



Highlights of Ancient Greek Philosophy

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Hesiod (of the 8th Century B.C.)

Hesiod was the founder of Greek didactic poetry, and, after **Homer**, was the earliest Greek poet whose work has survived. It has been suggested by some that Greek Philosophy began with Hesiod, for in his poem *Theogony* (meaning “Origin of the Gods”) he presented a very compelling story of how the Universe came into existence *by itself*, without having been created by a God or gods. In offering this secular cosmogony in order to explain the emergence of the Universe and the gods, Hesiod comes to within a hair’s breadth of freeing the mind of man from the need for supernatural deities, as his poem recounts the creation of the world out of chaos by natural means, but then he backs off, and retreats to the safety of conforming to the superstitions of the masses as he goes on to delineate the birth and genealogy of the gods. Despite this lapse — a lapse which might disqualify Hesiod from bearing the title “Founder of Philosophy” — Hesiod’s cosmogony is so elegant that it deserves to be kept alive in the mind of man. Hesiod’s *Theogony* is an account of the *origin* of things. This preoccupation with origins is typical of the whole of early Greek philosophy. Cosmogony (the branch of philosophy dealing with theories of the origin of the Universe) rests entirely upon the assumption that there must have been a time when the present world-order did not exist; for only on this assumption is its existence something that must be accounted for. Yet, this assumption may well be incorrect. Nevertheless, if we assume that there *was* a time when the present world-order did not exist, Hesiod’s cosmogony offers a poetically satisfying, charmingly anthropomorphic explanation of how the Universe could have come into being *by itself*: First, *Chaos* was born, then *Earth*, next *Tartarus* (the underworld, born in a nook in the Earth), then *Love* was born. Chaos gave birth to *Erebos* (where the dead pass as soon as they die) then to dark-robed *Night*. From Night, the *Upper Air* was born, and *Day* (the offspring of Night’s love for Erebos.) The Earth’s first offspring (equal to herself) was *Starry Heaven*. Then Earth bore the *Lofty Hills*, the happy haunts of goddess *Nymphs* who dwell in mountain glens. Next, Earth bore the Sea, *Pontus*, then having “lain with” her son, Heaven, Mother Earth bore the deeply-whirling *Ocean*. Although we customarily think of order being produced out of chaos, and tend to think of chaos as a pre-existent state of affairs out of which the world-order came into being, Hesiod says distinctly that Chaos, too, came into being. Hesiod’s conception of Chaos differs markedly from our own interpretation of the term — to Hesiod, *Chaos* meant not “utter confusion,” but rather *the region or gap between Heaven and Earth*, the abode of blazing thunderbolts. The birth of Chaos in Hesiod’s *Theogony* — in effect the opening of the gap between Heaven and Earth — seems to presuppose that before this, Earth and Heaven were one. Creation myths even older than Hesiod’s have it that *the world-order was created when the primordial Unity split in two*. In the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, for

example, Earth and Sky are not first distinguished, and nothing exists except the primeval waters. The hero, *Marduk*, after a great battle, kills *Tiamat*, the goddess of the waters, and divides her body into two halves: one half, the Sky with its sweet rain waters; and the other half, the Earth with its salty sea. In the Jewish Old Testament book of *Genesis*, too, (in a creation myth obviously based upon the *Enuma Elish*) the Earth is at first “without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the waters.” But God “divided the waters which were below the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament [i.e., rain water]” to create Heaven and Earth. (It is interesting to note how each culture put a slightly different spin on essentially the same creation myth: the lusty and shameless Greek pagans attributed the birth of the world order to rampant universal sexuality, while the prudish guilt-ridden patriarchal Jews attributed it to the sexless act of their sexless male God, and the famously violent Assyrians attributed it to a male hero hacking a goddess to pieces.) In any case, at first there was no distinction between Earth and Heaven, but they were “one.” *It was the creation of Chaos which made possible their emergence as distinct entities.* In other words, it was the separation of a previously unified Heaven and Earth by the creation of Chaos (which separated them) that began the creation of the world-order (composed of separate entities.) In Hesiod’s cosmogony, *the primordial Unity contained within it opposing principles (male and female), without which nothing could have happened; the process of creation could never begin from a completely undifferentiated Unity.* Thus, like so many other “primitive” myths, Hesiod’s ontology employs sexual imagery, which seems only natural, for the coming into being of Chaos may be viewed as a kind of birth, and all birth presupposes the union of male and female. This sexual imagery is sustained throughout Hesiod’s doctrine: from the division of Earth and Heaven, *Love is born, the desire of the male and the female — the desire of the sundered parts of the original whole, for one another.* In this exceedingly ancient view, all of Nature is suffused with sexual longing, as the rain falls from “her bedfellow, the sky, [to] impregnate the Earth.” According to Hesiod, the Olympian gods are directly descended from the *Titans*, who, in turn, were directly descended from Heaven and Earth, so that they issued, as it were, from the womb of Nature itself. Their birth was but an extension of the process by which the world-order itself came into being. Thus, the Greek gods of the first generation (i.e., the *Titans*) did not create the cosmos but came into being *with* it. In the Greek cosmogony it was not any god that created the Universe, rather, a generalized universal sex drive of Nature (the longing of the sundered parts of the original whole for one another) was the force which brought the Cosmos into being. This view is really not at all inconsistent with the natural properties of matter as revealed by modern physics (for example, charge separation from neutral matter, pair creation of a massive particle and a massive anti-particle from massless photons, etc.) and Hesiod’s explanation has the advantage of lacking the fatal flaw which is inherent in Judaeo-Christian cosmogony, namely the question of, “If everything needed to be created, then who created the creator?” Hesiod’s creator-less emergence of the Cosmos raises another question, though: If supernatural deities are not needed in order to explain the origin of the Universe, then why should the gods not be discarded altogether? Who needs them,

and what purpose could they possibly serve? My guess is that the gods were to the ancient Greeks what Santa Claus is to modern Westerners: an enjoyable myth and an edifying allegory that only toddlers seriously believe in, but a myth which is nevertheless a part of the culture that is worth preserving. If, for example, ancient Greek culture had discarded the delightful myth of Aphrodite, the goddess of Love, then what excuse would they have had for attending the many fuck-fests held in order to worship her? Also, let's face it, Greek myths are *great stories* that touch the human soul — stories that one can learn a lot from even if they're not literally true. Perhaps it was Hesiod's love for the edifying power of these tales of the gods, that caused him to become a mythographer of the first magnitude, but a mythographer is not at all the same thing as a Philosopher. Before we move on to history's first *true* philosopher, **Thales**, it perhaps bears passing mention that Hesiod made a grim Nostradamus-like prediction that involves a generation of men that sounds chillingly like those that inhabit the earth today. After his description of the "Fourth race of men" (the *Demi-gods*) who now forever dwell in the "blessed isles" with their hearts eternally released from care, Hesiod predicted that there would arise a "Fifth generation" of men who would be characterized by ceaseless toil, labor, and corruption — men to whom the gods would give bitter sorrow to endure. This race of men Hesiod predicted that Zeus would destroy when they would no longer repay their aged parents for their childhood care, when brotherly love no longer exists, when favor is not shown to him who is just or good, when the evil-doers' arrogance wins men's praise, and when "*Right shall depend upon might.*" [Hesiod, *Works and Days*] Does this sound at all familiar? Although the "Fifth generation of men" is usually taken to refer to the iron-wielding Dorians, it just as well describes some of the salient features of present-day culture. Perhaps today's arrogant and selfish hate-mongers are due to be visited by the blazing thunderbolts of Zeus ...

