

Some Principles at Work in Hesiod's *Theogony*

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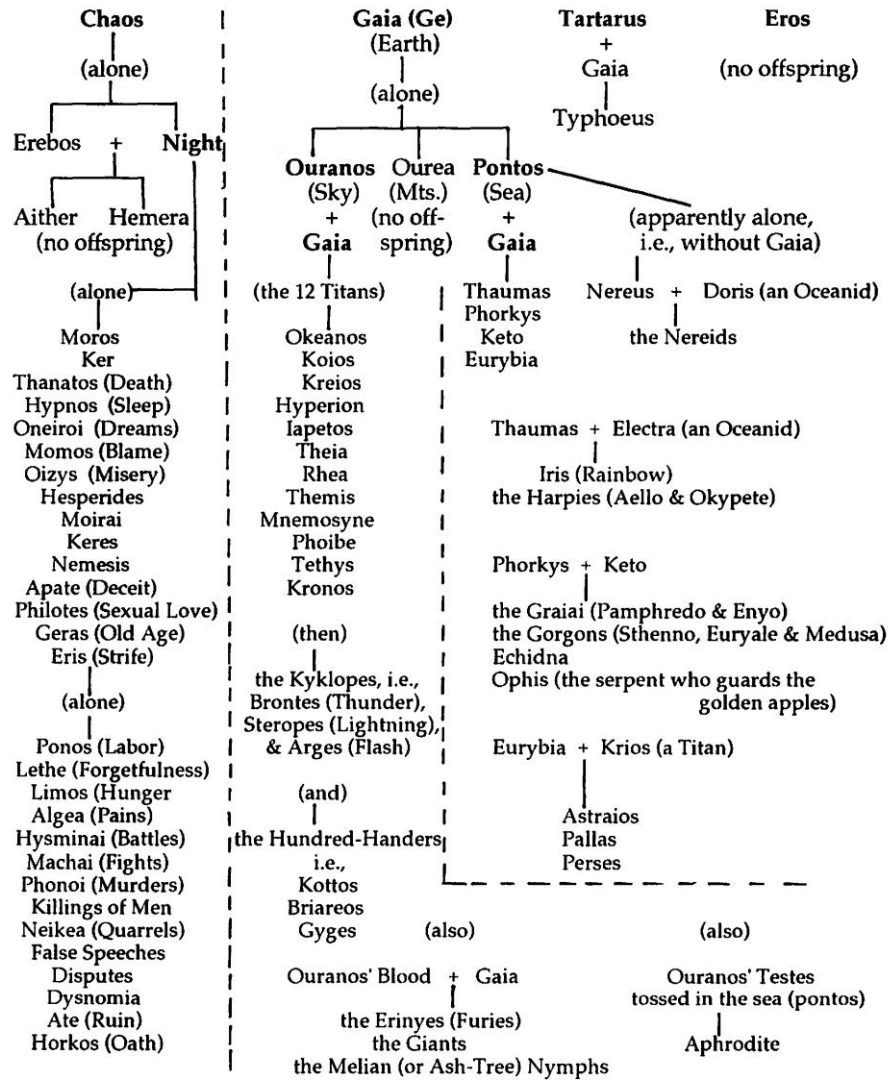
This essay was originally given as a talk at the annual conference of the Association of Core Texts and Courses (ACTC) in April of 2010. Under those circumstances I made some prefatory remarks recommending the use of Hesiod's *Theogony* as a possible core text to prepare the way for courses not only in Greek poetry, in epic poetry especially to be sure, but also in Greek philosophy, and for that matter also in the *Bible*. In the university where I teach, all our freshmen start the fall semester by reading the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*. They also take a course either in the *Republic* and the *Ethics*, or in the *Bible*, or in both. For all of these courses one might ask, "Where better to begin than with creation, the coming into being of the cosmos?" Here is how I argued the case for beginning with Hesiod on the occasion of the ACTC conference.

In attempting to understand the creation of the universe, as scientists we have the account that we call the Big Bang, but another recourse we have to the understanding of this event is the imagination, wherewith we can envision the coming into being and growth of the cosmos. The imagination might shrink before this task, but an exemplary man of imagination did some of our work for us 2,700 years ago: Hesiod. This is a talk about how Hesiod understood the coming into being of such entities as Earth, Sky, and Sea, and their role in a naturally generated, as opposed to an artistically constructed, cosmos. The difference is that between *poiesis* and *genesis*. *Poiesis* is of course exemplified for us by the Hebrew account – though paradoxically we know it by the name of the *Book of Genesis*, but Hesiod's account more properly deserves the title, for it is governed by various principles that are deeply genetic. The focus of this talk will be a consideration of some of these principles.

Let me begin by referring to the accompanying illustration (see Fig. 1), which diagrams the generations of the gods as described in the *Theogony*. Starting at the top of this chart with Chaos and Gaia, the first principle one might discern is that which leads from what could be called "nothing" to "something" to "everything." But perhaps one shouldn't call the origin "nothing." Prior to the coming into being of Chaos and Gaia there "was" some original, apparently static condition. In later terms, instead of thinking of it as nothing, we might call it a condition of pure potentiality, even a state of pure being, a state however, whatever it was, that could not be known until its constituent elements emerged into a state of becoming,¹ until they became actualized. There is then some initial coincidence between the knowable and the actual, while the potential remains wholly conjectural. But once actualized, Chaos and Gaia have an enormous amount of potentiality still in them – all things in fact are therein, and the subsequent process of generation is an actualization of the entities that are potential within each

Figure 1

Hesiod, *Theogony* - Genealogical Chart #1



“generation.” In modern terms the Big Bang is an event wherein the conjectural one becomes the evident many. That is to say, the present material cosmos with all its atomic and sub-atomic multiplicity has come from an original and undifferentiated something whose “being,” whose “nature,” we cannot know until it expresses itself as the constituent elements that resided within

it *in potentia*, and this attempt to know we call natural science or physics, but whether the account we examine is that of science or of myth, in both cases, cosmogony and theogony are equally an emergence into a condition of perishability, which is knowable, of a presumed original condition of imperishability, which is unknowable. So, this is a paradox – that the whole, the one, must give up its virtue, its simplicity, its unchangeability, in order to be known. In order to be known it must have parts; it must become complex and variable. So, tangentially, the question might be, Why would the One wish to be known, especially if its being known has to be at the expense of the perfection of its unity. Why would the permanent, the divine, wish to reveal itself in the impermanent, the mortal? So there we have what we might call the cosmological problem. Why would the unknown wish to make itself known, at the cost, as it were, of its own eventual death? In Christian terms the question might be phrased as, “why did God become Christ?” In Hesiod's terms, the answer seems to be that being has a yearning for becoming. Eros [Ἔρως] is the cause of this yearning.² The yearning is that of pure potency for complete actualization, such that the end of the process is the fully articulated cosmos down to all the ultimate particulars, which, as Hesiod describes them, are in a way us. The poem ends apparently with a catalogue of children born of mortal men and immortal goddesses, but scholars debate just where that end occurs, because in the manuscripts there is an immediate continuation with a catalogue of the tribe born of mortal women (at line 1021). There is no end in other words. The poem is still being written as, generation after generation, we replace ourselves with our own progeny. So that is one principle, from the One to the infinitude of ultimate particulars.

Another principle also emerges right at the start of the *Theogony* when the separation is made between Chaos and Earth. These two entities generate separate lines of progeny, the members of which never intermarry. Their separation from each other is represented on the diagram by the left-hand set of vertical dashes. The contrast between them has been called that between *Unform* and *Form*.³ On the one hand, Chaos, which is without substance and without form, produces entities that exist but are intangible and invisible: Ἐρεβός [Darkness] and Νύξ [Night], and they in turn produce Brilliance [Αἰθήρ] and Day [Ἡμέρη], that is to say, something like spaces in which creatures with substance can be seen and grasped. And Night then without Eros produces states which can exist within substantial living beings but which have no separate identity or existence apart from what they can achieve by coming to be in other living things. Then follow the children of Eris [Ἔρις], Conflict, conditions of pain that again exist only in other creatures, especially human beings, concluding with Horkos [Ὅρκος], Oath, the bulwark past which nothing can proceed and which represents the symbolic end of this line of progeny. There is an etymological connection between Ὅρκος = Oath, and Ἐρκος = Barrier; in this case Horkos is the barrier through which no further descendants of Chaos are allowed to pass.⁴

Form, on the other hand, in its initial emergence out of pure potentiality, is present within Earth, but she herself is the principal of substance – the stuff out of which everything else that is substantial comes to be. She contains within herself, however, principles of form, Ouranos [Οὐρανός], Sky; Ourea [Οὐρεα], Mountains; and Pontos [Πόντος], Sea. Along with Earth, all these together may be considered the first order of deities, the order of elemental gods that

become the elements of classical materialism, but here in Hesiod they are still animate. Among these three principles of form, which are derivative from Earth, the Mountains are non-generative. They seem to be a manifestation of Earth herself as the horizon that separates Sky from Sea. Sky and Sea in turn, in union with Earth, generate beings that have both substance and form. From Earth and Sky are born the Titans (see Figure 2), the second order of deities, i.e., intelligible entities that have the power to generate but are more like attributes of fully developed creatures than creatures themselves. From their names, with the exception of Okeanos [Ὠκεᾶνός], Ocean, we understand them to be abstract powers rather than creatures with identifiable shapes that can be represented in art as having “bodies.”⁵ And from these “powers” or “attributes” the third generation is born. But when the third generation is born, it becomes apparent that there are two kinds of form, represented by Ouranos and Pontos, and a third principle emerges, a paradoxical one, that there is a distinction

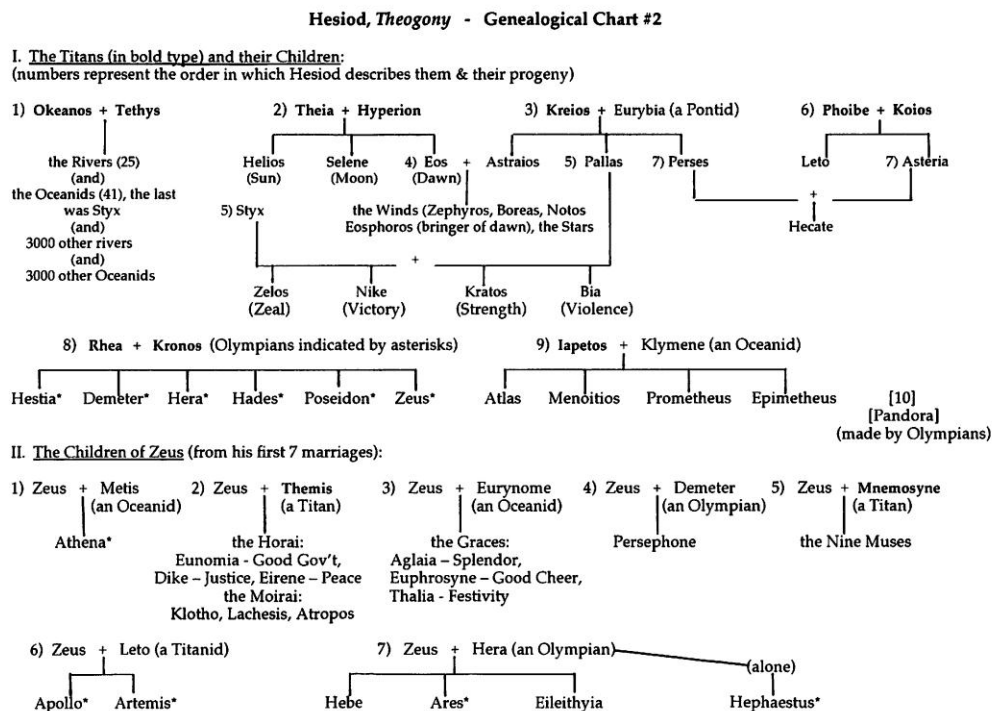


Figure 2

between well-articulated form and “amorphous” form, having to do symbolically perhaps with the difference between sky and sea and the quality of visibility within them – that is to say, how things appear in each medium, whether they are clear or confusing in outline, and finally whether they are shapely or monstrous, beautiful or ugly.

The difference may be called that between the Ouranids and the Pontids. The separation between them is indicated by the right-hand set of vertical dashes on Figure 1. The culmination

of Ouranian visibility is the Olympian pantheon, the gods whose beauty and clarity are perhaps the cause of their being worshipped, who embody the complete coincidence of form and substance in such distinctive ways that each is a peculiar entity, an individual divine power with special epithets, and these epithets enable us to know each of them as a person. Yet, strangely, the names of most of the Olympians themselves are not perspicuous, as opposed to the names of the two generations of gods that preceded them.⁶ In the Olympians a name is just that, a marker of their individualized being. Another principle of genealogy is therefore that of definition, according to which there is a progression from the initial order of substances, or elements, whose names are what they are, Earth, Sky, and Sea, to the Titanian order of divinities whose names are attributes that float free of the bodies within which by implication they lie, to the order of Olympians, who combine substance and attribute, whose names are pure names marking each as a distinctive divine entity, and whose epithets make it clear that they have beautiful bodies.

On the other side of the dichotomy of form, the Pontid tendency towards multiformity is most clearly represented in the only marriage of two Pontids with each other, that of Phorkys and Keto. Their marriage produces the Graiai, the Gorgons, Echidna and Ophis, and their descendants such as Orthos, Cerberus, the Hydra, the Chimaera, the Sphinx, the Nemean Lion and other grotesque creatures who are eventually slain by various heroes, that is, by the mortal descendants of the Olympians, by Heracles and other heroes, who ultimately are all Ouranids, such as Oedipus, Perseus, and Bellerophon. The cosmos therefore is driven by principles of order and disorder, of the beautiful and the ugly, and there is strife between them. Heroic action is the conclusion of the process. The two tendencies of theogony are in conflict with each other, both are in Earth, and the tendency in her towards articulate form, beauty and intelligibility prevails. Theogony is the struggle of what "is" or pure potency – not only to become, but also to become known. It culminates in knowing beings who can satisfy the need of being to be intelligible. We might say it culminates in Hesiod, the heroic poet.

But the heroes and the poets are not gods. Somehow the divine apparently declines into the heroic and then into the mortal. So a fourth principle emerges, one that is visible very early – the principle that generation implies degeneration, that is, it implies the process of growing old and being replaced by succeeding generations, one's own children in fact. The solution to this threat first employed by Ouranos was not to permit his children to be born but to keep them confined in the Earth, and Kronos in his turn allowed them to be born but then swallowed them, and even Zeus used this method to prevent a son stronger than himself from being born. He swallowed his first wife, Metis. These events represent, in mythical form, the attempt of each generation to solve the problem of succession, of being potent, that is, of having children, but not being succeeded by them. (Here, one might think of Donald Hall's poem, *My Son, My Executioner*.) The attempts of Ouranos and Cronos fail, thanks in part to the efforts of Earth to prevent them from, as it were, swallowing up the future, the very promise of generation, whereas Zeus' attempt seems to have succeeded for the time being (if we are still in his stage of cosmic history). A possible explanation of why Zeus succeeds in conquering generation, where his father and grandfather failed, is that when he swallows Metis [Μῆτις], she is a substance, so to speak, a

separate divine entity, but in him she becomes metis [μητις],⁷ the prudent power of the mind to solve problems, that is to say, not a substance but an attribute; as such he exercises her continuously when he formulates his many plans, and in doing so, he continuously gives birth to her. She has not simply disappeared into him.

There are, however, other stories about a possible future son greater than Zeus, such as that of Thetis, stories which continue to point towards the fact that generated beings decay and die. As the universe develops, paradoxically, it develops in stages towards its own death. Teleologically, therefore, something must be said for each later stage as it emerges. The development may be from a static elemental world that is inert, while waiting for the impress of form, to the dynamic world of the Titans, whose dynamism is represented as willfulness, or pure power, to that of the Olympians, who represent the combination of power and intelligence, and thence perhaps to the stage of intelligence without any power other than that of intelligence itself, and this would be our world, the world of humans. Hence the notion is sometimes implicit in the accounts of the poets that humans are superior to gods on the grounds of their weakness; they are vulnerable to the assaults of nature, and they die. To ward off both, they need to exercise their intelligence in the form of the arts, and this is the story of Prometheus, but at the same time their weakness and mortality give them an advantage over the gods. Humans have a greater ability to love and to prize the value of articulate form and of beauty, precisely because they know what it is to lose their beauty and perish. Perhaps we might conjecture that this is also why the gods fall in love with humans. How poignant, how worthy of eros, can beauty be that never diminishes?

Leaving this possibility aside, however, let us conclude by returning to the degenerative tendency of the *Theogony* as illustrated by Earth's history, that is, by the stages that mark the differences between the children to whom she gives birth, from Sky and Sea to Typhoeus. In her prime she bears the Ouranids and the Pontids, but then her fecundity exceeds the ability of Ouranos' principle of form to control it. She produces the Cyclopes, monsters with one eye, then the creatures with a hundred hands and fifty heads, and finally in a paroxysm of fertility, through the power of Aphrodite and the seed of Tartarus, she produces her last child, Typhoeus, and is barren thereafter. Briefly, to look for a moment at the consequence, the loss of the fertility of the Earth results in the next poem of Hesiod, the *Works and Days*. Through work, through the tilling of her as soil, she becomes fruitful again, but not abundantly so. She only produces enough so that humans, by learning to share, can survive, and by surviving and sharing, can learn to be just.

While Earth's power, as the principle of substance, declines over the course of the poem, Ouranos, as the principle of beautiful form, loses his power suddenly. The essence of Ouranos, however, is perhaps best represented by his last child, Aphrodite, who is his alone. She is born from his severed genitalia and brought to term in the sea. We might think of her as replacing the power of her father. She figures repeatedly towards the end of the poem as generative in herself and as the cause of generation in others.⁸ As Eros was present at the start of the process of generation, Aphrodite becomes the symbolic culmination of this process, which issues in the ever self-renewing, sometimes articulate, sometimes beautiful, sometimes intelligent, carriers of the future of the power of genesis, human beings.

There is more to be said about arresting the power of genesis among the gods, for this is the power that will subject them to the same fate confronting humans – some form either of death or of diminution into insignificance. Zeus halts the process of divine generation by swallowing Metis, his first wife, by using her power within him to organize the cosmos, to order it through various dispensations, by assigning prerogatives to the deities under his sway, but he preserves the generative principle by continuing to engage in a series of dynastic “marriages,” which in various ways produce either deities that do not generate or humans that do but are not a threat to him because they are mortal. By looking at these dynastic marriages one can see that he replaces physis with nomos, nature with law, genesis with poiesis. But perhaps this is a matter for a talk at another conference of the ACTC.

Notes

1. See the various forms of γίγνομαι (gignomai) at lines 106, 108, 111, 115, 116, 123, 124, 126, etc.
2. Eros, the fourth entity to appear out of the pre-existent state, is the non-generative principal that can be considered the co-cause of what is to come, in conjunction with a generative urge within the phenomena themselves. Such an account, if accurate, would be in accord with the pre-philosophic Greek notion of dual causation, both internal within, and external to, the things themselves, a notion that is present in both epic and tragic poetry.

The third entity is Tartarus, apparently necessary as the repository of immortal beings who are to be replaced by a later generation, e.g., the Titans, who lose their title to rule but who by definition cannot die. They reside in a place between Chaos and Earth.

3. Phillipson, Paula. 1966. “Genealogie als mythische Form.” In *Hesiod*, ed. Ernst Heitsch. Wege der Forschung, v. 44. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 661.
4. See the Homeric phrase referring to teeth as the barrier through which ill-spoken words should not be allowed to pass.
5. The Greeks conceived the Ocean to be the river that delimits the earth that is known to us. It was a substance like the sea, with elemental content, but at the periphery of our knowledge. It confined within its circumference the cosmos that was to come. The other Titans were different, if we can judge them by their names: Koios (=

- Poios), “of what sort?”; Kreios (= Kreion), “he who rules”; Hyperion, “he who goes on high”; Iapetos, “he who hurls”; Theia, “she who is divine”; Rhea, “she who flows abundantly”; Themis, “she who is fixed in position”; Mnemosyne, “she who remembers”; Phoibe, “she who shines brightly”; Tethys, “she who nurses”; Kronos, “he who accomplishes.” For the most part, grammatically, these are adjectives made into nouns. They represent attributes rather than substances.
6. The meaning of the names of most of the Olympians is not known. The names may derive from non-Greek sources, some from a pre-Greek language, spoken by the people in the peninsula before the Greeks arrived, others from the religion of the Mycenaean Greeks themselves, whose meaning the Greeks lost in the destruction of their civilization at the end of the Bronze Age. Linguists debate about the meaning of the names of the deities of the Olympian pantheon, with the notable exceptions of Hestia (Hearth), Demeter (Earth Mother), and Zeus (god of the day sky). But there is continuing debate about the meanings of Hera, Athena, Poseidon, Hades, Apollo, Artemis, Ares, and Hephaestus. The ancient Greeks themselves wondered about the names of their gods and sometimes assigned meanings to them, but they did not debate about the meaning of the names of the elemental gods and the Titans. The meaning of these names lay clearly on the surface.
 7. There is of course no difference between “M” and “m” in classical Greek, but for us the orthographic distinction is useful in enabling us to mark the differentiation, which a Greek was aware of, between a substance and an attribute.
 8. Note the profusion of references to Aphrodite at the end of the poem, wherein she is both generative herself and the cause of generation in others, at this point most particularly in humans, where the future of generation may safely lie without threat to the gods.