because such a thing happens at the height of the great battle between Zeus and the Titans. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Hesiod pictures Chaos as though it is a large space across which one may pass; it is "beyond" or "on the other side" of Tartaros. So it

is that many equate Chaos with “chasm,” the large gulf or gap that Hesiod posits between Earth and Tartaros. Of the chasm, Hesiod states that once a man has entered its gates, “he would not come to the bottom of the chasm even if he travelled for a whole year.”

If this equation is true, that is, *if* we can equate Chaos with chasm, then we’re able to say more about Chaos by way of chasm. In short, chasm seems to be the “painful, damp and moldy” gap where the “sources and limits” of “everything”—earth, sea, sky, Tartaros—are located.² What are the sources and limits of everything? They seem to be the roots of earth and sea that extend down to Tartaros. We may tentatively conclude, then, that Chaos, chasm, the sources and limits of everything, and the roots beneath earth and sea are closely related, if not identical. The point—in addition to the fact that Chaos was “the god who came into being first”—seems to reinforce the idea that Chaos is the source of all things. Even so, we should keep in mind that Hesiod nowhere explicitly makes this point. Perhaps this is why Epicurus was so frustrated.

Desire (Eros). With Desire, we have a similar phenomenon to Chaos. We get the impression that Desire is something truly significant, but Hesiod is short on the details—at least explicit details. Still, what can we put together from what Hesiod himself reveals?

First, Desire appears in third place “in the beginning” after Chaos and Earth (Gaia). As is the case with Chaos, Desire simply comes to be, that is, without parents or any other apparent source. Second, Desire is “the most beautiful of the immortal gods.” Hesiod doesn’t reveal how or in what sense Desire is beautiful. Is it that Desire *himself* is beautiful? Or is it that Desire leads the desiring one to beautiful things, which is to say desirable things? Or both? Or is Desire beautiful in some other manner? From what Hesiod says, we don’t know. What we do know—Hesiod’s third revelation—is that Desire has great power. He is “the one who loosens limbs and conquers the mind in the chest of every god and every human being and the wise counsels therein.”³ Consequently, Desire is perhaps the most powerful force in Hesiod’s cosmos since he is able to take over and direct every

other being. But in what? How or in what does Desire direct others?

We begin to understand the nature of this direction when we look at Desire’s alliance with Aphrodite and Longing (Himeros), and Desire’s possible relation to other goddesses. “And Desire (Eros) and beautiful Longing (Himeros) joined themselves in common with [Aphrodite] when she was first born and followed her when she went up to the tribe of the gods.” Interestingly, Longing (Himeros) lives in the same neighborhood as the Muses, whose dancing moves “call upon desire,” and the Graces (Charites), whose eyes drip “desire that loosens limbs.” It’s likely that Hesiod imagined Desire and even Aphrodite dwelling in the same vicinity, but he doesn’t directly address the point.

As for Aphrodite, she is the means by which gods and men join together in love in order to procreate. Therefore, if Desire operates with or even through Aphrodite (a point Hesiod implies but does not explicitly make), then Desire’s direction is ultimately all about joining things together. As Robert Lamberton has it, Desire “is the force of combination that unites the generative pairs, and there can be no theogony, properly speaking, until he is present.”⁴ These unions result in offspring and further unions until the cosmos is one vast web of unions (if not quite unities) and offspring.

We can only speculate regarding why such direction requires the loosening of limbs and the conquering of minds and “the wise counsels therein” as Hesiod indicates. Whatever Hesiod thinks, there is some indication that Desire has both positive and negative qualities. He’s beautiful on the one hand but devious on the other in that he coops and oftentimes acts contrary to the general direction of wisdom. His neighbors and allies are similar. The “sweet-sounding” Muses, for example, declare their ability to “say many false things that appear true.” Then there are the Graces who are stunningly beautiful, as we observed a moment ago, yet their eyes drip “desire that loosens limbs.” Desire’s allies are no different. “Beautiful Longing (Himeros)” shows up when Sky (Ouranos) longs for love with Earth (Gaia)—this despite an

ambush awaiting him.⁵ Then there is Aphrodite. Among other things (things hard to simply identify as goods, things such as “intimate chatting” and “delightful pleasure”), Aphrodite’s portion is said by Hesiod to include the ability to deceive or beguile thoroughly. Surely this is part of Desire’s ability to conquer minds and wise counsels. Whatever the case, we learn that Aphrodite’s contribution to the first woman Pandora causes a similar duality. When Aphrodite pours “grace around her head as well as painful yearning and limb-gnawing cares,” Pandora becomes an “utterly irresistible deception” “against which humans are powerless.”

One last note on Desire. The Cave’s rendition of the *Theogony* gives *Eros* as “Desire” rather than the usual “Love” that appears in most translations. The reason is straightforward. Given the concepts of sexual, romantic, or parental love, and the much later Christian understanding of God as love, it seems to us better to give “Desire” for *Eros* rather than any other word.⁶ The reader should nevertheless be aware of this peculiarity.

Giving birth and genealogy. When modern cosmologists discuss the origin of the cosmos, they talk about things forming, evolving, coming into existence, and the like. Some things in turn manufacture other things.⁷ We should not see any personality or intent behind such origins, they advise. No, we’re told that the emergence of the cosmos—both in the past and as an ongoing reality—is an impersonal, random, and, therefore, meaningless occurrence.

That’s not how Hesiod thinks about the emergence of the cosmos. Instead, as one scholar explains, he describes the origins of things in terms of “relationships among entities fundamental to our experience.”⁸ More specifically, Hesiod utilizes the very concrete and personal language of sexual love and childbirth—that of begetting, fathering, engendering, giving birth, and bringing into the world. A god “mixes in love” with a goddess, and their union brings about the existence of a third god or goddess, who is “brought into the world” or, more abstractly, “comes into being.”

Hesiod’s approach to the beginning of things provides a genealogical structure to the cosmos,

allowing his audience to trace the ancestry or origin of a divine or human being back to its source. From an etiological standpoint, which explains certain aspects of reality in terms of myths, legends, and other stories, such an approach offers an explanation of a god or man in terms of his or her origin or cause, nature or qualities, and even value or worth. To state that “dark Night” is the mother or source of Death (Thanatos), that she “brought Death into the world,” is to say something about the origins and nature of Death itself. To further state and understand that Night is the offspring of Chaos is to say something more. What is it that is specified? Hesiod wisely leaves the explicit conclusion to his audience. But we all *know*.

Think of the experience you’ve likely had when a friend has introduced someone as the son or daughter of a particular man, woman, or family. If you know something about the man, woman, or family, you immediately feel as though you better understand the person introduced. “Ah, he’s a Ringsby.” Or, “Ah, she’s an Arellano.” For instance, when Hesiod gives Harmony’s parents as Ares and Aphrodite, anyone familiar with them will understand that Harmony is the offspring—the midpoint, as it were—of war and love, of difference and unity. The nature of the parents declares something about the nature of the child. Genealogy provides origins in terms of relationships, and origins disclose nature.

The same is true with Zeus, the ruling god of Hesiod’s cosmos. Zeus was the offspring of Kronos and Rhea, the most significant and powerful of the Titans. When the Titans ruled, Kronos and Rhea were the king and queen. They, in turn, were born to Sky (Ouranos) and Earth (Gaia), the prior rulers. Sky himself was born to Earth, who simply appeared as Chaos and Desire did, independently and on her own, which is quite a power. Zeus’ genealogy, therefore, declares something about Zeus himself. Again, genealogy provides origins, and origins disclose nature. But in Zeus’ case, there’s more. His origins and nature add up to his value or worth, which is great. Zeus is great not only because he is powerful and rules but also because he comes from a line of powerful and ruling

gods. So when we learn that his father and grandfather are Kronos and Sky, not to mention his grandmothers Rhea and Earth, we think, “Ah, he’s one of them. That explains it.” And so it does. Genealogy reveals the origins, nature, and value of any being.

But more. Beyond individual gods, Hesiod’s genealogies are doing something and going somewhere. Stephanie Nelson argues that “the genealogies of the *Theogony* reveal that a new order has developed in the universe.”⁹ As Jenny Strauss Clay states it, “the *Theogony* constitutes an attempt to understand the cosmos as the product of a genealogical evolution and a process of individuation that finally leads to the formation of a stable cosmos and ultimately achieves its *telos* under the tutelage of Zeus.”¹⁰ It’s to that progressive order and *telos* (goal) that we must next turn.

Cosmos-order. For Hesiod, the development or movement of the cosmos is from what is general to what is more specific. It is therefore the movement from what has less definition or form, in that the definition or form is very broad, to what has greater definition or form. Consequently, the movement is from what is less known, in that it is general, to what is more known, in that it is more specific.

The cosmos begins with Chaos, Earth (Gaia), and Desire (Eros), three somewhat amorphous beings. We’ve already seen above what there is to know about Chaos and Desire. The short answer: not much. Chaos is the chasm, the gap, that is somehow the source and limits of everything. Desire is the overpowering force that draws things together. As for Earth, she’s presented as the huge (“broad-breasted”) and even “monstrous” foundation or stage upon which everything else rests or happens. She is “the forever immovable abode of all the immortals.” At one point, Hesiod calls Earth “limitless,” even though at other times the earth seems to have limits.

From this rather vague beginning comes everything else. From Chaos, for example, come Darkness (Erebus) and Night. From Night come Death, his brother Sleep, and their sister Strife. From Strife come Battles and Murder and Ruin. Or, to trace another line, Ocean (Okeanos) and Tethys arise from Sky and Earth.

They in turn give rise to some three thousand rivers and three thousand nymphs, one of whom is Doris. With Nereus, Doris gives birth to the Nereids, one of whom is Thetis. With Peleus, Thetis gives birth to the hero Achilles. Another nymph is Calypso, who, with the hero Odysseus, gives birth to Nausithoos and Nausinoos. Regardless of the genealogical line we follow, we move from the general to more specific.

Of great significance for Hesiod and the order of the cosmos is how Zeus governs. His just rule gives definition to the cosmos in a way that did not exist with its earlier rulers, Sky and Kronos. As Lamberton puts it, there is an “increasing orderliness . . . to its moral coherence.”¹¹ When they ruled, justice was merely the same as power—the power to maintain their own whims and vague rule by means of preventing further development or specification. With Zeus things are different. Although he also comes to rule by means of the violent use of power, utilizing the might of thunder and lightning, his rule is characterized by a balance of noble distributions, where each god and goddess—not to mention human beings such as kings—has his or her own proper share of power and sphere of activity. “Zeus made a noble division of the honors.” We are left with two general realities, then, exemplified by one specific god. There’s the violence that powerfully wins victory and maintains rule, and there’s justice, the balance of all the parts that violence or power creates and ensures, Zeus’ noble distribution of specific spheres of influence or power. Making these two points, Hesiod wishes us to know that the world is a complex reality, with its dark and light sides. Nevertheless, the cosmos is an ordered reality guaranteed by Zeus’ power that orders things according to justice. We’ll return to justice and to the general harmony of the cosmos in a moment.

The five races of men and the present reality of human life. In one of the most well-known and frequently cited passages of the *Works and Days*, Hesiod bemoans the fact that he lives among the iron race or kind¹² of men, during what others have called the Iron Age. “If only I were no longer obliged to be part of the fifth kind of men but had died before or been born afterward. For presently the race of men is truly one made

of iron.” To understand the problem with living among this kind or race of men, we must first briefly analyze the earlier golden, silver, bronze, and heroic races in terms of two major points: one, the availability of what it takes to live during each age; two, the nature of the relationships that exist during the same—whether between human beings or between humans and the gods.

Relative to the first, to the availability of what it takes to live during each age, Hesiod reports that the golden race “had all good things,” living “with care-free spirits.” The reason was that “the grain-giving field spontaneously bore many fruit and grain crops.” They consequently “delighted in abundant feasts.” Hence, they not only had what it took to live but they prospered enough to enjoy life. Regarding their relationships with one another, “they willingly and peacefully distributed the results of their work along with many good and noble things.” In other words, they shared with one another. Hesiod adds that their relationship with the gods was good. To summarize, “dear to the blessed gods,” the golden kind of men possessed, shared, and enjoyed everything good together.

It was not so for the two races that followed. Hesiod says very little about what they had to live except that the bronze race “did not eat bread.” Rather, he focuses on the condition of their relationships, which was primarily one of violence. The men of the silver race “suffer[ed] pains in their thoughtlessness.” The reason for their suffering had to do with how they related. “They were unable to abstain from reckless and needless violence against one another.” Not only that but Hesiod tells us their relationship with the gods was equally bad in that they refused to honor and sacrifice to them. Consequently, Zeus—and presumably the other gods—was angry with the silver race. The bronze race was hardly better. “They were terrible and mighty and cared alone for the groan-causing works of Ares and for needless violence.” In the end they were “overpowered and conquered by their own hands.”

The men of the fourth heroic race “were better, more just, more observant of custom.” Even so,

Hesiod relates that “evil war and terrible battle destroyed these men-heroes” as they fought over sheep before Thebes and for Helen before Troy. As with the men of the silver and bronze race, violence and death took these men of the heroic race. Actually, “the end of death” only took some. Though we are not told why, Zeus transported the remainder to the Islands of the Blessed, where they lived in a manner similar to the men of the golden race, “with carefree spirits” among abundance. They were “the happy heroes for whom the grain-giving field bears honey-sweet fruit, flourishing three times per year.”

It is at this point in the *Works and Days* that Hesiod complains about his own time and his own iron race, as well as its apparent future. Of great significance, the means of life are hard to secure. “The gods keep what it takes to live hidden from human beings.” For this reason men suffer and will continue to suffer. “Oppressed by wearisome work and suffering, men will not rest day or night. And the gods will give them anxious thoughts that are hard to endure.” As for relationships, Hesiod reports that they have deteriorated and will continue to decline from any kind of ideal. Rather than the sharing of the golden race, there is ill-feeling and strife. “Every single wretched human being will be attacked by jealousy, by discordant, hateful rivalry that is gladdened by the misfortune of others.” Consequently, everyone will compete with one another in a way that is mutually harmful: father with son, brother with brother, friend with friend, guest with host. It is a time when injustice seems to have the upper hand over justice. “These will be men whose might is right.” For these reasons, reality for the iron race—and for us, now—is hard relative to what it takes to live, and it is unsatisfying in terms of relationships.

The good news is what Hesiod has to offer. Much of his poem is about how we can better the human condition, how we can convert our difficult situation into something that is easier, and, if all goes well, one in which we may even flourish and be happy. The significant questions we must ask are these: How can we better obtain what it takes to live? How can we

better live together? How can we better relate to the gods and the cosmos? The answers to these questions constitute the remaining themes and major ideas found in Hesiod. But first, we need to take a look at what was, for Hesiod, a serious problem. Then we'll return to the questions and answers.

Pandora, Pandora's jar, and the role of women. When the trickster god Prometheus steals fire for men against the wishes of Zeus, the chief god punishes men with Pandora. The problem? "From her comes womankind, those who are female. From her come the destructive race and tribe of women, who are a great misery for mortals when women dwell among men." Hesiod reveals that Zeus, with the help of the gods, "made this beautiful misfortune to offset the good of fire." When he finally introduces her into society, both the gods and men are "seized by wonder when they [see] the profound deception against which humans are powerless." Pandora is an "utterly irresistibly deception." There's that dual quality again, the one we've already observed when discussing Desire (Eros). Pandora is beautiful; she's irresistible!—but she's also somehow deceptive and, therefore, harmful.

Before the gods made Pandora, men were relatively well off. "The tribes of men lived upon the earth far away from evil misfortunes, and without bone-wearying toil and painful diseases that deliver the fates of death to men." But then Pandora (thanks to Zeus and the gods) came along and changed everything. Hesiod explains that she "took off the great lid of the large wine-jar"—which was only much later mistakenly called a "box," and thus "Pandora's box"—and she "scattered all these evils." Her purpose? According to Hesiod, it wasn't good. "She intended miserable troubles and cares for human beings." So it was that everything soured for men when the first woman (and women) came along. Taken together, women were and *are*, as Hesiod thought of them, "a great misery for mortals."

Does Hesiod have anything good to say about women? In general, no. But if we attempt to understand his true concern, then we will begin to understand how he sees women.¹³ And how is that? It

fundamentally has to do with the significant challenge of feeding the mouths that come into existence when a man mixes together in love with a woman—that is, when he gives himself over to her in marriage.¹⁴

So, how does Hesiod see women? As wives, women are immensely valuable in the family's struggle to survive and thrive. "A man wins nothing better than a good wife," Hesiod avers. "The man who takes on the portion of marriage and possesses a diligent wife, one with her thoughts together, even for him will bad things continually match themselves with good things through the years." Matching the hard-working man, the diligent woman positively contributes to the management, wealth, and satisfaction of the household. More, she provides offspring, who, even though they are mouths to feed and so a challenge, offer assistance to their parents when they grow old. Consequently, even though women are generally bad, if a man is lucky enough to get a good one, a diligent one, then this general badness will be balanced by the good woman's specific excellences.¹⁵

The two Strifes. Let's return to the questions raised a moment ago and Hesiod's answers. Early on in the *Works and Days*, Hesiod makes a startling revelation, what turns out to be a keen distinction. "So," he says to his brother, Perses, "there was not one kind of Strife (Eris), after all, but upon the earth there are two kinds of strife."

The reference to "one kind of Strife" is a nod to Hesiod's original revelation of the birth of Strife in the *Theogony*. There, Strife is the daughter of Night. In turn, she is the mother of many human ills, including Lies, Arguments, Lawlessness, (false) Oath, Battles, Murder, tear-causing Pains, and Hunger. As presented in the *Works and Days*, this Strife is "cruel" and "multiplies evil war and battle." It is "gladdened by the misfortune of others"—a descriptive that ties it to the present time and iron race of men. Thus it "multipl[ies] disputes and battles for another man's possessions." And just as his brother Perses has apparently done with a portion of Hesiod's property, this Strife snatches the property of others, and in doing so it looks for support from "gift-greedy kings," who

wrongfully take bribes to support injustice with crooked judgements and needless violence.

How do humans feel about this Strife? Hesiod explains that “no mortal man loves her.” Even so, “they honor the oppressive Strife by necessity, by the plans of the immortals.” Although the poet does not explain why, perhaps this Strife is a necessary evil given the difficulty of human life and the scarcity of what it takes to live. As Odysseus makes clear in Homer’s *Odyssey*, “It is because of hunger that well-benched ships are made ready to sail the barren sea and carry misery and sorrow to hostile men.”¹⁶ Said another way, we humans make war to satisfy our bellies. Given the fact of hunger and other needs, strife is therefore a necessity.

Whatever the explanation, Hesiod counters that there is another, better strife, one that actually existed first. She “is praised once a man comes to know her, while the other is found blameworthy.” Here’s how he describes her at length:

But dark Night (Nyx) gave birth to the other Strife first. And Zeus . . . planted her in the roots of the earth. She is much better for men. She rouses even the helpless man to work. Such a one will long for work when he sees a wealthy man hurrying to plow and plant and put his house in good order. And so the one neighbor jealously vies with the other who is speeding on toward riches. This Strife is good for mortal men.

The takeaway is that this other strife or competition is peacefully won by means of hard work in the general context or contest of household management and farming. By contrast, the other strife or competition is violently won by means of seizing from another what it takes to live with the help of crooked judgements and, if necessary, force or violence, including warfare.

The point: the good, beneficial Strife is far better than the cruel, oppressive Strife. We see how this is the case with Hesiod’s explanation of the two paths, and of work and justice.

The two paths—the path to failure and the path to success. We’ve finally come to Hesiod’s description of the

two possible paths that one may travel in life, the part of his *Works and Days* that was repeatedly cited, quoted, and adapted through antiquity to one purpose or another, the part that Basil the Great claimed “everyone is singing.” The first path (the Greek is *hodos*) is what we may call “the easy-then-hard path.” Though easy at first, this path becomes hard to follow when it ends with failure. “It’s easy to grab at Failure (*Kakotēs*),” Hesiod warns his brother and us. “It is there in abundance for you,” he says, “the way is smooth to her, and she dwells very near to you.” The other path (the Greek is *oimos*) is what we may label “the hard-then-easy path.” Though hard at first, this path grows easy as success begins to appear. Contrasting it with the easy-then-hard path, Hesiod declares, “But the immortal gods have put sweat in front of Success (*Aretē*). The path to her is long and steep. And so it is rough-going at first. Nevertheless, when one comes to the highest point, then the path becomes easy—however hard it is *at first*.”¹⁷

Over time, some Greeks came to understand the two paths in a different way in comparison with Hesiod. The difference had to do with the way they understood the result of each path, that is, the resulting *aretē* or *kakotēs*. For them, both were more of an internal quality rather than an external good or success, bad or failure. *Aretē* was virtue, a goodness or excellence related to the soul, whereas *kakotēs* was vice, a badness or imperfection. This is not to say that later Greeks meant nothing external by *aretē* or *kakotēs*. Surely, they thought, internal excellence or good results in external excellence or good (Socrates states as much in Plato’s *Apology*¹⁸). Still, the emphasis among many later writers was on the internal.¹⁹

For Hesiod, *aretē* and *kakotēs* do not generally imply internal moral qualities; rather, the stress is on success or failure in terms of material well-being. In this sense, Hesiod is similar to Homer. For Homer and his heroes, goodness or excellence is success, the ability to survive and thrive to the greatest extent possible, whereas badness is the opposite, the inability to survive and thrive. For Homer, therefore, the good and noble man is the one who is able to compete well in “word and deed,” whether in the assembly debating other men or

fighting others on the battlefield. It is largely by means of this forceful competition that the good and noble man is able to survive and thrive thanks to riches and power. He is the happy man. By contrast, the bad and non-noble man is the weak man, the “coward,” the one who has nothing to defend. For Homer, he is the miserable man.²⁰

Clearly, even though their conception of the goal of success is similar, Hesiod and Homer are dissimilar relative to the method or path to goodness or badness, success or failure. Whereas Homer seems to promote what Hesiod views as the bad kind of Strife, snatching another man’s wealth by means of force, Hesiod promotes work, the path upon which one must sweat in order to make it to the top. Homer’s ideal is the heroic warrior; Hesiod’s is the heroic farmer. As E.K.L. Francis notes, “We can hardly avoid suspecting that [Homer] was in conformity with the morals of warrior-pirates, while [Hesiod] reflects the moral conceptions of a peasantry.”²¹

Work—the heroic farmer. For Hesiod, the path to success is hard work, whereas that to failure is laziness—a path, by the way, that causes a man to glance around for an easy way to make a living, whether by theft, warfare, or even shameful begging. But the latter all lead to failure, to a variety of disasters, most significantly to hunger. As Hesiod puts it, “Hunger is best friends with the lazy man.” By contrast, work leads to enough of what it takes to live, and if all goes well, to abundance. Just after speaking of the two paths, Hesiod urges his brother on to work: “God-born Perses, always keep in mind my command to work. You should work,” he explains, “so that Hunger will hate you *and leave you alone*, and so that highly-regarded, well-crowned Demeter will love you and fill your storehouse with what it takes to live.” With the latter remark, Hesiod reveals the substance of success—abundance, a storehouse full of grain and other goods. The man who works hard, farming as Hesiod advises—“arranging [his] work in due order” and managing his household well—will “have many sheep and other riches.”

Significantly, those who work hard have better relationships with other men and the gods compared

with those who do not. Hesiod declares that “working men will be far dearer to the immortals and to mortals—for they hate men who don’t work.” Why? In part it has to do with the simple fact that workers tend to be wealthy, and that glory follows upon such success. People look up to rich and prominent men. By contrast, non-working men find themselves doing what is shameful or wrong in order to get what it takes to live. They have to beg or, even worse, they have to steal wealth by means of strength in warfare or corruption in the courts. “The lazy man, needing what it takes to live . . . plots all sorts of evil in his spirit.” Such behavior isolates the lazy man from others.

Justice—how justice is the best thing. According to the analysis in the previous section, we could say that working men do not violate justice to get what it takes to live, whereas non-working men do. The paradoxical reality of the iron race, however, is that unjust men oftentimes become wealthy and honored. For this reason, Hesiod seems to despair, going so far as to say that “given the present age, I myself would not wish to be a just man among human beings, nor would I wish that for my son.” Expanding on this strange—for Hesiod—sentiment, he offers this explanation: it is “because it is harmful to be a just man when the unjust man has the greater right.” But this is not his final judgment. Instead, however much things may appear at times to be turned inside out in the present age, he ultimately trusts in Zeus: “I hope that Zeus, who is wise in counsel, will not completely let this [harm to the just man and greater right to the unjust man] happen.”

Restored in mind, in hope we might say, Hesiod turns to call his brother to justice, now personified: “Perses, take all these things to heart, and give ear to Justice, and put any thought of bodily strength and force out of your mind—for this is the customary law that [Zeus] the son of Kronos ordained for human beings.” Again, he admonishes, “Listen Perses! Give ear to Justice (Dikē), to what is right and customary, and do not multiply needless Violence (Hubris).” He urges his brother forward on the pathway of justice, which “restrains needless violence.” Getting is not

about grabbing; right is not about might, he notes. No, unlike “fish and wild beasts and large flying birds,” humans do not “eat one another.” On the contrary, “Zeus gave human beings Justice, which is by far the best thing that has come to be.”

The just city and man versus the unjust city and man. For Hesiod, the contrast between the just man and the unjust man is clear, particularly in terms of long-term results. Things do not go well for the man who “seizes a pile of wealth and happiness with the strength of his hands or [the one who] plunders it with his tongue.” Instead of success, Hesiod judges that “the gods easily leave [such a] man in the dark, obscure, and they diminish his household, and wealth and happiness are his for a very brief time.” In short, “the man who causes harm to another causes harm to himself.” On the other hand, the hardworking man, as we’ve seen, the one who engages in the good strife of justice, following the hard-then-easy path of work, is the man who experiences long-term prosperity. Hesiod promises that “if someone who knows what is just is willing to declare it in the assembly, then far-seeing Zeus gives him the happiness of wealth.” This is not so for the unjust man, the one who corrupts justice. “The man who intentionally lies in his testimony, swearing a false oath, he is incurably hurt in the very act of hindering Justice. In times to come, that man’s family will be left in the dark, obscure, while the family of the man who swears well and truly will be better off.”

As it goes for just men, so it goes for just cities. This makes sense given the truth that just cities spring up from the ground of just men. “Those men who give straight judgments to foreigners and to those who live within the city and the surrounding land and do not swerve from justice at all, their city thrives and the people in it flourish.” How do they do well? Notably, the citizens of this city know peace. This reality follows from the fact that they do not go to war since “Zeus does not ordain painful war for them.” Why don’t they go to war? Though Hesiod doesn’t directly say, the answer is clear. They don’t because they have everything they need. “Having good things, they thrive in every way and at all times.”

In many ways, life in the just city ends up looking a great deal like life during the time of the golden race of men. Hesiod relates that “the earth bears much of what it takes to live” for those in the just city—much, as in *a lot*. In fact, they have so much that there is no need for them to engage in trade since “the grain-giving field bears crops of fruit and grain.” Moreover, their relationship with one another is good. As with the golden race of men, it appears to be a sharing relationship. “In abundance they distribute every valued thing.” Beyond comparisons with the golden race, the just city seems to rectify some of the relational problems that occur among the iron race of men, such as the fact that fathers and sons are “unlike each other.” Hesiod observes that the just city’s “women give birth to children who are like their parents,” suggesting there is a proper relationship between the two, meaning, most importantly, that children honor and help their parents, something that follows from the fact that parents take care of their children.

In comparison with the thriving just city, the unjust city led by unjust men does not do well. Whereas the just city flourishes, the unjust city suffers the miseries of misfortune: plague and hunger; shrinking households due to a lack of childbirth; defeat in battle and the subsequent sacking of the city; ships lost at sea. In sum, Justice “brings evil to those human beings who drive her out of the city and do not make straightforward distributions.” The message is clear. As Hesiod puts it, Zeus “doesn’t forget what kind of justice this city holds within.”

The need to rely on the gods. Speaking of Zeus and his concern for justice, and the positive and negative results that depend on whether a man or city is just or unjust, Hesiod reminds us throughout the *Works and Days* of the need to rely on the gods who are “the givers of good things.”²² For example, he reminds us to “make sacrifice to the immortal gods” so that “they may be kind to [us] in heart and spirit.” In this way, we will be able to get what we need and want. Moreover, Hesiod advises us to “offer prayers to Zeus of the earth and holy Demeter” for a full harvest of “heavy grain.”

In the *Theogony*, the goddess Hekate shows up as

particularly significant regarding our reliance on the gods. In the context of sacrifice, Hesiod explains that

even now, whenever some human being dwelling somewhere upon the earth offers beautiful, first-rate sacrifices and seeks to appease the gods according to custom, he calls upon Hekate. And when the goddess gladly receives that man's prayers into her house, honor follows him quite easily, and she gives him happiness as his companion—prosperity.

Hekate is able to make a man happy in prosperity, preeminent in the assembly, victorious in battle, lucky in athletic competitions, and successful in fishing and in increasing his livestock. Still, to do well a man must manage his life well in concert with the underlying harmony of the cosmos.

The underlying harmony of things and corresponding human activity. In a long section toward the end of the *Works and Days*, Hesiod instructs us on when and how to do what in terms of various work on the farm and other activities.²³ The section begins, "If your spirit within you longs for wealth, then work in this way, and add work upon work." We are directed to work in such a way that our activities will correspond throughout the course of the year with various signs that appear in the sky or upon the earth—for instance, the appearance of a single star, such as Sirius; or the rise and fall of a whole constellation, such as Orion; or the crawling up of the "house carrier," the snail, from the earth; or the sounding of the voice of migrating cranes across the sky.

If we know what to look for, every naturally occurring event will act as an all-embracing clock (though Hesiod doesn't call it such) that will indicate what we should be doing at any particular time. Accordingly, our activities will be fitting, seasonable, suitable. Stephanie Nelson judges that "the farmer's life, as explored by Hesiod, is the life of understanding, due season, and right measure. It is by these that the farmer stands or falls."²⁴ There's a time to plow and harvest, Hesiod explains. There's a time to sharpen tools and cut wood; a time to gather grapes and make wine; a time to rest and feast; a time to sail

and trade (though Hesiod is no fan of these); a time to bring a wife home; and so on with every activity.

In a brief statement that summarizes his general belief that things fit together, Hesiod says, "May the full period of the year upon the earth fit together well," underscoring the general idea that there is an underlying harmony to everything if we carefully look for it and regulate our activities accordingly. And just as everything fits together during the year as one giant cycle, from the rising of the Pleiades to their setting, so too do the days of each month arrive with a kind of regularity.

We are thus directed to "observe well the days that come from Zeus." Some are favorable for certain activities, some unfavorable, and some are mixed. Each day has its own "portion," that which the day is "good" or "best for." On the other hand, some activities should be avoided on particular days. Then again, we learn that some days actually "fall haphazardly." These days are "harmless . . . bringing nothing." The important lesson is that we should make the attempt to truly know the worth of each day since "sometimes a day is a stepmother, sometimes a mother."

If we zoom out from the fittingness of the year and days to human society as a whole, we learn that Zeus is the one who provides the structure and underlying harmony—again, if we know it and regulate our life accordingly. The structure he provides is justice, something we've already explored at length. Recall, "Zeus gave human beings Justice, which is by far the best thing that has come to be." And even though at times it appears that injustice and needless violence have the upper hand, that crooked judgments and force lead to wealth and honor, Zeus is nevertheless there in the background, always the guarantor of justice. In what is really his statement of belief in the world's underlying harmony or fittingness, its justice, Hesiod informs us that "the eye of Zeus," who sees and knows all things, "will not completely let [a state resulting from injustice] happen." No, the great mind of Zeus cannot be deceived. His "counsels do not fail." "It is not possible to cheat Zeus or to evade the notice of his mind." When, for example, Prometheus attempts to steal fire for men, Zeus, as we've

seen, balances the good of fire with Pandora and all the evil she brings with her.

In the end, Hesiod leaves us with the clear idea that misfortune corresponds to wrong-doing and doing things at the wrong time, just as fortune corresponds to doing what is right at the right time. If you work when you should, you will have what you need, possibly to the point of abundance. If you do not work or fail to observe the proper time, you will end up hungry. What is actually good will typically, if not always, lead to that which is actually good and beneficial. By contrast, what is apparently good—for instance, obtaining good and beneficial things by means of theft or violence, or getting them at the wrong time—will typically lead to that which is actually bad and harmful. All of this, as remarked, is guaranteed by Zeus, something which has been true since the beginning of his rule, when Zeus and his allies defeated “Kronos, the one whose counsels are crooked,” and the other Titans.

A few last notes regarding the underlying harmony or balance of things. First, let’s look at the just apportionment found in the divine and human worlds—what corresponds to the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*. We’ve already learned that the mess of the earliest cosmos is ultimately straightened out by the balancing justice of Zeus, which nobly apportions the cosmos among the gods. Ideally, the same kind of justice and apportionment operates through kings, who are from Zeus and “nourished by [him].” Kings make straight judgments in the assembly in order to apportion wealth (as in the case of Hesiod and his brother and their property) and to give the city a foundation of justice. In this way, the human world reflects the divine world. The second point to note is that the cosmos betrays a certain balance or symmetry. For instance, there is symmetry in the fact that the distance from the sky to the earth is exactly the same as the distance from the earth to Tartaros. Another example is that light and life are the norm on and above the earth, whereas darkness and death are found below. We could go on, examining the immortality of the gods and the mortality of men, or the justice found among human beings and the injustice among wild animals. We need not,

though, because the point is clear. All these aspects of life and the cosmos suggest an underlying harmony of things, of the cosmos, a reality that has tremendous significance for human beings if only we’ll pay attention to it and live our lives accordingly. Indeed, if we do things in a fitting manner, we may discover happiness itself.

Happiness and human flourishing. The very last lines of the *Works and Days* are reserved for what we may accurately term a happiness formula. There Hesiod declares:

Divinely favored and happy in wealth is the man who knows all these things and does his work, blameless before the immortals, distinguishing the birds of omen and shunning transgressions.²⁵

First, notice the general nature of happiness. It has to do with the gods, with being “divinely favored” or daemon-blessed (*eudaimōn*) and having wealth, with being prosperous (*olbios*).²⁶ Second, take in what we must know and do in order to be happy. We must grasp certain things—specifically how work fits together with the course of the year and with the favorable days of the month. Not only that but we must learn how to read the variety of bird signs that appear in the sky—something that, up to this point, Hesiod really doesn’t address.²⁷ Third, once we possess the right kind of knowledge, we must actually do the proper work at the proper time. Doing so we will engage in the right strife, following along the hard-then-easy path of work that ends in success, which is to say wealth and its attending glory and prominence. Finally, we must be aware of the gods. Such cognizance will allow us to be “blameless before the immortals.” For instance, we should “never pour a libation of shining wine at dawn to Zeus and the other immortals with unwashed hands.” If we do, the gods “will not listen but will spit [our] prayers back.” Most importantly, we should be just and so shun transgressions since Zeus blesses just people with wealth.

In short, if we have this knowledge and do these things, we will be happy. For this reason we may read

the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days* as a guide to happiness. Along with Homer, Hesiod is among the earliest in a long line of Greeks to think about what leads to the good life, to happiness, to what Aristotle and others called the goal (*telos*) of life.²⁸

So ends Item 6, “Introduction Part 6 – The Big Themes and Ideas of the *Theogony* & the *Works and Days*.” See **you in Item 7**, “The Cast of Gods and Men – A Quick Reference.”

NOTES

¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* 10.2.

² Compare Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris* 57: “Hesiod ... seems to lay the chaos under all, as a kind of room or place for the world to lie in.”

³ The term “limb-relaxing” or “limb-loosening” in Hesiod seems to echo or be related to Homer’s use of the same. In Homer’s case, it refers to being freed from cares in sleep or to the more general loosening of the knees in battle, when one is conquered by another and dies. See the *Iliad* 5.176, 11.579, 13.360, 15.291, 16.425, 17.349, 22.335, 24.498, and the *Odyssey* 14.69, 14.236, 20.118, 24.381, and the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* 2.282, where Metaneira’s knees are loosened at seeing her son on the ground.

⁴ Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod*, 71.

⁵ It is true that Sky has no idea about the ambush. Still, the implication is that he is somehow acting contrary to wise counsels.

⁶ The Greeks used a number of words, both nouns and verbs, for different kinds of love (*eros*, *storgē*, *phileō*, *philogonia*, etc.). For ancient Christians, the love equating to God was *agapē* (see 1 John 4.8).

⁷ See, for instance, Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017).

⁸ Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod*, 49.

⁹ Stephanie Nelson, *God and Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil*, 46.

¹⁰ Jenny Strauss Clay, *Hesiod’s Cosmos*, 13.

¹¹ Robert Lamberton, *Hesiod*, 88.

¹² The Greek for “race” is *genos* (same as the Latin and thus English *genus*), a word that can also be given as “kind” or “sort” or “type.”

¹³ Whatever our own views on the matter, our present job is neither to defend Hesiod’s view nor to denounce it. Rather, our humble task is simply to understand why he held it—what his reasons were. That said, we would do well to keep in mind Hesiod’s general pessimism regarding human beings and the human condition, as well as his negative judgment regarding men (males) of his own time and other ages. Women are not the only target of his criticism!

¹⁴ The challenge is one that most of us can hardly understand in our world of readily available and, for the most part, guaranteed food.

¹⁵ For a similar reading of women, one influenced by Hesiod, see the seventh century BC poem of Semonides of Amorgos on different women (given in The Classics Cave’s *The Best of Ancient Greek Literature*): “In the beginning, god made different kinds of women with a variety of minds. He made one from a long-haired swine. Everything is disordered in her household, filthy. ... Another he made from a sinful fox ... a dog ... earth ... the sea ... an ass ... a weasel ... and from a horse. ... He made another from an ape. Above all, this one is the greatest misfortune Zeus has given to men. ... The man who gets a bee-like wife is happy since blame doesn’t touch her. Thanks to this woman, his wealth grows, and whatever it takes for him to live prospers. Loving and loved, she grows old with her husband, giving birth to beautiful children and distinguished offspring. She stands out among all women and divine grace surrounds her. She’s not delighted by sitting around with women when they talk about those things belonging to Aphrodite. These are the best and wisest kind of women with which Zeus gratifies men. It is by the art of Zeus that all these other tribes of women exist and remain among men. For Zeus made women this great misfortune. ...”

¹⁶ Homer, *Odyssey* 17.288-289.

¹⁷ Although many translations or commentators give “failure” and “success” for *kakotēs* and *aretē*, others give “inferiority,” “misery,” “evil,” “wickedness,” or “vice” for *kakotēs*, and “superiority,” “excellence,” “goodness,” or “virtue” for *aretē*.

¹⁸ See Plato, *Apology* 30b, where Socrates states, “I tell you that virtue (*aretē*) is not born from wealth, but from virtue come wealth and all other good things to human beings, both to an individual and to a state.”

¹⁹ To see how Greek thinking on *aretē* shifted over time from Homer to the Neoplatonist Plotinus, see *Aretē: Excellence or Virtue: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Aretē* (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021).

²⁰ For Homer’s understanding of happiness, see Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish: What Homer Believed about Happiness and the Good Life* (Sugar Land: EuZōn Media, 2015).

²¹ E.K.L. Francis, “The Personality Type of the Peasant According to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*,” *Rural Sociology* 10 (1945): 275-95. That admitted, there are hints in Homer that he himself was not exactly happy with the “Homeric” worldview, which emphasized outdoing one’s opponents in violent strife to have more and more. See chapter 12, “Must We? An Apparent Shift,” in Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish*. See also Caroline Alexander, *The War that Killed Achilles: The True Story of the Iliad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

²² It is a belief shared by Homer: “All men need the gods.” See *Odyssey* 3.48.

²³ See *Works and Days* 281-617.

²⁴ Stephanie Nelson, *God and Land: The Metaphysics of Farming in Hesiod and Vergil*, 48.

²⁵ We could have just as well translated “divinely favored” as “happy.” The Greek term is *eudaimōn*, which means “happy, blessed with a good *daimōn* or spirit.” The translation “divinely favored” is inspired by Cornelius de Heer’s arguments in *ΜΑΚΑΡ-ΕΥΔΑΙΜΩΝ-ΟΛΒΙΟΣ-ΕΥΤΥΧΗΣ: A Study of the Semantic Field Denoting Happiness in Ancient Greek to the End of the 5th Century B.C.*, (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1969).

²⁶ *Eudaimōn* is often given as “happy” (where *eudaimonia* is happiness). *Olbios* is given as the same, “happy” (where *olbos* is “happiness”). For other possibilities, see the Glossary.

²⁷ We may understand something about the nature of bird signs from Homer. In the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, a bird sign (omen) auguring good fortune is one that appears on one’s righthand side (that of the rising sun and thus light if one is looking north), whereas one signifying doom appears on the left (that of the setting sun and thus darkness). For examples, see *Iliad* 24.310-312 and *Odyssey* 15.525-526.

²⁸ For more on the Greek view of happiness, see *Happiness: What the Ancient Greeks Thought and Said about Happiness*, (Sugar Land: The Classics Cave, 2021). For Homer’s view of happiness, see Tim J. Young, *A Hero’s Wish: What Homer Believed about Happiness and the Good Life*. For a general history of happiness, including the Greeks, see Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Gove Press, 2006).

Thank you for supporting The Classics Cave.

You’ll find books, readings, workouts, and more at www.theclassicscave.com. Do you want to support the Cave’s mission? Let’s talk! Contact Tim Young at tim@theclassicscave.com to sponsor or donate to the Cave.

“Let him hear the advice of Hesiod. . . . The advice of Hesiod is good.” —Aristotle

“Lampon . . . greatly honors the sayings of Hesiod, the one he declares and recommends to his sons.”
—Pindar

The Classics Cave ▪ www.theclassicscave.com



THE CLASSICS CAVE
The earliest light for a brighter life
www.theclassicscave.com

