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*Hesiod's Cosmos* by Jenny Strauss Clay

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The aim of this book is to demonstrate that Hesiod's *Theogony* and his *Works and Days* not only are self-consistent, but also present interrelated and complementary perspectives of the universe. After summarizing the main points of the author's argument, the present review will focus on her account of Hesiod's understanding of human knowledge. This account rests at the heart of her overall interpretation of Hesiod and has important implications for the poet's place in early Greek intellectual history.

The author admits in the introduction that Hesiod's two poems exhibit 'massive differences' both in structure and content [5]. She goes on to point out that the tendency in past scholarship has been to explain these differences by means of a diachronic model, which assumes an evolution from 'the more "traditional" *Theogony* to the more "individualistic" *Works and Days*' [5]. Clay, on the other hand, takes what she calls a 'synchronic view', treating the two poems as 'fundamentally complementary and interdependent' [6]. Elaborating her approach, the author suggests that Hesiod intended the poems to be understood as two halves of a whole—a 'diptych'—as he continually revised each poem in view of the other [6].

The first two chapters survey the content, structure, and movement of the *Theogony* and of the *Works and Days*. In the case of the former, Clay argues that Hesiod depicts 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' [13]. In contrast with this 'positive progression', the movement of the *Works and Days* ends 'on a far more pessimistic note' [48]. This dynamic, Clay argues, involves a

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narrowing of focus as it moves not only from the larger political community to the farm, household, family, and individual human body, but also from the regular and predictable cycle of the seasons and months to the more obscure individual days [10, 48]. The author concludes that the poem exhibits a ‘progressive darkening of vision’ and describes a decrease in the human capacity for certainty [47–48].

The author’s surveys point to what she calls ‘irresolvable tensions’ between the divine and the human worlds [48]. In the subsequent chapters, she sets out to clarify these tensions by focusing on several of their specific manifestations. As part of this project, chapter 3 examines the proems of each work. Clay begins by considering the famous passage in the *Theogony* in which the Muses pre-authorize Hesiod’s account of the beginnings and evolution of the cosmos. In doing so, they remark rather obscurely, ‘We know how to compose many lies indistinguishable from things that are real; And we know, when we wish, to pronounce things that are true’ [58; Clay’s trans., *Theog.* 27–28]. The tendency in previous scholarship has been to identify an external source, such as Homer, as the target of this remark, on the grounds that Hesiod would not call into question the truth of his own message [58–59]. Clay, on the other hand, takes Hesiod’s claim here as a serious admission of the ambiguity of the Muses’ (and therefore of his own) words. Her interpretation is that Hesiod acknowledges an inability to guarantee the absolute truth of his account [63]. She explains:

The unbridgeable gap between the Muses and their pupil is constituted by the difference between divine and human knowledge, more specifically, that knowledge, which is available to the gods alone, that can discern truths from falsehoods that masquerade as truths and human knowledge that cannot. [63–64]

The author concludes that Hesiod introduces here an important, ‘but nonetheless qualified, skepticism’, even though he is not denying outright the veracity of poetry and human language [64].

In her analysis of the proem of the *Works and Days*, Clay seeks to highlight the distinctive perspective of that work. Although its proem also begins with an invocation of the Muses, it is quite brief in comparison to the invocation in the proem of the *Theogony* [72]. Furthermore, in the *Works and Days*, Hesiod does not invoke the

Muses to authorize his knowledge of the subject matter. This is because, Clay suggests, the subject matter of the *Works and Days* is the realities (ἐτήτυμα) of human life—how to work and prosper, rather than the gods and their origins [72, 78]. Clay suggests that the different orientations of each proem show how the two poems complement one another. The proem of the *Theogony*, on the one hand, offers an Olympian perspective of the cosmos through the mediation of the Muses. Human beings cannot, therefore, distinguish its truths as such. The *Works and Days*, on the other hand, presents the human perspective of the cosmos under the order of Zeus. It may dispense with a divine intermediary, since common experience can confirm its veracity [78–80].

Chapter 4 continues the author’s examination of the particular tensions between the divine and human worlds. Here Clay is concerned with explaining how and why Hesiod’s accounts of the origins of mankind differ between the *Theogony* and the *Works and Days*. She suggests that in the myth of the five races in the latter poem the succession of ages constitutes a series of experiments to produce a race of inferior beings who would offer sacrifices and other honors to the gods [94]. Clay points out that in the *Theogony* human beings descend from the Giants, themselves a direct result of the blood from Uranus’ severed genitals dripping onto Gaia [97]. In this way, the poem attributes the origins of the human race to a fortuitous accident that occurred at the very beginning of the cosmos [98]. Clay explains the presence of these divergent stories of human origins in terms of the different perspectives of each poem:

Olympus evidently regards mankind as a threat to divine supremacy, a threat that must be tamed and channeled into obedience; human beings look nostalgically to a golden age of happiness, which they set in an era before the reign of Zeus; over the course of time, they have become increasingly distant and subservient to the gods. [99]

The author devotes chapter 5 to a discussion of Hesiod’s two versions of the Prometheus myth and the divergent perspectives on the relationship between mortals and immortals that each version offers. Clay argues that both versions represent the human condition as one of ambiguity, a mixture of good and evil, and as involving a ‘progressive estrangement of gods and men’ [101–102]. As an example, she

points to the story of Pandora and her jar in the *Works and Days*. Pandora, she argues, is a ‘doublet’ of her jar: she has an external beauty that conceals the troubles within [103]. After Prometheus returns fire to mortals, Zeus substitutes Pandora for his initial attempt to take it away. He thus renders the technology a necessary evil by filling human life with the toil and misery of supporting a family [119–120]. Hope, Clay continues, is similarly ambiguous, as it ‘promises and seduces, but all too rarely delivers’ [103]. The author thus concludes that Hesiod regards Hope as an evil, ‘the ultimate *kalon kakon*’ which characterizes the human condition and situates it between ‘the ignorance of the beasts and the certain knowledge of the gods’ [103: cf. 124].

Clay goes on to consider the differences between the two versions of the Prometheus myth. She argues that both versions represent the history of the human race as proceeding in a negative direction, in contrast with the evolution of the gods and the ordering of the cosmos [126–127]. In the *Theogony*, however, the separation of mankind from the gods is the result of Zeus’ political efforts to secure his divine ascendancy. In this case, human beings are viewed externally from the divine perspective and as a potential threat to Zeus’ regime [116–117, 126–128]. In contrast, the Prometheus myth in the *Works and Days* represents the separation of mankind from the gods as the intended result of the gods’ need for the presence of inferior creatures to enjoy their own superiority [116]. In this way, the poem ‘presents mankind from an internal subjective human standpoint: the gods, who have deprived mankind of an earlier bliss, have filled human life with misery’ [128]. Clay concludes that ‘the full pathos of the human condition’ emerges only from combining the perspectives of both poems [128].

Chapter 6 continues the author’s overall project of demonstrating how the differences between the divine and human perspectives of Hesiod’s cosmos can be integrated into a larger whole. Here Clay elaborates the relationships between mortals and immortals by examining the role of human beings in the *Theogony* and the role of the gods in the *Works and Days*. In the former poem, Clay focuses on the ‘Hymn to Hecate’, in which humans play a prominent part. She draws attention to Hesiod’s description of Hecate’s powers over the lives of men: in particular, the goddess grants preeminence in council and victory in war to whomever she wishes; she assists kings

and athletic competitors; and she grants success in fishing and raising sheep if she wills [133–134]. Clay observes here how Hecate's goodwill is crucial to success, and concludes that the goddess represents the constant presence of chance in human affairs [135]. Just as in the case of Pindar's Τύχαι [*Olympian* 12], the arbitrary decisions of Hesiod's Hecate explain why the gods only sometimes fulfill the prayers of men and why there is no truly reliable sign from the gods to mankind [135–137]. In this way, Clay explains, Hecate provides the 'crucial intermediary' between gods and men [138].

Next, the author examines the role of gods in the *Works and Days* by tracing the changing influence of Zeus. From the beginning of this poem, Clay argues, Zeus alone possesses the powers attributed to Hecate in the *Theogony*. This suggests that from the human perspective Zeus directly guides the fate of mankind [143, 149]. Clay continues by arguing that our certainty about Zeus' power to determine (τεκμαίρεται) rewards and punishments diminishes as the poem narrows its focus [144]. In the Calendar, Zeus' direct intervention has already begun to diminish, as the cycle of seasons functions on its own and provides mortals with useful astronomical signs [145]. Later in the poem, Zeus becomes simply the god of weather, which mortals cannot hope to foresee with the certainty that they had earlier attained in regard to the cycle of seasons and the life of justice. Clay concludes that Hesiod was 'fully aware' that uncertainty surrounds any human endeavor; the poem thus ends with a view of the human condition as 'naked and vulnerable' [148–149].

In chapter 7, Clay considers what the two types of hybrids (monsters and heroes) that violate the boundaries of Hesiod's otherwise systematic cosmos might reveal about that system. She completes her study with a brief discussion of Hesiod's place in the tradition of heroic epic. Clay concludes that instead of regarding his own project as a rejection of the heroic tradition, Hesiod considers it to be more universal and complete than Homer's poetry. She explains,

[h]is dual vision comprehends both the divine and the human cosmos and unites the traditions of theogonic poetry with those of 'wisdom' literature, the divine world of Being and the ephemeral human world of Becoming. The gulf Hesiod detects and illuminates between the divine and human perspective points forward to the philosophical endeavors of Empedocles, Parmenides, and Heraclitus. [181–182]

In sum, Clay attributes to Hesiod a rather pessimistic outlook on the power of human knowledge. She emphasizes that Hesiod admits in the *Theogony* that he cannot guarantee the truth of his account, and that he thus embraces a ‘qualified skepticism’. She also attributes to the poet a view similar to the *amechania* of Pindar, who insists that the outcomes of human efforts depend entirely upon chance and that there is no such thing as a reliable sign (τὸ σαφὲς τέκμαρ) from the gods to mortals about the future. Clay likewise argues that in the *Works and Days* Hesiod characterizes the human condition by Hope and the inability to attain sure knowledge. Although Hesiod initially promises to reveal the realities (ἐτήτυμα) of human existence, she argues, the poem eventually gives way to uncertainty and darkness, and ends on a ‘pessimistic note’.

*Hesiod’s Cosmos* offers a convincing and thorough explanation of how the poet’s often enigmatic claims about human knowledge can be interpreted consistently, both with one another and across each of his two poems. In fact, the book goes a long way towards showing that it is indeed meaningful to speak of such a thing as ‘Hesiod’s understanding of human knowledge’. With that said, however, Clay’s final assessment of Hesiod as ultimately skeptical and even pessimistic seems extreme. This is not to suggest that Hesiod believes that human beings are capable of divine knowledge, or that he denies that most cases of death, disease, and suffering are unpredictable. But it is clear that he tends to focus more on what human beings can know than what they cannot. For instance, it seems reasonable to say that the lesson of the *Works and Days* is that all sorts of important outcomes are gained not by chance, but as the result of a human agent’s understanding of a given situation. Whether or not the gods were responsible for establishing the system whereby the agent’s actions naturally led to the expected result is not relevant. The point, rather, is Hesiod’s insistence that human beings can in fact begin to understand that system and use their knowledge to their own advantage.

The following considerations should support this assessment. In the *Works and Days*, Hesiod says that the gods have concealed the livelihood of men [*Opera* 42], but he does not mean that we cannot devise our own means of success; rather, he simply means that we must work to in order to succeed. Such work involves acting in accordance with our understanding of the world around us, or as

Hesiod later puts it, thinking for ourselves about what course of action might be better in the end [τέλος, *Op.* 293–294]. Similarly, the entire Calendar section [*Op.* 383ff.] implies that there do exist in the heavens and in nature reliable signs of the appropriate times for effecting specific desirable results. It is on the assumption of the reliability of such indirect means of knowledge that Hesiod promises to reveal the realities of human life and how best to attain prosperity.

With this said, Hesiod does still grant that the unexpected might occur. He explains, for example, that the will of Zeus is different at different times, and difficult (ἀργαλέος) for mortals to know [*Op.* 479ff.]. But it is important to note that he does not say that Zeus' will is impossible for men to know. He does admit that, even if one starts the winter ploughing too late, this is no guarantee of loss. But the possible gain here can still be known through rational calculation. For Hesiod explains that, in this case, if the call of the cuckoo should sound for the first time, and if Zeus should send a specified amount of rain on the third day, then the late-plougher will in fact prosper. Here, in laying out such detailed conditions for success, and in doing so in a positivistic tone characteristic of so many Hippocratic treatises (he calls his advice here a φάρμακον, [*Op.* 485]), Hesiod suggests that mortals still have a reliable means to determine outcomes even when faced with the unexpected.

Hesiod's subsequent remarks bear out this suggestion. He insists that the lazy person who neglects the winter chores depends on 'empty hope', which leads to trouble [*Op.* 493 ff.]. Here the poet appears to be distinguishing Hope from another, more positive human mental faculty. A person who does not plan for the winter or engage in the appropriate winter work does so on the basis of 'empty Hope' to the extent that his tendency to wish for a desirable end without making the appropriate plans will not likely fulfill his needs. His consequent dearth, in fact, proves that Hope is no good [ἐπις οὐκ ἀγαθή, *Op.* 500]. All this, however, suggests that there is a 'good' kind of expectation, one that a person who does plan for the future and work appropriately enjoys. His expectations are good because they will likely come to fruition in accordance with his understanding of the world around him. Although Hesiod would say that we usually have only the futile hope of foreseeing such outcomes as disease, misery, and death, this does not mean that he would characterize human beings by their possession of this weaker capacity. Nor would

he likely say, as Clay puts it, that we are all, ‘in the final analysis, a thrall to Hope and ignorant of Zeus’s plans’ [124].

If the above sketch of Hesiod’s outlook on the potential of human knowledge is correct, then it need not invalidate Clay’s interpretation. For it, too, acknowledges the scepticism that Clay attributes to Hesiod. But it restricts this attitude to a few issues in life. For the most part, Hesiod would agree that we can be certain about how to prosper. Perhaps then, it is better to regard the poet as a forerunner of the more positivistic tradition which tends to defend man’s capacity for indirect knowledge—e.g., the Hippocratic authors, or the character Prometheus in *Prometheus Bound*, who insists that mortals do have available to them in astronomy and other sciences a reliable sign (τέκμαρ βέβαιον) to determine the issues of their lives [cf. *Prom. Vinct.* 454–458, 486–487, 497–499]. Hesiod may believe that we are not able to know every decision of the gods on every occasion; but the fact that he focuses on what we can know, as opposed to, say, Pindar’s resignation, gives good reason to attribute to him a rather optimistic view of human intelligence.