

## Hesiod's *Works and Days*: Moral or Practical Teaching?

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Hesiod's *Works and Days* is undeniably a didactic poem. It is concerned with real problems of mankind. At a first glance it may seem as a practical guide to living and prospering in the Ancient Greek world. The title itself, along with the many parts of the poem that deal with practical issues can lead one to this conclusion. A more careful analysis, however, can show that *Works and Days* is more about morality. Undeniably it also deals with the *practice of morality*, but the main axis of the poem is not that; it is morality itself.

The first part of this paper attempts to present the abundance of moral elements in the poem. The occasion of the poem is injustice, but Hesiod does not stop there. He talks about war and peace, religion, family as well as society, all crucial issues both then and now. In the second part, I argue against the view that *Works and Days* is mostly a practical teaching poem. Instead, I trace the importance of practical instruction in the poem as being support to Hesiod's main teaching goal, morality.

Probably the most important issue for the poet is injustice. In fact, it is to injustice that we may owe this poem: Perses, Hesiod's brother has tricked him in a matter of inheritance. Moreover, the lords, to whom the poet had applied for justice, had been bribed by Perses and have misjudged to his favor. The complaint about this injustice, especially that of the lords, is of great importance, since it reveals the fact that Hesiod (and thus any member of the community)

was not afraid to accuse the lords in public. Along with injustice, Hesiod warns about a society ruled by the powerful, when he foretells about the future generations that “law and decency will be in fists”, (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 191). This ethical issue is also presented in the story of the hawk and the nightingale. This tale is well known, although in a quite different version, as one of Aesop's tales. The main difference between the two versions lies in the fact that, in Aesop's tale, as in almost all of his tales, talking animals simply represent some classes of people. Hesiod's version of the tale, on the other hand, reminds us that people are actually very different from animals. In particular, he points out that the law of the jungle that prevails in the world of animals should not dominate our world too: “So spoke the swift-flying hawk, the great winged bird. But you, Perses, must hearken to Right and not promote violence” (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 213)

Apart from injustice, a very significant issue for the poet is that of religion. Religion appears everywhere in the poem, from the first word, “Muses”, to the last sentence, “well with god” (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 1, 826). The belief that disobeying or tricking the Gods leads to disaster is emphasized by the myth of Prometheus, whose action to steal the fire from Zeus lead to the fact that a man must work to find his food, as well as to many other evils that were released from Pandora's box. (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 48-104) Serving and sacrificing to the immortals is another aspect of religion stressed by Hesiod (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 336-7). Moreover, the failure to respect these rules is implied as the main reason for the extinction of the second, Silver race of men: According to the poet, the Gods destroyed the Silver race since they neglected to offer respect to them (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 135-40).

Hesiod is also concerned with the moral issue of war and peace. While Hesiod's world “is a world without war”, (Osborne, *Greece in The Making* p. 146) the consequences of previous wars are presented in an effort to emphasize the

irrationality of violent actions and the importance of peace. An example is the destruction of the Bronze race of men: With “woeful works of Ares and with acts of violence ... they were laid low by their own hands” (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 146-55) Peace is also praised in a non-mythological context, for its beneficial effects on the land and the people. (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 225-37)

Moreover, a substantial part of *Works and Days* is concerned with the relationships of people with their families as well as with community in general. Hesiod foresees the decline of his own race, the Iron one, with reference to people losing respect to their aging parents and blasting crude words towards them. (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 185, 330). The poem also provides advice for social behavior, in terms of neighbor relationships and donating to society. Furthermore, he warns that the actions of a single man may adversely affect the whole community. (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 260-6)

The above issues are the main moral concerns of Hesiod in *Works and Days*. Beyond these elements, as the title suggests, Hesiod cites much practical instruction as to how to work and when to do so. Even though this advice constitutes a large proportion of the poem (about two thirds of it), a number of reasons suggest that *Works and Days* is more about morality than it is about practical teaching.

Firstly, I argue that most of the practical elements presented in the poem are simply used as means to the end of teaching morality. The poem would be incomplete without arguments and examples of how to implement the moral theory cited. All of the practical advice found in *Works and Days* is associated to one or more moral issues. For example, the largest part and the main theme of Hesiod's practical advice is *work*, both in the land and the sea. The poet organizes his advice very carefully, providing several subtasks and giving the

proper time margins in which each subtask should take place. However, one should also regard the reasons why Hesiod describes in such detail how one should work. Some of these reasons can be traced in the poem: Hesiod mentions “whatever your fortune, work is preferable, that is, if you turn your blight-witted heart from others’ possessions towards work” (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 313-5), giving the moral advantages of work: It keeps you from stealing and being jealous of the others. In addition to this, work helps one avoid begging for money or goods from others, a significant moral issue for the poet who himself experiences Perses soliciting for food or employment. (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 394-6) On the contrary, work allows you to offer voluntarily, a moral action than brings pleasure to the giver. (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 358-61)

Finally, there are several reasons that suggest that *Works and Days* is of no significant practical value. Despite the length of the practical instruction in the poem, the value of this teaching is doubtful, and compared to the moral elements that have been cited above, it only constitutes a secondary feature. First of all, the practical advice offered to the audience is no less known to the average Greek of that age than it is to Hesiod. The poet does not suggest any new discoveries or a new way of living; most of the advice can be classified as common knowledge. It is well known that the main occupations of the Greeks at the period were agriculture and sailing. In such a society, therefore, it is natural to assume that people knew very well their jobs and that all the advice cited by Hesiod was not secret or original. Another fact that supports the above is that Hesiod himself had an extremely limited experience in sailing: “I have never yet sailed the broad sea, except to Euboea from Aulis”, a distance of 65 meters (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 647-9). This does not necessarily mean that Hesiod made up of all these practical advice about sailing; rather that he himself listened to the sailors and rephrased what he had heard in his poem, or used other traditional poems and compiled them to a version of his own.

Furthermore, Hesiod's calendar is not as one could claim completely didactic. A large portion of the calendar is superstitious and not practical at all: An example of that is advice of this kind: "The middle 6<sup>th</sup> is ... good for a man's birth; for a girl, however, it is not suitable, either to be born or to marry." (West, Hesiod's *Works and Days* 780-3) It would need extreme caution and luck to make sure that a woman doesn't give birth to a child (boy or girl) in the middle 6<sup>th</sup>, since she wouldn't know the sex of the child she was carrying. Finally, some of the advice is simply common sense, both now and back then. One particular example is the one about what to wear on your feet and how to cover your head in the cold (Hesiod *Works and Days* 540-5) Later on, the poet advises the worker to work before the dawn, in order to avoid the morning rain or the hot sun, and to have a dog in order to protect his house. To summarize, clearly the poem does not teach practical things to someone today, and from the above one can see that if it did teach something to the people of those days, this was not practical but moral.

In conclusion, *Works and Days* is a poem about morality. Hesiod is concerned with almost all the moral issues of his world: Law, justice and injustice, religion, peace and war, as well as matters of family and community, issues that have tortured generations and are still torturing us today. A large part of the poem is dedicated to some practical instruction, which, under a more careful analysis, turns out to either be support for Hesiod's arguments about morality or advice already known by the majority and thus of no significant practical value. All these strongly suggest that *Works and Days* is more concerned with moral rather than practical teaching.