PART ONE

THE LAYING OF THE FOUNDATIONS

Hesiod

Anaximander

Anaximenes and Xenophanes

Pythagoreanism

Hesiod’s Theogony is an account of the origin of things. In it Hesiod tells us how the existing world-order arose, and how the gods, and after them the generations of men, came into being. This preoccupation with origins, with beginnings, is typical of the whole of early Greek philosophy. It rests on an assumption so natural that
we are apt not to notice that we are making it at all. This assumption is that there must have been a time when the present world-order did not exist; for only on this assumption is its existence something that must be accounted for. The efforts of the earliest Greek philosophers were directed mainly to the solution of this problem.

Hesiod's description of the origin of the world-order is brief and obscure, but it is of the greatest importance for the subsequent development of Greek philosophy:

1.1 First of all was Chaos born;
Then, after him, wide-bosomed Earth,
a sure, eternal dwelling-place
for all the deathless gods who rule
Olympus' snowy peaks.
Next, Tartarus of the dark mist was born
in a nook of the wide-wayed earth;
then Love, most beautiful by far
of all the immortals, the looser of limbs,
who overcomes, of all the gods
and all mankind, the mind within them
and their clever counsels.
From Chaos there sprang Erebus
and dark-robed Night.
From Night the Upper Air was born
and Day, borne in her womb,
the offspring of her love for Erebus.
The Earth's first offspring,
equal to herself, was Heaven
filled with stars, to cover her entire
and be a sure, eternal dwelling-place
for the blessed gods.
Then she bore the lofty hills
the happy haunts of goddess nymphs
who dwell in mountain glens.
Without sweet union of love
she bore the sea, Pontus,
unharvested, with raging swell of surge
and, having lain with Heaven, bore
the deeply swirling Ocean River stream.

We are so familiar with the idea of order being produced out of chaos that we tend to assume unconsciously that in this passage, too, "Chaos" stands for that pre-existent state of affairs out of which the world-order comes into being. But Hesiod distinctly says that Chaos came into being; moreover, he seems to be referring in

his use of the word to some feature of the world-order itself. In fact, chaos is derived from a root meaning "gap," and it refers here to the region between earth and heaven. This is certainly the meaning which the word has, at any rate, later in the Theogony, where Hesiod describes the battle between the Titan and the Olympian gods. From out of the sky, he says, Zeus hurled his thunderbolts, and the land was engulfed in flame:

1.2 The whole earth seethed with it,
and the streams of the Ocean river,
and the unharvested sea.
The blazing vapor engulfed
the earthborn Titans.
A flame unquenchable pierced through
the shining upper air.
A blazing beam of thunder flash
and lightning blast
blinded their eyes, despite their strength.
The wondrous blaze confounded Chaos.
To the eyes the sight was such
and the sound was such to the ears
as the collision of Earth
might seem with the mighty Heaven above.

Chaos, here, is clearly the region between earth and heaven, which is filled with the burning heat of the thunderbolts and the noise of their passage.

The Primordial Unity

Hesiod's account, then, begins with the opening up of a gap between heaven and earth. But the opening of this gap presupposes a pre-existing state of affairs in which earth and heaven are one. Hesiod himself does not refer to this earlier stage, but traces of it survive in later writers:

1.3 Not from me but from my mother
comes the tale how earth and sky
were once one form, but being separated,
brought forth all things, sending into light
trees, birds, wild beasts,
those nourished by the salt sea
and the race of mortals.

The suggestion implicit in the opening words, that the tale is an old one handed down from generation to generation, is confirmed by the
existence of creation myths much older than Hesiod, in which the first step in the creation of the world-order is the splitting in two of a primordial unity. In the Babylonian Enuma elish, for example, earth and sky are at first not distinguished; nothing exists but the primeval waters. The hero Marduk, after a great battle, kills Tiamat, the goddess of the waters, and divides her body into two halves. One of these he sets overhead to be the sky with its sweet waters; the other he sets opposite to it to be the earth with its salt sea. In Genesis, too, the earth is at first “without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the waters.” But God “divided the waters which were below the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament” to create heaven and earth.

At first, then, there was no distinction between earth and sky, but they were “one form.” It was the creation of Chaos which made possible their emergence as distinct entities. This accounts for Hesiod’s assertion that earth came into being after Chaos; for before Chaos came into being the form of earth was not yet visible as such, but was blended with the form of heaven in a single whole. It is their separation that marks the beginning of the creation of the world-order.

What caused this separation to take place? In 1.1, at any rate, we are not told. But later in the Theogony, in a myth describing the mutilation of Heaven by his children, Hesiod returns to the events of this earlier time. Heaven, he says, hated his children from the beginning:

1.4 The minute that each child was born
he would hide them all away
in a hidden place of Earth
and conceal them from the light.
Heaven exulted in his evil work,
but mighty Earth, within her heart,
groaned from pressure’s pain,
and conceived a crafty plan
of wicked treachery.
Straightaway she made the spark
of hard grey flint, and made
a mighty sickle of it.
Then she told her children
of the plan and spoke
encouraging words to them
born of her heart’s distress:
“Children of mine, born of a wicked father,
obey me if you will, that we might punish
the vile and wicked outrage of your father
who was the first to plan such deeds of shame.”
So she spoke; but fear laid hold of all
and not one said a word.
But mighty Cronus, crouched in his counsel,
took courage, and addressed his mother thus:
"Mother, I undertake to do this deed;
for I do not respect our ill-named father,
who was the first to plan such deeds of shame."
So he spoke; and mighty Earth rejoiced
within her heart, and in an ambush
made him lie, concealed.
She placed within his hand a sickle,
jagged sharp, and then revealed her plan.
Great Heaven then approached, and in his train
came Night; he longed for love and lay
spreading himself entirely over Earth.
Then from his ambush, his own son
stretched out his left hand; with his right
he seized the monstrous sickle,
long, and jagged sharp, and swiftly chopped
and cut his father’s genitals,
and hurled them far behind him.
Nor did they fall in vain.
For every bloody drop that poured forth
Earth received; and as the seasons changed
she bore the powerful Furies
and the mighty Giants ablaze with armor,
holding in their hands long javelins.

This version of the story, like the first, assumes that in the beginning there was no gap between heaven and earth. This was because heaven covered earth completely, so as to prevent the emergence of her children. The myth of the mutilation of heaven is clearly an attempt to explain the separation of the two and the appearance of Chaos. As an explanation it may seem worthless, but it serves to reveal an important fact about the primordial unity, namely, the existence within it of opposing principles, male and female. Their existence is important because otherwise nothing would happen; the process of creation could never begin from a completely undifferentiated unity.

The myth seems crude to us because, like so many primitive myths, it uses sexual imagery in a context in which such imagery no longer seems to us to have any place. But to Hesiod the use of such imagery
was natural; for the coming into being of Chaos is a kind of birth, and all birth presupposes the union of male and female.

This imagery is sustained throughout. From the division of earth and sky Love is born, the desire of male and female — the sundered parts of the original whole — for one another:

1.5 Holy sky desires to penetrate the earth.
Love seizes earth with longing for this marriage.
And rain, falling from her bedfellow the sky, impregnates earth; and she brings forth for men pasture for their flocks, and grain for them.

In these lines from Aeschylus it is by means of rain, falling across the gap which separates them, that Earth is impregnated by Heaven. In Hesiod she receives the bloody drops that fall from his mutilated body, and from this union springs the first generation of gods.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WORLD-ORDER

Of this generation the firstborn is Ocean, the great river which Hesiod describes elsewhere as "flowing backward upon itself" as it circles the outer rim of earth. It is possible that this conception of a ring of water surrounding the earth originated in Mesopotamia, where it figures in the Babylonian epic of creation and has some physical basis in the situation of the fertile lands that lay between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Certainly it did not fit the geographical situation of the Greeks, and the historian Herodotus, who found the conception still current in his own day, was clearly puzzled as to what basis it could possibly have in experience:

1.6 The Greeks claim that Ocean flows around the whole earth, beginning where the sun rises; but in fact they offer no evidence to support this.

Equally without basis in observed fact is the existence beneath the earth of Tartarus. In 1.1 Hesiod simply mentions it as coeval with heaven; but in his account of the battle between the Titan and Olympian gods he describes it at some length. It is the place into which the defeated Titans are at last driven:

1.7 As far beneath the earth as heaven is above,
so far away from earth is dank and misty Tartarus.
If a brazen anvil were to fall from heaven, it would fall nine days and nights continuous until, upon the tenth, it reached the earth.
And if an anvil made of bronze should fall from earth nine days and nights continuous, upon the tenth at last it would reach Tartarus.
Around it runs a wall of bronze, around it Night has poured her triple necklace chain.
Above it grow the roots of earth and the unharvested sea.
There the Titan gods are hid beneath a dark and misty gloom by Zeus the cloud commander's plans, in a dank place where ends the mighty earth.
They may not leave this place; Poseidon set upon it doors of bronze and a wall runs round it on all sides.
There Gyes lives, and Cottus, and great-souled Obriareus, the trusty guardians of Zeus who bears the aegis.
There, each one in order, loathsome and dank, are the wellsprings and the boundary marks of gloomy earth and murky Tartarus and of the starry heaven and the unharvested sea.
Even the gods abhor this place — a mighty chasm, whose floor no man would reach when once he entered its gates until a year had run its course, for whirlwind after whirlwind would toss him to and fro with deadly blast.
This place of portent even the immortals dread. The dreadful house of black-robed Night stands shrouded with a pall of cloud.
Before her home stands lapetus' son immovable; upon his head, and with unwearied hands he holds aloft the vault of heaven.
Along its vertical axis heaven and Tartarus stand in opposition; along its horizontal axis the stream of Ocean flows back upon itself; and at the center, equidistant from all these, lies earth, “a sure, eternal foundation for the blessed gods” and men.

The Apportioning of the World-Order

Much of Hesiod’s Theogony is devoted to the story of Zeus, father of the Olympian gods. Because of a prophecy that his own son would displace him, Cronus, the son of heaven, ate his children as fast as earth brought them forth. But when Zeus was born, his mother hid him away and gave Cronus a stone to swallow in his stead. In time the prophecies were fulfilled; through treachery Cronus was forced to disgorge his children one by one, and led by Zeus they drove out the first generation of gods, the Titans, and hurled them into Tartarus.

1.8 Now when the blessed gods had ended their hard labor — judging by strength in battle their quarrel with the Titans for whom should have more honor — they stirred up Zeus, far-seeing, to rule and reign the gods, because Earth bade them do it. So he shared out among them the honors each should have.

The distribution of honors to which this passage refers is of great importance for later thought. Hesiod himself does not explain it, but there is a passage in Homer which helps to bring out its significance very clearly. It occurs in Book 15 of the Iliad where Zeus, enraged at the interference of Poseidon in the battle between Greeks and Trojans, sends a messenger to command him to withdraw from the plain of Troy. Poseidon angrily protests:

1.9 No, no; good though he be, he spoke insolently if he would restrain me by force against my will when I am his peer in honor. For we three are brothers, sons of Cronus whom Rhea bore:
Zeus and I, and Hades, lord of the world below.
All was divided in three; each received his share of honor.
I had the gray sea as my dwelling when we cast lots;
Hades, the shadowy world; Zeus, the broad heavens among the upper air and clouds. The earth
is shared by all of us, along with high Olympus. Wherefore I will not live by Zeus’ will;
strong though he be, let him rest content with his share.
Let him not threaten me with his strength, as though I were wicked.
Better for him to scold his sons and daughters, the children whom he begat, for they of need must listen to his rage.

The basis for this protest is evident. Each of the three brothers has received an equal share — Poseidon the sea, Zeus the sky, and Hades the realm of darkness — earth being reserved for their common use. With these shares go certain rights and privileges which define the place of each in the scheme of things. These are the “honors” which in Hesiod’s version of the story Zeus distributes among the gods after the defeat of the Titans. They determine, as it were, the spheres of influence of the gods, and any attempt at encroachment upon the sphere of one god by another is fiercely resisted as an injustice, for it constitutes a threat to the balance of power established by the original apportionment.

THE GENERATIONS OF MEN

In his *Theogony* Hesiod is concerned with the birth of the gods; in *Works and Days* he is concerned with that of men:

1.10 First of all, the immortals who dwell on Olympus created the golden race of mortal men.
These lived in Cronus’ time
when he held sway in heaven.
Like gods they lived their lives
with hearts released from care,
released from pain and sorrow.
They never felt the misery
of age; with never-failing limbs
they banqueted with pleasure, remote from every ill.
Their death was like a sweet subduing sleep.
All good things were theirs.
The fruitful earth poured forth
her fruits unbidden in boundless plenty.
In peaceful ease they kept their lands
with good abundance,
rich in flocks, and dear to the immortals.
Now the earth has covered over these men who are called “pure spirits who dwell on earth,” “good men,” “defenders from evil,” “warders of mortal men” (who keep watch over lawsuits and wicked deeds and roam the earth enveloped in mist), “givers of wealth.”

This is Hesiod’s account of the Golden Age so often referred to in Greek literature, when the first men, fresh from the hands of the gods, lived a life like that of the gods themselves, free from hardship, suffering, and toil. The spirits of these men, long departed, still roam the earth, says Hesiod, and watch over men; but they themselves were mortal and passed away to be replaced by another generation.

1.11 Next after these the gods who dwell in Olympus made a race of silver men
far baser than the first,
unlike the race of gods, in stature and in spirit.
A child was nurtured at his mother’s side a hundred years, an utter simpleton, playing a child’s part in his house. But when he was full grown and reached the prime of life he lived a meager span of years in sorrow for his folly.
For they could not restrain themselves from sin and wrong, nor would they serve the gods nor sacrifice upon the holy altars of the blessed ones, which is man’s lawful duty. Then Zeus the son of Cronus engulfed them in his rage because they paid no honors to the gods, the blessed ones who dwell upon Olympus.

With the second generation of men we enter the realm of historical fact. Though we do not know with certainty who these men of silver
were, it is not hard to guess. For Hesiod says that they paid no honor to the gods of Olympus, and this description would fit well enough the peoples whom the Greeks found already occupying the land when they came down from the north bringing with them their own gods, the gods of Olympus. It was Olympian Zeus himself who destroyed this second generation of men and created the third:

1.12 Then the earth engulfed these men
who are called by mortals
"blessed gods of the underworld,"
men of inferior rank, but still
honor attends them too.
Then Father Zeus devised another race,
a third, of mortal men,
a race of bronze, in no way like the silver,
dreadful and mighty, sprung from shafts of ash.
The all-lamented sinful works of Ares
were their chief care.
They ate no grain, but hearts of flint
were theirs, unyielding and unconquered.
Great was their strength,
invincible the arms
which grew from mighty shoulders
on strong limbs.
Bronze were their weapons,
their houses too were bronze,
with bronze they worked.
Black iron did not exist.
Subdued by their own hands
nameless they went to icy Hades'
dark and drear abode.
Black death laid hold upon them;
in spite of their great strength
they left the sun's bright light.

We know who these men were. They came out of the north about 2000 B.C., bearing weapons of bronze. They settled the mainland, built the great Mycenaean fortresses, and left behind them the documents in Linear B which we now know to be an early form of Greek. We can trace the extension of their power southward to Crete and eastwards to the coast of Asia Minor, where they sacked the city of Troy toward the beginning of the twelfth century B.C.

The expedition against Troy and the men who took part in it form the subject of the Homeric poems. Already in these poems the heroes...
Mycenaean strongholds, and took the land for themselves. These were the fifth generation, the generation of Hesiod himself:

1.14 Then Zeus, forseeing, made another race of men, the fifth, who live upon the fruitful earth. Would that I had no share in this fifth race of men. Would that I had died before or afterwards been born. This is the race of iron. Not for a day do they cease from toil and labor, not for a night does their corruption cease. The gods will give them bitter sorrow to endure. Yet still some good things shall be mingled with the bad. Zeus will destroy this race too of mortal men, as soon as infants at their birth have gray hair on their temples; when father and children can be no longer like-minded, nor guest agree with host, nor friend with friend; when love no longer exists from brother to brother as once it did. Then they will swiftly dishonor their aging parents, and chide them with harsh rebukes, in bitterness, with no respect for gods. They will not repay their aged parents for their childhood care, but take the law in their own hands. One man will sack another’s city; favor will not be shown to him who keeps an oath, is just, or good. The evil-doer’s arrogance will win men’s praise. Right shall depend on might and piety will cease to be. The wicked will slander the noble and do him harm, and forswear himself. Among all wretched men envy will go her way with shrill and evil tongue delighting in disaster, her face a face of hate. And then the time will come when, to Olympus from the wide-wayed earth, enveloped in white robes to hide their lovely flesh Shame and Respect shall go, leaving mankind, to join the blessed gods. Bitter heartache they bequeath to mortal men, nor leave defense from evil.

Hesiod’s account of the generations of men in *Works and Days* bears a certain resemblance to his account of the generations of gods in his *Theogony*. But there is an important difference between them. The Olympian gods are directly descended from the gods of the first generation. Moreover, the first generation of Titan gods is directly descended from heaven and earth, so that they issue as it were from the womb of nature itself. Their birth is but an extension of the process by which the world-order itself comes into being. This is not true of man. The generations of men not only form a discontinuous series but are brought into being by special acts of creation. Man is not a product of nature but a creation of the gods, and his destiny is bound up with theirs.

**The Justice of Zeus**

The Dorian invasion ushered in a Dark Age beyond which Hesiod, though he lived at the close of it, could see nothing but dissolution and death. In the violence of the great and the strong it seemed to him that he saw already the beginning of the end:

1.15 Now I will tell a story for the ears of kings, who know it well. Thus spoke the hawk to the nightingale, the bird of lovely throat, bearing her high in the clouds
clenched in his crooked claws.
Pitifully she wept,
pierced by his curving claws.
But he, disdainful overlord,
addressed her thus:
"Wretch, why do you weep?
One mightier than you
now holds you fast.
You go wherever I take you,
singer though you are.
Food I shall make of you,
if I will, or let you go.
Foolish is he who wishes
to strive with those who are stronger.
He loses victory and gains
the pain of shameful suffering."
So spoke the hawk,
the swift of flight,
the long-winged bird.

Strength extorts what it will; weakness concedes what it must. Such is the philosophy of the overlords. But it is a false philosophy, Hesiod asserts; for Zeus has given justice to men, and it is by justice, not violence, that men must live:

1.16 Listen now to justice, and forget,
completely, violence.
For Cronus' son set up
this law for men.
Fish, flesh, and fowl
each other may devour,
for right is not in them.
But right he gave
to men, and this
is best by far.

Zeus has not only given justice to men; he casts down the unjust and rewards those who follow justice:

1.17 Those who give to every man,
those from abroad and those from home,
straight judgments, and do not transgress
the just — their city flourishes,

their people prosper too.
Peace, the children's guardian,
patrols the land, and Zeus, far-seeing,
does not plan cruel wars against them.
Upon the men who judge with honesty
famine and disaster never wait;
they work at their appointed tasks
with merriment.
For them the earth brings forth
a plenteous livelihood.
The mountain oak trees bear
on their high branches acorns,
and in the middle, bees.
Their woolly sheep are laden down
with heavy fleeces.
The children that their women bear
are like their parents.
They abound with good things in plenty.
They never take to the sea,
for the earth, the giver of grain,
supplies their every need.

Those who delight in violence
and wicked, sinful deeds,
far-seeing Zeus, the son of Cronus,
plans to punish.
Often a whole city suffers,
for the actions of a man
who sins and plans outrageous crimes.
Upon such men the son of Cronus
brings great suffering,
with plague and famine too.
The people perish.
The women bear no children,
the houses dwindle through the plans
of all-contriving Zeus.
At other times, the son of Cronus
did destroy a mighty army
of these men, or else their walls,
or wrecked their ships upon the sea.

THE MORALITY OF PRUDENCE

If a man would avoid disaster, then, let him avoid injustice:
1.18 That other road is better
which leads toward just dealing;
for justice conquers violence,
and triumphs in the end.

This is the voice of prudence. When we say, "Honesty is the best policy," we mean that honesty pays; and when Hesiod says that justice is better than injustice, he too means that it pays, for it "triumphs in the end." If violence paid, that would be the better way; for a man would be foolish to be just if there were nothing to be gained by it. Hesiod puts it with disarming candor:

1.19 The eye of Zeus, all-seeing and all-knowing,
beholds us even now, if thus he wills.
The sort of justice that this city deals in
within herself will not escape his notice.
For otherwise I'd not myself be righteous,
nor have my son be so;
for it is bad to be a man of justice
if the less just's to have the greater right.

If the just man were to receive less benefit from being just than from following violence, it would clearly not be in his interest to be just. For no man is just simply for justice's sake, because justice is good in itself; but because it is the will of Zeus, who is able to detect injustice and punishes those who practice it.

We see the same mentality at work in the admonitions with which Hesiod intersperses his directions for plowing, planting, and harvesting. It is the mentality of the small peasant farmer, to whose way of life and station the virtues of hard work and thrift are appropriate:

1.20 If your heart within you yearns for riches,
do as I tell you; work unceasingly.

1.21 Don't put it off until tomorrow, or the next day.
No man fills his barn by shirking work
or putting off the job. It's keeping at it
gets the work done. The man who puts it off
contests with ruin.

1.22 If you add little to little
and do it often,
soon the little will grow
and become big.

1.23 Get good measure from your neighbor;
give good measure back.
Return as much, or better, if you can,
so that when you are yourself in need
you will find him able to supply it.

These admonitions reflect a way of thinking very different from that of the heroic age. The world of Homer is a world in which men are moved by considerations of honor; the world of Hesiod is one in which men are moved by self-interest. It is a simple view of life, but a limited one. With the passage of time it was to prove full of difficulties — as full of difficulties, indeed, as Hesiod's conception of the world-order as a whole.