

Oxford Handbooks Online

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

Mitchell Miller

The Oxford Handbook of Hesiod

Edited by Alexander C. Loney and Stephen Scully

Print Publication Date: Sep 2018

Subject: Classical Studies, Classical Poetry, Classical Reception, Classical Philosophy

Online Publication Date: Aug 2018 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190209032.013.42

Abstract and Keywords

The early pre-Socratics' major speculative and critical initiatives—in particular Anaximander's conceptions of the justice of the cosmos and of the apeiron as its archē and Xenophanes's polemics against immorality and anthropomorphism in the depiction of the gods and against any claim to divine inspiration—appear to break with Hesiod's form of thought. But the conceptual, critical, and ethical depth of Hesiod's own rethinking of the lore that he inherited complicates this picture. Close examination of each of their major initiatives together with the relevant passages in Hesiod shows that even in the course of departing from his thought, Anaximander and Xenophanes also reappropriate and renew it. A postscript to this chapter poses some questions for future inquiry into Heraclitus's and Parmenides's receptions of Hesiod.

Keywords: anthropomorphism, apeiron, archē, cosmogony, justice

STUDYING the reception of Hesiod's thought by Anaximander and Xenophanes is a daunting project.¹ It is not just that we have only fragments and sketchy reports to go on; what is more, both these texts and Hesiod's reflect the development of unprecedented modes of thought. As a consequence, almost everything that one ventures to say is contestable. Let me begin by acknowledging the obscurity of the depth of each of our thinkers, as well as the inevitable danger of circularity that faces any effort to reconstruct their relations.

The project is nonetheless compelling. Anaximander and Xenophanes attempt, each in his own way, to break free from the mythopoeic tradition, and Hesiod is the most philosophical member of that tradition. In their generation of new forms of thought, Anaximander and Xenophanes develop possibilities that are arguably implicit, albeit

within the mythopoeia they challenge, in Hesiod.² The mix of departure and return is veritably Heraclitean.

I begin with Anaximander, then turn to Xenophanes.

Anaximander and Hesiod on the Question of the *Archē*

Anaximander's *Apeiron Archē*, Justice, and the Opposites

Anaximander is best known for declaring the *archē* of the world—that is, the source of the sphere of the heavens and the earth—to be *to apeiron*, “the unlimited.” He is (p. 208) objecting to his Milesian predecessor Thales's view that all things originate from water. He evidently agrees with Thales that the *archē* is something physical, for he holds that *to apeiron* “surrounds and embraces all things” (περιέχειν ἅπαντα). But as the name he gives it indicates, he takes it to outstrip every given limit of place (for it lies, untraversibly vast, outside the sphere of the heavens), of time (for it is “eternal and ageless”), and of kind (for it is qualitatively indefinite, being “neither water nor any other of the so-called elements”).³

Why does Anaximander reject Thales's identification of the *archē* as water, and why does he think it to be, instead, indefinite in kind? Our best recourse is Anaximander's one surviving fragment, in which he declares that “[the things that are] perish into the things out of which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time.” If we ask, for what “injustice” committed by, say, A, it would be a proportionate “penalty and retribution” for A to “perish into” B, we see that A, by coming to be, must have caused B to perish, and also that B must have perished into A; for A's “perishing” is proportionate to its having denied to B its existence, and A's perishing “into” B, that is, its letting B come to be “out of” it, restores to B what it has denied. But this restoration to B, because it costs A its existence, is also B's denial to A of A's existence. Hence Anaximander envisages an endless alternation of crime and reparation, in which each reparation is itself a new crime that calls for new reparation. And if we ask what “things that are” stand in this reciprocal relation of crime and reparation, in which the coming to be of each causes the perishing of the other and vice versa, we see that their mutual negation requires that we think of opposites—presumably, as is suggested by other reports, the hot and the cold. Anaximander discerns, in the endless alternation of the seasons, the fundamental justice that governs the basic conditions of the natural world.

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

These reflections show why the *archē* of the world must be “neither water nor any other of the so-called elements” but, instead, indefinite in kind. As the ultimate source of all else, the *archē* must itself have no source; hence it is “eternal” (ἀίδιον [Kirk et al. 1983: 107-8]). Accordingly, for it to be water would be a crime against the dry, for the dry would be forever denied coming to be, and the “penalty and retribution” for this “injustice” would be forever forestalled. More generally, just insofar as to be qualitatively definite is to be subject to having an opposite, for the *archē* to be qualitatively definite would be to make permanent the injustice of its suppressing its opposite. Justice, then, requires that the *archē* be such as to have no opposite, and this requires that it be qualitatively indefinite.

These reflections also cast light on the logic that motivates Anaximander’s understanding of cosmogenesis. Insofar as the basic powers within the world are the opposites and the *apeiron* is the *archē* of the world, the coming to be of the world must involve the “separating-off of the opposites” from the *apeiron*. But this must not be understood to imply that the opposites initially exist in the *apeiron*, for this would undermine its character of being qualitatively indefinite. Accordingly, Anaximander interposes a middle term, which, in the words of Ps.-Plutarch, he characterizes only by its function: “that (p. 209) which is productive (γόνιμον) ... of hot and cold.” (Kirk et al. 1983: 131) In the first phase of cosmogenesis this “productive” something is “separated off” from the eternal *apeiron*, and in the second phase it somehow produces the hot and the cold and, so, the world; thus the *apeiron* itself remains unqualified by the opposites.

Hesiod’s Cosmogony: The Justice of the Whole

To appreciate the way in which Anaximander’s notion of the *apeiron archē* responds to Hesiod, we must first mark and interpret the key cosmogonic passage in the *Theogony* (hereafter *Th*), 116-33:⁴

First of all, Chaos was born (γένετ’); then next
Broad-breasted Earth, a firm seat forever for all
The immortals who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus,
And misty Tartara in the depths under the wide-wayed ground,⁵

And Eros, handsomest among the deathless gods,
A looser of limbs, who in all the gods and all human beings
Overpowers in their breasts their intelligence and careful planning.
And from Chaos were born both Erebus and dark Night,
And from Night, in turn, were born both Aither and Day,

Whom she conceived and bore after joining in love with Erebus.
But Earth first brought forth, as an equal to herself,
Starry Sky, so that he might cover her all over,
In order to be a firm seat forever for the blessed gods,

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

And she brought forth the tall Mountains, pleasing haunts of the goddess

Nymphs who make their homes in the forested hills,
And also she bore the barren main with its raging swell,
Sea, all without any sweet act of love; then next,
Having lain with Sky, she bore deep-swirling Ocean... .

Even before exploring these lines in detail, we can hardly fail to be impressed by the break in mode of thought represented by Anaximander's notion of the *apeiron*. Hesiod belongs to the mythopoeic tradition, and he proceeds by letting a series of vivid images unfold before his hearer; Anaximander, by contrast, makes inventive use of a term that, even while it brings to mind the picture of a vast expanse, also resists picture thinking itself. What is without outer bounds of place and time and qualitatively indefinite defies the individuating borders and qualitative determinateness that the constitution of a picture requires; one feels oneself challenged by Anaximander to enter unfamiliar thought space, the space of the abstract or purely conceptual. This, however, is only the beginning, not the end of the matter of Anaximander's relation to Hesiod. For in a different but analogous way, Hesiod too enters unfamiliar thought space when at *Th* 105–10 he prepares the way for his cosmogony; in the course of his appeal to the Muses to

sound out the holy stock of the everlasting immortals
who were born from Earth (Γῆς) and starry Sky
and gloomy Night, whom briny Sea brought to maturity,
and tell how at the first gods (θεοί) ... [,]

he makes a subtle but nonetheless sudden shift, here in the middle of line 108,⁶ from straightforwardly anthropomorphic characterization of the gods to transparently cosmic characterization, shifting from the person figures of 105–8 to the sorts of structures and conditions of the natural world that these person figures represent:

... and earth (καὶ γαῖα) were born
and rivers and boundless sea, raging in its swell,
and shining stars and wide sky above all.

What is more, some of the key structures Hesiod will introduce in the cosmogony do not belong to the *visible* natural world. Hence we must be ready to ask, before we settle on the contrasts we have begun to draw between his and Anaximander's language, whether and to what degree Hesiod too, even in the medium of vivid mythopoeic imagery, is pressing toward an abstract thought content.⁷

Let me now venture a reading of the main lines of thought in *Th* 116–33. This will put us in position to return to Anaximander and begin to mark the ways his proposal of an *apeiron archē* responds to Hesiod. I proceed in five steps:⁸

(1) *The first four: Chaos, Earth, Tartara, and Eros (116–22).* Though the first four beings are “born” (γένετ’, 116), Hesiod refrains from naming a parent and, indeed, from asserting any sibling relations. What he offers instead is the vision of an event that is partly topological, partly logical. His word *Chaos* derives from the root *cha-* and signifies the sort of “gap” that appears, to cite a cognate, in a “yawn” (χάσκειν, χάίνειν). The birth of Chaos is the topological event of the opening of a gap in what can only be thought of retrospectively as a hitherto undifferentiated field, and the opening brings along with it, in its immediate aftermath (“next”), the emergence of Earth and Tartaros as its two sides. The birth of Eros is, strange to say, a logical event. Eros is not to be envisaged as a thing in space but rather is the force that draws spatially distinct partners together, and its birth therefore presupposes and complements the birth of Chaos.

(2) *The character of Tartara.* To appreciate the motivation of the subsequent series of births in the cosmogony, it is important to keep in the mind’s eye a vivid image of Tartaros. As the underworld, it is as far below the Earth, separated from it by Chaos (814), as the Earth is below the Sky (720–25). It is a “vast chasm” (740), and its darkness—it is associated with Erebos and filled with “murk” or “gloom” (729, (p. 211) also 653, 659) and “mist” (119, 721, 729, 736 [= 807])—and its “dank, moldy” character (731, 739 [= 810]) prevent any distinct contours or shapes from appearing to sight and touch. Indeed, were a man so unlucky as to fall into it, “stormblast upon stormblast would sweep him one way and another” (742), making it impossible for him to get his bearings; as the onomatopoeia of its name suggests, it is characterized by unceasing disturbance. These vivid details help to explain the curious fact that Hesiod first names Tartaros in the plural, *Tartara*; a being so lacking in internal structure must also lack integrity.

(3) *The offspring of Chaos (123–25) and Earth (126–33): two kinds of order in interplay.* The topological event of the opening of the gap that separates Earth and Tartaros is only the first, in itself incomplete step in Hesiod's vision of cosmogenesis; Earth and Tartaros only receive their full specificities *as* Earth and *as* Tartaros through the further offspring of Chaos and Earth. These births exhibit two kinds of relation, and in their fitting together these constitute the order of the cosmos as a whole. First, already prefigured by the complementing of Chaos by Eros, there is a being's need, if it is to have its full specificity, for its opposite; thus Chaos's first-born, the spatial and temporal powers of darkness, Erebus and Night, together beget their correlative opposites, Aither and Day. By these begettings Erebus expresses his need, if he is to be the darkness of the underworld, for there also to be the brightness of the upper sky, Aither, and Night expresses her need, if she is to be the time of darkness, for there also to be the time of light, Day. Second, there is a whole's need, if it is to have genuine wholeness, for its articulation into parts. Hesiod displays this by having Earth bear, by and within herself, Mountains and Sea; thus Earth gives herself the internal differentiation essential to her *as* Earth. What is more, these two kinds of relation, each of which is itself a kind of complementarity, also complement one another. That a being's need for its opposite can complete a whole's self-differentiation is already evident in Earth's bearing of Mountains and Sea: as "tall," "forested," and the "pleasing haunts of nymphs," Mountains stand in determinate contrast with the low, "barren," and "raging swell" of Sea. More striking still is the way this self-differentiation completes Earth's acquiring of her opposite, Sky: when Earth first bears, "as an equal to herself, starry Sky," they are merely two undifferentiated masses, with Sky "covering [Earth] all over" without, however, standing in any qualitative contrast to her; by giving birth to Mountains and Sea, however, Earth makes herself into—as, now, a differentiated whole—the opposite to the undifferentiated expanse of Sky. That this achievement of qualitative contrast allows them to fit together as opposites, Hesiod lets us see in the final begetting of the cosmogony: Earth now lies with Sky and together they beget "deep swirling Ocean," the circular stream that, flowing around Earth at the farthest horizon, forms the continuous "point of contact between earth and the enclosing bowl of sky" (Kirk et al. 1983: 36n1)—thus Earth and Sky join together, constituting the upper world as a whole.

(4) *Hesiod's vision of the cosmic whole.* This constitution of the upper world of Earth and Sky is, in turn, both the analog to and the completion of the constitution of (p. 212) the cosmos as a whole. If, letting ourselves "see" the process of cosmogenesis unfold, we keep vividly in the mind's eye the character of Tartaros as a "vast chasm" without either internal structure or integrity, we will see that just as the upper world is constituted as the whole of the internally differentiated whole of Earth, with its Mountains and Sea, and undifferentiated Sky, so the cosmos in its entirety is constituted as the whole of the differentiated whole of the upper world and undifferentiated Tartaros.

(5) *The cosmogony as the visible expression of the justice of Zeus.* I spoke at the outset of the “abstract thought content” that, in the medium of his vivid imagery, Hesiod presses toward. If we now set the cosmogony within the context of the *Th* as a whole and, in turn, set the *Th* together with the *Works and Days* (hereafter *WD*), we can make out this content. The main body of the *Th* tells the story of the victory of Zeus over the Titans. This victory does not consist, as did Kronos’s victory over Ouranos, merely of the violent taking of supreme power; rather, it consists of Zeus’s introduction of the rule of justice, that is, of that proper apportioning that prevents the need for violence in the first place. Zeus’s first three acts after driving the Titans into Tartaros are to “distribute well among [the gods who fought with him] their titles and privileges” (885, cf. 66–67 and 74); to swallow Metis and with her inside him give birth to Athena, “the equal of her father in wise counsel and strength”⁹ (896); and with Themis (justice as established by custom) to beget “Good Order” (Εὐνομίην), Justice, and Peace” (901–2). In the *WD*, in turn, Zeus ordains the rule of justice for human beings. The crux of justice is to restrict one’s reach to “the half” that is one’s own rather than to try to seize “the whole” for oneself (*WD* 40); respecting boundaries, each party allows the other its due. The cosmogony gives visible form to this idea of justice. Beginning with the birth of Chaos, it makes central the differentiation that gives rise to Earth and Tartaros, and at each step along its vivid way it matches part and counterpart in a nested whole. To mark this for ourselves by tracing from the innermost parts to the outermost whole: we are shown the pairs of Mountains and Sea, of the thereby differentiated Earth and undifferentiated Sky, and of the *thereby* differentiated upper world and undifferentiated Tartaros. Thus the cosmogony images the formation of a world in which it is appropriate, because its differentiations and pairings express the idea of justice as its ordering principle, for a just Zeus to come to prevail.

Anaximander's Critical Response (Reconstructed) to Hesiod's Cosmogony

How does Anaximander's thought respond to Hesiod's? We have no surviving explicit evidence—no text of Anaximander's referring to Hesiod—to guide us. What we can do, however, is to set Anaximander's notions of the *apeiron archē* and the interplay of the opposites against the background of *Th* 116–33; if we do, three observations present (p. 213) themselves. First, while for Anaximander the coming into being of each of the opposites negates the other's existence, the requirement of justice reflects his recognition of the need that each has for the other; that each must pay reparation to the other “for [its] injustice” attests that the being of each requires the being of the other. Thus Anaximander shares the understanding that leads Hesiod to balance the being of Night with that of Day and, more generally, to structure the cosmos as a complex of counterbalancing opposites. Indeed, it is precisely because he agrees with Hesiod in letting his thought be guided by justice that Anaximander challenges Thales, rejecting the privileging of the wet over the dry. Second, this very agreement also leads Anaximander to challenge Hesiod—albeit, remarkably, in a way that Hesiod's portrayal of the birth of Chaos itself seems to invite. Just insofar as the differentiation that first begins to bring the world into being occurs as a “birth” (γένετ', *Th* 116), there would seem to need to be a parent. But what sort of being could precede the birth of Chaos and play this role? Insofar as it is only with this first differentiation, the gapping of Earth and Tartaros, that the world begins, this presupposed parent would seem to have to be an undifferentiated, indefinite, and—lacking any other to delimit it in place or time—boundless being. Thus Anaximander's conception of the *apeiron archē* in effect challenges Hesiod's beginning by making explicit the still more primal being that the birth of Chaos itself silently presupposes!¹⁰ Third, and as already noted, by giving his conception the strikingly transparent name *a-peiron*, Anaximander takes a decisive step beyond Hesiodic mythopoeia and toward the non-imagistic conceptual thinking that will eventually prevail, above all with Parmenides, in the emerging philosophic tradition; again, however, it is a step that, as the implicit conceptual order of Hesiod's cosmogony makes palpable, Hesiod's own thinking itself in effect invites.

Xenophanes and Hesiod on the Representation and Knowledge of the Divine

Xenophanes's reception of Hesiod is both indirect and critical. In our few surviving fragments, he mentions Hesiod only once, lumping him together with Homer (fr. 11.1)¹¹ and objecting to their attributing immoral conduct to the gods. But Hesiod is no less an implicit target in Xenophanes's critical remarks on anthropomorphism and the nature of

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

the divine and in his declarations of the limits and source of human understanding. We shall consider each of these three concerns in turn.

Xenophanes's Moral-Political Qualms—and Hesiod's

Xenophanes claims a “wisdom” (σοφίη, 2.12) that contributes uniquely to the city's being “in good order” (ἐν εὐνομίῃ, 2.19) and prospering (2.22). On the basis of this “wisdom” (p. 214) he urges that humans “always show respect for the gods” and declares that there is nothing χρηστόν—morally right or (in Lesher's translation) “useful”—in portraying them in “battles” and “furious conflicts” such as the Titanomachy (1.21–24); similar concerns, presumably, lead him to object to “Homer[’s] and Hesiod[’s] attributing to the gods all the things which are matters of disgrace and censure among humans, thieving and adultery (μοιχεύειν) and deceiving one another” (11.1–3; also 12.2). Whereas the former portrayals might tempt the citizenry too easily to enter into foreign wars or even, recalling that the Titanomachy was a conflict between two generations of the same family, into internecine violence, the latter might be mistaken to legitimize violations of the proprieties of property and marriage and of the bond of trust that the unity of the city requires. Moral-political “wisdom” therefore proscribes portraying the gods as engaged in violent or immorally acquisitive comportment.

What is the bearing of this on Hesiod? First, Xenophanes's thought seems to key not from any idea of moral perfection but rather from a normative respect for what is properly another's—be this another's property or spouse or, indeed, city—and from an idea of the “good order” and prosperity that maintaining this respect enables for a community. This is strikingly Hesiodic. “Fools, all,” Hesiod exclaims at *WD* 40, “who know not how much greater is the half than the whole!” Sticking to what is one's own, not trying to seize by force the “half” that is another's, but rather working on one's own land in “good strife” with one's neighbor, is the practice of the ethic of justice and work that will avoid the worst, each party's losing everything in “bad strife,” and enable the best, peace and plenty for all. It is, then, a Hesiodic moral-political order that Xenophanes supports by striking from poetry and lore portrayals of the gods that fail to “show respect for [them].”

There are, of course, conspicuous cases in Hesiod's poems of various gods comporting themselves in the objectionable ways that Xenophanes decries. The “furious conflict” of the Titanomachy lies at the heart of the *Th*, and it is preceded by the tales of the violence and counter-violence of Sky and Kronos and followed by the tale of Zeus's battle against the monster Typhoeus. Attempted deception and theft are key moments in the extended tale, told once in the *Th* (521–616) and again in the *WD* (42–104), of Zeus's contest with Prometheus and the fashioning of Pandora. But a closer look at his representation of Zeus, in particular, shows that Hesiod is already guided by the moral-political scruples that motivate Xenophanes. First, the point of Zeus's violence against the Titans is to put an end to the very rule of violence that they stand for and replace it with the rule of justice; as we have already observed, Zeus's first acts after securing victory are to distribute power to the other Olympians, to beget his “equal in wise counsel and

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

strength,” and with Themis, to beget “Good Order, Justice, and Peace.” Second, in the Pandora story it is not Zeus but Prometheus who is the primary thief and deceiver; Zeus’s “deception” (*WD* 83) in ordering the fashioning of Pandora is a punishment that brings home the inescapability of a life of work.¹² Third, in the long catalog of Zeus’s many fatherings at *Th* 886–944, there is no mention of the salacious comportment—the varieties of *μοιχεύειν*—attributed to him in so much of the lore that Hesiod inherited from archaic myth; especially the old tales of Zeus’s beddings of Leto, Maia, Semele, and Alkmene (p. 215) provided rich material for portraying his variously opportunistic, shape-shifting, and exploitative philanderings, but in each case the poem forgoes this, restricting itself instead to naming the glorious offspring by which Zeus distributes his powers to later generations. Doesn’t Hesiod in each of these ways morally sanitize his portrait of Zeus¹³ along the lines—albeit not to the full extent—that Xenophanes later demands? Seen in this light, the notion of Xenophanes as a critic of “Homer and Hesiod” gives way to the notion of Xenophanes as extending what is already Hesiod’s moral-political “wisdom” in portraying Zeus.

Xenophanes’s Critique of Anthropomorphism and His Reconception of the God(s): Two Questions

Xenophanes reconceives the divine by reflections that are at once negative and positive. Exposing the tendency to project onto the gods our own ethnic looks (“snub-nosed and black,” “blue-eyed and red-haired,” 16.1–2), body types (“horses would draw the figures of the gods as similar to horses,” etc., 15), powers (“voice,” 14.2), and manners (“clothing,” 14.2), he reimagines the divine as in the highest possible degree “not at all like mortals in body or in thought” (23.2). Hence he pictures the divine as having no distinct and localized organs of consciousness—rather, “all [of him] sees, all [of him] thinks, all [of him] hears” (24); he imagines the divine as “remain[ing] in the same [place], not moving at all”—for “it is not fitting for him to travel to different places at different times” (26.1–2); and, indeed, he regards the divine as having no need to move—for he is radically unlike mortals not only in his mind and in his body but also in the very relation between these: “completely without effort he shakes all things by the thought of his mind” (25).

Two sets of questions should confront any effort to interpret these declarations. The first is motivated by a seeming gap in Xenophanes’s thought. Is the “showing [of] respect for the gods” that strips away morally objectionable acts compatible with the reconception of the divine that strips away anthropomorphic characters? That is, does the conception of the divine that is reached by setting aside every limiting character that critical reflection on anthropomorphic projection can discern—from particular looks and specific body type to the distinctions between faculties of consciousness and even between the powers of body and mind themselves—allow for or contradict the attribution to the divine of any distinctively moral characters of goodness and justice?

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

The second set of questions has motivated my use of the vague phrase, “the divine,” in these last two paragraphs. Is Xenophanes a monotheist? To focus on the key fragment, 23, how should we hear the first two words, Ἐἷς θεὸς, as they lead into the rest of the first line, ἔν τε θεοῖσι καὶ ἀνθρώποισι μέγιστος? Is εἷς, “one,” a predicate, yielding the line “god is one, greatest among both gods and humans,” or is it attributive, yielding the line “one god is greatest among gods and humans”? If we take εἷς as a predicate and hear εἷς θεὸς as a declaration of monotheism, we immediately face another question: How should we understand the reference to “gods” in the very next phrase—and, multiplying the difficulty, in its appearance in at least seven other fragments: 1.24, 11.1, 14.1, 15.3, 16.1, 18.1, and (p. 216) 34.2? It is not implausible to hear the phrase “among both gods and humans” in 23.1 as typically Xenophanean provocative irony; as a *quasi*-Homeric and Hesiodic formula, it challenges his hearers to recognize the contrast with their anthropomorphic polytheism that Xenophanes’s insight into the “greatness” of the divine, under his new conception, requires. But it is no less plausible to take the plural reference to “gods” in 23.1 and the other fragments to indicate that Xenophanes, even while he elevates his “one god” above all others, continues to affirm the reality of these others; in this view, Xenophanes is less a revolutionary who overthrows traditional polytheism than a revisionist who leaves in place the idea of a plurality of gods, whoever and however they may be, even while claiming an extraordinary primacy for his “one god.”¹⁴

How we respond to these two sets of questions will have major implications for our understanding of Xenophanes’s reception of Hesiod. If we take Xenophanes to have pushed his stripping away of anthropomorphic characters so far that he holds back from attributing not just vices but virtues as well to the divine, then we take him to abandon his own moral-political “wisdom,” for such a divinity—whether one or many—would have no attributes qualifying it to serve as a source of moral-political order for human beings, much less as a moral paradigm; such a divinity would make no contribution to the establishment or maintenance of the “good order” of the city. And since, as we have argued, in his moral-political “wisdom” Xenophanes extends rather than opposes Hesiod’s own, a Xenophanes whose anti-anthropomorphic theology undercuts his moral-political “wisdom” would undercut Hesiod’s as well. On the other hand, turning to the second set of questions, if we take Xenophanes to be a polytheistic revisionist, then the path is open for taking his theology to remain consistent with his moral-political “wisdom” and with Hesiod’s as well; a “one god” who is at once the “greatest” and yet remains situated “among both gods and men” would be an analog to Hesiod’s Zeus in the exalted status Zeus achieves by his victories over the Titans and Typhoeus. And it would remain open to Xenophanes, limiting his project of de-anthropomorphization in favor of his less radical drive to purge our representations of the divine of any trace of violence or vice, to credit his “one god” with maximally virtuous relations to the other gods and to human beings; as a lordly figure comporting himself with goodness and justice, such a god would be, even if in other ways “not at all like mortals,” a distillation of the essence of Hesiod’s still anthropomorphic figure of the father of “Good Order, Justice, and Peace.” A Xenophanes

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

who took this course would be consistent both with his own moral-political “wisdom” and with Hesiod’s.

Xenophanes—and Hesiod?—on the Limits and Means of Human Understanding

That we are reduced to outlining alternative possibilities may be the consequence of the fact that, as Aristotle famously complained, Xenophanes “made nothing clear” (*Metaphysics* 986b22–23). But Xenophanes himself might reply that it is rather (p. 217) a consequence of the fact that “the clear truth” (τὸ ... σαφές) is beyond the reach of human beings. In frs. 34 and 18, Xenophanes marks the limits and sources of human understanding:

And the clear truth no human has seen, nor will there be anyone
Who knows about the gods and about all the things of which I speak.
For even if a person should happen to say most fully what is perfectly so,
All the same he himself would not know it; for opinion (δόκος) is allotted to all.

(34.1–4)¹⁵

By no means did the gods reveal all things to mortals from the beginning,
But in time, by searching (or “examining,” ζητοῦντες), they discover better.

(18.1–2)

As before, the bearing of these reflections on Hesiod is complex. On the one hand, Hesiod bases his claim to know about the gods on the “fact,” as he sings in the proem to the *Th*, that the Muses visited him on Mt. Helicon and, “breath[ing] into me a divine voice, ... commanded me to hymn the race of the blessed gods everlasting” (*Th* 31–33). If, as his shift from imperatives to the Muses in lines 104–15 to the indicative at line 116 implies we should, we take the *Th* from line 116 on as his channeling of the Muses’ reply to his imperatives, then we will take Hesiod to be claiming that the *Th* is divinely inspired and informed. Should we take Hesiod’s report of the Muses’ visit literally? If we do, then we make him a likely target of Xenophanes’s denial in the opening clause of fr. 18: “By no means did the gods reveal all things to mortals from the beginning.”

On the other hand, a variety of considerations should lead us to hesitate to take Hesiod’s report at face value. West has identified six “conventional elements” in the proem, namely, that the “poet, prophet, or lawgiver who receives instructions” “on a mountain where the god lives” works there as a “shepherd” and that the god—that is, in our passage the Muses—first address him “in strongly derogatory terms,” only then to give him “a visible token of [their] ‘call’ ” and to “grant [him] eloquence.”¹⁶ That Hesiod assembles “conventional elements” in composing his song of the Muses is interpretively significant. It invites us to suspend the ascription of naiveté not only to Hesiod but also to at least some significant part of his projected audience and to wonder what different sorts of conscious activity—different, that is, than channeling the divine voices of the Muses—

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

he was engaged in and, what is more, understood that his most sophisticated hearers would also know him to be engaged in. There is no reason to doubt that Hesiod intends his song of the Muses' visit, both in its content and in its spell-binding beauty, to constitute a claim to extraordinary insight. But the sophisticated poet and his most sophisticated hearers would recognize this insight as the result of the deliberate deployment of his no less extraordinary, nonetheless *human* powers of critical and creative thought. And for those who understand Hesiod's poetry this way, Xenophanes's words are—surprisingly, on first hearing—not polemically dismissive but, quite the contrary, (p. 218) helpfully illuminating. For in a number of ways, Hesiod, like Xenophanes, appears to be “searching” (or “examining”) the tradition he has inherited and “discover[ing] better.”

Detailing all of these ways would require a full study of the *Th* and the *WD*; let it suffice here to note four. (1) *The Muses' alert at Th 27–28*. When Hesiod has the Muses declare that

We know how to say many false things that seem like truths,
But we also know how, when we wish, to proclaim truths,

he portrays them as at once acknowledging that they have spoken falsely to others in the past and challenging him to rise above his mundane consciousness in order to discern the truth in what they will now say. Xenophanes's words help us put this twofold point more directly: Hesiod acknowledges that he has arrived at the insight he will now utter at least in part by “examining” what others have claimed to have learned from the Muses, and he challenges his hearers, by sharing in the critical work of “examin[ing]” and “discover[ing]” that he has done, to see why what he will now claim really is “better.” (2) *Finding genealogical and ethical order among the many gods*. In one massive respect that, nonetheless, is largely hidden from us, the whole of the *Th* is the result of such a “discovering better.” Hesiod takes the vast aggregate of stories about the gods—stories that range from obscure and local to widely known and that tell of all manner of major and minor gods—and, selecting and reshaping them to fit within his alternating genealogical and epic narrative, integrates them within his overall account of Zeus's accession to power and establishment of justice. This extraordinary work of “examining” and “discovering better” is largely hidden, however, by its very success; whatever elements there may have been in the heterogeneous plurality of stories he inherited that resisted the requirements of his genealogical and ethical vision, he presumably revised or left out. (3) *Several such revisions and omissions, recalled*. We have just noted an extended set of such revisions and omissions. In the *Th* Hesiod treats Zeus's violence as his necessary means for replacing violence itself by the rule of justice, and in his genealogical account of Zeus's offspring Hesiod suppresses many of the details of abusive sexual aggression that we know from other sources; by “examining” the tales of Zeus that he inherited and by removing what would otherwise have presented themselves as signal inconsistencies, Hesiod clears the way for his subsequent celebration of Zeus in the *WD* as the ordainer of the ethic of justice and work for human beings. (4) *Selective de-anthropomorphizations of the representations of the gods*. We have also noted what we

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

can now mark as a strikingly proto-Xenophanean way in which Hesiod “discovers” what is “better” than what he inherits: in order to establish the very terms needed for a genuine cosmogony, he has to partly de-anthropomorphize the figures of the great cosmic gods in *Th* 116–33. As he indicates in advance by his transition from “gods” to “earth” at *Th* 108, he shifts focus from the familiar personifications of the structures of nature to these structures themselves. Nor is this an isolated case. In at least four other sets of passages he undercuts anthropomorphism by giving as the names of gods nouns that call to mind not persons but impersonal qualities or principles: at *Th* 77–79 (to be heard against the background (p. 219) of 65–72), he distinguishes and names each of the nine Muses—hitherto an undifferentiated host—by picking out qualities of the experience of inspiration; at 211–25 he names as the children of Night a host of the mostly fearsome conditions that assail us as threats and worries in the darkness of night; at 226–32 he extends this doleful list by elaborating as the offspring of Discord many of its damaging consequences; and at 902, as already noted, he names as the children of Zeus and Themis “Good Order” and “Justice” and “Peace.”¹⁷

Postscript: Heraclitus and Parmenides

If space allowed, I would extend these reflections to Heraclitus and Parmenides. As with Anaximander and Xenophanes, so here, the task of interpreting Heraclitus’s and Parmenides’s receptions of Hesiod is inseparable from the task of interpreting Heraclitus and Parmenides themselves. Following are some basic issues to explore.

Heraclitus and Hesiod

Unity. How much elicitive irony should we find in Heraclitus's anti-Hesiodic polemics? It is surprising enough to hear the poet who integrated cosmogony, theogony, and ethics derided as a "polymath" (40);¹⁸ it is more than surprising to hear Heraclitus charge that Hesiod—whose unforgettable image of Night and Day exchanging a greeting as they pass each other at dawn and dusk at the edge of the underworld (*Th* 748–57) makes explicit that night's need for day, first expressed at *Th* 124–25, is reciprocal—"did not understand [that] night and day ... are one" (57). On a straightforward reading, Heraclitus faults Hesiod for representing as separate individuals what are really phase and counter-phase of a cyclical unity. But is there, in this apparent "differing" with Hesiod, a "hidden harmony" (51, 54)? Does Heraclitus seek to elicit from the hearer moved to come to Hesiod's defense the very recognition of the unity of opposites that he only ironically claims Hesiod misses?

Justice and strife. Does Heraclitus oppose the one-sidedness of Hesiod's vision of a divinely established order of "Good Order and Justice and Peace" (*Th* 902) by his tragic insight that "justice is strife" (δίκην ἔριον, 80) and that "war," not Zeus, "is the father ... and the king of all" (53)? Or does δίκην ἔριον mean, as well, that "strife is justice," and is the elision of "Zeus" meant to summon to mind, not banish, Hesiod's Zeus and the "Justice" he fathers as the redeeming significance of "war"? In an analogous way, does Heraclitus object to Hesiod's distinction between the two "strifes" (*WD* 11–26)—or does he, understanding their inextricability, credit Hesiod's recognition that the rule of justice is no less a mode of "strife" than is its violation?

The god. How does Heraclitus's "the god," in some sense the very unity of each pair of opposites (67, also 102), relate to Hesiod's theology? If Heraclitus takes a Xenophanean (p. 220) perspective in declaring that "the wise, one alone, is unwilling ... to be called by the name of Zeus," does he at the same time counter and integrate this with a Hesiodic perspective when, seemingly contradicting himself, he also declares that "the wise ... is willing" to be so called (32)? But why would "the wise" be "willing"? Does Heraclitus, imitating the enigmatic voice of "the lord whose oracle is at Delphi" (93), provoke us to find in "the name of Zeus"—that is, of the warrior for justice that Hesiod has portrayed Zeus to be—a "sign" (93) of that unity of opposites that, also signified by the Zeusian "thunderbolt," "steers all things" (64)?

Parmenides and Hesiod

What "is." For Parmenides's reception of Hesiod, inquiry should focus on Parmenides's appropriation of *Th* 748–57 in his image of "the gates of the ways of Night and Day" (1.11). In his proem, to reach the goddess who teaches the thought of what "is" (... ἔστιν, 2.3, 8.3), the traveler must arrive at and then pass through these gates; thus Parmenides grants to the insight symbolized by arriving at the gateway of opposites the

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

status of a necessary but insufficient stage of understanding. This raises a nexus of compelling questions. Restricting ourselves first to Parmenides, what is the insight symbolized by the arrival at the gateway, and what is the process of thinking by which, upon reaching this insight, the traveler finds himself able to pass beyond it to the goddess? Second, turning to Parmenides's relation to Hesiod, does Parmenides mean to mark the limit of Hesiodic thinking and to claim to have gone beyond it—or does he, either alternatively or in addition, mean to imply that the possibility of passing beyond the gateway and on to the discovery of the thought of what “is” is already to be found, if only implicitly and without the goddess's new language, in Hesiod?¹⁹

References

- Athanassakis, A., ed. and trans. 2004. *Hesiod: Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*. 2nd ed. Baltimore, MD.
- Clay, J. S. 2003. *Hesiod's Cosmos*. Cambridge.
- Cornford, F. M. 1950. “A Ritual Basis for Hesiod's *Theogony*.” In *The Unwritten Philosophy and Other Essays*, edited by F. M. Cornford, 95–116. Cambridge.
- Diels, H., and W. Kranz, eds. and comms. 1951. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*. 6th ed. 3 vols. Berlin.
- Dornseiff, F. 1959. *Antike und Alter Orient*. 2nd ed. Leipzig, Germany.
- Gallop, D., ed. and trans. 1984. *Parmenides of Elea: Fragments, A Text and Translation*. Toronto.
- Graham, D. 2006. *Explaining the Cosmos: The Ionian Tradition of Scientific Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ.
- Hyland, D. 2006. “First of All Came Chaos.” In *Heidegger and the Greeks: Interpretive Essays*, edited by D. Hyland and J. Panteleimon, 9–22. Bloomington, IN.
- Kahn, C. 1960. *Anaximander and the Origins of Greek Cosmology*. New York.
- Kahn, C., ed., comm., and trans. 1979. *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*. Cambridge.
- Kirk, G. S., J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, trans. and comms. 1983. *The Presocratic Philosophers*. 2nd ed. Cambridge.
- Lattimore, R., trans. 1959. *Hesiod, The Works and Days, Theogony, The Shield of Herakles*. Ann Arbor, MI.
- Leshner, J., ed., trans., and comm. 1992. *Xenophanes of Colophon: Fragments, A Text and Translation*. Toronto.

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

Miller, M. 2001. "‘First of all’: On the Semantics and Ethics of Hesiod’s Cosmogony." *Ancient Philosophy* 21: 251–76.

Miller, M. 2006. "Ambiguity and Transport: Reflections on the Proem to Parmenides’ Poem." *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 30 (Summer): 1–47.

Most, G. W. 2004. "Two Notes on Hesiod’s Theogony (116–22, 426–39)." In *Studia Humanitatis ac Litterarum Trifolio Heidelbergensi dedicate: Festschrift für Eckhard Christmann, Wilfried Edelmaier und Rudolf Kettman*, edited by A. Hornung, C. Jaekel, and W. Schubert, 175–80. Frankfurt am Main, Germany.

Most, G. W., ed. and trans. 2006. *Hesiod I: Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*. Cambridge, MA.

Mourelatos, A. P. D. 2008. *The Route of Parmenides*. Las Vegas, NV.

Palmer, J. 2009. *Parmenides and Presocratic Philosophy*. Oxford.

(p. 223) Scully, S. 2015. *Hesiod’s Theogony: From Near Eastern Creation Myths to Paradise Lost*. Oxford.

Trencsényi-Waldapfel, I. 1955. "Die orientalische Verwandtschaft des Prooimions der Hesiodischen Theogonia." *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 5: 45–76.

West, M. L., ed. and comm. 1966. *Hesiod: Theogony*. Oxford.

West, M. L., ed. and comm. 1978. *Hesiod: Works and Days*. Oxford. (p. 224)

Notes:

(1.) Due to limits of space I have deferred discussion of Heraclitus and Parmenides. See the postscript for an anticipation.

(2.) I strongly second Clay’s remark that "[it] is past time ... to discard the antiquated notion of Hesiod’s primitive simplicity and to accept the possibility that he may be fully aware of the implications of his own words" (2003: 59).

(3.) These characterizations of Anaximander’s τὸ ἄπειρον are first reported by Aristotle and Theophrastus; see Kirk et al. (1983: 106ff., 115).

(4.) My translation, with help from Lattimore (1959); Athanassakis (2004); Most (2006); and the editors of this volume.

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

(5.) We face a textual uncertainty in lines 118 and 119. Both are disputed, and the stakes are high. If, following Plato at *Symposium* 178b, we excise both lines, there are only three, not four, primordial beings; Tartaros drops out. Moreover, there is a dissenting construal of the grammar that has the same consequence. On the widely accepted reading by West (1966), Τάρταρα is a nominative plural and takes the same verb γενετ' (116) that Chaos, then Earth (117), and then Eros (120), also take; these four are the primordial beings in Hesiod's cosmogony. On the dissenting construal, recently defended by Most (2004: 175–80), τάρταρα at line 119 is an accusative and, paired with κάρη νιφόεντος Ὀλύμπου, forms a compound object of ἔχουσι at 118; hence Tartaros and the “peaks of Olympos” play the secondary role of being parts of Earth, and Tartaros is not one of the primordial powers—nor, I would note, does it have its own distinct birth. I follow West's judgment that “118 is a formula complete in itself, and unlikely to be continued [into 119]” (1966: 194). In addition, Hesiod's later characterization of Tartaros as dark, moldy, ceaselessly stormy, and hateful to the gods (739) makes it problematic to think of it as forming a part of a “firm seat forever for all the immortals.” Most important, the pairing of Tartaros with Earth as the two equi-primordial “sides” of the gap formed by the birth of Chaos plays a crucial role in the order that Hesiod discerns in the cosmos at 116–33; that 119 be read to grant this status to Tartaros is essential to the balance and coherence to which every other cosmic birth in 116–33 contributes. (Thanks to Rachel Kitzinger for discussion of these issues.)

(6.) West (1966: 190) comments that the phrase θεοὶ καὶ γαῖα—“gods and earth”—in line 108 is “a little surprising, since Earth and the things that follow are themselves divine. To Hesiod's audience θεοὶ would suggest primarily the non-cosmic gods.” The force of the “and,” in other words, is to indicate that the terms that follow—“earth,” “rivers,” “boundless sea,” “shining stars,” “wide sky”—are to be thought of *not* in the manner of the characterizations in lines 105–7, that is, as the anthropomorphized “non-cosmic gods,” but rather as structures and features of the cosmos.

(7.) To state explicitly what I hope is already clear, Hesiod's shift of focus from anthropomorphic person figures to what they represent introduces and is restricted to the cosmogony (116–33). That he reverts to a full personification of Earth and Sky in the rest of the poem makes his shift away from it in the cosmogony all the more conspicuous and, as an achievement in thinking, impressive.

(8.) For a more detailed exegesis of *Th* 116–33 together with a focused refutation of the once standard interpretation, offered by Cornford (1950), that the birth of Chaos is the splitting of Earth and Sky, see Miller (2001).

(9.) This complex act has a Heraclitean paradoxicality. In short, for Zeus to swallow Metis seems to represent the extreme form of the injustice of Sky and of Kronos; whereas Sky keeps all power for himself by pushing his children back into mother Earth's womb and Kronos one-ups this violence by swallowing his children, Zeus now seems to one-up Kronos by swallowing the mother before the child is born. But the upshot of his act points

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

to a contrary significance: Zeus, who now has Metis within him to “counsel him about good and evil” (*Th* 900), gives birth to his “equal”—that is, rather than foolishly and violently hoarding all power for himself, he wisely and morally shares it.

(10.) Surprisingly, this may not be the last word. Two passages, *Th* 726–28 and 736–39, provide evidence that Hesiod himself both identified this primordial being as Tartaros and deliberately held back from giving it pride of place, subordinating it, instead, to Chaos. Could it be that Hesiod *in effect* anticipated and, well in advance, objected to Anaximander’s granting τὸ ἄπειρον the status of ἀρχή? For interpretive discussion, see Miller (2001).

(11.) The numbers are those in Leshner (1992), following Diels-Kranz (1951).

(12.) What, however, of the “deception” Zeus employs in swallowing Metis (*Th* 889–90)? See note 9.

(13.) Scully (2015: 43–45, 47–48).

(14.) Cf. Leshner (1992: 98–100).

(15.) I follow Leshner’s translation of the final clause.

(16.) West (1966: 159–60), citing Dornseiff (1959: 37–38, 76); Trencsényi-Waldapfel (1955: 45–76).

(17.) For Hesiod’s naming of the Muses and the offspring of Discord, see Scully in this volume, pp. 86–88.

(18.) Fragment numbers for Heraclitus and Parmenides are those in Diels-Kranz (1951).

(19.) For discussion, see Miller (2006).

Mitchell Miller

Mitchell Miller, former Dexter Ferry Professor in Philosophy, is professor emeritus at Vassar College. In addition to his work on Plato and the pre-Socratics, he has long-term interests in late medieval philosophy, Descartes and Leibniz, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century continental thought. He has published two books on Plato, *Plato’s Parmenides: The Conversion of the Soul* (Princeton University Press, 1986; Penn State UP pap., 1991) and *The Philosopher in Plato’s Statesman* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1980; reissued with “Dialectical Education and Unwritten Teachings in Plato’s Statesman,” Parmenides Publishing, 2004), a wide-ranging array of essays on Plato, and studies of Hesiod (“‘First of All,’” *Anc Phil* 21 [2001]) and Parmenides (“Ambiguity and Transport,” *OSAP* 30 [2006]). In recent years he has concentrated on the Sophist (“What the Dialectician Discerns,” *Anc Phil* 36 [2016]); the *Philebus* (“A More ‘Exact Grasp’ of the Soul,” in *Truth*, ed. K. Pritzl, CUAP 2010); and, as the

The Reception of Hesiod by the Early Pre-Socratics

context for inquiry into Plato's "so-called unwritten teachings," the notion of "the longer way" to the Good and a more "precise grasp" of the city, the soul, and (he argues) the cosmos that Plato has Socrates project at Republic 435c-d and 504b-e. For more, go to <http://pages.vassar.edu/mitchellmiller/>.

