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Moral Law and Political Law in Greek Mythology: The Case of Prometheus

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Abstract: The aim of this work is to offer the reader a tour through the most significant interpretations of the Prometheus myth, attempting to contribute from their standpoint to the clarification of the relationship between moral law and political law. In especial, it aims to highlight in Prometheus's attitude something that betrays the presence of a strongly individualized conscience, whose dictates lead him to clash with power in its highest expression. On the other hand, different interpretations of the Greek concept of law are examined, where its highest expression is indebted to the idea of destiny. Based on Law, a common order that connects gods and humans is established, although not with the same degrees of subjection.

An old truism opposes myth to *logos* in order to explain the origins of Greek philosophy. As with many truisms, it does hold some truth; although, like all truisms, this explanation misses an essential part of the truth of the matter. This becomes clear when we turn to Greek literature, where poetry and theatre constantly offer us the possibility of finding common threads between mythology and philosophy.[1] From this standpoint, and without any other aim than to share some reflections upon and provoke a discussion around the philosophical questions that are still our backdrop, it may be illustrative to analyse the main recreations of the myth of Prometheus. For this purpose, we shall begin with the words uttered by the dramatic character who embodies this powerful mythical figure when he receives his punishment. One could say that it seems as if Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.) had heard the Titan's voice echoing within him while writing these words. In his *Prometheus Bound*, the hero, who has faced Zeus's wrath for having helped human beings, is prepared to accept the consequences of his actions, even though he knows that they will be terrible: "All that is to be I know full well and in advance, nor shall any affliction come upon me unforeseen. I must bear my allotted doom as lightly as I can, knowing that the might of Necessity permits no resistance".[2]

Prometheus's attitude shows a strongly individualized consciousness whose dictate leads him to assume the clash with power in its highest expression. His belief in his well-doing, in his not being able to do anything else other than what he did, selflessly, moves him to resignedly accept the punishment imposed by the father of the gods, as arbitrary as it might be. What seems to be arbitrary and hazardous is also part of destiny, and one needs to know how to face it. Prometheus's actions involve a permanent defiance of Zeus's authority, but they are lead by his pity for those who endure the immense cruelty of the son of Chronos.

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1 According to W.F. Otto, "if myths did not spring as practices with a determined goal or as irresponsible fables, but rather as monumental creations such as certain paintings or edifications, their creational process should be judged as creational processes need to be judged". And he adds, "artists have always known that the act of creating has to be driven by something that does not depend upon men. And, the more powerful their creative force is, the greater their belief in the essential being and the magnitude of such an impulse" (*Dioniso*, Madrid: Siruela, 1997, p. 26).

2 Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, London: W. Heinemann, 1922, 102-106.

This becomes evident when Prometheus answers the questions posed by the chorus and relates the reasons for the punishment imposed by Zeus: "However, you ask why he torments me, and this I will now make clear. As soon as he had seated himself upon his father's throne, he immediately assigned to the deities their several privileges and apportioned to them their proper powers. But of wretched mortals he took no notice, desiring to bring the whole race to an end and create a new one in its place. Against this purpose none dared make stand except me—I only had the courage; I saved mortals so that they did not descend, blasted utterly, to the house of Hades. This is why I am bent by such grievous tortures, painful to suffer, piteous to behold. I who gave mortals first place in my pity, I am deemed unworthy to win this pity for myself, but am in this way mercilessly disciplined, a spectacle that shames the glory of Zeus."[3]

Prometheus both presents and recognises himself as a benefactor to humankind. To his mind, the actions he has undertaken in defence of those who were going to be the object of the cruelty of the son of Chronos are no cause for shame, but for pride, regardless of his situation in relation to the gods. On the contrary, it is Zeus who should feel ashamed for his irrational hatred towards human beings and his unjustified abuses. This holds equally true for Aeschylus's audience members, as they would bear in mind the affairs which Zeus had with some mortals, the tricky devices that the lord of Olympus employed to have these sexual encounters, as well as the demigods that sprang from such relations. Thus Zeus's attitude towards Prometheus must have seemed even more incoherent and unfair for its original audience than it does for us now. Furthermore, this sign of reproach would certainly not have been tinged with disbelief, but with a renewed reverential fear of the god's power. For all this, we could now reflect from this perspective on the meaning of the critical charge within this work by Aeschylus. Indeed, under its apparent acceptance of the established theological order, *Prometheus Bound* suggests the need to free human law and morals from the subjection to a legislation whose only foundations are undisguised power and the irrational will with which it is expressed.

The most prominent version of the myth refers to the donation of fire as the most commonly stated gift; however, Aeschylus reveals to us that there was another gift even more precious than this one whose value is still priceless. Thus, when the chorus asks Prometheus if he made any other gift to the mortals, he answers that he liberated them from the fear of death by

3 *Ibid.*, 227-242.

instilling hope in their souls; and he describes it as *blind* in order to stress the ambiguous power of this gift. Hope is also acknowledged by the chorus as a powerful remedy – perhaps the only possible one – against the biggest fear that humankind must face. Prometheus then narrates the donation of fire, stating that human beings will enjoy great benefits from this gift, as it will enable them to know the various valuable techniques derived from mastering it.[4]

In fact, from a pragmatic point of view, the donation of fire to the mortals may be the greatest gift from the auspicious Titan. But in a deeper sense, and in spite of what appearances might suggest, it seems that revealing the secret of fire is less significant than the gift of hope. Perhaps it is precisely hope that enables human beings to face the ills that threaten them, whether fallen from the skies or sprung up from the earth. Perhaps this is the ultimate source of Zeus's wrath, for hope leads us to overcome the docile prostration to destiny, and destiny is the firmest expression of the power exerted over us by forces that surpass us. As we shall see later, this matter is of greater importance than it might appear at first sight. Even though human beings cannot avoid their destiny, due to hope they can certainly face it with a kind of courage that occasionally amazes us. Therefore we cannot overlook hope if we want to convey a coherent vision of who we are. However, it is even more important to bear in mind that hope is a resource that the very gods themselves lack. They cannot hope for anything other than the relentless fulfilment of universal justice. Lines can never be twisted for them; everything is predicted according to the place that each god occupies in the Olympic hierarchy, and what is predicted will happen as it is supposed to happen. Only the most powerful of the gods will be able to avoid destiny; however, this will be possible only through acquired knowledge, never through hope. Their gift of immortality is thus balanced; gods cannot harbour hope nor can they trust that it could enter their hearts by chance. An inflexible power structure dominates the relationships established among them; a closely guarded order that will sanction their dealings with mortals as well. To avoid being subjected to it, they could resort to shrewdness, but never to hope. The titan Prometheus is the exception to this. He is related to humans not only by the links of generosity, but also because he possesses the gift that he wanted to share with us. He hopes for a knowledge so powerful that will break the chains that bind him.

4 *Cf.*, *ibid.*, 253-254.

The value of hope for humankind is also stressed in Euripides's tragedy *The Madness of Heracles*. We find there a dialogue between Megara, the wife of Heracles, and Amphitrion, the hero's father – although Amphitrion's proudly assumed fatherhood is somewhat ambiguous as the mortal shares this circumstance with Zeus, who, disguised himself as Amphitrion, took his place in bed and slept with his wife, the beautiful and chaste Alcmene, who did not notice the deception. As we can see, the irrepressible desire of the god places humans in very difficult positions, although he himself runs some risks in such adventures. To face the consequences of these adventures, which fall upon us human beings quite frequently and unfairly, we have no better weapon than hope. The gentle Amphitrion seems to be aware of this:

"- Megara: What is the need to suffer? You love life that much?

- Amphitrion: I love life, and I also love hope".[5]

Later on, the illustrious deceived one adds: "Everything in the world is a constant spin; everything is subject to change. And he who keeps his hope always alive is a wise man; to act discouragingly is common among foolish souls".[6]

Hope, therefore, is not a comfort for ignorant people, but the only grip left to humankind in the most complicated circumstances – hence it would be foolish to reject it. To reject hope would be refusing to assume the human condition, which individualizes us in a peculiar way, in contrast to animals or gods. Hope makes us be what we are, and it enables us to open ourselves to what we may become. We assume, through hope, the existence of a reality that surpasses us, but also, thanks to it we manage to raise our heads up enough to keep an eye on the horizon.

It is perhaps for this reason that the role of hope is so central in this classical text, in which this force, which keeps human beings on their feet, will be opposed to other forces that spring either from the gods' favour, neglect or punishment. In a concrete example from this particular work, Hera's jealousy for Zeus's treason will lead her to find revenge in turning Heracles mad. He will murder his wife and children after having saved them from death at the hands of the tyrant Lycus. The most terrible fate is completed precisely when the hero thinks he has eluded the fulfilment of his destiny – something which not even the strongest of heroes can avoid.

However, turning back to Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, let us now consider the rest of the implications of the list of gifts owed to the kindness

5 Euripides, *The Madness of Heracles*, 90-94.

6 *Ibid.*, 104-107.

of this great protector. The account goes on as follows: "They had no sign either of winter or of flowery spring or of fruitful summer, on which they could depend but managed everything without judgment, until I taught them to discern the risings of the stars and their settings, which are difficult to distinguish. Yes, and numbers, too, chiefest of sciences, I invented for them, and the combining of letters, creative mother of the Muses' arts, with which to hold all things in memory. I, too, first brought brute beasts beneath the yoke to be subject to the collar and the pack-saddle, so that they might bear in men's stead their heaviest burdens; and to the chariot I harnessed horses and made them obedient to the rein, to be an image of wealth and luxury. It was I and no one else who invented the mariner's flaxen-winged car that roams the sea."[7]

Human inventiveness, after receiving the generous gifts made by Prometheus, has elevated itself above the possibilities they confer. However, in spite of how far this has taken us human beings, there is a strict legality from which no-one escapes. Its highest expression resides in the idea of destiny. Such common order bounds men and gods equally; not even Zeus himself could avoid it.

"Chorus: Who then is the helmsman of Necessity?

Prometheus: The three-shaped Fates and mindful Furies.

Chorus: Can it be that Zeus has less power than they do?

Prometheus: Yes, in that even he cannot escape what is foretold."[8]

In other words, Zeus cannot avoid the consequences of his actions either.[9] However, Prometheus possesses a knowledge that could keep Zeus away from what he fears most – being dethroned by another deity. Prometheus is making a double move here – not only does he try to attain his liberation through the knowledge he has, but at the same time, he also tries to avoid the disorder that would come about, in both the worlds of gods and men, if the rule of Zeus was overthrown. It is true that, as Salvador Mas has pointed out, "the Zeus of *Prometheus Bound* is not a good and fair ruler, but rather a capricious being who, like the tyrants that Aeschylus knew from his visits to Sicily, governs as he pleases on the

7 Aeschylus, 'Prometheus Bound', *o.c.*, 454-469.

8 *Ibid.*, 515-518.

9 "If we consider the Homeric world as *terminus a quo* in the trajectory drawn by the curve of the recognition of responsibility in the Greek space, it is because it can be demonstrated that the threshold towards reflection focused on deliberation has already been crossed, as it will be the case in Aristotle" (Ricoeur, Paul, *Caminos del reconocimiento*, Madrid: Trotta, 2005, p. 84).

fringes of law".[10] All the same, though, a certain order is derived from Zeus's tyranny and, as arbitrary as it may be, it is always better than chaos. One needs only to recall that chaos is precisely the starting point for all the cosmogonies and theogonies that we know about. The first step is always the same – to overcome the utter uncertainty of a world not subject to any legality whatsoever. Later on, the need will come to subject all that exists to one and the same rational legality. Some passages of the *Prometheus Bound* reflect a decisive step in this process.

Between the lines it could be read that "Aeschylus, however, seems to claim that this situation is both untenable and self-destructive in the long run – the tyrant produces another tyrant that ends up overthrowing him. It is not just a matter of reaching power; it is a matter of establishing a fixed domination order. From a mythical standpoint, Zeus achieves this goal through his various marriages; from a strictly political standpoint, which is already insinuated in Aeschylus, a pact is in order"[11]. The purpose of this pact, which is the subject matter of *Prometheus Bound*, is the mutual benefit of Zeus and Prometheus. The father of the gods will, due to the information given to him by Prometheus, refrain from making a serious mistake which would eventually lead him to his own ruin, and the benefactor of humankind will then be freed from his chains. "The new pact with Zeus is an authentic negotiation in almost commercial terms. For the son of Chronos it is vital to know the secret, as only through it will he be able to avoid his destiny, and have Thetis wed to a mortal and give birth to a main hero, Achilles. The power of the most powerful god is what is at stake here, since what Prometheus knows is enough to frighten Zeus and force him to reach an agreement – even the power of the most powerful of the gods has its weak spot, hence the need to make a pact".[12]

As we can see, a very human element is involved in this approach – fear. Zeus is terrified by the possibility, as remote as it might be, of losing his power. The primary reading of this fact is enlightening – no one has a power which is unlimited. Power does not exist without both concretion and determination; its exercise is not possible without responsibility. The king of Olympus is forced to consider that the enjoyment of his power involves some risks; that the consequences of his actions may rebound upon him in the worst way possible – endangering his own existence.

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10 Mas Torres, S., *Ethos y polis*, Madrid: Istmo, 2003, p. 62.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

Salvador Mas, in *Ethos y polis*, analyses also the differences between the myth of Prometheus as presented in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and in his *Theogony*. "The first of these works – he tells us – serves the purpose of explaining and justifying Zeus's justice; in the second one, the definitive separation between gods and mortals is settled, as they both used to live together in very ancient and happy times".[13] In this respect, the episode in which Prometheus tricks Zeus in the distribution of the sacrificial meat is clarifying. Zeus, in spite of being deceived, receives the most important part of the sacrificed ox, for, as Salvador Mas reminds us, the bones represent that which is incorruptible, and they are of great significance to the Greeks as they contain the marrow, whose consumption was related to beneficial effects in both the brain and the semen. Despite all of this, though, Zeus feels he has been deceived; this, more than the specific object of the deception or the relativity of its success, is the reason why he imposes a cruel punishment on Prometheus.[14]

His intention is to punish men as well – protected by Prometheus as they are – by depriving them of the fire they used to collect from the fall of lightning-bolts thrown down to earth by Zeus himself. However, Prometheus deceives Zeus once again; this time he hides fire – thrusting it into a fennel-stalk – and then gives it to humankind.[15] This new offense doesn't go unpunished either, for Zeus gives Pandora to humankind as a present. Woman is, therefore, presented as a refined punishment for man, as ever since then he will have to choose between either living by himself without any children that would take care of him in his old age, or bind his existence to a woman, and hence becoming a victim of her supposed voracity. Indeed, this account is characterised by the standpoint according to which "women's womb is insatiable and voracious both of food and sexual attentions; supplying the first and satisfying the latter is the cause of man's fatigue and labour. But only they, within this same womb, are able to carry what extends the life of human beings – children".[16] As in other instances, here myth provides a foundation for the *topos*, and they both

13 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

14 "In *Works and Days*, Hesiod resorts to three myths – the myth of Prometheus, of Pandora, and of the Ages of Man – in order to explain that the origins of evil lie on the very human nature, on its arrogant wisdom and on its touch of crassness and injustice. The world of men follows a continuous process of degradation". Santana Henríquez, G., 'Modalidades amatorias (sexuales) en la obra de Hesíodo', in: *Philológica Canariensia*, 10-11 (2004-2005), p. 5.

15 Mas Torres, S., *o.c.*, pp. 59-60.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

reflect the situation of women in the archaic Greek culture. The persistence of these prejudices is shown in one passage of Aristophanes' *Clouds*, where Strepsiades says: "Oh! Curses on the go-between who made me marry your mother! I lived so happily in the country, a commonplace, everyday life, but a good and easy one – had not a trouble, not a care, was rich in bees, in sheep and in olives. Then indeed I had to marry the niece of Megacles, the son of Megacles; I belonged to the country, she was from the town; she was a haughty, extravagant woman, a true Coesyra. On the nuptial day, when I lay beside her, I was reeking of the dregs of the wine-cup, of cheese and of wool; she was redolent with essences, saffron, voluptuous kisses, the love of spending, of good cheer and of wanton delights."[17]

One version that I consider of enormous importance is the one we find as an interpretation of this myth in Plato's *Protagoras*. By analyzing this version, we are told that Zeus punishes Prometheus "not for the theft itself, but for causing humankind unhappiness with it; for fire, instead of bringing happiness, lead men to war and destruction. To complete Prometheus's deed, Zeus gave men the *techne* required to organize cities and states".[18]

Here we have a profound change. Indeed, it seems that the transition has been fully completed, and now the idea of a legality which is common to all beings seems to be embedded in the presuppositions of the reflection. This conviction goes along with, and is balanced by, a reactionary conception of technological skill, which considers it as the source for new problems rather than the means to solve old ones. We have to bear in mind that during this period of time – if we recall that Plato lived between 428 and 347 B.C. and Aeschylus between 525 and 456 B.C. – a series of social and political transformations occurred that, somehow, are reflected in the re-interpretation of the myth of Prometheus. Perhaps the most significant of such transformations is the political experience as regards the work of two great rulers – Solon and Pericles. And undoubtedly, we also have to take into account the transformations related to the works of other less-celebrated but enormously influential personalities.

Such theoretical-practical tension has completely disappeared in the first *Dialogue of the Gods* by Lucian of Samosata, which recreates a hypothetical dialogue between Prometheus and Zeus. We find there a lively account of this mythological passage that, in this reconsideration which

17 Aristophanes, 'The Clouds', in: *The Complete Greek Drama*, New York: Random, 40-52.

18 Mas Torres, S., *o.c.*, p. 65.

dates back to the 2nd century A.D., is settled in the following way by the brilliant style of this Latin author:

"Prometheus: You are bound on a little visit to Thetis.

Zeus: Right so far. And the sequel? I trust you now.

Prometheus: Have no dealings with her, Zeus. As sure as Nereus's daughter conceives by you, your child shall mete you the measure you meted to—

Zeus: I shall lose my kingdom, you would say?

Prometheus: Avert it, Fate! I say only, that union portends this issue.

Zeus: Thetis, farewell! And for this Hephaestus shall set you free."[19]

Here we see the effect of a withdrawal from what, in Lucian's times, was considered essential. The dramatic charge of the text lies in Zeus constantly bearing in mind that he himself has dethroned his father, Chronos. Therefore, he takes Prometheus's warning seriously. Such a contingency may repeat itself, but Zeus, warned about it, is willing to avoid it. All the tension derived from the conflict between chance and necessity has disappeared now – and in such tension the world of the gods functioned as a key element in explaining the interaction between the natural and the human. The classical tension between natural law and human law is similarly lacking.

In order to deepen these questions a bit further, it is interesting to compare, on the one hand, the model of divine justice as we have seen it in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* – with its implacable relation between offenses and punishments – with, on the other hand, the model of human justice presented by Aristophanes (425-380 B.C.) in *Wasps*. This contemporary of Plato, who will go on to depict a cruel portrait of Socrates in his comedy *Clouds*, does not seem to believe in any grounding for justice other than agreement. In relation to justice, there is no conflict either between the elements that configure what is transcendent, or between such elements and the human order. What is just is no other than the precise concretisation of the balance of interests. Justice is not the material expression of an ideal, but rather the materialisation of power. We can perceive the comedy's shamelessly critical tone from the start. Hence the following dialogue referring to the judges which takes place between Sosias, the slave that guards the house, and Bdelycleon, his master:

"Sosias: Well, if need be, we will chase them off with stones.

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19 Lucian of Samosata, 'Dialogues of the Gods', I, in: *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, translated by H. W. Fowler and F. G. Fowler, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905.

Bdelycleon: What! You dare to speak so? Why, this class of old men, if irritated, becomes as terrible as a swarm of wasps. They carry below their loins the sharpest of stings, with which to prick their foe; they shout and leap and their stings burn like so many sparks.

Sosias: Have no fear! If I can find stones to throw into this nest of jurymen-wasps, I shall soon have them cleared off."[20]

We find the same tone, characteristic of Aristophanes' crude humour, in yet another passage in which the aim is to create a certain dramatic atmosphere in the performance through a choral intervention. The dialogue highlights the comedy's background without explicitly defining it.

"Chorus: Assuredly, my child, but tell me what nice thing do you want me to buy you? A set of knuckle-bones, I suppose.

Boy: No, father, I prefer figs; they are better.

Chorus: No, by Zeus! Even if you were to hang yourself with vexation.

Boy: Well then, I will lead you no farther.

Chorus: With my small pay, I am obliged to buy bread, wood, and stew; and now you ask me for figs!"[21]

As it can be seen, it is clear that the goal of this dialogue is to highlight the dependant situation of the judges who, given their scarce income, are more focused on pleasing the powerful than on doing justice.

With a similar strategy, Aristophanes reveals his basic ideological stance, and suggests his own critiques of the political establishment. An aversion towards democracy is easily noticeable in his comments.

"Bdelycleon: Everything is now tyranny with us, no matter what is concerned, whether it be large or small. Tyranny! I have not heard the word mentioned once in fifty years, and now it is more common than salt-fish, the word is even current on the market. If you are buying gurnards and don't want anchovies, the huckster next door, who is selling the latter, at once exclaims, 'That is a man whose kitchen savours of tyranny!' If you ask for onions to season your fish, the green-stuff woman winks one eye and asks, 'Ha, you ask for onions! Are you seeking to tyrannize, or do you think that Athens must pay you your seasonings as a tribute?'

Xanthias: Yesterday I went to see a whore about noon and told her to get on top; she flew into a rage, pretending I wanted to restore the tyranny of Hippias.

Bdelycleon: That's the talk that pleases the people! As for myself, I want my father to lead a joyous life like Morychus instead of going away

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20 Aristophanes. 'Wasps', in: *The Complete Greek Drama, o.c.*, 221-229.

21 *Ibid.*, 293-302.

before dawn basely to calumniate and condemn; and for this I am accused of conspiracy and tyrannical practice!"[22]

This exchange warns us about the latent tensions in the society of the moment. The ghosts that are apparently seen by the characters of the fishmonger, the greengrocer, and the prostitute, indicate the presence of a concern about the existence of possible plots to overthrow the political regime, as well as highlighting the classicist contempt of the author towards democracy. When reading such allusions along these lines, one can understand that the political atmosphere that Aristophanes is depicting is typical of a society in which people who are included for the first time in the political arena distrust everything that may represent a revival of the aristocratic spirit.

However, the central theme of the comedy lies in the dispute around the figure of the judge, embodied in Philocleon, who is not prepared to give up the power derived from such a position for anything in the world. This power is characterised, firstly, by the social relevance implicit in the figure of the judge: "Philocleon: At the outset I will prove to you that there exists no king whose might is greater than ours. Is there a pleasure, a blessing comparable with that of a juryman? Is there a being who lives more in the midst of delights, who is more feared, aged though he be? From the moment I leave my bed, men of power, the most illustrious in the city, await me at the bar of the tribunal; the moment I am seen from the greatest distance, they come forward to offer me a gentle hand... that has pilfered the public funds; they entreat me, bowing right low and with a piteous voice, 'Oh, father,' they say, 'pity me, I adjure you by the profit you were able to make in the public service or in the army, when dealing with the victuals.' Why, the man who speaks thus would not know of my existence, had I not let him off on some former occasion."[23]

Through this last gibe Aristophanes winks at the audience, pointing out both the moral proximity between the judges and big thieves – those who steal from public funds – and their distance from the people and their hardships. Justice is here depicted as a mere pact in the worse sense possible, that is, as an agreement between those who have the power to mutually cover their respective offenses. Nevertheless, it is essential to add another aspect to the characterisation of the figure of the judge. This one is related to his links to politics. Indeed, Aristophanes also characterises the judges by their political influence in society, as can be inferred from the

22 *Ibid.*, 488-507.

23 *Ibid.*, 548-558.

following lines of the same character: "And if the Senate and the people have trouble in deciding some important case, it is decreed to send the culprits before the Heliasts".[24]

In opposition, Bdelycleon's role focuses on arguing against this point of view, considering these kinds of power as means of servitude towards a greater power which is the only real one. Such greater power is the effective guarantor of what is considered just, and this foundation of justice leaves no room for any reference to something transcendent, except for some rhetorical allusions: "They want you to be poor, and I will tell you why. It is so that you may know only those who nourish you, and so that, if it pleases them to loose you against one of their foes, you shall leap upon him with fury."[25]

As I have already noted – in accordance with the intervention of the chorus whose function is to create the proper atmosphere in order to launch the definitive accusation that the work contains –economical dependence enforces a submission to power. One would have to say that there is nothing new under the sun, at least in relation to this aspect of the play.

A last matter is to be discussed before finishing these pages. In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* there is no reference to the role of the Titan as a Demiurge, who creates human beings by moulding them out of clay. Nevertheless, this aspect is highlighted as essential in the accusation and punishment of Prometheus in Lucian's *Prometheus on Cucasus*. What has happened in this span of time that has turned Prometheus's transformative action into a criminal one? Why is the creation of men – and, above all, of women – now emphasized as an offense that Zeus can reproach Prometheus with? As is well known, Lucian's sources of information are the theogonies and cosmogonies collected in Homer's and Hesiod's works, but it would not be acceptable to ascribe Lucian's inspiration solely to the virtues of a reverential reading of the classical texts. Perhaps the crime of manhood is already clearly perceived.

This crime is no other than the murder of the gods, who have already been turned, for some people, into pagan superstitions, whilst others reduced them to a mere cause of fatuous literary inspiration. The rest, finally, strongly clung to the monotheist ideal and reduced the classic theogonies to the condition of superstitious stories.

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[24] *Ibid.*, 590, 591.

[25] *Ibid.*, 703-705.

"The question as to the harm done by my innovation is best answered by an appeal to the past, to those days when the race of heaven-born Gods stood alone, and earth was a hideous shapeless mass, a tangle of rude vegetation. The Gods had no altars then, nor temples (for who should raise them?), no images of wood or stone, such as now abound in every corner of the earth, and are honoured with all observance. It was to me that the idea occurred—amid my ceaseless meditations on the common welfare, on the aggrandizement of the Gods and the promotion of order and beauty in the universe—of setting all to rights with a handful of clay; of creating living things, and moulding them after our own likeness. I saw what was lacking to our godhead: some counterpart, some foil wherein to set off its blessedness. And that counterpart must be mortal; but in all else exquisitely contrived, perfect in intelligence, keen to appreciate our superiority".[26]

What a peculiar justification Prometheus seemingly gives, according to these lines. According to him, the creation of mankind has had two beneficial effects: the caring and embellishment of earth, on the one hand, and the procurement of beings who are ready to worship the gods. The latter is like claiming that human beings exist because the gods need someone to love and fear them.

In any case, considering the results obtained, Zeus would have nothing to complaint about. Nonetheless, "The Gods, it seems, are Gods no longer, now that there are mortal creatures on the earth. To judge at least by Zeus's indignation, one would suppose that the Gods suffered some loss of prestige from the creation of mankind; unless it is that he is afraid of another revolt, of their waging war with heaven, like the Giants".[27]

Thus, Prometheus wants to be recognised also as the benefactor of the gods, for without manhood the gods would be lonely, yearning for submission, worship and fear. Their condition does not assure them complete happiness: the links between them, nectar and ambrosia, are not enough. Now we have to note, though, that with men's existence, the gods might know other forms of solitude, such as the one derived from neglecting or forgetting them; however, their existence would be incomplete without mankind. Lucian already knows that the gods need us perhaps even more than we need them. This will be the greatest discovery of human beings. An illumination that will never occur again in any other moment in history with

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26 Lucian of Samosata, 'Prometheus on Caucasus', in: *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, *o.c.*, p. 57.
27 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

such a degree of confidence: gods need us even more than we need them. "But for the positive benefits I have conferred, use the evidence of your eyes. The earth, no longer barren and untilled, is decked with cities and farms and the fruits of cultivation; the sea has its ships, the islands their inhabitants. Everywhere are altars and temples, everywhere festivals and sacrifices".[28]

Additionally, "But for mankind, the glories of the universe must have been without a witness; and there was little satisfaction to be derived from a wealth which was doomed to excite no envy in others. We should have lacked a standard for comparison; and should never have known the extent of our happiness, while all were as happy as us. The great is not great, till it is compared with the small."[29] Therefore the gods would know very little about themselves if they had not found a proper element of contrast in mankind.

Correspondingly, the gods are seen to be worried, in a way, about looking after humankind. However, this also gives them various pleasures, such as, for example, to be engaged in something else than the eternal enjoyment of the pleasures afforded by the world of the sublime, "What should we do, if we had not mankind to think of? There would be nothing to live for; we should sit about drinking nectar and gorging ourselves with ambrosia."[30]

Blind to these reasons, Zeus has had Prometheus bound to a big rock where the eagle that devours his liver comes punctually day after day. The punishment could not be crueller or less justified, especially if we consider some of the reasons put forward by Prometheus: "But what fairly takes away my breath is, your assurance in finding fault with women in particular, when all the time you are in love with them: our bulls and satyrs and swans are never tired of making descents upon the Earth; women, they find, are good enough to be made the mothers of Gods!"[31]

In this context, the theft of fire becomes an incidental matter, to which Lucian refers in the last place, minimizing its importance, since "It is the nature of fire that it does not become less by being imparted to others. A fire is not put out by kindling another from it."[32] Hence, the reproaches made to Prometheus on this ground can only have been dictated by envy –

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28 *Ibid.*

29 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

30 *Ibid.*

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

a petty and inappropriate adornment for a divine nature. However, it is now beside the point to judge whether humankind has the deities it deserves or not. The fact is that there is something that these stories help us to understand: we are to continue each and every day with the struggle to achieve a closer link between the moral and the political realms. The Prometheus myth still illustrates one of the crucial elements of this process.

(Translated from Spanish by Michell Nicholson)