

# Pandora's Box: Reflections on a Myth

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**Abstract:** The article seeks to consider the relationship between hope and utopianism by looking at the ancient Greek myth of Pandora's Box, with its enigmatic figure of hope. It begins by considering Hesiod's influential formulation of the myth, before examining a range of modern interpretations in which diverse conceptions of hope are to be found. Using the work of Spinoza, Hume and Day an alternative conception of hope is proposed that conjoins hope with fear. This is followed by an exploration of the utopian, using this time another figure associated with the myth, Prometheus. An attempt is then made to differentiate the frequently conflated concepts of hope and the utopian. Finally, in the spirit of recent post-secularism, the two concepts are brought to bear on the nature of religion.

**Keywords:** Hope, utopia, myth, religion, post-secularism

I have always found the legend of Pandora incomprehensible, indeed preposterous and absurd. (Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*)<sup>1</sup>

He who is without hope is also without fear. (Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*)<sup>2</sup>

I want to examine the relationship between hope and utopianism through a consideration of the Greek myth of Pandora's Box or, to be more exact, Pandora's *jar* (it was Erasmus who turned it into a box).<sup>3</sup> This is not an arbitrary or capricious choice of focus, for there is a long tradition of using this myth to reflect on the enigmatic nature of the concept of hope. The most influential version of the myth is to be found in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, dating from the eighth century BCE, but it will also be necessary to consider a related, but significantly different version of the myth to be found in another of Hesiod's texts, the *Theogony*. The aim in the first part of the paper is to explore various readings of the figure

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1. A. Schopenhauer, *Essays and Aphorisms*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 219.

2. *Ibid.*, 7.

3. D. Panofsky & E. Panofsky, *Pandora's Box: The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 14–26.

of hope in the myth, before attempting to specify an alternative, and hopefully fuller, conception. In the second part this alternative conception will be distinguished from, but related to, the concept of the utopian. Finally, the third section examines the role of utopia and hope in religion, in the context of the recent emergence of post-secularism.

## Hope: Pandora's Box

### *Hesiod's account*

Because there are so many ambiguities and anomalies in Hesiod's narrative it resists *précis* and begins to deconstruct in the telling, so one can initially give only an inadequate, imprecise account of the main events, drawn from both the *Works and Days* and the *Theogony*. The gods and men (for there were no human women then) meet at a place called Mekone to settle the proper relationships between the two groups. Prometheus the Titan, who slaughters an ox into distinct portions to express symbolically the relative status of gods and men, tries to trick the lord of the gods, Zeus, into taking as his portion bones camouflaged with attractive fat, leaving the real meat (concealed in a repulsive bovine stomach) for the group of men. Zeus is so enraged that he withholds fire from men. Prometheus then steals fire from Zeus and gives it to men. In retaliation Zeus decides to punish men by sending Pandora, the first human woman, to them, giving Pandora to Epimetheus, the brother of Prometheus. Accompanying Pandora, in the *Works and Days* version, is a large jar that she proceeds to open, allowing all the calamities of the world to fly out, with hope the only thing left behind. Such a bald account immediately begs legions of questions, some of which are answered in the fuller narrative, but most of which are not.

Prometheus, who was to become a benign symbol of defiant progress, is presented by Hesiod as an impious being, possessed of a "crooked cunning".<sup>4</sup> Prometheus's technological gift of fire only brings humanity disaster, visited on them from Pandora and her jar. Human technological "progress" is thus born out of a revolt against the cosmic order. Such progress is indeed decline, as is made clear in Hesiod's portrayal of mankind before these events: "For formerly the tribes of men on earth lived remote from ills, without harsh toil and the grievous sicknesses that are deadly to men".<sup>5</sup> It should be noted furthermore that Hesiod in the very next section after the Pandora episode introduces his famous account of the various ages of the world, in stages of decline from the initial "Golden Age" to the contemporary, and woeful, age of iron.

4. Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, M. L. West (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 38.

5. *Ibid.*, 39.

Zeus deploys desire to ensnare humanity; they must positively *want* the thing that will cause their downfall: “I shall give them an affliction in which they will all delight as they embrace their own misfortune”.<sup>6</sup> Thus Pandora is created to embody physical beauty and the capacity to inflame immoderate desire and passion (“painful yearning and consuming obsession”), but also with personal attributes (“a bitch’s mind and a knavish nature”)<sup>7</sup> which will rob life with her of any true satisfaction. Pandora is the passive recipient of these divine gifts (Pandora means “all-gifts”), and humanity chooses to accept its two gifts, fire and Pandora; thus harmful desires destroy the traditional order. Hesiod hints that Prometheus realizes this danger in the wake of his own gift to humanity for, given his role in the meat offering, he knows all about bogus gifts; he thus warns his brother Epimetheus, “never to accept a gift from Olympian Zeus but to send it back lest some affliction befall mortals”,<sup>8</sup> advice that Epimetheus disastrously fails to heed. Certainly in some later schools of Greek philosophy, notably Cynicism and Stoicism, the avoidance of desire was seen as essential to a well-ordered life, for desire merely brought disappointment and inner discontent; and flowing from this was a belief that hope, saturated as it was by desire, was a snare for humanity;<sup>9</sup> in certain Eastern traditions of thought also, notably in Hinduism and Buddhism, the overcoming of desire was a central theme.

But what of the jar and its paradoxical contents? In a purely formal sense the jar is not absolutely necessary to make a point about the origins of fallen humanity. Indeed, in the alternative narrative of Prometheus and Pandora in *Theogony*, Hesiod makes the gift of Pandora alone (this time without a jar) the extent of Zeus’s punishment. As the story of Eve in Genesis attests there was clearly an archaic Near Eastern tradition associating the introduction of evil into the world with women. It may be that the jar was being used to amplify contemporary thoughts and feelings about the womanly nature of Pandora, specifically her sexual and reproductive body. Commentators have seen in the large bulbous jar accompanying Pandora an allusion to woman as vessel, of woman with child, and the hopes and fears this conception evoked in archaic times;<sup>10</sup> to a modern artist, Paul Klee, Pandora’s vessel, reduced in size to the

6. *Ibid.*, 38.

7. *Ibid.*, 39.

8. *Ibid.*

9. See J. P. Day, *Hope: A Philosophical Inquiry*, Acta Philosophica Fennica, vol. 51 (Helsinki: Philosophical Society of Finland, 1991), 19.

10. See C. M. Schlegel’s “Introduction” to Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 4–7; and L. E. Doherty, *Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth* (London: Duckworth, 2001), 133–7.

shape of a goblet, suggested the female genitals, and an anxious sexuality.<sup>11</sup> To this mixing of promise and danger we shall return.

### *The ambiguous legacy*

In Hesiod's narrative the jar, whatever other functions it was serving, provides a location for the juxtaposition of hope and evil. It is this, to many later commentators, bizarre co-habitation of evil spirits and the figure of hope that is the central puzzle of the whole myth. There is a range of possible interpretations, and with none of them entirely consistent with the narrative, yet all sufficiently consistent to have a degree of plausibility, there is the opportunity to explore different conceptions of the meaning of hope.

According to Hesiod, Zeus intended Pandora and her jar to be "a great calamity"<sup>12</sup> for humanity. We are not told, however, the precise nature and extent of this punishment and, crucially, the role of hope in this ordeal. One possibility is that hope is part of the punishment, a sadistic added twist of the knife on Zeus's part. Zeus, in this reading, knowing the human propensity to desire, allowed humanity to keep this enervating presence close by in the jar, endlessly thinking that things must get better, always to be bitterly disappointed. This was Nietzsche's take on the myth. In *Human, All Too Human* (published in 1878, the year he had given a series of lectures on Hesiod's *Works and Days* in Basel), he had no doubts as to the malign intentions of Zeus, and the corrosive effect of the "gift" of hope. Hope is not the sole good in the midst of evil – it is the greatest evil of all:

For [man] does not know that that jar which Pandora brought was the jar of evils, and he takes the remaining evil for the greatest worldly good – it is hope, for Zeus did not want man to throw his life away, no matter how much the other evils might torment him, but rather to go on letting himself be tormented anew. To that end, he gives man hope. In truth, it is the most evil of evils because it prolongs man's torment.<sup>13</sup>

A tragic echo of this belief can be found in the words of an inmate of Auschwitz, Tadeusz Borowski: "We were never taught to rid ourselves of hope, and that is why we are dying in the gas-chambers".<sup>14</sup> The latter statement can also be construed as referring to merely *false* hope, a theme to be found in both leftist and

11. Klee's painting *Die Büchse der Pandora als Stilleben* is illustrated and discussed in Panofsky & Panofsky, *Pandora's Box*, 112–13.

12. Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days* (West), 39.

13. F. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, M. Faber & S. Lehman (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004), 58.

14. Quoted in J. J. Godfrey, *A Philosophy of Human Hope* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 1.

rightist critiques of ideology and utopia. Certainly Ernst Bloch thought that delusional hope might be implied in the Pandora's Box myth, and for this reason considered it ultimately unsatisfactory, preferring a later Hellenistic version of the story where there is an authentic "founded" hope. In Hesiod's account, Bloch speculates, "hope as evil refers to its deceptive aspect, even to the powerless aspect which it still represents for itself alone ... [and] hope may appear as an evil on the side of uncertainty, and the deceptive, the unfounded kind certainly is one".<sup>15</sup>

A different but perhaps even darker interpretation can be put on Zeus's punishment of humanity. While the evil spirits leave the jar and enter the world, hope remains in the jar, with the lid firmly in place. Hesiod makes it clear that it was a part of Zeus's plan that Pandora replace the lid: "the woman put the lid back in time by the providence of Zeus the cloud-gatherer who bears the aegis".<sup>16</sup> There is of course a possibly benign explanation for this, to which we shall return, but the malign possibility remains that Zeus intended that hope be inaccessible, with no presence in the world; there for a brief moment, with the possibility of becoming active in the world, only irrevocably to be put beyond human use. A version of this type of interpretation can be found in Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas's 1930s' classic, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity*, which sees a dark archaic myth posited on "the envious and monopolistic temper of the Gods", where the fact that hope "remains inescapably shut up" is meant to emphasize "the irremediable nature of the disaster", where "no future redemption of man is forecast".<sup>17</sup> The more general point in this form of reading is of human yearning without any possibility of fulfilment, of desire without hope. This is the territory explored by Dante in *The Inferno*: the terrible inscription over the gates of Hell, "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here", and the plaintive lament of the inhabitants of Limbo, "We are lost; there is no other penalty/Than to live here without hope, but with desire".<sup>18</sup> Philosophers such as Hobbes and Hume, when they have sought to define the absence of hope, have named it despair.

The predominant interpretation is that the presence of hope in the jar was an expression of the merciful aspect of Zeus. He wanted to punish but not annihilate humanity and therefore gave them the resources of hope to help them survive in the midst of adversity: even possibly flourish if suitably chastened and reformed. As one leading commentator on Hesiod, M. L. West, has put it "Hesiod ... means that hope remains among men as the one antidote to

15. E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, N. Plaice, S. Plaice & P. Knight (trans.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 334.

16. Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days* (West), 40.

17. A. O. Lovejoy & G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935), 196–7.

18. Dante, *The Divine Comedy*, C. H. Sisson (trans.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 61.

suffering".<sup>19</sup> Pandora's guided hand in replacing the lid is an act of domestication and protection, not imprisonment or the baiting of a trap: keeping hope safely close by as a perennial human resource. In connection with this one can see a Christianization of the story centred on the new status of hope registered in the New Testament. To Nietzsche, in *Daybreak*, this Christian rupture with the classical world falsified subsequent readings of Hesiod's tale, which was rendered "so strange no more recent commentator has understood it – for it runs counter to the modern spirit, which has learned from Christianity to believe in hope as a virtue".<sup>20</sup> The classic text is from Paul – "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three"<sup>21</sup> – which not only placed hope in an elite troika of virtues, but cast this virtue in an entirely positive light, lacking any dark dimension; with Aquinas, as Joseph Patrick Day argues, systematizing this status in medieval Europe by characterizing hope as one of the three "Theological virtues".<sup>22</sup> The temptation to view hope in the Pandora myth through these spectacles must have been great indeed. An aspect of the Christian co-option of the myth can be seen in a degree of conflation between the Hesiodic myth and the Eve narrative in Genesis, where increasingly Pandora is viewed as in some degree culpable for the entry of evil in the world, through the addition of elements entirely absent in Hesiod, such as the claim that Pandora was driven by a wilful curiosity to open the jar, or was disobeying some divine prohibition in doing this.<sup>23</sup> Even in those translations that suggest that Pandora had malign intentions towards humanity,<sup>24</sup> it is clear that these were deliberately implanted by Zeus and the gods to effect the divine purpose of excoriating humanity; it was not an exercise of malevolent free will on Pandora's part. In this reconfigured Christian myth a redemptive hope moved centre stage. Thus, for example, Dora Panofsky and Erwin Panofsky in their study of the historical iconography of the Pandora myth, show how renaissance artists, themselves particularly attracted to the literary themes of classical antiquity, used the story to highlight the Christian importance and necessity of hope, now in its Latin form of *Spes*.<sup>25</sup> In this sense Pandora's jar was part of the consolidation of

19. In Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days* (West), 75 n.97.

20. F. Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 40.

21. 1 Corinthians 13:13.

22. Day, *Hope*, 23.

23. One can see these Christian accretions in the Wikipedia entry on "Pandora", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pandora> (accessed Mar. 2008).

24. D. Hine has "the maid pried open the lid ... her purpose, to bring sad hardships to mankind" (his translation of *Works of Hesiod and the Homeric Hymns* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 26); D. W. Tandy and W. C. Neale have "she contrived pernicious woes for people" (their translation of *Hesiod's Works and Days: A Translation and Commentary for the Social Sciences* [Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996], 65).

25. Panofsky & Panofsky, *Pandora's Box*, 27–33.

the Christian conception of hope that was to inform in secular form the strongly positive conceptions of hope developed in modern thought.

But yet a further reading of the myth has relevance at this point. Again, as Day has argued, while some of the giants of modern philosophy, notably Kant and Mill, have examined hope in the context of a study of values, some have not, as is the case of Hume and Spinoza, where the emphasis is on hope as a psychological state.<sup>26</sup> That the latter two philosophers have a conception of hope different from the mainstream Christian tradition is not particularly surprising, given their unorthodox assumptions: Spinoza's process philosophy of nature, *Natura naturans* (naturing Nature),<sup>27</sup> with its hostility to a value-protecting transcendental God, and Hume, philosophical sceptic, hammer of the rationalist God of the Deists.<sup>28</sup> In Day's analysis the approaches of the latter are further differentiated in terms of Kant's and Mill's concern with hope, but Hume's and Spinoza's concern with hope *and* fear, where the two elements have a form of conjoined unity.<sup>29</sup> Pandora's jar can be read in a way that recognizes this alternative way of conceiving hope: as a symbol of the connectedness of the seemingly contrary and distinct qualities of the spirit of hope and the figures of fear and destruction. Certainly a number of commentators on the myth have been drawn to the ambiguous status of the figure of hope, which seems a figure of two worlds or to somehow link both the light and dark aspects of human existence. Apostolos Athanassakis speculates that hope "is treated differently because she can be both good and bad," but conceptualises this in dualist terms, sometimes hope can be good, at other times bad.<sup>30</sup> Jean-Pierre Vernant is the commentator who has travelled the furthest distance in exploring the ambiguity of the figure of hope in the Pandora myth. In particular he recognizes that the fallibility of human knowledge, in the context of a dangerous universe, is the basis of hope: "since evils are ... inextricably intermingled with ... good things ... and it is impossible for us to foresee exactly how tomorrow will turn out for us, we are always hoping for the best. If men possessed the infallible foreknowledge of Zeus, they would have no use for Elpis [Hope]".<sup>31</sup> Day's fascinating discussion of Hume, and brief reference to Spinoza, can further help us to develop a more fruitful exploration of the ambiguity of hope. It is undoubtedly the case for Spinoza that hope is only hope because there is no certainty, and this lack of certainty is an element of icy fear at the heart of hope.

26. Day, *Hope*, 33.

27. S. Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 231.

28. D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

29. Day, *Hope*, 32.

30. A. N. Athanassakis, "Notes", in Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, 2nd edn, A. N. Athanassakis (trans.) (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 88.

31. J.-P. Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, J. Lloyd (trans.) (Hassocks: Harvester, 1980), 184.



Likewise the lack of certainty in fear engenders a significant dimension of hope in the fearful: it follows that there is no hope without fear and no fear without hope.<sup>32</sup> Hume discusses the juxtaposition of hope and fear in the course of an analysis of the passions, where he uses a musical analogy: the passions, he says, are not like a wind instrument, “which in running over all the notes immediately loses the sound after the breath ceases”, but like a stringed instrument, “where after each stroke the vibrations still retain some sound, which gradually and insensibly decays”.<sup>33</sup> In the real-world context of mere probability people will oscillate between conflicting responses, with predominance occurring as the chances of attainment rise or fall. Thus Day argues that Hume ends up with not a genuinely distinct hope *or* fear, but effective compounds: “Hope-Fear” and “Fear-Hope”.<sup>34</sup> “Hope” as the name of the compound thus only has an existence between the states of despair and certainty. Bloch, although he does, as we have seen, reject the utility of the Hesiodic myth, nonetheless does seem to be operating with a similar notion of hope as a compound. In his formulation the utopian “not-yet” precisely because it is “not-yet” carries with it frustration, anxiety and foreboding, just as in conditions of abjection and dejection the gleam of something better is a tenacious presence:

Every dream remains one by virtue of the fact that too little has yet succeeded, become finished for it. That is why it cannot forget what is missing, why it holds the door open in all things. The door that is at least half-open, when it appears to open on to pleasant objects, is marked hope ... [T]here is no hope without anxiety and no anxiety without hope, they keep each other hovering in the balance.<sup>35</sup>

This conception of hope undoubtedly has intuitive appeal. The word “hope” does tend to be deployed in a context where failure is a real possibility, frequently as the last line of defence against the forces of disaster: in phrases such as “our last hope”, “keeping hope alive” and “give us hope”, where hope is summoned by its opposite and maintains its existence within that tension. For it is indeed the evil spirits that leave Pandora’s jar first and that thereby throw the spotlight on that which they have left behind: miles apart but significantly joined.

32. B. Spinoza, *Complete Works*, Samuel Shirley (trans.) (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2002), 313.

33. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 487.

34. Day, *Hope*, 32.

35. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 333.



## Utopia: Prometheus

But what is the relationship between hope and utopia? We know that Bloch called his great study of utopianism *The Principle of Hope* and that the term hope is often used to signify recognizably utopian enterprises, as for example in the term “social hope” or “spaces of hope”, but utopianism and hope are clearly not synonyms, so what is their relationship? In terms of the mythological sources we have been dealing with, it is the figure of Prometheus that has often been used as a symbol of utopian energy in modern utopian thought. His very name, which in Greek means forethought, seems to situate Prometheus as a cutting edge into the future. As we have seen, however, according to the Hesiodic scale of values Prometheus was guilty of *hubris*. To ancient eyes the utopian moment in the Pandora narrative in *Works and Days* was in the past, the age of ease destroyed by the Promethean intervention, or more broadly Hesiod’s lost Golden Age, something, as in the case of the Roman author Virgil, to be *restored*. Modern eyes read against the grain of the Hesiodic texts, or pick up on more positive workings of the Prometheus myth in later antiquity, viewing Prometheus as a fighter against authoritarian power, a friend of, and co-worker with, humanity. The Promethean enterprise embodies many of the features of utopianism. There is a strong normative dimension, where humanity gets its due – its right to fire and all that entails; there is an intended transformation of the status quo – the theft of fire and its presentation to humanity is intended to create a new cosmic context; and the alternative involves and is grounded in a critique of the values of the existing order – in this case the authoritarian order of Zeus. Zeus’s decision to punish both Prometheus *and* humanity draws up battle lines between two distinct tendencies, and the punishment Zeus metes out to Prometheus (described in the *Theogony*) combines static virtues of fixity of location and endless repetition: “And he bound crafty Prometheus in inescapable fetters, grievous bonds, driving them through the middle of a pillar. And he set a great winged eagle upon him, and it fed on his immortal liver, which grew the same amount each way at night as the great bird ate in the course of the day”.<sup>36</sup> In Prometheus’s modern apotheosis this fate spoke of a double-edged immortality: endless suffering on the one hand but endurance on the other. To the British romantic poets Prometheus’s defiance of divine authoritarianism unleashed the social creativity of humanity. “Thy Godlike crime”, wrote Byron in his poem *Prometheus*:

... was to be kind  
To render with thy precepts less

36. Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days* (West), 18.

The sum of human wretchedness,  
And strengthen Man with his own mind.<sup>37</sup>

In the preface to his *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley, while rejecting the charge that he was writing didactic verse, takes the opportunity to side with the utopians against the “realists”, defiantly asserting that “I had rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon, than go to Heaven with Paley and Malthus”,<sup>38</sup> and in the body of the play (which is an engagement with Aeschylus’s Prometheus, not Hesiod’s) paints a picture of a human society transformed in the wake of Prometheus’s struggle:

Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man:  
Equal, unclassed, tribeless and nationless,  
Exempt from awe, worship, degree: the king  
Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man.<sup>39</sup>

The material in Pandora’s jar can be seen to be doing a different, but complementary type of work. The Pandoran dispensation follows in the wake of, and is a consequence of, the Promethean enterprise. In a modern reading, the compound Hope-Fear both registers the terrain in which utopianism takes place, and the psychological dynamics attendant on the utopian project, a mingling of the objective and subjective registers. One might note here the sometime portrayal of hope as blind. In Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound*, written three centuries after Hesiod’s tales, Prometheus cites as one of his gifts to humanity that “I planted firmly in their hearts blind hopefulness”.<sup>40</sup> This can be seen as dramatizing a difference between the far-sighted “utopian” figure of Prometheus and the function of hope, which is about coping with the resistances to one’s expectations. In George Watts’s 1886 painting *Hope*, a female figure, her eyes covered by a white band, strains her head to hear the sound emanating from the one remaining unbroken string on her battered lyre.<sup>41</sup> Again, this is about the praxis of survival in a world inhospitable to dreams, and it led a number of contemporary critics to mistakenly suggest that Watts should have called his composition *Despair*. The processes and language of hope come into play when reflection and emotion are deployed on utopian desire in the context of a perceived reality, with all its limitations, possibilities and probabilities. This may consolidate or even augment

37. Lord Byron, *Selected Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65.

38. P. B. Shelley, *The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 232.

39. *Ibid.*, 293–4.

40. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound, The Suppliants, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 28.

41. One of two versions of this painting can be found in the Tate Britain gallery in London.

the original desire or lead to a scaling-down or redefinition. In the process hope language (with its dark other, fear, invisible) takes possession of the desire generating the vast array of the vocabulary of hope. The fallibility of reflection and the treacherousness of the emotions can validate self-frustrating desire, as articulated by Nietzsche and Borowski; or the process can rob the desire of all credibility, when hope is said to be gone, and despair is the only place left – although hope, which actually is not blind, is usually able to find some glimmer of light (albeit sometimes false) in the deepest of glooms. Hope is not therefore the simple glorious virtue of the Christian tradition, sovereign antidote left by a merciful God, for its voice is uncertain, even contradictory, and can, Siren-like, ensnare.

The strange guest list in Pandora's jar can thus be read as a meditation on the complexities of utopian thought and action. The Promethean revolt against the reality principle of Zeus, although successful in its appropriation of the symbolic fire, encounters the deep resistances of that reality principle, in Zeus's punishment, but also the double-edged weapon of hope. The stark, unforgiving universe of archaic Greece is in many ways strikingly contemporary, in contrast to the various forms of benign cosmos prevalent in the early-modern and modern eras. Unsurprisingly it is possible to see the outlines of a flintier conception of hope, one shaped and marked by the possibility of disaster; lacking certainty, but shunning despair, it is still recognizably the figure of hope.

### Gods and humans

The Hesiodic myths concern themselves with the boundaries between gods and humans; they thus have a resonance for contemporary debates about the reconfiguration of the relationship between the religious and the secular. The starting-point for the Prometheus/Pandora narrative is a primeval meeting between gods and men at Mekone. The meeting is described as an attempt to establish appropriate relations between the two parties; one translation talks of gods and humans "settling their accounts",<sup>42</sup> another refers to it as a "pact",<sup>43</sup> such language suggesting a proposed formal social contract between the two parties. In fact, the process is derailed by Prometheus's attempt to trick Zeus over the portions of meat. One can see in the myth a speculative narration of the emergence of a dualistic religion out of a ruptured shared space. Humans and gods now inhabit different spaces, and the ritual practices of humans reflect this new reality. Instead of both sides sharing the meat, humans use their new fire to cook and consume all the meat, and burn the bones on altars for the gods. This sharp delineation

42. Hesiod, *Theogony, Works and Days, Shield*, 24.

43. Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days*, H. Weinfeld (trans.) (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 39.

between the divine and the human is further entrenched with the arrival of the evils contained in Pandora's jar.

Hesiod's account is, in effect, a legitimization of this dualistic conception. Zeus is not really tricked by Prometheus's meat substitution trick, and it is clear that his way will triumph, for, as Hesiod, is fond of saying, "there is no way to evade the purpose of Zeus".<sup>44</sup> Once, however, the forces of modern secularism began their assault on traditional religion, Prometheus was available for mobilization as an exemplary opponent of religious authority. The utopian energy invested in his apotheosis frequently directed itself towards the taming or the destruction of the gods. All manner of freethinkers, secular humanists and atheists emblazoned Prometheus on their banner. The young Marx in his doctoral dissertation quotes Aeschylus's Prometheus, "Better to be the servant of this rock/Than to be faithful boy to Father Zeus", before concluding that "Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar".<sup>45</sup> Prometheus became one of a number of nay-sayers to God, including Mikhail Bakunin's Satan, who "did not deceive Adam and Eve" when he promised them "knowledge and liberty as a reward for the act of disobedience",<sup>46</sup> and Bloch's Job, who "is pious precisely because he does *not* believe".<sup>47</sup> The Titan, the Angel and the human, all have morally surpassed their God. For Nietzsche, even if the Christian God existed he would not be worthy of respect; indeed, his actual existence would be a greater scandal than his non-existence:

What sets *us* apart is not that we recognize no God, either in history or in nature or behind nature – but that we find that which has been revered as God not "godlike" but pitiable, absurd, harmful, not merely an error but a *crime against life* ... If this God of the Christians were *proved* to us to exist, we should know even less how to believe in him.<sup>48</sup>

God rightly evokes a visceral response – "what decides against Christianity now is our taste, not our reasons"<sup>49</sup> – God is literally distasteful. Nietzsche was also able to weave Pandora and Hope into this indictment. In *The Anti-Christ*, written in 1888, his last year of sanity, Nietzsche returned to his *Human, All Too Human* interpretation of the Pandora myth, but this time it is explicitly harnessed

44. Hesiod, *Theogony and Works and Days* (West), 40.

45. K. Marx, "Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature", in *Collected Works*, vol. 1, K. Marx & F. Engels (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 31.

46. M. Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Dover, 1970), 12.

47. E. Bloch, *Atheism In Christianity*, J. T. Swann (trans.) (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), 122.

48. F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.), in *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 162–3.

49. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, J. Nauckhoff (trans.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 123.

to a critique of Christianity; Christian hope with its *post-mortem* fulfilment sustains endless human suffering:

Sufferers have to be sustained by a hope which cannot be refuted by any actuality – which is not *done away with* by any fulfilment: a hope in the Beyond. (It was precisely on account of this capacity for keeping the unhappy in suspense that the Greeks considered hope the evil of evils, the actual malignant evil; it remained behind in the box of evil).<sup>50</sup>

Hope maintains tyrannical divinity and its corollary, abject humanity.

Yet it would be a mistake to merely focus on the oppositional aspect of this secular process. The attempt to theorize the secular necessarily had ramifications for the religious, including the possibility of a new and fruitful dialogue between the secular and the religious, a dialogue one might term post-secular. Hume is perhaps an unlikely author to discuss in this context, given what we know about his deep distrust of religion. But he is an example of a thinker who could only critique religion by altering the traditional terms of debate, thereby suggesting or, more accurately, anticipating, later developments. He also used Hesiod's myth in the process. While assembling his troops against Christian and Deist creationism, Hume saw the potential in Hesiod's account of the common emergence of the gods and humanity out of nature, suggesting a conception of "generation" not "creation"; indeed, as he notes, "Pandora is the only instance of creation or a voluntary production"<sup>51</sup> in the *Theogony*, thereby recognizing Pandora's distinct status as a non-autonomous product of an external production. Hume's sensitivity to this portrayal of a unitary generation, rather than a dualistic creation, in Hesiod's cosmology, anticipates one aspect of later nineteenth-century developments: the demolition of the essential ontological difference between the human and the divine. Hume, in effect, seems to have understood the significance of the meeting between men and gods at Mekone. Given the tenor of the progressive thinking of the time this naturalistic conception of "generation" would tend to take a materialist form. As we have already seen, the myth itself dramatizes the origin and form of the materialism–idealism dualism in the aftermath of Prometheus' meat substitution scam. The humans cook and consume the meat, and the gods breathe in the scented smoke from the incinerated bones. Out of disunity comes a whole range of ontologically conceived ideological differences: the human and the godly (as opposed to humans and gods), the sacrificer and the receiver of sacrifices, and the material and the ideal. Daryl Hine's translation

50. F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, R. J. Hollingdale (trans.) (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), 133.

51. D. Hume, *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 147.

of the Mekone incident captures the significance of the event: “Men had distinguished themselves from the gods at Mekone”.<sup>52</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach used Hesiod in the same manner as Hume, noting that in the *Theogony* Earth is the mother of all the gods, but using this a launch pad for more radical speculations: “the Greeks [and the Norse] ... looked upon nature as the source not only of men but also of the gods – clear proof that the gods and men are one, that the gods stand and fall with mankind.”<sup>53</sup> In the modern world, Feuerbach argues, religion possesses a false theological essence and a true anthropological essence; humans pour all their deepest human aspirations into the godhead and become poorer and poorer in the process. Religion is thus a treasure trove of the most sublime material, but this material needs to be incorporated into social relations, not wasted on an alienated religious abstraction. In the pessimistic terms of the Hesiodic myth the gods are deemed exclusively to embody qualities now unattainable by humanity. For Feuerbach the prospect of reunification of the human and the divine is opened up by modern social conditions, and this is not a reductive unification: “I ... while reducing theology to anthropology, exalt anthropology into theology, very much as Christianity, while lowering God into man, made man into God”.<sup>54</sup> While the two essences theory is clearly visible in the famous “opium of the people” passage in Marx, where religion is deemed to be “the heart of a heartless world”,<sup>55</sup> the young Marx’s perception of religion as *the* paradigmatic form of alienation and ideology entailed that there was to be no religious heritage in communism. It was left to Nietzsche to run with the notion of humanity’s divine potential. As with Hume and Feuerbach, Nietzsche saw philosophical significance in the archaic Greek conception of the ontological proximity of humans and gods, instanced in the Hesiodic myth in the Mekone meeting of the two parties. For Nietzsche this meant that humans could both envisage themselves as partaking of the life of the gods, and have no conception of themselves as permanently ontologically abject in relation to the gods. But, silently echoing Hesiod, as the gods became more remote, so did humanity decline:

The Greeks did not see the Homeric gods above them as masters and themselves below them as servants ... They saw, as it were, only the reflection of the most successful specimens of their own caste, that is, an ideal, not a contrast to their nature. They felt related to them, there was a reciprocal

52. Hine, *Works of Hesiod*, 72; this translation actually has “Mecone”.

53. L. Feuerbach, *Lectures On The Essence of Religion*, R. Manheim (trans.) (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 86.

54. L. Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, G. Eliot, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), xxxviii.

55. K. Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law. Introduction”, in *Collected Works*, vol. 3, K. Marx & F. Engels (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), 176.

interest, a kind of *symmachia* (alliance)... Where the Olympian gods retreated, there Greek life too grew gloomier and more fearful.<sup>56</sup>

Prometheus, in Nietzsche's hands becomes a being whose desire and imagination leads him into the realization that he has the "divine" power of self-creation. This experience of one individual is paralleled with the historical experience of humanity, where religion is likewise deemed to be a preparation for the human exercise of godly powers:

Perhaps to a distant age the whole of *religion* will appear as an exercise and prelude. Perhaps religion could have been the strange means of making it possible one day for a few individuals to enjoy the whole self-sufficiency of a god and all his power of self-redemption ... Did Prometheus first have to *imagine* having *stolen* light and pay for it before he could finally discover that he had created light *by desiring light*, and that not only man but also *god* was the work of *his own* hands and clay in his hands?<sup>57</sup>

Hence in the famous "God is Dead" scene in *The Gay Science*, the "madman" who announces this death adds "We have killed him", and, further, "Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it?"<sup>58</sup> Certainly the parallel of self-generating norms between Zeus and Prometheus, although a source of scandal to Hesiod, is there in the myth. Both create their own morality out of themselves. This, for Nietzsche, is the essence of divine behaviour, the will to life or power, wrenching the framework of the universe into a new shape, such that later people think it entirely natural – like representation before and after Picasso: "I am no seeker", wrote Nietzsche; "I want to create for myself a sun of my own".<sup>59</sup>

It is easy to see the strong utopian elements in the Feuerbachian and Nietzschean perspectives, and in the work of Bloch there is a great deal about religion as both utopian resource and utopian space. What still needs to be considered is the relationship between religion and hope. Our myth can provide a starting-point. Hope is the *last* thing in the jar: everything else has gone, it remains. This chimes in with many characteristic uses of the word hope, where, with accompanying adjective, as in "last hope" or "final hope", a sense of patrolling the borderland of disappointment, disaster or despair is suggested. Its loss expresses something terrible and final; indeed, it is difficult to find a more chilling word than "hopeless", with Dante, as we saw, inscribing the abandonment of hope on the gates of Hell.

56. Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, 85.

57. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 170.

58. *Ibid.*, 119–20.

59. *Ibid.*, 180.



In the Pandora myth also, among the contents of the jar only hope is named; the other spirits are just nameless ills. This is suggestive of hope as a noun as distinct from a verb: hope as something substantial on which one can rest.

The provision of reassuring navigation in conditions of uncertainty has undoubtedly been one of the strongest dimensions of religious traditions, as evidenced by the continuing popularity in secular times of the ritual and liturgy of hope associated with the great moments of hazard in life, notably birth and death, and, to an extent, marriage. Death as the most certain uncertainty is the most challenging test for hope, but also the most fruitful begetter of sublime fearful wanting. In *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch has a chapter dealing with what he terms “Images of Hope against the Power of the Strongest Non-Utopia: Death”, where he charts, among other forms of hope, the rich religious tradition of entry into the great unknown of death. Bloch himself tends to conflate utopia and hope, but although intense utopian energy is deployed in the various constructions of life after death, there is clearly a separate experience of hope within this process, for even among those who have faith in the existence of an afterlife, there must be even fewer who have certainty that they will experience its benign and not its malign form, hence the presence of hope. Mindful of Marx looking over his shoulder, and an atheist himself, he is at pains to point out “the opium of the people” in all of this, but refuses to reduce the whole affair to narcotics. Convinced as he is of the miraculous nature of the material universe, compared with the banal hypothesis of divine creation, in effect echoing here Hume’s distinction between generation and creation in the Hesiodic myth, he is unwilling narrowly to circumscribe the possible: “For no man yet knows whether the life process does not contain or admit of transformation, however obscure. The bald No, however empirical it may have been to date, does not settle the question.”<sup>60</sup> The articulation of religious hope is also, for Bloch, a statement of human worth, and a means of strengthening and defending that worth; I hope for the type of life I actually deserve, even if, as hope itself counsels, I may not get it. There is thus for humanity “a strengthening of the sense of the infinite value of their own souls and thus a strengthening of the will not to be treated like cattle here and now”.<sup>61</sup> Finally for Bloch, religion, understood as both utopia and hope, was a vibrant heritage, a storehouse of values and imagery, available for yet further utopian thought and practice. A hyper-rationalism with no time for this heritage is disarming itself before oppression: “The point ... to be made against all pseudo-enlightenment which sees religion as a spent force caught between the alternatives Moses or Darwin ... is this: the counter-blow against the oppressor is biblical, too”.<sup>62</sup>

60. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1108–9.

61. *Ibid.*, 1108.

62. Bloch, *Atheism In Christianity*, 24.

## Conclusion

This tale of Prometheus and Pandora therefore speaks to the current post-secular attempt to reconfigure the Enlightenment relationship between the religious and the secular, where the vital political and cultural achievements of the secular moment are defended but with a more sensitive and nuanced appreciation of the religious heritage of humanity. The myth speaks of a conjunctural time before the emergence of the dualistic Western tradition of religion – when, in Vernant’s retelling of the story, at Mekone “gods and men live together. They share the same meals, they sit at the same tables”<sup>63</sup> – and of the moment when the two groups became separated, and formal religion was born. Its central characters, Prometheus and Pandora, enable us to see the tenacity of religion, its Promethean, properly utopian, yearning for the sublime and its articulation of a hope that refuses to give way to despair. These are powerful resources that no effective modern social theory can do without. Appropriately for the author to whom we owe the terminology of the Golden Age, the story of Mekone and its consequences can function as the best of subsequent formulations of golden times have done: not as a backward-looking lament for a condition gone for ever, or as a project of simple restoration, but as a stimulus to thinking about the virtues of that age in a new and modern context. In the case of Mekone it evokes the possibility of a new conversation between the historically sundered elements of the human and the divine, whether conceived as different aspects of an essentially human discourse, or as a dialogue between the natural and the supernatural.

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63. J-P. Vernant, *The Universe, the Gods, and Mortals*, L. Asher (trans.) (London: Profile Books, 2002), 43.

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