

Prometheus through the Ages

From Ancient Trickster to Future Human

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the role and significance of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus in Western philosophy from Antiquity to today. Paying particular attention to its moral and existential meanings, an analysis of this in-depth investigation produces an overview of the exceptional array of the myth's functions and themes. It demonstrates that the most significant functions of the Prometheus myth are its social, epistemic, ontological and moral functions and that the myth's most significant themes are fire, rebellion, creation, human nature and ambiguity. The dissertation argues that this analysis brings to light meaningful information on two sides of a reference to the Prometheus myth: it reveals the nature, functions, themes and connotations of the myth, while information about these functions and themes provides access to fundamental meanings, moral statements and ontological concepts of the studied author. Based on its findings this work claims that, as in history, first, the Prometheus myth will still be meaningful in philosophy today; and second, that the analysis of the myth's functions and themes will provide access to essential ideas underlying contemporary references to the myth. To prove the validity of these claims this thesis examines the contemporary debate on 'human enhancement'. Advocates as well as opponents of enhancement make use of the Prometheus myth in order to support their arguments. Employing the acquired knowledge about the myth's functions and themes, the dissertation analyses the references encountered. The results of this analysis confirm that the Prometheus myth still has a significant role in a contemporary philosophical context. They improve our understanding of the philosophical argument, ontological framework and ethics of the debate's participants; and thus demonstrate that the information about the Prometheus myth acquired in this thesis is a useful means to reveal fundamental ideas and conceptualisations underlying contemporary (and possibly future) references to the myth.

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Introduction

1.1. Dissertation Subject and Aims

This dissertation explores the role and significance of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus in Western philosophy from Antiquity to today. Without ever falling completely into oblivion as did many other ancient tales, this myth has experienced great popularity in the history of Western philosophy and still takes its place in contemporary discourse. At first sight a reference to the Prometheus myth may seem a mere illustration and the text's tone may be light. Yet each time the myth occurs, this happens against a background of serious arguments and discussions. It carries (amongst other things) strong moral and existential meanings, an analysis of which can reveal significant information regarding the ethics and ontology of the author of the text in question.

A lively discussion in which the myth of Prometheus plays its part today is the debate on human enhancement. The debate centres on the question whether emerging technologies such as genetic engineering could be used to 'enhance' the human – eventually perhaps even create a *posthuman* species – and if we could, whether we should or not. The discussion is always ethically loaded and draws much attention from all sides – from scientists and philosophers to politics and media. One of the most important philosophical topics of the discussion is what it means to be human when, for instance, the debate concerns the difference between the human and posthuman being. Yet even though this means the definition of human nature is in question, the ontological concepts of the debate's participants are often implicit and/or unclear, which in turn detracts from their arguments. Now several academics have concentrated their thinking on the concepts of human nature in the debate, but none of them has studied the role and meaning of the myth of Prometheus – which interestingly, is employed by both advocates and opponents of enhancement in support of their respective positions. Here my hypothesis is that such an investigation can significantly improve our understanding of the participants' positions and the debate as a whole, for it can bring to light relevant information about the employed concepts of the human, the ethical value of these concepts and much more. For this reason, this thesis seeks to explore the Prometheus references in the contemporary enhancement debate.

Yet how can the Prometheus myth serve as a means to clarify an author's/debater's conceptual framework? The historical occurrences of the Prometheus myth have been studied before. But to my knowledge nobody concentrated on the significance of the myth's specific functions and themes in the presentation of an author's philosophical arguments and ontological ideas. In order to bridge this gap, this dissertation has made the historical references to the Prometheus myth in Western philosophy the focus of an in-depth

investigation, with particular attention paid to the existential concepts used. The data of this investigation form the material for an analysis that produces an overview of the myth's exceptional array of functions and themes and their significance in an understanding of an author's philosophical position and ontological framework. The outcome of this analysis will in turn be put to use to analyse the human enhancement discourse.

In sum, this thesis aims

- *to investigate the systematic use of the Prometheus myth in Western philosophy, with particular attention to ontological concepts;*
- *to form an overview of the exceptional functions and themes of the Prometheus myth;*
- *to demonstrate the usefulness of this information when analysing an author's philosophical argument and ontological framework;*
- *to analyse the Prometheus references in the contemporary debate on human enhancement with the acquired knowledge of the myth's functions and themes at hand, in order to 1) demonstrate the continuing relevance of the Prometheus myth today; 2) improve our understanding of the philosophical argument, ontological framework and ethics of the debate's participants; 3) demonstrate the validity and (future) relevance of the employed knowledge of the myth.*

The results of this dissertation will contribute to academic knowledge regarding the history of the Prometheus myth; the role of the Prometheus myth in (the history of) philosophy; the relation between the Prometheus myth and the concept of human nature (humanity, 'the human', etc.¹); the Prometheus myth's specific functions and themes; the utility of these functions and themes in an analysis of an author's philosophical argument and existential concept; more generally the function of myth in philosophical argument and thinking; our understanding of the enhancement debate and in particular of the ontological frameworks used.

¹ I use the words 'humanity', 'humankind', 'mortals', 'humans' and 'the human' interchangeably. When speaking of 'the human' my aim was to (roughly) use masculine and feminine pronouns alternately. However, since many of the works discussed are historical and written by men, masculine pronouns will be used more often than feminine ones. Of course, where 'he' is written, one can always read 'she' and the other way around.

A Definition of Myth

A major subject of this thesis is the nature of myth. In chapter 4 I will have a close look at different definitions and explanations of myth. Until then, I will be working with the Oxford Dictionary definition of myth as “a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events”.²

1.2. The Myth of Prometheus

The Figure

Who is Prometheus? For a start, relevant information can already be gained from his name, which is usually translated as ‘forethought’, ‘forethinker’ or ‘foresight’, depending on the etymological analysis and the way his role is interpreted. Most scholars argue its cognates are the Greek prefix *pro-*, i.e. ‘before’, and *metis*, i.e. ‘cunning’, ‘intelligence’, or *pro-* and the verb *medomai* or *manthano*, i.e. ‘to learn’. It is completed by the suffix *-eus*, thus explaining his name as ‘the one who reflects/thinks in advance’, leading to translations such as ‘forethinker’³. However, some linguists argue it has Proto-Indo-European roots and is derived from the Vedic Sanskrit prefix and verb *pra math*, ‘to steal’, which would explain his name as ‘the one who steals’. They support their argument by the fact that the verb is also used in a Vedic myth on the theft of fire⁴.

Similarly, Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant emphasise the “undeniable connection” for the Greeks between Prometheus’ name and “*promethes*, foreseeing, or *prometheia*, foresight; and equally between the name of his brother Epimetheus and *epimetheia*, afterthought”⁵. However, I would like to emphasise that to interpret his name as ‘foresight’ rather than ‘forethought’ is not completely identical and not without consequences. Foresight suggests him having the ability to predict the future, which he does in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* but not in Hesiod’s narratives. In the latter, Prometheus rather stands for clever thinking and contemplation, so that a translation of ‘forethought’ would be more appropriate.

There are several versions of Prometheus’ character, background or origin. In his *Theogony*, Hesiod writes that he is a son of Iapetus and Clymene, who are Titans. The Titans are the divine generation that rule before the Olympian gods and the direct offspring of Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Sky,

² <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/myth?q=myth> ; last visited 29-08-2014.

³ C. Dougherty, *Prometheus* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 4.

⁴ Benjamin W. Fortson, *Indo-European Language and Culture: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 31.

⁵ Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978), 93.

Heaven). In Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Gaia is Prometheus' own mother, which means he is not merely a son of the Titans, but a Titan himself. In the works of Plato nothing is said about the generation he belongs to. There is not one 'correct' originary story, but since Prometheus always has a family relationship with the Titans for the purpose of this thesis I will use the phrase 'the Titan' and 'Prometheus' interchangeably.

The Myth

There is not one canonical version, which makes it simply impossible to tell 'the' myth of Prometheus. Nevertheless, there is a nice summary in the *Library*, a mythological handbook written by an Athenian scholar named Apollodorus (180-120 BC). The different aspects of the myth are conveniently united into one, comprehensive story, straightforwardly told in one paragraph:

"Prometheus molded men from water and earth and gave them fire which he had hidden in a fennel stalk unknown to Zeus. When Zeus learned of it, he ordered Hephaestus to nail Prometheus to Mount Caucasus in Scythia. Prometheus was pinned there for many years. An eagle swooped down upon him daily and ate his liver, which grew back during the night. This is the penalty Prometheus paid for stealing fire until Heracles freed him"⁶.

Apollodorus' paragraph does not contain all events and personages that occur in the many different variations of the Prometheus myth, but it does sum up almost all of the myth's most characteristic themes: creation (of the human), beneficence, human progress, fire/knowledge, courage, rebellion, theft, hubris, punishment and salvation. These themes will keep on returning in the myth's lively journey throughout history. Some authors only pick one or two themes they consider most relevant; others try to include as many as possible in their story; and again others transform the story so much it is barely recognisable. However, a close look at the references will reveal that each version contains at least one of the myth's essential elements.

1.3. Mythological Characters

Apart from Prometheus there are of course several gods and other mythological figures that have their part in the myth. Those who play a significant role I shortly describe below, the other figures will be described and explained at the relevant point in question.

Epimetheus – Prometheus' brother, whose name, as we saw, is based upon the word *epimetheia*, consisting of the prefix *epi-*, i.e. 'after', and *metis*, or

⁶ Apollodorus, *Gods and Heroes of the Greeks: The Library of Apollodorus* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1976), 1.7.1.

medomai/manthano. Contrary to his brother, Epimetheus is thus ‘afterthinking’, or ‘afterseeing’, which means he is not so clever and indeed always brings himself and others into trouble.

Olympians – the group of twelve Greek gods who rule after they have conquered the Titans. They are named after their place on the Mount Olympus and are all related in some way. The Olympian gods that play an important role in more than one variation of the Prometheus myth are:

- Athena – the goddess of intelligence and war
- Hephaistos – the blacksmith god
- Herakles – a demigod, the son of Zeus who completed the famous Twelve Labours
- Hermes – the god of travel and athletics and personal messenger of Zeus
- Zeus – the Father or King of the Olympians and the supreme ruler of the universe

Pandora – the first woman on earth, who carries the infamous box – actually a *jar* – with human miseries. There are several possible etymological analyses: her name is usually explained as a combination of *pān*, i.e. ‘all’ and *dōron*, i.e. ‘gift’ and thus translated as the “gift of all”⁷ or “giver of all”⁸. There are, however, other interpretations: Boccaccio argues her name was formed out of the words *pān*, and *doris*, i.e. ‘bitterness’, for human life is literally all bitterness⁹.

Titans – the powerful divine and immortal beings of an earlier generation than the Olympian gods. They are the offspring of Gaia (Earth) and Ouranos (Sky, Heaven) and rule the Universe in the Golden Age. Kronos is their chief, but his son Zeus defeats him and the other Titans in the Titanomachy (War of the Titans) and takes his place.

I wish to point out that the Romans often had their own version of a mythological figure and his story, and virtually all of the figures had a different name. Zeus, for instance, was Jupiter in Latin. In principle I will use the Greek names and spell them in one way, which may differ from an author’s spelling. Yet if the author I discuss uses the Roman name I will follow him in that.

⁷ Fulgentius, *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, trans. L. G. Whitbread (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971), 2.6.

⁸ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 41.

⁹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, vol. I (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), IV, 45.2.

1.4. The Plan for this Study

This introduction is followed by chapter 2, which presents the primary sources of the Prometheus myth. I chose to concentrate on writings by Hesiod, Aeschylus and Plato: these I consider the most important ancient texts since they are in fact the main sources of the later references to the myth.

The third chapter is an historical inquiry into the use of the Prometheus myth within philosophy and, to a lesser extent, literature and art. I chronologically examine and critically analyse the references to the myth, in order to a) establish its meaning and role in each text or artifice; b) point out significant similarities, dissimilarities and patterns amongst the texts; and c) show how the myth develops through the ages. The overarching aim of this and the previous chapter is to produce a satisfying amount of information on the basis of which I can then continue my analysis in chapter 4.

In chapter 4 my aim is to find an answer to the question why especially *this* myth has never lost people's interest throughout history. I continue the study of the ideas, arguments and images I saw arise out of the many variations of the Prometheus myth in the second and third chapter. Based upon a critical analysis of my findings, in the first part of this chapter I determine what the most important functions of the Prometheus myth are: the social, epistemic, ontological and moral functions. The second part of the chapter is an extensive analysis of the myth's characteristic themes: fire, rebellion, creation, human nature and ambiguity. In the appendix to this chapter I provide an overview of the relevant functions and themes of each work.

The chapter's analysis brings to light significant information on two sides of a reference to the Prometheus myth: it reveals the nature, functions, themes and connotations of the myth; while information about these functions and themes provides access to fundamental meanings, moral statements and existential concepts of the studied author. Working from my findings I explain how the Prometheus myth survived so many centuries and on their basis I claim that a) the Prometheus myth must still be meaningful in philosophy today; and b) that the analysis of the myth's functions and themes must (as with the historical cases) provide access to essential ideas underlying contemporary thinkers' references to the myth.

In order to prove the validity of the last two claims in the fifth and last chapter of this thesis I examine the contemporary debate on human enhancement, in which advocates as well as opponents of enhancement make use of the Prometheus myth in order to support their arguments. Employing the information about the myth's functions and themes – such as about its inherent ambivalence and ontological significance – from the previous chapter, I analyse the references encountered. The results of this analysis prove, first, that the Prometheus myth indeed still has a meaningful role in a contemporary philosophical context; and, second, that the acquired information about the

myth's functions and themes is useful as a means to reveal fundamental ideas, moral and existential concepts underlying the participants' references.

2. The Ancient Myth of Prometheus

As far as we know, the myth of Prometheus originates at least 2700 years ago, as that is roughly the time in which Hesiod's version was composed. It is reasonable to assume that the myth already existed before that time, but unfortunately we do no longer have those older versions at our disposal.¹⁰ Although there are more ancient authors who narrate or mention the myth – Aesop, Menander and Philemon for instance – in this chapter I will study Hesiod's, Aeschylus' and Plato's versions of the story. For theirs are by far the most important primary sources: they provide the most extended literary treatments of the Prometheus myth and it is one (or a combination) of these classics the authors have in mind when later in history they tell about the Titan.

2.1. Hesiod

From the ancient authors I discuss in this chapter the poet Hesiod (7th-8th century BC) paints the most negative picture of the Titan: he is a trickster figure who, with his hubristic attitude and plots made a significant contribution to the misery of human existence. How he did and how much Hesiod laments this I will discuss below, exploring Prometheus' role in the poet's *Works and Days* and *Theogony*.

2.1.1. Life's Hardness

Why is human life so tough? Why do mortals have to work so hard, endure sorrow, misery, and pain, and slowly decline until they die? In *Works and Days*, Hesiod narrates several myths in order to explain why. The poem is directed at his lazy brother Perses who “made off”¹¹ with more than his fair share of their inheritance. By means of myths and stories Hesiod lectures him on how to live, emphasising the importance of justice and work, for instance: “[Y]ou, Perses, you listen to Justice, and do not cultivate Violence [*hubris*, TF]”; “*Work*, you fool Perses. Work the work the gods laid out for men”¹². However, as the poem includes many general, grandiose, sometimes even bombastic statements or aphorisms, it seems to be addressed just as much at an external audience: “Violent behaviour is bad for a poor man. Even a rich man can't afford it”; “Hunger is the lazy man's constant companion”¹³. In other words, Hesiod is

¹⁰ I do not claim that Prometheus' name never appears in any older document, but none of the works or secondary literature I consulted mention any older version of the myth.

¹¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, trans. Stanley Lombardo (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 54. When I am referring to Hesiod's work the numbers will represent the poem's lines instead of page numbers.

¹² *Ibid.*, 246–247; 447–448.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 248–249; 345.

presenting a statement on how to make the best out of human life as it is, an example of what Robert Lamberton calls “wisdom poetry”¹⁴. And apparently life’s unfortunate character also requires explanation – according to Hesiod it used to be different. In the section “Why Life Is Hard” the poet describes how humans used to live like gods, “not a care in their hearts, nothing to do with hard work or grief, and miserable old age didn’t exist for them”¹⁵.

“But Zeus got his spleen up, went and hid
How to make a living, all because shifty Prometheus
Tricked him. That’s why Zeus made life hard for humans.
He hid fire. But that fine son of Iapetos stole it
Right back out from under Zeus’ nose, hiding
The flame in a fennel stalk”¹⁶.

2.1.2. The Cunning Trickster

Both fatal tricks Hesiod refers to are described in his *Theogony*.¹⁷ In this work, the author gives a concise account of the origin of the cosmos and the gods. After outlining in detail which divine generations preceded the Olympian gods in their rule of the universe and how the latter – Zeus, Hera, Athena, and so on – came into being, Hesiod relates the story of Prometheus. Prometheus was a son of Iapetos, who was a Titan – one of the older generations, the direct offspring of the Earth (Gaia) and Sky (Ouranos). Hesiod characterises Prometheus by his cunning and trickery: his mind is “a shimmer” and he is “the smartest of them all”¹⁸. He does not, however, depict Prometheus as capable of true predictions – ‘foresight’ – but rather of ‘forethought’, as otherwise he should have been able to ‘foresee’ both humanity’s and his own fate. Prometheus does advise his not so clever, ‘afterthinking’ brother Epimetheus not to accept any gift from Zeus – which his brother does nevertheless, with terrible effects. However, that does not mean Prometheus foresaw these effects, it could just as well have been nothing but caution.

Despite his clever, ‘forethinking’, and well-meaning actions, in both *Works* and the *Theogony* Prometheus’ manoeuvres have disastrous consequences for himself as well as for the human race. In the *Theogony* Hesiod relates how he tried to deceive Zeus “when the gods and mortal men were negotiating at Mekone”¹⁹. Prometheus offered the “high lord of Olympos”²⁰

¹⁴ Ibid., 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., 132–134.

¹⁶ Ibid., 557–559.

¹⁷ It is unclear whether the poems that are assigned to Hesiod (*The Theogony*, *Works and Days*, and *The Shield of Heracles*) indeed have been written by one and the same author (see e.g. the introduction to Hesiod’s work (literature referred to here), written by Lamberton). However, as this fact does not significantly influence my interpretation and use of these versions of the myth I will keep on referring to Hesiod as their author.

¹⁸ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 513; 561.

¹⁹ Ibid., 537–8.

what seemed to be a portion of appetising ox meat and fat, whereas it merely consisted of bones. He had hidden the desirable meat in the ox's stomach, which he kept for the humans. However, Zeus, "eternally wise"²¹, realised before making his choice that he was being cheated and in anger withheld the divine fire from the mortals. "But that fine son of Iapetos outwitted him and stole the far-seen gleam of weariness fire in a hollow fennel stalk"²² and gave it to humanity. Unfortunately, this further enraged Zeus, who punished both Prometheus and the mortals. However clever the hubristic trickster may have been, in the end Zeus' "imperishable wisdom" attained victory over his.

2.1.3. Humanity's Benefactor?

On the one hand, Prometheus is presented as a benefactor of humanity. He shows the courage to cheat Zeus by means of his cunning guile; he presents humans with the most appetising food; he steals fire so that they may enjoy its "weariless power"; and he advises his brother not to accept Zeus' presents "in case trouble should come of it to mortals"²³. On the other hand, although especially the theft of fire is meant to improve human life, it has degrading results for humanity. Up to Prometheus' myth Hesiod's *Theogony* has not narrated anything yet about a separation between humankind and the gods. The 'befuddling' of Zeus' wits even takes place when gods and humans were 'negotiating' at Mekone at what – as Prometheus serves up portions of meat – apparently is a banquet. Carol Dougherty reveals that Mekone was a truly existing city and an extremely fertile place, while simultaneously (according to the writings of several ancient authors) also being "the place where the gods established their seat and divided up their privileges at the end of the war against the Giants"²⁴. The negotiation thus takes place at a location where both gods and mortals sojourned, at a time at which they still feast together, still live side by side.

However, as the myth continues, men and gods are separated in several ways and hence the human position moves downscale. First, the trick with the ox establishes the tradition of sacrifice. The "artfully tricked out" bones explain "why the tribes of men on earth burn white bones to the immortals upon smoking altars"²⁵. From now on, humans present sacrifices to the immortals. This means that a hierarchy has been established and humanity does not occupy the highest rank.

²⁰ Ibid., 531.

²¹ Ibid., 552.

²² Ibid., 567–569.

²³ Ibid., 108.

²⁴ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 36.

²⁵ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 557–559.

Second, the section in *Works* explaining “why life is hard”, fantasises how life would have been if Zeus would not have hidden “how to make a living” – or, translating the Greek word ‘βίον’, *life* –

“Else, you might get enough done in one day to keep you fixed for a year without working. You might just hang your plowshare up in the smoke, and all the fieldwork done by your oxen and hard-working mules would soon run to ruin”²⁶.

In former times, the human had indeed been living a life as divine as the one depicted above. *Works* narrates that before the brothers’ actions “the human race had lived off the land without any trouble, no hard work, no sickness or pain that the Fates give to men”²⁷. Further, the next tale in *Works* relates how humankind slowly fell downhill over “Five Ages” from a Golden generation who “lived like gods”²⁸ to a terrible “Iron Age” – the one in which humanity finds itself now. Although Hesiod does not connect it explicitly with Prometheus’ story, the fact that the tale about the ages immediately follows his story does suggest that the wonderful state the mortals lived in ‘before’ Prometheus’ deceits had been the Golden Age. His tricks provide an explanation for the humans’ decline and why they ended up in the Iron Age. In any case, as the former myth relates, Zeus hid βίον “all because shifty Prometheus tricked him”. In other words, all the hard work that humans have to do in order to nourish themselves is due to Prometheus’ plots, and it is thus another – though indirect – manner in which the Titan’s son caused a strong distinction between humanity and the deities. Third, the fact that the *Theogony* narrates how Zeus, after Prometheus’ trick with the ox “wouldn’t give the power of weariless fire to the ashwood mortals who live on the earth”²⁹ and how *Works*, too, relates that he “hid fire”, could be understood as meaning that before the sacrificial trick, mortals must thus have disposed of the same divine fire that Zeus possesses – he was able to remove it. Drawing an analogy between ‘hiding livelihood’ (as explained above) and ‘hiding fire’, Vernant argues indeed that

“originally celestial fire was freely available to men on the ashtrees where Zeus placed it; but henceforward, since fire is hidden, it must be buried deep ‘in a hollow stem’ [...] and then it must be continually fed for this fire only lives if it is fuelled (cf. Herodotus, III, 16)”³⁰.

Contrary to the celestial fire that Zeus, “the high lord of thunder”³¹, can use whenever he pleases, the ‘stolen’ fire that humanity ends up with appears to be

²⁶ Ibid., 59–64.

²⁷ Ibid., 111–113.

²⁸ Ibid., 132.

²⁹ Ibid., 565, my emphasis.

³⁰ Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Harvester Press Limited, 1980), 191.

³¹ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 604.

a mere flame: it needs to be kept alive “in a hollow fennel stalk” since it will otherwise expire. If Vernant is right, this flaming change also separates humanity from the gods, as it diminishes one of the mortals’ former powers and thus also provides a reason to raise their esteem for the deities. However, to assume that ‘not to give’ is exactly the same as ‘to hide’, and that the latter implies that whatever was hidden must thus have been available before to the indirect object of the gift is too strong a claim in my view. Therefore, I consider it a possibility but not a fact that humanity disposed of divine fire before Zeus decided to hide it.³²

The final and most radical degradation of the mortals took place when Zeus decided to make humanity pay for Prometheus’ theft. He ordered the Olympian gods to create a “lovely evil to balance the good”³³: Pandora, the first woman and a gorgeous but wicked being. “From her is the [...] deadly race and population of women, a great infestation among mortal men, at home with Wealth but not with Poverty”³⁴. Women are a torment for several reasons. They are wonderful to look at, but a “sheer deception” as well; stunning, but “irresistible to men” at the same time³⁵. The *Theogony* compares them to drowsy insects, for men – when married – will need to work all day, just as bees, “while the drones stay inside [...], stuffing their stomachs with the work of others”³⁶. Even a ‘good wife’ will result in a life full of problems, as the husband will still have to bear the struggle and pain that this union inevitably brings along. Women and the institution of marriage thus also make men fall from their Golden state. *Works* illustrates the female maleficence in more detail, just as Pandora’s arrival among the mortals. Apart from having “an immortal goddess’ face and the figure like a beautiful, desirable virgin’s [sic]”, Pandora is also equipped with “knee-weakening anguish”, “a bitchy mind and a cheating heart”, and “lies and wheedling words”³⁷. In this slightly different version of the myth she becomes – even more emphatically than in the *Theogony* – the origin of all harms, ills, and horrors that exist in human life: she carried the notorious ‘box’ that made an end to humankind’s comfortable existence. Epimetheus accepted her as a gift from the gods, despite his foreseeing brother’s warning and then

“the woman took the lid off the big jar with her hands and scattered all the miseries that spell sorrow for men. Only Hope was left there in the unbreakable container, stuck under the lip of the jar, and could not fly out: the woman clamped the lid back on the jar first [...]. But ten thousand or so other horrors spread out among men. The earth is full of evil things, and so’s the sea. Diseases wander around just as they please, by day

³² Vernant might be basing his argument as well on sources which are not from Hesiod. However, as I’d like to restrict myself to the latter’s works and as these do not present unmistakable evidence for humanity’s former possession of divine fire, I will leave this an open question.

³³ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 588.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 594–597.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 593.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 602–603.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 81–2; 85; 87; 98 resp.

and by night, soundlessly, since Zeus in his wisdom deprived them of voice. There's just no way you can get around the mind of Zeus"³⁸.

2.1.4. Analysis

The last sentence seems to be the main moral of the story: even Prometheus, despite his cunning trickery and forethought, could not escape Zeus' almighty powers. Hubris will be punished, for not only was humanity sent into trouble, Prometheus was severely disciplined as well. For years, Zeus had the immortal god chained to a pillar, and an eagle devour his liver – each day again, as it would grow back at night. Eventually, the semi-divine hero Herakles slew the bird and “drove off the evil affliction from Iapetos' son and released him from his misery"³⁹. But still, this was “not without the will of Zeus”⁴⁰, aggrandising the glory of his son Herakles.

However, the moral is a bit more complex than merely stating that Zeus is the almighty one and hubris will be punished. Very interesting is the relation between Prometheus, his brother and the humans and the consequences of their actions for them. What deserves attention, for instance, is the ambiguity of some of the main characters, and even the myth itself. First, Prometheus: on the one hand, he is intelligent, cunning and courageous and chooses to take humanity's part, apparently out of pure altruism. On the other hand, he is a hubristic trickster who crosses boundaries and, moreover, seems to enjoy the very act of misleading: “Prometheus, whose mind was devious, smiled softly and remembered his trickery”⁴¹. In other words, his personality cannot be purely good. Furthermore, as explained in the former section, although he is a benefactor of humankind, he is just as much, as D. J. Conacher puts it, “the indirect cause of all man's woes”⁴². His character as well as the consequences of his actions thus make his figure rather ambivalent.

Pandora plays an ambivalent role too. Her wonderful, divine looks disguise her lying nature, her “bitchy mind” and “cheating heart”. After Prometheus stole fire, Zeus angrily thunders he is “going to give [humans] Evil in exchange for fire, their very own Evil to love and embrace”⁴³. She makes men suffer – not only because of the awful jar, but also because she will “stuff her stomach” with the work of others – while at the same time she is needed as well: the *Theogony* relates that the man who does not marry (so that he may keep his harvest for himself) will die all alone and have his inheritance divided by “distant relatives”. Pandora is a trap but indispensable, a “sheer deception” but “irresistible to men”.

³⁸ Ibid., 115–125.

³⁹ Ibid., 529–530. (*Theogony*).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 548–549. (*Theogony*).

⁴² D. J. Conacher, *Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 13.

⁴³ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 75–76.; (*Works*).

Third, there is Epimetheus, who because of his silliness and tardiness obviously forms the complete reverse of Prometheus. He lacks his brother's predictive capacities, is 'witless' or even stupid. Although Epimetheus is briefly alluded to in the *Theogony*, in *Works* Prometheus' brother seems to play a role that is just as important as the one of his cunning sibling. The latter is of course the one that originated all human trouble in the first place. However, Epimetheus is just as much the initiator of humankind's misery, as it was him who accepted the vicious woman. In the duel which (this version of) the myth narrates, together they even seem to represent the human. As Vernant notices, "[T]his pair of brothers who are the complementary opposites of each other, [...] this union of subtle foresight and stupid shortsightedness, is characteristic of the human condition"⁴⁴. Together they mirror the ambiguous condition in which humans encounter themselves: sometimes able to 'foresee' as much as Prometheus, while at other times suffering from the extreme Epimethean shortsightedness.

Finally, what is said about hope is rather enigmatic: what does it mean that it remains stuck in the jar? On the one hand, it could signify that all that was left for humanity, tormented by all the horrors that spread out among them, was Hope – hope for improvement of whatever nature. On the other hand, it could mean the opposite: precisely because it "couldn't fly out" it were just the evil things which scattered, and thus not even hope would be available to humanity. Although the latter is perhaps more logical, the former interpretation seems to be the right one. Throughout the myth it is emphasised several times that good and evil are intertwined: not just Prometheus' and Pandora's characters embody both, but also the sacrifice, marriage, and fire, which could only be reached through a wicked action. When Pandora has been fabricated, the *Theogony* relates that Zeus "made this lovely evil to balance the good"⁴⁵. In other words, evil is introduced into the human world but the good has not disappeared completely – it was just drastically reduced. Therefore, as long as the good still exists, Hope should be possible for humankind. Of course we should not forget that hope in itself is ambivalent. As Dougherty phrases it,

"it can encourage a man to work hard [...] in anticipation of a prosperous future or it can delude an idle man into an unrealistic expectation of a life of ease. Neither gods nor beasts have any need for hope, only humans who are defined by their curiosity about the future together with their imperfect knowledge of it"⁴⁶.

Hope, too, is thus emblematic for the human condition – a condition which, after its establishment by Prometheus, is characterised precisely by ambiguity. Sacrifice and agriculture establish the human position between gods and animals: working hard but sacrificing and domesticating the latter. Fire is divine

⁴⁴ Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, 184.

⁴⁵ Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 588.

⁴⁶ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 40.

and enables them to cook, while on the other hand it is stolen and needs to be kept alive. Women are attractive and necessary, but thieving and deceptive at the same time. They can have a divine appearance, are human in that they speak and marry, but their bitchiness and voracious belly makes them bestial. As said, hope mirrors humans' Promethean forethinking, as well as their Epimethean lack of knowledge. And so Hesiod's myth does not merely state that one can't get around the mind of Zeus, but it also presents the human as a courageous but tricky, pretty but lying, loving but suffering, intelligent but always knowledge lacking being.

2.2. Aeschylus

Humanity's fate, Prometheus' character and success, his relation to Zeus and even less prominent elements such as the role of hope are radically changed in Aeschylus' (ca. 525-456 BC) version of the myth. Conacher even states that "[t]here can be little doubt that the *re-creation of Prometheus* from his relatively humble origins in the Hesiodic tradition into the great founder of the practical arts was almost entirely the work of Aeschylus"⁴⁷ – although he does stress that the playwright's 'transformation' of the god has been perpetuated and fortified by numerous poets and writers of later eras. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is probably the best known account of the myth, the one which indeed strongly inspired many wordsmiths of, for instance, the Romantic age.

As the name already reveals, the *Prometheus Bound* covers the times in which Prometheus is 'ironbound' to the rocks. It is one of the plays of a tragic trilogy: the *Prometheia*, consisting of the *Prometheus Bound (Vinctus)*, *Prometheus Unbound (Luomenos)* and *Prometheus the Fire-bearer (Pyrphoros)*. Unfortunately, the *Prometheus Bound* is the only play remaining in its entirety. All that has been preserved of the latter two plays is a small collection of citations or references in the work of other ancient authors. Nevertheless, the silhouette of the second play can be reconstructed with relative certitude, its most important occurrence being that Prometheus is released by Herakles. When it comes to the narrative of the 'final' play we do not have much more at our disposal than speculation, as there are only three very short passages of classical evidence which do not confirm much more than the play's existence. Therefore, in the following, I will be speaking of the *Prometheus Bound* – unless the other fragments are relevant to the text's analysis – and after that I will elaborate a little more on the *Prometheus Unbound*.

⁴⁷ Conacher, *Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound.*, 3, my emphasis.

2.2.1. Brute Force versus Cunning

The play opens with a scene in which Prometheus is forcefully dragged to the summit of a remote Scythian mountain⁴⁸ by Zeus' minions Power (Kratos) and Violence (Bia). At the strong insistence of these two Hephaistos, the blacksmith god, reluctantly executes Zeus' order and chains Prometheus to "this inhuman cliff"⁴⁹. Prometheus starts lamenting his agony as soon as they have left. He has already foreseen that for ten thousand years he must remain chained to this rock and as is revealed later in the play, at some point an eagle will arrive to nourish himself each day with his liver. In contrast to Hesiod, Aeschylus does not speak of any manipulated sacrifice by means of which Prometheus would have wanted to deceive Zeus. On the contrary, the immortal, suffering god narrates how Zeus' victory after the Clash of the Titans was in part thanks to his helpful advice. His mother Gaia, the Earth, "had sung time and again [...] how the war is won not by brute force but by cunning"⁵⁰. As the Titans would not listen to his clever plans, Prometheus decided to help the Olympians, and so "[t]hanks to the strategy I devised, the black hole of Tartaros holds and hides archaic Kronos and all his allies too"⁵¹. His mother being Gaia in this play makes Prometheus' willingness towards Zeus and his collaborators extra remarkable as this signifies he is not merely a son of the Titans (as in Hesiod's version), but one of their *members* and therefore even more closely related to the defeated ones that are thrown into Tartaros: the abyss of punishment in the underworld. Yet he chooses to support the Olympians because they, unlike the Titans, *did* listen to his sharp tactics. And they win indeed, which already indicates early within the story the moral of the play – verbalised by Prometheus' mother – that in conflict 'cunning' defeats 'brute force'. It suggests that despite him being bound, the intelligent and knowing Titan might not be completely overcome by the 'almighty' brute after all.

2.2.2. Hope, Foresight and Mortality

Unfortunately, and without it being a response to anything – such as a deceptive trick from Prometheus – the Olympian Father conceives a plan to wipe out the whole human race. It is worth noticing that by leaving out the Mekone trickery and by having Zeus planning the extinction of humankind *before* Prometheus' theft of fire Aeschylus takes away Hesiod's 'justification' for the Olympian's plot. This completely changes the reader's impression of Zeus' nature: the god's resolution to extinguish the poor species lacks any moral

⁴⁸ A large area around the Caspian Sea extending from the Ukraine to Kazakhstan, including Iran, southern Russia and the Caucasus mountains.

⁴⁹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. J. Scully and C. J. Herington (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 38–39. When referring to this play the numbers will represent its lines instead of page numbers, unless the reference includes a 'P'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 316–318.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 326–329.

legitimacy – he simply decides to because “for the suffering race of mankind he cared nothing”⁵². What used to be the “eternally wise”, “high lord of Olympus” thus turns out to be a merciless tyrant, a barbarous despot – a significant and characteristic change, to which I will return below.

Prometheus takes pity on the mortals: “no one dared stand up against this thing but me! I alone had the courage. I saved humanity from going down”⁵³. How exactly he managed to save the humans in the face of Zeus’ destructive disposition is not mentioned, but apparently he succeeded one way or another in realising *his* wishes instead of the tyrant’s – which means he must have been rather powerful. In the same section, the brave Titan tells the chorus about the fire he stole from heaven for the humans and all the skills they acquired from it.

Interestingly, however, Aeschylus has Prometheus start off with another component of his donations: hope. But no Pandora is mentioned in the entire play, nor is Epimetheus, let alone a jar which would have hope trapped within it. Here hope is a direct gift and, unlike in Hesiod’s version, it clearly has a positive value. Prometheus relates that he put an end to mortals foreseeing their own death.

“Chorus: “What cure did you find for such a disease?”

Prometheus: “Blind hopes. I sent blind hopes to settle their hearts”⁵⁴.

In contrast with the hope Pandora locks up in her ‘box’, it is portrayed as a true gain: Ocean’s daughters exclaim “[w]hat a wonderful gift you helped mankind with!”⁵⁵. None of the characters clarify why hope is such a ‘wonderful gift’, but as Dougherty phrases it, “[w]hile its blindness may hamper mortal knowledge of the future, hope also allows man to ignore his impending death and live with zest”⁵⁶. Instead of being completely discouraged by having the details of their life’s end already delineated before them from the start, humans with hope are more likely to have the spirit and audacity to undertake challenging enterprises, to try to structure and guide their own future. Hope thus enriches human life, and death is an evil which the human is better off not to foresee. Actually, in the eyes of the gods, mortality makes the human weak, or even of a lesser rank. When Prometheus tells Ocean’s daughters that he gave humanity fire, they cry out astonishedly “[f]air-eyed fire!? Now! In the hands of *these things that live and die!*”⁵⁷. The latter designation occurs several times. Further on in the play the Oceanides sing that “[n]othing is sweeter than life lived as long as this may be; always to hope and feast, keep the heart while it throbs alive, lit up with

⁵² Ibid., 343–344.

⁵³ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 347–350.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 374–375.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 376.

⁵⁶ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 74.

⁵⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 378–380. My emphasis.

happiness”⁵⁸. Immortality is obviously a good: the longer one lives, the better, according to the daughters – who are immortal themselves, just as Prometheus. They pity the Titan’s miserable situation and wonder why he even bothered to do the mortals good as he does not benefit from it, on the contrary: “what help are they? You must have seen how blind and weak, like prisoners of a dream, the human beings are”⁵⁹. Here, death is thus depicted as a weakness and it is Prometheus’ immortality which keeps on feeding his rebellion against Zeus; which nourishes his courage and bravery, his bearing of the suffering:

“Chorus: “Aren’t you afraid, throwing such talk about?”

Prometheus: “Afraid? Why? I’m not fated to die”⁶⁰.

However, this immortality is also the reason he suffers so badly – or better: for so long – otherwise he would have given up the ghost soon. Several times throughout the play he laments his awful situation, and so does Io, his cow-headed human visitor who lives a miserable life as well. She wonders why she did not commit suicide:

“Io: “[w]hat good’s life? Why haven’t I thrown myself off this harsh rock [...] and so freed myself from *all* suffering! [...]

Prometheus: “Then you’d be hard put to bear this agony of mine. My fate is I cannot die. Death would be freedom from sorrow, but now... There’s no end point to my misery, none until Zeus falls from power”⁶¹.

By now the eagle has arrived and is feasting daily upon his liver, and so Prometheus wails about the pains this “bloodthirsty banqueter” causes him:

“...my prison warden [...], by deathless outrage, tortures my live body – look! Only, myself gutted, take what agony comes, grope for an end to pain and burn, like sex, for death. But by the will of Zeus I’m exiled far away from death”⁶².

Death could thus signify the end to distress, it could mean the salvation one longs for, and so it cannot be unconditionally qualified as something negative, as a disadvantage. Immortality may be the characteristic feature of the divine, and could imply a wonderful, infinite life; but it can just as well result in nothing but one’s miserable fate or the expulsion from the possibility to rest in peace. In summary, death is a complex question which is ambivalently evaluated.⁶³

⁵⁸ Ibid., 781–789.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 802–806.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1430–1431.

⁶¹ Ibid., 1127–1137.

⁶² Ibid., 389.

⁶³ Speaking of ambivalence, I’d like to make another brief remark on hope: despite the heart-settling effects of the “blind hopes” Prometheus gave to humanity, Dougherty states that hope has preserved some Hesiodic ambiguities. Referring to mankind’s foreknowledge of their life’s end, the chorus asks what ‘cure’ Prometheus found for “such a disease”. However, Dougherty

2.2.3. Founder of the Arts

Other than in Hesiod's tales, Prometheus' gift of fire is nothing but beneficent for the humans and they clearly did not possess it before. It mostly has a symbolic meaning; Prometheus focuses on the wisdom it will bring humanity and all the sorts of crafts it will teach them – from writing to building houses, from agriculture to medicine and even the art of prophecy. It does not cause humankind's degradation from a Golden to an Iron Age, on the contrary: Prometheus' theft – and all that it stands for – elevates them from the infantile, primitive or even *bestial* state they were in.

“Hear what wretched lives people used to lead, how babyish they were – until I gave them intelligence, I made them masters of their own thought. [...] Men and women looking saw nothing, they listened and did not hear, but like shapes in a dream dragging out their long lives bewildered, they made hodgepodge of everything [...]. They swarmed like bitty ants in dugouts, in sunless caves [...]. All their work was work without thought, until I taught them to see what had been hard to see: where and when the stars rise and set. What's more, for them I invented NUMBER: wisdom above all other. [...] And I was the first to put brute beasts under the yoke [...], so they could take the heaviest burdens off the backs of human beings”⁶⁴.

It is thus taken for granted that the previous absence of these capacities and 'technologies' is equivalent to an 'inferior' stage. Furthermore, Prometheus does not merely uplift humans one step higher by presenting them a static gift. He gives them *technai* (singular: *technē*)⁶⁵ – a noun which covers crafts, skills, art(s) and techniques – and this provides them with a means for progress. In contrast with his interlocutors he sees in humans the potential to create a better future, to improve their condition. By endowing them with knowledge, mastery of their thought and all these crafts and arts he gives them the ability to continuously develop and improve these skills. Indeed, Aeschylus thus transforms Prometheus into “the great founder of the practical arts” (Conacher), and as we will see the Titan is later often referred to as *the* symbol of human

notes, the Greek word for 'cure' can also signify 'poison'. Yet I consider the possibility that it should be translated as such rather unlikely because first, the chorus speaks of “such a *disease*”; second, their reaction to Prometheus' answer is unquestionably positive; and third, three different – and randomly picked – translations of the text all interpret the word as 'cure' – the Scully and Herington translation, Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, transl. Vellacott, P (London: Penguin Classics, 1961) and Smyth, H. W. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, vol. 145 & 146, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press., 1926). Perhaps hope could be called ambiguous because it replaces humanity's foresight as such, which means it takes some of humanity's comprehending capacities away. However, no valuable characteristics of human foreseeing are mentioned and hope's evaluation within the play is, as said, positive without a doubt. Moreover, Prometheus will teach them prophecy, so some insight in the future will remain possible.

⁶⁴ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 630–671.

⁶⁵ *Technē* is the basis of the contemporary words 'technique' and 'technology'.

civilisation and technological progress. “In a word: listen!”, the Titan himself exclaims, “[a]ll human culture comes from Prometheus”⁶⁶.

Yet humanity’s progressive capacities are not necessarily all ‘given’ by Prometheus. The fact, namely, that Prometheus extensively outlines everything that he ‘taught’, ‘showed’ and ‘invented’ does not merely emphasise *his* powers. As Eric Havelock puts it “[t]his can only mean that man on his side has been engaged in a prolonged enterprise of learning and instruction requiring the concentration of intellectual powers”⁶⁷. Havelock emphasises the historical process that this presupposes and the fact that compared to Hesiod’s account of humanity, humankind as such has changed: it has become an essentially evolving instead of devolving species. And indeed, indirectly, it establishes the human as a learning being, as a being with the capacity to master techniques, skills, or arts, over time. Reasoning logically, a fundamental basis for the ‘progressive abilities’ that Prometheus allegedly endows the human with, must thus have been there to begin with. For in order to be taught anything the human must have been capable to learn – whether the practices to be learned are given by a god or not. The human, in other words, is depicted as relatively autonomous and as possessing an essential progressive capacity which is even independent of the divine extra’s.

Furthermore, one could interpret Prometheus not merely as the great founder of human culture, but as representing humanity *itself*. Of course, he is immortal, has knowledge of the future and has much more power than humankind: he managed to exercise strong influence on Zeus, saved the humans and appears to be the source of human civilisation. However, at the same time his condition shows strong similarities to a human one: he is in pain and suffers: “[b]ear with me,” he tells the chorus, “now it’s *my* turn for misery. Sorrow wanders about the world touching on each of us, and each in turn”⁶⁸. Apparently, he sees himself as part of the world – including the human world. He considers himself as merely one amongst others, one out of the many creatures which inhabit the cosmos. ‘Sorrow’ touches him too – despite his divinity he suffers as an injured mortal, and shares human emotions. He ‘loves’ humankind, ‘feels agony’, and is frightened when he hears the daughters of Oceanus approaching, probably foreseeing the arrival of the eagle: “Light air whispers fluttering with wings! I’m afraid whatever comes!”⁶⁹. He is chaotic and incoherent: one moment he chants courageously that Zeus will not be able to escape his fate, whereas at other times he suddenly bursts into desperate lamenting, tells the chorus that his agony will end “only when HE [Zeus -TF] sees fit”⁷⁰ and virtually wishes to die.

C. J. Herington concludes from such ‘contradictions’ that Prometheus

⁶⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 737–738.

⁶⁷ Eric Alfred Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics* (London: Cape, 1957), 64.

⁶⁸ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 418–421.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 186–189.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 388.

“appears to be deliberately represented as an unstable compound of mortal sufferer and immortal prophet [...]. At one moment Prometheus is totally absorbed, as any of us human beings would be, in the emotions and the agonies of the present, while at another he has the limitless and timeless vision of a God”⁷¹.

I agree with Herington that Prometheus is portrayed as an unsteady being who combines instants of suffering and complete emotional absorption with moments of brilliant foresight. However, is it merely the former type of demeanour that should be identified as human? Herington solely classifies his emotional and suffering characteristics as mortal – “[i]s Prometheus a human sufferer or a divine seer [...]?”⁷². Yet I suspect it is precisely the ambiguous combination of suffering and foresight embodied by Prometheus that characterises the human condition. Moreover, as said, even death is portrayed as complex and ambivalent, so that the classical dichotomy between mortality and immortality cannot simply be aligned with that between the human and the divine. Yet this is precisely what Herington suggests: he explicitly contrasts the ‘*mortal sufferer*’ with the ‘*immortal prophet*’, and thus implicitly the ‘*human sufferer*’ with the ‘*divine seer*’. However, Aeschylus describes the god several times as craving for an end to his life and so – although this death does not take place – he brings divinity and mortality close together. Further, although each individual human is mortal, as a *species* the human does not die. This is not merely due to the biological rules of evolution, but also in large part to humanity’s creative development and its transference of skills, technologies, and cultural heritage from generation to generation. In other words, humanity can be interpreted as immortal partially because of these typically Promethean capacities. Therefore, the two dichotomies mentioned above cannot be considered as completely equivalent, and even the Titan’s immortality provides a reason which supports the idea of him representing the human species.

To review the issue in terms that are hopefully slightly more concrete than a fictional being’s emotions or humanity’s abstract immortality: what are Prometheus’ physical capacities? What hierarchal position does Prometheus occupy among the universe’s other existing creatures? Again, for one thing he is the deathless saviour of humanity. For another, he will be unable to move for the next 10,000 years and will thus be entirely dependent on the Olympian’s decisions. This makes him occupy a place between a god and an utterly powerless – i.e., a virtually mortal – being. It is a different situation than the humans’, but in a way it places Prometheus in a similar position as theirs. For instead of being characterised by the separation between them and the gods as in Hesiod’s poetry – having their inferiority emphasised, that is – in the *Prometheus Bound* humans are delineated by the difference between them and animals and are thus elevated instead of degraded. Previously, “[t]hey swarmed

⁷¹ Ibid., P. 301.

⁷² Ibid., P. 302.

like bitty ants” and had to be shown how “to put brute beasts under the yoke”. However, they established a line between themselves and the other creatures: the primitive ones or perhaps their own, former prehuman condition. A line drawn by the concrete techniques, their evolving potentials and the substantial independence this gives them. This way, the human occupies a place between the gods and the animals, just like Prometheus is in a state which is divine on the one hand, yet almost incapable of anything on the other. On a more tangible level, it is thus again an ambiguous combination which characterises both the Titan and the human creature: divine capacities on the one hand, such as intelligence, practical creativity and autonomy, even immortality in a way, while inferior – if not bestial – characteristics on the other, such as vulnerability, dependence and lack of capacity.

Approaching the issue from a different perspective, several classicists interpret Aeschylus’ Prometheus purely as a symbol of human progress or rationality. By the mid-fifth century in ancient Greece, there was a strong scientific-rationalistic tradition coming up, considering the history of human cultivation from an evolutionary point of view. Since the Titan’s gifts form a collection which includes intelligence, mastery of thoughts, the wisdom of ‘NUMBER’, ‘LETTERS’, and prophecy, many scholars find his speeches fit perfectly within the age’s development. Havelock, who extensively investigates the emergence of this scientific anthropology, wonders whether Prometheus is “equivalent to the fire he gives and [...] his instruction [is] only a concrete symbolization of the process of self-instruction employed by men?”⁷³. In fact, he already seems to know the answer but Conacher does not agree, for this would be to “import into the play a humanism alien to its theme”⁷⁴. Moreover, says Conacher, regarding the play’s topic(s) the political conflict between the gods is at least as important as humanity’s destiny, and so Prometheus should not be interpreted as nothing but “the embodiment of intelligence”⁷⁵.

Nevertheless, Prometheus could play a political role but still stand for humanity without being nothing but a symbol of wisdom. Interestingly, if he would, his gifts were the humans’ own gifts to themselves. This way, humans become even more autonomous and independent than if those were given by a divine being. Instead of merely having practical skills by means of which they can make progress, this would mean that humans would have the ability to enhance themselves with ever more progressive capacities, skills and arts – that is, with the sources that enable them to develop perhaps yet unimaginable means and skills for progress.

⁷³ Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, 65.

⁷⁴ Conacher, *Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound.*, 86.

⁷⁵ Havelock, *The Liberal Temper in Greek Politics*, 64.

2.2.4. The Cunning and Foreseeing Rebel

An important difference between Hesiod's account and Aeschylus' is the reason(s) for Prometheus' punishment, and its validity. As mentioned before, in Aeschylus' version the feast at Mekone has not taken place; instead Zeus even managed to win the war against the Titans thanks to Prometheus' strategy. Therefore, the despot's only 'proper' moral reason to punish him is the fact that he stole fire, which he did in order to civilise the species Zeus had wanted to destroy without any reasonable motivation.

What the play emphasises just as much as the practical fact that Prometheus' theft significantly enlarges humanity's capacities is the pride, the boldness of Prometheus' action, the *hubris* it entails in the eyes of his enemies. He crossed a boundary, or rather several boundaries, not only by saving humanity and stealing fire but also by his very attitude towards Zeus. He does not show any form of regret during the entire play, on the contrary: as the play unfolds, his statements get more and more self-confident and rebellious. But already from the very first scene on – and although Prometheus as yet maintains a stony silence – it is revealed how much the Titan's defiance bothers his enemies by their insults. Power and Violence, while brutally dragging Prometheus over the cliffs, grumpily order Hephaistos to “[c]lamp this troublemaking bastard to the rock”⁷⁶, “‘intellectual’ that [Prometheus] is, next to Zeus he’s stupid”⁷⁷. They tell him he is “getting what he deserves”⁷⁸ – “[y]ou cocky bastard”⁷⁹. Hephaistos, however, feels awful about the fact that he has to carry out Zeus' commands. “I haven't the heart to chain this god, this brother!”⁸⁰. Nevertheless, he is commissioned to “hard as [he] can, hammer the shackles INto him!”⁸¹. In short: according to Zeus' allies Prometheus is an insolent troublemaker who betrayed *all* the gods, instead of a mere cheat who loses what is mostly a contest of wits as in Hesiod. The insults and cruelty of Prometheus' punishment are due just as much to the arrogant *hubris* that his theft and attitude imply – in their view, that is. For although in practice the Greek concept of *hubris* was defined as a crime and although in tragedies it would almost certainly lead to the trespasser's disaster, Aeschylus does not unambiguously state which of the parties is the most *hubristic*, nor with whose ruin the story will end. Yet what remains clear from the beginning is which party we are supposed to sympathise with.

Aeschylus thus pictures the relation between Prometheus and the Olympian in a novel way, for rather than that of a trickster Prometheus fulfils the role of a political rebel, who even poses a certain danger to Zeus. At the end of

⁷⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 10.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 28–29.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

the first scene Hephaistos does his job and so the Titan is punished, but the fact that Hephaistos questions the 'Father's' order already casts the latter's power into doubt, and also the justice of Prometheus' punishment. Throughout the play Zeus is portrayed as a tyrant – not least of all through the 'new' leader's violence and the vicious disdain of his servants for their victim. Hephaistos warns Prometheus that "Zeus is not about to be mellow. Every ruler who's new is hard"⁸², which explains beforehand that the often occurring reference of 'the new leader' should not be interpreted positively. Not only the Titan's punishment, but also the ruler in question are challenged. Zeus has a much more insecure place, and Prometheus has much more power with regard to him than in Hesiod's version – and not just because, being a Titan, he is older than the Olympian.

That is to say that fortunately Prometheus has a weapon against the dictator: a secret. He knows something crucial about Zeus' future, thanks to his own foreseeing abilities. Therefore, the Titan tells the chorus that the tyrant may be torturing him, "yet still my day will come. He'll need me to tell Him how a new conspiracy [...] strips Him of His sceptre and all His privileges"⁸³. He even predicts a reconciliation between him and Zeus: "[H]e's savage, I know. He keeps justice in his fist. But with this hammer blow He'll soften, He'll calm down His blind stubborn rage. He'll come to me, as a friend, I'll love my friend again"⁸⁴.

Although Prometheus kept the content of his secret concealed from his visitors up to now, it is finally revealed in a later scene in which a heifer-headed human girl arrives, who is actually the beautiful princess Io. The poor, panicking maid had to undergo this metamorphosis because of Hera's jealousy of Zeus' feelings for her, and is now endlessly fleeing from a gadfly sent by the tyrant's wife. Prometheus demonstrates his prophesising abilities by not only relating the preceding events that brought her in her uncomfortable position, but also describing the details of her forthcoming experiences. He delineates the course of her impending journey east and west, and tells her how many generations later one of her descendants will free him: the demigod Herakles, who will have Zeus as his father.⁸⁵

Although there are still quite some miserable millennia lying ahead of Prometheus as this release will happen in the far-reaching future, his cunning prophesies tell him that Zeus will need to have him liberated in the end. The reason for this is that he foresees a marriage between the Olympian ruler and a lady who will "bear a child greater than its Father"⁸⁶. "[A]h, what a marriage... it will throw Him out of His throne and His tyranny [...]. None of the gods can show

⁸² Ibid., 66–69.

⁸³ Ibid., 251–256.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 278–283.

⁸⁵ Herakles is not named in this play, but from fragments from the second play, the *Prometheus Unbound*, it is clear that he will be Prometheus' saviour.

⁸⁶ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 1149.

Him the way out of these troubles. Except me. I know these things and how they will happen”⁸⁷. As Zeus does not know the lady’s identity – the sea-goddess Thetis⁸⁸ – one day he will have to acquiesce in Prometheus’ demand to be freed so that the mysterious secret be revealed to him and this dethroning fate prevented.

Interestingly, there are many similarities and links between Io’s and Prometheus’ stories, and even their destinies are intermingled. First of all, both Io and Prometheus suffer from Zeus’ quirks, whether love- or anger-induced, and both of their fates depend on the developments surrounding the tyrant’s potential fall. Second, Prometheus’ future saviour comes from Io’s lineage. Third, it is important to note that the bovine princess is the only *human* within the whole piece. It is a crucial scene as it involves the revelation of Prometheus’ secret and of the form of his redemption and so the fact that Io is human and that Prometheus chooses to disclose its content *now* in particular can hardly be a coincidence. Humankind was the reason of the entire drama between the gods; after much procrastination, he reveals its resolution to a human being; while it is thanks to a descendant of a human that the Titan will be rescued. In short, apart from the interwoven destinies of the two, the scene thus shows the complexity of the issue, its past, present and future consequences, and the continuous role of humanity within it.

Speaking of the role of humanity, one wonders what the reconciliation predicted by Prometheus between him and Zeus may mean if one approaches it from the point of view in which Prometheus represents the human. Apart from freedom and an end to suffering, the human is then expected to experience forgiveness, as well as complete equivalence and peaceful reunion with the enemy – reminiscent of a paradisiacal situation. It completes the set of thematic parallels with the Fall of Adam and Eve which can be drawn with the myth on almost every level. Prometheus’ theft of fire and the couple’s eating from the tree of knowledge both aim for providing the humans with divine wisdom. Both actions lead to punishment, expulsion from an original state of happiness and to a life or condition which consists of constant suffering. Furthermore, there is also a parallel between the myth and the biblical story when it comes to The End, which has, ultimately, salvation in reserve, reconciliation, and return to the heavenly roots. Later, I will examine this fascinating correlation in more detail. For now, it emphasises the symbolic meaning of the myth.

Whether it is likely that Zeus and Prometheus will end up as loving friends, will be discussed below. In any case, Io’s visit has assured Prometheus

⁸⁷ Ibid., 1397–1406.

⁸⁸ Thetis’ name is not mentioned, but there is a classic myth about Zeus’ desire for her and his pursuit of the goddess, while rivalled by his brother Poseidon. Both Poseidon and the competition between the two are referred to in the play, and so it clearly seems to be this myth and hence this goddess. In other versions of this myth it is the Earth who warns the brothers for the dangers of such a marriage, but by changing the source of the warning, Aeschylus appears to have adapted the myth on purpose in order to bestow Prometheus with armoury against Zeus.

of his future release. This is why, when Zeus' messenger Hermes appears in order to obtain the essential information for his father, Prometheus laughs scornfully at his threats. None of the messenger's menacing and blackmailing attempts manage to get Prometheus to reveal the secret – not even his reassurance that Zeus will send an 'EAGLE' who will feast upon Prometheus' liver. Every night his organ will regenerate so that his torture can be continuously repeated. However, it does not change his mind as the Titan foresaw the details of his suffering anyway: "I knew all this and knew it all along. Still, I *meant* to be wrong. I knew what I was doing. Helping humankind I helped myself to misery"⁸⁹. The Titan may be confrontational, antagonistic and insolent – accusing Hermes of having a "pompous mouth" and being a "puppet god" – but the messenger's insults and derogatory tone obviously depict him, too, as a disdainful figure and thus anything but a sympathetic deity. Although he calls Prometheus insensible and hubristic, the servant himself – and his authoritarian boss – may be just as hubristic. When Prometheus is justifying one of his own insults towards Hermes, he declares "'Tis right so to insult [ύβρίζειν, treat with hubris – TF] the hubristic"⁹⁰. In other words, Aeschylus states again that Prometheus is far from the only overconfident figure. And whereas his hubris may lie in the proud, aggressive, or even violent utterances by means of which he opposes his enemies, their hubris does not merely lie in insults but also in the violence and aggression of their ruling.

2.2.5. The End

When Hermes has run out of threats, he leaves Prometheus empty-handed, and the play ends with the doom the messenger warned him about, but which the Titan had already foreseen. Zeus has a great tempest erupt – thunder, lightning, a shaking earth and surging waves. Prometheus knows it will hurl his body "utterly down the black pit of Tartaros, down the stiff whirlpool Necessity..." However, "[c]ome what may: He won't put me to death"⁹¹. None of Zeus' seemingly almighty powers will destroy him, as he remains an immortal god. He is certain that eventually the future has his salvation in disposal. As the play proceeds, Prometheus becomes much more self-confident and his references to the conflict's alleged resolution become more defiant each time. At the end, the re-establishment of friendship between him and Zeus is far to seek. Shortly after Prometheus warns for the last time that he is the only one who is able to save Zeus from the disastrous consequences of his future marriage, the conditional value of the tyrant's fall has completely disappeared. The course of events seems to have become inevitable:

⁸⁹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 406–408.

⁹⁰ Conacher, *Aeschylus' Prometheus Bound.*, 71.

⁹¹ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 1608–1614.

“[n]othing will save him from the sharp plunge into shame, excruciating ruin [...]. Zeus will learn what a difference there is: between being a power and being a slave. [...] It is what I wish. But also, in fact, it’s bound to happen”⁹².

This poses the question which version of the future will actualise itself. For whereas first, Prometheus’ liberation and the two gods’ reconciliation seemed to be the way its course was supposed to run, at this point a different destiny seems to lie ahead. In the last lines Prometheus describes the raging elements; and as he screams, calling for his mother and father – “SKY SKy Sky sky”⁹³ – one imagines him disappearing from sight, being swallowed by the rocks.

Part of the answer to the question how the story will finish can be reconstructed from what has been preserved from the lost plays. As there are barely any references to *Prometheus the Fire-bearer*, in the following I will focus on the second play, *Prometheus Unbound*. The first fragment is a chant from Prometheus’ next of kin – the other Titans – who must have been released by Zeus from the Tartaros, where the latter had made them sojourn since their Clash. Prometheus is back at his former location, chained to the rock, for Cicero quotes a response to his brothers which consists of a long lamentation in which he bemoans the pain he has to endure because of “Zeus’ horrible pet”⁹⁴ – the Eagle. He wishes to die but “[b]y the will of Zeus I’m exiled far away from death”⁹⁵. The Olympian sovereign is thus still a tyrant who makes Prometheus suffer and so his release seems very unlikely. However, in one of the succeeding scenes Herakles must have arrived, for in the following fragments Prometheus foretells the demigod the course of his journey and works. Plutarch writes how “Herakles [...] raise[s] his bow against the bird, as Aeschylus says – *Let Hunter-Apollo level straight this shaft!*”⁹⁶: Herakles shoots the Eagle in order to liberate Prometheus. The last literal quote from the *Unbound* is also cited by Plutarch, in which Prometheus thankfully says to Herakles, after the hero rescued him, “[t]his dearest child of the Father I hate!”⁹⁷.

Apparently, although Zeus must have decided to set Prometheus at liberty, at this point the Titan still hates the despot who stationed him there in the first place. Whether eventually this hatred will indeed turn out to be friendship again is a question that remains hard to be answered. For this same ‘despot’ shows entirely new characteristics within the *Unbound*. Whereas he is always dismissed as a tyrant and selfish tormentor in the *Prometheus Bound*, sometimes in the *Unbound* Zeus is suddenly merciful: he ordained that Prometheus be freed and also released his brothers; in another fragment when Herakles is in trouble, Zeus takes *pity* on him; and as already stated in the former play he will eventually stop chasing Io. Since, moreover, all the main

⁹² Ibid., 1410–1412; 1422–1427.

⁹³ Ibid., 1661–1663.

⁹⁴ Ibid., P. 388.

⁹⁵ Ibid., P. 389.

⁹⁶ Ibid., P. 392.

⁹⁷ Ibid., P. 393.

figures – Prometheus, Io, and Herakles – go through an agonising process which nevertheless culminates in salvation, Herington concludes that the moral of the *Unbound* replies to the *Bound*'s tyrannical image of the Olympian god “with the antithesis “Zeus is a Savior!”⁹⁸. However, in view of Prometheus’ enduring hatred, Zeus’ persistent cruelty earlier in the *Unbound* and the facts that he has a very selfish reason to free Prometheus – the fatal, future marriage – and that his pitying feelings are towards his *son*, I think his new affections do not suffice to turn him into a genuine saviour. Nevertheless, the grotesque and monstrous image of Zeus which is drawn in the *Bound* needs to be adjusted. Just as hero Prometheus encapsulates some daemonic features leading to thievery, defiance, and shrewd secret-keeping, tyrant Zeus possesses some good traits. Aeschylus’ communiqué seems to be that they cannot be analysed in unequivocal, black-and-white terms. The situation is a little more complicated than Prometheus the Good Guy versus Zeus the Bad Guy, in line with the view – also brought forward by other Aeschylean plays⁹⁹ – that the gods in general are not straightforwardly the Good, let alone Perfect Ones. Deities struggle with one another, sometimes playing bad, sometimes playing good characters. As individuals they cannot be easily identified as good or evil, right or wrong, clever or stupid. In the *Prometheus Bound* Hephaistos states that he does not have the heart to chain Prometheus to the rock but later carries out Zeus’ order nevertheless; the ladies of the Chorus pity Prometheus, but the Father with his “orchestrated universe”¹⁰⁰ still inspires them with much awe; the Titans were offered their brother’s smart advice, but brushed it off and lost the war. All deities have many different and contradictory facets, turning them into ambivalent, imperfect beings. This supports once more the idea of Prometheus representing the human and it shows a deeper similarity between humanity and divinity in general. It emphasises how much resemblance a god’s personality, essence, or being bears to a human one, and underlines the fundamental ambiguity which characterises both.

2.2.6. Analysis

Clearly, Aeschylus’ Prometheus is a completely different figure than the Hesiodic trickster, whose cheats turn out the wrong way and lead to awful suffering for both himself and those he was doing them for. In the *Prometheia* the Titan is principally depicted as a courageous, noble rebel, whose only true crime consists of his gifts to the mortals which will enable them to endlessly improve their life. He defies Zeus, who is (in the *Prometheus Bound*) continuously referred to as a tyrant, as a “latter-day god” who is ruling “beyond

⁹⁸ Ibid., P. 304.

⁹⁹ For instance, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. For a short analysis and comparison of the two plays, see the introduction to Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, PP. 304–305.

¹⁰⁰ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 809.

the law”¹⁰¹ instead of “the high lord of thunder”, “whose wisdom never wears out”¹⁰² as in the *Theogony*. As Theodore Ziolkowski phrases it, Aeschylus’ Prometheus is not driven by “the trickster’s simple delight in deceiving Zeus but by a genuine love of humankind”¹⁰³. And indeed, the hero chants that he is “hated by all those gods [...] because I love mankind more than I should”¹⁰⁴. Therefore, his shrewd, opposing attitude is of a dignity which is absent in Hesiod’s work. Moreover, with his revolutionary actions and disposition the Titan is not merely rebelling against the authoritarian powers, but even levelling them. He first helps the current boss and then forces him to bow and listen to *his* longings for a change – “this Zeus is in no way superior to Prometheus in intelligence or morals”¹⁰⁵. “Just as he had to ally himself to Prometheus and depend upon his knowledge in order to win his throne, so must he do to guarantee his lasting possession of it”¹⁰⁶. Zeus is anything but almighty, has to surrender himself to fate just as anyone else, and thus becomes dependent upon Prometheus – something that is inconceivable within the context of the *Theogony* or *Works and Days*. Prometheus’ tactical guile enables him to conquer the feral vigour of the Father; as his mother already predicted, in the end, his cunning enables him to surmount a tyrant who has the naive impression that authoritarianism and brute force will suffice for successful sovereignty.

In sum, from Hesiod to Aeschylus Prometheus developed from a tricky but benevolent figure – whose actions, however, mostly did not turn out well – into a brave, cunning rebel, ready to take on Zeus. A purely beneficent saviour for humanity, bringing them – in addition to fire and hope – the entire scope of enlightening and civilising capacities.

Humanity also undergoes a substantive development – from author to author as well as within this version of the myth in particular. Coming out of a state of severe degradation in Hesiod, in Aeschylus humans end up in a position from which they can continuously proceed. Wisdom, rationality and courage will lead to crafts, evolution, success and victory. This is the main moral of the story, as applicable to real-life humankind as to the fictional god, who is nothing short of an archetype for the human being. Vulnerability, mortality, and hubris may characterise the Promethean human, suffering and authoritarian oppression may characterise human life. Yet perseverance, courage and guile will enable humans to extend their control over their own future, to keep on making progress. They should be aware that enlightening fire may also be destructive and that brave hubristic actions may be retaliated with punishment. But simultaneously evil things such as death, blind hopes, and

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 626; 223.

¹⁰² Hesiod, *Works and Days and Theogony*, 563.

¹⁰³ Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Sin of Knowledge. Ancient Times and Modern Variations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37.

¹⁰⁴ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 182–185.

¹⁰⁵ Ziolkowski, *The Sin of Knowledge. Ancient Times and Modern Variations*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 60.

their subjection to destiny in reality are also all ambivalent. Death means an end to suffering; human ignorance with respect to their demise and the hope this brings forth is precisely what produces the passionate creativity and – though not *foreseeing*, definitely *forethinking* – plans that encourage humans to accept challenges and undertake exciting enterprises. The fact that they have to resign themselves to fate means their enemies have to as well, however powerful they may be.

The Promethean human who, despite her bondage, sorrow and agony, has hope and belief in her future and is autonomous and confident enough to fight her misery and use her intelligence and creativity, will keep on evolving. In the end, even the brutal enemy will have to give in to the human cunning and courage, while Fate has a Heraklean salvation awaiting her.

2.3. Plato

Prometheus appears in several of Plato's (ca. 428-347 BC) works. Particularly interesting are his role in the *Gorgias* and the *Protagoras*. Again, compared to Hesiod's and Aeschylus' stories, the myth as well as its protagonist undergo some significant changes. The storyline is entirely different, Prometheus lost his rebel characteristics, in both cases the myth is set in the context of a dialogue and the frame of reference is straightforwardly *human*. In the following, I will investigate in detail how these and several other changes come about. I will start by examining Prometheus' small yet relevant part in the *Gorgias*, after which I will study the myth as it is told in the dialogue of the *Protagoras*.

2.3.1. Gorgias

In the *Gorgias* Socrates discusses the nature of truth with Gorgias, Polus, and Callicles, who are all fervent and successful (or aspirant) champions of rhetoric. In order to – amongst other things – convince them of the independence of the truth and of the value of this independence, at the end of the dialogue Socrates tells the rhetoricians a myth about the final judgement of the human soul. Zeus changed the process after he took over the rule of the universe from his father Kronos, for according to him this judgement of the dead was conducted badly under Kronos' reign. Unjust and impious persons were sent quite regularly to the heavenly Isles of the Blessed, whereas they should have been sent to Tartaros, the pit of torment. Conversely, just and pious people often wrongly ended up spending their afterlife in this dungeon of retribution. One reason for this ill-judgement was that both the humans under trial and their judges were still alive while the fate of the former was determined. This way, those who had "wicked souls" could try to confound the judges by means of their appearance. For despite their injustice, the former had nevertheless "clothed themselves in fine bodies, good family, and wealth" and the judges, too, were "passing

judgement clothed, their own soul cloaked by eyes and ears and their whole body”¹⁰⁷. The main reason, however, that the last judgement was carried out badly was that humans had foreknowledge of the day of their death. This enabled them to prepare for their final trial far ahead of time and thus to not only arrange a body with the fairest possible “clothing” – from beauty and heritage to wealth – but also to gather a group of witnesses ready to testify to the justice of their lives. Therefore, this foreknowledge needed to be prevented, so Zeus told the other gods that “Prometheus [had] already been given instructions to deprive them of this faculty”¹⁰⁸. Furthermore, both those who were tried and their judges had to be “stripped” – in some translations: “naked” – and *dead* when the trial took place. This way, the mortal’s soul could be directly assessed, bereft of its disguising and potentially deceiving outfit – whether physical, material, or social – while the judges, too, could not be misled anymore by the veil of their vision, hearing, and physicality, so that “the judging may be just”¹⁰⁹. In order to achieve this, Zeus appointed three of his mortal sons – after their own death – to become the judges. They would decide for each human, after his life had ended, whether he would go to the Isles of the Blessed and “live in all happiness, free from evils”¹¹⁰; or to Tartaros, where he would undergo “the greatest, most painful and most fearsome sufferings”¹¹¹.

As Socrates explains after narrating the myth, “[d]eath is in fact, as I see it, simply the separation from one another of two things, the soul and the body”¹¹². After this separation, just as the person’s body retains roughly the same state as while they were alive – its stature, hair, scars –

“once it is stripped of the body, everything in the soul is plain to see – both its natural characteristics and things which have happened to it, the things the person had in his soul as a result of his approach to all his activities”¹¹³.

Now that the judge is “looking with the soul itself at the soul itself”¹¹⁴, the human soul is thus allocated the afterlife it deserves.

The direct attention Prometheus receives in this myth – in the entire dialogue, actually – does not consist of more than one sentence. However, the part he plays should certainly not be dismissed as insignificant, especially with respect to the human condition. Just as in Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, the Titan deprives humanity of their foreknowledge of death. Yet its motivation and result seem to be rather different from those in Aeschylus’ version of the event.

¹⁰⁷ Plato, *Gorgias, Menexenus, Protagoras*, ed. Malcolm Schofield, trans. Tom Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 523c–d.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 523d–e.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 523e.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 523b.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 525c.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 524b.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 524d.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 523d–e.

First of all, in terminating the mortals' foresight Prometheus is responding to the wishes of Zeus. The Olympian seems to have lost all his tyrannical characteristics – at least with respect to humanity – whereas in the *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus acted *against* the will of the despot, and explicitly out of love for humanity. Second, instead of receiving the wonderful gift of “blind hopes” in exchange for their loss – or actually, their “disease” according to Ocean's daughters – all that humans will inherit in Socrates' myth appears to consist of nothing but ignorance and insecurity due to the new gap within their knowledge and the sudden unpredictability of their death. Moreover, they lose their – bit of – control. It has become senseless to try and manipulate the judgement about their afterlife by dressing themselves up and sorting all their external attributes – including the witnesses – as well as possible, since they will be “judged stripped of all these things”¹¹⁵. For Zeus the purpose of the matter is that his change will establish the foremost justice with respect to the final judgement. This is why – just as it is in Aeschylus' play – Prometheus' act is presented as unquestionably positive.

At first sight humanity does not seem to gain much by death's sudden unpredictability – at least not while being alive. However, when looking closer, the myth's message is about the moral value of what is actually nothing less than a true *transformation* of the human condition, which, from now on, will be characterised by much more justice, truth and authenticity. First, humanity is less likely to take unjust actions or commit crimes. Being deprived of foreknowledge, humans lost much of their former influence on the last judgement of their soul. Their ignorance and loss of control have significantly raised their fear of punishment but according to Socrates, neither fear nor punishment – as long as they are justly executed – are necessarily bad:

“What is appropriate for anyone undergoing punishment [...], is either to be made better and helped, or to be made an example to the rest, so that others may be frightened by seeing him suffer the things he suffers, and so be made better”¹¹⁶.

When humans understand that the more just their life, the higher the chance that they will not need to join their agonising companions in Tartaros, they will refrain from punishable actions more than they used to. They make more righteous judgements and act with more justice, which, importantly, implies that they are also more inclined to judge each other fairly.

Second, particularly important to Socrates is that ignorance with respect to the course of their afterlife will open humans up to what we could call ‘genuine’ truth.¹¹⁷ For what is true about them will no longer be the result of their

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 523e.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 525b–c.

¹¹⁷ Alessandra Fussi argues that Socrates' reason to tell the myth is to draw an analogy between the humans under Kronos' reign and the rhetoricians he's been discussing with. Socrates criticises Gorgias as his only goal is persuasion of the audience: “you bring lots of

appearance – i.e. the extent to which they are clad in a “fine body”, a “good family” and “wealth”. Nor will it arise from their success – or failure – in persuading others of their ideas and the alleged justice of the life they live. Humans used to be what they *seemed* or were *said* to be, because their ‘being’ was entirely dependent on their appearance and their witnesses’ stories, all manipulable because of the expectedness of death. Now, if humans recognise their new situation – they are ignorant, naked, *incomplete* in a way – they understand that truth is actually just as independent from them as death. Humans will realise that they are unable to manipulate – let alone *create* – the truth. They will have to rely much more on themselves and their own spirit, mind and reasoning. And this is something of great worth, for it provides them with a certain access to themselves and encourages them to think independently. Paradoxically, the loss of foreknowledge and control over what was once accepted as truth thus simultaneously opens up the possibility of acquiring knowledge, searching and perhaps even finding the truth on their own.

Third, it is worth emphasising that the new human state is simply *good in itself*. The practice of justice is not merely a way to flee from punishment or an easier method for humans to coexist. Nor is the ability to think for oneself and to look for truth only a matter of independence or the acquisition of knowledge. The righteously judging, independently thinking, and truth seeking human will find himself in a new, different, and essentially more *authentic* condition. This does not mean that since Zeus’ and Prometheus’ interventions all humans have suddenly become one hundred percent just and truthful saints. Some humans will perhaps never recognise the fact that truth is not about appearance and there will always be others who will be downright evil. However, the ones who do acknowledge the human condition will know that in the end their own souls will be distinguished from these malicious ones. The soul of an evil tyrant, when judged, will be found to be ugly, unhealthy, “full of scars from the perjuries and injustice imprinted on his soul by his every action – [...] the result of an upbringing devoid of truth”¹¹⁸. The person doing great wrongs, Socrates explains, does not understand “how much more wretched it is to live with a soul which is not healthy, but rotten, unjust, unholy, than to live with an unhealthy body”¹¹⁹. Living one’s life justly, practising virtue, and recognising one’s ignorance will create a healthy, authentic and beautiful soul. Moreover, it will even make the human *happy*: it is “by the acquisition of justice and self-control

false witnesses against me, and try to dislodge me from my patrimony, from the truth” (Ibid., 472b.). Just as the humans living in the age of Kronos depend upon foreknowledge and appearance, the rhetoricians rely completely on their witnesses. Thereby, they are denying that the truth is entirely unaffected by their practices, just as the Kronossians believed to be (partially) in control of their final judgement.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 524e–525a.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 479b–c.

that the happy are happy, and by the acquisition of evil that the wretched are wretched”¹²⁰.

In conclusion, although at first glance it may not have appeared that way, there is a quite positive side to the changes humanity needs to undergo in the myth – a story Socrates emphasises he believes to be true. Although it is a completely different narrative than the versions I discussed before, again it is a story which relates how an important human transformation took place. And although the god certainly does not play the main character, by means of a single sentence Plato nevertheless assigned Prometheus a significant role in the myth and, in a way, even in the whole dialogue.¹²¹ The Titan neatly obeys Zeus’ commands and thus is not the tricky figure or the hubristic rebel pictured by Hesiod and Aeschylus respectively. Yet just as in *Prometheus Bound*, human nature has changed once again and the Titan’s action makes a substantial contribution to the enrichment of the human’s wisdom and independence, while simultaneously it underlines her vulnerability and mortality. Prometheus helps to bring about an essential transformation, the point of which is that despite and paradoxically thanks to their deficiency or vulnerability, humans will be judged with justice, live in authenticity, value truth and also judge each other more fairly.

2.3.2. Protagoras

In the *Protagoras* Plato has one of his characters relate the entire myth, once again in a completely different way and context. The dialogue centres on a discussion between Socrates and the prominent sophist Protagoras about the question whether civic virtue (*arete*)¹²² is an inherent human quality or a skill that can be taught. On behalf of Hippocrates, an ambitious adolescent who passionately wishes to become wise, Socrates asks Protagoras what exactly the boy would learn if he were to become his student. The sophist’s not so humble answer is that every day he studies with him Hippocrates “will go home a better man, and the same thing will happen the day after”¹²³. Protagoras explains that he teaches “sound deliberation” (*euboulia*) and “the art of citizenship” (*politike technē*): he knows how to make people “good citizens”¹²⁴.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 508a.

¹²¹ Unfortunately, here I do not have the space to support this statement, but as in all of Plato’s works the myth should be read within the context of the dialogue as a whole.

¹²² *Arete* is most of the time translated by ‘virtue’, which is why I will mainly use this term as well. However, I think it is still important to keep in mind that it has a strong - often teleological - association with action or activity and thus regularly refers to the capacity to do something excellently. For instance, in the dialogue that bears his name, Meno defines the word with the “ability (*dynamis*) to secure goods” (Meno, 78b-c). So (of course dependent on the context) at other times the term is translated by related but different concepts such as ‘excellence’, ‘correct behaviour’, or even ‘skill’.

¹²³ Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Stanley Lombardo and Karen Bell (Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), 318a–b.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 319a.

Socrates, however, is sceptic, for even Pericles, a wise statesman known to be particularly virtuous and a great teacher as well, never succeeded in educating his sons in his own goodness. This simply shows, the philosopher thinks, that civic virtue is not teachable. After all, of all people, Pericles is *the* person who should have been able to pass on his virtues – but his sons had to acquire their virtuousness by themselves. Therefore, Socrates asks Protagoras to support his claim and clearly show how he thinks civic virtue is teachable, upon which the latter decides to tell a story, for this “would be more pleasant”¹²⁵ for his audience than if he would develop an argument.

Protagoras tells them how once upon a time, no mortal being existed yet. But the Olympian gods intermingled earth and fire, and “when they were ready to bring them to light”¹²⁶, appointed Prometheus and his brother Epimetheus the task to empower each race with its defining attributes and capacities. Epimetheus pleaded with Prometheus to let him execute this important order – he would let his brother examine the results when it would be finished. Prometheus assented and so his brother enthusiastically began to assign the powers and gifts. He carefully gave each creature its own specific abilities. The strong races would not be quick, whereas quickness was assigned to the weaker; some were armed or large, but the smaller ones he enabled to fly, this way making sure he endowed each one with enough capacities to sustain themselves.

“But Epimetheus was not very wise, and he absentmindedly used up all the powers and abilities on the nonreasoning animals; he was left with the human race, completely unequipped. While he was floundering about, at a loss, Prometheus arrived to inspect the distribution and saw that while the other animals were well provided with everything, the human race was naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed”¹²⁷.

In urgent need to procure something that would ensure human survival, Prometheus stole wisdom in the practical arts¹²⁸ from Athena and fire and technological crafts from Hephaistos and gave them to humanity. These were the resources with which humans could survive and develop. Of all the species only the humans started worshipping the gods, because they “had a share of the divine dispensation”, “a kind of kinship”¹²⁹ with the gods. They built altars and houses, invented speech and clothing and found out how to nourish themselves. However, they still lived separately, which made them unable to defend themselves against wild animals. “This was because they did not yet

¹²⁵ Ibid., 320c.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 320d.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 321c.

¹²⁸ According to the translators the powers “referred to here were the arts of warfare and the more docile arts and crafts of weaving, spinning, smithing, and potting” (Ibid., p. 16.). However, the art of warfare cannot yet have been the politically wise and informed version – I will come back to this below..

¹²⁹ Ibid., 322a.

possess the art of politics, of which the art of war is a part”¹³⁰. In order to solve this problem they tried to live together, but this resulted in them fighting each other, again because they lacked political wisdom. Zeus saw that the survival of the whole human species was jeopardised, and therefore he sent Hermes to bring humanity justice [*dike*] and shame (or reverence) [*aidos*] so that they would be able to build cities and live together peacefully. When Hermes asked Zeus how these arts should be distributed – to everybody or to some, as with the other capacities? – he responded

“To all [...], and let all have a share. For cities would never come to be if only a few possessed these, as is the case with the other arts”¹³¹.

Finishing the story with Zeus’ response, Protagoras declares that his point is thus that, contrary to the other crafts and arts – not everyone has shoemaking or ship-steering skills – “political excellence [...] is shared by all, or there wouldn’t be any cities”¹³². In fact, to have “political excellence” – justice, moderation, civic virtue, shame, decency, and so on – turns out to be the human’s very essence. For, as the sophist claims, it is common sense that everyone should call himself just. Even if a person is known to be unjust, he would not confess that truth to others, for “it is madness not to pretend to justice, since one must have some trace of it or not be human”¹³³. Now Protagoras’ statements do not immediately clarify why civic virtue should be teachable. On the contrary, an obvious conclusion that may be drawn is the opposite: it is *not*. For one could easily reason that if all humans have a share of political virtue, this is thus a natural characteristic – as Protagoras himself says, either one has it, or one is not human. But if everyone naturally possesses this virtuous property, there is no need for it to be taught: it is simply there, given by nature, or it is not. And if nature (or Zeus, in the myth) is the one who distributes these characteristics, it is certainly not something that humans equip themselves with through teaching.

However, the sophist narrates the myth with another, opposite, objective in mind. Instead of the story’s point being that humanity is naturally equipped with readily available virtues distributed by Zeus, the myth in its entirety should represent the origin of life and the birth of human culture, and show how the human was educated throughout this process in how to overcome her setbacks. Rather than proving to Socrates that particularly virtue is teachable, Protagoras emphasises by means of the myth that the human has come to be the special kind of being that has the capacity to learn – and thus to be taught virtue as well.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 322b.

¹³¹ Ibid., 322d.

¹³² Ibid., 322e–323a.

¹³³ Ibid., 323c.

2.3.3. Analysis

There is an interesting resemblance between Protagoras' narrative and Aeschylus' play.¹³⁴ As in *Prometheus Bound*, the Titan is the great benefactor of humans who provides them with practical skills, culture, wisdom and civilisation, and in both stories these qualities establish a fundamental distinction between the human and the animal. Yet Plato also significantly modifies the myth in several ways. First of all, there is no mention of Pandora or any other punishment of humanity. In fact, the myth even barely refers to Prometheus' sanction, the mere allusion being that "[l]ater, the story goes, Prometheus was charged with theft, all on account of Epimetheus"¹³⁵. In other words, there is not a vulture to be seen, and it is certainly not Prometheus who is to blame.

In line with this is the second modification: the violence and aggression which defined the relationship between Zeus and Prometheus in Hesiod's and Aeschylus' tales have completely disappeared. As in the *Gorgias*, the Olympian Father has been disposed of all of his former villainy and Prometheus lost all of his revolutionary features. In fact, the two gods are co-workers together aiming to benefit humanity, which is why Dougherty rightly wonders "why Prometheus had to steal the fire at all"¹³⁶. Zeus' actions are not atrocious or tyrannical anymore, on the contrary: they are essential for the humans to persevere.

Third, some important changes have taken place with respect to the character of the myth's protagonists, the nature of humanity and the relationship between the two. To the elements of development and improvement of the – in the earlier versions already existent – human being, Plato added *creation*: together, Epimetheus and his brother create the human, different from any other being. Yet their uniqueness does not make humans perfect. At first, what distinguishes them is their very incompleteness, their imperfection: other than all other species they are "naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed", an essential characterisation reminiscent of the naked, ignorant *Gorgias* human. Later, however, thanks to Prometheus' gift the human does not merely make progress, but has truly divine capacities, "a kind of kinship" with the gods. Again, humans have a position distinct from all other creatures, though from now on due to a definite and superior rather than "completely unequipped" nature. Yet the human is still anything but a harmonious being. As becomes clear from the storyline – according to Protagoras, that is – humans actually *need* to be taught political skills and virtue, or they will be unable to live in communities. To study human nature in more detail, one could reasonably interpret the myth's three deities as together personifying the human condition.

¹³⁴ Since the *Protagoras* tale is clearly a new version of the classical Prometheus myth, in the following I will focus on the differences and similarities between this version and the Hesiod and Aeschylus tales. I will also every now and then refer to the *Gorgias* myth, for although an entirely different and independent story, thematically there are some relevant parallels between Plato's two stories.

¹³⁵ Plato, *Protagoras*, 322a.

¹³⁶ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 82.

For each of the gods appears to represent a specific kind of human drive, activity, or capacity. Epimetheus, for a start, is a very impulsive creature. Infamously *afterthinking*, the god enthusiastically starts to hand out the capacities he is in charge of distributing, without taking into account the amount of powers he has in stock, or how many species should be attended to. Instantly acting according to his impulses and desires, the deity symbolises the activity driven by the (immediate) satisfaction of a need, focusing purely on the present and the pleasure it should bring, without taking the consequences of the action into consideration. He is, in Oded Balaban's words, in fact "the god of consumption"¹³⁷. Prometheus, however, is a rather different kind of being. Employing his *forethinking* skills, he develops a plan in order to make up for the problems caused by his brother. His action is anything but pleasant, but he is willing to sacrifice his own comfort for the – positive – outcomes of his deed. The Titan represents, then, a kind of activity opposed to the one Epimetheus stands for – making Prometheus' become "the god of production"¹³⁸ (Balaban) rather than consumption. His activity has no intrinsic value nor is it carried out because of its immediate, satisfying results, but it is a *means* for the sake of an end, and thus executed with a particular, future objective in mind. Prometheus' gifts to humanity should be understood along the same lines. The skills in the practical arts and fire are given as a means to humankind's survival: "the wisdom it acquired was for staying alive"¹³⁹. The Promethean *technai* – that is, human techniques in general – are instrumental, teleological activities, their worth lying in their usefulness, purpose, and benefit. Yet one should note that the brothers and the human drives they stand for do not as strictly oppose one another as they do in *Works and Days*. Epimetheus is "not very wise" but must nevertheless have some wisdom and foresight in order to be able to create such a wide range of species and endow them all with their specific qualities; while if Prometheus' foresight were exhaustive he should have known not to confidently leave his brother the task the gods asked them to fulfil. In any case, Zeus' values should keep humans, driven by their different impulses and aims, together in harmony. Shame should restrict the Epimethean desires that move the individual to act without any regard for its consequences for himself or his fellow men. Justice should constrain the Promethean, instrumental urge and ensure that it is not taken too far and lead to harmful and/or criminal actions. Zeus thus personifies morality, in particular the more political virtues which are there to compensate for the risks of the Epimethean and Promethean drives and enable human beings to cooperate and live peacefully in a community.

This way, together the three gods represent the fundamentally ambiguous condition of the human, whose soul is simultaneously motivated by pleasure, striving for benefit, and morality. As these values or principles do not

¹³⁷ Oded Balaban, "The Myth of Protagoras and Plato's Theory of Measurement," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4, no. 4 (October 1987): 373.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 374.

¹³⁹ Plato, *Protagoras*, 321d.

uncommonly contradict each other, Protagoras thus sketches the human as a being that is easily in conflict not only with his fellows, but also with himself. In that sense, Epimetheus and Prometheus actually already represent the human by themselves: both are ambivalent beings with good as well as bad characteristics, which make them (potentially) trip over themselves. Just like humankind, they have a “share of the divine dispensation” but are imperfect nevertheless. Yet once more, the imperfection of humans does not mean that they cannot be *taught* how to live a life in balance. And thus the sophist’s argumentation on virtue’s teachability proceeds along these lines. According to Protagoras, people consider justice and the other civic virtues absolutely not as natural but as acquired through teaching and practice. Persons that suffer from evils that *do* come about through nature – ugliness, or weakness for instance – will never be met with anger or punished. Rather, they will be pitied by others – precisely because such things are due to birth or fate. Yet “wrong-doers” and offenders in the realm of political excellence are met with fury, criticised and punished because these virtues are not due to chance.

“Reasonable punishment is not vengeance for a past wrong – for one cannot undo what has been done – but is undertaken with a view to the future, to deter both the wrong-doer and whoever sees him being punished from repeating the crime”¹⁴⁰.

In other words, the unjust, impious, etc. are punished so that they themselves as well as their observers will learn from that penalty and do more justice in the future. Everyone who imposes punishment cannot but have this attitude, he says, which implies that virtue can be taught. Remarkably, here Protagoras makes a statement which is strongly reminiscent of Socrates’ one about punishment in the *Gorgias*. And indeed, after some extensive arguments, at the end of the dialogue the debaters’ ideas have come much closer to each other.¹⁴¹ Slowly, the question discussed has evolved from the teachability of civic virtue to the nature of virtue in general. By means of a rather complex argument, Socrates comes to the conclusion that what he calls “the art of measurement” would enable people to make the morally right decision. Those who control this technique will not be overcome by irrational drives, immediate pleasures or misleading appearances. They will be able to weigh the goods of the present, near and far future against one another, so that to make the right choice becomes solely a matter of calculation, weighing, or measurement, that is, *knowledge*. And so in the end Socrates and Protagoras agree – though the latter rather reluctantly – on the thesis that all virtues are knowledge. However, the question as to what this means exactly – what is the nature of knowledge? – and whether virtue is then teachable or not, are still pretty cloudy, according to both. In fact, the debaters have reversed their original stances. For now that

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 324b.

¹⁴¹ Unfortunately, here I do not have the opportunity to extensively discuss all the arguments and questions that bring about this situation.

virtue is defined as knowledge, Socrates is arguably thinking it is teachable, and Protagoras – despite his hesitant giving in to his opponent’s arguments – has come to deny it, whereas at the start of the debate their positions were the other way around. Noting their confusion, Socrates says that he is “most eager to clear it all up”¹⁴². He would like to continue their conversation later on, in order to find an answer to these questions,

“so that Epimetheus might not frustrate us a second time in this enquiry, as he neglected us in the distribution of powers and abilities in your story. I liked the Prometheus character in your story better than Epimetheus. Since I take promethean forethought over my life as a whole, I pay attention to these things, and if you are willing, as you said at the beginning, I would be pleased to investigate them along with you”¹⁴³.

The last quote nicely rounds off the dialogue with another allusion to the myth. What exactly does Socrates wish to say here? Does he fully subscribe to the symbolic function Protagoras ascribed to the gods? The philosopher states he is eager to find out what virtue is and whether it can be taught, so that Epimetheus does not trip them “a second time” in their investigation. How the god did the “first time”, during the discussion, may seem rather unclear. Epimetheus surely overlooked humanity in his distribution of capabilities, which could have frustrated the two debaters in several ways. It could just be a remark according to Socratic irony, meaning that actually Protagoras himself annoyed him with his story because of the silly figure in it that forgot to assign humanity proper faculties. However, a more likely interpretation would be that it should point to the fact that the two thinkers, being human, did not have the capacity to properly finish their investigation due to a certain lack of powers. In all probability, Socrates is referring to Epimetheus’ impulsive nature and lack of foresight, which disabled the god to foresee the end of the powers he had to distribute. Similarly, the two thinkers ended up focussing too easily on the present, in the heat of the discussion getting pulled away by the pleasure of the moment. They did not take the future into account, which could have brought much more pleasure and good – an answer to their questions, that is. Naturally, Socrates prefers the figure of Prometheus to his brother, as his instrumental, calculative and future-orientated approach nicely connects to the art of measurement from the philosopher’s argument. To possess the art of Promethean forethinking implies one will be less easily misled by appearance. One will be better able to measure, weigh and judge the different pleasures and pains and make the right choice and decide which action should be performed. Since Socrates says “I take promethean forethought over my life as a whole”, apparently he himself already masters the craft and so the authenticity of his own disorientation at the end of the debate should be taken with the greatest

¹⁴² Plato, *Protagoras*, 361c.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 361d.

suspicion. The philosopher's allusion to the myth should then be understood as him pointing out Protagoras' Epimethean shortcomings rather than his own. Reinvestigating their questions would be a means for Socrates to teach the sophist the virtue of Promethean forethought – of great worth not only with respect to their discussion but to life in general. For Socrates, the god thus represents the art or knowledge that should provide humans with the means to take control of their life and live in virtuous harmony with their companions.

What must have become clear is that there are both significant differences and similarities between Plato's reshaped Prometheus myth and the other ancient tales, including his own *Gorgias* story. In short, the *Protagoras* Titan remains an important benefactor of humanity as in all versions; symbol of forethought, craft, rationality and wisdom. He is an archetype of the human as in *Prometheus Bound*, though together with other protagonists, without his rebel characteristics and less heroic. As in all other tales, thanks to (a considerable contribution from) Prometheus humans undergo an important transformation – other than in *Works and Days* a serious improvement – which makes them a unique species. It is an improvement which paradoxically involves imperfection: vulnerability and ignorance. An ambiguous form of imperfection that, as in *Prometheus Bound* as well as *Gorgias*, is nevertheless of great worth and as in *Gorgias* in particular of moral worth, centring on social virtues, justice and the moral value of truth. In conclusion, there are some obvious parallels between Plato's stories and the earlier ones. But through the sympathetic relation between Zeus and Prometheus, the latter's and his brother's hand in the creation of humanity, the complex nature of our species and the emphasis on (the role of) virtue, the philosopher makes meaningful changes and adds substantial elements to the earlier tales.

Conclusion

Despite all the significant differences between their narratives, somehow Hesiod, Aeschylus and Plato together created 'the' ancient myth of Prometheus, which provides later storytellers with a broad source of often contradictory but adaptable story elements. The myth contains a set of core story components and a set of core themes. At this point I can only provide a rough list but in short, the core components are the Titan's theft of fire, his gift(s) to humanity, his punishment, his liberation and his creation of the human. The core themes are fire/knowledge, rebellion/hubris, creativity, human nature and ambiguity.¹⁴⁴ Yet Hesiod, Aeschylus and Plato themselves showed that none of these components or themes are obligatory in further narration and that expansion is always permitted. From the start, the Prometheus myth has thus had an extraordinary flexibility, which may be the reason why in the following centuries

¹⁴⁴ In chapter 4 I will elaborate on the nature and meaning of the myth's core themes.

many philosophers, artists and writers grab hold of *this* tale to tell their own. Who does, how and when, I will discuss in the next chapter.

3. Prometheus' Journey through History

In this chapter I give an historical outline of the use of the Prometheus myth within Western philosophy and, to a lesser extent, in literature and art. I chronologically examine and critically analyse the many variations of/references to the myth, in order to a) establish its meaning and role in each text or artifice; b) point out significant similarities, dissimilarities and patterns amongst the texts; and c) show how the myth develops through the ages. I do not wish to present an exhaustive overview, but by studying a serious number of references the overarching aim of this inquiry is to gain a reliable and satisfying amount of information on the basis of which in the next chapter I can find an answer to the question why, century after century, authors and artists always kept on returning to *this* tale.

3.1. From Antiquity to Christianity

Apart from Hesiod, Aeschylus and Plato, many others had their say about Prometheus and so several additions are made to the myth in Antiquity. A compound of core story elements is formed and when Christianity emerges the myth fuses partially with the biblical tales.

3.1.1. Crafts, Customs and Practices

Someone who made an interesting addition to the myth, is the Roman philosopher Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD). In his section about gold and rings, Pliny narrates how Prometheus, after he was released from his chains, was told by Zeus to wear a ring of iron. This was intended “to signify a chain thereby, and not an ornament”¹⁴⁵, and to remind the god after his liberation of his sinful actions in the past. Yet Prometheus “enclosed a fragment of [gold] in iron, and wore it upon his finger; such being the first ring and the first jewel known”¹⁴⁶. This is “how the use of precious stones first originated, and from what beginnings this admiration of them has now increased to such a universal passion”¹⁴⁷.

Judging by Pliny's writings, the Titan's status appears to be rather high. The terms Pliny employs when referring to the myth – all stories about Prometheus are “utterly fabulous”¹⁴⁸ – and to the related ring-wearing – “admiration”, “passion” – suggest a strikingly positive evaluation of the figure, whose negative chains have somehow transformed into worshipped

¹⁴⁵ Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History of Pliny*, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, vol. VI (London: Bell, 1857), XXXVII.4.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, VI:XXXVII.1.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, VI:XXXVII.1.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, VI:XXXIII.4.

accessories. A similar statement about the rings is made in the *Poetica Astronomica* (2nd century AD), in which the author Hyginus relates quite extensively about the god and reveals several practices as having originated in his story.¹⁴⁹ It was due to Prometheus' knowledge – “who with his wonderful wisdom is thought to have made men”¹⁵⁰ – that humans, when sacrificing, started to offer only part of the animal instead of the entire beast, as they did before. This way, they could keep its flesh for their own consumption and did not have to give up the whole animal to the gods. Next, Hyginus narrates the tale (as did Hesiod) in which Prometheus misleads Zeus by offering him a sacrifice consisting of covered up bones. Angered by this, the latter takes fire from humankind, which Prometheus brings back in a fennel stalk.

“[H]e came joyfully, seeming to fly, not to run, tossing the stalk so that the air shut in with its vapours should not put out the flame in so narrow a space. Up to this time, then, men who bring good news usually come with speed. In the rivalry of the games they also make it a practice for the runners to run, shaking torches after the manner of Prometheus”¹⁵¹.

Zeus sends Pandora to the mortals, and Prometheus is chained to the Caucasus, tortured by the eagle. However, the Father of the Olympians releases Prometheus when he warns the former for the dangers of his plans to marry Thetis, since Prometheus knows – as is also revealed in the *Prometheus Bound* – that her son will be stronger than his father. The Titan will nevertheless have to remain wearing stone and iron on his fingers as commemoration, which – just as Pliny related – was from then on followed by humans. Moreover,

“[s]ome also have said that he wore a wreath, as if to claim that he as victor had sinned without punishment. And so men began the practice of wearing wreaths at times of great rejoicing and victory. You may observe this in sports and banquets”¹⁵².

Hyginus continues the story by narrating that Herakles killed the eagle as a way to thank Prometheus for showing him the way to get the apples from the Hesperides. And “since it was slain, men began, when victims were sacrificed, to offer livers on the altars of the gods to satisfy them in place of the liver of Prometheus”¹⁵³.

The roots of several of the ancients' customs and cultural practices are thus traced back to this god and his myth: torch racing, the habit of wearing

¹⁴⁹ The true authorship of the *Poetica Astronomica* is disputed. The work was attributed to the Roman author (and possibly freedman from Caesar Augustus) Gaius Julius Hyginus (c. 64 BC – AD 17). But it probably consists of school notes made in the 2nd century AD which abbreviate his treatises. Hyginus' original work is lost.

¹⁵⁰ Hyginus, *Fabulae English. The Myths of Hyginus; Book 2 of the De Astronomia*, trans. Mary Grant (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, 1960), PA II. 15.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

rings as well as wreaths, sacrificing practices and more. From the tricky figure in Hesiod's version of the myth, Prometheus thus evolved into a highly appreciated, cultural hero. However, James George Frazer says that Prometheus "appears not to have been worshipped by the Greeks; Lucian says that nowhere were temples of Prometheus to be seen"¹⁵⁴. Yet this Assyrian author, Lucian of Samosata (c. 125-180 AD) treated the myth in a rather humorous way, and so one cannot simply assume that his statement should be taken seriously. Lucian's *Prometheus* is a satirical dialogue in which Prometheus addresses Hermes and Hephaistos with the aim "to dissipate the charges"¹⁵⁵ made upon him by Zeus and his allies. Starting by treating the accusation of sacrificial trickery, he explains that he is blushing for Zeus' decision to crucify him "just because he found a small bone in his portion"¹⁵⁶ – Prometheus had just been joking. As far as it concerns his creation of humankind, he does not understand Zeus' response either – "[s]urely he doesn't fear that they will plot an insurrection against him and make war on the gods as the Giants did?"¹⁵⁷. The genesis of the mortals has actually been rather advantageous than negative to the Olympians: before their existence, the Earth had been a mess, and there were no altars or temples where the gods were being worshipped. Yet now there *are* temples, he says, – "to Zeus, to Apollo, to Hera, and to you, Hermes, in sight everywhere, but nowhere any to Prometheus"¹⁵⁸. Obviously, he did not create humanity for his own interests. On the contrary, it was done for the gods' pleasure, for

"if man had not been created [...], it would be our lot to possess wealth, so to speak, which no one else would admire [...], and we should not realise how happy we were if we did not see others who did not have what we have. What is great, you know, can only seem great if it is gauged by something small"¹⁵⁹.

In Prometheus' view, the gods' agitation with respect to his theft of fire does not make any sense either, for they themselves did not lose any fire when he brought some of it to humanity. Moreover, they do not even *need* fire – whereas mortals do – and so "it is downright stinginess"¹⁶⁰.

By and large it is Zeus and the other gods who are ridiculed by Prometheus and not the other way around. However, apart from depicting Prometheus as a very comical creature Lucian's dialogue also presents him as a very clever one, who has a much greater capacity of intelligent arguing than

¹⁵⁴ Apollodorus, *The Library*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. : London: Harvard UP ; Heinemann, 1921), 229.

¹⁵⁵ Lucian, *Lucian*, trans. A. M. Harmon, K Kilburn, and M.D. Macleod, vol. II (London: Heinemann, 1915), 7. *Prometheus* was written in Greek.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, II:13.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, II:14.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, II:15.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, II:18.

his interlocutors. Moreover, since the dialogue ends with the prospect of Prometheus' liberation and tougher times for Zeus, we are left with the impression that the former is the victor and the latter the defeated.

Lucian had in fact a very satirical attitude to religion. Principally to both the ancient Greek and the new, Judeo-Christian one, but most of all he delighted in deriding the beliefs and superstitions of Antiquity's traditional pantheism, and in particular its capital god. Zeus is ridiculed not just in this text, but also in many other of Lucian's works, such as in the *Pro Imaginibus*, *Timon*, and *Zeus Tragoedus*. In the last work, the author presents the 'Great Almighty' as a helpless butterfingers. And in doing this by ridiculing a highly revered statuary of the god, he kills two birds with one stone: he manages to criticise not only the classical religion itself but simultaneously the senseless, rusty customs supporting it.

Perhaps Lucian's *Prometheus* should thus be taken with a pinch of salt, but through its irony still shines admiration for an extensively equipped hero. The characteristics that Lucian valued most of all must have been Prometheus' rebellion and creativity, as becomes even more apparent in the short, 'warm-up' speech *Prometheus Es in Verbis (PEV)*. Here, the author addresses an interlocutor who has told him to be – as the speech's title reveals – 'a literary Prometheus'. In the first instance, Lucian appreciates the identification: "If your meaning is, my good sir, that my works, like his, are of clay, I accept the comparison and hail my prototype"¹⁶¹. Just as Prometheus, Lucian aims to take some raw material – in his case the stiff, rigid substance of the established traditions and beliefs – and manipulate, transform, and remodel it by means of artistic and playful creativity.¹⁶² However, later he refuses to accept the association, for he views his own clay as "poor common stuff, trampled by common feet till it is little better than mud"¹⁶³. Then again, as in Athens the ceramic potters used to be called Prometheuses, Lucian notes that the resemblance may be accepted after all for "my productions are as brittle as their pottery; fling a stone, and you may smash them all to pieces"¹⁶⁴. Lucian's work is muddy, common, and filthy. Moreover, it lacks the vitality from Prometheus' creations, for instead of warming up his clay or even bringing it to life, he dried it out so that it became fragile and vulnerable. Even when he is comforted by someone telling him that it is his "innovating originality"¹⁶⁵ that constitutes the likeness between him and the Titan, he still refuses to accept this in a positive way, for mere originality or novelty does in no way guarantee quality, harmony, or beauty. Lucian fears that the audience his work appeals to is in fact only

¹⁶¹ Lucian, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. H. W. and F. G. Fowler, vol. I (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1905), 1.

¹⁶² The moulder of clay is a metaphor for the literary artist, which – whether positively explained or not – also manifests itself in several other of Lucian's writings. See, for instance (apart from *Prometheus*), his *Zeuxis* (7), *Lexiphanes* (22), and the *Quomodo Historia Conscribenda Sit* (4).

¹⁶³ Lucian, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, 1:1–2.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 1:2.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

interested because of its novelty and bizarreness, without appreciating its aesthetic and intellectual worth.

However, in a last moment of comparison with Prometheus Lucian appears to have recovered some of his self-confidence. Quickly listing the Titan's infamous wrongdoings, he wonders "have I [...] cheated my hearers by serving them up bones wrapped in fat, comic laughter in philosophic solemnity?"¹⁶⁶. The author himself does obviously not take this particular analogy too seriously or negatively. Actually, in the end he seems to return to enjoying his reputation of originality, for he finishes his speech by strongly denying that he would, just as Prometheus, be a thief:

"I defy you there; that is the one fault you cannot find with me: from whom should I have stolen? if any one has dealt before me in such forced unions and hybrids, I have never made his acquaintance"¹⁶⁷.

The reader or auditor is thus left with a very ambiguous assessment of the Promethean analogy. Initially, Lucian strongly appreciates the correlation. For, like the Titan, he aims to revise the status quo by means of his clay innovations. Just as Prometheus, the author wants to rebel against the Olympian authority. The Titan symbolises the creative and recalcitrant artist: as he remarks cynically in Lucian's work: "see what the penalty is for making creatures out of mud and imparting motion to that which was formerly motionless"¹⁶⁸. The god represents him who dares to animate what had previously been immobile. His creations – the human beings he fashioned – embody this flexibility and malleability. These are characteristics which stand in stark contrast with the inelasticity of those in power – whether that power is wielded by means of divine thunderbolts and eagles, or ancient customs and superstitions. Of course, Lucian firmly wishes to identify himself with this artist. Simultaneously, however, he lacks confidence in his own products. Even if his writings do deserve the label of 'originality', that does not prevent them from being grotesque crossbreeds, which lead to the sheer entertainment of a cheap, spectacle-hungry crowd. Let alone that his work will ever be as original as the divine creation-out-of-nothing: novel or not, it will always continue to be a combination of revised, but familiar models. Be that as it may, in the end Lucian does seem to resign to his fate: his objective remains to playfully revolt against the constituted order of things, hoping it will be appreciated not only by the mob but also the sophisticated intellectuals.

How the situation was *in general* concerning the 'amount' of worship dedicated to Prometheus, and thus whether Frazer was right in his suggestion that there was no true reverence of the god, is a question that remains to be answered. As we saw earlier, according to Pliny and Hyginus people started wearing wreaths and rings out of Promethean inspiration and held torch races in

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., I:7.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Lucian, *Lucian*, II:13.

honour of the god – something which cannot but have emanated from some feeling of awe towards the Titan. The Greek traveller and geographer Pausanias (2nd century AD) also speaks extensively about the practices and traditions related to Prometheus in his *Description of Greece*. He describes in detail how the races in Athens take place:

“In the Academy is an altar to Prometheus, and from it they run to the city carrying burning torches. The contest is while running to keep the torch still alight; if the torch of the first runner goes out, he has no longer any claim to victory, but the second runner has. If his torch also goes out, then the third man is the victor. If all the torches go out, no one is left to be winner”¹⁶⁹.

A little further in the same work, Pausanias relates that the inhabitants of the chief cities of both Argos and Opous claimed to have the Promethean grave on their territory, apparently revering him there as a hero. Further, Pausanias brings to the reader’s attention that the very site where humanity’s creation had taken place was localised and honoured as well. The author narrates that there is a ravine at Panopeus, central Greece, and there lie stones which

“have the color of clay [...] and they smell very like the skin of a man. They say that these are remains of the clay out of which the whole race of mankind was fashioned by Prometheus”¹⁷⁰.

Most modern scholars confirm that there were not that many statues and temples dedicated to the god. Yet each of them also underlines that in Athens Prometheus enjoyed a significant cult – which according to Conacher and Dougherty already emerged in the fifth-century BC. The torch races Pausanias describes were held at five different festivals, all in honour of the deities associated with fire, light, cunning intelligence, and arts – admittedly, not always only in honour of Prometheus, but also Hephaistos and the goddess Athena. One of these festivals was actually called the *Prometheia*, in which particularly the Titan’s gift of fire was celebrated, for this was a very important element in Greek culture. It provided the people with warmth and light and symbolised knowledge, technology, civilisation and more – which does not mean the ancient Greeks were not also well aware of fire’s dangerous and destructive potential.

Wreaths, rings and sacrifices; multiple cities squabbling over who was in possession of the genuine tomb; localisation of the clay that had served as the original material out of which the human race was born; but above all the torch races – there was a number of practices and adorations, all in honour of Prometheus and his courage, creativity, intelligence and gift of fire. He may not

¹⁶⁹ Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, trans. W. H. S. Jones and H. A. Ormerod (London: Heinemann, 1918), 1.30.2.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.4.4.

have had that many temples dedicated to him, but in his own way, the Titan must have nevertheless been worshipped by the ancient peoples – in particular by the Athenians.

3.1.2. The Creation of the Human

Remarkably, the last three authors above all integrate the Platonic element of Prometheus' creation of the human into the myth. As Olga Raggio observes, this element "did not inspire any great literary or artistic creation among the Greeks"¹⁷¹ but became very popular among the Romans during the reign of Caesar Augustus (27 BC-14 AD). This can be deduced from the work of poets such as Ovid, Horace and Propertius. In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid (43 BC-17 AD) writes how the human was either made by the "great Creator" or whether it was

"[new-made] earth that Prometheus moulded, mixed with water,
In likeness of the gods that govern the world –
And while the other creatures on all fours
Look downwards, man was made to hold his head
Erect in majesty and see the sky,
And raise his eyes to the bright stars above.
Thus earth, once crude and featureless, now changed
Put on the unknown form of humankind"¹⁷².

Ovid speaks of a creation based on fresh earth, humans made in the divine image, and a majestic – even world-metamorphosing – result. Yet the picture drawn by the other Augustan poets is not necessarily as positive as his. In his *Odes*, Horace (65-8 BC) does call Prometheus "resourceful" or "ingenious" (*callidum*). He also narrates that while creating humankind the god did "add to our primal substance particles drawn from wherever"¹⁷³ or, as another translation has it: "a particle cut from each of the animals"¹⁷⁴. The Titan thus appears to have done something quite praiseworthy by endowing us with an impressive range of (animal) qualities. However, – and even though he is said to have had no choice – apart from all the enriching capabilities and ambitions Prometheus also 'equipped' the human with negative characteristics, such as anger, sinfulness and hubris – he "put in our stomachs the urge of the ravening

¹⁷¹ Olga Raggio, "The Myth of Prometheus: Its Survival and Metamorphoses up to the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 21, no. 1/2 (January 1, 1958): 46.

¹⁷² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A. D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3; Book I, 80–87.

¹⁷³ Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes with the Centennial Hymn*, trans. W. G. Shepherd (New York: Penguin Group, 1983), Book I, 16.

¹⁷⁴ Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes*, trans. David West (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Book I, 14.

lion”¹⁷⁵. This caused the human often to be governed by anger, sinfulness and hubris. Our many capacities thus also brought dangers along, for as Horace concludes “[n]othing is too steep for man: we foolishly seek heaven itself, our sin will not let Jove lay down his punitive thunderbolts”¹⁷⁶.

Another contemporary, the love poet Sextus Propertius (43-16 BC) even seems to think that the god has simply failed his task. He straightforwardly exclaims “[w]hat a botch Prometheus made when he fashioned men out of clay and left so little space for the governing mind”¹⁷⁷. That mind should control our actions, the poem continues, but, whether rich or poor, it is unable to, for

“the slightest wind is enough to blow us far off course and out to sea to founder or find some war to begin or, worse, renew. Whatever wealth you’ve piled up, you cannot take it with you. When you cross that ferry into the world below, you go aboard as naked as when you were born, equal, victor and vanquished, rich man and pauper together”¹⁷⁸.

Propertius opened the elegy with the statement that the god of peace is Love. And by speaking passionately about his “battles” between the sheets, he suggests it is *this* kind of war that should be fought instead. Actually, even though the state of Love is a state of mind that is not any more controlled or “governing” than its alternative, from this point of view Prometheus’ moulding mistakes may have been not so bad after all. For Propertius himself deeply enjoys his young, free, dancing and drinking life. He explicitly says it is his delight to “bind” his mind to the ‘Unbinder’ (Lyaeus), which is an epithet for Dionysius, his unchecked parties and his wine. In this context of love poetry the poet’s glee could reasonably be interpreted to include the – paradoxically – *unbinding* “bondage of Love”¹⁷⁹: he does not only delight in his mind being tied to wine or the ‘unbound’, but also to the goddess Venus and what she stands for. Therefore, whether the – again paradoxically – *un-forethinking* actions of Prometheus in creating a licentious type of being should be truly interpreted as negative, is certainly doubtful. Nevertheless, when “my hair begins to go grey and love is behind me”, *then* it “will be time enough for my mind to turn to nature to consider the ways of the gods who built this intricate house we too often take for granted”¹⁸⁰. But Propertius implies that up to then he will take happy and full advantage of the – thanks to Prometheus – ‘ungoverned’ nature of his mind, and his Love-regulated life.

¹⁷⁵ Horace, *The Complete Odes and Epodes with the Centennial Hymn*, Book I, 16.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, Book I; 3; 37–40.

¹⁷⁷ Propertius, *Propertius in Love: The Elegies*, trans. D. R. Slavitt (London: University of California Press, 2002), Book III.5, 9–10.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, Book III.5 12–18.

¹⁷⁹ Stephen Hinds, “Venus, Varro and the Vates: Toward the Limits of Etymologizing Interpretation,” *Dictynna*, no. 3 (2006): 2.

¹⁸⁰ Propertius, *Propertius in Love: The Elegies*, Book III. 5. 29–33.

3.1.3. Early Christianity

The story of Prometheus' creation of humankind had thus firmly established itself in the Roman culture and was being narrated and evaluated in different, creative, and often ambiguous ways. In the meantime, Christianity was coming up and in the first Christian centuries the myth was slowly absorbed by the biblical stories. Apart from many differences, there are also several parallels between the narratives and their figures. The most obvious one is Prometheus' creation of humanity and the Genesis itself, as both stories' protagonists are fashioning humans out of clay. Some Bible illustrations are actually showing evident similarities with the ancient iconographical tradition of the myth. For instance, the way the Lord bends over Adam in the biblical illustration below, is certainly reminiscent of the depiction of Prometheus' moulding activities on the sarcophagus next to it:

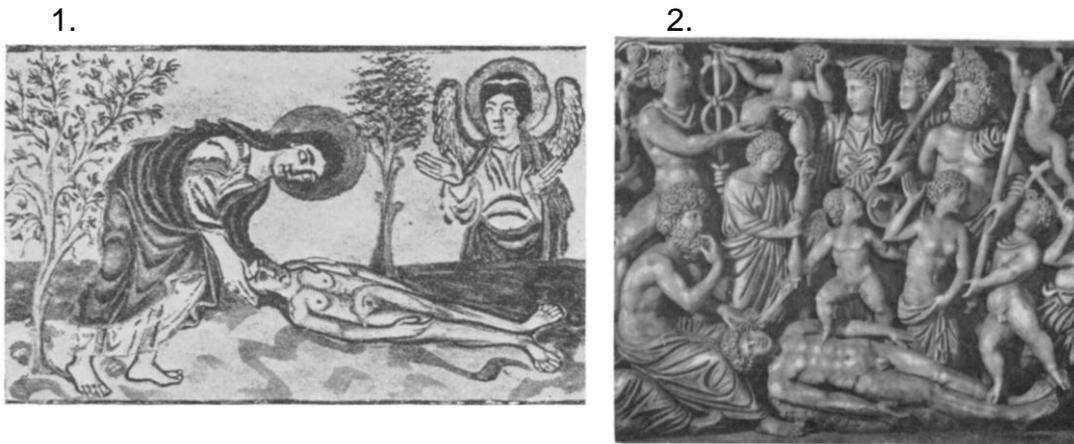


Figure 1) God enlivening Adam; Moutier– Grandval Bible (840 AD), the British Library (MS Addl. 10546).

Figure 2) Prometheus creating the human; detail of sarcophagus (third century AD), Museo Nazionale, Naples.¹⁸¹

Both creators are about to bring the first human to life while another divine or angelical figure is watching. Raggio explains that “[i]n the Graeco-Roman world of the first Christian centuries the myth of Prometheus plays the role of a sort of “Genesis secundum Gentiles”¹⁸² – a kind of folktale of creation. Tertullian (160-225 AD), one of the first Christian authors, tried to convince the people that the Titan was not the real creator. He exclaims about the Christian Lord that “[h]e alone is God, Who made the universe, Who fashioned man of mud – (for He is

¹⁸¹ Illustrations from Raggio, “The Myth of Prometheus,” fig. 6c; 6d. According to Raggio the first illustration is obtained from a fifth-century Byzantine manuscript.

¹⁸² Ibid., 47.

your true Prometheus!)”¹⁸³. Several other Early Church Fathers advance similar ideas about the ancient gods, inspired – just as Tertullian – by earlier allegorical and euhemerist explanations of the myths. With respect to the first explanatory form they drew on ideas of, for example, Plutarch (46-120 AD), who speaks of the Titan as the personification of human rationality: “Prometheus, or, in other words, the power to think and reason”¹⁸⁴. That is, Prometheus is an interesting allegory, yet nothing more. With respect to the second manner of explanation, the ecclesiasts were encouraged by Euhemerus’ (c. 330-260 BC) rationalising way of analysing the myths. This Greek philosopher had, centuries before, introduced historicising methods of exegesis into mythography by explaining the gods – actively worshipped by his fellow Greeks – as originally having been living humans. According to him, the mythological divinities had been merely mortal kings, heroes, champions, or benefactors in some other way, who had earned serious respect during their lives and had therefore, somehow, been deified by later generations.

Both forms of mythological interpretation were enthusiastically espoused by the Early Church Fathers in an attempt to incapacitate pagan religion. The ‘merely human’ interpretation was, moreover, also stimulated by the anthropomorphic character of the ancient deities. Anger, jealousy, adultery – the gods were depicted just as frail and sinful as humans, if not worse. Particularly relying on the euhemerist argument, the Fathers thus often explained the classical tales as perhaps once truly happened historical events that had, however, – and whether positive or not – been obscured and deformed throughout the years because of exaggerating storytelling and retelling. One of these Patristic authors, for instance, was Lactantius.¹⁸⁵ In *The Divine Institutes* (c. 303-311 AD), he states that poets such as Plato and ‘the Sibyl’ had not been wrong when relating how the human was formed out of earth and in divine likeness. However, “they said that man was made by Prometheus from clay. They were not mistaken in the matter itself, but in the name of the artificer”¹⁸⁶. Actually, they were also incorrect with respect to Prometheus’ divinity: he must have been simply the first sculptor:

“[Prometheus] first originated the art of making statues and images [...]. And thus the truth was corrupted by falsehood; and that which was said to have been made by God began also to be ascribed to man, who imitated the divine work. But the making of the true and living man from clay is the work of God”¹⁸⁷.

¹⁸³ Tertullian, “Apology,” in *Tertullian, Minucius Felix*, trans. T. R. Glover (London: Heinemann, 1931), XVIII, 2.

¹⁸⁴ Plutarch, *Moralia*, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt, vol. II (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1971), 81.

¹⁸⁵ Lactantius literally included several references to Euhemerus in his work.

¹⁸⁶ Lactantius, “The Divine Institutes,” in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, J Donaldson, and A Roberts, trans. W Fletcher, vol. VII. Fathers of the Third and Fourth Centuries: Lactantius, Venantius, Asterius, Victorinus, Dionysius, Apostolic Teaching and Constitutions, Homily, and Liturgies (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1885), Book II, XI.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

Just as the other ancient gods, Prometheus had thus been nothing but an idealised man – an exceptional human being who, through the legends of inspired poets and authors, had been aggrandised and ultimately deified.

Unlike Lactantius, the mythographer Fulgentius Planciades (late 5th – early 6th century) presents an allegorical explanation of the myth, which as we will see below, was very influential. He narrates in his *Mythologies* that the Titan – a symbol of divine foresight – stole heavenly fire from Phoebus' chariot wheel, with the help of Minerva – an allegory of divine wisdom – in order to animate the human with a divinely inspired soul. Fulgentius says to follow the ancient philosophers, who understand Prometheus' liver as the human heart where “wisdom dwells”, and “explain the vulture as an allegory of the world”¹⁸⁸. Our heart is thus being consumed by the concerns of the world and this way it nourishes Divine Providence, which “cannot have an end to itself” and thus cannot do without the wisdom of our heart.

The famous Archbishop Isidore of Seville (c. 560-636) turns his attention again to the euhemeristic method. Yet instead of merely rejecting the pagan ideas as fables and superstitions, he seriously aims to demonstrate his claims, and does so by supporting these with historical facts, etymological analyses and other details. Isidore sums up a list of these once-human-gods, who had been royalties, founders of cities, or otherwise notable men and women. Some had been inventors of arts – Aesculapius had discovered medicine, for instance, and Vulcan developed forging. Because of these persons' impressive powers, activities, or inventions “after they had died, the people who had been fond of them made likenesses, so that they might have some solace from contemplating these images”¹⁸⁹. This is where Prometheus comes into play, since in the following section the archbishop relates that it was he who had actually been the first person to teach people how to make these:

“The pagans assert that Prometheus first made a likeness of humans from clay and that from him the art of making likenesses and statues was born. Whence also the poets supposed that human beings were first created by him – figuratively, because of these effigies”¹⁹⁰.

Isidore suggests that it was due to the lyrical reformation of facts about the historical – the *human* – inventor of the art of sculpture, that Prometheus was promoted to divinity and to the creator of humankind. His suggestion is similar to the statements of his ideological forebears, but – quite importantly – missing their polemical tone.¹⁹¹ Moreover, in the *Chronicon*, Isidore presents a long but

¹⁸⁸ Fulgentius, *Fulgentius the Mythographer*, 2.6.

¹⁸⁹ Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. S. A. Barney et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Book VIII, xi.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, Book VIII.xi.

¹⁹¹ The Titan figures in two other sections, in which the archbishop treats the origin of gems and rings, and informs the reader that “[I]egend claims that Prometheus first enclosed a piece of

detailed list of important (once living) persons, and he places the pagan god amongst other great, Judeo-Christian figures, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Interestingly, because of Isidore's more practical, historical, descriptive and objective treatment of the ancient gods – and because of the author's immense value as source of information – euhemerism lost its negative function as a tool to fight paganism. As Jean Seznec formulates it, the result of the work by the “great encyclopedist” was

“to restore dignity and independence to the personages of Fable: as benefactors of humanity they had every right to be held in grateful remembrance. [...] By gaining a foothold in history, the gods had acquired new prestige”¹⁹².

Many centuries later many authors were still greatly indebted to Isidore when writing on ancient history. One of his most important followers is Peter Comestor, who was chancellor of the Notre Dame in Paris in the 12th century. He wrote the *Historia Scholastica* (ca. 1170) – the “mediaeval popular Bible”, as it is often called because of its authority. It is a sacred history that practically involves all biblical information but, in passing, also presents quite some mythological material and thus also includes a small section on Prometheus and other pagan heroes or gods. The sections in question may not be that extensive, but significant is that Comestor presents the biblical and mythological information textually parallel to one another and thereby also establishes a parallel between the characters of the different narratives – if not, says Seznec, “strict equality”:

“All these mighty spirits [i.e. pagan figures – TF] are worthy of veneration, exactly as are the patriarchs, and for the same reasons: they have been the guides and teachers of humanity, and together stand as the common ancestors of civilisation”¹⁹³.

In part because of the *Historia's* popularity, the analogous evaluation of pagan and biblical wisdom became the common attitude in the Middle Ages. The text was enthusiastically copied, translated, used and adapted for centuries, and so Prometheus also keeps on emerging in other historical and genealogical works. Around the same time a treatise on mythology appears, written by a still unidentified *Mythographus Tertius*¹⁹⁴ – possibly the well-known English scholar Alexander Neckam (1157-1217). This treatise forms a compendium of virtually

gemstone in iron and encircled his finger with it; from these beginnings rings and gemstones originated” (Ibid., Book XVI.vi.).

¹⁹² Jean Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods. The Mythological Tradition and Its Place in Renaissance Humanism and Art* (Princeton NY: Princeton University Press, 1953), 15.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹⁴ The *Mythographus Tertius* was partially based on two other anonymous mythological handbooks from the ninth century, written by the *Mythographus Primus* and *Mythographus Secundus*. The very first section on the first page of Liber 1 of the *Mythographus Primus* is the section ‘Prometheus’ – and the Titan figures several other times in the two works.

all the available information on mythology at the time, thus including both allegorical and euhemerist explanations. In its part on Prometheus, the Titan is initially explained in line with Fulgentius, as “the foresight of God”¹⁹⁵, who animated his creation – the human – with divine fire, which he stole aided by Minerva, goddess of “heavenly wisdom”¹⁹⁶. However, the section presents more than one possible exegesis. For instance, the vulture gnawing at Prometheus’ liver could be understood in Fulgentius’ way – that is, as the world’s worries bothering the human heart. Yet the Titan could also have been the first sculptor, in which case the vulture would be representing “envious men” who “bit him with the tooth of detraction”¹⁹⁷. The next paragraph again describes a different interpretation, according to which Prometheus was a very intelligent man, who studied (and later taught) astrology from the Caucasus Mountains. Thus “an eagle is said to devour his heart because solicitude, by which he understood all the eclipses and motions of the constellations, is unrelenting”¹⁹⁸.

Whether the vulture should in the end be comprehended as the world’s worries, envious men, or the unrelenting solicitude of devoted study is a question that is not clearly answered. Yet it remains very interesting that this work presents an overview of explanations that are entirely different in nature. Another fascinating characteristic is the regular emergence of a personal and moral tone – something which is rarely found in former mythographies. Frequently, the author includes his comments and opinions in the text. Unfortunately, in the paragraphs on Prometheus, his view is difficult to distinguish from those of the classical writers he refers to. The author asserts, for instance, that “Prometheus *rightly* kindled his torch from the sun because, according to the natural scientists, [...] we receive life from the sun”¹⁹⁹. Whether this should be understood as a positive evaluation of the Titan’s thieving action from the side of the mythographer is hard to determine, as this ‘judgement’ is made within the context of Fulgentius’ – rather positive – version of the myth. A few sentences further, in the paragraph on another authors’ exegesis, it is explained that the fire brought by the Titan

“benefited mortal man *while they used it well*. Later, through the *wicked use of mankind*, it was turned to their destruction. [...] Thus it is that when fire was stolen, diseases are said to have been sent down upon mankind by the angry deities”²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁵ Ronald E Pepin, *The Vatican Mythographers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 299.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. Here, the author refers to the explanation from the ancient writers Nicagoras and Petronius Arbiter. Note, however, that their different viewpoint was also already mentioned by Fulgentius himself.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 300.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 299.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 300.

Suddenly, fire was not that beneficial anymore. Perhaps both quotations are cases of pure paraphrasing of the ancient authors, perhaps they are not. Possibly, the mythographer aims to send a broad, ambiguous message, encouraging the human to acquire knowledge by praising fire as the metaphor of wisdom, soul, and life; while simultaneously, by emphasising the angry gods' punishments, warning humanity about the miserable consequences of its "wicked" misuse. His own view remains difficult to establish; yet most important is that in any case the entire work shows quite an inclination to moralise – a new inclination, which becomes stronger in the centuries that follow.

3.2. From Early Middle Ages to Renaissance

In the 13th and 14th century Prometheus gradually recovers his classical, favourable image and his value as sage, as *sapiens* who created the human being and animated him. This becomes apparent, for instance, in the popular literature on Ovid, such as the *Ovide Moralisé* (end 13th-beginning 14th century):

“Li filz Japeti, sans doutance
 Prometheüs, qui mout savoit
 De terre et d'iaue, fet avoit
 Une ymagete a la semblance
 Des dieus, qui toute ont la puissance
 de toutes choses ordener.
 La glose dist que, pour donner
 A l'ymage esperit de vie,
 Ot du chars du Solail ravie
 Une luisante faille enflamnee,
 Dont il ot l'image animee”²⁰¹.

Similar interpretations are found in Giovanni del Virgilio's discussion of the *Metamorphoses*. Both works aim to legitimise Ovid's pagan poetry by moralising and theologising it, both explain his myths as foreshadowings of ethical, Christian truths. This results in positive, allegorical presentations of Prometheus as the sage who made “[u]ne ymagete a la semblance/Des dieus”, provided the creature with wisdom, and as such prefigured the true, Christian God. One manuscript of the *Ovide Moralisé* (first half of the 14th century) perfectly demonstrates this fusion of the mythological and biblical narrative as it even contains an illustration that shows both God and Prometheus, together in the act of genesis:

²⁰¹ C. de (ed.) Boer, *Ovide Moralisé. Poème Du Commencement Du Quatorzième Siècle*, ed. Martina G. de Boer and Jeannette Th. M. van't Sant, vol. I (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1915), 324–329.



Figure 3) Creation and animation by God and Prometheus. *Ovide Moralisé*, Lyons, Bibliothèque de la Ville MS. 742.²⁰²

God is creating Chaos, while Prometheus animates the human with the flame of his torch, all this against the background of Creation: animals, trees, and houses.

3.2.1. Boccaccio

After quite some consideration – and reluctantly, as he considers himself unable to accomplish such a task – halfway through the 14th century Giovanni Boccaccio accepts the truly Renaissance request of Cyprus' King Hugo IV to write an encyclopaedia of myth. The outcome is the influential mythological handbook the *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods* (1373). Continuing and building on the trend of his predecessors' literature, in this extensive work Boccaccio brings the allegorical, euhemerist, and moral tendencies together. However, unlike the earlier mythographies, this handbook returns to the classical manuscripts, focusing just as much on the ancient texts themselves as on their later, Patristic exegesis. And unlike the just mentioned analysts of Ovid's work, Boccaccio does not narrate and moralise myths mainly in order to reveal their theological significances and truths. Rather, he writes the mythological encyclopaedia because he is convinced of the necessity and unavoidability of myths. They contain an inexhaustible amount of literal, historical, allegorical, political, and ethical meanings, ancient fantasies and cultural memories which the mythographer can revive by means of the animating powers of his research, interpretations, and poetry. According to Giuseppe Mazzotta, the *Genealogy* is a "meta-discourse [...] on myth", which "describes for Boccaccio the total history of man's creative imagination from the beginning to the present"²⁰³.

In his chapter on Prometheus Boccaccio presents two versions of the myth and its protagonist. After having quoted a number of ancient authors –

²⁰² Illustration from Raggio, "The Myth of Prometheus," fig. 7b.

²⁰³ Giuseppe Mazzotta, "Boccaccio: The Mythographer of the City," in *Interpretation and Allegory. Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 355.

Ovid, Aeschylus, Hesiod, Fulgentius and many more – the author warns the King that it will be difficult “to peel off the outer layer of these fictions”.²⁰⁴ Most important is to find out who Prometheus – child of Iapetus – was, and “[i]n fact, he was twofold, just as the man he produced is twofold”²⁰⁵. The first Prometheus is God himself: in line with Tertullian’s Patristic interpretation, the Titan represents the true, almighty God-Creator, the “deus verus et omnipotens”²⁰⁶. “The natural man [*homo naturalis*] was first created by God from the clay of the earth; both Ovid and Claudian know about him, although not in the religious sense in which Christians understand it”²⁰⁷. Boccaccio combines the Christian and mythological narratives. Both tell the story of the creation of the human, who was endowed with a “rational spirit” as well as “sensible and animating powers”.²⁰⁸ The ancients simply visualised the Creator – who the Christians now know is God – differently. If the created humans, says Boccaccio, would not have sinned, their corporeal powers “would have been eternal just as is the rational spirit, the nature of which is divine”²⁰⁹. In other words, due to their sinning, humans became these dualistic organisms. We became creatures consisting, first, of physical spirits that could have been perfect but are defective now; and second, of rational ones which prove our (apparently) divine kinship – although these spirits, too, are far from flawless. For “indeed, those who are produced by nature arrive coarse and ignorant, nay, unless they are instructed, filthy, savage, and beastly”²¹⁰. Here, the second Prometheus comes into play. This is the historical philosopher who, as other authors relate, studied the stars and lightning from the summit of the Caucasus, and taught the Assyrians astrology: “those whom he found boorish, uncultivated, and living like beasts he left as civilized men”²¹¹. The historical Prometheus is not a mere euhemerist figure, but also has an allegorical, moral meaning: the myth becomes a tale about the civilising power of wisdom, in which the ancient god emancipates humankind from its natural, beastly condition and becomes a hero of culture. For in contrast with the *homo naturalis*, Prometheus was a *homo doctus*,

“a learned man, and taking them [the *homines naturales* – TF] as if they were made of stone and he were creating them anew, he taught them and educated them and, by his demonstrations, turned them from natural men to civil, so distinguished in their knowledge of customs and in their virtues that it is very clear that nature produced some and teaching had reformed others”²¹².

²⁰⁴ Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, I:IV, 44.7.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., I:IV, 44.10.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., I:IV, 44.10–11.

²¹⁰ Ibid., I:IV, 44.11–12.

²¹¹ Ibid., I:IV, 44.9.

²¹² Ibid., I:IV, 44.12.

When the human sinned, he became this merely natural – that is, imperfect – product. But Boccaccio's point is that through wisdom – that is, philosophy and science – one can be transformed and moulded into a *homo civilis*. In that sense, the myth has a political dimension as well: a civilised human is a being who possesses virtues and a sense of ethics, and who is capable of communal living.

Boccaccio continues by relating that with the help of Minerva, this second Prometheus rose to the sky “that is, [...] the place of perfection”, where everything was enlivened by fire, “that is, by the clarity of truth”²¹³. There, he stole fire in order to animate – to “complete” – the human with this symbol of life, wisdom and truth. The *Genealogy's* author emphasises that the myth describing the fire as being *stolen* is anything but ill-suited,

“for we do not obtain the clarity of truth in theatres or town squares or in open spaces but secluded in solitude, and it is in silence that we pursue our inquiries and investigate the natures of things with much deep thought. And because such things are done in secret, as if we seem to be stealing them, and to explain whence wisdom comes to mortals, the fable says that it is from the wheel of the sun, that is, from the lap of God, whence comes all wisdom, for He is the true sun “who illuminates every man coming into this earth”²¹⁴.

Prometheus' stolen fire thus represents the ray of truly divine wisdom, which the by nature ignorant human may – and should – attain if he dedicates himself to the acquirement of knowledge in the solitude of silent meditation. Again, the Bible and the myth are connected, or even integrated: the phrase about God being the true sun includes a quote from John 1:9. By means of the above paragraph, the author illustrates how both the Christian story and the pagan fable emphasise the divinity of knowledge and its absolute necessity for the illumination, enlivenment, and completion of the “twofold” human being, for

“the bodily mass infected by a terrestrial cloud weakens the powers of the mind so much that unless they are aided and inspired by knowledge, they become so benumbed that men seem more like brutish than rational animals”²¹⁵.

Boccaccio narrates how the poets say that Prometheus' actions had to be paid for: the angered gods left him bound to the Caucasus cliffs.

“There they say his vitals were torn by an eagle, that is, troubled by sublime and deep thoughts, and then, after being worn out by the long labor of profound thought, they are restored when after various ambiguities the once allusive truth about something is discovered”²¹⁶.

²¹³ Ibid., I:IV, 44.13.

²¹⁴ Ibid., I:IV, 44.14.

²¹⁵ Ibid., I:IV, 44.15.

²¹⁶ Ibid., I:IV, 44.18.

In the poets' eyes, the liver consuming eagle thus represents the trouble, torture, and anxiety one needs to go through in order to achieve spiritual salvation. One has to work hard in order to find the clarifying truth. Then Boccaccio relates how the authors he studied also told that the furious divinities sent humans poverty, fever, and women.

“By poverty I understand corporeal labors, which weaken us and for which we are born by the crime of him to whom it was said: “With the sweat of your face you eat your bread.” [...] By fevers I think they mean the ardors of desire, which give us continual anguish and vexation. Woman, however, was created as consolation, but by her disobedience became cause of torment”²¹⁷.

Another time, allegorical meanings are read into the myth, and once more, one of these is literally supported with a quote from the Bible, in which God addresses Adam after the Fall²¹⁸. Essentially, all three messages are found in both the pagan and theological narrative: crime will be punished, work is indispensable, and lust is dangerous. The main point is once again that humans will have to make a strong effort in order to make up for their sin. They will have to compensate their physical and spiritual imperfections through corporeal and psychological labour – through philosophy and civilisation.

The threats of women are particularly underlined by means of several lengthy citations from Boccaccio's highly esteemed mentor Francesco Petrarch, who said in *On the Solitary Life* (1346) that “no poison is as destructive for those pursuing this life as feminine companionship”.²¹⁹ The next section is on Pandora and although no box or jar is mentioned, eventually – again reinforced with a biblical parable²²⁰ – she does end up once more as symbol of human misery. Yet not all women in the context of the myth represent misery and the dangers of desire. Boccaccio also writes a section on Prometheus' children, Isis and Deucalion, who both possessed impressive abilities that are comparable to their father's: Isis the capacities to teach and cultivate, Deucalion the ones to create.

In summary: despite his earlier warnings to the King, through his extensive discussion of the Prometheus myth, Boccaccio actually managed to peel off quite some fictional layers. The poet made a great effort to bring its subterranean meanings to light, while thereby reconciling the mythological and theological narratives. The story's first, significant sense lies in the fact that Prometheus represents no one but the Creator, the Christian God himself. Second, the Titan had literally been an historical wise man, a philosopher, who

²¹⁷ Ibid., I:IV, 44.21–22.

²¹⁸ Genesis 3.19.

²¹⁹ Quoted from Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, I:IV, 23.: Petrarch, *On the Solitary Life*, 2.3.3.

²²⁰ Job 14.1.

taught people science, who educated and civilised them. Boccaccio shows that allegorically, the tale states the supernatural quality of wisdom and rationality, and the importance of the development of the human's rational potentials. Prometheus' myth emphasises the necessity of this cultivation. A process enabling an initially natural and savage creature to become civil, capable of virtue and science, and of engagement in social life – that is, enabling that organism to become truly *human*. Further, the poet explains how the narrative underscores the solitary, labour demanding, frightening, and even tortuous characteristics of that process, and stresses the dangers of the human's corporeal shortcomings and vulnerability to lust.

Noteworthy is the strongly dichotomous image of humankind underlying Boccaccio's excavated meanings: a "twofold" creature that consists, first, of a sinful, imperfect body and, second, of a potentially – that is, if aided by knowledge – rational mind. The latter highlights the divine kinship of that same, sinful being, providing a rather positive counterweight to the human's more negative characteristics. It is interesting that, just as the story's allegories, this image is a perfect blend of the pagan and Christian pictures of humanity.

However, the myth's allegorical value does not finish here. In the book's preface, Boccaccio describes the mythographer's work itself as a *Promethean* task. He assures the King that he will satisfy his wish for a genealogy, but still explaining his reluctant attitude he says

"Nonetheless, I dread undertaking such a large task, and if another Prometheus or even Prometheus himself, who in a bygone era the poets said could form man from mud, were to rise up and present himself, I scarcely believe that he, much more than I, would have the skills for this work"²²¹.

The beauty of this quotation lies in its – I'd like to say *Promethean* – ambiguity. For, on the one hand, it has a desperate, negative flavour, with Boccaccio underlining the fundamentally unaccomplishable character of the task he is asked to perform – a satisfactory result would demand *divine* capabilities. On the other hand, these same lines draw an analogy between Prometheus and the poet. By means of other – and surely rather indirect – words, in a way Boccaccio calls himself "a literary Prometheus", just as Lucian was named by others. According to Susanna Barsella Boccaccio should be considered an early-humanist author, as his innovative views already contained the essence of Humanism: a strong attempt to unite Christian and classical thoughts, and an image of the poet as a "moral philosopher", whose function it is "to educate men to natural and moral knowledge so that they may live in a secular, political, context according to the principles of justice and piety"²²². In the last book of the

²²¹ Boccaccio, *Genealogy of the Pagan Gods*, I:I, Preface 1.41.

²²² Susanna Barsella, "The Myth of Prometheus in Giovanni Boccaccio's Decameron," *MLN* 119, no. 1 (2004): S122.

Genealogy, Boccaccio indeed emphasises the poet's valuable function once more. He tells the King that he has reached the end of this task:

"In obedience to your command, I have according to my ability added interpretations to the myths, both derived from the ancients and from my own slender intellect. I have also performed what I considered in some directions a most urgent duty, and shown that the poets [...] are [...] not absurd nor mere story-tellers – nay, they are marked with secular learning, genius, character, and high distinction".²²³

Clearly, Prometheus perfectly embodies Boccaccio's concept of the poet with his socialising, illuminating, educative and humanising function. Thanks to the truth, knowledge, and meanings he can teach, the Promethean poet is thus not just a creative moulder of verbal clay, but by means of his artistic productions he may even transform an originally brutish organism into a civil, *human* being – and Boccaccio hopes to join this group of geniuses.

3.2.2. Ficino

In the 15th century, Humanism is getting more and more popular and so is (Neo-)Platonism and the work of its 'father' Plotinus (ca. 204-270 AD). Influenced by the humanistic tendencies and fascinated by the ancient authors, the philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) commits himself to revitalising Plato's ideas. At the time, Aristotle has long been the favourite of scholars and clergy, but Ficino turns to Plato and translates virtually all of his writings in Latin. This way, he makes the philosopher's works available to the public. He promotes the examination of his writings at the Platonic Academy of Florence (established in 1462) and Plato's work as well as Ficino's interpretations become very popular and influential. It continues the Patristic tendency, aiming to unite pagan and Christian ideas. However, whereas earlier authors usually tried to keep (and apply) the Platonic concepts separate from their philosophical framework as such, according to Josephine Burroughs "Ficino deliberately set out to combine the Platonic doctrine as a whole with the Christian doctrine"²²⁴. Ficino got so inspired by Plato's ideas and theology that, in his early 20s, he even had a religious crisis. Later on, he converted back to Christianity, but not without conceiving of it in a different way, that is: within a Platonic paradigm.

The result is a new system, which centres on humanity's one and universal aim: the achievement of the *summum bonum*, the highest good. Both philosophy and religion are required for Ficino's scheme – philosophy providing knowledge and universal principles; religion the right conception and

²²³ Translation from Charles G. Osgood, *Boccaccio on Poetry. Being the Preface and the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Books of Boccaccio's Genealogia Deorum Gentilium* (Indianapolis, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1956), Book XV, xiv..

²²⁴ Marsilio Ficino, "Five Questions Concerning the Mind," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, JR., trans. Josephine L. Burroughs (London: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 186.

justification of that highest good. They complement each other, and being both “manifestations of spiritual life”²²⁵, they strive to attain this same aim. Clearly, underneath this system lies the strongly humanistic idea of the uniqueness of the human and his universal desire – and, not unimportantly, his *ability* – to pursue and attain the highest good. Yet beside that Humanism and Platonism, Ficino remains very open to the Aristotelian school, which focused on a more practical, natural, or physical, philosophy. In fact, as he explains in his *Five Questions Concerning the Mind* (1476-7), the human’s universal desire for that ultimate, perfect end is a *natural* motion, the *appetitus naturalis*. Thus, in a way, he combines Aristotelian and Platonic ideas in that very concept. The principle of the universe – or better: of Being – is such that every species has its own essential, natural, tendency to move towards a specific, common good, which is both its source and end. In humanity’s case that is “boundless truth and goodness”, “the cause of causes”²²⁶ – in other words: *God* – in which it will find the rest that its moving soul eventually strives towards. Each species has a highest, ideal member, *primum in aliquo genere*, who stands at the top of a hierarchy. It is according to that hierarchy that its individual members are organised, and upon which the less perfect order and goodness of less perfect creatures, depend – but to which, as they are nevertheless still *partially* good, ordered, and *in motion*, these beings and their single, particular ends, also contribute. God, embodying Being, Goodness, and Truth as such, is the transcendent *primum* of humanity. And in the end, as the cause of all Being, He is the *primum* of each created thing. This image of God is reminiscent of the Platonic Ideas. The human soul has a unique metaphysical position: it stands at the centre of the hierarchy that includes all creations. The soul has the ability to move up- and downwards, high and low; to move towards goodness and wisdom through its intellect, or towards pleasure and enjoyment through “the will” – that is, desire. Again, this demonstrates a dichotomous image of the human. On the one hand, the soul has a rational tendency, eager for learning, enquiry, and reason, that is: the mind, or contemplation – which it shares with God – and the power of discourse and deliberation. On the other hand, it has an irrational, physical tendency, guided by instinct and thus focusing on its body and senses – “the powers which we and brutes have in common with the plants”²²⁷, that is: nutrition, reproduction, and sensation. Because of its reason, the human essence is more perfect than the nature of any other species. Humans are capable of grasping what Ficino calls “the whole of being”²²⁸. They must indeed have some divine kinship, for “if intellect thus touches upon the highest form of perfection, it does so undoubtedly because of a certain highest affinity between that highest form and itself”²²⁹. Yet the mind remains

²²⁵ Ibid., 187.

²²⁶ Ibid., 201.

²²⁷ Ibid., 196.

²²⁸ Ibid., 200.

²²⁹ Ibid., 204.

vulnerable, for it can “be diverted from its speculative intention when it occupies itself excessively with the care and cultivation of the body”²³⁰. Both tendencies are natural, and inherent to the human essence:

“thus we see that by a natural instinct every soul strives in a continuous effort both to know all truths by the intellect and to enjoy all good things by the will”²³¹.

The paradox of this situation is that since the human reason is characterised by freedom of choice, the soul is unable to be satisfied: it will either let itself be misled by the senses, which means it will not succeed in attaining the highest good; or it will oppose the senses, in which case its ‘inferior’ parts will remain unfulfilled and render life ‘laborious’. The result is that

“reason is always uncertain, vacillating and distressed; and since it is nowhere at rest while thus affected, it certainly never gains possession of its desired end or permits sense to take possession of its proper end which is already present”²³².

In short, the human’s very nature disables her to attain happiness and rest – that is, infinite being, truth, and goodness.

Now here Prometheus enters the stage, and, as Raggio says, “for the first time after Plotinus, the myth is invested with the dignity of a philosophical symbol, mystical and deeply pessimistic”²³³. As said, according to Ficino, it is because of reason that the human is the most perfect of every creature on earth; however, due to that same reason, it is at the same time the *least* perfect being, because of the unattainable character of the final, absolute perfection she strives for. For Ficino, Prometheus’ unfortunate story nicely represents the human soul’s complicated quest for superior truth – indeed, moving itself towards some Platonic Intellectual Realm. With the help of Pallas, the Titan managed to get hold of divine fire, “that is, reason”, but

“[b]ecause of this very possession, on the highest peak of the mountain, that is, at the very height of contemplation, he is rightly judged most miserable of all, for he is made wretched by the continuous gnawing of the most ravenous of vultures, that is, by the torment of inquiry. This will be the case, until the time comes when he is carried back to that same place from which he received the fire, so that, just as he is now urged on to seek the whole by that one beam of celestial light, he will then be entirely filled with the whole light”²³⁴.

²³⁰ Ibid., 205.

²³¹ Ibid., 201.

²³² Ibid., 208.

²³³ Raggio, “The Myth of Prometheus,” 54. For Plotinus the Prometheus myth is an allegory of the enlightenment of the human soul.

²³⁴ Ficino, “Five Questions Concerning the Mind,” 208.

Like Boccaccio's eagle, in this dark comparison Prometheus' vulture stands for the agony that human reason brings along. After stealing a ray of the heavenly light of contemplation the human soul is torn apart by that very power, "the torment of enquiry". Aware of its intellectual capacities and its desire towards the end it was given, yet unable to reach its goal because of its dual nature, the soul encounters itself as if chained to a rock, incapable to move. Just as Prometheus, it will only be released when it returns to heaven, and finally that one flame of knowledge can expand so that it be "entirely filled with the whole light". In other words, the mystical state of perfection, wisdom and happiness to which the human's entire life is devoted can only be achieved in the *afterlife*, when the body – and thereby, the soul's inclination towards it – does not present its problems anymore. Human life is nothing but misery. Only death can relieve our harmful situation.

Unsurprisingly, Ficino also draws a biblical parallel:

"The more easily the first man was able to receive happiness when in the beginning he was entirely devoted to God, the more easily he has lost ease itself when thereafter he turned against God"²³⁵.

Prometheus and Adam both committed a sin of knowledge and had to endure the torture of its consequences – and so still today, the human has to "[o] sorrow! – live and suffer contrary to the order of nature"²³⁶. However, in the end, the human soul will be released from its agony, for as difficult as it is when the soul is still in physically trapped, as "easily it obtains it [its aim, happiness – TF] when it is either free from the body or in a temperate immortal celestial body"²³⁷. Eventually, we will enter some paradisiacal place, where "nothing evil can be imagined" and we will find

"eternal life and the brightest light of knowledge, rest without change, a positive condition free from privation, tranquil and secure possession of all good, and everywhere perfect joy"²³⁸.

Prometheus' more artistic and creative skills are not mentioned in the *Five Questions*. Yet Ficino does pay these abilities attention in his *Summary of Protagoras* – Plato's *Protagoras*, that is. He explains that "Prometheus, who represents the highest level of daemons, might equip men" and that "Prometheus [...], ruler of the rational soul, transferred the activity of art [...] to man"²³⁹. Of course, he also speaks of Epimetheus, "who represents the host of

²³⁵ Ibid., 209.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid., 211.

²³⁸ Ibid., 212.

²³⁹ Marsilio Ficino, *Gardens of Philosophy. Ficino on Plato*, trans. A Farndell (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2006), 68.

the lower daemons”, which “support corporeal and irrational nature”²⁴⁰. In this context, the dual nature of the human condition – his incorporeal and corporeal, rational and irrational nature – is thus embodied by the two brothers together, and the resulting image seems less pessimistic than the one in the *Five Questions*, because

“the more Epimetheus and the lower nature support the irrational in matters pertaining to the body, the more Prometheus and the higher providence seem to give counsel to men in matters pertaining to the soul. For when he bestowed the principle of art, he revealed the skilful maker of all that nature has granted to the beasts”²⁴¹.

Yet despite the fact that Prometheus embodies some Divine Providence, the text is not optimistic either. For, although Plato himself does not explicitly mention Prometheus’ punishment in this dialogue, Ficino adds later on that “through the very gift of reason [...] we lead a life on earth that is more wretched than that of the beasts, since it is more disturbed and more tearful”²⁴² – an addition that finds its origin rather in his own theories than in Plato’s.

In several other works Ficino respectfully draws attention to Prometheus and his intellectual and creative arts. He describes him “as the sun cherishing the rational spirit”²⁴³ in the *Philebus Commentary*; and together with Saturn and Jove as part of “the triple intelligence” in his commentary on Plato’s *Statesman*. The Titan appears once more, but remarkably this time against a completely different background. In 1489, Ficino writes a short letter – *The Pursuit of Long Life* – to his fellow philosopher and friend Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. He tells Pico he is reading a difficult – because poorly written – book called *On Delaying Old Age*, and explains that “this difficult text on delaying old age is delaying your visit to me”²⁴⁴. He seems to regret this impediment, but God is urging him to read the text before they meet. Although, he says, “my own concern, however, is not so much with delaying old age as with holding on to it”²⁴⁵. Interestingly, the letter continues in the following way:

“In the meantime, while we seem to be apart and to be dealing with different things, we are doing the same thing: we are imitating Prometheus. We are making man, you the soul and I the body. You are bringing the soul from the divine world; I am taking the body from the heavens. The universe has already been marvellously displayed by you

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Marsilio Ficino, *Marsilio Ficino: The Philebus Commentary*, trans. M. J. B. Allen (London: University of California Press, 1975), Book I, XXVI, 244.

²⁴⁴ Marsilio Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Language Department of the School of Economic Science, vol. VIII (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2009), Letter 15; 22. According to Ficino, the book was written by Arnaldo della Villanova, but according to the editors of Ficino’s letters it may actually have been Roger Bacon: Ibid., VIII:70, note 15.3..

²⁴⁵ Ficino, *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, VIII:Letter 15; 22.

in a sevenfold mirror. How beautifully, by our joint effort, we are now putting together our man, the observer of the universe!”²⁴⁶

Now, how should this analogy be understood? Just as Boccaccio, Ficino appears to conceptualise his and Pico’s writings – the “sevenfold mirror” refers to Pico’s recently published *Heptaplus*, a work on the seven days of creation – as a Promethean task. However, unlike Boccaccio, Ficino does not mention the Titan’s role as educator: it is all about his creative powers. Further, what is striking is that Ficino’s comparison is of a much less humble nature than Boccaccio’s. Together, by means of their texts, those we could call the new ‘literary Prometheuses’ would be capable of – or actually *are* already – creating and animating the human being. The task seems to be anything but unachievable: apparently, Ficino and Pico *do* possess the supernatural capacities necessary to accomplish the job that Boccaccio feared he himself could not.²⁴⁷

Yet the section may need to be interpreted in an entirely different way – it should probably not be understood in all earnestness. First of all, Ficino is known for his sense of humour. Second, the tone of the letter as a whole is quite ironic indeed – think of the linguistic play in the quote above, how the book “on delaying old age is delaying your visit to me”. Third, if one takes into account that Pico was quite handsome, whereas Ficino himself had a hunched back, an imaginary situation in which precisely the former would create the soul and the latter the body seems to be loaded with quite some self-mockery, and so all in all I would say that it is highly likely that the text should be taken with a grain of salt. Perhaps the analogy is even a wink to the poorly written book: through their work, Ficino and Pico may be retarding their own ‘old age’ as they are developing their essentially immortal soul, and ascending towards that “everlasting” state by means of Promethean contemplation and philosophy. Actually, from a more practical point of view, they are *literally* establishing some form of immortality through the material, time-resistant nature of their writings.

3.2.3. Pico della Mirandola

Apart from being a fellow philosopher and great friend of Ficino, Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) is another essential member of the Florentine Academy and just as enthusiastic about Plato as he was. Just as Ficino, Pico thinks Christianity and the ideas of Antiquity should be united, as should Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories. He believes that there are moral and religious truths to be

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ By calling the man they create “the observer of the universe”, Ficino emphasises humanity’s divine kinship, his heavenly inspired powers of perception and reflection: ‘observer’ is the translation of *speculator* – someone who looks in the mirror, a *speculum*. In other words, man has the ability to self-reflect, and does not only observe, but also *mirror* the world.

found within the wisdom of ancient thinkers and that allegorical exegesis can disclose the natural and theological revelations that lay underneath the Classics' mysteries. And like Ficino, Pico deifies the human. Yet despite the two philosophers' similarities, their theories do diverge significantly.²⁴⁸ The main difference lies in the way they characterise and value human life on earth. Whereas both of them have strong faith in the power of human knowledge, Pico's idea of the human and her capacities is far more positive than Ficino's. Pico is convinced that the felicity of the human is to be found on earth, and that here, already, she can exert her divine powers. In the words of Raymond Trousson, "[c]'est là ce qui sépare Ficin de Pic de la Mirandole": for Pico's human "la noblesse réside précisément dans la recherche terrestre de la vérité"²⁴⁹. What for his friend epitomises humanity's misery is precisely what provides his glory in Pico's theory: the *earthly* quest for truth.

In his oration *On the Dignity of Man* (1486) Pico discusses what he calls "the outstandingness of human nature"²⁵⁰. Even though the human reason or their 'central' position are admirable characteristics, in his eyes these are not so much what make humans so exceptional, but rather the freedom of the human will and, consequently, their immense amount of possibilities. To demonstrate this "outstandingness", he tells the story of Creation, which interestingly, has a strong Promethean flavour. When God built the world, Pico relates, he made heaven, animated the planets and created animals. "But, with the work finished, the Artisan desired that there be someone to reckon up the reason of such a big work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its greatness"²⁵¹, and thus God decided to create humanity. Yet when he came to the human's formation, there were no features or characteristics left: "[e]verything was filled up; all things had been laid out in the highest, the lowest, and the middle orders"²⁵². Therefore, God made the human without any specific nature. He tells Adam he has given him

"no fixed seat, no form of thy very own [...]. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgement [...], thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. [...] Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine"²⁵³.

²⁴⁸ Pico's methods also differ significantly from Ficino's. Apart from Greek and Latin philosophers he studies many other – at the time virtually unknown - writings of, for instance, Hebrew or Arabic origin, such as the Cabbalah, or works from Avicenna.

²⁴⁹ Raymond Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...* (Genève: Droz (Clichy-sous-Bois, impr. R. Cavillon), 1964), 102.

²⁵⁰ Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, trans. C. G. Wallis (New York : London: Macmillan Publishing Company ; Collier Macmillan, 1985), 3. Unfortunately the oration was never held since Pico was accused of heresy.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

The resemblance to Protagoras' version of the Promethean myth is extraordinary. For a start, there is the implicit reference to Epimetheus' premature finishing up of the abilities to be distributed; further, the sections of the above quote are strongly reminiscent of Protagoras' phrases describing the human race as "completely unequipped" or "naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed". A few paragraphs later, Pico refers explicitly to the myth and asks

"Who does not wonder at this chameleon which we are? It was not unfittingly that Asclepius the Athenian said that man was symbolised by Prometheus in the secret rites, by reason of our nature sloughing its skin and transforming itself"²⁵⁴.

Asclepius was right, Prometheus is a beautiful archetype for the human: we are endowed with a creative godlike capacity to decide for ourselves what to be, to mould ourselves into whatever we wish. Pico explains that the human is a 'microcosm' – we unite the different zones of the universe in our unique nature. That universe consists of three worlds: the intellectual or angelical world; the one of the heavenly bodies; and the one of the earthly, the physical bodies. As micro-embodiment of this cosmos, of the intellect, the divine, the material and the body, the human is given an innumerable amount of potencies on the basis of which she will shape herself. Pico thus brings the human significantly closer to God than Ficino. The essence of the comparison with Prometheus does not so much lie in creativity as a practical skill, but it is rather a unique ontological gift. Humans literally have the celestial type of power to apply their capabilities to themselves as such, as being, as *creature*. This is outstanding indeed, yet Pico points out this does not mean that humans are perfect. Importantly, their moral nature is an essential element of their self-creation and transformation. They can always "grow downward" and become a brutes, when they, for instance, choose to exclusively follow the physical realm. In Charles Glenn Wallis' words "God has granted to man every kind of seed. They grow as man cultivates them"²⁵⁵ – and so the human can grow whatever way.

3.2.4. Bovelles, Erasmus and Alciati

Slowly, Renaissance thinking places the ability to give form more and more in the hands of the individual human being. In *Le Livre du Sage* (1509), Charles de Bovelles (1479-1566) assigns Prometheus a similar role as his exemplary

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 5. Note that an alternative translation says that man "was symbolised by *Proteus* in the mysteries". (Pico della Mirandola, "On the Dignity of Man," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer and et. al. (London: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 225; my emphasis.) Proteus is a son of Poseidon, who, like Prometheus, has significant prophetic, intellectual and creative capabilities and is also a trickster figure. Which translation should be the right one is remains unclear. In fact, due to their similarities some authors conclude that the two gods were actually the same figure (see e.g. Jacob Bryant's *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-1776)).

²⁵⁵ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, 1985, xv.

Florentine predecessors did: the Titan represents the human who – contrary to any other living being – determines his own shape. Humans certainly have great potentials when it comes to wisdom and civilisation, but they are not born a sage, they have to *become* one. Each human has to face a specific process in order to evolve into a ‘true’ human – the *sapiens* – for “seul dependent le sage est *vraiment homme*”²⁵⁶. Moving through several stages of being – *essere*, *vivere*, *sentire*, *intelligere* (being, living, feeling, knowing) – they develop from a mere “natural human” into a wise, a *perfect* human. This sage “begs” for darkness in order to obtain light; for nature to obtain intelligence; for “the part” to obtain “the whole”; and for seed, so that it may be brought to full fruition:

“En ce domaine en effet, il imite le célèbre Prométhée [...]. De même, le sage abandonnant le monde sensible par la force de la contemplation et pénétrant dans le royaume du ciel, après y avoir recueilli au giron immortel de son esprit le feu très clair de la sagesse, le porte au monde d’en bas et cette flamme pure et très vivante vivifie, réchauffe et anime l’homme naturel et terrestre qui est en lui”²⁵⁷.

This wise human is embodied by that “famous Prometheus” who, “abandoning the sensible world”, managed to catch the fire of knowledge from the divine realm. When introducing the “very bright flame of wisdom” within his immortal soul, the sage – just as the ancient god – “enlivens, reheats, and animates” the mere, terrestrial creature he was before. He is artful, and *remoulds* (reproduit) the divine creation:

“Rien n’est le propre de l’homme mais tout ce qui est le propre des autres êtres lui appartient. Tout ce qui est la particularité de tel ou tel, de celui-ci et de celui-là, individuellement, appartient à l’unité de l’homme. Celui-ci en effet porte en lui la nature de toutes choses, voit tout, reproduit la nature entière”²⁵⁸.

Like Pico’s human, the *sapiens* has the freedom to form himself. He “carries within him the nature of all things” and gains perfection as he acquires knowledge, self-consciousness, self-mastery, and independence. The absence of a particular nature enables humanity to embrace the universe and to know, appropriate and eventually “reproduce nature in its entirety”. Moreover, it is a *circular* process, for as the human follows his path, and, guided by reason, arrives at his destination, “mother nature” is led back to herself. As he moves from matter to mind, from substance to subject, from mere existence – even via *angelic* knowledge – to true, divine, and universal “*connaissance de soi*”²⁵⁹, not only the human but *Being as such* becomes conscious of itself.

²⁵⁶ Charles de Bovelles, *Le Livre Du Sage*, trans. Pierre Magnard, De Pétrarque À Descartes 42 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J.Vrin, 1982), 87, my emphasis.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 105.

Just as his theoretical forebears, Bovelles tries to combine different ancient theories: the human development follows a rather Aristotelian scheme – from the potential to the actual – while its supreme end tastes of Platonic idealism. Both the process of becoming sage and the final state of wisdom are reminiscent of Ficino's dynamic system and his highest good. The Titan himself is very similar to Boccaccio's second Prometheus and his civilising capabilities. As in the end he finds a state of *unity* with himself – Being, the angels, God and the world – Bovelles' human is very reminiscent of Pico's image of the human as microcosm – Bovelles says that “[l]e sage est un homme qui mérite d'être célébré comme *un petit monde*”²⁶⁰. However, a significant difference between Bovelles' human and his predecessors', is that his one is much more of an individual, and so is her process: it is a journey of self-creation in which “le penseur solitaire”²⁶¹ has to lift her spirit up to this higher level *only* by means of her contemplation – and all by herself. Another, remarkable change in Bovelles' theory is that he secularises the essentially religious concepts of his forebears: the human's ascension is an exclusively human, self-achieved, and independent process that has no need of divine intervention or help. As Eugene Rice phrases it, “[t]he wise, divine, and Promethean man is the natural end and consummation of the natural man and his own creation”²⁶².

In the meantime other thinkers still make serious attempts to harmonise the – by now more independent, perhaps even secular – urge for wisdom with the Christian faith. The time's tremendous love for science had evoked a counter-reaction: it had nourished the opposite idea that the human should refrain entirely from boldly diving into the laws of nature and the divine secrets, and should leave the 'high' wisdom to God. Yet in his *Antibarbari* (ca. 1495), the humanist philosopher (theologian, priest, and teacher) Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (1466 – 1536) argues against this idea. Knowledge is good and needed, since it can release us from our ignorance and stupidity. It should not be forbidden at all, we should just take care that it be combined with 'charity' and modesty, so that we do not end up bragging about our achievements. And one should *work* for it:

“Wisdom is indeed to be sought from God, I agree, and sought in what way? [...] [D]o you think that what you need for the mind is to be received gratis? is wisdom to be poured in while one is asleep? [...] If it be right to bring in the fables of the poets at this point, *we ought to imitate Prometheus*, who when he wanted life for his clay image dared to seek it from the stars, but only when he had already applied every means available to human skill”²⁶³.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 99. My emphasis.

²⁶¹ Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 107.

²⁶² Eugene F. Rice, *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), 220.

²⁶³ Desiderius Erasmus, *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson, vol. 23 (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press, 1978), 116–117.

His remarks may have a strong ironic flavour, but between the lines Erasmus seriously reinforces us to follow, perhaps even *emulate* Prometheus' ambitions. We should not expect to suddenly wake up wise without having struck a blow, but just as the ancient god we must be willing to make an effort, cross boundaries and actively engage in learning in order to get rid of our ignorance.

The most famous *Emblemata* (1531) by Andrea Alciati (1492 – 1550), literally paints a rather different picture of the Titan than the two authors just discussed. As Raggio points out, “[a]s soon as we turn to more popular sources, Prometheus, the pious philosopher, is replaced by Prometheus, the arrogant astrologer”²⁶⁴. Alciati's emblem book includes a depiction of Prometheus (see Figure 4²⁶⁵), lying suffering and enchained against a rock, while his liver is engorged by the eagle. The motto above reads *quae supra nos, ea nihil ad nos* – “we should not be concerned with things above us” – ironically – a Socratic phrase.²⁶⁶ In the 1550 version of the book, the emblem is placed in the section ‘Astrologia’, together with, amongst other things, an emblem of Icarus. Being too bold, the boy Icarus flew too close to the sun. The wax of his wings melted, so that he fell into the sea and drowned. Apparently, both of them do indeed fit under the heading of “arrogant astrologers”. The verse accompanying Prometheus' picture says that the Titan, now that his liver is being torn apart by the bird,

“could well wish he had not made man. Hating moulders of clay, he curses the torch lit from the stolen fire. – The hearts of the learned are gnawed by various cares, the learned who strive to know the vicissitudes of heaven and the gods”²⁶⁷.

Interestingly, the text strongly reminds us of the earlier references to the torture of knowledge. Boccaccio's and Ficino's Titans are also gnawed by the troubling attempt to achieve divine wisdom. Yet contrary to these two Alciati strongly condemns the strivings for knowledge. It is *hubris*. The arrogant “learned” are not only suffering, let alone to be pitied. The moral lesson to be learned from the emblems is that figures as Prometheus and Icarus are *wrong*, and probably even deserve their penalties. For pride should be punished and what is above us should be left untouched.

²⁶⁴ Raggio, “The Myth of Prometheus,” 55.

²⁶⁵ Illustration from Carlo Ginzburg, “High and Low: The Theme of Forbidden Knowledge in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Past & Present*, no. 73 (November 1, 1976): fig. 2.

²⁶⁶ Interestingly, this sentence is also quoted by Erasmus. However, the latter's citation should be understood in a completely different context, namely aiming at the – according to him, silly – theological speculations of Catholics and Protestants.

²⁶⁷ Andrea Alciati, *Emblemata, Lyons 1550*, trans. Betty I. Knott (Aldershot, Hants: Scolar Press, 1996), 112. The commentary under Icarus' image sends out a message along the same lines: “Let the astrologer beware of prediction. Headlong will the imposter fall, as he flies beyond the stars” (*Ibid.*, 113.).

Figure 4.

EMBLEMA CVI.
Quæ supra nos, nihil ad nos.



CAUCASIA æternum pendens in rupe Prometheus
Diripitur sacri præpetis vngue iecur.
Et nollet fecisse hominem figulosq, perosus
Accensam raptò damnat ab igne facem.
Roduntur varijs prudentum pectora curis,
Qui cœli affectant scire, deùmq, vices.

2. Andrea Alciati, *Emblemata* (Frankfurt a. Main, 1567), page 106

3.3. From Renaissance to the Scientific Revolution

What Raggio calls “more popular sources”, such as the emblems, thus put the human urge for divine wisdom in a pejorative context – and with that, the Promethean myth. However, simultaneously a solid belief in human powers – and particularly in the *value* (or perhaps even necessity) of the execution of these powers – does remain very much alive within the time’s theoretical or philosophical context.

3.3.1. Bacon

A famous philosopher – as well as scientist, statesman, and jurist – who, on the eve of the Enlightenment, cultivated the Renaissance focus on humankind’s intellectual and scientific capacities, is Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626). He further developed the humanist views into what many consider to be the basis of modern thinking. The difference and modernity of his ideas lie in his way of placing the already vividly present ideals of human freedom, rationality and progress within a new, pragmatic and experimental paradigm, which – as phrased by Charles Whitney – sees “knowledge as power over nature, knowledge for the benefit and use of life”²⁶⁸. In the *Instauratio Magna* (1620), Bacon calls for a radical regeneration, an ‘instauration’ of humanity, which should lead to major scientific innovations, discoveries, transformation and progress – for that is essentially what human existence is all about. His call for knowledge-as-power is almost completely secularised, as, instead of a search for divine wisdom, it has become a quest for practical and most of all *useful* knowledge. In the *Novum Organum* (1620) he formulates his idea of a proper scientific method:

“[m]y course and method [...], is this – not to extract works from works or experiments from experiments [...], but from works and experiments to extract causes and axioms, and again from those causes and axioms new works and experiments, as a legitimate interpreter of nature”²⁶⁹.

He continuously emphasises his independence from the past and demands a radical break with tradition. The routines in discourse and the modes of production in arts and sciences limit our possibilities, which is why we need to emancipate ourselves from those timeworn systems.

However, in order to define and articulate his concepts of reform, instauration, and innovation, at the same time it is obvious that Bacon cannot but build on classical, religious, and traditional ideas and significances. One of

²⁶⁸ Charles Whitney, *Francis Bacon and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 1.

²⁶⁹ Francis Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. William Rawley, vol. IV (London: Longman, 1858), CXVII, p. 104.

Bacon's more literary works, *De Sapientia Veterum (Wisdom of the Ancients, 1619)*, demonstrates this paradoxical situation quite well. The philosopher analyses a set of classical myths one by one, thereby using them to give shape to his own thoughts. Interestingly, Chapter XXVI, 'Prometheus, or the State of Man' extensively treats the story of the Titan. According to Bacon, the story does not only prove humans' rational capabilities, but also their position at the centre of the world, and their mastery over nature. He starts by relating that according to the ancients, Prometheus created the human of clay "mixed with certain parcels taken from diverse animals"²⁷⁰. In order to be not only its creator, but also its "propagator", he stole fire from heaven and gave it to the new race. Presenting a less familiar version of the myth, Bacon adds that Prometheus' efforts were *not* appreciated by humankind. On the contrary: the humans were ungrateful and accused him to Jupiter. The father of the gods was very pleased with their accusation, and thus did not only allow them the use of fire, but also granted them "perpetual youth"²⁷¹. Yet foolish humankind placed this fabulous present on the back of a silly donkey. The animal was very thirsty and turned to a fountain. He accepted the condition of the serpent which guarded the fountain, that he may drink only if the latter would receive the burden on the donkey's back. This way, humanity's eternal youth was lost to serpents.

In the meantime, Prometheus reconciled with the humans. However, he was still quite angry at Jupiter and thus prepared him a misleading portion of what seemed to be ox meat, but consisted of nothing but bones.²⁷² Having discovered the trick, Jupiter ordered the Olympian gods to create Pandora and her box full of misery. Thanks to his foresight, Prometheus refused to accept the 'gift'. Unfortunately his brother Epimetheus did not foresee the trouble, released the box's miseries when opening it and only managed to retain hope. Jupiter charged Prometheus for his various crimes – even accused him of attempting to rape Minerva – and chained him to the Caucasus mountain, so that he may be perpetually tortured by the eagle. Yet, says Bacon, it is said that he was liberated by Herakles, who sailed the ocean in a cup that was given to him by the sun.

Finally, the philosopher tells about the real-life torch games that were held in honour of the Titan. Lighted torches were passed on from one racing participant to the other: "whoso suffered to go out yielded the place and victory

²⁷⁰ Francis Bacon, *The Wisdom of the Ancients & New Atlantis*, Cassell's National Library (London: Cassell, 1889), 97.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Later, Bacon explains that the parable about the sacrificial trick concerns religion. He thinks that the two sacrifices – one containing appetising fat and meat, the other mere bones – represent a truly religious man and a hypocritical one. The latter and his sacrifice probably refer to the contemporary erosion of religion, to "those external and vain rites and empty ceremonies by which men do oppress and fill up the sincere worship of God, things composed rather for ostentation, than any way conducing to true piety" (Ibid., 106.). He supports his argument with a quote from Isaiah (LVIII.5), who opposes man's choice of sacrifice.

to those that followed [...], so that whosoever came first to the mark with his torch burning got the price"²⁷³.

After his precise descriptions of the myth's episodes, in the rest of the chapter Bacon provides a pervasive, allegorical analysis of each passage, for "[t]his fable demonstrates and presseth many true and grave speculations"²⁷⁴. The philosopher starts by stating that Prometheus obviously represents Providence. Out of the entirety of nature, the ancients selected only the creation of the human as the particular work of Providence. The reason why they did, Bacon explains, is that the human has a mind and comprehension. And as it is unthinkable that this rationality and understanding should originate in an irrational basis, one must assume as well that these be designed and implanted in the human mind by a higher Providence. Yet humanity's rational mind is not the only reason why the ancients picked out our species as the providential location, for

"man is, as it were, the centre of the world, in respect of final causes, so that if man were not in nature, all things would seem to stray and wander without purpose, and like scattered branches, as they say, without inclination to their end. For all things attend on man, and he makes use of and gathers fruit from all creatures; [...] all things seem to work, not for themselves, but for man"²⁷⁵.

The fact that when the human being – that creature around which the whole world is built – was created, the clay was mixed with particles from many different animals, was not a trivial detail either. For the human is indeed a "microcosm" – a term which reminds us of Pico and Bovelles. It is obvious, says Bacon, that in contrast other creatures' figures "the body of man [...] is endued and furnished with most admirable virtues and faculties"²⁷⁶. Without explicitly mentioning the ancient author, Bacon employs Platonic terms when describing the human as "naked" and "unarmed" and continues explaining that Prometheus stole fire in order to make up for these shortcomings. Therefore,

"if the soul be the form of forms, [...] fire deserves well to be called the succour of succours [...], which infinite ways affords aid and assistance to all labours and mechanical arts, and to the sciences themselves"²⁷⁷.

The fact that the Titan's theft was brought about by means of a set of twigs is also significant: as twigs are used for striking and blowing, they symbolise the way the fire is generated, namely by violently colliding objects. It thereby emphasises the power of fire to set things in motion, stealing, as it were, its flames from the sun.

²⁷³ Ibid., 99.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 100.

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 101.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 102.

The episode which relates about the ingratitude of humankind for Prometheus' gifts may seem rather peculiar, but Bacon explains it is not: its allegorical meaning is "that men's outcries upon the defects of nature and art proceed from an excellent disposition of the mind and turn to their good"²⁷⁸. Those who infinitely praise themselves and their wisdom appear to equalise their own nature and capacities with divine ones, thereby showing little esteem for God and his perfection. Moreover, having contented themselves with their own powers and knowledge, they cease exploring. Therefore, those who complain against nature "are indeed of more true and moderate judgements; for they are ever in action, seeking always to find out new inventions"²⁷⁹. We should acknowledge how little we know, and how truth and falsehood are intermingled. We should be grateful to the gods for our imperfections, as these will enable us to acquire new blessings and greater goods.

With respect to the gift of perpetual youth, according to Bacon its moral is that "the divine bounty is not wanting unto man in the obtaining of such gifts, but men are wanting to themselves"²⁸⁰. It was *humankind* who placed this valuable gift on a donkey's back – a stupid, slow-paced creature which, says Bacon, symbolises experience. Reason and experience have not yet been properly united – philosophical abstractions and ponderous practice remain separate. Yet, says Bacon, we may nevertheless be hopeful. For he is convinced that if humans keep on following the empirical path, guided by methodology, and without letting themselves be distracted by certain avaricious thirsts, they "may prove no unfit porter to bear this new addition of divine munificence"²⁸¹.

Next, the myth attends to the human condition and major aspects of his life, personified by the tale's main characters. For a start, there is the figure of Pandora, who embodies

"pleasure and voluptuousness, which (when the civil life is pampered with too much art and culture and superfluity) is engendered, as it were, by the efficacy of fire [...]. From this do infinite miseries, together with too late repentance proceed, and overflow the minds, bodies, and fortunes of men"²⁸².

Humans should not spoil themselves with too much pleasure, for not only individual trouble but fighting, wars and despotism find their source in there. Further, the brothers Epimetheus and Prometheus represent two types of human. The first stands for the un-foreseeing, careless one, who merely focuses on the present and its diversions and therefore ends up living his life "almost in perpetual affliction"²⁸³, but nevertheless does entertain himself. Those of the second type are cautious, and do think further ahead. This way,

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 102–3.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 103.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., 104.

²⁸¹ Ibid., 105.

²⁸² Ibid., 107.

²⁸³ Ibid., 108.

they manage to evade many miseries, yet, due to their prudence, simultaneously they also “deprive themselves and defraud their genius of many lawful pleasures and diverse recreations”²⁸⁴. As many before him, Bacon relates how rational, enquiring humans torture themselves with worries, concerns, and anxieties.

“For, being chained to the pillar of necessity, they are afflicted with innumerable cogitations [...], and those griping, and, as it were, gnawing and devouring the liver”²⁸⁵.

Consequently, few people of either condition succeed in both deriving the benefits of Providence and avoiding misery. They are, indeed, unable to achieve that aim without the help of Herakles, “that is, fortitude and constancy of mind, which is prepared for every event, and armed in all fortunes, foreseeing without fear, enjoying without loathing, and suffering without impatience”²⁸⁶. Even Prometheus did not possess this virtue – for, says Bacon, no being can handle such agony by its own nature. Therefore, he needed the help of Herakles, the message being that knowledge, psychological fortitude and courage will teach us how to deal with our flaws and vulnerabilities.

Finally, Bacon explains the significance of the torch races. The lighted flares represent practical science and art, the message being that “the perfection of sciences is to be expected from succession, not from the nimbleness and promptness of only one author”²⁸⁷. Just as the torches used to be passed from one person to another, those speeding today with the fire of knowledge should also make sure that they transfer their wisdom,

“seeing it may be as well extinguished in running too fast as by going too slow. [...] It were therefore to be wished that these games in honour of Prometheus or human nature were again restored, and that matters should receive success by combat and emulation, and not hang upon any one man’s sparkling and shaking torch”²⁸⁸.

The father of modernity aimed at a radical break with the past. Of course there are still obvious connections with earlier theories – sometimes Renaissance, sometimes mediaeval ideas – but simultaneously, he does indeed also make some radical and rather new statements. For a start, whereas Bacon, just as Ficino, Pico, and Bovelles, also places the human at the world’s centre, he does this in a much more optimistic framework than the former theorists. Unlike in Ficino’s and Pico’s work, the possibility of the human growing downward to become a “brute” is not mentioned. We do have imperfections, but from there we proceed, we do not fall off – as long as we make an effort, of course.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Ibid., 110.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., 110–11.

Further, just as Pico, Bacon states that the universe is there to be appreciated by humans – it would be senseless without them. Yet it is remarkable that Bacon's description of this situation pictures a much less divine setting and shows much less references to God than those of his predecessors. Although he explicitly claims that our mind must have been provided by the Lord, he does not extensively relate – as Pico did – how humankind was created according to the Lord's wishes, so that there be someone to admire his work. These may have been God's desires, but apparently that aspect is not that important right here, right now. Moreover, as Bacon confesses at the end, he does rather not interpret the myth by drawing analogies with Christian themes. Of course, that does not mean that we should not show deep respect for the Lord; and we should take care not to violate divine wisdom. Yet the main point in his argument is that the world is built around us humans – we are unique. We find ourselves here on earth, and accordingly, the wisdom we strive for is not so much divine, but it is rather the practical, empirical and empowering knowledge that we should acquire, pass on and take to our advantage.

Our uniqueness does, nevertheless, not imply that we do not have our shortcomings: we are “naked” and “unarmed”. Therefore, we should follow the myth's advice to arm ourselves with fire – not so much a symbol of the Ultimate Truth or Supreme Wisdom, but rather of the mechanical and scientific instrument. Fire is there to help us to make progress in the empirical sciences, technologies and arts. Similarly, we should pay attention to the tale's recommendation to be grateful for our imperfections, as those will only stimulate us to continue our analyses and persevere in our investigations. Despite his emphasis on the human's central position, Bacon thus also extensively treats human imperfections. These are not only the above ones related to knowledge or rationality, but also flaws such as hypocrisy, lack of piety or foresight, excessive self-pampering or, on the contrary, superfluous – and again, *gnawing* – worrying. Yet the philosopher maintains his faith in humanity's capacities: as long as we recognise and appreciate our imperfections and we believe in the possibility to improve our frail nature through practical knowledge, Heraklean courage and constancy of mind, we should be able to make progress. Our flaws are, in the end, even preconditions for this advancement, the crucial requirement being that we are willing to share and transfer our knowledge – to literally *advance* the flames of our learnings.

Bacon thus holds particularly new ideas of knowledge and science, of the human and her destiny, and of the relation between the two fields. Science has become something practical, empirical, and material, and we should not spend too much time on art and culture. Moreover, wisdom is acquired in a social, collaborative setting, rather than by a solitary sage such as envisioned by Bovelles. In accordance with that, Prometheus has thus ceased being the Renaissance figure and become a pragmatic researcher who engages in systematic examination. Knowledge is supposed to be based upon a proper combination of reason and experience – even if of an inferior, donkey-like

nature, for “rightly is truth called the daughter of time, not of authority”²⁸⁹. There is always room for innovation and improvement – if only we persevere in our research and learn from our experience, Bacon believes even perpetual youth is among our possibilities. It should be useful and grant humanity power over nature, rather than resulting in divine abstractions:

“I do not trouble myself with any such speculative and withal unprofitable matters. My purpose, on the contrary, is to try whether I cannot in very fact lay more firmly the foundations and extend more widely the limits of the power and greatness of man”²⁹⁰.

What the human potential might lead to and what form science could take when exercised the way he conceptualised it, becomes clear in Bacon’s utopian story *New Atlantis* (1627).²⁹¹ The novel tells the tale of the crew of a European ship that, lost in the South Sea and on the verge of perishing, discovers just in time an unknown island and sails towards its fair harbour. The island and its city Bensalem are very pretty and highly developed, and its people are incredibly friendly, generous and pious – they are Christian as well. The sailors are overwhelmed by the miraculous place and its enlightened inhabitants:

“It seemed to us, that we had before us a picture of our salvation in Heaven; for we that were a while since in the jaws of death, were now brought into a place, where we found nothing but consolations”²⁹².

Several days in a row a priest visits the crew and tells them how through regular and pervasive navigation the island’s people aim to get to know other countries, and there acquire knowledge “especially of the sciences, arts, manufactures, and inventions”²⁹³. After a week, the sailors are taken to a fascinating place called Salomon’s House. They are led from room to room, from one incredible instrument, practice and experimentation to another. Here, the island’s people produce “new artificial metals”, create new plants and develop ways to achieve the “prolongation of life”²⁹⁴. They bring new animals into being, “whereof some are advanced (in effect) to be perfect creatures”²⁹⁵. Extremely nourishing food and drinks are produced, some of it making “the very flesh of men’s bodies sensibly more hard and tough and their strength far greater than otherwise it would be”²⁹⁶. Even some kind of robot is fashioned: “We imitate also motions of

²⁸⁹ Bacon, *The Works of Francis Bacon*, IV:LXXXIV, p. 82.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, IV:CXVI, p. 104.

²⁹¹ The book was actually written around 1623, published posthumously – and unfortunately incomplete – in 1627.

²⁹² Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis* (London: Oxford University Press, H. Milford, 1906), 244.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 268.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 269.

living creatures, by images, of men, beasts, birds, fishes, and serpents”²⁹⁷. The Father of the House explains to them that the “end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible”²⁹⁸. Further, with respect to their investigations and experiments, it is essential to “cast about how to draw out of them things of use and practise for man’s life”²⁹⁹. And obviously, they are very successful.

The civilisation depicted in the novel shows the perfect society as Bacon visualises it: one based upon, or built around science – Salomon’s House is literally called “the lanthorn of this kingdom”³⁰⁰. The form of science that is practised at this place has the empirical and experiential characteristics whose importance Bacon emphasises in his other works. Furthermore, they say they study the “creatures of God”³⁰¹, but no religious ceremony is incorporated. Moreover, their type of wisdom is passed on as if it were a Promethean torch. Bensalem’s people travel across the world to pick up knowledge from other cultures, bring it back home and cultivate it further. Moreover, it all takes place in a social environment, although independent from the State. In short, the people’s main objective is to conquer nature, and to effect “all things possible”, thereby making sure that the inventions and creations can be brought to benefit. They aim for a type of utility that even includes the ascension of the human race *as such*, the “prolongation of life”, or the creation of an artificial doppelgänger. In short, the utopian picture sketched in *New Atlantis* delineates nothing but the various forms of celestial heights that humanity may reach if science is performed as envisioned by Bacon.

3.3.2. Hobbes

After Bacon, for more than a century, the interest in the myth of Prometheus diminishes noticeably. It appears much less frequently, and if it does, originality in the interpretations is virtually absent. The euhemerist tradition is revived and many authors identify mythological figures with biblical ones. The Dutch theologian Gerardus Vossius (1577-1649), for example, explains that the one who the Greeks thought to be Prometheus had actually been Noah; others compare the Titan to Moses, and Pandora’s box represents the Sin of Knowledge (Robert Burton; 1577-1640). What according to Trousson is “le seule utilisation intéressante du mythe”³⁰² of the times, is Thomas Hobbes’ (1588 – 1679) use of it. Disgusted by the Puritans’ revolt against the monarchy in the century’s Civil War period in England, the philosopher’s objective is to

²⁹⁷ Ibid., 272.

²⁹⁸ Ibid., 265.

²⁹⁹ Ibid., 273.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 255.

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 159.

develop a theory that will re-establish the sovereign's authority. In *De Cive* (1642), he explains that only those few individuals who are most able should govern – the Monarchs, that is – “and the People, least of all”³⁰³.

“It seems the ancients, who made the fable of Prometheus, pointed at this. They say that Prometheus, having stolen fire from the sun, formed a man out of clay, and for this deed he was tortured by Jupiter with a perpetual gnawing at his liver. Which is, that by human invention, which is signified by Prometheus, laws and justice were by imitation taken from monarchy; by virtue thereof, as by fire removed from its orb, the multitude, as the dirt and dregs of men, was as it were quickened and formed into a civil person; which is termed aristocracy or democracy”³⁰⁴.

Prometheus thus symbolises “human invention”: a natural human capability, a desire to create. Yet this urge is neither noble nor heroic, but proud and defiant. Hobbes' presentation of the story centres on the Titan's challenge of the Olympian authority. It underlines the terrible actions to which the human desire to invent may lead: the recalcitrant “imitation” of the lawful powers of the sovereign. In his times, Hobbes bears witness of this Promethean urge resulting in the revolt of the Puritans, who are also opposing God's will while striving for the “dirt” of the empowered mass. Remarkably, he refrains from reading the myth from Prometheus' perspective, and pay attention to the possibly legitimate character of his activities and the illegitimate actions of the gods. As George Shulman puts it: “[b]y making Jupiter the completely justified embodiment of human interests and public good, Hobbes makes Prometheus's crime gratuitous, infantile, and self-destructive”³⁰⁵. The Titan personifies rebellion against established authority, and thereby also against God – something strongly rejected by the philosopher.

A decade later, Hobbes' *Leviathan* appears (1651). In the meantime, the Parliamentary victory has taken place and the philosopher has to adapt his political theory. Rather than trying to inhibit a revolt against a settled Monarch he himself aims to, one could say, ‘invent’ something: namely, a proper solution to the disorganisation of what he considers to be any society's natural, pre-political basis. That is, a remedy to the chaotic and most of all, anxious state people find themselves in when there is no form of order whatsoever – not yet. Hobbes' theory is not any more about defending the settled Monarch (against the Puritans), but creating a form of government from scratch, which will prevent future rebellion. Accordingly, he changes his view of Prometheus as well:

“it is impossible for a man, who continually endeavoreth to secure himself against the evill he feares, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in a perpetuall solicitude of the time to come; So that every man, especially those that are over provident, are in an

³⁰³ Thomas Hobbes, *De Cive* (Whitefish (Montana): Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 93.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁰⁵ George Shulman, “Hobbes, Puritans, and Promethean Politics,” *Political Theory* 16, no. 3 (August 1988): 434.

estate like to that of *Prometheus*. For as *Prometheus*, (which interpreted, is, *The prudent man*,) was bound to the hill Caucasus, a place of large prospect, where, an Eagle feeding on his liver, devoured in the day, as much as was repayed in the night: So that man, which looks too far before him, in the care of future time, hath his heart all the day long, gnawed on by feare of death, poverty, or other calamity; and has not repose, nor pause of his anxiety, but in sleep³⁰⁶.

Instead of the insurgent against an established authority, the Titan has come to represent the anxious and unstable and – most importantly – *ontological* condition of the human before the political needs of sovereign order have been fulfilled. Ignorant of what causes the good and bad happenings of his life, the human finds himself in a state of “perpetuall solicitude”. This is how, says Hobbes, religions arise: as humanity is in need of explanations, clarifications and order. Trying to foresee the future, humans are overtaken by angst and distress, due to the lack of rules and standards, to the absence of a Jupiter. Their worries are gnawing on them as the Eagle on Prometheus’ organ – an allegorical interpretation made many times before. Interestingly, Hobbes removes the earlier pejorative flavour of the Titan and his desire. Now he is characterised as “The prudent man” and the natural urge to invent seems to be appreciated or even necessary. Only, of course, as long as it results in the appropriate kind of solution to this natural state of agony: the construction of a proper government, of a positive Leviathan authority – and thus its corresponding, civilised people. As finding this solution is Hobbes’ very goal, according to Shulman

“Hobbes himself, as the teacher of a new science tacitly has replaced the rebellious Prometheus. For now it is Hobbes who steals fire from the gods on behalf of mankind, whom his science will teach to invent precisely the “civil person” or “artificial man” whose creation he once condemned as pride³⁰⁷.

Contrary to all the century’s biblical analogies and corrections of the myth, in the philosopher’s *Leviathan* interpretation Prometheus has again come to represent the human – perhaps thus even Hobbes himself. Yet the Titan is not the Renaissance hero of rationality and wisdom, but a practical figure. Not so much practical in the Baconian sense of an empirical scientist, an interpretation which is still mostly knowledge-centred, but in a new, namely *socio-political* sense. Hobbes has placed the myth within the context of society – a reading we did not encounter before. Further, a noteworthy aspect is that religion no longer plays a role in the *Leviathan* – whereas in *De Cive* it still does. The necessary authority will be self-made – no need for God when it comes to this. The human is capable of creating it independently. Hobbes makes the radically new choice to

³⁰⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 76; Hobbes’ emphasis.

³⁰⁷ Shulman, “Hobbes, Puritans, and Promethean Politics,” 429.

separate religion and politics, the Church and the State – for the latter requests an exclusively human, that is, terrestrial ground: a base consisting of Promethean creation.

3.4. The Enlightenment

Although one might expect that in the Enlightenment age one would grab hold of and elevate the god of fire as symbol of human reason, knowledge, and progress, what happens is the reverse. In philosophy, barely anyone refers to the Titan, which was probably due to the fact that mythology as such was anything but in fashion. According to Trousson “les Lumières se contentent de froids symboles ou même délaissent toute valeur symbolique; le génie du siècle est trop critique et trop rationnel pour s’attacher à Prométhée”³⁰⁸. When the myth was mentioned, it was often in theatrical plays, satires or comedies, and the focus was usually rather on Pandora and her box than Prometheus. If Prometheus does play a more important role, he is – just as Pandora – symbol of the community’s downturn. He embodies the bad consequences the times’ so-called ‘progress’ and ‘rationalisation’ have: the human detaches himself from God, and is drawn from his moral duties by his curiosities, overconfidence, and so-called ‘achievements’.

3.4.1. Rousseau

The famous philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778) accuses humans of having created their own state of misery by developing contemporary society. Yet he does not attribute this to the humans’ disengagement from God, but to their disengagement from *themselves* as human beings. Rousseau speaks of an historical, rather than a religious downfall, for by nature, the human is innocent, good and happy. However, in his *Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts* (1750), he argues that the present civilisation has destroyed that natural purity. The deceiving appearances of today’s alleged progress would make a foreigner be completely misled about the citizens’ morals. For in fact, “our souls have become corrupted in proportion as our Sciences and our Arts have advanced toward perfection”³⁰⁹. Society’s decadence is thus brought about by science and art: “Astronomy was born of superstition; Eloquence of ambition, hatred, flattery, lying; Geometry of greed; Physics of a vain curiosity; all of them, even Ethics, of human pride”³¹⁰.

Interestingly, the frontispiece of the *Discourse* depicts Prometheus, who with the fire of his torch animates the immaculate human he seems to have just

³⁰⁸ Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 203.

³⁰⁹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 9.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

created. In the human's shadows stands a satyr, reaching for the fire. Rousseau explains that

"It is easy to see the allegory [...]. "The satyr," says an ancient fable, "wanted to kiss and embrace fire the first time he saw it but Prometheus cried out to him: 'Satyr, you will weep the loss of the beard on your chin, for it burns when you touch it.'" This is the subject of the frontispiece"³¹¹.

Later, he clarifies the meaning of the myth even further, saying that

"Prometheus's torch is the torch of the Sciences made to quicken great geniuses; that the Satyr who, seeing fire for the first time, runs toward it, and wants to embrace it, represents the vulgar who, seduced by the brilliance of Letters, indiscreetly give themselves over to study; that the Prometheus who cries out and warns them of the danger is the Citizen of Geneva"³¹².

The Titan remains a symbol of knowledge, science, and creativity, but again, as with the religious critics, his fire is placed in a very bad light. The splendour of wisdom's illumination is betraying and seduced by the apparent power and control it should produce, the human will burn herself. As the one who founded science, Prometheus is an enemy of the serenity of the ignorant, innocent and virtuous primitive human.³¹³ And rather than some supernatural evil, the Titan personifies the evil the human does to herself, and for which she herself – her pride, vanity, and craving for luxury – is entirely responsible. There will be no help from above. The only positive thing about that responsibility is that salvation, too, is in human hands. Consequently, Rousseau pleads for and believes in a return to humankind's original goodness. Not through some – unfortunately impossible – historical rebound, but by developing a life analogous to that natural, uncivilised, and happy life we used to lead.

3.4.2. Kant

One of the very few times the Titan is mentioned in a positive context, is when Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) compliments Benjamin Franklin, who had recently been experimenting with electricity and calls him the 'modern Prometheus'. Here, the Titan *does* seem to represent the paradigmatic modern human, who combines scientific rationality with creativity: the independent human who aspires to take control over nature, history and the future; who has the courage

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid., 90.

³¹³ Many call Rousseau's primitive man his 'noble savage', but I do not use that phrase since it does not appear anywhere in his work.

to take the freedom to try and overcome his limits, striving to literally “emerge from his self-incurred immaturity”³¹⁴.

3.5. The Romantic Era

Whereas for the most part the Enlightenment’s spokesmen thus did not quite worship Prometheus, in the Romantic era the Titan will again inspire many artists. The fact that Aeschylus’ work is translated into English partly explains his popularity. And essential is the political character of the *Prometheus Bound*: disappointed by the sad results of the French Revolution, the Romantics need other icons than the Enlightenment ones to represent their ideas and feelings, and Prometheus’ creative and rebellious qualities make him very suitable.

3.5.1. Goethe

First, however, in the last decades of the 18th century the *Sturm und Drang* movement comes up, which in response to the time’s extreme fixation on rationality has its focus on entirely different themes: emotion, creativity, and independence. A crucial figure in this proto-Romantic period is Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832). The illustrious and very successful author of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) has the figure of Prometheus appear regularly in his work: he composed a play dedicated to him, a poem, an epic on *Pandora* (1807-1808), and more. Even *Faust* (1808) might be seen as presenting a Promethean theme: the protagonist of this story is willing to sell his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge.

Around 1773, Goethe writes a drama called *Prometheus*, which is, however, never finished and only published in 1830. In the play, Prometheus has audacious discussions with Mercury and makes tough statements in conversations with others, thereby each time emphasising his disdain for Jupiter and his independence from him. He dismisses all deities’ powers and celebrates his own. The Olympians are neither eternal nor almighty and do not deserve any more respect or reverence than anyone else – on the contrary. Despite the fact that in this story it is *Jupiter* who is his father, Prometheus states full of determination that he does not belong to them: “Göttern? Ich bin kein Gott/Und bilde mir so viel ein als einer”³¹⁵. Instead, he associates with humans, whom he sculpted all by himself, through hard and “daily work”.³¹⁶ He

³¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, “Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment,” in *Kant: Selections*, ed. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1988), 462.

³¹⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Prometheus, Dramatisches Fragment,” in *Goethe’s Poetische Und Prosaische Werke in Zwei Bänden*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer and Johann Peter Eckermann, vol. I (Stuttgart und Tübingen: J. G. Cotta, 1845), 482.

³¹⁶ Note that it is thanks to Minerva that Prometheus’ yet inert statues are animated. But one may wonder whether he and the goddess are not one and the same. For he says “[u]nd du bist meinem Geist” (Ibid., 483.) and states that his soul’s words are the same as hers, while she makes similar claims.

also teaches them how to build houses, to tend their flock and to defend their interests. He even teaches Pandora – here, his “daughter” – about fundamental and emotional issues, such as love and death. Jupiter shrugs his shoulders about Prometheus’ attitude and actions, for he is still convinced of his own supremacy. His son, however, once again denies his father’s power and declares that the Earth is *his* instead. Further, Prometheus challenges the allegedly exclusive infinity of the Olympians and exclaims “[w]ir alle sind ewig!”³¹⁷. He explains that he does not remember his birth, nor can he foresee his end and therefore his existence is eternal – and so is humankind’s.

The play covers many issues and its protagonist plays many parts, amongst which are those of educator and founder of civilisation. But the most important of his personifications are those of creativity and rebellion. These are the main themes that are found as well – in a finalised and more compact form – in the poem that Goethe writes a year later: *Prometheus* (1774), a true ode. Instead of the rational, society-corrupting, or blasphemous characteristics ascribed to the Titan in the Enlightenment, the hymn glorifies his artistic and revolutionary spirit. It is a bold speech, in which Prometheus, again, heavily assails the Olympian King. The ode is framed as a dialogue, yet his interlocutor’s part is absent. Prometheus starts off by telling Zeus³¹⁸ to “cover his heavens” (“Bedecke dein Himmel”) and leave *his* Earth (“meine Erde”) to him – that is, the world he shares with humanity, a fundamentally different realm than the divine one. Once more, Prometheus repudiates his father’s might, for he did not have any hand in what the hero achieved, created or experienced. He does not owe Zeus anything – who protected him from the Titans, he asks emotionally, from death or slavery?

“Ich dich ehren? Wofür?
Hast du die Schmerzen gelindert
Je des Beladenen?
Hast du die Thränen gestillet
Je des Geängsteten?
Hat nicht mich zum Manne geschmiedet
Die allmächtige Zeit
Und das ewige Schicksal,
Meine Herrn und deine?”³¹⁹

Whatever Prometheus accomplished, he accomplished all by himself. He is thrown upon his own resources, but determined in his resistance: what on earth – literally on *Earth* – should he honour Zeus for? Nor does humankind have any reason to worship him; the uncaring ‘Father’ never made the least effort to

³¹⁷ Ibid.

³¹⁸ This time, Prometheus thus addresses the god by his Greek name.

³¹⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, “Prometheus, Gedichte,” in *Goethe’s Poetische Und Prosaische Werke in Zwei Bänden*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Riemer and Johann Peter Eckermann, vol. I (Stuttgart und Tübingen: J. G. Cotta, 1845), 57.

relieve them from their miseries. There is no substance to his alleged authority. As a matter of fact, the truly almighty and eternal powers are Time and Fate, to which all – Prometheus, humans and the Olympians too – are subjected. And in contrast to the latter, Prometheus does care about the humans' fate, and has fashioned their lives according to his own:

“Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen
Nach meinem Bilde,
Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sey,
Zu leiden, zu weinen,
Zu genießen und zu freuen sich,
Und dein nicht zu achten,
Wie ich!”³²⁰

The people he created, he made in his own image, “invoking his own mixed experiences to illuminate the inherent duality of the human experience”³²¹. They will have the same diversity of sensations as he does: they will suffer and weep, but also feel pleasure and delight.

It is not entirely clear who or what Prometheus represents exactly. He no longer symbolises the community's religious downturn, or the Rousseauian prototype of 'civilised' sin and misery. Nor is he merely the rebel, or recalcitrant son – Goethe's portrayal of his figure suggests something more profound. Moreover, Prometheus has a very hostile attitude towards the gods, and in the play he literally states he is *not* a god, so despite his creation of humanity it is also rather unlikely he forms some substitution of the Christian God. His “daily work”, as Carl Kerényi points out, should not be understood as Creation in a Biblical sense, for it is “limited exclusively to what he can create on earth”.³²² Yet neither is Prometheus merely identical to the human being. He was “forged as a *Man*”³²³ (“zum Manne geschmiedet”) by Time and Fate, but at the same time it was him who moulded humanity. He identifies with the humans, but nevertheless still resides in another place, positioned between their sphere and the divine. As Kerényi concludes:

“Goethe's Prometheus is no God, no Titan, no man, but the immortal prototype of man as the original rebel and affirmer of his fate: the original inhabitant of the earth, seen as an antigod, as Lord of the Earth”³²⁴.

What makes Prometheus into the prototype of the human and the Lord of the Earth is creativity *as such* and the revolutionary autonomy that creating *per se*

³²⁰ Ibid. This section already appears (slightly different) in the second act of the play.

³²¹ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 94.

³²² C. Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1963), 8.

³²³ My emphasis.

³²⁴ Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence*, 17.

entails. The above lines form an ode to the headstrong human and the inherently divine quality of his creative powers – placing the human in that sense, just as Prometheus, between the two spheres. It is a hymn to the individual who, leaving all his former credulity behind, makes the rebellious move to take life in his own hands – despite the heaviness of the human lot. Actually, Prometheus specifically embodies the artistic genius celebrated in the *Sturm und Drang* time. He provides the means to express artistic identity. In fact, one person's in particular. For the poem's content – Prometheus' non-stop celebration of himself, his creativity and independence; its form – the continuous repetition of first person pronouns ('I', 'me', 'my', and 'mine'), which make up 23 of the poem's 225 words; and the way it ends – "Wie ich!" make one suspect that Prometheus symbolises *Goethe* and the unconstrained, artistic endowment through which he can virtually create *himself*. And indeed, an interesting section from his autobiography *Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1833), supports these presumptions. Goethe writes that when he was looking for the basis of his independence, he found that the firm foundation lies in his "productives Talent".

"Wie ich nun über diese Naturgabe nachdachte und fand, dass sie mir ganz eigen angehöre und durch nichts Fremdes weder begünstigt noch gehindert werden könne, so mochte ich gern hierauf mein ganzes Daseyn in Gedanken gründen. Diese Vorstellung verwandelte sich in ein Bild, die alte mythologische Figur des Prometheus fiel mir auf, der, abgesondert von den Göttern, von seiner Werkstätte aus eine Welt bevölkerte. Ich fühlte recht gut, daß sich etwas Bedeutendes nur produciren lasse, wenn man sich isolire"³²⁵.

Goethe knows that he – or the artist in general³²⁶ – is entirely left to his own devices, but he discovered that this is also his very strength. He may not be able to count on any help from above, but – and this is essential – nor is he hampered by anything unknown. Therefore, he can establish his entire Being on his individual "natural gift". In fact, thinks Goethe, one will only produce "something meaningful" when it is the result of the solitary execution of his talent. This makes him identify with Prometheus, who populated an entire world in isolation. The latter's rebellion against Zeus is thus not so much a sacrilegious opposition against Christianity, or an urge for secularism. The revolutionary hero represents the artist's independence from anything outside himself. He is the genius who is able to create everything by himself and who has the gift to animate his creations with his internal powers, capable "à façonner son oeuvre d'après une *forme intérieure*"³²⁷. In the play, after

³²⁵ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus Meinem Leben: Dichtung Und Wahrheit*, vol. III (Tübingen: J. G. Cotta, 1814), 474–476.

³²⁶ He may speak of the artist in general, but again continuously repeats the first person pronoun.

³²⁷ Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 102.

sarcastically wondering whether the gods are eternal and almighty, Prometheus asks a set of rhetorical questions, underlining the things they cannot do:

“Unendlich? – Allmächtig? –
Was könnt Ihr?
Könnt Ihr den weiten Raum
Des Himmels und der Erde
Mir ballen in meine Faust?
Vermögt Ihr zu scheiden
Mich von mir selbst?
Vermögt Ihr mich auszudehnen,
Zu erweitern zu einer Welt?”³²⁸.

However, he – Goethe, the poet – can: in contrast to the gods, he *does* have the capacity to resume the entire world – heaven and earth – in his “fist”, that is, in one poem. He is able to “separate him from himself” by putting his spirit on paper, this way “stretching” himself, “expanding” his soul to cosmic sizes. Ironically, as embodiment of the poet, even Prometheus himself has had to tolerate the consequences of this artistic autonomy. “Die Fabel des Prometheus ward in mir lebendig. Das alte Titanengewand schnitt ich mir nach meinem Wuchse zu”³²⁹. Prometheus is Goethe’s idol, but then of course only once moulded according to the poet’s personal wishes and shape.

3.5.2. Lord Byron

The innovative, refreshing nature of Goethe’s oeuvre makes him into one of the most important people to fashion the Romantic era and its typical expressions of creativity, emotion, independence, et cetera. Moreover, as Trousson phrases it, Goethe brings Prometheus with “a giant step forward” to the “heart of a new age”³³⁰, for the Titan inspires many other Romantics. However, whereas Goethe still assigned a significant role to Prometheus as Creator of Man, several Romantic poets let go of that part. They do keep him as personifying the Creative Artist, but further move their focus to the Rebel. As they observe the French Revolution – and thereby their hopeful expectations for regime change and freedom – progressively degenerate into terror, tyranny, and violence, Prometheus is an excellent model for courageous rebellion and the agony resulting from it. The Titan offers “a way to think about the complexities of a tumultuous political world”³³¹.

Lord Byron (1788 –1824) is one of his admirers and writes that “[t]he *Prometheus* [*Bound*, TF], if not exactly in my plan, has always been so much in

³²⁸ Goethe, “Prometheus, Dramatisches Fragment,” 482.

³²⁹ Goethe, *Aus Meinem Leben: Dichtung Und Wahrheit*, III:477.

³³⁰ Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 267.

³³¹ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 96.

my head, that I can easily conceive its influence over all or any thing that I have written"³³². His works count at least seventeen references to the Titan. *Manfred*, for instance, celebrates the human mind, which the protagonist proudly calls "the Promethean spark,/The lightning of my being"³³³. Next, like Goethe, Byron identifies Prometheus with the poet as the uncomprehended, solitary genius. The poet aims to "be the new Prometheus of new men"³³⁴ and takes risks to acquire creative powers. However, as Prometheus suffered in loneliness, so does the artist, whose beloved labour is not appreciated. Further, in the *Ode to Napoleon Buonaparte* Prometheus' martyrdom is compared to the Emperor's miserable defeat.³³⁵

One of Byron's poems is entirely dedicated to his idol. *Prometheus* (1816) is an ode to humans and their suffering, against the background of the time's miserable political scene. Again, it shows how beneficial work is repaid with pain:

"Titian! [sic] to whose immortal eyes
The sufferings of mortality,
Seen in their sad reality,
Were not as things that gods despise;
What was thy pity's recompense?
A silent suffering, and intense"³³⁶.

Yet despite all this torture, the martyr refuses to admit defeat and Byron glorifies his endurance of the ruthless powers of Zeus. In fact, "the Thunderer" is not as almighty as he may seem. Prometheus suffers and is immobile, but he suffers *quietly* and this frustrates his oppressor. Moreover, because Prometheus is unwilling to reveal what he foresaw – Zeus' future collapse – his torments are thrown back on the allegedly Almighty. As Byron writes: "in thy [Prometheus'] Silence was his Sentence"³³⁷. Zeus is overcome by "evil dread"³³⁸ because he will not learn the details of his demise. His anxiety is so strong, "[t]hat in his hand the lightnings trembled"³³⁹. In a way, rather than Prometheus, it is he who is the victim, who is punished by the Titan's refusal to reveal what tyranny awaits his foe.

³³² George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron, in Verse and Prose, Including His Letters, Journals, Etc: With a Sketch of His Life* (New York: George Dearborn, 1833), 122. He writes this in a letter to Mr. Murray, October 12, 1817.

³³³ *Ibid.*, 164.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, Canto IV, 210.

³³⁵ Byron was not the only one to compare Prometheus to Napoleon; Percy Bysshe Shelley, for instance, seemed to have him in mind at some points in his *Prometheus Unbound*, and William Blake painted him along Promethean lines in *The Spiritual Form of Napoleon*.

³³⁶ Byron, *The Works of Lord Byron, in Verse and Prose, Including His Letters, Journals, Etc: With a Sketch of His Life*, 201.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*

For Byron, Zeus represents the totalitarian policies of the contemporary rulers and Prometheus the mental, emotional and revolutionary forces of the human. It is the Titan's "impenetrable Spirit"³⁴⁰ that make him

"[...] a symbol and a sign
To Mortals of their fate and force;
Like thee, Man is in part divine,
A troubled stream from a pure source;
And Man in portions can foresee
His own funereal destiny"³⁴¹.

Like Prometheus' fate, the humans' may be wretched and "funereal", but they also share the Titan's divine qualities, they have the ability to "foresee" and their "Spirit may oppose" to their "sad unallied existence";

"And a firm will, and a deep sense,
Which even in torture can descry
Its own centered recompense,
Triumphant where it dares defy,
And making Death a Victory"³⁴².

Prometheus embodies the essential agony of human existence, but just as much the force of the human mind and will – "the Promethean spark" we saw earlier – by means of which humans can rebel against whatever tyrannical power is the source of that agony. Byron strongly believes in humanity's power of endurance and encourages the people of his time to resist the despots. For even in torture humans can find their repayment: if they follow Prometheus' example and endure their suffering, they refuse to satisfy the cruel and unjust desires of their oppressor and thus the triumph will be theirs. "Prometheus teaches us not to want life, and thus to want less than our opponent(s)"³⁴³: he teaches us to make "Death a Victory".

3.5.3. Percy Bysshe Shelley

In 1820 a good friend of Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792 – 1822) publishes the *Prometheus Unbound* (1820), a long dramatic poem with, just as Byron's, a strong political undertone. Prometheus is again a revolutionary hero, helping humanity to overcome tyrannical forces. Yet Shelley takes it a large step further: the Titan ends up truly liberating humanity from all forms of oppression, resulting in a utopian state of love, harmony and happiness. Shelley decides to

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Ian Dennis, "'Making Death a Victory': Victimhood and Power in Byron's 'Prometheus' and 'The Prisoner of Chillon'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 50 (2001): 149.

revive Aeschylus' lost play – but *his* version of it, written according to different lines. For instance, as he reveals in his preface, he refuses to reconcile “the Champion with the Oppressor of mankind”³⁴⁴.

The story initiates thousands of years after Jupiter had Prometheus chained to the rock. The Titan is still there, the Oceanides Panthea and Ione are seated at his feet. He is still suffering, still defying his oppressor: “me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate [...]. No change, no pause, no hope! Yet I endure”³⁴⁵. Humans, too, are still Jupiter's “slaves”, engaging in useless worshipping, while filled “[w]ith fear and self-contempt and barren hope”³⁴⁶. Therefore, in the past, Prometheus called down a gruesome curse upon the omnipotent tyrant, but he suddenly realises not to want to respond to the god's atrocity along that same principle of vengeance and violence, which would only make him “a potential perpetuator of the destructive life-to-death cycles fostered by Jupiter”³⁴⁷. Prometheus disclaims his earlier hatred and now only pities Jupiter. He seriously regrets and recalls his curse and wishes “no living thing to suffer pain”³⁴⁸ – apparently, not even his torturer. In order to attain his aims – overthrowing Jupiter, humanity's salvation and his own reunion with his wife Asia – Prometheus decides to orient himself according to a wholly different principle: the principle of *love*. This does not mean he will give in, or submit himself to the tyrant's horrendous powers – he just chooses to operate from an entirely new basis of opposition.

In the second act, we follow Asia, who on her way to Prometheus meets the Demogorgon³⁴⁹ – a rather mysterious but good deity. She interrogates him about who made the Earth and good and evil. He replies several times that it was ‘God’ – though not once mentioning Jupiter by name. Asia relates how gods and humans used to live in a happy, early era where there was nothing but “Light and Love”³⁵⁰. Then, however, Jupiter came to power and as soon as he started ruling famine, disease, strife and death fell upon the human beings. Prometheus came to their aid. He sent love, and

“gave man speech, and speech created thought,
Which is the measure of the universe;

³⁴⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, ed. C. and J. Ollier (Google e-book, 1820), viii.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ix.

³⁴⁷ Roland A. Duerksen, “Shelley's Prometheus: Destroyer and Preserver,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 18, no. 4, Nineteenth Century (Autumn 1978): 626.

³⁴⁸ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, 34.

³⁴⁹ Many different interpretations of this character are doing the rounds. As Trousson notes, Demogorgon has been labelled Eternity, Destiny, or even “une préfigure du Démon triomphant” (Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 328, quoting M. Castelain.). Duerksen calls him “the spirit of infinite potentiality” (Duerksen, “Shelley's Prometheus: Destroyer and Preserver,” 638.) and Dougherty repeats the literary critic Harold Bloom who names him “a demonic parody of the Spirit” (Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 101.).

³⁵⁰ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, 83.

And Science struck the thrones of earth and heaven³⁵¹.

The Titan brought music, taught astronomy, politics and much more. Of course, he was severely punished for his actions, but humans still worship him. Slowly it becomes clear that in the end, it is *love* which is the all-embracing force that rules the universe, the “deep truth”, as Demogorgon says. Earth and Heaven will be unified and so will Asia and Prometheus. And indeed, in act three Jupiter falls down Demogorgon’s abyss and disappears into nothingness. Then Herakles arrives at the Caucasus, and unbinds Prometheus. Finally, the Titan and Asia are brought back together – “thus introducing Shelley’s vision of a return to the Golden Age”³⁵². They “will search, with looks and words of love,/For hidden thoughts, each lovelier than the last”. They will “Weave harmonies divine, yet ever new”, and feed “all/That tempers or improves man’s life, now free”³⁵³. They will be “visited” by “[t]he gathered rays [...] /Of Painting, Sculpture, and wrapt Poesy,/And arts, tho’ unimagined, yet to be”³⁵⁴. Prometheus will enrich humanity with all these creative capacities and apart from that the human will grow “wise and kind/And, veil by veil, evil and error fall”³⁵⁵.

In the next scene of the act we witness the fabulous results of these plans and predictions. The Spirit of the Earth describes in detail the transformation of humanity – for a true *transformation* it is – that has now taken place. “[T]hrones were kingless”, man’s “foul masks”, “self-loved ignorance”³⁵⁶ and feminine villainy have disappeared: “with little change of shape or hue; /All things had put their evil nature off”³⁵⁷. Similarly, the fourth and final act is one grand hymn to love, beauty, happiness, freedom, virtue, and wisdom – and most of all to their cosmic proportions. A chorus of spirits assures that their task is accomplished, and they will build

“A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
We will take our plan
From the new world of man,
And our work shall be called the Promethean”³⁵⁸.

The lyrical description of the new, paradisiacal world continues for many lines. “Unimaginable shapes”, are perceived and the “monstrous works” and “monarch beasts”³⁵⁹ exist no more. The human has been improved in countless ways. He “who was a many sided mirror,/Which could distort to many a shape

³⁵¹ Ibid., 85.

³⁵² Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 102.

³⁵³ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, 87.

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 105.

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 106.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 117; 113.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 115.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 131.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 135–138.

of error”, has become “one harmonious soul of many a soul/Whose nature is its own divine controul”³⁶⁰. At the end, the Demogorgon emerges and concludes the tale in a profoundly optimistic way, with an ultimate praise to Prometheus’ admirable endurance and his amorous attitude. Hope, love, forgiveness and compassion – the *Good* has triumphed.

As Shelley states in his preface, the ancient Greek playwrights each formed the mythological stories according to their own shape. “They by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation [...]. I have presumed to employ a similar licence”³⁶¹. And so he does: he may have taken Aeschylus’ play as his basis, but consciously releases all his creativity upon that source of inspiration, to mould his very own version.

“The imagery which I have employed will be found, in many instances, to have been drawn from the operations of the human mind, or from those external actions by which they are expressed”³⁶².

There are many ways in which Shelley employs the inventive “license” of the ancients. For a start, compared to Aeschylus’ play in Shelley’s poem Prometheus’ own share in his rescue has become much larger – the withdrawal of his malediction has become more important than Herakles’ actual unbinding. As Dougherty observes, Shelley dedicates nothing but four lines to the latter’s action – it is rather Prometheus himself who is the cause of his liberation. Next, as mentioned, hero and tyrant may not be reconciled – the latter, symbol of evil, must be completely overthrown by the figure who Shelley characterises as “of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature, impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest ends”³⁶³. Furthermore, Prometheus’ victory is established through non-classical means: pity, forgiveness, and love, instead of rebellious defiance. As usual, the Titan calls for a revolution, but he comes up with an entirely new itinerary to victory. The human battle against evil and misery is not won through recalcitrant and violent resistance, but by banning hatred, fighting and vengeance. For, Shelley tells us in *Queen Mab* (1813), it is not human nature to be evil: “Nature? —no !/Kings, priests, and statesmen, blast the human flower”³⁶⁴. In fact, “every heart contains perfection’s germ”³⁶⁵.

Shelley’s myth carries a serious political message.³⁶⁶ While Prometheus deplores the death of peace, implicitly the poet even expresses his substantial disappointment with respect to the French Revolution:

³⁶⁰ Ibid., 142–143.

³⁶¹ Ibid., vii.

³⁶² Ibid., ix–x.

³⁶³ Ibid., ix.

³⁶⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Queen Mab* (New York: “The Citizen of the World” Office, 1852), 30.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 38.

³⁶⁶ In fact, in one of his letters to Thomas Love Peacock (January 26th, 1819), Shelley tells his friend that he completed the first act of the *Prometheus Unbound*, and writes: “I consider poetry

“The nations thronged around, and cried aloud,
As with one voice, Truth, Liberty, and Love!
Suddenly fierce confusion fell from heaven
Among them; there was strife, deceit, and fear;
Tyrants rushed in, and did divide the spoil”³⁶⁷.

Prometheus urges that a life be established which is ruled by equivalence and harmony instead of an authoritarian force. Relying on the figure of the Titan, Shelley encourages humans to take their responsibility and start a new, peaceful revolution. They should break the vicious circle of violence and retribution, and by virtue of their love and creative intellect exchange that for a world in which the human is free and equal, “the king/ Over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man”³⁶⁸. In Shelley’s words the thrones should be “kingless”, whether that ‘king’ be a monarch, tyrant, or even a *clergyman*. For the Church has also developed a kind of tyranny because of the system’s urges for power, its forms of oppression, petrified traditions, customs and superstitions. Several times Christianity is strongly criticised throughout the poem. Towards the end of the first act, for instance, the Titan sadly exclaims that Jesus did not succeed in his mission. “O, horrible! /Thy name I will not speak,/It hath become a curse”³⁶⁹. Although the Saviour’s ethics and intentions were the best of all, Christian society has become a failure and his name is indeed not mentioned once throughout the entire poem. Fortunately, humanity has the capacity to fulfil the task of transforming the socio-politico-religious realm. Prometheus is the humans’ perfect model. His aim, for them to follow, is to strictly hold on to Christ’s moral teachings but apply them in a wholly different manner and fight against the status quo – including their own ignorance and mistakes.

Shelley thus sketches an optimistic picture of the future – much more than, for instance, Byron –, in which the human will take matters into her own hands and overturn her misery by means of hope and love. As in earlier stories, Prometheus embodies the human being, or actually, as he phrases it himself, both “[t]he saviour and the strength of suffering man”³⁷⁰. Again, he gave humankind speech, thought and wisdom, and taught them science. Knowledge and the human mind are thus important, but they are not the main focus of Shelley’s tale. Just as Goethe and Byron, he celebrates humanity’s creative imagination. The author’s own “imagery [...], drawn from the operations of the human mind” is a perfect example of this creativity, which in this case takes on

very subordinate to moral and political science, and if I were well, certainly I would aspire to the latter, for I can conceive a great work, embodying the discoveries of all ages, and harmonizing the contending creeds by which mankind have been ruled” Thomas Love Peacock, *Peacock’s Memoirs of Shelley with Shelley’s Letters to Peacock*, ed. H. F. B. Brett-Smith (London: Henry Frowde, 1909), 162.

³⁶⁷ Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, 52.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 49–50.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 60.

utopian colourings. Once Prometheus and Asia are united, humans acquire the capacity to produce ‘divine harmonies’ and ‘unimagined arts’. They even have the power to transform their own living and in that sense there is an “essential unity of art and life”³⁷¹. Like the other two authors, Shelley pays particular attention to the poet, who, one of the spirits tells,

“Of shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses.
[...] from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings of immortality!”³⁷².

Humans have an immense creative talent and are apparently even able to produce immortal entities, as long as they let themselves be driven by love and imagination. However, Shelley also underlines that the relationship between humans and their work does not only go in one direction.

“Every man’s mind is [...] modified by all the objects of Nature and art [...]. Poets, not otherwise than philosophers, painters, sculptors and musicians, are, in one sense, the creators, and, in another, the creations, of their age”³⁷³.

The relation human-creation is reciprocal, for the creator builds on ideas of others, is influenced by his contemporaries and his era and it that sense, a creation himself. Yet this given does not make the creator/creation helpless. The artist – and in particular the poet – even has a political force. In fact, the author assures us in *A Defence of Poetry* (1821) that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”³⁷⁴ – and Prometheus is the ideal symbol of this imaginative power.³⁷⁵

In *Prometheus Unbound*, Shelley rejects all forms of authority, advocates equality, celebrates the intellectual and creative human powers and encourages us to use these. Full of positive hope and belief, he calls for a peaceful revolution, so that we can let the “purest and the truest motives” rule and we can say that we took our “plan/From the new world of man” and our work may be called “the Promethean”.

³⁷¹ Duerksen, “Shelley’s Prometheus: Destroyer and Preserver,” 634.

³⁷² Shelley, *Prometheus Unbound: A Lyrical Drama in Four Acts with Other Poems*, 56.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, xiii.

³⁷⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry, an Essay* (ReadHowYouWant.com, 2006), 44, http://books.google.nl/books?id=06e8FgRIwFIC&hl=nl&source=gbs_navlinks_s. (last visited 01-09-2014).

³⁷⁵ Note that unlike Goethe and Byron, Shelley does not celebrate the poet’s isolation.

3.5.4. Mary Shelley

For many Romantic artists Prometheus provides the perfect combination of rebellion (or opposition), and imagination, originality, and creativity. Another author who sincerely occupies herself with the myth and these motives is Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley. She spends the summer of 1816 on the shores of Lake Geneva, in the company of Byron and her husband (1792 – 1822). It becomes a rainy summer, and they have to spend many days inside. They have many long conversations³⁷⁶ and Byron proposes that everyone present would write a ghost story, which leads Mary Shelley to start her famous tale. *Frankenstein, or The Modern Prometheus* (1818) certainly concentrates on the Romantic creativity theme and again, as in the works of the two others discussed above, Prometheus plays an important – though completely implicit – role. However, Mary Shelley's approach, her treatment of the themes, and the questions asked are significantly different. Whereas neither Byron nor her husband paid much attention to that aspect of Promethean creativity, Mary Shelley shifts her focus to the creation of the *human*. In the preface of her novel, she explains that her idea took shape after listening to the men's discussions on, amongst other things, the "nature of the principle of life"³⁷⁷. They wondered whether "a corpse would be re-animated" or "perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth"³⁷⁸. Science had made significant progress and so the times in which they lived were not just characterised by political issues and a fascination for arts, but also by a very optimistic view on scientific potential.

In an attempt to explore science's (almost) unimaginable possibilities, Mary Shelley builds her tale around one central act: the creation of life by an immensely ambitious scientist named Victor Frankenstein. The story raises questions about human fears, desires, needs and social relations. Yet most of all, it raises the question of human nature and the

"enduring Promethean questions about the dangers of unbridled scientific research and the limitations of the creative process – what are the moral issues involved when mankind metaphorically steals fire and usurps the divine power of creation?"³⁷⁹.

Unlike Percy Shelley or Goethe, Mary Shelley lays her hands on the Titan in order to investigate the *boundaries* of humanity's creative and scientific powers.³⁸⁰

³⁷⁶ They spoke about literature, philosophy, politics, and science, and since all three authors wrote works in which Prometheus plays a (significant) role, the myth and its protagonist must have been one of the discussed topics.

³⁷⁷ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003),

8.

³⁷⁸ Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 111.

The narrative and its protagonists are of a rather complex nature, which is why the Prometheus myth, due to its ambivalent character, provides such a convenient tool to address the intricate matters the story contains. One of the first questions one would like to have answered is the one of personification – who is the Promethean figure?

Frankenstein starts his narrative by telling how he has always been “imbued with a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature”³⁸¹. Enthusiastically studying many scientists by himself,

“I entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher’s stone and the elixir of life. [...] What glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!”³⁸².

Following his dreams, he made a great effort to accomplish that desire. And at some point he actually discovered how to “bestow animation upon lifeless matter”, aware that he may even “in process of time [...] renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption”³⁸³. He spent many nights working body and soul in his laboratory, until one night he had created a living being. Unfortunately, as soon as it opened its eyes, Frankenstein was so shocked and disgusted by the savage looks of the massive creature, that he fled his home that very same night. The nameless monster (‘fiend’, ‘daemon’, or ‘wretch’) vanished as well and soon Frankenstein learned that his younger brother had been killed by the wretch. Finally, on a glacial field, he encountered the monster, who made the scientist hear *his* side of the story.

Up to here, the Promethean figure clearly seems to be Frankenstein: with nothing but positive intentions and aiming to do humanity good, he devotes himself to creation. Further, this is simultaneously an act of rebellion against the status quo. He never mentions him, but in a way Frankenstein even rebels against God. Implicitly he judges the being that God created to be flawed; he “metaphorically steals fire” from heaven, and thus appropriates the ability to create life – up to then an exclusively divine capacity. Because of this ability, Frankenstein could also be identified with God. I shall return to this below.

In a phrase which demonstrates two Promethean characteristics, namely both the ambitious creativity of Frankenstein’s act and its rebellious – and therefore frightening – quality, Frankenstein narrates how “[w]ith an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the instruments of life around me, that I

³⁸⁰ Dougherty suggests that Mary Shelley may have been inspired as well by Lord Shaftesbury, who presented a rather negative view of the Titan. Shaftesbury accused him of making man “in abusive likeness of the immortals [...]; that wretched mortal, ill to himself, and cause of ill to all” Antony Earl of Shaftesbury, “The Moralists; a Philosophical Rhapsody,” in *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, with a Collection of Letters*, vol. II (Basil: J.J. Tourneisen and J.L. Legrand, 1790), 158.. When it comes to other influences, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is also present in the background of *Frankenstein*.

³⁸¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 41.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 42.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 55.

might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet”³⁸⁴. Further, the symbol of fire is repeated several times. Frankenstein speaks of “a spark of being”, and once more putting his dreams into words, he states that “[l]ife and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a *torrent of light* into our dark world”³⁸⁵. However, it is clearly not just the positive side of the myth that applies. As several ancient authors (e.g. Ovid, Horace, and Catullus) emphasised: Prometheus failed in his work and he was blamed for humanity’s imperfect, even ‘animal’ nature. Similarly, the *hubristic* Frankenstein creates a flawed, beastly being and fails. Moreover, as we will see, when Frankenstein allegedly achieves his aim, he is severely punished; and, just as the Titan, not only does *he* but also those he meant to benefit suffer misery and death.

Yet at a closer look, Frankenstein is not the only character that reminds us of the Promethean myth. When Frankenstein and the monster meet, the latter recounts his experiences during the months they did not see each other. He tells in detail about his disorientation, his feelings of loneliness and his frustration of not understanding anything – “I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing [...]; all was confused”³⁸⁶. Yet he invents fire, learns how to cook, speak and read and slowly evolves from an ignorant beast to an educated, somehow socialised and *human*-like being. He starts as a creature who is virtually devoid of any capacity whatsoever; reminiscent of Epimetheus’ “completely unequipped” species (as in the *Protagoras*); and also of the state of the humans as described by Aeschylus’ Titan before he presented them his gifts. Like those lost creatures who “swarmed like bitty ants”, the monster, too, wanders randomly through the fields; like them in a “babyish” and “wretched” state: ignorant, unable to ‘master’ his thoughts, and without any place to stay. Yet he does have senses and feelings from the start. And little by little, “I began to distinguish my sensations from each other”³⁸⁷ – as Aeschylus’ humans, he learns how to “see” and “hear”.

“[M]y mind received every day additional ideas. My eyes became accustomed to the light, and to perceive objects in their right forms”³⁸⁸.

On the one hand, the monster teaches himself how to make fire and suffers badly – qualities that are reminiscent of Prometheus himself. On the other hand, he discovers how to construct a hideaway, just as the people from the *Prometheus Bound*; and – as in the *Protagoras* – he learns, when watching the family, about the advantages of living with others, “in bonds of friendship”. The development of a beastly creature to a practically civilised being is strongly

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 58.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 55. My emphasis.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 105–106.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 106.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

reminiscent of the process through which humankind, enabled by Prometheus' efforts, evolves.

While observing them from his hideaway, the monster came to feel tender affection for the family members. However, when he decided to meet them, they were terrified by his appalling appearance and violently rejected him. The monster was deeply hurt, and interrupts his tale to exclaim to Frankenstein

“Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed?”³⁸⁹.

After being dismissed by the only people to whom he felt attached, in bitter agony he left his place. When he arrived at Geneva, at some point he saw a boy and caught him, hoping that if he could “educate him as my companion and friend, I should not be so desolate in this peopled earth”³⁹⁰. The boy, however, was horrified and when the fiend learned it was his creator's brother, he suffocated him. Desperate for a friend, at the glacier he came up with the idea that Frankenstein create him a female companion, “one as deformed and horrible as myself” for she “would not deny herself to me”³⁹¹.

Frankenstein reluctantly consented. However, when his second creature was almost finished, he realised that she could turn out to be much more evil than her companion. Or worse, they may even reproduce themselves, “at the price, perhaps, of the existence of the whole human race”³⁹². Overcome by this horrendous thought, he decided to tear the body to pieces and fled. But the daemon took his revenge and murdered more of those dearest to Frankenstein: he killed his best friend and strangled his bride. He knew when and where his creator would spend his wedding night – as in the *Prometheus Bound*, a secret about a marriage, which could (and practically does) overthrow his master. That master has by now acquired ‘Zeusian’ characteristics: he has become the monster's “tyrant and tormentor”³⁹³, who sentenced him to an existence of nothing but suffering.

For many weeks Frankenstein pursued the wretch, until they ended up in the Arctic. When realising that Frankenstein was about to be brought into safety by some captain, the monster killed his creator. The novel finishes with Captain Walton relating how the fiend nevertheless emerges one final time to grieve for his maker. Severely embittered, he recalls how he once sought virtue and happiness, dreamt of meeting people that could give him love, and was motivated by “high thoughts of honour and devotion”³⁹⁴. But all his hopes turned out to be false.

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 138.

³⁹⁰ Ibid., 144.

³⁹¹ Ibid., 146.

³⁹² Ibid., 171.

³⁹³ Ibid., 173.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 223.

“No guilt, no mischief, no malignity, no misery, can be found comparable to mine. When I run over the frightful catalogue of my sins, I cannot believe that I am the same creature whose thoughts were once filled with sublime and transcendent visions of the beauty and the majesty of goodness”³⁹⁵.

The monster still strongly deplores the injustice with which he was treated, but literally acknowledges that he is a wretch and tells Walton that “your abhorrence cannot equal that with which I regard myself”³⁹⁶. The captain does not need to obey Frankenstein’s dying request to kill the daemon, for, disgusted by his own being, the monster will do that himself.

Both creator and creature display characteristics of Prometheus and/or other essential elements from the myth. Frankenstein embodies the Titan as the creator and saviour of humankind and as a rebel. But then the monster creates fire and unfolds a marital secret, while his evolution symbolises humanity’s progress as told in the Promethean story. “And yet – and this is Mary Shelley’s macabre twist on the myth – neither one is entirely successful”³⁹⁷.

Frankenstein’s good ambitions crumble into misery, and the sensitive, wilful creature who assembles all his powers to become *truly* human, finishes as monstrous as his looks suggest – and each of them suffers badly. Both are thus to be identified with the Titan – whether as god or representative of humanity – and together they cover the ambiguities of the figure, who is as much a creator and benefactor of humankind, as a personification of its agony. Moreover, each of them embodies Prometheus’ ambivalence on his own: Frankenstein is heroic but rebellious and responsible for intense agony for himself as well as others; the monster is criminal but human at the same time. And that is not all; things become even more complicated when their personas start to merge. Whereas Goethe, Byron, and her husband present Prometheus as a noble and ethically perfect idol who deserves nothing but praise, Mary Shelley ascribes similar qualities to both characters – the good as well as the bad. It is this *moral* ambiguity in particular that differentiates her story and Promethean figure from those of her contemporaries. Frankenstein is not a pure hero – he is the controller, the *tyrant* of his creature, who in his isolation, vulnerability, and ignorance, suffers due to his creator’s cold rejection. The monster begins as an innocent infant, with nothing but peaceful intentions – looking to understand the world and yearning to be socially accepted and loved. But as the story proceeds, the initially innocent creature becomes the tyrant, who tortures his master through death and destruction and turns him into a slave. Yet despite the fact that he murders his master and appears to triumph somehow, the monster never loses his own slavishness. On the contrary, in the end, he still needs to submit to a power stronger than he – the brutal misery of his existence – and thus he sees no other option than his own annihilation. “Farewell,

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 144.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 224.

³⁹⁷ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 113.

Frankenstein! If thou wert yet alive, and yet cherished a desire of revenge against me, it would be better satiated in my life than in my destruction”³⁹⁸.

Mary Shelley’s use of the myth comprises a wide range of ideas, metaphors, allegories, possible interpretations and explanations. A major point is that it “is a complex critique of the Romantic notion of creativity. [...] [T]he creative force, as symbolized through Prometheus, is dangerous and unpredictable”³⁹⁹. Although Frankenstein’s creative plan starts as an enthusiastic, ambitious and purely benevolent project, the scientist soon starts to show extremely obsessive, controlling, and – when working day and night in his laboratory, spending barely any time with friends and family – even antisocial qualities. No wonder, perhaps, that his creation turns out to be revolting. Whereas many other Romantics employed the Promethean figure to celebrate the unconstrained creative powers of the (solitary) artist, Mary Shelley challenges that unboundedness. She draws attention to the limits of creativity, the (moral) responsibilities it brings along and its ambiguous – and therefore problematic and possibly even dangerous – character: the obsession, tyrannical urges, and unforeseen consequences that may emerge from creative passions.

The creativity Mary Shelley addresses also encompasses scientific ambitions, for an important form of such creative passions is a scientist’s intense devotion to knowledge. The imagination of Byron and her husband with respect to science was fuelled by the Romantic dream to create life, about which they speculated excitedly. In contrast to their enthusiastic imagery, Mary Shelley’s investigation discloses the dark side of such scientific drives. The story is not written as pure fantasy literature, but founded upon what she regarded as the latest science of the day. Many years of scientific progress had established people’s faith in science. Although in his preface to his wife’s novel Percy Shelley emphasises that he does not have “the remotest degree of serious faith to such an imagination”, he writes nevertheless that “[t]he event on which this fiction is founded has been supposed, by Dr. Darwin, and some of the physiological writers of Germany, as *not of impossible occurrence*”⁴⁰⁰. It was probably its connection with (scientific) reality that led to the fierce reactions to the book when it was published. The *Edinburgh Magazine* review states that it was written in the “highest style of caricature and exaggeration”; they “received a shock [...] so as to produce a painful and bewildered state of mind”⁴⁰¹. However, simultaneously it generated strong emotions of admiration: Sir Walter Scott complimented it as “an extraordinary tale, in which the author seems to us to disclose uncommon powers of poetic imagination”⁴⁰².

³⁹⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 225.

³⁹⁹ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 113.

⁴⁰⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 11. My emphasis.

⁴⁰¹ Anonymous, “Review Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus,” *The Edinburgh Magazine and Literary Miscellany*, March 1818, 249; 253.

⁴⁰² Sir Walter Scott, “Review Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, March 20, 1818, 614.

It is likely that the reader's shock was caused by the apparently unlimited possibilities of science. According to Theodore Ziolkowski, Mary Shelley's book should thus be read as expressing "society's concern at what it perceived to be the mindless pursuit of knowledge with no thought for its social implications"⁴⁰³. She does, however, not reject the quest for knowledge as such. The story underlines that scientific work is ethically neutral in itself and has exciting potentials that may have genuinely good results, but is simultaneously in serious danger of being perverted by society. Responding with horror to each of the monster's well-intended actions, it is *society* that turns him into an evil being. If Frankenstein would have reacted differently to the monster, taken his responsibilities and received him with love and help, he may have become anything but a monster, but a *good* being instead.⁴⁰⁴ Frankenstein has learned his lesson and makes a great effort to teach Walton about the perils of scientific ambitions:

"You seek for knowledge and wisdom, as I once did; and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been"⁴⁰⁵.

Mary Shelley points at the conflict between 'objective' or 'pure' science and its often ignored ethical implications, social consequences and possible misuse. She warns of a science practiced without concern for moral responsibilities. In fact, according to Ziolkowski Mary Shelley "produced for the first time that ambivalence toward scientific knowledge that we have come to regard as characteristically modern"⁴⁰⁶.

Apart from a critique of creativity and irresponsible scientific practices, the story's focus on creation also invokes images of the Genesis; the negative theme of dangerous knowledge being reminiscent of the Sin of Knowledge. Several parallels are drawn indeed between the book's tale, Prometheus' myth and the Biblical legend. After having read Milton's *Paradise Lost* the monster himself is struck by the similarities to his own situation: "Like Adam, I was created apparently united by no link to any other being in existence"⁴⁰⁷.

⁴⁰³ Theodore Ziolkowski, "Science, Frankenstein, and Myth," *The Sewanee Review* 89, no. 1 (Winter 1981): 40.

⁴⁰⁴ The literary scholar Harriet Hustis compares Frankenstein's situation with an "unwanted pregnancy" and speaks of "paternal negligence" (Harriet Hustis, "Responsible Creativity and the 'Modernity' of Mary Shelley's Prometheus," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 43, no. 4, *The Nineteenth Century* (Autumn 2003): 448–449.). She argues that (part of) the problem is that he "is interested in the principle of "life" only as an abstraction [...]. Ultimately, this attitude will enable him to avoid grappling with the moral complexities and physical impracticalities of life in its concrete manifestations" (*Ibid.*, 848–849.).

⁴⁰⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 30–31.

⁴⁰⁶ Ziolkowski, "Science, Frankenstein, and Myth," 48.

⁴⁰⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 132. Christopher Small underlines the analogies between the monster and Milton's Adam in particular, though these are often of a "distorted equivalence" (Christopher Small, *Ariel Like Harpy. Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972), 60.): whereas Milton's Adam was of a "fair large front and eye sublime" (John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (London: John Bumpus, 1821), 109.), the monster had

Frankenstein is compared to God, and just as the latter's creature, the monster starts off fully grown and sometimes "allowed [his] thoughts [...] to ramble in the fields of Paradise"⁴⁰⁸. Like Adam – and Prometheus – he was soon forsaken by his master, but unlike him this turned the creature into a satanic being; as he phrased it himself, "the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone"⁴⁰⁹. Unlike Adam's maker, the monster's one refused to provide him with company; "no Eve soothed my sorrows"⁴¹⁰.

Though never explicitly naming God, Frankenstein himself also employs Biblical images while telling his story – how hard he worked to "animate the lifeless clay"⁴¹¹. Yet there is not just the analogy between him and God. Shortly before their marriage, Frankenstein remembers with anxiety how the monster threatened to find him and Elizabeth on their wedding night. He is reading a sweet letter from his fiancée and overcome by "paradisiacal dreams of love and joy; but the apple was already eaten, and the angel's arm bared to drive me from all hope"⁴¹². Frankenstein knows that his dreams are in serious danger of not being realised, due to his own pursuit of knowledge, which, as he tells Walton, in the end indeed turns out to be "a serpent to sting" him. In fact, not only did he eat from the Tree of Knowledge, but also from the Tree of Life. Like the monster, Frankenstein compares himself to Adam, though not so much as God's creation, but as somebody who has committed a disastrous sin. As Prometheus and Adam, he searches for forbidden knowledge and is punished for his quest. In a way, Frankenstein himself could – just as Prometheus, Adam, and the monster – also be said to be rejected by his master: God. He is very much aware of the sacrilege he committed and regrets it with all his heart. Yet at the same time his sad disillusion can be read as a critique of God: it was the latter who made the human to be flawed, vulnerable and mortal. Frankenstein merely wished to make the world a better place – why shouldn't he be allowed to do so, and make up for the Almighty's failures? However, just as God and Prometheus, he himself also ends up producing an imperfect creature.

Despite their many differences, the three tales and their four main characters – Prometheus, Adam, Frankenstein and the monster – are connected in several ways. All four are fallen angels in their own way: each of them is gifted and has 'angelic' aspirations, yet none of them succeeds and all sink very low. They acquire knowledge, but this has for all of them bad

yellow eyes and his "yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath" (Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 132.).

⁴⁰⁸ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 134.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 134. Thinking of Milton's Eve, perhaps this was only for the better. For Milton writes that she was "[m]ore lovely, than Pandora", but "O! too like in sad event" (Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 122.).

⁴¹¹ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 55.

⁴¹² *Ibid.*, 193.

consequences.⁴¹³ An important difference between Adam on the one hand, and Prometheus' humankind and the monster on the other, is that Adam is equipped with many more capacities from his moment of creation. Like an infant, *Protagoras'* "naked" human and the monster had to start from zero, whereas Adam – though also naked and disoriented when born – did not have to learn: "[W]ho I was, or where, or from what cause /Knew not: to speak I tried, and forthwith spake"⁴¹⁴. In contrast, the monster only "muttered some inarticulate sounds"⁴¹⁵ and could barely think. And unlike both the biblical and mythological human, he had to teach himself everything, the only basis being pure observation of the family. The fact that he learns everything in a situation of sealed isolation is fundamental. It leads us to another interesting Promethean theme brought out by the narrative: human nature. Basically claiming that he himself is the author of the novel,⁴¹⁶ Percy Shelley states in his preface that "I have not considered myself as merely weaving a series of supernatural terrors"⁴¹⁷. Although the story's "event" is surely

"impossible as a physical fact, [it] affords a point of view to the imagination for the delineating of human passions more comprehensive and commanding than any which the ordinary relations of existing events can yield. / I have thus endeavoured to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature, while I have not scrupled to innovate upon their combinations"⁴¹⁸.

As mentioned, the story should be read to have a serious link with reality; and apparently not only with respect to the possibilities of science, but also with respect to humans and their possibilities. Byron, Shelley and his wife contemplated about the "nature of the principle of life". The fact that the full-grown, lonely monster is illiterate and understands virtually nothing, shows that Mary Shelley believed that a human deprived of social circumstances – Protagorean "bonds of friendship" – would be rather inarticulate. The human being needs a form of socialisation to be able to learn to speak, read, etc. However, despite his lack of a 'normal', socialising situation, the monster manages to acquire these capacities. From this, says Christopher Small, emerges an image of the human who "born or made, has innate potentialities that allow him to make use of them far beyond mechanically rational expectation"⁴¹⁹. Social contact is needed to put them to work, but *by nature* the human being has an impressive range of potential capabilities. And these do

⁴¹³ In the case of the Promethean myth, this depends of course on which version one considers; it is mainly Hesiod's myth in which mankind has to deal with bad consequences.

⁴¹⁴ Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 234.

⁴¹⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 59.

⁴¹⁶ The first version of the novel in 1818 was published anonymously (it was not until the second edition in 1823, that it bore Mary Shelley's name), but because of Percy Shelley's preface, many assumed he was the author.

⁴¹⁷ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 11.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ Small, *Ariel Like Harpy. Shelley, Mary and Frankenstein*, 61.

not just include the intellectual capacities to speak, read and think, but also emotional ones – the ability to *feel*. Shortly after the monster started his walk through the fields and before he has cultivated any of his intellectual capabilities, he enjoys the light of the moon; is pleased by the light and heat of fire; and listens to the “pleasant sound” that “proceeded from the throats of the little winged animals”⁴²⁰. He already experiences emotions before he is able to put them to words. His sensations, moreover, demonstrate his (principally) virtuous nature. The monster sympathises with the family members and wishes them nothing but the very best. He even saves a girl’s life while wandering through the woods. Just after he met him on the glacier, he tells Frankenstein “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous”⁴²¹. Mary Shelley seems to withhold a quite Rousseauian idea of human nature: we start off “naked”, innocent and ignorant, and possess innate intellectual, emotional and virtuous capacities. But knowledge and society may be dangerous and corrupting and essential is that happiness and virtue are intertwined. What not only the monster, but also Frankenstein himself shows, is that good intentions and potentials can nevertheless produce evil and that bad social circumstances may lead to misery, violence, and vice.

In conclusion, Mary Shelley aims to highlight the complex nature of the – all interconnected – issues of creativity, science, society and human nature, which is why the myth provides such a suitable instrument to address the paradoxes these matters evoke. The intricate and ambiguous issues – all coloured by implicit Promethean symbolism – treated in the novel raise many moral and practical concerns, or rather: questions. Mary Shelley breaks through the neat categories in which these issues as well as the Promethean allegories were often pigeonholed in her age. The Promethean torch may lead to enlightenment or darkness; creativity – perhaps even the power to create life – may produce beauty or imperfection; courageous rebellion may lead to victory and salvation or suffering and defeat; (the quest for) knowledge or education may lead to progress or failure; good intentions may result in respectful mastery or enslaving tyranny. Actually, the point is that none of these matters are a question of either/or, but it is most likely that all these activities, intentions, hopes and desires will produce *both* – the good as well as the bad.⁴²² Real life is a lot more complicated than it is pictured by many of Mary Shelley’s fellow Romantics; it is characterised by innumerable puzzles and questions that she may not solve, but does dare to *address*. What will happen if we blindly follow our desires and appropriate all divine creative powers for ourselves? It is not necessarily the more creation the better; scientific research does not

⁴²⁰ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 106.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁴²² Ironically, that same line of Promethean ambivalence is applicable to the book *as such*. For it provoked morally charged reactions characterised by both “a painful and bewildered state of mind” as “a similar power of fascination”. And what Mary Shelley herself called “my hideous progeny” in her preface (added in 1831) – taking ethical responsibility for her own creation – she simultaneously had “an affection for” and wished to “go forth and prosper” *Ibid.*, 10.

automatically produce nothing but good. Should we, in our enthusiasm, simply allow every plan of creation, every scientific innovation, to be executed in complete freedom? Should we not first carefully consider the social circumstances, reflect on the possible consequences, and take our moral responsibilities – whatever the outcome? Should we not at least ask ourselves whether there are not any boundaries to respect? These are questions that still demand our attention today – it is not for nothing that Frankenstein's name still regularly occurs in discussions on scientific progress. Mary Shelley's Prometheus is still a *Modern Prometheus*.

3.6. The Masters of Suspicion

After Mary Shelley's novel, the figure of Prometheus will maintain a high popularity. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – labelled the 'The Masters of Suspicion' by the philosopher Paul Ricoeur – will each refashion the myth to explore their contemporary concerns. In McLelland's words all three "are diligent interpreters of what they see as hidden meanings, masked through falsehood either deliberate or unconscious. If the truth is to make us free, they feel called to make the truth free"⁴²³.

3.6.1. Marx

For a start, an important and unmasking reinterpretation of the myth is the *socialist* one, which will place it within a much more political context. The emphasis moves from the theme of creation more towards the Byronian and Shelleyan themes of rebellion, freedom and justice. In fact, both Byron and Shelley are very popular amongst the great social theorists Karl Marx (1818 – 1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820 – 1895), as well as amongst the working class people themselves.

Not only does Marx enjoy reading the rebellious Romantics, but he is classically educated and fascinated by Greek mythology. At a young age and probably before he had read any romantic work, he writes his dissertation, *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature* (1841). In his preface Marx quotes from the *Prometheus Bound*:

⁴²³ Joseph C. McLelland, *Prometheus Rebound: The Irony of Atheism* (Waterloo, Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1988), 198.

“Philosophy makes no secret of it. The confession of Prometheus:

In simple words, I hate the pack of gods
[Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*]

is its own confession, its own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity. It will have none other beside”⁴²⁴.

Marx cites Aeschylus’ play a second time, at the point where Prometheus says to Hermes: “Better to be the servant of this rock / Than to be faithful boy to Father Zeus”; and following that quote, he finishes his preface with a respectful phrase, stating that “Prometheus is the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophical calendar”⁴²⁵.

It is a section from a very early work, in which Marx’s main aim is practically to revive classical Epicurean atheism. He employs the Promethean image accordingly, namely to proclaim his resentment against divinity and its estranging quality, and to announce philosophy’s uprising against religion.⁴²⁶ Furthermore, it already foreshadows the analogy between the Titan’s rebellion against his despot, and Marx’s future revolt against the tyranny of capitalism. Whatever it takes, all heavenly and earthly gods – later the bourgeoisie and capitalists – should be overcome, and the only authority exercised over the humans – later the labourers in particular – should be their own authority.

In Marx’s *Capital* Prometheus emerges once more, this time indeed as representative of the proletariat:

“in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse. Finally, the law which always holds the relative surplus population or industrial reserve army in equilibria with the extent and energy of accumulation rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaestus held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding with the accumulation of wealth.”⁴²⁷

The two ways in which Marx employs the Titan combine the positive image of a rebellious hero with the negative image of the miserable, degraded creature that is caught in a stranglehold – as many times before, the ambiguity of the myth proves to be useful. In Marx’s dissertation, Prometheus represents the brave, defying human who refuses to obey the constraints imposed on him by the

⁴²⁴ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), Vol. I. 30.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, Vol I. 30.

⁴²⁶ In his *Work on Myth* (1985), the philosopher Hans Blumenberg suggests it must, above all, be understood as Marx’s revolt against Hegel.

⁴²⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. I (Middlesex, UK: Penguin Classics, 1976), 799.

(religious) authorities. Later this human becomes the proletarian, bounded to the alienating rock of capitalism and its mechanised factories. The labourer is “necessarily” downgraded by the class system based on the accumulation of wealth, which is an “accumulation of misery” on his side, and “moral degradation on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital”. However, although the Titan’s heroic capacities are not explicitly mentioned in *Capital*, they are also unequivocally present in this book. For despite – or actually, *due to* – their suffering, these workers are preparing themselves to fight for their freedom, to revolt against the bourgeoisie; against the abasing, impersonal laws and the anonymous institutions of capitalism; against that restraining system of wealth and its masters. The labourers’ misery is at the same time their strength, as it evokes a Promethean ambition. Their agony drives them to action; encourages them to appeal to their creative powers, and set in motion the revolutionary processes through which they will manage to cross the system’s boundaries and create a new future.

Several theorists pick up this – perhaps at first sight seemingly insignificant – Promethean element. Quoting the Prometheus section from Marx’s dissertation, Joseph McLelland observes that the young “Left Hegelians have become a moving force in militant atheism, and soon Marx is at the cutting edge, Prometheus reincarnate”⁴²⁸. Lorelea Michaelis underlines the modernity of Marx’s concept of history, characterised by “a kind of Promethean striving that tolerates no limits”⁴²⁹. Leszek Kolakowski even argues that besides the Romantic and the Enlightenment patterns, the ‘Promethean motif’ supplies one of the three principal motifs that are essential to Marx’s doctrine. With respect to the Enlightenment motif, Kolakowski states that the thinker borrows from its rationalist and deterministic ideas. As the least relevant one in this context, I will leave my discussion of the Enlightenment motif at this, but before I treat the Promethean motif, I’d like to take a closer look at the Romantic one.

Kolakowski argues that Marx adopts the Romantics’ attack on the industrial society in which the community was based on self-interest and the individual was alienated, as he was cut loose from the collective life. Moreover, he borrowed their optimistic view of the future. Kolakowski underlines the influence of Marx’s favourite poets, such as Aeschylus and Goethe. To those, I’d like to add Shelley, for Marx was indeed a great admirer of the Romantics and of Shelley in particular, whom he considered an avant-garde socialist.⁴³⁰

⁴²⁸ McLelland, *Prometheus Rebound: The Irony of Atheism*, 147.

⁴²⁹ Lorelea Michaelis, “The Wisdom of Prometheus: Kant, Marx, and Hölderlin on Politics, Disappointment, and the Limits of Modernity,” *Polity* 31, no. 4 (Summer 1999): 540.

⁴³⁰ Eleanor Marx recalls that her father seriously lamented “Shelley’s death at the age of twenty-nine, because he was a revolutionary through and through and would consequently have stood with the vanguard of socialism” (Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *On Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 321.) She also quotes Friedrich Engels saying that in their early days he and Marx knew Shelley by heart. In one of his letters Marx writes how they read passages from Shelley’s work at communist meetings. Engels states that “Byron and Shelley are read almost exclusively by the lower classes; no ‘respectable’ person could have the works of the latter on his desk without coming into the most terrible disrepute” (*Ibid.*, 162.).

Taking Marx's fondness of Shelley together with his Promethean references does not make it unlikely that his ideas have been influenced by the *Prometheus Unbound*, for on top of these facts Marx's picture of the future is indeed of a rather utopian character. Whatever happens, in Marx's view the revolution will take place anyway. The individual will voluntarily unite with his fellows; there will be an uprising; the people will free themselves and no longer be enslaved to capitalist power. Interestingly, Shelley's wife must also have left her impression. Marx criticises scientific 'progress' as it only improves machinery and enriches capital instead of the worker. He explains that the labourers are subordinate to "an alien will", to "the *objective unity* of the *machinery*, of fixed capital, which, as the *animated monster*, objectifies the scientific idea"⁴³¹. As Walt Sheasby observes, here Marx appropriates "Mary Shelley's personification of science gone monstrously wrong through Victor's experiment "bestowing animation upon lifeless matter"⁴³². Science is only used to animate the machine, which subjugates, isolates, and alienates the worker.

With respect to the third motif, Kolakowski argues that

"[t]he Promethean idea which recurs constantly in Marx's work is that of faith in man's unlimited powers as self-creator, contempt for tradition and worship of the past, history is man's self-realization through labour, and the belief that the man of tomorrow will derive his 'poetry' from the future"⁴³³.

Although Marx might not have phrased it this way, Kolakowski identifies "the proletariat as the *collective Prometheus*" who would, "in the universal revolution, sweep away the age-long contradiction between the interest of the individual and that of the species"⁴³⁴. Whether Kolakowski goes one step too far by characterising Marx's entire oeuvre in Promethean terms is a question that may be asked, but what is certain is that there are numerous Promethean concepts that keep on recurring in his books, which particularly match humankind's emancipation through the proletarian revolution. Marx trusts humanity's rebellious powers, infinite creativity, and future-oriented urge to transform the unjust, enchaining, capitalist system. People will overcome the tyrannical masters – whether heavenly or earthly. Marx has faith in humanity's capacity to shape itself through work, and create another civilisation. This revolution, this fight for freedom, is even worth Promethean martyrdom, for it will liberate the species as a whole. When the time is right the unbound Prometheus of one Shelley will triumph over the other's animated monster – as well as his creator.

⁴³¹ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1973), 470.

⁴³² Walt Sheasby, "Anti-Prometheus, Post-Marx," *Organization Environment* 12, no. 1 (March 1999): 31.

⁴³³ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism. Its Rise, Growth and Dissolution*, trans. P. S. Falla, vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 412.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, my emphasis.

3.6.2. Nietzsche

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) also reworks the Promethean myth according to his own needs and theories. The Titan appears several times in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).⁴³⁵ In this work Nietzsche discusses Greek tragedy and establishes a connection between that ancient form of art and contemporary (German) art and human culture. He introduces a fundamental dichotomy between two aesthetic-metaphysical concepts, both carrying names derived from mythological gods:

“We will have achieved much for scientific study of aesthetics when we come [...] to the certain and immediate apprehension of the fact that the further development of art is bound up with the duality of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*”⁴³⁶.

For Nietzsche mythological figures provide a means to observe, analyse and criticise modern culture and life. It is the “duality” cited which provides the basis for the connection between the ancient and the contemporary, for it characterises the “further development of art”, which is continuously evolving. Referring to Apollo – the god of calm, beauty, dreams and light – the concept of the *Apollonian* embodies order, clarity, beauty, but also the cosmetic in art, according to Nietzsche best expressed in pretty images and sculpture. Referring to Dionysius – the god of frenzy, intoxication and crossed boundaries – the *Dionysian* symbolises chaotic, amorphous and limitless art, as best expressed in music. It is exactly the tension between the opposed drives that is particularly productive and generates the most fruitful creations. The ancient tragedy is the sublime form of a fusion of the two impulses, which, according to Nietzsche, did not return ever since. Modern culture has become sterilised and inanimate and – understood as tragic work of art – so has modern *life*. Only a resurgence of the dynamic balance between these two aesthetic powers will save the contemporary society of lifelessness. A flawless harmony between the two tendencies should be the foremost objective of all human culture.

The frontispiece of *The Birth of Tragedy* was an image of the Titan. In section 9 Nietzsche discusses the hero most extensively, when demonstrating the character of Greek tragedies. Those works of art were of a light, beautiful, Apollonian, yet superficial and illusionary form, as essentially they were telling the most miserable, dark, Dionysian stories. The tragedy’s bright images of its hero, “briefly put, the Apollonian mask, are the [...] necessary creations of a glimpse into the inner terror of nature, bright spots, so to speak, to heal us from

⁴³⁵ At a very young age, Nietzsche already seems to be fascinated by Prometheus, for when he is still at school he writes several studies in which the Titan plays a central role.

⁴³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, trans. Ian Johnston, 2009, section 1. http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/Nietzsche/tragedy_all.htm#tragedy. (last visited 20-08-2014).

the horrifying night of the crippled gaze”⁴³⁷. Nietzsche uses the figures of Oedipus and Prometheus in order to illustrate the dynamic nature of the ancient tragedy. He infers from the Oedipus myth (as related by Sophocles) that its core message is that “wisdom, and especially Dionysian wisdom, is an unnatural atrocity” – but the playwright managed to present this sad truth in the prettiest, most illuminating format.⁴³⁸ About the *Prometheus Bound* he writes that Aeschylus demonstrated the illuminating “glory of activity”, but Goethe truly knew how to express what the former “could only hint to us through a metaphorical picture”. Nietzsche quotes from Goethe’s passionate poem, citing the last verse in which Prometheus tells Zeus that each human will ignore the god – *like him* (“Wie Ich!”)! The aggressive, reckless words of the poem’s protagonist and its anti-divine flavour please the philosopher. Prometheus’ tirade shows the human’s autonomy, the power of his knowledge and the unity of the human and the divine world: the “Titanic” human “compels the gods to unite with him, because in his autonomous wisdom he holds their existence and the limits to their authority in his hand”. Yet although Goethe may have stated it more directly, Nietzsche admiringly declares that Aeschylus already claimed there was such a “oneness”, a reciprocal dependence of “both these worlds of suffering” (i.e. the human and divine world). The courageous playwright saw “Fate [*Moirai*] enthroned over gods and men as eternal justice” – he *called* for such justice. Aeschylus’ Prometheus – the “Titanic artist” who fought the gods with his wisdom – symbolises the justice of this mutual dependency. Nietzsche compares the myth – “a primordial possession of the Aryan population” – with the story of the Fall, and suggests that the latter is probably of the same significance for “the Semitic peoples” as the former for the Aryan. The Prometheus myth, however, provides a much better view of the essence of human existence.

“The best and loftiest thing which mankind can be blessed with men acquire through a crime, and now they must accept the further consequences, namely, the entire flood of suffering and troubles with which the offended divine presences must afflict the nobly ambitious human race: an austere notion which, through the *value* which it gives to the crime, stands in a curious contrast to the Semitic myth of the Fall”.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Ibid., section 9. All quotes from the *Birth of Tragedy* that follow are from this section.

⁴³⁸ According to Nietzsche Sophocles’ version of the Oedipus story is about “the noble man who is destined for error and misery in spite of his wisdom, but who, through his immense suffering, at the end exerts a magically beneficial effect around him, which still has an effect beyond his death”. It is a play about agony, destruction and murder, yet it renders a “supernatural serenity”. Oedipus breaks “the most sacred natural laws”, but “how could we have compelled nature to yield up her secrets, if not for the fact that we fight back against her and win, that is, if not for the fact that we commit unnatural actions?” Hence Nietzsche’s conclusion that “wisdom, is an unnatural atrocity” (Ibid.).

⁴³⁹ Here, Nietzsche gives a misogynist list of so-called “female emotions” which characterise the (obviously judged to be inferior) Semitic conception of the origin of evil.

Both tales focus on a fundamental crime against divinity (by, respectively, Prometheus and Eve); pose (thereby) an antithesis between human and god; and underline the terrible consequences of that act. Yet

“[w]hat distinguishes the Aryan conception is the lofty view of the *active* transgression as the essentially Promethean virtue. With this, at the same time the ethical basis of pessimistic tragedy is established, together with the *justification* of human evils, that is, both of human guilt and of the forfeit of suffering caused by that guilt”.

In contrast with the passive, weak Semite, who characterises the crime as (female) *sin* and calls for redemption, the thoughtful (male) Aryan recognises the world’s tragic, contradictory and impious essence and does not only accept but even *value* human crime and agony. The Promethean Aryan tries *actively*, heroically and in full awareness of the misery he will have to endure to cross the world’s boundaries, violate its laws and break the contradiction between the human and the divine world. The “innermost core of the Prometheus saga” is “the imperative requirement that the individual striving like a Titan has to fall into crime”. One should note, says Nietzsche, the “un-Apollonian quality of this pessimistic idea”. The Apollonian tendency emphasises rules and reason, establishes borders between individuals and demands moderation but – fortunately, Nietzsche seems to say – sometimes the reckless Dionysian energy manages to break through those suffocating limits and

“[t]his Titanic impulse to become, as it were, the Atlas of all individuals and to bear them on one’s wide back, higher and higher, further and further, is the common link between the Promethean and the Dionysian. In this view, the Aeschylean Prometheus is a Dionysian mask”.

Yet even as a “Dionysian mask”, in the end Aeschylus’ Titan has a “simultaneously Dionysian and Apollonian nature” and the play perfectly demonstrates how the two tendencies complement each other. It is a story about Dionysian suffering smartened with the Apollonian beauty and structure of Greek tragedy. It tells of an individual following Apollonian dreams, reaching for light – it is a courageous, yet reckless individual who is forced to atone for his Dionysian actions with perennial agony. Important is that the myth does not merely represent something aesthetic, but in fact the essentially tragic and ambiguous nature of human *life*. Its core philosophy entails both the atrocious nature of wisdom and the justification of human hubris – and of course, the miserable consequences. The Apollonian “will” and laws as well as the Dionysian crime that violates them can be justified as well as rejected. In Nietzsche’s words, Prometheus’ double nature reflects that “[e]verything present is just and unjust and equally justified in both”. The Apollonian-Dionysian dynamic is not merely about theatre or art: it is about the tragedy of

the world *as such*, about the tragedy of humanity and their contradiction with God.⁴⁴⁰

In *The Gay Science* (1882), Nietzsche employs the Promethean figure again, this time to oppose the Greeks and Christians – analogous to the Aryan-Semite opposition in *The Birth of Tragedy*. His perspective on the possibility to reintroduce the ancient Apollonian-Dionysian dynamic in modern art has become much more pessimistic. In a section called ‘Origin of sin’ (135) he sadly states that through the notion of sin, Christianity “judaized” the modern world and its morality. Despite all the hard work by Nietzsche and his contemporaries to access and integrate the ancient Greek culture – “a world without feelings of sin”⁴⁴¹ – this world has become “alien” to modern Europe. Sin, which provides the foundation of Christian morality as such, is only about injury of the *divine* honour. “The Greeks, by contrast, were closer to the thought that even sacrilege can have dignity – even theft, as in the case of Prometheus”⁴⁴². The Christian moral would have been ridiculous in the Hellenic view, in their tragic ethics of crime and misery and the *dignity* of the hubristic action – so well symbolised by the Promethean narrative. Other than in *The Birth of Tragedy*, for Nietzsche the Titan saga no longer embodies the roots of the Aryan population and the potential recovery of the sublime, hubris-acknowledging duality of the Greek tragedy in modern art. In *The Gay Science*, Prometheus symbolises the alienation of this ancient world, the miserable fact that it has become inaccessible to the contemporary artist – whether Semitic or Aryan.

Prometheus also appears in a section entitled ‘Preludes to science’ (300).⁴⁴³ In order for the sciences to have emerged, they had to be preceded by the untrue claims and predictions of people such as magicians or alchemists so that a “thirst, hunger and taste for *hidden and forbidden powers*”⁴⁴⁴ be created. False promises and predictions were a prelude to science and created the very possibility of knowledge. Similarly, says Nietzsche, religion is likely to be such a prelude to humans, in order that some day they find their own powers and self-sufficiency.

⁴⁴⁰ Although Nietzsche does not say this explicitly, because of its double message (with respect to justice, amongst other things), the Prometheus myth also provides a perfect example of his (later often repeated) claim that, due to the nonexistence of fixed values, no final moral judgement can be made.

⁴⁴¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff and Adrian del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 124.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁴³ Prometheus is also found a third time in the book, in the section ‘Misunderstood sufferers’ (251). Nietzsche states that the Titan does not suffer from his torture when this is due to his help to humanity – on the contrary, “he is happy and great; but when he is envious of Zeus and the homage paid to him by mortals, then he suffers!” (*Ibid.*, 149.). That is, once again – though implicitly – Nietzsche deploys Prometheus to express his abhorrence of the Christian God (symbolised by Zeus) and humanity’s worship of Him.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

“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? All mere images of the sculptor – no less than delusion, theft, the Caucasus, the vulture, and the whole tragic *Prometheia* of all those who know?”⁴⁴⁵.

Whereas before Prometheus was each time celebrated as a hero, here Nietzsche downgrades the myth and even the Titan himself. The myth and its events were nothing but a delusion: Prometheus did not *steal* but *create* light; and although he did know he created humanity, the other actors and occurrences were just as much his own illusionary fabrications. Yet he did not realise what was his share in the tale’s figures and occurrences, which prevented him from assuming responsibility and honour for his accomplishments. Nietzsche’s point is that just as Prometheus, humans delude themselves by means of their own creations: mythical stories, legendary histories – and most of all the entire religious system. As he explains in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886),

“[R]eligion gives them an invaluable sense of contentment with their situation and type; it puts their hearts greatly at ease, it glorifies their obedience [...], it transfigures and improves them, it provides something of a justification for everything commonplace, for all the lowliness, for the whole half-bestial poverty of their souls”⁴⁴⁶.

Delusions such as religion give meaning and value to human life, they make suffering bearable because it is explained and justified. In a way, humans are indeed “half-bestial”, merely another type of animal who have their self-constructed stories and beliefs as their means of survival. There are, however, two essential differences between human and animal. The first is humanity’s self-consciousness: the fact that humans are able to distinguish themselves from animals already makes a fundamental difference, whether this ability/difference is something good or not. Second, in Nietzsche’s words the human is “*das noch nicht festgestellte Thier*”⁴⁴⁷, that is, “the animal that is *still not fixated*” or “the yet unfinished”, “the not yet defined”, or “the not yet determined” animal⁴⁴⁸. Unlike all other animals the human being is a creature

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 55.

⁴⁴⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut Und Böse. Vorspiel Einer Philosophie Der Zukunft*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, vol. 2, Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, VI (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968), 79.

⁴⁴⁸ Translations from respectively Karl Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, trans. Charles F. Walraff and Frederick J. Schmitz (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 130.; Alfredo Ferrarin, “Homo Faber, Homo Sapiens, or Homo Politicus? Protagoras and the Myth of Prometheus,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 54, no. 2 (December 2000): 289.; Hans-Georg Gadamer and Howard Brotz, “Theory, Technology,

whose nature is yet to be determined – reminiscent of the humans created by Epimetheus, who were “naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed”. This lack of fixation implies an immense source of possibilities. The human is alterable, “a being that changes and realizes himself by his own efforts”⁴⁴⁹. Unfortunately, up to now humans have been trying to compensate for their indeterminacy by means of “an illusory higher order of things”⁴⁵⁰ such as religion. This has only preserved the weak and suffering and restrained the higher and most promising types. It has kept “the type “man” on a lower level”⁴⁵¹ and resulted in the ‘breeding’ of “a stunted, almost ridiculous type, a herd animal”⁴⁵². There is a possibility to change the situation, for the “basic flaw in man”⁴⁵³ simultaneously is exactly what constitutes his very worth, what makes him *human*. Yet then, according to Nietzsche, it is necessary to break free from our self-created constraints, our artificial truths and fight the bestialising tendencies that let us sink to the level of herd animals. Prometheus is then a means for the philosopher to urge humans to let go of their false tales, beliefs, and constructions, for only *then* can they take full credit for their own attainments – instead of ascribing these to some divine power.⁴⁵⁴ Just as the Titan should have, humans should recognise God to be nothing but an illusion, produced by their very own imagination. The Almighty should be eradicated, for his downfall – His *death* – will release humanity from its celestial restraints.

As to many authors before, it is again the ambiguous character of the Prometheus myth which makes it particularly useful to Nietzsche. Its flexible format is practical: from a tragic yet highly estimated hero the Titan easily downgrades to a self-deluding Christian. Content-wise it is just as practical: beneficence and criminality, victory and punishment, creativity and rebellion, justice and injustice – it is these contrasting qualities and most of all their *dynamic*, that make the myth so effective. It makes it a perfect means to outline, or better, *unveil* the world’s tragedy. For each time Nietzsche brings Prometheus into play, the figure operates as a means to unveil “*hidden and forbidden*” significations about the human and his place in civilisation. As a Master of Suspicion, in McLelland’s words Nietzsche’s aim is indeed to disclose “hidden meanings, masked through falsehood” and try “to make the truth free”. Nietzsche employs the Promethean saga to remove humans’ “Apollonian mask” and heal their “crippled gaze”, so that they acknowledge the fundamentally tragic, illusionary, undetermined and ambiguous nature of human life. Yet as sad as it sounds, of course these unmaskings are not all negative: like Marx, Nietzsche tells the myth to encourage humanity to realise a revolutionary,

Practice: The Task of the Science of Man,” *Social Research* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 1977): 541.; and Rüdiger Safranski, *How Much Globalization Can We Bear* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 2.

⁴⁴⁹ Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, 128.

⁴⁵⁰ Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil. A Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, 55.

⁴⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁵³ Jaspers, *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity*, 130.

⁴⁵⁴ This is one of the first times where Nietzsche presents his famous idea of ‘the death of God’.

emancipatory break with the past. Nietzsche's Prometheus is there to teach humans that active Titanic ambition can free them from the traditional chains of degradation and oppression – and most of all, from their self-delusions.

3.6.3. Freud

What Marx seeks in the social-political and Nietzsche in culture and recognition of (religious) illusions, Sigmund Freud (1865-1935) seeks in the *psyche*. Originally a neurologist, the founding father of psychoanalysis discovers concealed meanings and sensations by exploring the human unconscious. Considering myth in general a useful tool to investigate, label and present the relevant issues and research results, apart from for Oedipus and other figures Freud also creates a place for Prometheus.

Before examining that place, first it is useful to take a quick look at Freud's use of the Oedipus myth, as this is an essential part of his theory as such. He bases his famous Oedipus complex on the myth about a boy who slew his father and married his mother, without knowing they were his parents. Freud employs the tale's symbols to characterise the infantile psychosexual maturation, which includes sexual desire towards the parent of the opposite sex and feelings of envy and rivalry towards the other parent. A conflict takes place between the infant's passionate 'id' and his 'ego' looking for mastery. These are two of the three components of Freud's renowned model of the human psyche, which consists of the id, ego, and super-ego. Respectively, these can roughly be characterised as the instinctual (unconscious and hedonistic), the rational and the moral component of the psyche, which together in interplay determine a person's thoughts, feelings and actions. The internal conflict between the id and ego forms an important part of Freud's interpretation of the Promethean myth. In his paper *The Acquisition and Control of Fire* (1932) Freud discusses the primitive human's relation to fire with the help of the story of the Titan. Motivated by "the Mongolian law against 'pissing on ashes'"⁴⁵⁵, he focuses thereby on the connection between fire and urination:

"I think my hypothesis – that, in order to gain control over fire, men had to renounce the homosexually-tinged desire to put it out with a stream of urine – can be confirmed by an interpretation of the Greek myth of Prometheus"⁴⁵⁶.

Freud argues that the crucial elements of the myth are 1) the way in which the stolen good was transported; 2) the character of the hero's action; and 3) the significance of his penalty. First, he says, the fennel stalk in which Prometheus hid the fire is a penis symbol. For if the confusing, dream-characteristic

⁴⁵⁵ Sigmund Freud, "The Acquisition and Control of Fire," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 22 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1964), 187.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid.

“mechanism of reversal”⁴⁵⁷ – is taken into account, one realises that instead of fire, the hollow stick should be understood as containing *water*. That is, it represents a man’s penis-tube and his urine – “the means of *quenching* fire”⁴⁵⁸.

Second, Freud accentuates that Prometheus’ undertaking was an act of thievery. And since in numerous myths from many other seriously distinct historical cultures the obtainment of (control over) fire is inherently related to crime, this must be an essential feature. His crime is a defiance of the gods, who “are granted the satisfaction of all the desires which human creatures have to renounce”⁴⁵⁹. This is why,

“[s]peaking in analytic terms, we should say that instinctual life – the id – is the god who is defrauded when the quenching of fire is renounced: in the legend, a human desire is transformed into a divine privilege”⁴⁶⁰.

That is, Prometheus’ theft of fire – which symbolises water or urine – signifies that the human’s instinctual urge to quench fire has to be discarded.

The third essential feature of the myth concerns Prometheus’ liver. When the Titan was tied to the rock, this organ was chosen to be the locus of his penalty – a vulture gnawing on it every day – and in old times the liver “was regarded as the seat of all passions and desires”⁴⁶¹. A punishment like this, says Freud, seems rather peculiar for such a well-intentioned act, which was only beneficial to civilisation. However, as this ‘gain’ for humankind included instinctual abstinence, Prometheus the “culture-hero” aroused “resentment”. For “[w]e know that a demand for a renunciation of instinct [...] call[s] out hostility and aggressiveness, which is only transformed into a sense of guilt in a later phase of psychical development”⁴⁶². Hence the myth treats the beneficent act simultaneously as a malfeasance, with Prometheus deserving an assault on his own core of passion and desire.

Freud states that the myth is quite obscure, for apart from the reversal interpretation with fire representing water, it should be noted that due to its heat, shape and movements, fire was also regarded by primitive people as a symbol of passion – that is, of the *libido*. And so “[t]here can be no doubt about the mythological significance of flame as a phallus”, which is why “to primal man the attempt to quench fire with his own water had the meaning of a pleasurable struggle with another phallus”⁴⁶³. Although here he does not elaborate on the issue, it is probably based on this explanation that Freud at the beginning of his text characterised man’s quenching of fire as a “homosexually-tinged desire”.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 188.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 189.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 189–190.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 190.

Now if the liver was the locus of passion and desire, its symbolic meaning is likely to be identical to the meaning of fire (i.e. when representing *libido*), “and that, if this is so, its being daily consumed and renewed gives an apt picture of the behaviour of the erotic desires, which, though daily satisfied, are daily revived”⁴⁶⁴. The psychoanalyst concludes that in that case, the vulture must also have the significance of a penis as it feeds itself on Prometheus’ organ. He draws an analogy between the Titan’s liver and the figure (and tale) of the phoenix, for the two clearly share a particular significance and aim. “Each describes the revival of libidinal desires after they have been quenched through being satiated. That is to say, each brings out the indestructibility of those desires”⁴⁶⁵. The stories’ accent on this indestructibility functions to comfort the human, or represents the positive reaction of the historical primal human who is hereby assured that though “the offender” (i.e. Prometheus) forced him to renounce his instinct “after all at bottom [the offender] has done no damage”⁴⁶⁶.

Before I continue with the discussion of the last section I will take a first look at Freud’s analysis of the story, since it involves a complex system of meanings, symbols, allegories and reversals. The myth’s well-known feature of ambiguity appears to have reached a climax. Fire actually represents water, but together with the fennel stalk and the vulture it also symbolises a penis; the robbed god is the human’s defrauded instinct; and Prometheus’ liver is the allegory of passion and desire (thereby again, similar to one of fire’s significations). As to many authors before, to Freud it is also the ambivalence that makes the Titan and his story so useful. Prometheus’ act is evaluated and responded to in two antithetical ways. Though surely performing a beneficent act, the Titan’s well-meaning transactions are not appreciated – interestingly, not even by humanity. The latter is an important difference in Freud’s analysis: what in other interpretations humans virtually always welcome with open arms, here calls out resentment and aggression. Only “in a later phase of psychological development”, feelings of guilt will arise, as well as of relief, consolation and appreciation. Yet despite this peculiar aspect of the psychoanalyst’s interpretation, its emphasis on the virtuous side of the crime as well as the miserable consequences for humanity does make it reminiscent of Marx’s and Nietzsche’s. Like the other two, Freud seeks for human emancipation and liberation and tries to release suppressed meanings. And as a genuine Master, he has his very own technique: mining the unconscious and elucidating the human’s (sexual) desires, shortcomings and needs.

To continue with the last section of the essay, here Freud comes back to the duality fire-water and explains that apart from an historical and symbolical element, it also has a physiological one. The two functions of the male sexual organ – “the evacuation of the bladder” and the satisfaction of the libido through

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 191.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid.

“the act of love” – are namely “as incompatible as fire and water”⁴⁶⁷. When the phallus is excited and has the accompanying warm sensations, it is unthinkable to urinate, while when it employs the function of urination, the genital faculties are entirely extinguished.

“The antithesis between the two functions might lead us to say that man quenches his own fire with his own water. And primal man, who had to understand the external world by the help of his own bodily sensations and states, would surely not have failed to notice and utilize the analogies pointed out to him by the behaviour of fire”⁴⁶⁸.

This section shows other characteristic aspects of Freudian reasoning, which help understand his interpretation of the Prometheus myth. What makes Freud’s analysis stand out from others are not only the elements of the physical, sexual and unconscious, but also his attention to the individual human and – though he is not the first – to the contemporary human.

First, the Prometheus myth does not only represent the historical acquisition of fire of the species *as a whole*. Freud’s explanation of the story’s essential components – the ‘id’ which is defrauded, the libidinal passions, the aggressive reactions – in the end mainly exposes the individual’s experience of the events. Of course, Prometheus’ theft aroused a common reaction and all humans probably sensed something similar when suffering the “blow in his instinctual life”⁴⁶⁹. But eventually the myth’s symbols embody an individual’s *internal* struggle between his instincts and their tempering; his unconscious and its managing; his desires and their control – an instinctual renunciation each human had to go through by himself.

Second, although Freud initially speaks of the overcoming of an *archaic* instinct, his physiological explanation of the fire-water dichotomy applies to each human with a male sexual organ, which means that the conflict between the phallus’ two functions must be experienced by every *contemporary* man just as much as the primal one. An historical habit may have been mastered, but the physical desires related to it will not disappear for as long as the human has a body; symbolically contemporary man still quenches fire. His passions, excitations and other physical demands are still the same as the primitive’s “bodily sensations and states” – and so is his strife when trying to learn how to cope with these. Note, however, that this is not only an individual process, for Freud draws a strong parallel between the maturing of each individual human and the evolutionary and cultural development of the human race. Volney P. Gay explains that this course of development is the role of myth.

“Myth is an elaboration of the task of taming [human instincts] and putting them into service. In general, Freud holds that the attainment of culture requires just this kind of

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., 192–193.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 191.

individual restraint. Hence myths and ritual are repeated endlessly because each generation must learn anew the tasks of self-control and self-sacrifice"⁴⁷⁰.

The Promethean myth may reflect the primal human's struggle with fire many ages ago, but the tale's allegorical elements – the phallus-stalk; the urine-fire; the defrauded id/god; the passion-liver – represent essential characteristics and difficulties that are far from unknown to the contemporary human and his society. In other words, the Titan's story remains relevant for as long as humans have to tame the instincts they are burdened with.

With respect to the connection between Prometheus and the individual-species-cultural analogy, it is also worth to shortly consider McLelland's analysis of Freud's work. He assigns the Titan quite a different place than Freud himself; his Prometheus is the Great Rebel and Liberator instead of a symbol of humanity's instinctual struggles. McLelland writes that he takes "Oedipus as Freud's symbol for the *Promethean will*, which overcomes domination and establishes personal autonomy"⁴⁷¹. The Oedipean revolt is "Promethean", for "[h]ere is the familiar story of rebellion against minority status, external power and authority (heteronomy)"⁴⁷². The myth's Zeus, from this Oedipus perspective, represents the maturing child's father; the Promethean hero is the child who defies his father and suffers. Further, the "Promethean will" is not only rebellion against paternal power or authority as such – it is the "constructor of atheistic autonomy"⁴⁷³. Prometheus becomes McLelland's means to articulate Freud's criticism of religion: the Titan represents the rebel against both the authority of the parent and the corresponding social authority of religion.

Freud indeed compares the Almighty Father – God – to the human father and the associated Oedipus complex. Religion is created according to the "infantile prototype", which makes Freud speak of the "childhood of the human race"⁴⁷⁴.

"When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends those powers the features belonging to the figure of his father; he creates for himself the gods whom he dreads"⁴⁷⁵.

Due to their essential imperfection and vulnerability, humans need some divine, paternal authority. Interestingly, Freud's critical account of religion reminds us of

⁴⁷⁰ Volney P. Gay, "Winnicott's Contribution to Religious Studies: The Resurrection of the Culture Hero," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 51, no. 3 (1983): 372.

⁴⁷¹ McLelland, *Prometheus Rebound: The Irony of Atheism*, 204, my emphasis.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 204.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*, 207. Note that all the authors (and their references to the Titan) treated in McLelland's *Prometheus Rebound: The Irony of Atheism* are analysed from a religious perspective.

⁴⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud, "'The Future of an Illusion', 'Civilization and Its Discontents' and Other Works," in *Complete Psychological Works Of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 21 (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 2001), 17–18.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

Nietzsche's. Freud, too, emphasises the fundamental incompleteness and the infinite immaturity of the human – reminiscent of Nietzsche's "noch nicht Festgestellte Thier" – and underlines the resulting need for some superior power. Like Nietzsche, he rejects the human's worshipping of a non-existent God – of a figure which is nothing but an illusion, self-made to compensate for this incompleteness. And just as Nietzsche, Freud considers humanity's illusionary fabrications as a major obstacle to civilisation: religion impedes cultural development.

"Like the obsessional neurosis of children, [religion] arose out of the Oedipus complex, out of the relation to the father. If this view is right, it is to be supposed that a turning-way from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of the process of growth, and that we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development"⁴⁷⁶.

Analogous to the maturing child who passes through a neurotic phase in which he turns away from his father, the (cultural) evolution of the human race involves a period in which it distances itself from religion. According to Freud this is all happening in his days. And like Nietzsche, he argues that the time has come to outgrow this phase – perhaps the human's immaturity is not so infinite after all. Freud's parallel Oedipean analysis of the individual and the human species thus makes McLelland conclude that Oedipus is the psychoanalyst's "symbol for the Promethean will", that is, for the urge to establish "atheistic autonomy". Whether the elements of rebellion, suffering and (the possibility of) cultural evolution should directly lead to this conclusion may be questioned. However, whether Oedipus should be classified as Promethean or not, the Oedipean analysis of religion certainly reveals an analogy between Nietzsche's and Freud's theological accounts – and both in a mythological context.

3.7. The Modern Prometheus

Although Marx, Nietzsche and Freud – and many before them – each refashioned Prometheus' tale in their own special and creative way, there is always the possibility of another and even more peculiar version. As time passes, the myth is modernised. Several authors let the Titan's adventures take place in a contemporary context and his story is systematically transformed, desacralised, and satirised.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid., 43.

3.7.1. Gide

On the cusp of the 20th century, André Gide (1869-1951) publishes an impressively innovative version of the myth: *Prometheus Illbound* (1899).⁴⁷⁷ The story starts off on a random afternoon – “May 189...” – in fin-de-siècle Paris. A heavy gentleman wanders on one of the city’s boulevards and drops his handkerchief, which is returned to him by a skinny man. The stout man hands the latter an envelope and asks him to write a name on it. He complies, but the corpulent man suddenly, without any reason, strikes him in the face and disappears. The fat man turns out to be Zeus – ‘the banker’, or ‘the Miglionaire’; the thin gentleman’s name is Cocles; and the address on the envelope is Damocles’.

In the following chapter, suddenly the anonymous narrator addresses us: “I will not speak of public morals, for there are none, but this reminds me of an anecdote”⁴⁷⁸. He tells the reader about the enchained Prometheus, who when he “found that chains, clamps, strait-waistcoats, parapets, and other scruples, had on the whole a numbing effect on him, for a change he turned to the left, stretched his right arm”⁴⁷⁹ and walked down a Parisian boulevard. Prometheus settles in a restaurant and has a chat with the waiter, who enthusiastically talks to him about ‘the gratuitous act’ (*l’acte gratuit*): an act without aim, without any motive whatsoever. He thinks, he says, “that man is the only being incapable of acting gratuitously; – gratuitously!”⁴⁸⁰. A friend of his – a millionaire – wanted to perform such an act. He put 500 francs in an envelope, had a random gentleman write a random name on it, gave the person a blow and disappeared. Then, Prometheus is seated with Cocles and Damocles. The latter two tell the others a personal adventure and are astonished when they realise they all refer to the same event. Damocles is desperate to learn who has been his benefactor, for it truly changed his entire life: “Before, I was banal but free [...]. This adventure has decided me; I was nothing, now I am somebody”⁴⁸¹. Prometheus is also asked to speak, but he is shy and insecure. “Oh, gentlemen”, he says, “anything that I can say has so little importance...”⁴⁸². Earlier, when the waiter asked him for his occupation, he had also been very reluctant to answer. Yet as the former insisted, he had to: “[m]aking matches, murmured Prometheus, blushing”⁴⁸³. Again, his interlocutors keep insisting, until he calls his eagle. The bird bursts through the window and Prometheus immediately offers him his liver, although it is anything but a dangerous monster

⁴⁷⁷ Note that this is actually some decades before Freud’s *Acquisition*.

⁴⁷⁸ André Gide, *Prometheus Illbound*, trans. Lilian Rothermere (London: Chatto & Windus, 1919), 15.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 35–36.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 21.

– it is a pathetic, ugly and meagre birdie. “That ... an eagle! — Not much!! at the most, a conscience”⁴⁸⁴ Cocles exclaims.

A couple of days later Prometheus finds himself imprisoned as he did not have a licence for making matches. His eagle is still miserable and unhealthy, but he feeds the bird, who the next day is embellished with three more feathers – Prometheus “sobbed with tenderness” and, “enamoured of the future beauty of his eagle, gave him each day more to eat”⁴⁸⁵. Prometheus’ feelings for his “sweet eagle” grow stronger and stronger, even though he himself becomes very thin and weak. Finally, the eagle becomes so powerful that he flies Prometheus out of prison. Prometheus gives a public lecture about his pretty eagle and Damocles and Cocles attend his speech. He states first, that *everyone must have an eagle* and second, that *everyone has an eagle*. Prometheus relates the audience his history. He used to be “unconscious and beautiful, happy and naked and unaware”⁴⁸⁶. But he pitied humans: “[t]hey lived in such darkness; I invented for them certain kinds of fire, and from that moment my eagle began. And it is since that day that I have become aware that I am naked”⁴⁸⁷. Prometheus tells the public that he has “passionately, wildly, and deplorably loved men — and I have done so much for them — one can almost say that I have made them; for before, what were they?”⁴⁸⁸. He made them conscious of existence and having made them in his own image, in every human there was some expectancy, “in each one was the eagle’s egg”⁴⁸⁹. However, he did not want to give them mere consciousness of existence, but also a reason for it.

“So I gave them Fire, flame and all the arts which a flame nourishes. By warming their minds, I brought forth the devouring faith in progress. [...] No more belief in good, but the morbid hope for better. The belief in progress, gentlemen, that was their eagle. Our eagle is our reason for existence, gentlemen”⁴⁹⁰.

Prometheus continues that when his eagle was born, he no longer loved humans. “I love that which devours them. — Now what devours man? — His eagle”⁴⁹¹. He states that everybody should not only have an eagle but also *love* it and devote themselves to it, like he does. “But I tell you this: the eagle will devour us anyway — vice or virtue — duty or passion, — cease to be commonplace and you cannot escape it”⁴⁹².

⁴⁸⁴ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 51–52.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁸⁹ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁹² Ibid., 73–74.

Then Damocles becomes very sick and so Prometheus and the waiter go and try to convince the Miglionaire to visit him and introduce himself to him, but he refuses. Zeus tells Prometheus about himself: he is very rich. “You belong to me; he belongs to me; everything belongs to me”⁴⁹³. Moreover, “[i]t is only I, [...] who can act with absolute disinterestedness; for man it is impossible”⁴⁹⁴. He admits that he loves gambling and tells them his most recent game – the one of Cocles and Damocles. Before they leave, the waiter tells the banker that people call him God. “— I let them say so”⁴⁹⁵, says the latter. Prometheus asks him whether he would be so kind as to show him his eagle, but Zeus responds he does not have one.

“Eagles (and he laughed), eagles! It is I who give them.
Prometheus was stupefied.”⁴⁹⁶

Damocles’ situation grows worse and worse. The banknote has become a true torture and he dies. Prometheus feels guilty and is afraid that Damocles’ disease was evoked by his speech. He tells Cocles that it made him change his mind about his bird. At the funeral, people are astonished when they see him – “he was unrecognizable; he was fat, fresh, smiling”⁴⁹⁷. Prometheus starts another speech and tells them that it is because of Damocles, “or rather thanks to his death, that now I have killed my eagle.... — Killed his eagle!!! cried every one”⁴⁹⁸.

After the funeral Prometheus invites Cocles and the waiter to go have lunch. Still astonished, Cocles asks Prometheus whether he truly killed his eagle, and whether they are about to eat him. “Do you doubt it? said Prometheus. Have you looked at me? [...] — He fed on me long enough. I think now that it is my turn”⁴⁹⁹. The eagle tastes ambrosial – at the last course, they even consume his *health*. Cocles wonders:

“— Of his past beauty, what is there left.
— I have kept all his feathers.

*It is with one of them that I write this little book. May you rare friend, not find it too foolish*⁵⁰⁰.

⁴⁹³ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid., 83.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid. One should know that in French, Zeus is asked whether he is “le *bon Dieu*” (my emphasis), which even strengthens the irony of the phrase as he is obviously anything but ‘bon’. Further, the capital D (or G) and the original ‘bon’ strongly suggest that it is not so much the antique Father of gods but the Christian God that Gide means to satirise – or even assault – here.

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid., 95.

⁴⁹⁸ Ibid., 96.

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid., 110.

This last sentence of the book suggests that Gide himself realised quite well that the story is pretty intangible. It is then rather unsurprising that there are quite some different critical interpretations of the book. Trousson emphasises it must have been a sacrilege. Despite its obscure, satirical and playful character, the short tale challenges the time's rigid religious ideas and practices and poses fundamental questions. Trousson speaks of *Prometheus Illbound* as “une ‘fable’ de la destinée humaine” and Prometheus is wondering about nothing less than “le sens de l’existence”⁵⁰¹ when he, just after he came down from the Caucasus, asks the waiter about the promenading Parisians: “[w]here are they going?” and “[w]hat are they looking for?”⁵⁰².

Pamela Genova reads the text from a different point of view and highlights its “veiled motif”⁵⁰³. The relation between the Titan and his beautiful, “sweet eagle”, references to Oscar Wilde’s work, Prometheus’ love for humanity, and many other things make her draw the conclusion that “[t]hat which is hidden beneath the formal complexity of *Le Prométhée mal enchaîné* is homosexuality”.⁵⁰⁴

There are many other analyses but all interpreters will nevertheless agree on the fact that what *is* obvious about *Prometheus Illbound* is that it is radically deconstructed and transformed. Therefore, one should probably not aspire to find the ‘right’ interpretation or the ‘true’ meaning of the text. As far as there is one, it shall be the book’s very multidimensionality, irony, elusiveness and “foolishness”. The myth’s traditional storyline and symbols are reversed and ridiculed as much as possible. The eagle is a complicated figure who is rather some pitiful parrot than a frightening torturer. Zeus/God is merely a fat millionaire who entertains himself by playing games behind the scenes. He does some nasty gambling with people’s lives – “more like a regular in a casino than a sovereign god”⁵⁰⁵. Tortuous enchainment is changed into boring ease and boulevard strolling: Prometheus is just a bit done with all the braces and banisters – he stretches, frees himself and walks down the boulevard. Even one of the major events of the classical narrative, the theft of fire, is satirised – stealing a divine flame at the risk of one’s life is degraded to making matches. The most important subject of ridicule of course, is the heroic thief himself. Prometheus is parodied as a timid, insecure and hyper-emotional creature and

⁵⁰¹ Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 435.

⁵⁰² Gide, *Prometheus Illbound*, 15–16.

⁵⁰³ Pamela A. Genova, “Myth as Play: André Gide’s *Le Prométhée Mal Enchaîné*,” *French Forum* 20, no. 2 (May 1995): 202.

⁵⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 211. Genova suggests that behind the eagle “lies the more burning symbol of the libido. The relationship Prometheus carries on with his eagle can be seen as that between rational man and irrational desire; when one gains control, the other loses ground” (*Ibid.*, 215.). Interestingly, in particular her emphasis on the libido and the relation or struggle between human rationality and irrational desire strongly remind of Freud’s interpretation of the myth.

⁵⁰⁵ Genova, “Myth as Play: André Gide’s *Le Prométhée Mal Enchaîné*,” 203.

the only time he truly attempts to save a human – Damocles – this proves to be a plain failure.

However, despite its satirical metamorphosis, Gide's myth still encompasses many traditional elements and themes. For a start, there is Prometheus' role of pitying creator: he "deplorably loved men" and made them in his own image. Further, his shameful job is making matches, but his gift of fire to humankind is nevertheless present and important. He "gave them Fire, flame and all the arts which a flame nourishes": the seemingly usual hope and belief in progress. His gift's value is, however, radically reversed, for it results in humanity's "*morbid hope*" for and "*devouring faith*"⁵⁰⁶ in progress.

Other essential and interrelated themes are religion, ethics and the human being. Through the figure of Zeus, Gide satirises the Christian God and the religious dogma's, as well as the belief in human liberty. The Millionaire is "acting gratuitously" at the expense of others, solely for fun, if not merely because of the fact that he *can*. He is the only one who knows full liberty, as he is the only one capable of acting amorally, disinterestedly and absurdly, without any reason or motive whatsoever. The human, however, as the waiter tells Prometheus, "is the only being incapable of acting gratuitously" and later he exclaims "[a] gratuitous act! There is nothing more demoralizing"⁵⁰⁷. The section's essence is first, that God is not benevolent, but uncaring, amoral, irresponsible and unjust; and second, that in contrast, human nature is fundamentally moral. Whether doing right or wrong, the human always needs to act within an ethical framework. An arbitrary, if not absurd fate is imposed on him, one for which he cannot find any reason or purpose but is forced to deal with anyway since he is conscious of his existence. And this condition is the result of Prometheus' gift. He illuminated the unconscious darkness of the human mind, but thereby limited the freedom of humans, who from then on need to have a motive, take responsibility and justify their actions.

Clearly, the traditional gifts of fire and the arts are present, but again entirely inverted by Gide. The human's unique qualities and characteristics are her reason for existence – even *what makes her human*, but instead of enabling her to infinitely evolve, they are swallowing her up completely. In other words, her consciousness is her eagle – or perhaps even better: her *conscience* is, like Cocles exclaimed when he met the bird. This eagle consists in the norms and laws that each conscious/conscientious human has somehow accepted to incarcerate herself in, in order to have a reason to live. Note that Gide does not merely criticise religious morals, but laws from *any* limiting moral system that comes to function in some quasi-godly way. Despite the fact that the rules and dogmas are enchaining and torturing, people endure them nevertheless. They even *devote* themselves to such laws, for they believe and hope that if one "nourishes" them well these can provide progress and become very beautiful.

⁵⁰⁶ My emphasis.

⁵⁰⁷ Gide, *Prometheus Illbound*, 20–21.

Such devotion of the human to his restrictions is underlined when Prometheus' says he does not love humans but "that which devours them". For though being their alleged 'benefactor', Prometheus himself also represents the human. From the day of his gift of consciousness his "eagle began" – from that day, something has been limiting Prometheus, feeding on him, something he loves nevertheless. And "it is since that day that I have become aware that I am naked": he/the human is an essentially incomplete and vulnerable being – interestingly, reminiscent of Nietzsche's and Freud's concept of humanity.

However, the theme of rebellion is certainly not absent. As pathetic as Prometheus may be at the beginning, he is nevertheless an independent figure who easily frees himself from his chains and – through speeches and feasting – rebels against Zeus. In the end, the Titan liberates himself from the limits imposed on him by God – it was him who gave him his eagle – and finally manages to exert positive influence on human destiny. Prometheus destroys his limits, nourishes himself with them and takes control of his own life. Gide's point is that people are not completely impotent with respect to their restrictions: they can decide to *eat* their eagle and free themselves from the set of rules imposed on them from outside. The author appeals to humans to emancipate themselves from whatever doctrine or ethical system is oppressing them in the name of some illusory consciousness. According to Gide, says Trousson, humans will never reach some absolute liberty, for human action is indeed limited by their own responsibility. But this is not necessarily something bad: "Le Prométhée gidien est responsable; il n'est pas coupable. Dans ce sens, il est un révolté, contre le dogme, la tradition, les classes sociales, les principes établis"⁵⁰⁸. The human's freedom may still be limited, but this is by his *individual* responsibility, founded upon nothing but his personal autonomy and morality.

A last and fundamental characteristic of the classical myth that cannot be missed is *ambiguity*. The ironical narration of the story already invites ambivalence, for obviously it does not need to be serious or logical – on the contrary. As said, Prometheus is shy yet independent, clumsy yet creative, loving humanity yet encouraging their misery. The eagle is both despotic and needed, cruel and loved. The relation between the two – whether homosexual or not – is sometimes encouraged, at other times rejected. In fact, the very text *itself* is one great ambiguous play. Intertextual and structural games confuse the reader as he is taken on the adventure of the author's experiments. The story is seriously remoulded and the text is told in a plurality of styles: it starts with a parabolic, third person tale (Zeus meeting Cocles) but in the next section the anonymous narrator speaks in first person. The chapter headings are in general mere Roman numbers, yet the subtitles are often placed at random locations, such as in the middle of a conversation, or one encounters a curious heading such as "a chapter while waiting the next one"⁵⁰⁹. There are more of such

⁵⁰⁸ Trousson, *Le Thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne...*, 438.

⁵⁰⁹ Gide, *Prometheus Illbound*, 54.

metafictional comments, such as the last sentence of the book when the reader – “you, rare friend” – is told it is written with one of the eagle’s feathers. In short, in *Prometheus Illbound* the radical transformation of the classical myth ends up in a disorienting collection of ambiguous images. Yet not merely this myth is ridiculed, but the storyline as such – *any* narrative in fact – is. Apart from an ironical subversion of the Prometheus myth, Gide’s book is one satirical deconstruction of a conventional textual structure as such: a mixture of parables, anecdotes, inverted symbols, abrupt interruptions and metafictional commentary. This is a level and a kind of ambiguity we did not see before in the many earlier versions of the myth.

3.7.2. Kafka

Though radically different from Gide’s, another strongly modified, ambiguous and even obscure version of the Promethean story was written by Franz Kafka (1883 – 1924). In fact, he presents four versions of the myth in a ‘short story’ or parable which is concise enough to quote in its entirety:

“Prometheus

There are four legends concerning Prometheus:

According to the first he was clamped to a rock in the Caucasus for betraying the secrets of the gods to men, and the gods sent eagles to feed on his liver, which was perpetually renewed.

According to the second Prometheus, goaded by the pain of the tearing beaks, pressed himself deeper and deeper into the rock until he became one with it.

According to the third his treachery was forgotten in the course of thousands of years, forgotten by the gods, the eagles, forgotten by himself.

According to the fourth everyone grew weary of the meaningless affair [*des grundlos Gewordenen*]. The gods grew weary, the eagles grew weary, the wound closed wearily.

There remains the inexplicable mass of rock. The legend tries to explain the inexplicable [*das Unerklärliche*]. As it comes out of the substratum of truth [*einem Wahrheitsgrund*] it has in turn to end in the inexplicable”⁵¹⁰.

At first sight, Kafka’s *Prometheus* (1918) seems as inexplicable as the rock. The first version of the myth is still rather recognisable. But the second is one we have not seen before and with respect to the third and fourth – in particular in the light of the last two sentences – one wonders whether these are still about the Titan at all. Whatever the text’s central subject is, certain seems to be that, as we read in the fourth version, the Promethean “affair” somehow lost its meaningful foundation – as far as it has ever had one in the first place. It literally lost its ‘ground’, for “*das grundlos Gewordene*” could also be translated as “that

⁵¹⁰ Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 432. The original German between brackets is added by me.

which has become groundless” or, again invoking different connotations, as “that which has come into existence without a reason”: there was no reason or ground for its becoming. What remains of the meaning-, ground-, or reasonless affair is “*das Unerklärliche*”, “the inexplicable”. Yet despite the text’s obscurity, re-reading it should enable us to reveal at least *some* of its hidden meaning – in fact, groundlessness or inexplicability seems to be *Prometheus*’ very point.

According to Svetlana Boym the central theme of *Prometheus* is storytelling and contemporary oblivion:

“there is no longer Prometheus bound or unbound but Prometheus forgotten. [...] We are in the modern era when [...] the common yardsticks of tradition can no longer be taken for granted. [...] Kafka blurs the boundaries between Greek myths [...] and the Jewish tradition of Midrash and Hassidic tales”⁵¹¹.

Blending various narrative traditions, Kafka makes the story a “cross-cultural fable”⁵¹² and the “ground of truth” – *Wahrheitsgrund* – “a space of long-term cultural interpretations”⁵¹³. “The inexplicable”, or as Boym translates it, the “unelucidated”, or the “unenlightened” requires enlightenment. “[T]he parable urges us to confront our limits and understand what we don’t understand”⁵¹⁴. Complete possession of the truth is not possible, but this does not mean that there is none at all; we do have some freedom of interpretation. Boym quotes another aphorism from Kafka, in which he compares the truth with light that falls upon a theatrical mask. Boym explains that the mask “refracts the light of truth, casting short shadows. [...] What remains is the shadow play of agnostic truth”⁵¹⁵. Yet the fragmented character of truth should not make one understand the parable in a circular sense – that is, from the inexplicable to the inexplicable – for reading it attentively reveals “a parabolic spiral in which every interpretation re-marks the previous one, foreshadows the next but also remains singular”⁵¹⁶. In the end, by means of the multiplicity of interpretations and obscure, *unerklärliche* truths, according to Boym even in modern times Kafka furthers the parabolic and never-ending process of storytelling.

György Kálmán agrees that *Prometheus* is about myth, interpretation and truth. He observes that the text’s first sentence and the very fact that there are four versions of the myth already questions their truth. Yet “it is not the truth concerning Prometheus”⁵¹⁷, the parable is rather an ironic subversion of

⁵¹¹ Svetlana Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 66–67.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 67.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67–68.

⁵¹⁷ György Kálmán, “Kafka’s Prometheus,” *Neohelicon* XXXIV, no. 1 (2007): 53.

“the machinery of working of the mythology, by [...] deforming the conventional form of myths. His myths are, in fact, parodies of the myth itself, experimental transformations of mythical thinking, challenges of the traditional ways of telling stories”⁵¹⁸.

Actually, the assumption that it is a parable should even be reviewed – “it has the form of a parable, but one cannot infer to any deep or transcendent idea from it”⁵¹⁹. Yet focusing on Kafka’s emphasis on the “inexplicable”, he does discover a fifth legend in *Prometheus*:

“a legend on the useless or defected nature of legends. However we try, we cannot interpret the phenomena of the nature [sic], it implies; it is in vain that people invent explanations for strange or obtrusive objects. The legend, then, is about the hopelessness of the legends. The parable suggests that we cannot use parables”⁵²⁰.

In the end, *Prometheus* is about explanation as such: legends are hopeless, parables are unusable and it is characteristic of myth is that it leaves much unexplained: the stories themselves require explanation. And texts about reality are indeed always interpretable, but the point is that reality itself is not. The rock as such cannot be explained, nor can the ground of truth.

“It just exists. It is something given. An interpretation is always focused on texts, that is, it is always an interpretation of interpretations – ultimately, an interpretation of the interpretation of the world around us. [...] Reality or truth itself must remain and will remain inexplicable”⁵²¹.

Hans Blumenberg reads *Prometheus* in a similar yet even more radical way: Kafka’s parable tries to overcome myth *as such*. Interestingly, according to Blumenberg this puts his text on a par with Gide’s *Prometheus Illbound*. For both embody the attempt “to bring myth to an end”⁵²² by means of grotesque modifications and fundamental reversals so that the classical myth can hardly be recognised. In the words of Blumenberg’s translator they end myth “by the indirect means of bringing one particular great myth to an end”⁵²³. The multiplicity of interpretations, says Blumenberg, is of an ironical nature; it “sets [...] relativism aside, overcomes it by means of the evidence of completeness: What could still be said in addition, what could be added to these ‘versions’?”⁵²⁴. The rock Prometheus becomes one with, the groundlessness, the forgetting and the weariness do no longer need clarification at all. “What remains [...] is the stone, because it is ground [*Grund*, “earth”] and therefore needs no ground

⁵¹⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 53.

⁵²⁰ Ibid., 56.

⁵²¹ Ibid., 57.

⁵²² Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 263.

⁵²³ Ibid., xxxii.

⁵²⁴ Ibid., 633.

[*Grund*, “reason”]: not needing explanation is the ground of its incontestability”⁵²⁵. Kafka’s inexplicable rock should be read as a “metaphor of an original stratum underlying all events, which itself no longer requires justification”⁵²⁶. The point is that if there is no longer any need for explanation or clarification, there is no longer any need for myth as such.

Now despite the differences between their interpretations, Boym, Kálmán and Blumenberg all share the conviction that *Prometheus* is about storytelling or mythology as such – an interesting and persuasive argument. However, another idea subscribed to by all three is not as convincing: the idea that the Titan’s story is nothing but a *means* – even an “indirect means” according to Blumenberg’s translator – to bring forward some transcending thought. The myth is barely paid any attention to in its individuality. But why, one could wonder, did Kafka choose *this* story in particular? Although Boym does focus on the metaphor of light, no connection is drawn with Promethean fire. And as she observes, Kafka “blurs boundaries” when merging Greek and Jewish storytelling, turning it into a “cross-cultural fable”. Yet what remains unnoticed is the Promethean character of this boundary crossing: Kafka himself takes a rebellious, Promethean position when radically deforming and even satirising the archaic myth. Further, although Kálmán’s statement is plausible that Kafka’s writing is not about “the truth concerning Prometheus”, Kálmán does not at any point consider the relation between “the inexplicable” and the Titan’s gift of knowledge. *Prometheus*’ overarching message may be about interpretation or legend per se, but it is not merely a means. An essential element of the myth is of course the Promethean fire, symbolising knowledge, wisdom and enlightenment. Even though fire or wisdom is not explicitly named in *Prometheus*, the fact that Kafka speaks of *das Unerklärliche* can hardly be a coincidence. For although it literally means the ‘inexplicable’ it nevertheless contains the word ‘klar’, which can mean ‘lucid’, ‘clear’, and ‘unobscured’, which is probably the reason why Boym chose to translate it as the “unelucidated”. By means of its multiplicity of interpretations, the parable does not only question or ridicule mythology as such, but in particular this specific myth which proudly presents the human capacity to enlighten himself, to know – that is, to acquire the truth. However, paradoxically Kafka states nevertheless that *das Unerklärliche* comes out of the *Wahrheitsgrund*, literally the ‘ground of truth’, which thus exists nonetheless. Confusingly, he combines an allegedly fatal rejection of the human possession of the Promethean gift of knowledge with the claim that the ‘inexplicable’ is rooted in truth after all. Kafka does thereby confirm that the human has the capacity to at least *search* for knowledge and truth. Interestingly, this disorientating combination gives the parable a high degree of ambiguity, an essential feature of the classical myth of Prometheus. In short, *Prometheus* may not reveal the truth about the Titan, but once again, it

⁵²⁵ Ibid., 635.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

is not a mere means or “one particular great myth” which also could have been about Oedipus or Herakles. The Promethean themes of rebellion, boundary crossing, enlightenment and knowledge are essential for Kafka’s parable. One could call his cynical deformation of the myth an act of Promethean courage, which turns him into a true benefactor of humanity. For Kafka uncovers the agnostic character of truth, the vainness of the legend, and the inscrutability of reality, thereby helping the human to face the rock of the inexplicable. On top of it all, not only do the contradictory messages about truth possess the characteristically Promethean quality of ambivalence, but so does the contrast between the parable’s content – its message about the incompleteness, futility, or even *end* of myth as such – and the parable itself. For even though it may not have been Kafka’s aim, instead of finishing myth as such he carries on the telling of a *specific* story which is hard, if not impossible, to end.

3.7.3. Camus

Someone who joins Gide and Kafka in their ironical and transformational approach to the Prometheus myth is Albert Camus (1913-1960). Like the other two, Camus uses traditional mythology to address modernity, yet focusing on more practical topics such as modern technology. And when it comes to bringing things to an end: not only God or myth is pictured as senseless; to Camus the entire world is. There is no divine order or destiny anymore today – at least not one of any use – only a terrestrial, a *human* one. God has become superfluous. As Camus explains in *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1951), the classical Prometheus has disappeared; he lost all of his metaphysical characteristics.

“Prometheus alone has become god and reigns over the solitude of men. But from Zeus he has gained only solitude and cruelty; he is no longer Prometheus, he is Caesar. The real, the eternal Prometheus has now assumed the aspect of one of his victims”⁵²⁷.

That is, in fact the Promethean ‘god’ has become human and his rebellion consists precisely in taking God’s place on earth. In an undeified world, meaning disappears: without a heaven and a determined destiny, life lacks significance and becomes absurd. Yet simultaneously that means that the human himself becomes God, now that the latter does not exist anymore. This results in an absurd form of freedom, for as Camus tells us in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) “[t]o become god is merely to be free on this earth, not to serve an immortal being”⁵²⁸. In her section on Kafka, Boym states that “[h]is

⁵²⁷ Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, trans. Anthony Bower (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 245.

⁵²⁸ Albert Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, trans. Justin O’Brian (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983), 108.

Promethean storyteller and Camus's Sisyphus are twin brothers"⁵²⁹. Kafka's concept of the inexplicable, the "agnostic truth" and his never-ending – though positive – parabolic storytelling remind Boym of Camus' concepts of the absurd and meaninglessness and their interminable – though positive – character. For in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, it is that hero's never-ending destiny with which Camus characterises human fate: Sisyphus' life is useless and meaningless, but it is nevertheless *his* lack of use and meaning and *his* senseless liberty, which, paradoxically, does create some absurd form of sense.

"His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. [...] This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. [...] The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy"⁵³⁰.

In fact, not only God, but virtually all metaphysical ideals or whatever form of spiritual salvation are found to be useless – the modern human focuses on the practical, on technique, on the machine. Now that all power is in human hands, with respect to science and technology nothing seems unrealisable anymore. However, with civilisation's entire focus on the practical, what happened to the ancient (humanist) ideals, values, and culture? Can today's society in its allegedly 'Promethean' progress live without them, left with nothing but rather *inhuman* faculties such as developing atomic bombs? In *Prometheus in the Underworld* (1954) Camus addresses the issue: "What does Prometheus mean to man today?"⁵³¹. The "God-defying rebel" could be considered to represent the modern human, says Camus, yet simultaneously "something suggests that this victim of persecution is still among us and that we are still deaf to the great cry of human revolt of which he gives the solitary signal"⁵³². Prometheus was not just the great rebel, but also humankind's benefactor. Not only did he give humanity technology, but also fire, liberty and art. Today, however,

"mankind needs and cares only for technology. We rebel through our machines, holding art and what art implies as an obstacle and a symbol of slavery. But what characterises Prometheus is that he cannot separate machines from art. He believes that both souls and bodies can be freed at the same time. Man today believes that we must first of all free the body, even if the mind must suffer temporary death. But can the mind die temporarily?"⁵³³

Instead of God, humans chose *history* to be their judge, yet without attention for art, beauty and the soul they do not master it but enslave themselves to it. Since the war began, all of Europe is in misery, in a (nonreligious) *hell* – and so

⁵²⁹ Boym, *Another Freedom: The Alternative History of an Idea*, 67–68.

⁵³⁰ Camus, *The Myth Of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, 123.

⁵³¹ Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 138.

⁵³² *Ibid.*

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 139.

is Prometheus. Humanity betrays him and Camus calls passionately for a return to the Promethean spirit, liberty and enlightenment. Technology and art cannot be separated, nor can body and mind – and neither should they. The human's suffering is a fact, and so is her blindness to beauty, freedom and the mind. However, in the end she does have the capacity, courage and strength to face her fate and reject history's blind justice "in order to replace it as much as possible with the justice conceived by the mind. This is how Prometheus returns in our century"⁵³⁴. We can be our own saviours, but only if we release the Titan from the underworld and embrace him in all his qualities and gifts. Promethean life is a life lived in beauty and liberty, with a view to not only the body and technique, but also the mind and soul. For

"one serves nothing in man if one does not serve the whole man. If he is hungry for bread and heather, and if it is true that bread is the more necessary, let us learn how to keep the memory of heather alive. In the thunder and lightning of the gods, the chained hero keeps his quiet faith in man. This is how he is harder than his rock and more patient than his vulture. His long stubbornness has more meaning for us than his revolt against the gods. Along with his admirable determination to separate and exclude nothing, which always has and always will reconcile mankind's suffering with the springtimes of the world"⁵³⁵.

Salvation lies in the Promethean patience to live the suffering and absurdity of life while stubbornly, based on our pretty memories, keeping faith in beauty and happiness. For even though the modern human lives under the illusion that art and technology *can* be parted, in the end beauty, happiness and the soul are inseparable from the machine.

3.7.4. Anders

Another serious commentary on modern technology is developed in the writings of the Jewish philosopher Günther Anders (1902-1992). His theory is concrete and explicit. Motivated by real, historical events such as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, Anders strongly criticises the technology-driven society and its negative effects on humanity. In *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen* (1956), he raises almost literally the same question as Camus: "Der heutige Prometheus fragt: Wer bin ich schon?"⁵³⁶. Just as Camus, he laments the modern human's exclusive focus on technology and the resulting dangerous inventions and he investigates what happened to Prometheus' magnificent and creative powers. Yet unlike Camus, Anders does not believe that now that it has come into force, the hazardous process can be reversed. He has a very

⁵³⁴ Ibid., 141.

⁵³⁵ Ibid., 142.

⁵³⁶ Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit Des Menschen, I. Über Die Seele Im Zeitalter Der Zweiten Industriellen Revolution* (München: C. H. Beck, 2010), 23.

pessimistic image of the future: our ‘enlightenment’ and technological ‘progress’ have developed into a (potential) self-staged apocalypse, the symbol of which is the atomic bomb.

Anders’ theory diverges in significant ways from the other 20th-century writers discussed above: in its pessimism and concreteness and most importantly in its concept of humankind. The other three call into question the classical idea of the human and so does he. However, even though in an ironic way, particularly Gide and Camus nevertheless develop their own idea of the human essence, somehow characterised by Promethean qualities. According to Gide, the Promethean gifts provide the human with a reason for existence. His qualities may be torturing, but they are special qualities and determine his fundamentally vulnerable, yet *unique* nature. Kafka’s *Prometheus* is perhaps too ambiguous to deduce a full account of human nature from it. But although in Camus’ theory meaning has disappeared and life has become absurd, the human essence is still explicitly defined, namely, as Promethean. Even though the modern human is fundamentally incomplete, he nevertheless has the potential to recover the essentially Promethean qualities – beauty, creativity, liberty – which are the unique characteristics of human nature.

Fundamental for Anders’ theory, however, is that the human being lacks any form of essence. Anders’ anthropology can only have a negative form, according to which any attempt to define human nature is doomed to fail. Humanity’s very essence is *not* having any. Anders argues that the human, or actually the individual is unadapted to the world – a foreigner, an outsider, literally independent. As Paul van Dijk phrases it, he is

“undeniably condemned to detachment from the world. Only later [...] does the person recover the world and come into relationship with it again. [...] The individual [...] must do so in fact, through the roundabout way of cultural mediation”⁵³⁷.

The human’s essential ‘unworldliness’ creates independence and a strange form of liberty. Just as Gide, Kafka and Camus, Anders concludes that meaning has disappeared, which forces the human to shape her own world: “the unadjusted being must create a personal world, because no ready-made world is available. (...) Human beings are unattached not just to this specific world, but to any world at all”⁵³⁸. This results in humankind’s capacity to develop – and change – a large scope of possible creations and ways of living. Yet this structural changeability means that human nature is essentially characterised by instability. And whereas in particular Gide and Camus still have hope for humans to liberate themselves from their self-created laws and blindspots, according to Anders they experience their unstable abstraction as a

⁵³⁷ Paul van Dijk, *Anthropology in the Age of Technology. The Philosophical Contribution of Günther Anders*, trans. Frans Kooymans (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 30.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*

““shock of contingency.” The person’s self-experience is that of being contingent and arbitrary, (...) a human being who is who that person is (though I had wanted to be quite different), “coming from an origin which he can’t do anything with, but which he must identify himself with here and now””⁵³⁹.

Whereas Anders’ description of the human as essentially abstracted, independent and non-fixated still may sound somehow as a positive definition of human nature, van Dijk emphasises it should not be understood in that way. It does not matter what concepts he uses to characterise the person,

“ – they may never be regarded as a determination of the human essence. [Anders] is firmly convinced that, after the “Hiroshima happening” of 1945, the changing of personal manifestations is henceforth without any permanent substance or essential core”⁵⁴⁰.

As Anders already stated at a seminar in Los Angeles in 1942, “artificiality is the nature of the human being”; “the demand of the human being exceeds from the very start the supply of the world”. Therefore, “humanity must create for itself a world which satisfies its needs. [...] The artificiality of humankind increases as it becomes a product of its own products. Since humanity is incapable of meeting the requirements of its own products [...], a discrepancy arises between human beings and their products”.⁵⁴¹ In his paper ‘Theses for the Atomic Age’ (1962) Anders will call this *The Promethean Discrepancy* (“das prometheische Gefälle”). The enlightened hero of creativity and technology has fallen. Human beings today have become “*Inverted Utopians*”:

“The basic dilemma of our age is that “We are smaller than ourselves,” incapable of mentally realizing the realities which we ourselves have produced. Therefore we might call ourselves “inverted Utopians”: while ordinary Utopians are unable to actually produce what they are able to visualize, we are unable to visualize what we are actually producing”⁵⁴².

⁵³⁹ Ibid., 31. Van Dijk quotes from an article by Anders called ‘Der Hungermarsch’ (The Hunger March) published in *Die Sammlung* (The Collection), 1936, 2:6, pp. 294-314. Interestingly, *Die Sammlung* was a monthly ‘emigrant’ magazine with André Gide as one of its patrons.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., 33.

⁵⁴¹ I rely on van Dijk’s quotes of Anders’ conference paper (Ibid., 36–37.).

⁵⁴² Günther Anders, “Theses for the Atomic Age,” *The Massachusetts Review* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1962): 496. Anders includes the German version of the paper – ‘Thesen zum Atomzeitalter’ – in *Endzeit Und Zeitende. Gedanken Über Die Atomare Situation* (München: C. H. Beck, 1972). In German, the quote is as follows: “Dies also das Grund-Dilemma unseres Zeitalters: *Wir sind kleiner als wir selbst*, nämlich unfähig, uns von dem von uns selbst Gemachten ein Bild zu machen. Insofern sind wir *invertierte Utopisten*: während Utopisten dasjenige, was sie sich vorstellen, nicht herstellen können, können wir uns dasjenige, was wir herstellen, nicht vorstellen” (Ibid., 96.).

Today's dichotomy is thus no longer one such as between body and mind, but between our *Herstellungs-* and *Vorstellungsleistung* – our capacity to produce and imagine. We can no longer imagine the immense potential of the techniques we developed. We have been so successful in applying our technological capabilities that we lost our overview and our control of our artefacts. The title and subtitle of the first volume of *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. Über die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* ('The Antiquatedness of the Human Being. On the Soul in the Age of the Second Industrial Revolution') reveal Anders' idea of humanity in the modern world: human life has become antiquated, a form of life lagging behind the technological reality of the day. The subtitle of the work's second volume, *Über die Zerstörung des Lebens im Zeitalter der dritten industriellen Revolution* ('On the Destruction of Life in the Age of the Third Industrial Revolution'), reveals the dystopian character of Anders' theory. In *Endzeit und Zeitende. Gedanken über die atomare Situation* ('Final Time and the End of Time. Thoughts on the Atomic Situation' (1972)), he phrases it in the following way:

"What we constantly aim at is to bring about something that can function without us and our assistance, tools by which we make ourselves superfluous, by which we eliminate and 'liquidate' ourselves. It does not matter that this final goal has hardly been achieved yet. What matters is the trend. And its motto is: without us"⁵⁴³.

Humanity's creations have outgrown it. This, says Anders in *Die Antiquiertheit (I)*, fills humanity with what he calls *Prometheische Scham* (*Promethean shame*): "*Scham für der 'beschämend' hohen Qualität der selbgemachten Dinge*"⁵⁴⁴. That is, the humans' being-in-the-world today is characterised by shame for the "shamefully high quality" of the things they fabricated themselves. What Anders describes as "prometheischer Trotz" (Promethean stubbornness or defiance) consists in the refusal to owe anything and particularly oneself, to others; and "prometheischer Stolz" (Promethean pride), in owing everything, and particularly oneself, exclusively to oneself. Yet this attitude, characteristic of the 19th century, has nearly disappeared. Prometheus' triumph has been too complete, so that now, facing his own handiwork, the Promethean pride is being replaced with a feeling of deficiency and distress.

"Prometheus hat gewissermaßen zu triumphal gesiegt, so triumphal, daß er nun, konfrontiert mit seinem eigenen Werke, den Stolz [...] abzutun beginnt, um ihn durch

⁵⁴³ Here I rely on van Dijk's translation (p. 34). The original (German) text is as follows: "Denn worauf wir abzielen, ist ja stets, etwas zu erzeugen, was unsere Gegenwart und Hilfe entbehren und ohne uns klaglos funktionieren könnte – und das heißt ja nichts anderes als Geräte, durch deren Funktionieren wir uns überflüssig machen, wir uns ausschalten, wir uns "liquidieren". Daß dieser Zielzustand immer nur approximativ erreicht wird, das ist gleichgültig. Was zählt, ist die Tendenz. Und deren Parole heißt eben: "ohne uns" (Anders, *Endzeit Und Zeitende. Gedanken Über Die Atomare Situation*, 199.).

⁵⁴⁴ Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit Des Menschen, I. Über Die Seele Im Zeitalter Der Zweiten Industriellen Revolution*, 23.

das Gefühl eigener Minderwertigkeit und Jämmerlichkeit zu ersetzen. Wer *bin* ich schon?“ fragt der Prometheus von heute, der Hofzwerg seines eigenen Maschinenparks, “wer bin *ich* schon?”⁵⁴⁵.

“Who *am* I after all?”; “Who am *I* after all?“, today’s Prometheus asks desperately. In their daily confrontations with the perfection of their self-created technological equipment – its strength, reliability, accuracy and durability – humans are forced to face their own imperfection. The contemporary humans feel that artifices have taken over their position of the most perfect, unique and superior being. They are ashamed to not have been made themselves, but to have been *born*, to be the outcome of a blind, accidental, illogical and obviously highly antiquated process of birth. Their aim is to overcome their inferiority, their contingency, their nature, and attain the perfection of the artifice.

When we look at his use of the myth, what is remarkable is that Anders, both when speaking of “Promethean discrepancy” and “Promethean shame” – and despite the fact that ‘discrepancy’ and ‘shame’ are negative concepts – employs only one image of Prometheus, namely the positive 19th century one of the creative, enlightened, progressive and boundary-crossing hero. It is this positive and proud self-image that fell and was brought to shame. At first sight, other typical pictures of the Titan such as the hubristic rebel or the thief that should be punished are not present. However, implicitly they are. That is, Anders explicitly emphasises that he does not want to make any moral judgement about the actions of humankind – even human ethics has lost its meaning. But it is a fact that humans, setting themselves hazardous (and thus perhaps hubristic) aims, have created their own punishment – or their own downfall, to use the image of Icarus Anders refers to below. Ashamed of their defects, humans are suffering just as Prometheus. They have enchained themselves to the rock of the modern tool – and *for good*. Actually, if we think of one of Kafka’s versions, the human even wishes to become *one* with the rock. For as Anders explains, today’s human has “das Begehren [...] ein self-made man, ein Produkt zu werden”⁵⁴⁶. He desires his own “Verdinglichung” – his own “reification”.⁵⁴⁷ The Promethean shame is not so much a feeling towards other people, but towards the thing, the product, the machine. Humans wants to conceal their flaws – and their shame itself – doing this paradoxically by making themselves visible. For, they reason, those who remain visible will not be suspected of shame. According to Anders, a simple example of this visible “self-reification” (“Selbstverdinglichung”) is make-up: ‘naked’ nails, for instance, have become unthinkable. They have only become presentable once they have become equivalent to the “device” (“das Gerät”) the fingers equipped themselves with. The whole human body has become “naked” in a new sense, namely, as “unworked” (“unbearbeitet”) and has become shameful if it has not

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid., 24.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁵⁴⁷ Van Dijk translates this term as “thingification”.

been sufficiently reified. Quoting Nietzsche, Anders states that the human body is something “that must be overcome”⁵⁴⁸. In fact, it has *already* been overcome: being human is something of the past. It is a “faulty construction”⁵⁴⁹ – his thinking capacities, for instance, lag behind computers. By means of the words of an imagined Air Force Instructor, Anders argues that in fact, we could easily reach every planet if it were not for our weak bodies. If it would only have come down to our machines and devices, we could have flown that high. Today’s Icarus does not fall down because of his wax: “Nicht weil das Flügelwachs versagt, stürzt heute Ikarus, sondern weil Ikarus selbst versagt. Könnte er sich selbst als Ballast abwerfen, seine Flügel könnten den Himmel erobern”⁵⁵⁰ – if only he could throw off the ballast that he is himself!

The humans’ shame even leads them to transform *themselves*. Once human beings wanted to be gods, now they want to be equal to machines. Anders observes that they already aim to improve themselves by means of Human Engineering. Humanity is trying to find weak spots or limits which are nevertheless changeable; boundaries that can potentially be crossed. Contemporary humans want to transcend themselves – not so much to reach some supernatural state but rather to the *not-natural-anymore*, the kingdom of the hybrid and the artificial. They leave their natural boundaries, the immature state of being human behind, and work on what one could call their *dehumanization*.

“So “übermenschlich” diese Leistung, gemessen an dem, was dem Leibe eigentlich möglich ist, sein mag, das erhoffte Resultat besteht also in etwas *Untermenschlichem*, in einer reinen Gerätfunktion, in einer isolierten “Fertigkeit”, an der der “wirkliche Mensch” [...] nur noch als in Kauf genommener Appendix hängt”⁵⁵¹.

Robots are no longer worthless or frightening figures, they are the embodiments of human wishes and dreams. To become dehumanized – *under-* instead of *overhuman* – will not be a problem and not even thought to be worth any attention, for this is what is demanded by the machine and thus what befits the human. Interestingly, it seems that Anders already saw, not only the digital revolution coming, but even the *unimaginable* potential of human enhancement today. Later, I will return to this fascinating topic.

⁵⁴⁸ Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit Des Menschen, I. Über Die Seele Im Zeitalter Der Zweiten Industriellen Revolution*, 31.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 42–43.

Conclusion

In this chapter I gave an historical outline of the myth of Prometheus and the many shapes it took in the hands of the many Western philosophers, authors and artists who made it their own. I chronologically treated the relevant texts or artifices and thereby a) established its meaning and role in each text or artifice; b) pointed out significant similarities, dissimilarities and patterns amongst the texts; and c) showed how the myth develops through the ages. From Antiquity a story emerges with a number of core elements, yet it remains very flexible. Some ancients trace the roots of their cultural practices back to this myth, whereas others employ the story to ridicule religion or even themselves. In the era of Augustus the creation theme has become truly popular, although this does not mean the result of the Titan's creativity is always appreciated. When Christianity arises Prometheus the Creator first intermingles with and then is taken over by the Bible's Creator. And more and more what used to be interpreted as religious truths by the classical people the Early Church Fathers explain in allegorical and euhemerist terms. The myth does maintain significance and the parallels between the mythological and biblical narratives are drawn, yet in a more descriptive encyclopaedia context.

Moving towards the early Middle Ages the Prometheus myth slowly recovers its moralising function. In the Renaissance its theological meaning is again taken more seriously and the myth is used to present deep ontological and moral messages about the nature, aim and sense of human life. Human knowledge, cultivation and self-creation are major subjects of discussion when the myth is appealed to and they are explained in positive as well as negative terms.

Towards the scientific revolution knowledge and rationality remain the main themes taken from the Titan's story. Yet they are presented against many different backgrounds: the secularised and practical one of empirical science, the euhemerist framework and the background of the time's social circumstances. Though being the personification of human reason, Prometheus does not become the hero of the Enlightenment. Mythology as such does not conform to the rational spirit of the age. Rousseau is the time's only author who truly concerns himself with the myth but explains it in opposition to the strong Enlightenment spirit as an allegory of the soul-corrupting effect of science and civilisation.

The myth regains its high esteem in the *Sturm und Drang* and Romantic period, this time based on a set of explanations that strongly contrasts with the Enlightenment ones, with artistic creativity, courage, suffering and rebellion as its central themes. In general Prometheus is celebrated in all his qualities, except by Mary Shelley. She does concentrate on the characteristic romantic themes, but approaches the myth from a more critical and questioning perspective.

Prometheus maintains his popularity in the second half of the 19th century and finds himself in more and more radical reinterpretations when the Masters of Suspicion take over. As time passes, the radical refashioning trend only expands and 20th century authors transform the myth up to the point where it is barely recognisable. Irony, abstraction, human nature and later contemporary technology become the main focus of those who tell the myth. Why and how the Prometheus myth never lost people's interest throughout history will be examined in the next chapter.

4. Promethean Functions and Themes

Now that I have investigated a large range of historical references to the Prometheus myth, I believe that I have gained a reliable and satisfying amount of information on the basis of which I can answer the question why especially *this* myth continued to intrigue philosophers, poets, ecclesiasts and many others throughout more than 2700 years – and still does today. What do these references to the Titan tell us about the myth itself? What do the myth's characteristics tell us about the authors' ideas and motivations? In order to answer these questions in this chapter I critically analyse my findings from the previous chapters and produce an overview of the myth's exceptional array of functions and themes and demonstrate their significance in understanding an author's argument and framework. In the first part I determine what are the most important functions of the Prometheus myth; in the second part I explore its specific characteristics and themes. As I will not be able to discuss each work separately, the appendix to this chapter contains two tables with a list of all authors (discussed in chapter 2 and 3) and the functions and themes relevant in their work.

4.1. The Myth – its Nature and Functions

First, we need to ask why it is useful to employ the Prometheus myth in the first place in order to make one's point – what are the myth's specific uses and functions? To answer this question, in the following I will have a look at more general functions of myth which are not necessarily exclusive but, as I will show, particularly relevant to the Prometheus myth. They are all inherently related, which makes it nearly impossible to study them one by one. However, I will nevertheless try to separately discuss the myth's main functions, while keeping in mind their interconnectedness.⁵⁵² Yet before I start treating its functions, I will discuss an attribute of the Prometheus myth that underlies and supports all of them. Something that strikes one immediately is the fact that it is told in times and by artists that diverge from one another to a considerable extent. The fact that we have also seen other ancient myths – such as ones about Herakles, Dionysius or Oedipus – recurring time and again shows that it is not only a Promethean characteristic. Rather, their survival is due to an essential quality of myth as such: *malleability*. The recurrence of the stories is only possible because they are conveniently adaptable to a wide range of societies with their specific historical circumstances, just as to many different personal characters and ideas, which opens up a myriad of conceivable

⁵⁵² I will be speaking of both the functions of myth in general and the functions of the Prometheus myth in particular. In the first case I'll speak of "a myth" or "myth" – that is, *without* definite article – in the second case of "*the* myth" – that is, *with* definite article (or, of course, "the Prometheus myth", "the Titan's story", etc.).

meanings and purposes. Prometheus provides Hesiod with a means to explain human misery, as well as to make his own voice heard. First, his Titan functions as a scapegoat, because of his tricky actions responsible for the harsh life of the people of Hesiod's times. Second, the story enables the poet to lecture both his lazy brother Perses and an external audience on how to live the right life: "Work, you fool Perses. Work the work the gods laid out for men". Many ages later, Boccaccio forms Prometheus into Christian shapes, so that he represents the almighty God-Creator: "both Ovid and Claudian know about him, although not in the religious sense in which Christians understand it". The Titan neatly fits the author's personal interests and ideas as well as his times: he embodies both Boccaccio's concept of the author – Boccaccio considers his writing tasks of a Promethean difficulty, thereby implicitly calling himself a Promethean author – as well as the Christian Creator, perfectly matching the era's beliefs. 450 years later, for Lord Byron the Titan's tale serves as a Romantic ode to the human and his suffering. With the time's despairing political situation in mind, he fashions his Prometheus in a completely distinct way, this time in order to celebrate brave rebellion and encourage the people of his age to resist their tyrants.

Prometheus thus evolves easily from a trickster via the almighty God to a romantic rebel-hero, each time within a story with its own context, explanation and significance. Kafka seems to contradict this significance when he comes up with an obscure set of versions of the Prometheus myth, allegedly in order to demonstrate the essential inexplicability of myth. Yet at the same time he picks the story of the Titan, shapes it according to his personal ideas and thus necessarily assigns it his own meaning. This means that with his apparently incomprehensible set of interpretations Kafka only confirms the significance of the myth and the usefulness of its malleability.

It is this innate flexibility that makes the myth of Prometheus survive all those different era's, each with its own problems, fashions, concepts and beliefs. It can be told in many different ways and may have a social, explanatory, ontological and/or moral function – all essential functions of the Titan's story, each of which I will discuss below.

4.1.1. Myth's Reciprocal Relation with Society

The malleability of myth clearly shows that it is in considerable part dependent on the cultural and political conditions whether the stories are told in one way or another; they are moulded according to the circumstances and thereby reveal a significant bit about the social and historical situation in question. As Ziolkowski puts it, "[t]he modifications of the myth [...] provide a key to the anxieties and hopes of the society that recognizes itself in the mythic model"⁵⁵³.

⁵⁵³ Ziolkowski, *The Sin of Knowledge. Ancient Times and Modern Variations*, 72. At this point Ziolkowski speaks specifically about his three stories – Prometheus, the Biblical Fall and Faust

My research shows indeed that apart from the examples I mentioned above – Hesiod, Boccaccio and Byron – all of the other versions of the Prometheus myth each in its own way reveal significant information about the society's happenings, aspirations and fears. Particularly because of his association with fire, technology and knowledge a genuine Promethean cult was practised in prosperous and science-focused fifth-century Athens (BC). Amongst other things the Titan was celebrated by means of torch races, which had also obtained a political significance due to the tyranny (of Peisistratus and sons) and political reforms in the late sixth century. It is then rather unlikely for it to be a coincidence that the conflict between Prometheus and Zeus in the *Prometheus Bound* changes from a mere competition of ingenuity into a political contest. More in general, the fact that Aeschylus' Prometheus was entirely transformed from the Hesiodic trickster into the brave founder of civilisation is thus most probably due to Athens' prosperity and the greatly increased interest in science. Similarly, it can hardly be coincidental that it is in early Christianity when Tertullian exclaims that "He [the Lord – TF] is your true Prometheus!" Furthermore, it is during the Industrial Revolution that the Titan comes to represent the proletariat. And Anders is motivated by the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings when he sadly draws our attention to our Promethean Shame now that the technology-driven society shows us nothing but our imperfections. In other words, whether it concerns the celebration of progress, the desire to convert people to the right religion, the urge to rebel against the unjust socio-political system, or fear of the dangers of technology – on the basis of each Promethean reference one can sketch at least a crude image of the age in which the myth was told.

Interestingly, myth's flexibility works both ways: it is not only the historical and social situation that fashions myth along its lines, but it also works the other way around. As Ziolkowski observes, "our imagination is shaped by cultural images or, to put it more crudely, life imitates art"⁵⁵⁴. Dougherty agrees: "[m]yths", she says, "take on the role of shaping a society's imagination"⁵⁵⁵. Myth should be understood as "a vibrant system of communication"⁵⁵⁶, and its power lies in the capacity to

"take all this pre-worked, culturally rich material – gods, goddesses, plots, and places – and work with it to create a narrative that is important and compelling to its audience. [...] Above all, [myths] help cultures accommodate and negotiate change in a productive way"⁵⁵⁷.

– but throughout the book he underlines several times that it is the malleability of (classical) myths *in general* that makes them reappear so often.

⁵⁵⁴ Ziolkowski, "Science, Frankenstein, and Myth," 49.

⁵⁵⁵ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 13.

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 14.

Myths are not only there to relate to or think about, but also useful to think *with*. They provide the human with a means to reflect on essential issues of life such as misery, love and change. Blumenberg speaks of “work on myth”, which entails a whole process that is done by humanity in order to pursue the “reduction of the absolutism of reality”⁵⁵⁸. That is, the threat of reality, of conditions we do not control, is put at a distance by means of a story that rationalises this anxiety into mere fear of specific agencies that are given names and as such are made familiar, identifiable and ready to deal with.

I agree with these scholars that mythological storylines, figures and symbols provide material to give shape to the problems, questions, concepts and novelties of the time and thereby influence a society’s imagery. It is certainly characteristic of the Prometheus myth. As we saw, for Hesiod the story was a convenient way to question as well as explain people’s social circumstances and human nature as such. His myth was not merely an example of a nice tale formed by the imaginary powers of one of the time’s great narrators. Conversely, through its pictures and tales, the myth also shaped the imagination of the era. Pandora’s jar, for instance, clarified the fact that humanity had to work so hard to survive, and deal with agonising issues such as disease and death. Together with the genealogical story about the human degradation from a Golden to an Iron Age, Hesiod’s Prometheus myth supplied the ancient Greeks with a comprehensible image of the human condition and a way to understand contemporary society, history and the world’s structure.

In a different way, the mythological figures used by Bacon both reflect the historical changes and embody the serious influence of his new, modern thinking on those changes. He places the late-Renaissance ideals of freedom, rationality and progress within a radically new framework – yet by means of familiar images. Bacon pursues an ‘instauration’ of humankind, which should lead to significant scientific innovations and progress. He calls for empirical research, illustrated by the donkey in his version of the Prometheus myth. He calls for knowledge-as-power, which he supports with a picture of the Promethean torch games. One should fight for knowledge: “matters should receive success by combat and emulation” and it should be passed on just as the torches. Bacon characterises the human as a creature with Promethean, Epimethean, Heraklean, and Pandoran qualities. By means of his mythological images and arguments, Bacon seriously reforms the contemporary paradigm. It becomes one in which humanity assumes a central position in the universe; the concept of knowledge is secularised; and new – experimental and pragmatic – models, aims and rules regulate. The people of his time are offered an entirely new way to view that world and to deal with its changes and novelties – not only conceptually, but also in practice.

In short, the relation between myth and society is reciprocal; it both mirrors and forms a society’s images, ideas and worldviews. The Prometheus

⁵⁵⁸ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, 14.

myth shows it is inevitably influenced by the historical and cultural circumstances, personal convictions and ideas, while simultaneously it also helps shape those ideas and imagery. It provides an important means to investigate and reflect on social, cultural, historical and even individual conditions, which in turn may very well also have practical consequences.

4.1.2. Knowledge Formation

With respect to the relation between myth and social imagery, what should not be overlooked is that *knowledge* plays an essential role. Myth's imagination-shaping function provides a way for people to assign things their place in the world, a framework through which to view that world and their own place in it. By means of its narratives and pictures, myth does not only create social imagination – but knowledge as well. It helps the human to understand a chaotic and inherently irrational universe. Myth offers answers to the essential questions the human poses about that universe – where does it start? where does it end? what is its form? what is its use? what is existence?⁵⁵⁹ This is a fundamental function of the Prometheus myth: it *explains*.

As we saw, Hesiod's and Bacon's stories are more than some assemblage of images. Together these images form a framework of *wisdom*: reading Hesiod's genealogical narrative, people learn about their history and condition – also if they realise it is mainly of a symbolic nature. Reading Bacon's argument, they learn about their place in the world and their relation to knowledge. Similarly, Socrates' myth about the soul's final judgement in Plato's *Gorgias* is not only *about* knowledge of death, but it also *provides* knowledge of death. For a start, death itself is defined: according to Socrates it is "simply the separation from one another of two things, the soul and the body". Further, his myth explains humans what happens after death and why they do not know what day they will die. It also gives them an important reason why it would be good to lead a just and pious life: that would assure them an afterlife on the Island of the Blessed. Moreover, by means of the myth as a whole Socrates wants to convey an important message about the nature of truth. Contrary to what his interlocutors – the rhetoricians – think, truth is not manipulable. When Prometheus took away humanity's foreknowledge of death, what was once accepted as truth was revealed to be mere appearance and manipulation. Truth is not about witnesses and persuasion, but completely independent and thus entirely unaffected by rhetoric practices. Socrates does not only choose to tell his story in order to sketch a particular image of death. As always in Plato's writings, the myth supplies its readers with knowledge; here about life and death – and on a meta-level, about truth as such.

One may think that to present wisdom by means of myth is a rather ancient practice, needed due to a lack of scientific knowledge. Yet this is

⁵⁵⁹ These questions I will treat more extensively in the next section.

anything but true. Roughly 2300 years after Plato, the Masters of Suspicion still take full advantage of myth – surely in order to explore contemporary issues and to give vent to social anxieties and hopes, but also to transfer knowledge to their public. All three feel, as McLelland’s phrases it, “called to make the truth free”. Their aim is to disclose mistakes and suppressed meanings and most of all: to fight falsehoods, and tell people what they think – or actually *know* – to be true instead.

Freud’s psychoanalytical explanations, for instance, are dotted with mythological figures and with respect to the Titan’s story Freud explicitly says “I think my hypothesis” – the one on control over fire by means of urine – “can be *confirmed* by an interpretation of the Greek myth of Prometheus”⁵⁶⁰. The myth does nothing less than present *facts*, “provided that we bear in mind the distortions which must be expected to occur in the transition from *facts* to the contents of a myth”⁵⁶¹. When interpreted in the right (i.e. Freudian) way it uncovers first, historical facts about a) ancient human practices, in particular the process of humankind’s acquisition of fire; and b) more in general about evolution, the species’ cultural development. Second, it discloses facts about essential qualities of the human being: physical and cognitive proceedings which characterise contemporary humans just as much as their primitive double. A proper analysis of the myth’s storyline and symbols – fire, Prometheus’ theft, the vulture, the liver – reveals insights about the human’s conscious and unconscious: his instincts, (sexual) desires, behavioural practices and processes of development. It tells about the individual’s experience of these, such as feelings of passion, aggression, suffering and guilt; as well as his reaction to these, such as attempts to understand and master his instincts and feelings.

Important to realise is that the knowledge Freud generates by means of his myths does not only consist in the results of his interpretations. If his analyses indeed unveil hidden meanings, processes or even facts, his myths also demonstrate the validity of his methods of analysis. Prometheus’ tale supports Freud’s method of interpretation based on what he terms “the mechanism of reversal”: fire is actually water, and vice versa. Further, the myth confirms several of Freud’s hypotheses – not only the one about the control of fire, but also his model of the human psyche. It does not take much effort to indicate elements in the Promethean myth that characterise the id – passionate desires, symbolised by (amongst other things) the fennel stalk and liver; the ego – the urge to control one’s instincts, symbolised by the Titan’s theft; and the super-ego – moral judgement reflected in the simultaneously beneficent and maleficent role of Prometheus. If it makes sense for the Promethean myth to represent the acquisition of fire, not only Freud’s hypothesis about that historical practice is accepted as knowledge, but then so are his assumptions, models

⁵⁶⁰ My emphasis.

⁵⁶¹ Freud, “The Acquisition and Control of Fire,” 187. My emphasis.

and methods. The methodical and conceptual wisdom brought to light by means of this and other myths can now be used to analyse and understand contemporary humans as well. And in the end, it can help them to cope with the instincts, feelings, behaviour and thoughts that primal humans had to handle just as much, that is, with the issues they tried to verbalise and give shape to in the stories that are still valuable today.

Many theorists affirm the inherent connection between myth and the formation of knowledge and underline their continuing relevance today. Mary Midgley states that myth-making is a “vital human function”⁵⁶²: we both use and create myths today just as we always have. “We have a choice of what myths, what visions we will use to help us understand the physical world. We do not have a choice of understanding it without using any myths or visions at all”⁵⁶³. We cannot separate knowledge – or what we *believe* to be knowledge – from the imaginations, hopes and myths that characterise the way we see our lives. Today, according to Midgley it is mainly *science* that shapes our myths and our views of human life and the world. The relation, then, between myth and knowledge is also reciprocal.

Nicolas Pethes also highlights the knowledge forming function of imagination and myth, with his main focus on science-fiction. He argues that “literary discourse can contribute to the future design of knowledge [...] in times when the classical forms of accounting for this knowledge are being reshaped”⁵⁶⁴. Similar to actual research, science fiction dealing with scientific experimentation is “fictional research”, based on discourse and narration and as such should be understood as a genuine mode of knowledge formation. Literary and mythological discourses contextualise and give meaning to science. This way, says Pethes, scientific facts obtain a cultural, popular meaning, which even overrules their ‘factual’ meaning; “the formation of knowledge generally depends on rhetorical and narrative, if not mythological, strategies”⁵⁶⁵.

I think that Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* embodies a good example of such “fictional research”. Shelley writes her book in an age when science has made serious progress. The authority of knowledge has been largely withdrawn from the church and in society a rather optimistic view prevails on science’s new potentialities. The narrative is a clear reaction to the contemporary situation and one could indeed characterise it as well as fictional experimentation, instigated by social change and discussion. I have some doubts about whether the novel’s substance itself should be called ‘knowledge’. I would say it rather poses questions: about scientific potential and about the dangers of extreme scientific ambition. It aims to set its reader thinking about the boundaries of humanity’s

⁵⁶² Mary Midgley, *Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning* (London: Routledge, 1992), 3.

⁵⁶³ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵⁶⁴ Nicolas Pethes, “Terminal Men: Biotechnological Experimentation and the Reshaping of ‘the Human’ in Medical Thrillers,” *New Literary History* 36, no. 2 (2005): 165.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 167–168.

creative powers and about related issues such as responsibility for one's creations. Simultaneously it sketches images of the future of science when some of its contemporary boundaries would actually be crossed. Shelley's story thus surely contributes to knowledge in the sense that by means of its narrative it creates space for new ideas and debate about the possibilities of science. Perhaps it does not explain, but it does open up space for investigation and explanation. The tale's fictional pictures and concepts stimulated real-life scientific imagery, discussion and research at the time – and interestingly, they still do. The idea of the self-created human seems more alive than ever with recent progress in practices such as molecular biology and nanotechnology. Consequently, the picture of Frankenstein's monster still regularly appears in scientific debates and as we will see, so does Prometheus. Important to realise is that the monster and Titan are anything but mere illustrations, for what is studied, questioned and conceptualised in *Frankenstein* as well as the myth is nothing less than *what it means to be human*. This, of course, continues to be a central point of discussion today; a question to which both scientists and laymen want to *know* the answer.

4.1.3. Myth's Originary and Ontological Meaning

Speaking of the question of *what it means to be human*, we arrive at what may very well be the most important about myth: its function as story of origin and ontology – its role in assigning the human her place in the world. The many retellings of the Genesis and the Prometheus myth provide countless examples that demonstrate the human quest for and generation of existential answers – interestingly, answers which are widely divergent. Plato's sage Protagoras tells how one day the creation process was started – a mixture of earth and fire was taken up by Epimetheus to create all mortal races. It tells how we were formed and came to be what we are – that 'afterthinking' Epimetheus left the human "completely unequipped"; that his brother had to make up for this fault by stealing fire for humanity; and that Zeus needed to complement this with justice and shame. Protagoras' tale fashions an idea of a common origin and gives ontological explanations. It clarifies our uniqueness and respectable capacities, due to our "share of the divine dispensation" and also explains the birth of culture, virtue, and politics. Because of his narrative about human history, Hesiod's story is another case.

After the emergence of Christianity, for many centuries it is very popular to draw a parallel between the Promethean story of creation and the Genesis. Each in his own way, many philosophers, theorists and clergymen – e.g. Isidore of Seville or Peter Comestor – try to bring the two narratives together, yet thereby virtually always with the aim to transfer the message that the *true* story of origin is told in the Scripture. In their fight against pagan religion, the Early Church Fathers state that Prometheus had simply been the first sculptor. According to Lactantius he was the one who "first originated the art of making

statues and images [...]. But the making of the true and living man from clay is the work of God”.

Ages later, Ficino (15th century) constructs an utterly new paradigm which is strongly inspired by Plato’s ideas and sometimes even has a secular flavour. Ficino places humanity in a unique metaphysical position: at the centre of the hierarchy of all creations. As he explains in *Five Questions concerning the Mind*, humanity’s one and universal aim is the highest good, that is, “boundless truth and goodness”. Unfortunately, due to its dual nature – irrational and physical as well as rational and spiritual – the soul will never be able to attain this *summum bonum*. Prometheus, then, represents humanity’s unfortunate condition very well. On the one hand, humans are uniquely equipped because of their reason and creativity, the “light” of which even establishes “a certain highest affinity” between their intellect and the highest good; on the other hand, however, they are fundamentally imperfect because of the inherent unattainability of the superior truth and perfection they search for all their life. The soul encounters itself as if chained to a rock, “most miserable of all, for he is made wretched by the continuous gnawing of the most ravenous of vultures, that is, by the torment of inquiry”. Prometheus embodies nothing less than human nature: the human’s rational, fantasising and creative skills and yet the inevitable agony his unique skills bring along.

In the 19th century Percy Shelley has Prometheus’ wife Asia relate how human existence originates in a beautiful, happy age – reminiscent of Hesiod’s golden one – when there used to be nothing but “Light and Love”. Unfortunately Jupiter came to power, evil was created and misery fell upon the humans. Prometheus tried to alleviate this situation by giving them hope, wisdom and creativity. In short, in Shelley’s myth not only humans’ story of origin is unveiled, but also their natural condition, which is again characterised by the Titan: brilliantly creative but in agony at the same time. Finally, as a story of ancient practices, evolution and essential human characteristics, Freud’s Prometheus myth shows once more its originary and ontological meaning. In Freud’s hands Prometheus and his tale are not a mere illustration, but a way to define and explain the human’s very nature.⁵⁶⁶

Several scholars accentuate the origin- and ontological function of myth. Anna Lydia Svalastog defines myth “as a narrative, a cultural construct that aims to describe the world, its origin and its constituent elements”⁵⁶⁷. According to Mircea Eliade myth is a representation of the truth about primordial time or the origin of the world: “myth, then, is always an account of a “creation””⁵⁶⁸. From a different than usual (that is, humanities) perspective, the evolutionary

⁵⁶⁶ As we will see in 4.2., the ontological significance of myth can also be of an even more distinct character. Anders’ emphasis on the Prometheus myth, for instance, precisely underlines humanity’s *lack* of origin.

⁵⁶⁷ Anna Lydia Svalastog, “Gene Myths in Public Perceptions,” *Public Understanding of Science*, September 2010, 4.

⁵⁶⁸ Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 6.

biologist Robin Dunbar also underlines the fundamental connection between storytelling, origins and metaphysics. Dunbar argues that it is specifically the cognitive capacity to envisage parallel universes which enables the human to tell narratives and which forms the basis of literature as well as religion.

“[S]tories [...] are often about group origins” and “play a prominent role because they remind us all who we are, and how we came to be here”⁵⁶⁹. They remind us of the fact that we have a shared ancestor – “whether that ancestor be real or entirely mythical” – which, in turn, arouses powerful and “evolutionary very ancient emotions” of loyalty to kin⁵⁷⁰. Further, “[b]eing able to tell a story depends on being able to call on a vast array of implicit shared knowledge among the listeners, so that the story-teller does not have to explain every last detail”⁵⁷¹. To be able to fill in the gaps “stirs up” the emotions mentioned above and creates a sense of bonding.

In his own way, Dunbar thus substantiates the functions of myth I outlined above: its reciprocal relationship with society, its function in shaping people’s imagination and wisdom and its inherent connection with knowledge. According to Dunbar himself it is even this very storytelling capacity that, bonding us into large social communities, makes us fundamentally different from monkeys and apes. The ability “to live in a virtual world”⁵⁷² is what distinguishes our race from other species – in other words: what makes us human.

It is interesting that there are thus also more biologically informed arguments which confirm myth’s ontological and originary character and explain their usefulness. Essential is indeed the human desire to find an answer to the questions of how we originated and what it means to be human. One thing, however, that seems self-evident but should still be noted is that this does not mean each story of origin has the prominent, ontological and emotion arousing role both Eliade and Dunbar seem to ascribe to it. The originary function of the Prometheus myth does not only concern the birth of humanity, but also much more practical issues, rituals and traditions. Pliny the Elder relates how the Titan encloses gold in the ring of iron which is supposed to be symbol of his chains and wears it on his finger: this is “how the use of precious stones first originated”. Hyginus narrates, like Hesiod, that the contemporary offering rituals have their roots in the Titan’s misleading portion of bones. Further, when bringing his gift of fire, the god “came joyfully, seeming to fly, not to run” and that is why since then, “men who bring good news usually come with speed”. Prometheus’ acrobatic way of transporting this gift gave birth to the torch races and finally the custom to wear rings and wreaths – “at times of great rejoicing

⁵⁶⁹ Robin Dunbar, “Why Are Humans Not Just Great Apes?,” in *What Makes Us Human?*, ed. Charles Pasternak (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 46.

⁵⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid.

⁵⁷² Ibid., 48.

and victory” – are also rooted in the Titan’s exciting actions and experiences.⁵⁷³ Of course the origins of ring wearing, speedy news bringing and torch racing are culturally significant and the stories are interesting because of (amongst other things) their society reflecting function. Yet it is also important to recognise that in these cases they do not carry the metaphysical gravity I discussed before.

4.1.4. Myth’s Moral Function

One more essential quality of a mythological story is its moral significance. Moulded according to social and personal interests, providing a framework through which to understand the world and often offering an account of the human’s creation, being and purpose, virtually all myths contain a strong ethical message. Many of the preceding examples confirm this is an essential function of the Prometheus myth: Hesiod tells his brother and readers how to live the good life; in the *Gorgias* Socrates also urges people to make and keep their soul healthy and just; and the Early Church Fathers aim to convince their audience that the Scripture tells the right story of creation. Another beautiful example of ethical encouragement is Erasmus’s, who in the light of Bible interpretation tells us literally that when it comes to knowledge “*we ought to imitate Prometheus*” and face the fact that we should *work* for our wisdom. Percy Shelley’s Titan also comes onto the scene in order to convey a serious moral message: he offers the author a way to criticise the contemporary political turbulence. Shelley expresses his regrets with respect to the French Revolution when Prometheus relates how many countries united and cried “[a]s with one voice, Truth, Liberty, and Love!” yet “[s]uddenly fierce confusion fell from heaven”. Everything slipped into fighting, cheating and anxiety, after which tyrants seized power by force. However, Shelley is optimistic about the future: the human has the ability to, in Promethean fashion, break the circle of violence and create a community which is governed by the power of equality and justice, in which he is “king over himself; just, gentle, wise: but man”. The human can, should and *will* manage.

Apart from its function as originary narrative, Svalastog also accentuates the social and moral use of myth, which is “meant to generate meaning that entails socially structuring functions for individuals as well as for the group that embraces the reading. I understand myths to be a carrier of both constructive and destructive norms and values”⁵⁷⁴.

John Maynard Smith emphasises the ethical significance of a mythological story as well. He argues that a major function of myths is to “give moral and

⁵⁷³ This does not mean that Hyginus’ references to Prometheus are *all* of a practical nature. His writings also include the statement that it was Prometheus “who with his wonderful wisdom is thought to have made men”.

⁵⁷⁴ Svalastog, “Gene Myths in Public Perceptions,” 4.

evaluative guidance” and to supply “a source and justification for values”⁵⁷⁵. Myths are reproduced by people “because they hope to persuade others to behave in certain ways”⁵⁷⁶. Interestingly, just as Dunbar, Maynard Smith is not a philosopher or social scientist but an evolutionary biologist and so another essential function of myth is confirmed by a scholar outside of the humanities.

Looking at my research, both scholars’ statements are very convincing. One thing, however, which neither of them focuses on, but is essential nevertheless is that this moral significance is particularly relevant with respect to the ontological concept. Whether explicit or implicit, the accounts of human nature in the Prometheus myth are never ethically neutral. When Pico della Mirandola narrates how God told Adam “thou art confined by no bounds” this is anything but a mere description. Pico states that we humans have the Promethean capacity to fix our own limits, “by reason of our nature sloughing its skin and transforming itself”. This is not merely our nature, or what we can do, but also what we *ought* to do: we should make every effort to mould ourselves *well*, lest we “grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes”.

Shelley’s political argument discussed earlier is also clearly based upon a morally charged image of humanity. The Titan of the *Prometheus Unbound* curses Jupiter but later recalls it and only pities him from now on; it is compassion, forgiveness and love on the basis of which he achieves victory. This Prometheus represents the suffering human who by nature has his flaws and can go awfully wrong, but nevertheless also has the intellectual, creative and moral powers to change his situation. It is not for nothing that “every heart contains perfection’s germ” – by means of hope, love and artistry humans can actually build a “new world”, a paradisiacal cosmos.

Of course there are also several ontological (and mythologically informed) accounts in which human nature – or one of the human’s natural features – is judged *negatively*. When the human condition is characterised by Promethean or Icarian hubris, this is almost always judged to be wrong. Horace, for instance, condemns the fact that “[n]othing is too steep for man: we foolishly seek heaven itself”, all because Prometheus equipped humankind with fury, immorality and over-ambition. Gide criticises the human condition in an entirely different way. He pictures the human as a naked, insecure and sensitive Prometheus who lets himself be tortured by “his eagle”, that is, by some illusionary – for instance, religious – ‘consciousness’ without any attempt to stop him. Gide laments that the human condition will always be limited by the fact that the human cannot but act within an ethical system, and is thus always followed by the need for moral justification and feelings of responsibility. Fortunately, however, there is a way for humans to free themselves from the external rules and traditions (how exactly I will come back to in 4.2.), and Gide’s

⁵⁷⁵ John Maynard Smith, “Science and Myth,” in *The Philosophy of Biology*, ed. David L. Hull and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 375; 381.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 375.

moral message then indeed consists of an appeal to the human to liberate herself from her natural restrictions and take control of her life.

4.2. The Promethean Themes

The Prometheus myth is not about one central topic, nor does it carry one particular message, but it consists of a set of interconnected themes, such as fire, rebellion and creation. This multiplicity may not be so special – most myths have more than one subject – but what is special about this story, if not *unique*, is the many ways in which these themes can relate to one another. The tale's topics are by themselves not sufficient to explain why specifically *this* myth is used: there are more myths and stories dealing with, for instance, hubris (Daedalus and Icarus) human knowledge (Plato's myth of the cave) or endless punishment (Sisyphus). But a fundamental quality of the myth of Prometheus is its *ambivalence* – and that is related to more than general mythological malleability. Not only do the storylines in the classical versions of the myth already differ radically from chronicle to chronicle but also – and especially – the evaluation of Prometheus and his actions. From Hesiod via Aeschylus to Plato, Prometheus evolves from a trickster bringing nothing but misery to humanity, by way of a tragic hero who civilised humans but was severely punished, to the courageous (co-)creator of humankind. Essential is that there is not one canonical text, which makes the myth much more adaptable than not only a text such as Homer's *Odyssey*, but also than already malleable tales such as Adam's Fall and Faust. The Promethean plot is easily liberated from the original contexts, enabling each narrator to mould the myth into an immense variety of forms and directions, shape the story according to his wishes, adapt it to his time and topic and let it carry the meaning he prefers. As Percy Shelley states, already the ancient Greek playwrights “by no means conceived themselves bound to adhere to the common interpretation”.

Furthermore, what is special about the myth's ambivalence is that it does not limit itself to the flexibility of the story as a whole, the lack of a canonical text or the massive array of possible relations between its themes. Crucial is the fact that, as we will see, ambivalence as such is also an essential theme of the myth itself and each of its separate elements, including the figure of Prometheus. Therefore, in the end, with a larger quantity of discussed material at my disposal, I will come back to the myth's ambivalence.

In short, it is this thoroughly ambiguous nature that explains why the myth and its protagonist lend themselves to as many contexts and perspectives as the historical ones discussed; this explains why Prometheus can symbolise just as much humanity's ill-fated urge to cross boundaries as the promise of human evolutionary progress. Yet despite all its transformations the myth nevertheless maintains some fundamental characteristics; and underneath the many different interpretations lie themes, questions and messages that keep on

coming back. In this section I will have a close look at these essential Promethean themes and study the differences, similarities and various significances in the many forms in which they arise. One of these themes is wisdom: in general represented by fire, which is often of such broad significance that it includes arts, skills, technology and science and is even the essence of human nature. Another fundamental matter is the ethical meaning underlying the myth; as I already argued when discussing myth's moral function in 4.1, the Prometheus myth always carries an ethical message, which ranges from Alciati's rejection of stealing divine wisdom to Marx's promotion of Promethean rebellion. The point is that wisdom and morality are absorbed in virtually every theme and example. Because of these intertwinements I chose not to treat them as separate subjects, but each time within the context of the other interconnected, yet generally easier definable themes: fire, rebellion, creation and human nature. I will conclude with a section on ambiguity.

4.2.1. Fire

An essential, never missing theme is fire. Speaking of ambivalence, fire is something which is in itself – i.e. in 'reality' – already something highly double-edged. On the one hand, fire lies at the origin of civilised life, while on the other hand, it has disastrous powers. With Prometheus' gift of fire ambiguity is thus placed at the heart of the narrative, presenting both narrator and audience with a large range of possible and contradictory symbols, messages and interpretations. It is a gift as well as a stolen good, can represent progress as well as steady decline and can be a way to urge people to cross boundaries as well as to respect limits.

4.2.1.1. Real-life Fire

Before starting a thorough analysis of its many symbolic meanings, it is useful to cast an eye on the phenomenon of fire as such, on what it is, what it does, and what it is used for in the 'real world'. Short and simple, fire is the oxidative process of combustion – burning – of a material, thereby releasing heat and light. It is ascribed its civilising role due to the fact that it thus enriches human life with warmth and light: indispensable in cold and darkness and of course the basis of many practices and techniques – from cooking and metal works to protection from animals and fighting. When speaking of its positive side, Dougherty characterises fire as

“giving mankind freedom from the constraints of nature. [...] Fire provides mankind with the means, both material and spiritual, to develop all those technologies and skills that mark his existence as superior to that of the beasts”⁵⁷⁷.

⁵⁷⁷ Dougherty, *Prometheus*, 18.

I think that to describe fire as giving humanity true *freedom* of nature and *superiority* to animals is quite excessive. The ability to make and use fire surely enables humans to develop themselves in many ways, bring them at least partially in control over nature and seriously distinguishes them from other animals, which is why it is often characterised as the fount of human civilisation. However, of course fire also has powers that can destroy virtually any kind of material or creature. It can be the source of complete demolition and annihilation – burning woods, houses, people – and bring humans nothing but suffering. This way, it is *subjecting* them to nature rather than liberating them from it.

Fire's double-edged nature has always fascinated people, which is why it has always and in most – if not *all* – cultures, had a larger role and significance than its practical one. Someone who already extensively investigates the functions, practices, rituals and meanings of fire in many different cultures – from the Mucelis of Angola to the American Indians or the Greeks – is Frazer in *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1906-1915). A great example is his chapter 'The Origin of Perpetual Fires'. That fire itself was useful for light, warmth and techniques is obvious, but here Frazer examines how and why throughout the ages peoples all over the world have or had the custom of maintaining a *perpetual* fire. Probably, he says, it “sprang from a simple consideration of practical convenience”⁵⁷⁸: some people did not know how to make fire – and if they did, making it by friction was not particularly easy, which is why virtually all people always kept a fire smouldering both at home and when travelling. Frazer describes ways in which different peoples maintain their fire and carry it about. On sea journeys New Guinea natives kept “glowing coals in a half-broken pot partly filled with earth”; tribes from Central Africa “keep the burning trunks of fallen trees in suitable spots and watch over their preservation”; natives of Materbert Island (New Britain) “place a red-hot ember in the middle of [a coco-nut shell]”⁵⁷⁹. Interestingly, Frazer writes subsequently how

“Greek peasants used to convey fire from place to place in a stalk of giant fennel. [...] Thus when Prometheus, according to the legend, stole the first fire from heaven and brought it down to earth hidden in a stalk of giant fennel, he carried his fire just as every Greek peasant and mariner did on a journey”⁵⁸⁰.

Prometheus' journey with the fennel was thus originally nothing but a reflection from daily farming practices. Yet when people all over the world started travelling less and settled in villages, soon what used to be nothing but

⁵⁷⁸ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion, Part 1. The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings*, 3rd ed., vol. I (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1920), 253.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, I:254; 255; 258.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, I:260.

convenience evolved into something more significant. For, says Frazer, a logical spot to keep fire where everyone could obtain it when needed, “would be the hearth of the head man of the village”⁵⁸¹. Amongst the Ethiopian Gallas, for instance, such a fire is indeed “a favourite mode of asserting high rank”⁵⁸². And

“in ancient Greece the perpetual fire kept up in the Prytaneum, or town-hall, was at first apparently the fire on the king’s hearth. From this simple origin may have sprung the custom which in various parts of the world associates the maintenance of a perpetual fire with chiefly or royal dignity”⁵⁸³.

Although Frazer himself does not explicitly highlight the commonalities between the Prometheus myth and other stories about how humanity obtained fire, the cultures he discusses often tell similar tales. He writes that in Uganda the king’s fire is lighted from “a perpetual sacred fire, supposed to have come down to earth with the first man Kintu”; and that “[b]efore the palace gate of the king of Siam there burns [...] a perpetual fire, which was said to have been lit from heaven with a fiery ball”⁵⁸⁴. The Natchez Indians maintained a fire “supposed to have been brought down from the sun”⁵⁸⁵ in a temple close to the head chief. Fascinating is that many of the cultural beliefs and rituals discussed by Frazer reflect the double-edged nature of fire: a good and a bad symbol at the same time. It is thus often obtained from some royal, celestial or divine source, which ascribes it a sacred value and worthy significance. Yet this also means that when it expires, that is a bad presage. If the Natchez’ sacred fire would be quenched this “would have been thought to put the whole nation in jeopardy”⁵⁸⁶ and the ancient Scythians indeed believed there to be an essential relation between the king’s life and his hearth, “so that if the fire were put out the king would die”⁵⁸⁷.

To return to the role of fire in ancient Greece – there it has a function in roughly every religion-related place or act. The Greek temple always has a fire place as its heart. It may formerly have been nothing but convenience, but now this is the gods’ hearth and understandably the fire is absolutely *not* to be extinguished. The smoke and smell of fire – often incense wears such as myrrh are used – is considered to establish contact with the gods. Walter Burkert tells that “a sudden burst of flame from the altar fire is seen as a sign of the divine presence”⁵⁸⁸ and as said Dougherty’s terms it a “system of communication” between humans and gods. Apart from temples, it also lights nocturnal festivals and travelling ships bring fire from one place to another. At a wedding a lit torch

⁵⁸¹ Ibid.

⁵⁸² Ibid., I:261.

⁵⁸³ Ibid., I:260–261.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid., I:261; 262.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid., I:262.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁷ Ibid., I:265.

⁵⁸⁸ Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion. Archaic and Classical*, trans. John Raffan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1985), 61.

is brought from the bride's home to her new husband's hearth, for she is about to illuminate her husband's life; in Argos after someone's death his hearth will be extinguished and after some mourning time rekindled with a sacrificial act – in both cases the practice symbolises a new start.

Not only fire's more positive sides of light and warmth are used, for burning obviously plays a significant part in sacrifice. Some festivals are entirely focused on the destructive potential of fire. At a festival called *Laphria* at Patrai the people throw all kinds of living animals – birds, gazelles, wolves – as well as fruit and trees onto the altar's fire, drive back any creature trying to escape and let it all dissolve in smoke and ashes.

Prosperous fifth-century Athens (BC) is particularly interesting. As said, the city has experienced the devastating potential of fire when after the first Persian war much of the city and its flourishing civilisation is burned. Yet the Athenians manage to recreate their home from the ashes left by the warriors which is something to which Aeschylus may have given a good contribution and if so, that provides another good example of the myth's society-shaping function. For with his positive adaptations of the Prometheus myth and the satyr play *Prometheus Fire-Kindler* Aeschylus gives the Athenians, in Dougherty's words, a chance "to transform their recent memories of fire's destructive capabilities into a city rebuilt and renewed" by means of their impressive Promethean capacities. In Athens fire is then celebrated even more than elsewhere and so are the gods associated with it. As said before, the Titan has an altar in the Academy and later even his own festival, the *Prometheia*. At this festival the civilians glorify the Titan and his flames, amongst other things with the torch races described in detail by Pausanias.

4.2.1.2. Symbols and Meanings

In Hesiod's story celestial fire does have 'weariless' powers, but in compliance with its ambiguous nature it nevertheless mainly symbolises the origin of human decline. This is not only because of Pandora's box and its "Evil in exchange for fire", but also because as a reaction to Prometheus' first sacrificial trick Zeus decided to hide fire from the mortals, which means that before they must have disposed of the same fire as the gods. If Vernant is right in his argument that the 'stolen' fire in the fennel stalk is a mere flame which "must be continually fed", then humans are already separated from the gods before the miseries scattered by Pandora because they are downgraded due to their second-class fire.

Yet Aeschylus substantially refashions the Promethean story. Accordingly, the role and meaning of fire change significantly. Fire is beneficent for the humans and it is not Prometheus' fault that they lacked it, for he did not do any earlier trick and they never had it before. Fire's area of meaning is widely expanded: the Titan's gift covers an immense range of knowledge,

technologies and arts. It elevates the humans from their former, outspokenly “babyish” state and literally enlightens their life:

“[t]hey swarmed like bitty ants in dugouts, in *sunless caves* [...]. All their work was work without thought, until I taught them *to see* what had been *hard to see*: where and when the *stars rise and set*”.⁵⁸⁹

Aeschylus’ interpretation and presentation of Prometheus’ fire is almost exclusively positive. Fire stands for illumination in both senses: it provides sight and simultaneously symbolises all kinds of understanding and wisdom. Fire’s warmth is also celebrated, as it is needed for all kinds of crafts that Prometheus enriches humanity with, such as medical care and metal works. He also teaches the human sacrificing and related prediction techniques:

“thigh bones wrapped in fat, and long backbones I burned, I showed humans the pathway into an art hard to figure. I gave the fire eyes, so that its signs *shone through* where before they were *filmed over*”⁵⁹⁰.

Fire’s enlightening and heating qualities do not only make humans see and understand; although of course never up to Prometheus’ level, it can also give them some form of foresight. All in all, it gives them the ability to continuously develop and improve their new skills: Prometheus “made them masters of their own thought”.

However, the negative side of fire is not absent. The play ends with a great tempest brought about by Zeus: “Rolling thunder hollowing up bangs at rock. *Lightning coils gutter and flash*”⁵⁹¹. As Prometheus already foresaw, this will throw him “utterly down the black pit of Tartaros”. In the hands of the tyrannical Zeus fire becomes lightning and in this context thus a symbol of devastation.

So despite all its positive associations, fire nevertheless maintains its double-edged nature. One more thing that adds to this ambivalence is Prometheus’ other gift to humans. He took away their ability to foresee their own death, and gave them “blind hopes” for this “disease”. Foresight is of course not the same as fire, but as we saw it is related to it. The fact that the hopes are *blind* implies that humanity receives obscurity in return for foreseeing and thus characterises foresight as a form of light. So Prometheus’ two gifts strongly contrast with one another: the light of fire versus the darkness of blindness. And in both cases it does not merely concern light, but the light of *knowledge*: the progress-generating practical knowledge versus the knowledge of death. Not only Aeschylus’ fire, but also his light of knowledge, is then of an ambiguous character. It can lead to progress and continuous development, but

⁵⁸⁹ My emphasis.

⁵⁹⁰ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 728–731. My emphasis.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 1644–1648. My emphasis.

also to the miserable situation of having to face one's inescapable fate. Sometimes it is good to turn off the lights, for ignorance can bring humans hope and creativity.

In Plato's *Protagoras* fire is purely beneficent and it is even unclear whether Prometheus will be punished for his theft or not. In this story, fire does not merely improve the human species, it is essential for its creation. In fact, it saves humans' very existence: it is the indispensable extension of them being left "unequipped" by Epimetheus. "Prometheus, desperate to find some *means of survival* for the human race, stole [...] wisdom in the practical arts together with fire (*without which this kind of wisdom is effectively useless*)"⁵⁹². Fire is fundamental for the human to stay alive: in combination with – and apparently *crucial* for – the practical arts it gives her the ability to build houses, develop language and nourish herself. Just as the gift of fire from the *Prometheus Bound*, the *Protagoras*' fire does not only represent theoretical knowledge but also many forms of technology and culture. Here it even provides the human with "a kind of kinship" with the gods – the flames are nothing but good.

Throughout all of history, the Promethean fire will keep on covering a myriad of significations and symbolic associations. The majority of authors and artists present fire as some form of wisdom or knowledge. Boccaccio calls fire "the clarity of truth"; Bovelles speaks of "le feu très clair de la sagesse"; Bacon describes fire as "the succour of succours" which "affords aid and assistance to all labours and mechanical arts, and to the sciences themselves"; and Byron calls the human mind and intelligence "the Promethean spark". However, one should realise two things: first, that it is not always the case that fire's symbolic meaning includes wisdom or knowledge; and second, that also when it does receive the at first sight positive label 'wisdom', it is judged in many different ways, positively as well as negatively.

Let us take a quick look at the first question. From Early Christianity to the Early Middle Ages the pagan story is theologised, it is fused with the biblical narrative. In the *Ovide Moralisé* Prometheus creates the human: "Une ymagete a la semblance/Des dieus". He *takes* fire – that is, he does not steal it. He takes it from the *sun* – "du chars du Solail ravie" – instead of from the Olympian gods. And he *animates* the human with the flame of his torch: "Une luisante faille enflammee/Dont il ot l'image animee". Prometheus prefigures, joins or even embodies the Christian God. And rather than knowledge, fire then is a means to bring the human to life, to enrich him with a (good) soul. Perhaps the most fascinating and extreme non-wisdom explanation of fire is Freud's in *The Acquisition and Control of Fire*. First, in Prometheus' tale fire is to be understood as water, or better: masculine urine. Second, it represents passion, the libido, or the male sexual organ: "[t]here can be no doubt about the mythological significance of flame as a phallus". Therefore, "to primal man the attempt to quench fire with his own water had the meaning of a pleasurable

⁵⁹² Plato, *Protagoras*, 321d. My emphasis.

struggle with another phallus”. Interestingly, once again fire is of a very ambivalent – if not contradictory – character. It represents the humidity of water and urine as well as the heat of passion and sex – according to Freud the two antithetical functions of the male genitals. The psychoanalyst’s fire clearly has a set of strong allegorical meanings, but these do not include wisdom or knowledge.

The second question to discuss is the variation in the evaluation of fire. Even though it may appear to be different, when fire represents ‘knowledge’ or ‘wisdom’ this does not automatically imply it is judged to be good. Many of the discussed authors do underline the positive side of fire, or even present it as nothing but valuable – Plato, Bacon, Percy Shelley, to name a few. However, there are also various authors who focus on the danger of fire. Hesiod is one of the most obvious examples, highlighting the miserable consequences for Prometheus as well as humanity. In the form of lightning fire is virtually always pictured as perilous and evil, by authors from Aeschylus to Camus. The 12th century overview of mythological interpretations, the *Mythographus Tertius*, presents completely opposite judgements. At one point Prometheus’ theft is praised for its enlivening powers: “Prometheus *rightly* kindled his torch from the sun because [...] we receive life from the sun”⁵⁹³. However, in the next paragraph we are told that the Titan’s flames only “benefited mortal man *while they used it well*. Later, through the *wicked use of mankind*, it was turned to their destruction”⁵⁹⁴. Fire itself is not disapproved of, but humanity’s “wicked” use is seriously rejected, because this is why it becomes dangerous and destructive. An author who strongly condemns fire is Rousseau. “Prometheus’s torch is the torch of the Sciences”, but he passionately argues against its flames. The Titan’s intentions may have been good, but the author relates how a satyr “wanted to kiss and embrace fire [...] but Prometheus cried out to him: ‘Satyr, you will weep the loss of the beard on your chin, for it burns when you touch it.’” Rousseau’s message is that the sciences, arts and ‘civilisation’ of the contemporary society have demolished the purity of humanity’s natural being. Humans will or actually already *have* burnt themselves on the apparent radiance of wisdom, for the accompanying urge for power and control will only lead to deplorable qualities such as greed, superstition and decadence. Humans should let go of the heat and the alleged illumination of knowledge and return to the serenity of their original ignorance, innocence and happy virtuosity.

4.2.2. Rebellion

Never absent from the Promethean reference are the themes of trickery, theft and rebellion. Humankind’s benefactor is simultaneously a trickster and a thief, who rebels in different ways against the powers of Zeus. In general the

⁵⁹³ My emphasis.

⁵⁹⁴ My emphasis.

retellings of the story do not elaborate much on the tricks and theft as such – regularly all that is said is ‘Prometheus stole fire from heaven’. Therefore, and because it is not just his trickery and thievery but often also his creativity which is found to be recalcitrant, in this section I will focus on the rebellious nature of his acts rather than the acts themselves. As with virtually any aspect of the myth, his riotous characteristics and actions are interpreted in a myriad of ways and evoke completely opposite judgements. One should note that in principle, the concept of rebellion is neither positive nor negative. It is some form of resistance to an authority, tradition or moral code and whether it is judged as being good or bad largely depends upon the evaluator’s opinion of that authority. It goes without saying that the authorities revolted against over the centuries as well as people’s assessments of the authorities and revolutions are countless. Consequently, so are the interpretations and evaluations of Prometheus’ defiant activities, influenced by – and often applied to – the contemporary circumstances. His tricks and theft are pictured as heroic boundary-crossing and righteous revolt, but just as much as hubris, disrespect and sacrilege – and sometimes even as a mixture of both. In the following, first I will treat a classical example of both the positive and negative understanding; second, I will discuss some historical cases of the different meanings and assessments of the rebellious Titan.

4.2.2.1. The Ancient Rebel

Two of the most obvious and radically contrasting examples are of course the ones from Hesiod and Aeschylus. In Hesiod’s story Prometheus’ revolutionary actions are his cheating of Zeus with misleading sacrifice and his theft of fire – both strongly dismissed by the author. Humans used to live like gods, “not a care in their hearts”, but Zeus – the “high lord of Olympos” – “went and hid how to make a living, all because shifty Prometheus tricked him”. The Titan may have been benevolent, but Hesiod seriously condemns the trickery of that “shifty Prometheus”, or “that fine son of Iapetos” (‘fine’ most likely to be understood cynically), which – via Epimetheus and Pandora – is the very cause of humankind’s misery. If that know-it-all would not have bothered, things would have been much better, and then “you might get enough done in one day to keep you fixed for a year without working”. Hesiod’s myth is about hubris: it warns of the perils of unrealistic imagination, arrogance, over-ambition and overestimation of one’s own powers.

As will be clear, Aeschylus shows nothing of the Hesiodic condemnation, on the contrary. Zeus is portrayed as a relentless despot and nearly all of Prometheus’ interlocutors sympathise with him. In the first lines, Hephaistos already strongly grumbles “I haven’t the heart to chain this god, this brother!”; Ocean’s daughters chant “[Y]ou’re brave, you won’t give in to pain”⁵⁹⁵; the

⁵⁹⁵ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 1975, 266–267.

chorus sings “Prometheus, your savage fate has made me cry”⁵⁹⁶; and Io calls him “patron saint of the whole human race”⁵⁹⁷. The Titan’s person and rebellion are now of a fully heroic and altruistic character. Virtually everything he says sounds courageous, for instance “I knew what I was doing. Helping humankind I helped myself to misery” and “[c]ome what may: [Zeus] won’t put me to death”. Further, in the *Prometheus Bound* the sacrificial trick does not seem to have taken place, but apart from Prometheus’ theft his foreseeing abilities also enable him to dare Zeus by keeping a secret from him about his future. It gives the Titan the opportunity to take an even more courageous and admirable stand. He still may have to endure quite some agonising millennia, but this does not matter that much, for he foresaw that the marriage between Zeus and Thetis “will throw Him out of His throne and His tyranny”. And when Hermes pulls everything together in order to let Prometheus reveal the secret, he answers recalcitrantly: “Do I seem afraid? Do I cringe before the new Gods? Far from it. Not one bit. Now scurry on back the way you came. Whatever you ask, you’ll get nothing out of me”⁵⁹⁸. This will in the end force the latter to give in and thus result in the Titan’s salvation. Important is that it is then not only his actions which are brave and rebellious, but also his cognitive capacities. As Detienne and Vernant explain, Prometheus is “the only one who is equipped to duel in cunning with Zeus [...] and challenge the *mētis* [cunning, TF] of the king of the gods with his own”⁵⁹⁹.

4.2.2.2. Heroic Boundary-Crossing

From Aeschylus onwards the positive and heroic image of Prometheus will prevail for quite some time. His brave thievery and the rebellious nature of his actions are appreciated and admired, yet in general not the centre of attention. It *is*, however, the focus of Lucian of Samosata, who gladly identifies with the Titan and mainly because of the revolutionary character of the latter’s movements. Interestingly, it is not so much Prometheus’ theft but rather his revolutionary creations that interest the author most. The reason Lucian wishes to acquire creative abilities that are similar to the Titan’s is precisely because of their rebellious, novel and ‘remodelling’ nature – because of the critique of religion and established tradition that these abilities imply.

In the next millennium the main focus is also on Prometheus’ creative activities but then again not their rebellious aspects. The appreciation of these aspects slightly returns in the Renaissance with authors such as Pico, but it only experiences a true revival with Goethe and his enthusiastic followers in the Romantic Age. Goethe’s Prometheus boldly tells Zeus to “cover his heavens” and to leave “his Earth” to him. The heroic Titan says he does not owe anything

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid., 577.

⁵⁹⁷ Ibid., 903.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid., 1476–1480.

⁵⁹⁹ Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*, 58.

to any god, nor does he identify with one – he radically states he is *not* a god but shares his world with humanity. No Olympian is almighty, so why honour them? “Ich dich ehren? Wofür?” Prometheus’ rebellion here is mainly this defiant attitude and his creativity. He shaped the human being all by himself, which provides him with a revolutionary autonomy that draws a sharp line between him and the Olympus. According to Kerényi, Goethe’s Titan is “the immortal prototype of man as the original rebel and affirmer of his fate: [...] seen as an antigod, as Lord of the Earth”. Goethe celebrates the independent, creative human who dares to ignore the limits imposed upon him, resist authority and take life in his own hands. He praises the recalcitrant individual, the artistic genius or, as we saw, even the confident Goethe himself.

After Goethe, the Romantics bring Prometheus’ rebellious characteristics even more to the foreground. They assign them a more practical significance, for often the Promethean reference is politically charged. As we saw, for Percy Shelley the revolutionary protagonist of the *Prometheus Unbound* is a serious way to express his antagonising attitude towards the contemporary political world. Byron’s Prometheus has a similar role. The Titan bravely opposes and frustrates Zeus by carrying his torture in indifferent silence, refusing to admit his defeat. Zeus represents the time’s totalitarian regime; and through Prometheus’ courageous resistance Byron means to highlight the revolutionary force of humankind and in particular the powers of the human mind. For even while in misery, the human can still fight the contemporary tyrants with “a firm will, and a deep sense [...] Triumphant where it dares defy/And making Death a Victory”. Both Shelley and Byron glorify Prometheus’ revolt and thereby celebrate and encourage humanity’s resistance against all forms of suppressive authorities – including the religious ones where they have assumed a tyrannical format. Note however, that in both cases Prometheus’ revolt is explicitly non-violent: his rebellious means are love and silence respectively.

The most practical interpretation – perhaps I should say *application* – of Prometheus’ revolt is Marx’s. First, he calls on the hero’s rebellious attitude to express his resentment against religion. In his dissertation Marx explains that the Titan’s confession “I hate the pack of gods” (from the *Prometheus Bound*) is philosophy’s “aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods”. Marx quotes this statement to praise and promote social opposition against religion. Whether it concerns its celestial or terrestrial components, religion is oppressive and alienating. Second, in the *Capital* Marx draws an analogy between Prometheus and the proletariat; in fact, the latter is even in a worse position since capitalism “rivets the worker to capital more firmly than the wedges of Hephaistos held Prometheus to the rock. It makes an accumulation of misery a necessary condition, corresponding with the accumulation of wealth”. Even though it remains rather implicit, by means of this comparison Marx brings in Prometheus’ turbulent qualities to call for an all-encompassing revolution against capitalism. Explicitly or not, again the Titan’s rebellion is presented as respect-invoking heroism, a strife to cross the boundaries of the restraining

status quo. One should note that Marx's image is a very optimistic one. The parallel between Titan and worker is about their common agony, but at the same time it implies a strong belief in the Promethean ambition of that worker; a belief in the fact that the proletariat's suffering will evoke a revolutionary power to fight for freedom and justice. Enforced by their very misery, in their Promethean striving the labourers shall be successful and will break free from the alienating rock of the industrial society.

There are innumerable other cases after Marx in which Prometheus is lauded for his rebellion, which each time consists of a brave transgression of some authoritarian limit – whether that limit be social, political and/or religious. He may start off as a pathetic little figure, but in the end Gide's Titan is also a rebel. When Prometheus eats his eagle, he emancipates himself from various external restrictions; not only religious ones, but a broad range nicely listed by Trousson who explains that he is “un révolté, contre le dogme, la tradition, les classes sociales, les principes établis”. Gide's rebellious Prometheus is representative of the human in general, but one should note that the author himself also identifies with the Titan as an individual. The same holds for Kafka – and in both cases this is particularly because of Prometheus' recalcitrance. Both authors ridicule, manipulate and remodel the myth in such a radical way that it acquires rebel forms; according to Blumenberg their versions are even “an attempt to bring myth to an end” – and in particular *this* myth of course. The authors have the courage to not only transform the story but also its format, so that it becomes even more unrecognisable and intangible. Kafka's emphasis on “the inexplicable” and his blending of Greek and Jewish storytelling is his way to challenge customs and cross traditional boundaries. Trousson underlines that because of its critique on religion Gide's version must have been experienced as a sacrilege; and if Genova is right about its “veiled motif” being homosexuality, that too (at Gide's time) does not make his work very compliant. Interestingly, where other authors identify with Prometheus mainly because of his creative capacities, Gide and Kafka thus consciously choose to put themselves in the Titan's place precisely because of his rebellious character. Not only do they celebrate Prometheus' defiance by telling a tale, but also by taking his role as rebel.

Speaking of which, Camus wrote a book called *The Rebel*. Here, the Titan's revolutionary action resides in him taking God's place on earth. This means that the “God-defying rebel” has become human and so in other words the human himself has taken that formerly divine position. Such an undeified world does lead to the absurdity of life, but it is nevertheless favourable because it creates freedom and independence: from now on, all power is in human hands. Modern humans particularly employ this newly gained force in science and technology: “[w]e rebel through our machines”. According to Camus, this may be something good, but modern humans have not yet completely taken over all positive characteristics of Prometheus' rebellion and therefore they keep on suffering. For Prometheus' revolt also consists in his

gifts of art, cheerfulness and the mind and these are just as essential as technology. Camus calls passionately for his contemporaries to embrace the Titan in all his qualities and revolutionary elements. If with Promethean stubbornness, they keep their faith in beauty, happiness and the soul, they can be their own saviours.

As with each theme or sub-theme, the positive interpretations of Prometheus' rebellion are very diverse. It may stand for a critique of pantheism, Christianity, capitalism or a traditional culture. But it is always a call for change: each time the author's reference to the Titan's defiant acts is a means to encourage a rebellious attitude towards some authority. It is always a call for at least verbal resistance; sometimes it even becomes an outspoken call for a real-life revolution; and sometimes it is taken up by the individual author and put into practice on paper.

4.2.2.3. Reckless Insurgency and Hubris

Of course there are also many negative evaluations of Prometheus' rebellion and these are often formulated in terms of hubris. Of the authors I discussed, the first after Hesiod to explicitly warn about hubris is Horace and his worries do not concern Prometheus' over-ambition but explicitly *humanity's*. It is nevertheless the Titan's responsibility since it was he who endowed us humans with – apart from many enriching capacities – an inherently hubristic nature, which makes us “foolishly seek heaven”. As with Lucian, Prometheus' riotous action is not so much his trick or theft, but his creation. However, contrary to Lucian, Horace obviously dismisses it as *wrong*.

In the early Christian centuries the myth is criticised as well, and again this is about the Titan's fashioning qualities. In fact, it is not Prometheus who is criticised, but rather people's defiant and impious idea that he has been the real Creator, which is dismissed as blasphemy by Christian clergymen. As we saw, ages later a similar critique comes from Alciati. He also rejects Prometheus' rebellious acts, which here symbolise the pretentious attitude of the educated of his era. While on the picture his liver is feasted on by an eagle, the Titan “curses the torch lit from the stolen fire” and laments his human-creating operations. Alciati's message is that this is what happens when the scholars he disapproves of try to grab hold of divine wisdom, thereby crossing holy limits. As the motto above the image reads “we should not be concerned with things above us” – such striving is all silly hubris and sacrilege.

In *De Cive* Hobbes also uses the image of the Promethean rebel to criticise humans for their overconfidence and recklessness, but this time in a socio-political context. Motivated by his repulsion of the Puritans' uprising against the English monarchy, Hobbes employs the allegory to argue against such hubristic audacity and in favour of royal authority. The torture Prometheus had to endure shows that the sovereign's control should not be challenged; the

ancients already knew that monarchs should rule “and the People, least of all”. According to Hobbes, the myth illustrates that

“by human invention, which is signified by Prometheus, laws and justice were by imitation taken from monarchy; by virtue thereof, as by fire removed from its orb, the multitude, as the dirt and dregs of men, was as it were quickened and formed into a civil person”.

Prometheus’ creation of humankind stands for the presumptuous human desire to “invent”; his theft stands for recalcitrant urges such as what one, in the light of the myth, could call the urge to steal the flame of power; and his creativity and thievery represent the people’s attempt to “imitate” the rules and control of those in charge – all in order to empower the ‘dirty’ mass. The Titan’s story demonstrates what agonising consequences such acts may have; and this is confirmed by the Puritans’ revolt against what Hobbes considers to be a completely legitimate and justified authority. Against an entirely different background than for instance Hesiod or Alciati, Hobbes thus also strongly dismisses Prometheus’ rebellious actions as misery-evoking hubris.⁶⁰⁰

Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is another work in which rebellion, trickery and theft play a central role. Though in a more indirect way, Prometheus’ defiance is present in both the person of Frankenstein and the monster. To start with the latter, he revolts against his tormentor in various ways, mainly by killing his loved ones and finally Frankenstein himself. One of these murders has particularly Promethean trick-characteristics as it is based on a secret about a marriage: the monster knows where to find Frankenstein’s bride and strangles her, thereby already virtually overthrowing his master. Although the creature’s actions are obviously wily and rebellious, they are not so much of a hubristic kind; they are rather produced by sadness and frustration than arrogance or overconfidence.

Frankenstein’s insurgence quietly resides in his passionate aspiration to shape a living being. This desire – and of course its exercise – is of a characteristically hubristic nature, for it implies a recalcitrant and disrespectful attitude towards God and nature. Frankenstein crosses sacred boundaries and rebels against the Creator when he, as Dougherty puts it, “metaphorically steals fire” from heaven and, one could say, *robs* the deity of the power to create life. The scientist’s project is overambitious; he overestimates his capacities and finds out that the results of his work are radically different from what he had imagined: very disappointing, painful and even lethal. Shelley does not wish to universally dismiss creative ambitions, but does express a serious warning for

⁶⁰⁰ Note that in the *Leviathan* Hobbes adapted his political theory and presents Prometheus in an entirely different way. According to Shulman, in this work Hobbes even has replaced Prometheus’ rebellious position, for he “steals fire from the gods on behalf of mankind” in his attempt to develop a science which can teach people to invent a proper form of authority.

Promethean hubris, this time with respect to the scientific dreams of her contemporaries and in particular the dangers of playing around with life.⁶⁰¹

As with the positive interpretations, there is a wide divergence of negative interpretations of the Titan's revolutionary actions. Yet the interpretation always implies a warning for the perils of rebellion against an authority that should be honoured. Whether it concerns the attempt to seize divine knowledge or a revolt against the monarch in power, boundaries are crossed that should have been respected – and the problem is almost always hubris. Here, the mythological allegory is a means to fight over-ambition and plead for caution, obedience and/or piety. Just as for those encouraging Promethean insurgency, for the above authors the allegory is also always a call for change. Yet here it is a call for withdrawal; sometimes for careful consideration of the possibly dangerous consequences of one's aspirations, sometimes for an immediate and complete reversal of opinion and activities.

4.2.2.4. Hubristic Heroism

Interestingly, where one should think that the concepts of 'crime' and 'hubris' necessarily involve a negative assessment, this turns out to not always be the case. As said, the myth as such is characterised by ambiguity and that includes Prometheus' defiance. This means that the interpretation of his revolutionary actions are not necessarily positive or negative, but may also be something in between. A fascinating example is Nietzsche's interpretation of the myth in *The Birth of Tragedy*: he praises the Titan's rebellion despite the fact that he recognises them to be criminal and hubristic. The story should be understood in the cultural context of "the duality of the *Apollonian* and the *Dionysian*" – in short, of the dynamic between on the one hand reason, order and beauty and on the other hand energy, chaos and transgression of limits. The philosopher argues that this aesthetic – and as it turns out also *metaphysical* – dynamic creates a "tragic" world, for the Apollonian force turns out to be superficial and illusionary and the Dionysian force reveals the miserable truths underneath. The duality as well as the forces each have both positive and negative characteristics and it is due to this ambiguity that according to Nietzsche Prometheus' tale represents the essence not only of culture, but also of the human's very existence. The myth acknowledges its inherently ambivalent and tragic – that is, Apollonian as well as Dionysian – nature. Just as Prometheus, humans look for the light of knowledge. But they should recognise that their knowledge is per definition an "unnatural atrocity", because their Titanic urge to acquire independent wisdom necessarily results in crime and agony. For, says Nietzsche, it is always an offense against the sacred, to which the deities react by engulfing "the nobly ambitious human race" with misery. However,

⁶⁰¹ I will discuss the relation between Frankenstein and God and the creation of life more extensively in the section on creativity.

knowledge is nevertheless of great value because it provides humans with autonomy and thereby enables them to confine the divine powers: the human and the divine world become mutually dependent. Praising Prometheus' rebellion, Nietzsche attacks Christianity and its limiting authority. In that light, he also underlines that the myth provides a much better view of human existence than the story of the Fall, precisely because of the worth it assigns to the Titan's violation, for "[t]he best and loftiest thing which mankind can be blessed with men acquire through a crime". Other than the Christians, who merely focus on 'sin', the ancients knew "that even sacrilege can have dignity – even theft, as in the case of Prometheus".

Obviously, just as the opponents I discussed above, Nietzsche views Prometheus' actions as criminal. However, this does not mean they are not valuable. Just as the other admirers of the Titan, Nietzsche lauds his insurgence. Whereas most interpreters try to make a clear choice and label Prometheus' rebellion as either – or at least, mainly – right or wrong, Nietzsche does not. What distinguishes his interpretation is that he acknowledges – or better, highlights – that somehow the Titan's actions are truly *bad*. Most of all, contrary to both opponents and advocates, he underlines that it is this very badness that makes Prometheus' revolt so worthy. Nietzsche emphasises that one should recognise "the *active* transgression as the essentially Promethean *virtue*"⁶⁰² – it is the *activity* with which the Titan breaks the laws that makes his boundary-crossing virtuous. It is the *consciousness* with which he establishes "the *justification* of human evils, that is, both of human guilt and of the forfeit of suffering caused by that guilt". Clearly, other than the opponents, Nietzsche does not reject Prometheus' defiance because of its badness; yet neither does he, like the advocates, honour it because of its pure righteousness. In his intriguing combination of the two interpretations and judgements, Nietzsche celebrates the Titan because of the evil nature of his rebellion.

4.2.3. Creation

After describing the brilliant list of his gifts to humanity, Aeschylus' Titan exclaims that "[a]ll human culture comes from Prometheus"; Plato relates how he partakes in the creation of the human species; and Marx believes in Promethean self-creation through labour. Clearly, the Titan's wisdom is not only of a rational, theoretical, analytical and logical nature. It is just as much of a more intuitive character, defined by imagination, artistry and creativity. From now on I will refer to this type of Promethean 'wisdom' as Promethean creation or creativity.

Creation/creativity is a very broad – and again, ambiguous – concept. It encompasses a wide range of significations, yet always refers to the ability to somehow create, shape, or produce and is generally inspired by an imaginative

⁶⁰² 'virtue' is emphasised by me.

– if not *forethinking* – motivation. Aiming for more clarity and transparency, I have subdivided the great historical diversity of interpretations and explanations of the Promethean creativity into three forms of creation: the creation of art, the creation of life and human self-creation.

4.2.3.1. Creation of Art

Just as the concept of creation/creativity, the concept of art is not a very clear-cut one. The Greek *technē* covers skills, techniques and arts, and in the ancient versions of the myth it is indeed *technai* that humanity receives from Prometheus. Art and technology are hard to disentangle and not only in the ancient context. Against a contemporary background Camus also emphasises that “what characterises Prometheus is that he cannot separate machines from art” and argues that neither he nor the modern human should try to. Yet aware of their intrinsic relatedness for practical reasons I will nevertheless attempt to separate the two concepts. Art I understand to be something – a product, object, or idea; material or immaterial – created according to aesthetic principles and (mainly) with aesthetic objectives and purposes. Technology I understand to be a craft, method, or process which concerns itself with material objects and (mainly) has a practical and/or scientific purpose. In this section I will focus on Prometheus’ role as an *artist*.

Now the artistic interpretation of Prometheus’ creativity again presents itself in many forms. First of all, there is the realistic-historical interpretation: Prometheus has been a human artist. Pliny tells us Prometheus was the first one to make jewellery and Hyginus adds he was an acrobatic athlete. Another interesting case is the Christians’ euhemerist explanation, according to which the alleged Titan had been nothing but a historical – that is, a human – figure. Just as Lactantius, Isidore explains that Prometheus’ creation ‘from clay’ should be taken literally:

“Prometheus first made a likeness of humans from clay and [...] from him the art of making likenesses and statues was born. Whence also the poets supposed that human beings were first created by him – figuratively, because of these effigies”.

The Titan had only been the inventor of sculpture, but he was idealised; the ‘figurative’ interpretation slowly disappeared and he was ultimately deified by his admirers.

Whether the Christian fathers are correct about him having been a human or not, they are right about Prometheus’ role as idol: for many poets and other artists he is the ideal model – for them and/or humanity in general. One of these artists is Percy Shelley. His *Prometheus Unbound* lauds and encourages humanity’s creative abilities in many areas – intellectual, social and political. But the human’s aesthetic and imaginative creativity is perhaps the most important, for this – together with love – is what sets the other forms of creation in motion.

The human mind can produce “harmonies divine, yet ever new” and “arts, tho’ unimagined, yet to be”. Shelley believes in the massive creative potential of each human, but poets deserve some extra attention. One of the spirits in the play says about the poet that

“Of shapes that haunt thought’s wildernesses.
[...] from these create he can
Forms more real than living man,
Nurslings of immortality!”

Of the wild chaos of images and ideas, poets thus have the ability to shape some supernatural, yet extra-real creation; and elsewhere Shelley also states that “poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”. Poets then even seem to have more creative abilities than Prometheus, for they have the capacity to produce immortal forms and on top of that to legislate the world – two things the Titan never managed to do. Yet it is not very likely that the poetic artist has the capacity to somehow transcend Prometheus. The immortal and legislative creations Shelley refers to are conceptual: by means of their ideas and initiatives people can improve their situation or society and in that creative approach Prometheus should always be their model. For Shelley art and life are fundamentally united and if humans let themselves indeed be driven by the power of their imagery, their “work shall be called the Promethean”. The more creativity, the better, which is why Shelley assigns poets – including himself – a special status.

The comparison between Prometheus and artists goes even deeper when an individual artist personally identifies with him, which throughout history a number of poets, playwrights and other kinds of authors do – whether seriously or cynically. Even though it is not his own initiative, an early example of such identification is Lucian. His account is a rather complex and ambiguous one, for he wrote a comical dialogue in which the myth is entirely satirised, but despite his ironical approach, he must have admired the Titan. For when in his speech *Prometheus Es in Verbis* his interlocutor names him “a literary Prometheus”, Lucian certainly sees that as a compliment and replies that “[i]f your meaning is, my good sir, that my works, like his, are of clay, I accept the comparison and hail my prototype”. As a strong critic of religion, just as Prometheus he aims to remodel the raw material of the established traditions by means of his creative proficiency. Yet even though Lucian initially seems to accept the comparison, a bit later he rejects it. He would gladly identify with the divine artist and compare the latter’s creative – and, not unimportant, rebellious – capacities to his own. However, he seems to be rather insecure about the quality of his creations, he fears it is superficial, unoriginal and mere imitation. His own clay, he says, is “poor common stuff, trampled by common feet till it is little better than mud. [...] [T]here is no motion, as with [Prometheus], not a sign of life; entertainment and pastime is the beginning and the end of my work”. Yet

at the end of his speech he denies that he would, just as Prometheus, be a thief: “I defy you there; that is the one fault you cannot find with me: from whom should I have stolen?” Nor does he consider himself as much a trickster as the Titan, for he wonders “have I [...] cheated my hearers by serving them up bones wrapped in fat, comic laughter in philosophic solemnity?” Apparently, Lucian has recovered some self-confidence. Perhaps his own creations will never acquire the amazing quality of those of Prometheus. But muddy or not, there may well be some novelty and motion in them after all – for I am sure Lucian will at least activate his hearers’ mouths and cheeks.

Another uncertain – but this time more serious – analogy is drawn by Boccaccio between himself and Prometheus. He doubts his capacity to accomplish the mythographical task he is to do at the King’s request. In the preface of the *Genealogy* he writes “I dread undertaking such a large task, and if another Prometheus or even Prometheus himself [...] were to rise up and present himself, I scarcely believe that he, much more than I, would have the skills for this work”. Boccaccio humbly presents himself as incapable to accomplish such a Titanic task, but as he nevertheless gives it a try and finishes the book, he does implicitly call himself a Promethean kind of author.

A more self-confident example of Promethean identification can be found in a letter by Ficino, who writes to Pico della Mirandola: “we are imitating Prometheus. We are making man, you the soul and I the body. [...] How beautifully, by our joint effort, we are now putting together our man, the observer of the universe!” Apparently, Ficino thinks very highly of their literary creativity, although his sense of humour and self-mockery suggests that perhaps we should not take this identification too seriously.

Goethe also establishes an explicit parallel between his aesthetic abilities and those of Prometheus. In his autonomous, defiant creativity the Titan of Goethe’s *Prometheus* is a perfect representation of the characteristic *Sturm und Drang*-artistic genius. Prometheus expresses a distinct artistic identity and the poem’s content as well as its form⁶⁰³ suggest that it concerns Goethe’s identity in particular. This is indeed literally confirmed in his autobiography. There, he writes that while he is thinking about his own “productive talent”, he realises that this “natural gift” is entirely *his* – everything he fashions is no one’s work but his own. In this thinking process, he says, an image comes to him of “die alte mythologische Figur des Prometheus”, the genius who populated the world with what he created in complete solitude. Goethe evidently identifies with Prometheus: just as the Titan, he is independent from anything outside himself; he employs his internal powers to animate his inventions; and these can only be meaningful when created in isolation. Goethe feels the fable “come alive” in him

⁶⁰³ Remember the poem’s content – Prometheus’ non-stop celebration of his individual self and his creative powers; and its form – the continuous repetition of first person pronouns (23 of the poem’s 225 words, e.g. “Hier sitz’ *ich*, forme Menschen/Nach *meinem* Bilde/ Ein Geschlecht, das *mir* gleich sey” (my emphasis)) – and the way the poem ends – “Wie *ich!*” (see the section on Goethe in chapter 3).

("ward in mir lebendig") and declares he can shape *das Titanengewand* – the "Titanic garment" – according to his wishes. In other words, the poet is so inspired by Prometheus' artistic autonomy that he believes to have the capacity to even model his idol according to his personal aesthetic wishes.

In conclusion, whether as a historical sculptor, a symbol for artistic creativity as such, or a figure a particular poet identifies with, Prometheus has always played an important role as artist; and even though his aesthetic capacities were not always appreciated, admired they always were.

4.2.3.2. Creation of Life

Prometheus' creation of life may very well be the most important form of his creativity. Several times I discussed the *Protagoras*, in which we witness Prometheus' participation in the creation of humankind for the first time. Ovid describes in detail and full of admiration how, this time on his own, the Titan fashioned humanity from "[new-made] earth [...] mixed with water/In likeness of the gods that govern the world". In the first Christian centuries the myth is slowly absorbed by the story of Creation. And before the Early Church Fathers start to emphatically deny Prometheus' life creation capacities, God and the Titan are basically one; some Bible illustrations showing many similarities with the iconographical tradition of Prometheus. In any case, Prometheus' creation of life has become an essential element – if not the basis – of the myth. Explicit or not, this element is virtually always present in the scores of references to the story.

We have already seen dozens of cases in which the Titan's creation of humanity is passionately celebrated – Boccaccio, Bacon and Goethe, for example. But not everyone is that impressed. Horace deplors the fundamentally negative qualities with which Prometheus equipped his creation, such as sinfulness and anger; Propertius calls the result of the Titan's fashioning "a botch" because he gave its mind so little control over its actions. Alciati sees it as a foolish aberration. Under one of his *Emblemata*, the picture of the suffering Titan, it says that he "could well wish he had not made man" and that he hates "moulders of clay". Alciati does not seem to pity him – it is due to Prometheus' own arrogance he is in such agony; he should have known better and not have created humankind.

The most fascinating work that questions the Promethean creation of life is probably *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley does not mean to immediately reject the Promethean ambitions, but rather aims to carefully study humanity's creative and scientific capacities in order to investigate their boundaries and dangers. The results are far from positive. Frankenstein, the enthusiastic scientist, tells us how he has always been "longing to penetrate the secrets of nature" and how he "entered with the greatest diligence into the search of the philosopher's stone and the elixir of life". His dream is to "banish disease from the human frame, and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!" Yet the outcome of Frankenstein's ardent creating urge is tragic and brings to life a

creature who, in his own words, is “a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; [who] knew, and could distinguish, nothing”. Shelley also presents fire as an in essence positive symbol of life, yet in a very negative context, when Frankenstein’s monster exclaims “Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish *the spark of existence* which you had so wantonly bestowed?”⁶⁰⁴

By means of the sad narrative Shelley calls attention to several points regarding creation: a) the sacrilegious aspects of creating life; b) the flexible but therefore simultaneously very vulnerable character of (the development of) human life; and c) more in general, the perils of radical creative ambition and of the unimaginable possibilities of science.

Frankenstein never explicitly criticises God, but in his aim to improve the human he judges God’s creation to be flawed. His operation is never literally labelled a sacrilege. But the monster calls him “that enemy of God and man” and the fact that Frankenstein’s creation is anything but an improvement of the human, his regrets and his many references to sin do present it as sacrilegious. Moreover, the scientist compares himself to a guilty Adam when he bitterly declares that “the apple was already eaten”, as well as when he tells Walton that he hopes that the captain’s search for knowledge “may not be a serpent to sting you, as mine has been”. Formulated in his own way Frankenstein admits that he committed a dreadful sin by cutting into the Tree of Knowledge, as well as into the Tree of Life. Regularly, the monster also draws a parallel between his creation and the Genesis. However, the former is in all ways a shadowed reflection of the latter: Adam was beautiful, had skills and company and his creator did not abandon him from the start, whereas the monster “was wretched, helpless, and alone” and said that “[m]any times I considered Satan as the fitter emblem of my condition”⁶⁰⁵.

Frankenstein transgressed sacred limits in his impious attempt to appropriate what up to then had been exclusively divine capacities; and both he and the monster become ‘fallen angels’ – later, in fact, even worse than that. Important is here the word ‘become’: neither Frankenstein nor the monster start off with negative objectives or bad qualities. On the contrary: driven by nothing but positive Promethean motivations Frankenstein dedicates himself to creation, in order to benefit humankind. Similarly, the monster begins as an innocent, ignorant and sensitive if not *virtuous* being. He admires the moonlight and enjoys the songs of birds, he empathises with the family and wishes to socialise with them. However, he is turned down by his creator as well as by other people and therefore, he says, “the fallen angel *becomes* a malignant devil”⁶⁰⁶. Frankenstein, too, is not just an angel who failed in his benevolent work and fell down – because of his cold rejection of the creature and denying him a companion the scientist also *becomes* a merciless tyrant.

⁶⁰⁴ My emphasis.

⁶⁰⁵ Shelley, *Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus*, 220.

⁶⁰⁶ My emphasis.

Shelley's point is that human life is subject to change, unpredictable and therefore vulnerable; and she accentuates that consequently good intentions and potentialities can never ensure a positive outcome. This is something which applies to all forms of creation. Even if one would manage to create life, this would not immediately result in something good. As said, Shelley questions the time's strong optimism with respect to science. People should seriously consider the limits of scientific knowledge and creation and make sure they take their responsibilities, for the unpredictability of their development makes them dangerous. What if her husband's (and Byron's) fantasies would come true – fantasies about reanimating a corpse and manufacturing “the component parts of a creature”, bringing them together and endue them “with vital warmth”? It does not matter how benevolent and enthusiastic a creative ambition is – it is perilous. The Promethean dream to “pour a torrent of light into our dark world” and “bestow animation upon lifeless matter” may turn out to be something more obscure and less alive than could have ever been imagined beforehand.

4.2.3.3. Human Self-Creation

If we understand the concept broadly, in each version of the myth the element of self-creation is present somehow. The Promethean gift is never some ready-made form of wisdom, but – as in, for instance, the *Prometheus Bound* – often consists of practical skills, techniques, arts, or at least the capacity to acquire knowledge. Promethean wisdom is a means for progress: humans can learn, practice and develop knowledge – in fact, they will *have to* before being able to benefit from it. That is, humans take part in their own creation in the sense that they proceed, cultivate, *improve* themselves. They evolve – and not just as individuals, but also on the level of society and the species.

Rather than an individual or evolution-related form of creativity, Marx's version is a social – or better, a *socialist* – one. He places humanity's self-creating capacities in a socio-political context. Kolakowski understands Marx's entire opus in terms of the myth and states that “[t]he Promethean idea which recurs constantly in Marx's work is that of faith in man's unlimited powers as *self-creator* [...], history is man's *self-realization* through labour”⁶⁰⁷. That is, Prometheus embodies the oppressed proletarian who nevertheless has a natural capacity to shape himself – this time through work. United with their fellows, the proletarians – or what Kolakowski calls the “collective Prometheus” – will call upon their infinite laborious creativity and be able to fashion not only themselves, but an entirely new civilisation.

Apart from Prometheus' gifts there are of course his human-moulding activities, upon which other authors focus when it comes to self-creation. As we saw, Pico for instance, takes our clay basis quite literally and concludes that this makes the human intrinsically pliable. ‘Self-creation’ should then also be taken

⁶⁰⁷ My emphasis.

to the letter: we don't have limits, which means that we can – and should – take our creation in our own hands. As Pico phrases it, it is our very nature to “slough” our skins and “transform” ourselves.

The idea of human nature as lacking bounds and being inherently malleable reoccurs many times, in positive as well as negative explanations. Therefore, I will discuss this ontological question further in the next section.

4.2.4. Human Nature

In 4.1 I examined the originary-ontological function of myth and gave some examples of Prometheus' story. The human condition is a very – if not the *most* – important theme of the Prometheus myth, because in all the versions written throughout all those different times, somehow there is always an essential connection between the Titan and the human being – one which, as we will see, is virtually always morally loaded. For some authors the myth is there to explain and/or condemn the characteristic agony of human life. For many others Prometheus has been the one who set human progress in motion and thereby established the superiority of the human species. And whatever the point of view of the author, in line with Promethean forethinking the myth is virtually always a means to speculate about the human future.

In any case, essential is again the myth's malleability, which also has its impact on the accounts of human nature. To picture the human, some of the authors choose the positive image of the courageous, wise, creative and progressing Prometheus; others choose the other side and emphasise the dangers of abusing knowledge and warn for the human's hubristic refusal to respect essential limits. Most, however, take a less black-and-white point of view and choose the myth precisely because of the characteristic ambivalence of the story as well as its protagonist. In the following I will treat positive, negative and ambiguous pictures of human nature. As we have already seen many human conditions coming by I will not pay as much attention to one as to the other. I will concentrate on the relation between Prometheus and the human – is he to be interpreted as archetype for the human as such? – and on the image of the human as essentially incomplete.

4.2.4.1. The Promethean Human

The classic image of the creative and infinitely evolving Promethean human has come by several times; and once again, due to Prometheus' trickery the condition of Hesiod's human is essentially miserable. Yet most accounts of the human condition are not outspokenly positive or negative but more complex, ambivalent – and the same goes for the figure of Prometheus himself and the myth as such. When it comes to the *Prometheus Bound*, for instance, one should note that other than in Plato's myth, Aeschylus' Titan is not only the benefactor of the humans, but simultaneously their archetype as well, for they

share many qualities. Prometheus is an ambiguous figure with divine as well as human characteristics; he is full of wisdom, immortal, has foresight and many other powers; yet he also suffers, is unsteady, emotional and several times he even wishes to die. The thousands of years on the rock – interestingly, dismissed by Hephaistos as “this *inhuman* cliff”⁶⁰⁸ – the Titan is in a lower position than the other gods. He is still divine but thwarted from any action whatsoever, whereas the humans may be another step down in the world’s hierarchy but are able to act. In a way, despite their differences this balances their two positions: the one strong and immortal but powerless nevertheless, the other vulnerable and mortal but free to move. The human started off as an immature being but, thanks to Prometheus’ gifts, evolved into a rational, skilled and creative one. Moreover, as a species – biologically as well as culturally – humans are as immortal as Prometheus. And although they do not foresee their own death, their continuous cultural development implies a form of foreseeing which enables them to think and act creatively, invent and evolve. In short, Prometheus and the human share a combination of divine/superior and terrestrial/inferior characteristics; on the one hand wisdom, foresight, creativity and somehow even immortality; on the other hand vulnerability, emotionality, restriction and dependence. Prometheus is then a complex figure: apart from humanity’s benefactor or the embodiment of intelligence as such, he is also an archetype of the human, something which is confirmed by other elements of the story (such as the similarity between the Titan’s tale and Io’s – the human princess – or the historical context of the play). A fascinating consequence of Prometheus standing for humankind itself would be that his gifts would be the human’s gifts *to herself*. In addition to creativity and forethinking, the autonomy and independence of humans would be emphasised, as well as their self-creation capacities. They would not only be able to evolve on the basis of practical as well as intellectual but *given* skills; they would be able to give themselves new skills and abilities, take control over their own nature and improve their very *being*. In conclusion, Aeschylus pictures a Prometheus who is ambiguous in his role as well as his character; and the author’s human also embodies an ambivalent combination of the terrestrial imperfect being needing help, and the autonomous one endowed with divine and self-creative powers.

To quickly name a couple of essentially positive accounts of the human condition: Plato’s humans, one more time, have a “share of the divine dispensation” and creative, technological, social and political capacities after Prometheus and Zeus enriched them with their gifts. Ovid proudly describes the human’s likeness to the gods and his uniqueness, for “while the other creatures on all fours/Look downwards, man was made to hold his head/Erect in majesty and see the sky”. However, someone who does not think too highly of humans is Horace, who characterises them by their “urge of the ravening lion” and hubristic nature.

⁶⁰⁸ My emphasis.

In early Christianity not so much is explicitly said about human nature when Prometheus is discussed; the authors who mention him aim to correct the story of Creation rather than examine the results of that process. Of course, in general the story underwrites the Christian image of the sinful human. Yet some authors of the era do speak of the Titan as the personification of human rationality – “Prometheus, or, in other words, the power to think and reason” (Plutarch); or of his liver as a symbol of the human heart where the wisdom is located which ‘feeds’ and ‘sustains’ Divine Providence (Fulgentius). Although neither case is a full account of the human condition, of course they imply a positive image of the human as a being who is endowed with special intellectual and spiritual powers.

Boccaccio is the first one for centuries to present a more extensive image of human nature. According to him, Prometheus is nothing less than the ancient image of the Christian God and so it was he who created the human. The Titan breathed life and rational powers into humans, but he *sinned* and as a consequence degenerated into what Boccaccio names a “twofold” being: the human’s physical spirits became defective, whereas otherwise these “would have been eternal just as is the rational spirit, the nature of which is divine”. The latter spirit, however, should certainly not be taken for granted, for “those who are produced by nature arrive coarse and ignorant, nay, unless they are instructed, filthy, savage, and beastly”. Fortunately, Prometheus instructed and cultivated them; and as if he were “creating them anew” this resulted in humans “so distinguished in their knowledge of customs and in their virtues that it is very clear that nature produced some and teaching had reformed others”. Boccaccio’s point is that natural humans are still ignorant, imperfect, if not beastly creatures, but through education these creatures can truly *transform*: they can be moulded into civilised humans, unique in their wisdom, capacities and virtues. In fact, it is not so much the case that they can ‘*be*’ moulded. They themselves, in solitude, should make a strong effort to search for the light of the divine truth in order to enliven, to “complete” their being. For “the bodily mass [...] weakens the powers of the mind so much that unless they are aided and inspired by knowledge, they become so benumbed that men seem more like brutish than rational animals”. It will indeed take some hard work to achieve the enlightening salvation, for as if tearing our livers, deep thoughts and anxieties will trouble us and so will “corporeal labors”, “the ardors of desire” and the woman “her disobedience”. In summary, just as Aeschylus’ image of the human, Boccaccio’s is again an ambivalent one, but this time not only based upon the terrestrial-divine, but, importantly, also upon the body-mind dichotomy. Moreover, it is a much more active process: in order to overcome the physical shortcomings, the by nature brutish beings have to search for and work with the divine powers of their rational potentialities. Yet, like Aeschylus, Boccaccio is certainly not pessimistic: if enough effort is made, the by nature twofold creatures will be able to make up for their sinfulness, conquer their original imperfection and civilise up to the point that they leave their savageness behind.

Thus the ambiguity in Boccaccio's concept is found at two levels. First, the human is an essentially dualistic organism, with on the one hand the terrestrial, beastly and bodily characteristics, and on the other hand the rational and animating powers which underline his divine kinship. Second, what should finally be understood to be the true human condition is unclear: as said, it is literally characterised as the natural "twofold" condition, whereas something rather different follows from the fact that "*unless they are instructed*"⁶⁰⁹, "those who are produced by nature" will stay "coarse and ignorant, nay, [...] filthy, savage, and beastly". According to Boccaccio it is only by means of education and solitary studying that humans can surmount their naturally numb and brutish character and genuinely become human. That is, a real transformation can take place, but it is not until one found truth and civilisation. Boccaccio's account is an ambiguous one, but in the end, it seems that even though the original humans may be *natural*, it is only the cultivated and virtuous condition the author will characterise as *truly human* – and this is of course the way they should be.

Ficino also presents a "twofold" image of the human condition. The human's unique nature is inherently dichotomous: she is superior in her rationality and creativity but simultaneously inferior because of her physical and irrational imperfections. Ficino's account is, however, much more pessimistic than Boccaccio's. Just like Prometheus, humans got hold of a ray of light of the celestial knowledge, but instead of happiness this brought them nothing but the vulture-like gnawing of the "torment of inquiry". Now, due to their intellect's kinship with "the highest form of perfection", it is humans' natural aim to acquire that highest form – the ultimate truth and goodness – in its entirety. However, dual in nature, they will always be distracted by the body and senses so that the highest good is essentially beyond reach – at least, while they are alive. The human is then not Boccaccio's civilised being who after serious studying reaches the right human level. The natural condition of Ficino's human is one like Prometheus's, miserably chained to the unique qualities of her reason; physically and intellectually tortured.⁶¹⁰ The soul of the living human is unsatisfiable by nature, infinitely tormented by both her body's and ratio's desires; wretched by the insurmountability of her imperfection and the fundamental unattainability of the *summum bonum*. This does not mean, however, that humans should let go of their ambitions, for once the soul is liberated from its body it will be able to reach what it has been striving for all its life.

It may not be a complete account of human nature, but as I showed when discussing rebellion, Hobbes' account and Prometheus' role in it in *De Cive* is surely negative: the Titan's creativity embodies the overconfident human

⁶⁰⁹ My emphasis.

⁶¹⁰ In Ficino's *Summary of Protagoras*, the dual nature of the human condition is characterised by both Prometheus and Epimetheus, the former representing rationality and creativity, the latter irrationality and physicality.

desire to “invent” and “imitate” – a natural craving to resist and copy legitimate authorities. Other than his Renaissance predecessors, Hobbes then does not stimulate the human to extend the borders of his Promethean capacities. Quite the contrary: he encourages humans to recognise their limits and fight the unfortunate hubristic urge that nature endowed them with, for otherwise misery will be theirs. Interestingly, in his *Leviathan* Hobbes’ presentation of Prometheus changes and so does his image of the human. The rebellious Titan has been replaced by “the prudent man”, who is “gnawed on by feare of death” and other worries when he tries to foresee the future and finds no social rule or structure. He represents the distressing, natural condition of humanity before their need for order has been fulfilled. Apart from their native anxiety, humans do however still possess their inventive capabilities and here, instead of something to be rejected, it is the potential way out of the anxious state. When used correctly, by means of these capabilities humans can – and should – “invent” the right form of civilisation and create the necessary authority. The human’s Promethean creativity is no longer dismissed as hubris or pride; it provides the solution to that other natural characteristic: his fundamental fear.

In the 18th-19th century, forthright celebrations of the human condition are Goethe’s and Percy Shelley’s, who both, with Prometheus as ideal, praise human courage, independence and creativity. Mary Shelley’s account of the human is a more complicated one. It has been studied before, but I would like to view her story one more time and bring together the many elements and questions it contains when it comes to the human. The main question *Frankenstein* poses is: ‘what does it mean to be human’? And so it investigates related questions such as ‘what are the boundaries of human nature’?, ‘can these be moved’? and ‘if so, *should* these be moved (by means of, for instance, science)?’

Shelley’s husband writes in the preface that the aim is “to preserve the truth of the elementary principles of human nature”, but this should not be understood as a clear list of factual principles on the basis of which one can classify someone as human or not. Inspired by the ambiguity of the Promethean character, Mary Shelley sketches a fascinating but complex picture of humanity. She introduces an artificially created ‘monster’, a human being, a (potentially well-realised) virtual post-human and indirectly even God. They may be different personages, but their boundaries are blurred: the monster also has ‘human’ characteristics and Frankenstein ‘monstrous’ as well as divine ones. Shelley’s point is that what are commonly considered to be ‘human’ characteristics do not exclusively belong to the human; just as the human does not exclusively possess these ‘human’ qualities.

Essential with respect to these qualities is the influence of the material and social circumstances. By describing the slow degradation of the two protagonists’ lives – the process of their ‘falling’ – Shelley wishes to accentuate this influence and the resulting contingency of human life. In his own way, Frankenstein’s creation represents the human, that is, what Shelley considers

to be the *actual* human condition. Reminiscent of Aeschylus' primitive human and Epimetheus' creature, the monster begins his life in a babyish state – unknowing and innocent; literally and metaphorically “nude”, while it does have impressive innate potentialities of a rational, emotional, social and moral character. These potentialities need to be developed in interaction with the environment. Although the creature starts off well, developing ideas, feelings, capacities and even morals, as the circumstances turn out poor he becomes a brute. By means of the monster's story Shelley points out that social contact and experience determine the way that the human personality evolves, which means that the human, somehow, is also *artificial*. The resulting capacities, qualities and traits can turn out in many ways – cultivated or underdeveloped, right or wrong, good or bad. Due to this contingency, the human is then most prone to end up with a complex combination of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ qualities and Shelley indeed equips her protagonists with widely divergent characteristics. Both Frankenstein and his creature are figures of a Promethean ambiguity, possessing qualities such as creativity, foresight, ambition and social empathy; but just as much hubris, rebelliousness, vulnerability and (Zeusian) cruelty. They enjoy and suffer, succeed and fail. Even God Almighty has a complex character: the figure who is commonly the embodiment of the Good could nevertheless be said to have been hubristic since he failed when creating humankind. The same goes for the virtual post-human, whether it is Frankenstein's monster before it is finished, the latter's potential (female) mate or another artificially created being. The outcome could be positive or negative, better or worse than the original human being: beautiful, affectionate and immortal, or ugly, harmful and susceptible. It is, however, most feasible for it to possess and develop a personality including qualities of all forms – ‘good’ and ‘bad’.

The boundaries, between the alleged ‘human being’, monster, post-human and God are blurred, for it turns out that it is precisely the combination of the classical ‘human’, ‘monstrous’, divine and artificial qualities and the continuous dynamic between being and environment out of which emerges the ‘real’ human condition. The question of what it means to be human is hard to answer, for the human condition is an essentially ambivalent one, characterised by flexibility, vulnerability and contingency. This evokes the urge of the human to turn things around, try to “penetrate” nature's secrets and grab hold of life. However, according to Shelley we should keep on asking ourselves whether to touch the limits of our being and carefully consider the possible consequences (and the resulting responsibilities) which are probably as unpredictable as the current course of life. The boundaries of human nature may be unclear, but this does not provide *carte blanche* for moving or crossing them. On the glacier the monster tells his creator “I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous”. Frankenstein goes through his own troubling circumstances; he becomes miserable and then develops tyrannical traits. Both their lives do not only demonstrate the social and

environmental influence on more practical characteristics, but also on their emotional and moral being. Shelley shows that human sensations are inherently connected to virtue – and it is the human’s very *happiness* which is at stake.

4.2.4.2. The Limits of Nakedness and the Power of Incompleteness

Like Mary Shelley, many authors referring to Prometheus focus on malleability and incompleteness when describing the human condition. They characterise the human being as essentially missing or lacking something, as fundamentally incomplete. Yet in line with the myth even this ontology itself is of a malleable nature and can be explained in a positive or negative way – and whether good or not, it is always a unique quality of the human species. In the following I will treat the different versions of the human being and her inherent shortcomings.

Even though it has been discussed several times, I should like to have one more look at the human from the *Protagoras*. When Plato describes the human state after he was created by Epimetheus – I shall repeat once more: “completely unequipped” and “naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed” – those wants are obviously unacceptable and even species threatening. Initially, humans were naked; they practically lacked any nature whatsoever. Prometheus and Zeus had to save the human beings by fulfilling their wants with (divine) fire and justice (and everything these stand for), for without these they would have been incapable of anything. Remarkably, however, Prometheus’ role in the *Gorgias* is not one of giving but consists in *depriving* humans of something: their foreknowledge of death. Here, this ‘lack’ is nevertheless a positive thing, something to be praised. For despite the fact that their loss of foresight results in ignorance and the unpredictability of death, in return the mortals are now ensured by absolute justice when their soul will undergo its final judgement. For from now on, “stripped” of its misleading “clothing” of “fine bodies, good family, and wealth”, the human soul can be immediately evaluated; while the judges cannot be deceived anymore, because unlike before they are no longer alive and so their souls are no longer “cloaked by [...] their whole body”. An interesting remark on the side is that another translation writes that the people

“must all be judged in *nakedness*, for judgement must not be passed till they are dead. The judge also must be *naked* and dead in order that the judgement shall be just, his very soul contemplating the *naked* soul of each man who has died without warning”⁶¹¹.

This makes it even clearer that in this myth, in contrast with the *Protagoras* story, ‘nakedness’ is thus positively valued. In any case, the judges have finally become truly righteous; and the human, having lost his foreknowledge of death and thereby the (partial) control over his fate, has become keener to lead a just

⁶¹¹ Charles B. Daniels, “The Afterlife Myth in Plato’s *Gorgias*,” *The Journal of Value Inquiry* 26 (1992): 274. My emphasis.

and more authentic life. Similarly, the *Prometheus Bound* pictures a Titan who is extremely generous and makes sure he fills a myriad human wants, but nevertheless also takes the human's foresight of his death. He sends them "blind hopes to settle their hearts". Again, this lack is something beneficial – in the words of Ocean's daughters even a "cure" for a "disease". For both Aeschylus and Plato, then, an essential shortcoming is possibly, but not *necessarily* something negative.

Nor is it for Propertius. He may seem to dismiss Prometheus' deficient creation when he exclaims "[w]hat a botch Prometheus made when he fashioned men out of clay and left so little space for the governing mind". The mind's lack of control produces chaos for everybody, rich or poor: "[w]hen you cross that ferry into the world below, you go aboard as naked as when you were born". However, at the same time it is precisely that condition which allows humans to let themselves be *led* by that boundlessness – actually, again *nakedness* – and follow the *unbinding* "bondage of Love". In the end, it is the inadequate, non-governing nature of the mind which enables humanity to enjoy the pleasures of a licentious, Love-regulated life.

For more than a millennium after Propertius the essentially lacking human being stays in the background. She does return in the Renaissance, and then for a few centuries there are quite some instances where the human's inherent shortcoming is presented as something of great worth. In general, this shortcoming is not as clearly defined as the one in *Gorgias* or the *Prometheus Bound*. In fact, many authors seem to build forth upon the *Protagorean* image of a 'naked' human being without any clearly defined abilities. Yet they interpret it in a positive way: the human's incompleteness is her very *power*, for this enables her to evolve and shape herself the way she wants. For Bovelles, for instance – as for Pico – "the famous Prometheus" represents the human who, contrary to all other beings, came into being without a predetermined form. Humans do, however, carry in themselves "the nature of all things" and therefore are endowed with the ability to determine their own shape. They can – and *should*, for Bovelles' account is ethically charged – follow Prometheus and remould the deity's creation. Bovelles explains that the Promethean human will have to move through several stages in this process of becoming and self-creation, but with the flame of wisdom humans can "enliven", "reheat" and "animate" the sheer terrestrial being they are at the start; they can design their own shape and ascend to celestial levels of consciousness and perfection.

Bacon has another positive concept of the wanting human – a rather ambiguous concept, but full of faith nevertheless. Bacon settles upon four main characters of the Prometheus myth who, together, personify the human condition. We humans have a unique, namely central position in the world, and are "endued and furnished with most admirable virtues and faculties". We enjoy Promethean foresight, wisdom and a strong urge for research – also, or especially, *pragmatic* research and invention; and nothing less than Providence – again symbolised by Prometheus – is located in the human's rational mind.

However, we also have our imperfections, such as disproportionate self-indulgence, embodied by Pandora. She stands for “pleasure and voluptuousness” and when in line with these characteristics “the civil life is pampered with too much art and culture and superfluity”, this produces not only individual misery, but also war and tyranny. Bacon sees Epimetheus and Prometheus each providing a great example of a specific kind of human being with his own flaws. Typically Epimethean humans are un-foreseeing, irresponsible ones, who always live their life in the moment and its delights, but thereby also “almost in perpetual affliction”. However, thanks to their ignorance and carelessness, they do have their hopes and enjoy themselves, which the second type does not. According to Bacon Promethean humans are thus characterised by brightness and foresight, but also by caution. This comfortably enables them to avoid many disasters, yet also makes them “deprive themselves and defraud their genius of many lawful pleasures and diverse recreations”. It are exactly these rational, prudent and forethinking humans who continuously bother themselves with fears and worries: “they are afflicted with innumerable cogitations [...], as it were, gnawing and devouring the liver”. Bacon says we will never be able to both benefit from the faculties Providence enriched us with *and* evade anguish without the aid of Herakles, “that is, fortitude and constancy of mind [...], foreseeing without fear, enjoying without loathing, and suffering without impatience”. The solution lies in acknowledging our deficiencies; in keeping our faith in the possibility to advance by means of knowledge, (empirical) research and Heraklean courage and perseverance, for then we will evolve and improve ourselves.

In short: humans suffer from excessive Pandoran self-pampering, Epimethean carelessness and/or Promethean self-generated eagle-like gnawing, that is, worrying. Yet according to Bacon this is nothing bad. In fact, it is a *good* thing: the story teaches us to be grateful for our limits, for those will only awaken the Heraklean potential in us and stimulate us to explore those limits and life and continue our search for (scientific) knowledge and improvement. Actually, our shortcomings are even preconditions for progress and so, paradoxically, our flaws make our condition flawless: as with Pico and Bovelles, the frailty of the human being is her strength. Moreover, again one should note that Bacon’s account of human nature is not a mere description. The human condition as such already incorporates, first, a moral evaluation: this condition is *good*; and, second, a moral encouragement: humans *should* employ this nature – their capabilities as well as their deficiencies. This will enable them to always keep on growing, expand their wisdom and capacities and perhaps even prolong their life, so that they may end up in a paradisiacal situation such as that of *New Atlantis*.

The image of the fundamentally wanting human will keep on appearing throughout the centuries. Rousseau’s account of the human is another positive interpretation of the fundamentally wanting human. According to him, the original ignorance and primitivity of humanity is good; the human’s natural lack

of knowledge and civilisation is the precondition for her serenity, innocence and happiness – the human will only burn himself on the Promethean torch of science.

In a quite different form, the idea of the lacking human returns with Nietzsche and Freud. This time the human condition is not so much straightforwardly celebrated or lamented, but rather stated as a fact, although the consequences are certainly discussed and criticised. Each in their own way, the scholars highlight humankind's fundamental incompleteness and relate this to religion. Nietzsche characterises the human as “das noch nicht Festgestellte Thier” – reminiscent of the Epimethean creation – and Freud underlines humanity's infinite immaturity. Humans need dreams, fantasies and illusions to compensate for the indeterminacy of their condition; and as Nietzsche argues in *The Gay Science* it is precisely these self-deceiving constructions which make the human strongly resemble Prometheus and his illusionary fabrications. Both Nietzsche and Freud point out that God is nothing but such a delusion, created by humans to close their inherent gaps. The human urge to complete may be not a bad thing in itself, but up to now the effects are: we took the wrong step when “finishing” or “maturing” ourselves by means of religion, for the worshipping of a non-existent deity only impedes the process of civilisation. Nietzsche may be more pessimistic than Freud, but neither is without hope for the future. Both push us to acknowledge our essential indeterminacy and the illusionary – according to Nietzsche even *bestialising* – nature of our tales and beliefs. Nietzsche states that we should recognise the fact that we ourselves, in Promethean fashion, created the myths we believe to be true, for if we do, we can free ourselves from those self-constructed restraints, proceed and explore the unlimited possibilities of our indefinite nature. Freud's argument with respect to our self-deception is that it is time to outgrow our infantile state and its gods, self-made out of a need for paternal authority. And we *will*, for Freud believes that the evolution of the human species will proceed in accordance with the human's individual, physical process of growth, which means that humans will no longer need an external authority to compensate for their ‘infinite’ immaturity: the gaps seem to have lost their inevitability. There is thus an important difference between Nietzsche and Freud: the latter states that “we find ourselves [...] in the middle of that phase of development” – in the end we will reach personal and cultural maturity. The human is endowed with what McLelland calls “the Promethean will” and by means of this rebellious opposition against authority we will establish personal and “atheistic autonomy”. For Nietzsche, however, we will always remain undetermined; there is nothing necessarily wrong with that, as long as we do not fix ourselves with something as deceiving as Christianity.

Each in their own way, all the 20th century authors I treated picture the human as an inherently incomplete being and do this by means of the Prometheus myth. Gide's Prometheus relates how he used to be an “unconscious and beautiful, happy and naked and unaware” being, but as soon

as he concerned himself with the humans the eagle appeared, took advantage of his exposedness and started feasting on him. Prometheus thus starts off as a Rousseau-like natural being, but his pleasant state of nudity is severely disturbed by the eagle, that is, by consciousness. The Titan makes the human in his own image, that is, conscious of existence, but thereby also essentially vulnerable. For with consciousness of existence also comes conscience and responsibility, as well as the need for a *reason* for existence. The reason Prometheus endows humans with is faith in progress, but this faith is “devouring”, a “morbid hope for better”. At first sight Prometheus may be humanity’s giver, but he embodies the inherently fragile human: *everyone* has an eagle, and “[t]he belief in progress, gentlemen, that was their eagle”. The human needs a reason to live and is forced to fulfil this with a moral system, which is as illusory as the ones envisioned by Nietzsche and Freud. Humans devote themselves to its set of principles and laws as Prometheus to his eagle, hoping and believing this will make them advance. However, this allegedly need-satisfying system is only imprisoning, liberty-constraining, devouring them; only amplifying the human lack. Yet despite the misery of this image, again just as Nietzsche and Freud, Gide has faith in the human capacity to deal with their want. This want is inevitable, but, like Prometheus, humans can ‘eat’ their eagle: they can at least create their *own*, private morality and let their freedom be restricted by their *own* sense of responsibility instead of by some religious or other traditional ethics from the outside. According to Gide, humans can – and *should* – take life in their own hands and decide for themselves with what rules and laws they will close the moral gap of their existence.

As I said when discussing rebellion, Camus’ Titan represents the human being in an undeified world. This modern, suddenly independent human has surely made progress, but Camus tells us “we are still deaf to the great cry of human revolt of which [Prometheus] gives the solitary signal”. The loss of God made life absurd: human existence lacks meaning and with our exclusive focus on science and the physical we ignore essential Promethean gifts such as art, liberty, happiness and the soul. We may be successful with technology, but “one serves nothing in man if one does not serve the whole man”. However, as the other 20th century thinkers just discussed, Camus believes we have the ability to fulfil our wants: we can – and again, we *should* – serve our *whole* selves, body *and* soul, if, like Prometheus, we “separate and exclude nothing”, because that “always has and always will reconcile mankind’s suffering with the springtimes of the world”. If we open our ears to the vibrations of freedom, enchantment, the aesthetic and the spiritual we can compensate for our lives’ absurd lack of significance.

Finally, Anders emphasises the human’s lack of *origin*. He is another author who employs the Prometheus myth to reveal what humanity is missing. According to him, human nature is not having any nature at all and that is why humans shape their own world and being. At first sight, Anders’ idea may appear to fall under the same heading as Pico’s and Bovelles’ cheerful concept

of the naturally undetermined, self-transforming human. However, Anders' account is dark and troubling: the human's lack of essence makes him inherently detached from the world and then, rather than a Titanic talent, self-creation is her *duty*, a *pre-requisite*. "[T]he unadjusted being must create a personal world, because no ready-made world is available" – nor is there any ready-made form of significance. Humans' fundamental 'unworldliness' forces them to create their own universe and way of being out of an unfathomable amount of possible worlds. The non-existence of some inherent meaning and the structural artificiality and changeability of his nature makes the human essentially unstable. He experiences himself as contingent and arbitrary; "coming from an origin which he can't do anything with, but which he must identify himself with here and now". Driven by their Promethean pride and creativity humans used to keep on making progress, the quality of their products growing and growing. However, says Anders, Promethean pride is history – it has been replaced by Promethean *shame*. Nowadays, no one succeeds any more in satisfyingly employing their mythological moulding abilities. Paradoxically, this is all due to humankind's immense technological progress, for it has been overhauled by its own creations. The "shamefully high quality" of their fabrications confronts humans with their own imperfections and the severely antiquated character of the accidental, contingent and illogical nature of their coming-into and being-in-the-world. The human body is naked in the sense that it is "unworked", insufficiently reified, a "faulty construction" which invokes the severe Promethean shame humanity feels towards the artifice. Confronted with their own weaknesses, contemporary humans desire to become a product themselves, they crave their own reification. People wish to mould themselves into something mechanical, leaving behind all that is natural about them. Like thinkers such as Nietzsche and Gide, Anders pictures the human as fundamentally undefined. However, he certainly sketches the most pessimistic image and pictures a human who has become something of the past, who continuously fails to shape himself. This human lost the capacity to fulfil his inherent ontological emptiness and the only solution is to denaturalise; his only aim is *dehumanization*.

4.2.5. Ambiguity

As I said at the beginning, an essential quality of the Prometheus myth is its ambiguity. It is something that keeps on coming back and plays a fundamental role at various levels and layers of the story and its interpretations. First of all, the classical myth itself is ambiguous. Second, several of the myth's themes, happenings, figures and objects are ambiguous by definition. Third, the narrators' mouldings and interpretations of the story as well as the characters and themes within one narration are often ambiguous. Fourth, regularly the function and message of one particular version of (or reference to) the

Promethean story is ambiguous – sometimes because of several antagonistic references in different contexts – and so is the narrator’s point of view.

To start with the *first* point: the ambivalence of the Prometheus myth itself – that is, its storyline – must be more than obvious. There is not one canonical text and so the different classical versions each include elements the others do not have – in short: Hesiod’s the sacrificial trick; Aeschylus’ the many details and Plato’s the creation. This already makes sure ‘*the*’ myth consists of a set of themes, occurrences, personages and objects, which together create complex network of potential connections, agreements, unities and contradictions and thus a world of possible forms, interpretations, employments and applications of the story.

Second, various of the myth’s characteristic themes, concepts, figures and objects are ambivalent *in themselves*. Evidently, they are different from version to version, but even when taken out of the context of the Prometheus myth, they are not unequivocal. As said, fire is one of these elements. In ‘reality’, apart from whatever storyline, the phenomenon as such is double-edged: a source of light, warmth, technological practices and civilisation, while just as much one of death and destruction – one of the reasons why it plays not only an important practical role but also a symbolic and spiritual one in many different existent cultures.

Hope is another example of such inherent ambiguity. As Dougherty says, “it can encourage a man to work hard [...] in anticipation of a prosperous future or it can delude an idle man into an unrealistic expectation of a life of ease”. It can take away fears – like the gift of “blind hopes” from Aeschylus’ Prometheus – and motivate humans to develop plans and undertake action. Yet its ‘blinding’ tendency may also disturb a sensible worldview and lead to nothing but unforeseen misfortunes.

Related to hope is the ambiguity of knowledge. It is the birthplace of understanding, control, progress and perhaps even truth; but is simultaneously restrictive and it excludes possibilities. Whether on purpose or not, ‘wisdom’ can be used for inappropriate, immoral or dangerous objectives and contain confrontational and frightening facts one should rather not have known. The emptiness of ignorance may be preferable, for that can still be filled in many ways, with an innumerable amount of possible facts and understandings, which means there is much space for surprising and beautiful outcomes – and therefore also for much hope.

There are several other cases of such intrinsic ambivalence (used in the myth). The figure of *the Greek god*, for instance: whatever myth it concerns, it is an equivocal figure – each possesses divine as well as human qualities, good as well as bad and controlling as well as chaotic ones. Typically Promethean *character traits* such as ambition, creativity and courage are ambiguous anyway – as they produce (respectively) progress as well as overconfidence; invention as well as failure; victory as well as suffering. *Freedom* is ambivalent – it places life in one’s own hands and thus opens up an immense realm of possibilities.

This free state of being, however, implies no guidance or structure so that there is a serious threat of getting lost in that very same realm.

The above examples can be extended with a number of other ones. But the discussed cases should have made clear that several of the double-edged themes and concepts present in the Prometheus myth are ambiguous by definition, independent of the myth's framework. Their use is unlikely to be a coincidence; the classical writers must have consciously chosen particular concepts to set their audience thinking. The ambivalence of hope, for instance, is probably why Hesiod keeps it in Pandora's box – leaving it to the reader to decide whether it is the human's last means of survival or something evoking such a terrible kind of badness that it should remain in the jar of evil. The ambiguity of knowledge is another main focus of the ancients. The gains of wisdom – technological progress, cultural civilisation etc – are obvious, but those of ignorance are not neglected. The benefit of not having knowledge of future misery is the main reason why Aeschylus' and Plato's Prometheus takes away the human's foreknowledge of death. They have the reader reflect on the conviction that wisdom is not always for the better.

The already independently ambiguous themes – together, of course, with the differences between the classical versions of the myth – produce a broad range of potential storylines, explanations and interpretations and thus food for thought. This is why throughout history many authors enthusiastically grab hold of the myth; its flexibility makes it easy for them to mould it according to their own wishes and use it to their benefit. However, this does not mean that within *one* particular version of the myth a figure or occurrence does not often still have different characteristics and can be interpreted in several ways. In fact, it is often not only the malleability of the myth as such but precisely the ambiguity of its figures and themes why narrators choose this story in particular to make their point. So to continue with the *third* field of ambiguity: the Promethean characters, themes and concepts employed are regularly still ambivalent within one narration since – thus often on purpose – different and even contradictory elements of the tale are combined.

Evidently, Prometheus himself is the main case of such an ambiguous figure. From one tale to another we have seen a myriad of types with an immense variety of characteristics, from a nasty deceiver to an outright champion, from an anxious defaulter to a divine creator. But although usually there is a greater focus on some features than others, also within one narrative the Titan virtually always possesses a combination of different and even antithetical qualities. The same goes for his operations: perhaps an author focuses on one rather than the other, but often conflicting actions take place – though not always as explicit, his stealing as well as giving are for instance consistently included in each version. Hesiod rejects him as a trickster, Aeschylus and Plato present him as a hero, but in all three separate stories he is a thief as well as a benefactor. The appreciation of Prometheus' character and actions and the author's final judgement may be of an obviously positive or

negative nature. Yet whether he embodies “the power to think and reason” (Plutarch) or the miserable hubris of “human invention” (Hobbes), he has always done something good and bad, so that according to Ficino’s interpretation, the Titan may simultaneously represent “the highest level of daemons” and the “ruler of the rational soul”.

Many other examples of ambiguous characters could be given which are obviously radically different from story to story, but also within one and the same: Pandora, for instance, is literally defined by Hesiod as a “*lovely evil*”⁶¹² – a *contradictio in terminis*, I would say. Another fascinating case is Gide’s extraordinarily refashioned eagle: a) a pitiable, meagre bird, yet nevertheless still a torturing, liver-devouring creature; b) first the “sweet eagle” loved tenderly by an anxious Prometheus, yet happily eaten by an advanced Titan at the end. The bird’s symbolic significance turns out to be the ambivalent human conscience, which devours humans by means of its restricting ethical rules, yet at the same time provides them with an identity. Clearly, Gide selected this particular story because of its malleability and rich supply of ambiguous and contradictory elements.

In addition, not only the myth’s characters, but also the (classical) actions and themes are often equivocal within one version of the story. With respect to actions, Prometheus’ theft is always of an ambiguous nature. This is beautifully put to use by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* when he characterises the theft – that is, the acquirement of knowledge – as a *valuable crime*, paradoxically worthy because of its evil nature. Further, the Titan’s act of creation is very often explained in the most ambivalent ways. Anders, for instance, shows how that same Promethean creative power which made humanity continuously evolve and proceed, simultaneously is the source of its current inferior and shameful condition. One could call it a *self-destructive power* – again, a contradiction in terms.

When it comes to themes, as said, some are ambiguous by themselves, but clearly they are as well within the context of one particular narration, such as the examples given above: hope, for instance, in Hesiod’s version and knowledge in Aeschylus’ and Plato’s. Again, these could be extended with many more examples of ambivalence – such as science in *Frankenstein*, or fire in Freud’s explanation of the converse functions of the male genitals. Yet the most crucial ambiguity inspired by the myth is the concept of *human nature* – Plato’s semi-divine human, Boccaccio’s “twofold” one and many more. Indeed, all the accounts of an essentially incomplete, malleable human condition discussed above are fundamentally ambivalent, whether it is Bacon’s human with his fruitful flaws or Nietzsche’s undetermined, self-deceiving human animal. In fact, for Nietzsche the myth as a whole symbolises the inherent ambiguity of human existence as such, which is Apollonian as well as Dionysian, orderly as well as chaotic, victorious as well as tortured, human as well as bestial.

⁶¹² My emphasis.

Fourth, the function of the Promethean reference in a text and the author's message and viewpoint underneath are often ambivalent as well. Lucian's perspective, for instance, is rather ambiguous in different ways. First, as said, he completely ridicules the myth in his dialogue, but Prometheus remains its hero nevertheless. Second, Lucian celebrates the vitality and flexibility of humans – that is, Prometheus' creations – yet at the same time he states that humankind is nothing but a product to please the gods, for “[w]hat is great, you know, can only seem great if it is gauged by something small”. Moreover, he often speaks of himself – as a human – in a belittling way, just as of the people who enjoy his work, for they are nothing but a cheap, spectacle-eager crowd. Third, when called “a literary Prometheus” because of his creative and innovative capacities, Lucian is flattered, but later he emphasises that contrary to the Titan he is no thief – “from whom should I have stolen?” – or trickster – “have I [...] cheated my hearers by serving them up bones wrapped in fat?” In all three cases, it is unclear whether Lucian's final assessment of Prometheus is entirely cynical or serious at the core, whether it is positive or negative. Actually, what *is* clear is that his assessment cannot be characterised in either way. Lucian is a great example of a narrator who chooses this myth in particular precisely because of its ambivalence, because it provides him with a rich source of antithetical elements with which he can expose his complex ideas.

Propertius' idea is another equivocal one. He calls the creation of Prometheus a “botch”, which was made without forethought. The human being is ill-fashioned because of the mind's unbound, ungoverned character – “the slightest wind is enough to blow us far off course” and this leads to awful things such as warfare. Yet at the same time Propertius deeply cherishes that nakedness, that lack of control and restriction and he openly admits to thoroughly revel in a free life of dancing, drinking and loving. Instead of telling people to let their minds be governed by rules, Propertius stimulates them to “bind” those minds to freedom and most of all, to *love*, for that is not only pleasing but also generates peace. However, once he has become older and his Love-filled days are over, that “will be time enough for my mind to turn to nature to consider the ways of the gods”. In short, the narrator's statements are contradictory: Prometheus has made a blunder which is nevertheless happily enjoyed; the unbound mind is celebrated and stimulated, but in the end intellectual investigation and control are surely important. So when it comes to the crunch, does Propertius appreciate the Titan's failure or not? Does he mean to encourage people to unbind their minds or not? His message is double and it seems to be so on purpose: enjoy your unbounded mind when young and bind it to serious rationality when older, when love life has become less interesting. In fact, it seems to be precisely the ambiguous, half-bound nature of the mind which pleases Propertius, so that in the end Prometheus has not done such a bad job after all.

Once more, there are many other occasions on which the narrator's idea or opinion is ambivalent. If we lay an author's reference to the myth side-by-side with another in a different text of his, often his final judgement is opaque by all means. Ficino's Prometheus is a miserable chained martyr (*Five Questions*), whose creative capacities are nevertheless appreciated when Ficino compares himself to the Titan (Letter to Pico); Hobbes' Prometheus who was earlier dismissed as a hubristic "imitating" rebel (*De Cive*), becomes "the prudent man" (*Leviathan*); and Nietzsche's dignified criminal (*The Birth of Tragedy*) degrades to a pathetic, self-deluding human (*The Gay Science*). Of course the ambivalence of these cases could simply be due to the fact that the narrator's view radically changed over time.

The last text I'd like to address is Kafka's *Prometheus*, which may be the most ambiguous of them all. One can endlessly speculate about its literal meaning and profound message: is it about storytelling, or about truth? Is it about the end of mythology as suggested by Blumenberg? Does it still have anything to do with Prometheus? Kafka's writing covers the Promethean ambiguity in all four layers discussed above. First, by presenting four versions of the myth it makes use of its classical ambiguity due to the differences between the archaic versions. Second, two themes which are of central importance are the inherently ambiguous ones of truth and reality. Third, within the text as a whole the figure of Prometheus himself is ambiguous: a betrayer, a martyr and at some point even a rock. Fourth, together with cryptic phrasings this produces a text of which the meaning and purpose as well as the author's viewpoint are thoroughly ambiguous. Kafka's radical remodelling of what he names "the meaningless affair" is paradoxically nevertheless an attempt to assign meaning to that affair – in fact, it *cannot but* assign it *some* meaning, even if it is virtually incomprehensible. Perhaps his reshaping of "the legend" which "tries to explain the inexplicable" – again, a contradiction in terms – is about something one could call *the inherent inexplicability of life*? Whatever the answer, Kafka's writing shows the myth's ambivalence at its best.

Conclusion

By means of an analysis of the historical data from the former chapters in this chapter I have tried to show how the whole of interconnected characteristics, functions and themes explains why especially the Prometheus myth has always kept on intriguing people throughout all these centuries. Not only did I show what the historical references to the myth tell us about the myth itself, but also what they tell us about the ideas of the author and his times.

I started by pointing out the myth's extraordinary malleability, which is an essential quality that provides a firm basis for its functions. It produces an infinite potential of storylines and interpretations and therefore makes it adaptable to all the different eras and hands it passed through, all with their own aims, problems and paradigms. This is why it has always continued to spark all

kinds of authors to take hold of the fruitful story and shape their own version, moulded according to their own wishes, aims and philosophical convictions.

First, I discussed the myth's functional values. It has a society-related function: it is both influenced by the time's social circumstances and individual beliefs, while its rich content also helps shape and reflect on those circumstances and beliefs. Related to this is the myth's knowledge forming function: it offers a flexible assemblage of images and meanings which can be formed into frameworks that help humankind understand and investigate the world. As a story of the human's origin and nature it particularly helps assign the human a place in that world and answer existential questions: what it means to be human. This brings us to the myth's moral function. Apart from more specific ethical messages and normative recommendations, the ontology it presents by definition carries a moral meaning. The human condition represented by the Titan or his story always implies an idea of the 'right' or 'just' condition.

Second, I investigated the myth's themes. Whereas individually the treated functions are not exclusive to the myth of Prometheus, the combination of its malleability, functions and themes is. Its malleability is not only an essential feature of its form or storyline, but imbues all of its elements because the myth's content is substantially ambiguous. Fire, rebellion, creativity and human nature – all of its characteristic themes are of an ambivalent nature. I discovered that the seemingly contradictory interpretations of the myth's themes are never waterproof. One (e.g. positive) interpretation can never completely exclude the (e.g. negative) other. Prometheus' beneficent gift is stolen; hubris is courageous nevertheless. The creation of humanity demands artistry; poetry involves self-creation. The Promethean human is infinitely self-improving, but therefore necessarily incomplete. This is what distinguishes the Prometheus myth from other stories: its ambiguity is impossible to escape, for it is inherent to its form, functions, themes, characters and (individual) interpretation. Moreover, it is not merely an ambiguous story but poses that ambiguity as its central question. The all-encompassing theme of the complicated double-edged nature of vital elements of the human and her life is the very question or problem that those employing the Prometheus myth – whether on purpose or not, implicitly or explicitly – raise, study and/or try to answer or solve. The myth's ambivalence only strengthens its malleability, so that, as noted, the author is free to examine the innumerable quantity of possible interpretations, shape the story according to his own time, taste and philosophy, and create his own way to deal with the issue of ambivalence.

However, the author's 'freedom' of choice is simultaneously a restriction, since he is forced to limit his choice to only a few possibilities out of the infinite amount at his disposal. This means that the chapter's analysis unveils significant information on two sides of a reference to the Prometheus myth: first, about the myth as such; second, about the author referring to the myth. While the references, shapes and choices of the many authors studied have taught us much about the nature, functions and themes of the Prometheus myth, at the

same time with this information at hand we gain access to the – often at first sight not that obvious – essential concepts, beliefs and judgements of the authors in question. Whether their emphasis lies on thievery or giving, whether the human's Promethean nature is condemned or praised – it all allows us a look into something as paramount as their worldview. And so my findings have an explanatory as well as practical value. They explain its continuous recurrence in history: thanks to its complex, flexible whole of characteristics, functions and themes, the Prometheus myth has a particular usefulness and kept on inspiring philosophers, authors and artists throughout all these centuries. The practical value of my findings lies in their function as a means to disclose the fundamental views of the author who chose to appeal to the thought-provoking potentialities of *this* myth in order to make her point. Therefore I claim first, that in line with its malleability and continuous popularity the myth must still be of significant relevance in philosophy today; and second, that an analysis of contemporary references to the myth with my research as point of departure would thus provide access to the author's vital concepts and convictions. In the next chapter I examine the contemporary debate on human enhancement in order to demonstrate the validity of these two claims.

5. The Enhancement Debate

Introduction

There is one more step to take in order to complete the discussion of the Prometheus myth: exploring the debate on ‘human enhancement’. Provoked by the blistering pace at which technology is advancing, it has made philosophers, scientists and many others wonder whether – and if so, *how* – emerging technologies such as IVF, cloning, artificial intelligence, genetic engineering and nanotechnology could be used to ‘enhance’ humans by fundamentally improving their characteristics. What would such profound changes mean for us as human beings? Would we actually remain human or become *posthuman* beings? Would such changes be improving us at all? Should we then be trying to ‘enhance’ the human with those new technologies or *not*? These are some of the main questions driving the ‘Enhancement Debate’.

Both proponents and adversaries of human enhancement often refer to Prometheus. The former may warn us to “[b]eware the day when we betray our Promethean heritage”⁶¹³. The latter may hold that “[i]n his moment of triumph, Promethean man will [...] become a contented cow”⁶¹⁴. In what follows, I will examine how both camps in the debate make use of the myth. I will start by giving a brief overview of the arguments and Prometheus references of Gregory Stock, Ronald Dworkin, Donrich Jordaan and Simon Young (advocates) and Michael Sandel, Leon Kass and Mike McNamee (opponents). I will go on to analyse the references encountered with my findings from the previous chapters as point of departure. My aims are to, first, demonstrate the continuous relevance and inspirational value of the Prometheus myth in philosophical arguments today; and second, uncover fundamental conceptualisations, beliefs and judgements of the participants of the debate. Thereby, I wish to a) clarify the arguments, ethics and ontological framework of the debaters and b) demonstrate the usefulness of my earlier findings as a means to gain access to vital concepts and convictions of an author referring to the myth.

5.1. The Advocates

The theorists in the pro-enhancement camp argue that human enhancement should be pursued: because it is a logical step in humanity’s evolution, because it is inevitable, or because it is a moral imperative. It will cure disease, reduce inequality, make us physically and mentally stronger, make us happier.

⁶¹³ D. Jordaan, “Antipromethean Fallacies: A Critique of Fukuyama’s Bioethics,” *Biotechnology Law Report* 28, no. 5 (2009): 590.

⁶¹⁴ Leon Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defence of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 48.

According to some scholars, this will culminate in generating a new and better species. Many of those endorsing the latter idea call themselves ‘transhumanists’. The term ‘transhumanism’ was coined by biologist Julian Huxley in 1957, who spoke of a belief in “man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature”⁶¹⁵. Transhumanists believe in a future posthuman race which, in the words of leading transhumanist Nick Bostrom, will have physical and mental capacities “greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being”⁶¹⁶. Today’s transhumanists promote this transcendence towards a posthuman existence and show strong commitments to science, technology, reason and progress.

When they refer to Prometheus, they opt for the most positive and optimistic versions of the myth, dominated by themes of fire, courage, wisdom, control and progress. Their Titan is one who is shaped along Aeschylean lines and further possesses the creative powers Plato bestowed him with. He is the heroic benefactor of humanity who does not fear to face dangers and cross boundaries, not even if they lead to realms which are completely impossible to visualise. The pro-enhancement Prometheus is the one who fashioned humans out of clay and endowed them with the capacity to take over his shaping activities and fashion themselves. He is the one who gave them wisdom, arts and technology through which they can infinitely proceed and evolve, or better: *enhance* themselves.

5.1.1. Gregory Stock

The biophysicist Gregory Stock, a major figure among the advocates, is one of the promoters of the Promethean urge to improve. In his book *Redesigning Humans* (2003), he confidently announces that we are “on the cusp of profound biological change”⁶¹⁷. Given emerging technologies such as cloning and human genetic modification it is only a matter of time before “these developments will write a new page in the history of life, allowing us to seize control of our evolutionary future”⁶¹⁸. Whether we like it or not, he argues, the trend has been set and further developments are inevitable. In fact, some of us are already enhancing themselves by means of, for instance, performance enhancement in sports – doping – or aesthetic surgery. If people believe manipulating themselves by means of genetic engineering is to their advantage, as soon as they think it is safe enough, they shall be willing to use these new technologies.

⁶¹⁵ Julian Huxley, “Transhumanism,” in *New Bottles for New Wine* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), 17. In fact, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) already spoke of “transumanare” or “transumanar” in the *Divine Comedy*, which could be translated as “to go outside the human condition and perception”, or in short, “to transhumanize”.

⁶¹⁶ Nick Bostrom, “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up,” in *Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity*, ed. B. Gordijn and R. Chadwick (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 107.

⁶¹⁷ Gregory Stock, *Redesigning Humans* (London: Profile Books, 2003), 1.

⁶¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

Quoting James Watson, co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, Stock asks us: “[i]f we could make better humans ... why shouldn’t we?”⁶¹⁹. Yes, there will be anxiety, mistakes and even abuse, but that could be said about any radical new development or technology. And of course we should be careful with the application of the technologies, but no serious scientist will start engineering human genes until such operations can be safely carried out. So “[w]hy all the fuss, then?”⁶²⁰. To try to stop the developments is unrealistic and impossible. We will be facing daunting choices, “but putting our heads in the sand is not the solution”⁶²¹. Rather we should think about how to minimise the risks and maximise the benefits.

“Humanity is moving out of its childhood and into a gawky, stumbling adolescence in which it must learn not only to acknowledge its immense new powers, but to figure out how to use them wisely.”⁶²²

Instead, we should be brave and face the unknown dangers:

“[S]ome imagine we will see the perils, come to our senses, and turn away from such possibilities. But when we imagine Prometheus stealing fire from the gods, we are not incredulous or shocked by his act. It is too characteristically human. To forego the powerful [enhancement] technologies [...] would be as out of character for humanity as it would be to use them without concern for the dangers they pose”⁶²³.

In short: the Promethean urge is only human.

5.1.2. Ronald Dworkin

A similar point is made by philosopher of law Ronald Dworkin in his book *Sovereign Virtue* (2000). In the chapter “Playing God: Genes, Clones, and Luck” he argues that the revulsion many people feel against cloning and genetic engineering is based not so much on fear of the potential dangers, concern about social injustice or loss of human diversity, but on an aversion to “playing God”. However,

“it is deeply unclear what the injunction [not to play God] really means—unclear what playing God is, and what, exactly, is wrong with it. It can’t mean that it is always wrong for human beings to attempt to resist natural catastrophes, or to improve upon the hand that nature has dealt them. People do that—always have done that—all the time”⁶²⁴.

⁶¹⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁶²⁰ Ibid.

⁶²¹ Ibid., 17.

⁶²² Ibid.

⁶²³ Ibid., 2.

⁶²⁴ Ronald Dworkin, *Sovereign Virtue* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: Harvard University Press, 2000), 443.

The problem rather seems to be that genetic science presents the possibility of an enormous dislocation in the very structure of our moral and ethical framework. People dread genetic engineering not so much because of a fear of what is wrong, “it is rather a fear of losing our grip on what is wrong”, of a “moral free-fall”⁶²⁵. However, this does not mean that the emotional responses to genetic manipulations are justified. It only means that we may have to revise some of our most basic moral presuppositions, but we should rise to the challenge:

“Playing God is indeed playing with fire. But that is what we mortals have done since Prometheus, the patron saint of dangerous discoveries. We play with fire and take the consequences, because the alternative is cowardice in the face of the unknown”⁶²⁶.

Again: the Promethean ambition is something inherently human.

5.1.3. Donrich Jordaan

Dworkin’s idea of the “Promethean courage” is strongly upheld by the biotechnology entrepreneur Donrich Jordaan, in his article “Antipromethean Fallacies: A Critique of Fukuyama’s Bioethics” (2009). Jordaan challenges the views of “bioconservative” Francis Fukuyama of (amongst other things) “resurrecting” the naturalistic fallacy. In *Our Posthuman Future* (2003), Fukuyama rejects genetic engineering on the grounds that it would harm human dignity, be unnatural, and dehumanize us. He argues that human dignity is based on what he calls “Factor X”, which

“cannot be reduced to the possession of moral choice, or reason, or language, or sociability, or sentience, or emotions, or consciousness, or any other quality that has been put forth as a ground for human dignity. It is all these qualities coming together in a human whole that make up Factor X”⁶²⁷.

Fukuyama holds that enhancement would mean an invasion of this “human whole” and as such harm human dignity. Jordaan argues that this human whole or Factor X is nothing but human nature. And to derive values such as human dignity exclusively from human nature is invalid because human nature, in itself, has no (or limited) moral relevance. Fukuyama’s argument, in other words, is a case of naturalistic fallacy.

Another claim from Fukuyama argued against by Jordaan is that pain and suffering are essential for humanity because they form the basis for

⁶²⁵ Ibid., 446.

⁶²⁶ Ibid.

⁶²⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2003), 171.

fundamental and valuable qualities such as compassion, heroism and “depth”. Since enhancement will relieve suffering, these qualities will be lost and such a loss will *dehumanize* us. In Jordaan’s view, this argument is “thoroughly unconvincing and unabashedly technophobic”⁶²⁸. In the absence of human suffering, nothing prevents us from still being compassionate or heroic – even if one insists on interpreting the latter narrowly as “bravery under difficult or even life-threatening circumstances”⁶²⁹, for there will still be extreme situations, such as accidents or natural disasters. Nor will it withhold us from deep reflection.

Jordaan criticises Fukuyama for a “disappointing lack of intellectual courage”⁶³⁰ and for assuming that any change in human nature is automatically bad. But human nature could just as much “be changed for the better, promoting human dignity rather than undermining it”⁶³¹. In Jordaan’s eyes, we should follow the example of Dworkin, who *does* have the “Promethean courage” to play with fire – to face the moral challenges of the new technologies, that is. It is thanks to this courage, this “cultural catalyst”, that we live in such a modern, civilised and technologically advanced society right now; that we have made such “awesome improvements to the human condition”⁶³². And so Jordaan concludes the article with the following:

“At the onset of modernity, only 500 years ago, nearly all Westerners lived in servitude, almost unimaginable poverty, ignorance, and superstition and toiled their short, disease-ridden lives away with hard physical labor. Beware the day when we betray our promethean heritage. Beware the antipromethean heresy of Fukuyama”⁶³³.

The Promethean courage is our heritage, a fundamental element of our cultural essence.

5.1.4. Simon Young

Simon Young, author of *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (2006), refuses to accept the greatest “tragedies” of human life – biological limitations and death – and puts his trust in the power and possibilities of science to eventually conquer those. The overcoming of these limitations is not a mere wish, but understood to be our natural destiny: “the goal of human life is survival – we are programmed that way”⁶³⁴. We have always been engaged in the ongoing process of evolution and now the time has come to liberate ourselves – and here Young uses a metaphor nicely fitting the Promethean image – from

⁶²⁸ Jordaan, “Antipromethean Fallacies: A Critique of Fukuyama’s Bioethics,” 585.

⁶²⁹ Ibid.

⁶³⁰ Ibid., 590.

⁶³¹ Ibid., 585.

⁶³² Ibid., 590.

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Simon Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), 15–16.

our “biological chains”. “Humanity will take evolution out of the hands of butterfingere nature into its own transhuman hands”⁶³⁵. This is not merely desirable – “Designer Evolution” is the *inevitable* next step in the human history of self-improvement. Young holds that we are standing at the “Dawn of a New Age – the DNAge” which will be characterised by our new ability to manipulate and enhance the human body by means of “Superbiology”⁶³⁶.

At the DNAge, we require a new ethics. Secularisation and postmodernism, Young claims, have left us with a society devoid of shared meaning, values and beliefs. We need a new philosophy to provide us with answers to fundamental questions on metaphysics, human nature and ethics, and, from there, with shared values and a universal purpose. These answers, of course, are to be delivered by transhumanism. For Young, the world is “a process of evolutionary complexification toward evermore complex structures, forms, and operations”⁶³⁷. Human nature is defined by the “Will to Evolve”: “the instinctive drive of a conscious entity to expand its abilities in pursuit of ever-increasing survivability and well-being”, “even at the expense of present pains”⁶³⁸. Prometheus symbolises this “Will”, which Young therefore entitles the “Prometheus Drive”⁶³⁹ and which his transhumanist ethics urges us to “*foster*” so that

“by acting in harmony with the essential nature of the evolutionary process – complexification – we may discover a new sense of purpose [...] and come to feel ourselves *at home in the world* once more”⁶⁴⁰.

This new sense of purpose will be provided by “[t]he prospect of Designer Evolution [...]: the continual improvement in the quality of life through the eradication of disease and enhancement of abilities”⁶⁴¹. Young recognizes that a future of self-enhancement is not without risks. But to neglect the “innate” Prometheus Drive to progress, improve and *enhance*, will lead to stagnation or decline. It would mean to forever remain in the power of our limitations and keep on suffering from disease and death. Hence, Young pleads:

⁶³⁵ Ibid., 17; 38.

⁶³⁶ Ibid., 38.

⁶³⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁶³⁸ Ibid., 39. Young calls this “transhumanist psychology”. However, since it is based upon an idea of the human being as by nature being a creature that evolves and improves and whose goal is survival, I would rather call it “transhumanist *ontology*”.

⁶³⁹ Further in the book Young defines the *Will* as consisting of two drives: the *Prometheus* and *Orpheus Drives*, or the *Will to Grow* and the *Will to Love* (or the Drive for Integration) respectively.

⁶⁴⁰ Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto*, 19.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., 39.

“Let us be the **New Prometheans**. Let us unite in our commitment to boldly go where none have gone before in search of the knowledge by which to transcend the limitations of the human condition.

Let us cast aside cowardice and seize the torch of Prometheus with both hands”⁶⁴².

We should foster what is our innate, evolutionary, Promethean drive.

5.2. The Opponents

The debaters in the other camp, baptised ‘bioconservatives’ by their adversaries, are sceptical of the wonderful effects novel technologies such as bioengineering will bring about. They oppose human enhancement with arguments ranging from practical doubts with regard to its feasibility to passionate condemnation of any possible application of the allegedly enhancing techniques to humans. The new crafts will not make us happier, stronger, or equalise us, on the contrary: they threaten our dignity, will destroy our autonomy, promote injustice or, as Anders warned us earlier, even *dehumanize* us – and this would be anything but positive.

It should then be no surprise that when Prometheus enters the scene in this context, he does not appear in his benefactor costume. The contra-enhancement Titan is not shaped along Aeschylean but rather *Hesiodic* lines: the emphasis is on thievery, hubris, danger, misery and punishment.

5.2.1. Michael Sandel

The political philosopher Michael Sandel is a prominent opponent of enhancement who, in his book *The Case against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (2007), carefully studies many of the moral questions raised by enhancement. Sandel observes that violating the right to autonomy or exacerbating inequalities are often considered to be the main problems of enhancement – if, for instance, parents could choose a child’s genetic makeup or if access to the new technologies is unequal. Although Sandel recognises that these are serious issues, he locates the real problem in the moral status of enhancement and genetic engineering itself:

“The deeper danger is that they represent a kind of hyperagency, a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires. The problem is not the drift to mechanism but the drive to mastery”⁶⁴³.

⁶⁴² Ibid., 40. Note that “to boldly go where none have gone before” is a reference to Star Trek, which Young calls a “technomythology”, characterised – just like transhumanism itself – by an essentially humanist philosophy that believes in “the ongoing progress of the species through reason, science, and technology” (Ibid., 39.).

⁶⁴³ Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection* (London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 26–27.

Sandel argues that such a drive to mastery will destroy our appreciation of what he calls the “giftedness of life”⁶⁴⁴: in short, our natural talents and gifts. Appreciating the gifted quality of life is fundamental, for it “constrains the Promethean project and conduces to certain humility. It is in part a religious sensibility. But its resonance reaches beyond religion”⁶⁴⁵. This appreciation creates a kind of balance, a harmony between our different tendencies. If we would lose our reverence for life’s giftedness, this would transform three essential moral elements – humility, responsibility and solidarity – in a most negative way.

“The awareness that our talents and abilities are not wholly our own doing restrains our tendency toward hubris. If bioengineering made the myth of the “self-made man” come true, it would be difficult to view our talents as gifts for which we are indebted rather than achievements for which we are responsible”⁶⁴⁶.

The increasing (and possibility for complete) mastery would demolish the humility with regard to what we, so far, did not control – the world would become “inhospitable to the unbidden”⁶⁴⁷, until nothing would be left but our wish and desire. To be self-made would mean to be responsible for everything we are – athletes for their ‘talents’, parents for their children.

“The Promethean impulse [...] unsettles and erodes the gifted dimension of human experience. When performance-enhancing drugs become common-place, unenhanced ballplayers find themselves “playing naked.” When genetic screening becomes a routine part of pregnancy, parents who eschew it are regarded as “flying blind” and are held responsible for whatever genetic defect befalls their child”⁶⁴⁸.

We would become the only ones liable for the entirety of our characteristics and functioning and such responsibility would undermine our solidarity with those who are less fortunate. If people’s genetic endowments would become achievements or choices rather than gifts or fortune, the “disadvantaged” at the bottom of society “would be viewed not as disadvantaged, and thus worthy of a measure of compensation, but as simply unfit, and thus worthy of eugenic repair”⁶⁴⁹. They would be considered to be lacking through a fault of their own, they – or their parents – could have chosen to be different. Therefore, it would eliminate the reason for others – the healthy or well-off – to share their ‘fate’ by, for instance, paying a greater share for insurance or taxes. “Perfect genetic

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid., 86.

⁶⁴⁷ Ibid. Here, Sandel refers to a phrase from the theologian William F. May, who spoke of “openness to the unbidden”: a form of acceptance of giftedness, particularly in the context of parenthood.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid., 92.

control would erode the actual solidarity that arises when men and women reflect on the contingency of their talents and fortunes”⁶⁵⁰.

Sandel admits that the prospect of mastery by means of bioengineering – enhancement, design, perfection of life – is somehow attractive and may seem to provide us with the most pleasant kind of freedom, but forewarns us that in reality it is deeply disempowering:

“changing our nature to fit the world, rather than the other way around, is actually the deepest form of disempowerment. It distracts us from reflecting critically on the world, and deadens the impulse to social and political improvement” [...]. “It threatens to banish our appreciation of life as a gift, and to leave us with nothing to affirm or behold outside our own will”⁶⁵¹.

Instead of feeding our “Promethean impulse” and following it in full power, we should realise the importance of the contingency of life. We should free ourselves from “the heady, Promethean self-image of the age”⁶⁵², and cherish life’s giftedness, for the Titanic urge to master our nature seriously jeopardises the *good* of our limits and imperfection.

5.2.2. Leon Kass

In his book *Life, Liberty and the Defence of Dignity* (2002), the scientist and medical ethicist Leon Kass argues against what he calls the “disposition to rational mastery”⁶⁵³ – a concept similar to Sandel’s mastery. He writes that in their search for progress – and indeed achieving new technological successes each day – people in contemporary society lose sight of the most important human and moral concerns. Especially in biotechnology, “the evils we face are intertwined with the goods we so keenly seek”⁶⁵⁴. While serving noble goals such as relieving suffering and saving lives, the “burgeoning technological powers to intervene in the human body and mind [...] are also available for uses that could slide us down to the *dehumanizing* path toward what C. S. Lewis called [...] the abolition of man”⁶⁵⁵. Now that the medical possibilities are moving beyond the traditional aims of curing disease and fighting death, “[h]uman nature itself lies on the operating table, ready for [...] “enhancement”, for wholesale redesign”⁶⁵⁶. Kass considers Huxley’s *Brave New World* the worst case scenario for such a dehumanized future: its citizens do not pursue

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid., 97; 100.

⁶⁵² Ibid., 98. Note that “the age” Sandel speaks about in this context refers to the time of a specific quotation of Robert L. Sinsheimer, a molecular biologist making some very optimistic utterances on the new eugenics in the 70s. Sandel holds that we still live in this age.

⁶⁵³ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defence of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, 33.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁵⁵ Ibid., 3–4; my emphasis.

⁶⁵⁶ Ibid., 4.

anything “humanly richer or higher”⁶⁵⁷ than health, amusement and pleasure. Everything they aspire to is of a superficial, mediocre and trivial nature and they do not even recognise what they have lost. What is most concerning today is that because the striving for enhancement originates in a well-meant aiming for human welfare, we are heading towards such dehumanization *voluntarily* if nothing will stop us. We are well aware of the dangers of inequality, physical harm or the potential abuse of the emerging technologies. “But we are slow to recognize threats to human dignity, to the ways of doing and feeling and being in the world that make human life rich, deep and fulfilling”⁶⁵⁸. Hence, it is our task “to find ways to preserve [the human future] from the soft dehumanization of well-meaning but hubristic biotechnical “re-creationism”⁶⁵⁹.

Kass uses the myth of Prometheus in order to clarify today’s discussion about technology and the mastery of nature and sketches the age-old dispute in which it is originated. He places “those who hold that the biggest obstacles to human happiness are material” against those who hold that these “are psychic and spiritual, and arise from the turbulences of the human soul itself”⁶⁶⁰. He notes that the first employ a concept of the human as a weak, wanting creature: it is *need* and *anxiety* that evoke the human quest for control. The world is seen as a hostile place; nature is the enemy which has to be conquered by technology and rationality and so for them Prometheus is the great benefactor as “bringer of fire, with its warming and transforming power, and through fire, all the other arts”⁶⁶¹. In contrast, in the second view legislators, politicians and prophets are humanity’s benefactors – “not Prometheus but Lycurgus” – there to tame the “self-destroying passions of men”⁶⁶². In this view, “the arts are suspect precisely because they serve comfort and safety, because they stimulate unnecessary desires”⁶⁶³. In order to illustrate the problem Kass recalls Plato’s allegory of the cave, in which

“it is the Promethean gift of fire and the enchantment of the arts that hold men unwittingly enchained, warm and comfortable yet blind to the world beyond the city. Mistaking their crafted world for the whole, men live ignorant of their true standing in the world and their absolute dependence on powers not of their own making and beyond their control”⁶⁶⁴.

Because of its misleading and perilous potential, art can only be beneficent to humans when ruled by (political) law, and then only when this is based on proper insight in the human soul and their “true standing in the world”. Kass’

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., 7.

⁶⁶⁰ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶⁶² Ibid. Lycurgus of Sparta was a legendary figure (8th century BC) who positively transformed the city’s society by initiating socio-political laws and military reforms.

⁶⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid.

own view is rooted in the second, spiritualist, approach: contemporary arts such as biotechnology and other forms of alleged enhancement should thus “be restricted and brought under intellectual, spiritual, moral and political rule”, or “human debasement” will be our fate⁶⁶⁵. Euthanasia and embryonic stem cell research already show how the body is unjustly being “commodified”. More and more people are willing to accept the scientific, reductionist view of the human as “just a collection of molecules”⁶⁶⁶ and subject even the human soul, psyche and happiness to the indifferent, arbitrary standards of science.

Kass respectfully quotes Rousseau, who centuries before had already seen the evils of technological success: the consequences of what Kass calls the “indefinitely inflatable”⁶⁶⁷ desires of the human. Rousseau writes that the many commodities humanity had developed

“to soften body and mind [...] lost almost all their pleasantness through habit, and as they had at the same time *degenerated into true needs*, being deprived of them became much more cruel than possessing them was sweet”⁶⁶⁸.

Full satisfaction of all our needs and desires by means of new technologies may seem unlikely, but if we became able to master the human soul, the result would indeed be outright *Brave New World* dehumanization:

“Homogenisation, mediocrity, pacification, drug-induced contentment, debasement of taste, souls without loves and longings – these are the inevitable results of making the essence of human nature the last project for technical mastery. In his moment of triumph, Promethean man will become also a contented cow”⁶⁶⁹.

The Promethean disposition to mastery will only lead to a “disconnected existence”, for “[p]erfected bodies are achieved at the price of flattened souls”⁶⁷⁰. What is needed is a richer anthropology, a new bioethics and a new biology: “an ethical account of human flourishing based on a biological account of human life as lived, not just physically, but psychically, socially and spiritually”⁶⁷¹. Non-scientific wisdom about the human soul and place is fundamental to keep the technological enthusiasm within limits; and it is not per definition the more scientific knowledge, the better. “Foreknowledge”, says Kass, about your “possible medical future”⁶⁷², will surely be gladly received when it enables healing or preventing of disease. But it will not always be welcome – genetic profiling of individuals could be damaging – not only for

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid., 135; 134.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid., 135.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁶⁶⁸ Ibid., 47. This quotation comes from Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* (1755).

⁶⁶⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁷⁰ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁷¹ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁷² Ibid., 125.

one's chances to get a job or health insurance, but also for oneself: to know that you carry a predisposition for some dreadful disorder could severely diminish the quality of your life. Hence, Kass quotes the *Prometheus Bound* and reminds us of the fact that apart from being the god who brought fire and technology, Prometheus also gave humankind

“the greater gift of “blind hopes” – “to cease seeing doom before their eyes” – precisely because he knew that ignorance of one's own future fate was indispensable to aspiration and achievement”⁶⁷³.

Promethean foreknowledge and, more generally, infinite Promethean improvement and satisfaction are not necessarily something good. On the contrary, they threaten our humanness, for a human life is by definition a life that is *lived*: it is the human's social, spiritual and embodied life, with all his wishes, pains and pleasures – and ignorance of his fate. And mortality is just as essential. Opposing proponents' striving for immortality, Kass states that “[t]his is a question in which our very humanity is at stake [...]. For to argue that human life would be better without death is, I submit, to argue that human life would be better being something other than human”⁶⁷⁴. To be mortal is to have “loves and longings”, is to have a life of meaning, is to be *human*.

5.2.3. Mike McNamee

Although he does not use the term as such, a similar fear of dehumanization seems to drive the philosopher of applied ethics Mike McNamee in “Whose Prometheus? Transhumanism, Biotechnology and the Moral Topography of Sports Medicine” (2007). In this article, McNamee “problematise[s] the unfettered application of science and technology to the sphere of sports medicine”⁶⁷⁵. More broadly, he challenges medicine wherever it is guided by the “vertical ambition in transforming our very nature as humans”⁶⁷⁶, as in a pro-enhancement ideology such as transhumanism. McNamee argues that an ethical framework is needed to evaluate the enhancement project. Therefore, he will present two versions of the Prometheus myth – Hesiod's and Aeschylus' – “which can help frame the moral limits of sports medicine”⁶⁷⁷.

McNamee notes that there are “elements of science derived from [...] Sir Francis Bacon [...] which survive and in some sense shape the hubris of modern biomedical science”⁶⁷⁸. Just like Kass, he thus observes how the

⁶⁷³ Ibid., 126. I used a different translation of the *Prometheus Bound*, in which these phrases are “Blind hopes. I sent blind hopes to settle their hearts” (see my Aeschylus chapter).

⁶⁷⁴ Ibid., 265.

⁶⁷⁵ Mike McNamee, “Whose Prometheus? Transhumanism, Biotechnology and the Moral Topography of Sports Medicine,” *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, August 2007, 183.

⁶⁷⁶ Ibid., 182.

⁶⁷⁷ Ibid., 181.

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid., 183.

contemporary issues find their roots in age-old moral debates. The problems as well as the possible solutions do, for on the opposite side there is also “no need for the generation of a new ethics; rather [...] the moral sources for such evaluations as the proper ends of medicine and sports medicine themselves go back at least as far as Plato”⁶⁷⁹. After treating doping, McNamee broadens his criticism to human enhancement in general and discusses transhumanism. He dismisses it as “undesirable utopianism”⁶⁸⁰ and sums up several points of critique. First, it could easily lead to social inequality – not everyone could equally afford enhancement. Second, some transhumanists wrongly equate ‘the good’ with personal choice and others assume they defend something like “objective goods”, whereas the idea to improve humanity’s quality of life presumes a specific concept of the good. Finally, McNamee writes that to interfere in human constitution would deprive the human of his “naturalness”, and change his “normative self-understanding”⁶⁸¹. “At TH’s (sic) heart, it seems to me, is a view of technology at the mercy of scientists generally [...] which is simply a case of Prometheanism”⁶⁸².

McNamee thinks that the charge of Prometheanism is often made in the debate on human enhancement but not properly explained and so he decides to turn back to the myth’s origins and examine the two contrasting versions of Hesiod and Aeschylus. On the former’s account, he says, Prometheus is a rather faulty character. He is “a cheat and a thief”⁶⁸³ who acts against his fellow Titans, misleads Zeus and steals fire, and whose hubris leads to punishment for himself and humankind. Prometheus’ sacrifice is one of “foolhardy thieves, stealers of the divinity round about them – for the world of nature that surrounds them is divine”⁶⁸⁴. In contrast, in Aeschylus’ interpretation the Titan is the great benefactor, a courageous figure who brings humanity civilisation. “The Hesiodic Prometheus is thus the indirect cause of all man’s woes, while the Aeschylean Prometheus is the saviour of mankind”⁶⁸⁵.

Although McNamee does not draw any explicit parallel between the two interpretations of the myth and transhumanism (or contemporary biotechnology), he does imply that it is *Hesiod’s* Prometheus who represents the transhumanist agenda. The warning of what will happen if enhancement is given free sway is thus clear.

⁶⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰ Ibid., 188.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid. Here McNamee quotes from Habermas’ *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity, 2003.

⁶⁸² Ibid.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., 189. Here McNamee quotes from Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence*.

⁶⁸⁴ McNamee, “Whose Prometheus? Transhumanism, Biotechnology and the Moral Topography of Sports Medicine,” 189. Here McNamee quotes from Kerényi, *Prometheus: Archetypal Image of Human Existence*.

⁶⁸⁵ McNamee, “Whose Prometheus? Transhumanism, Biotechnology and the Moral Topography of Sports Medicine,” 190. Here McNamee quotes from Conacher, *Aeschylus’ Prometheus Bound*.

McNamee urges for a dialogue between different groups so that the “moral topography”⁶⁸⁶ of the enhancement project in the context of sports can be established. Essential questions include where to draw the line between therapy and enhancement, between the natural and artificial, how much control over our bodies should be allowed and what other (physical) boundaries should be observed. Just as Sandel and Kass, McNamee emphasises the importance of human imperfection. “[W]e are mortal beings. Our vulnerability to disease and death, far from something we can overcome or eliminate, represents natural limits both for morality and medicine generally and sports medicine in particular”⁶⁸⁷. However, especially elite athletes, their coaches and sports institutions

“all have an interest in surpassing limits. [...] This denial of the necessity of limits in nature by some, the desire [...] to control these human-limiting factors by the unfettered use of biotechnology is something that should concern us all in sports. I submit that philosophers of both sport and medicine begin to press such questions home [...] so that sports do not become the vanguard of Hesiod’s Promethean project”⁶⁸⁸.

In other words, the athlete should beware in his enhancement enthusiasm not to follow the wrong Promethean urges, steal “the divinity” of “the world of nature” and become “the indirect cause of all man’s woes”.

5.3. Analysis

The texts just discussed show that the myth of Prometheus is remarkably fitting with contemporary ideas. Once again, the myth demonstrates its malleability: its capacities to accompany a variety of socio-cultural developments, while never losing its strong rootedness in Antiquity. The very fact that the Titan is present in such a lively debate confirms my claim that the myth is still relevant and significant in philosophy today. The mentions of Prometheus are not rare and participants in the debate treat one Promethean issue after another. Both advocates and opponents bring up the classical storytellers and in addition to that other historical authors, some of whom I discussed in earlier chapters. This shows that today’s debaters are still dealing with age-old dilemmas and continue a discussion held for at least three millennia. And while it may seem that Prometheus references are mere illustrations, they enable us to uncover essential elements of the authors’ positions. The myth clearly has a powerful illustrative function and flexible format, which make it so widely used. But as we have seen in chapter 4, it has a broader function and works amongst other things also as an ontology and/or a story of origin. This is a fact which

⁶⁸⁶ McNamee, “Whose Prometheus? Transhumanism, Biotechnology and the Moral Topography of Sports Medicine,” 191.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

commentators and the authors themselves, often fail to notice. If we have a closer look at the Prometheus references, we will always find the idea of *what it means to be human* – and never without its moral charge.

With my findings from the previous chapters as point of departure, in the following section I will examine the references to the myth, indicate historical links between texts and explore how the Promethean themes which I previously identified fit in the debaters' arguments. The analysis led by these themes – whether present on an explicit or implicit level – will help us understand the debaters' thinking. I aim to clarify their arguments and frameworks and disclose moral, ontological and other vital conceptualisations in their employment of the Prometheus myth and themes. I will treat advocates and opponents respectively and conclude with an examination of the ambiguity theme in both camps.

5.3.1. A Closer Look: the Advocates

All four advocates of enhancement employ the most positive form of the myth and its protagonist. The format is modern, but ancient symbols and characteristic themes are consistently used. Below, I will start by treating the Promethean themes of fire, rebellion and creation; and after that the theme of human nature and the myth's ontological and moral function. Throughout, I will point out the other functions discussed in chapter 4.

5.3.1.1. Fire, Rebellion and Creation

Fire is the most obvious classical symbol in pro-enhancement thinking. For the advocates, just as for the positive-thinking historical authors, the Titan's flames stand for (scientific) knowledge, artistry, technology and progress. The theft of fire, along with the creation of humanity, functions as a general symbol for the development of science and creation of technology, as well as a particular symbol for the manipulation and creation of the human by means of technology. For Stock, the fire which Prometheus steals represents "the powerful [enhancement] technologies". For Young, "the torch" is "the knowledge by which to transcend the limitations of the human condition". For Jordaan, the "metaphorical fire" is the very basis of our highly developed civilisation:

"the Promethean metaphor has been a defining paradigm in classical times, as well as in modernity – it was the cultural catalyst for creating the free and technologically advanced contemporary society of the West"⁶⁸⁹.

Reading these phrases, in the background one sees a fire burning such as Bacon's proud "succour of succours" which "affords aid and assistance to all labours and mechanical arts, and to the sciences themselves". And when

⁶⁸⁹ Jordaan, "Antipromethean Fallacies: A Critique of Fukuyama's Bioethics," 590.

looking carefully, one can even see the faces of his *New Atlantis* “perfect creatures” warming themselves at that fire.

The proponents do not see the alleged dangers of the symbolic fire as an obstacle, but rather as a challenge: each radical new development inevitably brings along risks, but it is worth taking those risks. This will eventually bring us progress, transcendence and enhancement. Interestingly, Stock combines the image of such progress with another mythical image that persists throughout history – that of human infancy: “Humanity is moving out of its childhood and into a gawky, stumbling adolescence”. We may not have arrived at adulthood yet, but we are on our way, discovering our “immense new powers”. Today, Stock witnesses the same process Aeschylus described when Prometheus’ gifts elevated humans from their “babyish” state. Freud refers to a similar process in asserting that we are “in the middle of that phase” to be leaving the “childhood of the human race” behind. McLelland calls the drive to evolve discussed by Freud “the Promethean will”, in a striking similarity of contents and naming – in fact, almost a literal mergence of words – to that of Young’s “Prometheus Drive” and “Will to Evolve”. Stock and Young are not the only pro-enhancement debaters thinking in such terms: Bostrom, for instance, in “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow up”, suggests that “we are all currently in the situation of children relative to the emotion, passion, and mental states that posthuman beings could experience”⁶⁹⁰.

The idea of growth may have remained largely neutral were the flame of progress presented rather than stolen. Yet it was acquired through theft and there are thus themes of *rebellion*, courage and overcoming of limits underlying the idea of growth. All four pro-enhancement thinkers acknowledge that Prometheus was a trickster and thief, but do not consider that as necessarily bad. On the contrary: it is inevitable to run risks when trying to cross established boundaries in order to improve one’s situation. The Titan’s thievery is an admirable form of such brave boundary-crossing; and it is something to follow, for it will enrich us with wisdom and control. Dworkin recognizes that “Playing God is indeed playing with fire”, but he does not see why this should hold us back. He encourages us to take the position of the audacious anti-god; “to play with fire and take the consequences, because the alternative is cowardice in the face of the unknown” – and such cowardice and the resulting lack of knowledge is unacceptable. Building on Dworkin’s statement, Jordaan urges everyone to have the “Promethean courage” to play with the “metaphorical fire” that Fukuyama fears so much and to “explore a radically new value paradigm”⁶⁹¹. The advocacy of the Promethean attitude is often combined with some kind of risk rhetoric: enhancement technologies might be dangerous, but to remain what we are – non-enhanced, limited, *defective* beings – also contains risks, possibly even worse ones. In essence, Jordaan says that to forsake our

⁶⁹⁰ Bostrom, “Why I Want to Be a Posthuman When I Grow Up,” 12.

⁶⁹¹ Jordaan, “Antipromethean Fallacies: A Critique of Fukuyama’s Bioethics,” 590.

Promethean legacy could take us back centuries, to pre-modern circumstances – “poverty, ignorance, [...] superstition and [...] disease-ridden lives”. Young also emphasises the awful consequences if we do not cherish the Prometheus Drive, for “without the instinct to progress, humankind is doomed to remain forever at the mercy of disease, decay, and the limitations of the human body and mind”⁶⁹².

The enhancement advocates fight established principles with a *Sturm und Drang* temperament – moral, social, conceptual, material, physical, natural principles and regularly, also religious ones. Like Goethe’s Prometheus – “Ich dich ehren? Wofür?” – they wonder why they should honour any god or alleged ‘naturalness’. The radical transhumanist (or ‘extropian’) Max More writes “[n]o more gods, no more faith, no more timid holding back. Let us blast out of our old forms, our ignorance, our weakness, and our mortality”⁶⁹³. They announce that the time has come for God/Nature to leave the earth to humanity and for the latter to “take evolution [...] into its own transhuman hands” (Young). The quotes show how the advocates aim to persuade others to follow the Promethean defiance, but that is not all: whether consciously or not, in their fight against the common paradigm, with a Goethean passion they *themselves* have set the example and taken the Titan’s rebel stance.

The torch of knowledge and the rebellious attitude come together in the most controversial Promethean theme of the debate: *creation*. The advocates encourage creation in all forms discussed in 4.2.: the creation of *technē*, the creation of life and self-creation, all motivated by a characteristically Promethean, forethinking kind of creativity. *First*, they aim to stimulate what one could call humanity’s Aeschylean creativity in the *technē* realm, that is, the scientific and technological realm. They encourage a creative, forward-looking approach in the development of our “immense new [technological] powers” (Stock) such as “Superbiology” so that we can “boldly go where none have gone before” (Young).

The technologically enhanced future visualised by the advocates often shows utopian characteristics. They foresee a Hesiodic Golden Age; seem to quote from *Prometheus Unbound* in which Prometheus’ gifts made “[s]cience struck the thrones of earth and heaven”; they imagine a paradisiacal era like the “DNAge” (Young), which is ruled by yet to be developed knowledge and reminiscent of the world Shelley’s spirits have in mind:

“A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield;
We will take our plan
From the new world of man,
And our work shall be called the Promethean.”

⁶⁹² Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto*, 39.

⁶⁹³ More, M. (1990) ‘Transhumanism, Towards a Futurist Philosophy’, <http://www.maxmore.com/transhum.htm>, (last visited 21-02-2011).

It is this kind of Promethean work Young refers to when he asks us to be “the New Prometheans” and design our own human. For the aim of the techno-scientific artistry is the *second* form of creativity: the manipulation, transformation and indeed the creation of human, transhuman or posthuman life. The creative means of the pro-enhancement Titan may be different than his nineteenth-century doppelganger, but he is a Shelleyan figure with rather similar capacities. When Bostrom envisions the living outcome of future enhancement activities – “lives wonderful beyond imagination” and creatures “greatly exceeding the maximum attainable by any current human being” – it is as if he describes the work of Shelley’s protagonists. As if he pictures them feed “all/That tempers or improves man’s life, now free”; how they make the human grow “wise and kind/And, veil by veil, evil and error fall”. It is as if Prometheus has been there to “create [...] [f]orms more real than living man,/Nurslings of immortality!” In fact, even the last phrase can be taken to the letter and the *Prometheus Unbound*–pro-enhancement comparison holds. For those “nurslings of immortality” or, better, *immortal nurslings* are “no longer just a dream” to the enhancement advocates. Raymond Kurzweil speaks of the “Fantastic Voyage” through which life extension can be achieved and makes “the scientific case that immortality is within our grasp”⁶⁹⁴.

The *third* type of creation is already an essential element of the other two: both technological creativity and the creation of life are a form of self-creation. The development of a new technique makes the human – whether on a physical/material or more theoretical level – take part in his own improvement. Obviously, the creation of human, trans- and posthuman life is also self-creation. In Young’s phrase, it is “Designer Evolution”: literally taking evolution into our own hands. In general, it is in his self-creating role that Prometheus is used by the pro-enhancement debaters. As will become clear shortly, they also take Prometheus to be the archetypal human being, the embodiment of human nature. In the following section, I will treat the themes of self-creation and human nature simultaneously.

5.3.1.2. Human Nature: a Moral Imperative

In all its versions throughout history the Prometheus myth has had a powerful, ethically charged ontological function and I will show that it does as well in the pro-enhancement writings. The mythological reference is not a mere illustration – analysis reveals that it includes a fundamental idea of *what it means to be human*. The Promethean self-creating urge is what characterises us as humans. The Titan is the prototype of the human being, that is, the *Aeschylean* prototype, who stands for the human who in his autonomy and independence gives himself his own gifts. We have always been enhancing our lives in the

⁶⁹⁴ Raymond Kurzweil and Terry Grossman, “Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever. The Science Behind Radical Life Extension - Questions and Answers,” in *Strategy for the Future of Health*, ed. Renata G. Bushko (Amsterdam: IOS Press BV, 2009), 187.

course of history, whether by the invention of fire, the steam engine or plastic surgery. It is “what we mortals have done since Prometheus” (Dworkin). Similarly, Young states that all forms of human improvement are motivated by the same self-enhancing Prometheus Drive, which is “instinctive”, “innate” – that is, something essentially human. He explains that “[e]ach era of cultural evolution has been defined by the nature of its production processes”⁶⁹⁵: the Agricultural Age by the manipulation of plants and animals, the Industrial Age by the manipulation of metals in order to make machines, and just like that the DNAge will be defined by the manipulation of human life. Bioenhancement is just a new way of exercising that innate Prometheus Drive: it “will come to be welcomed as the next step in self-improvement after education, exercise, diet, and aesthetic surgery”⁶⁹⁶.

By presenting the Titan as the archetype of the human being, the defenders of enhancement aim to convince the reader that self-creation is *not* unnatural, like many of its critics claim. On the contrary: it is simply what we, as members of the human species, do. As Stock says: to steal fire from the gods is “too characteristically human”. It is our *nature* to confront the new and dangerous in search of wisdom and improvement, to transform ourselves and conquer our limitations, even if this means taking part in our own physical creation. A typical human dares to take a rebel stance against today’s version of the gods – our “biological chains” – and put herself at risk for the better of humankind. To turn away from the possibly perilous challenges, to dismiss the new technologies would not simply mean to be unrealistic or cowardly. One would be refraining from acting “in harmony with *the essential nature* of the evolutionary process” (Young⁶⁹⁷). It would be “*out of character* for humanity” (Stock), unnatural. A *true* human being enhances herself.

Jordaan’s argument takes a cultural turn: our self-improving bravery is a fundamental element of our cultural and spiritual constitution – of our legacy as a species. But the message of self-creation being characteristically human and remarkably beneficial remains the same. It is thanks to our Promethean courage and technological ingenuity that we live in such a modern, civilised and advanced society today, whereas before all was misery, ignorance and disaster. Sadly, as demonstrated by Fukuyama, not every human is as fortunate to have this Promethean courage – it is thus anything but a *natural* quality in the Fukuyama sense. However, our self-improving bravery certainly is a fundamental element of our *cultural* and *spiritual* constitution and by calling Fukuyama guilty of “antipromethean heresy” Jordaan even insinuates it has a religious sanctity.

In adhering to a Promethean concept of human nature, pro-enhancement thinkers have predecessors with impressively similar ideas. Once again, I cite Pico’s words in which God tells Adam he has “no fixed seat, no form of thy very

⁶⁹⁵ Young, *Designer Evolution: A Transhumanist Manifesto*, 38.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁹⁷ My emphasis.

own [...], thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself". Humans, continues Pico, are "symbolised by Prometheus in the secret rites, by reason of our nature sloughing its skin and transforming itself". Michael Hauskeller argues that "Pico was the first transhumanist [...] by describing man as an animal whose nature it is not to have a nature"⁶⁹⁸. I think the same could be said of Bovelles – perhaps he was the second transhumanist. He states that, in essence, *nothing* is inherent to humanity, or actually, *everything* is. And this is the human's strength: he who carries "the nature of all things" within him "reproduces nature in its entirety".

Several interesting conclusions can be drawn from the above discussion about the pro-enhancement view of what it means to be human. First of all, human nature is fundamentally characterised by incompleteness and malleability. And as much as it may strike us as paradoxical, this is the same as saying that human nature is essentially self-enhancing: to be possible to complete, evolve and/or enhance oneself, there *must be* something lacking or imperfect. Intentionally or not, the proponents of enhancement define the human as a self-improving being and, by virtue of this, as fundamentally flawed.

Second, as in the case of Pico, Bovelles, Bacon and others (e.g. Boccaccio and Gide), in pro-enhancement thinking humanity's malleability and imperfection are understood as some of its greatest powers – in my words, 'the power of incompleteness'. Humans' essential flexibility enables them to shape themselves, up to the point where the outcome can even be a posthuman being, who/which is regularly envisioned as a hybrid that possesses characteristics of both human and machine. The posthuman is by definition a superior being: a creature improved to such a degree that it is no longer human – that is, deficient by nature – but member of a new species.⁶⁹⁹

Third, the pro-enhancement argument has a strong ethical charge: to enhance ourselves is the right thing to do: "*Beware* the day when we *betray* our promethean heritage"; "*Let us be* the New Prometheans" (Jordaan; Young⁷⁰⁰). And while Jordaan bases his moral message on our cultural heritage, Stock, Dworkin and Young infer their normative claim from *human nature*. It is highly

⁶⁹⁸ Michael Hauskeller, "Prometheus Unbound: Transhumanist Arguments from (human) Nature," *Ethical Perspectives* 16, no. 1 (2009): 13.

⁶⁹⁹ Due to his superiority, the posthuman is often likened to the *Übermensch* from Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85) [see, for instance, Nick Bostrom, "A History of Transhumanist Thought," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14, no. 1 (April 2005).; Stefan Lorenz Sorgner, "Nietzsche, the Overhuman and Transhumanism," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 20, no. 1 (2009): 29–42.; and Michael Hauskeller, "Nietzsche, the Overhuman and the Posthuman: A Reply to Stefan Sorgner," *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 21, no. 1 (January 2010): 5–8.]

In short, the 'Overhuman' (also translated as Overman, Superhuman and otherwise) is a new, significantly evolved species, which one may characterise as the human who, despite by nature being the 'unfinished animal', managed to finish himself, thereby finding himself in a perfect condition and thus no longer a human being, but an entirely new race. Whether the analogy is appropriate is a complex question I cannot answer here, but evidently there are at least superficial similarities with the pro-enhancement posthuman.

⁷⁰⁰ My emphasis.

unlikely they would recognise this – after all, Nature is their fiend. Nature, including *human* nature, is not good enough as it is. It is “butterfingere” and we are condemned to “remain forever at the mercy of disease” and other physical restrictions (Young) – that is, the mercy of Nature –, if we do not “improve upon the hand that nature has dealt [us]” (Dworkin). However, as Hauskeller observes, “[t]ranshumanism [...] rests on certain value assumptions that are tied to a particular conception of human nature that is just as normative as the one that transhumanists so eloquently attack”⁷⁰¹. Proponents may, like Jordaan, accuse “bio-conservatives” such as Fukuyama of committing the naturalistic fallacy, but are likely to do the same. Just as Fukuyama invokes Factor X, they invoke the flexibility, courage and creativity fundamental for us *as humans* to justify their argument: *since* it is our nature to discover, face danger, create and improve, we *should*. We have always stolen and played with fire (Stock; Dworkin), so why stop now? If human nature is self-moulding we *ought* to mould ourselves – lest we “grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes” (Pico). In other words, the three pro-enhancement thinkers use the myth of Prometheus to (explicitly or implicitly) present their idea of what it means to be human, which consequently provides the basis for a moral imperative: we *should* improve ourselves, because otherwise we would be acting “out of character” (Stock) with our nature. I would say this comes down to an is/ought argument which is not unlike the naturalistic fallacy: we *are* creative, daring, knowledge-seeking beings and therefore we *ought to* enhance.

Fourth, this ethically charged ontological concept has a significant implication for the contemporary human. As we saw, the advocates show a certain disdain for the non-enhanced human or for those who choose not to “recognise” their Promethean nature, culture or drive and at least *try* to promote enhancement. The metaphor of infancy and accusation of cowardice is used more than once. But there is more than disdain. The proponents’ claim that human nature is essentially Promethean implies that those who do *not* enhance themselves, or do not do everything that lies in their power to promote enhancement, are in some sense abnormal or dysfunctional. Pro-enhancement theorist John Harris argues that we have a moral obligation to develop or use enhancement and he would probably even label the non-enhanced human as *disabled*. For in his eyes, disability should be defined relative to “possible functioning”⁷⁰², that is, to the possible alternative conditions at a certain point. I think this entails that as soon as we have the opportunity to enhance ourselves, we become practically disabled.⁷⁰³ But the consequences could become still

⁷⁰¹ Hauskeller, “Prometheus Unbound: Transhumanist Arguments from (human) Nature,” 3. Hauskeller employs the concept of transhumanism in a broad sense: not just applicable to people who literally call themselves ‘transhumanists’, but more in general to “someone who believes [...] that we should do everything we can to leave the human condition behind and to evolve into something better than human” (Ibid., 6.).

⁷⁰² John Harris, *Enhancing Evolution* (Oxfordshire: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3.

⁷⁰³ On this topic, see my paper “Prometheus Descends: Disabled or Enhanced? John Harris, Human Enhancement, and the Creation of a New Norm,” in *New Bodies for a Better Life? Views*

more puzzling: we could become *unhuman*. Stock says literally that it would be incompatible with our humanness not to welcome enhancement technologies; and by means of their conception of human nature the other advocates agree. If to be what we really are we need to show our Promethean qualities, if enhancement is what makes us ‘truly’ human, the *non*-enhancing or the *non*-enhanced human becomes a *subhuman* being. This is a rather confusing outcome, intensely fought by other thinkers.

5.3.2. A Closer Look: the Opponents

As outlined above, the opponents of enhancement tend to concentrate on the negative storyline of the myth of Prometheus – Hesiod’s rather than Aeschylus’ – and on negative aspects of the symbols associated with it. As in the pro-enhancement case it is a story in modern form, but still firmly rooted in the ancient themes and dilemmas. Analogous to 5.3.1., in the following section I will discuss the role of the Promethean themes and functions in their thinking.

5.3.2.1. Fire, Rebellion and Creation

Fire is again an indispensable symbol of knowledge, technology, creativity and civilisation, but one should note that in the opponent’s camp its double-edged nature is highly pronounced. The image of Prometheus’ flames is used, for instance, when Kass discusses the classical dispute about technology. Because of its widely divergent characteristics, the Titan’s fire has a meaningful place in both the materialist and spiritualist approach. It has “warming and transforming power” and promises control. But it is simultaneously “suspect”: it stimulates “unnecessary desires”, or worse, “self-destroying passions”; it holds the human “unwittingly enchained, warm and comfortable yet blind to the world beyond the city”. While in the pro-enhancement context all focus is on the positive powers of the metaphorical fire, the opponents bring its dangers to the fore: heat is destructive and light is blinding. Knowledge and technology can be damaging and make one lose, amongst other things, humility, sensitivity and spiritual wisdom. Ignorance of the human soul and its worth is seriously harmful, but lack of knowledge is not necessarily bad. Sandel and Kass accentuate the threats of an overload of information, interestingly both using an allegory of blindness. Sandel writes that “[w]hen genetic screening becomes a routine part of pregnancy, parents who eschew it are regarded as “flying blind” and are held responsible for whatever genetic defect befalls their child”. Similarly, when discussing genetic profiling, Kass reminds us of Prometheus’ gift of “blind hopes”. Both thinkers point out the value of ignorance in these kinds of

on the Human Enhancement Debate from Anthropology and Disability Studies, ed. M. Eilers, K. Grüber, and C. Rehmann-Sutter, Science and Cultural Theory (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

situations: knowing less of your (child's) medical future can make a great positive difference in your (child's) quality of life.

Apart from evoking the “blind hopes” metaphor, Sandel's and Kass' argumentation is also reminiscent of the *Gorgias*' message about knowledge and ignorance, in their various forms – intellectual, visual and even physical. In this work Prometheus deprives humans of their foreknowledge of death. But this is not only to “to cease seeing doom before their eyes”⁷⁰⁴. Now that death has become unpredictable, humans can no longer manipulate the judgement about their afterlife and are thus stimulated to lead a more just and authentic life. And as the judges are no longer alive, their assessments are truly just. Although the opponents make no explicit reference to the *Gorgias*, to take a moment to consider the correspondence between their thinking and the Prometheus story from that work brings to the fore two of their core views. First, as in the *Gorgias* tale, the opponents emphasise the fact that ignorance of our fate endows us with humility, solidarity, righteousness and suchlike virtues, rather than that it spares us fear or “doom”. Second, they highlight a motif from the myth of a strong connection between, on the one hand, humans' knowledge of their future and the accompanying loss of spirit (authenticity, righteousness, etc.) and on the other hand, an undue focus on the body and appearance. When in the story the humans still had their foreknowledge, they tried to mislead the judges with the “fine bodies” they could arrange beforehand. The judges themselves used to have “their own soul cloaked by eyes and ears and their whole body”. Authenticity and righteousness do not exist until humans lose their foreknowledge and body and they are “judged in nakedness” by judges who are also “naked and dead” – who, one could say, lost their ‘physical knowledge’. One should note that the adversaries of enhancement employ a similar approach: one of their main arguments is based upon the (potential) despiritualisation and injustice (e.g. unequal access to new technologies) of the proponents' often exclusive and glorifying focus on the physical and external. Kass nicely phrases it in *Gorgias*-like terms when he states that “[p]erfected bodies are achieved at the price of flattened souls”. For both *Gorgias*' Zeus and the contra-enhancement camp ignorance, care for the spiritual (instead of exclusive care for the physical) and authenticity are inherently connected.⁷⁰⁵

Fire, its light and the knowledge and arts it represents are remarkably ambiguous. Of course, to gain knowledge can be truly worthy, but so can it be to *lack* knowledge. With respect to the fire of techno-scientific knowledge, the enhancement adversaries try to draw all attention to its damaging perils. It should then be no surprise that Kass cites Rousseau when he discusses the soul-flattening evils of scientific success. For all three adversaries could have

⁷⁰⁴ Note that this phrase is from the *Prometheus Bound*, placed here since it is quoted by Kass in this context.

⁷⁰⁵ As McNamee observes, it was indeed already “the ancient Greek philosopher's task of undermining the glorification of the body” and still today, that is clearly what he considers to be the bioconservative's task.

phrased their fears like this French philosopher, who warns that the fire of Prometheus' torch "burns when you touch it" – not despite, but *because* of the fact that it is "the torch of the Sciences".

With respect to the themes of *rebellion*, courage and boundary-crossing, what may be Promethean courage to the proponents of enhancement is Promethean *hubris* to the opponents. Sandel laments "our tendency toward hubris"; Kass warns about "hubristic biotechnical "re-creationism""; and McNamee rejects "the hubris of modern biomedical science" and its underlying Baconian roots. In their view, the conceptual, natural and scientific boundaries the advocates wish to overcome should be respected, at least to some extent.

Of all forms of hubris, the one implied in the wish for *creation* is the most loathsome. As in the pro-enhancement argument, in the opponents' reaction one can find the Promethean theme in its three different forms. *First*, creation in the *technē* sense: the boundless technological inventiveness symbolised by the Titan and his fire is virtually present at any place at any time – but the opponents discourage it just as passionately as it is stimulated by the proponents. The promising possibilities of the new techniques will be of a misleading, Pandoran kind of beauty. They will open the jar and scatter what Hesiod called "the miseries that spell sorrow for men": the technologies will 'blind' us (Sandel, Kass), be 'self-destructive' (Kass), produce inequality and injustice, and threaten our dignity and autonomy. Consequently, the 'improved' future takes on dystopian qualities for contra-enhancement thinkers. This is something they freely admit and regularly highlight. We are reminded of horrific events in history and rather often of the frightening Nazi ambitions. Sandel, for instance, writes that "[t]he shadow of eugenics hangs over today's debates about genetic engineering and enhancement"⁷⁰⁶. There is also a myriad of references to miserable scenarios in novels and other writings, from the Original Sin to, as we saw, *Brave New World*. This last work and eugenics lead us to the *second* form of Promethean creativity, which is probably by far what concerns the opponents the most: not the creation of the technologies themselves, but overconfident "re-creation" (Kass), that is, the actual manipulation, transformation and creation of human, transhuman, or posthuman *life*. It is ironic that when it comes to picturing this form of (future) creation, just like their adversaries, the contra-enhancement thinkers seem inspired by a Shelleyan image of Promethean work – with that difference that they call upon *another* Shelley. Often, when the opponents envision a future where "Promethean mastery" has triumphed, the first image that arises is Frankenstein's self-made creation: their Titan is not Percy's brilliant inventor but Mary's crazy scientist. For instance, when in 1976 Harvard planned to open a new laboratory to do recombinant DNA research, a concerned Mayor Alfred Vellucci (of Cambridge, Massachusetts) exclaimed:

⁷⁰⁶ Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, 68.

“we want to be damned sure the people of Cambridge won’t be affected by anything that could crawl out of that laboratory. . . . They may come up with a disease that can’t be cured, even a monster. Is this the answer to Dr. Frankenstein’s dream?”⁷⁰⁷.

More recently, as ‘bioconservative’ George Annas discusses the risks of genetic engineering (and screening, cloning, etc.), he tells us what we can – and should – learn from an old science fiction novel such as Mary Shelley’s. Her story, he says, “teaches us a lesson that we find hard to deal with seriously: as difficult as it is to create a monster, it is even more difficult to control it or to restore order after the creation has spawned chaos”⁷⁰⁸. Annas worries about the fact that scientists today working on the Human Genome Project are unstoppable in their research, motivated by ‘the more knowledge, the better’. They do not concern themselves with the impact of the new knowledge on our thoughts, society and species:

“[i]f we take the scientists at face value, they have given no more thought to the potential social applications of genome mapping and sequencing than Victor Frankenstein had given to the consequences of creating his monster”⁷⁰⁹.

Hauskeller also compares Harris, Bostrom and More with Frankenstein, because of their focus on the prolongation of life and even immortality: they share the idea with the scientist “that death is the greatest of all evils and that nothing could be more important than getting rid of it”⁷¹⁰ – something strongly questioned by Hauskeller himself.

Another example is the parallel drawn by Kass; he expresses his revulsion at cloning by calling it “the Frankensteinian hubris to create a human life and increasingly to control its destiny: men playing at being God”⁷¹¹.

The Frankenstein metaphor makes explicit what the authors’ reasons are to oppose human enhancement and creation of life. Kass’ statement above

⁷⁰⁷ Ziolkowski, “Science, Frankenstein, and Myth,” 53.

⁷⁰⁸ George J. Annas, “Mapping the Human Genome and the Meaning of ‘Monster Mythology,’” in *A Companion to Genethics*, ed. J. Harris and J. Burley (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 139. Apart from *Frankenstein* Annas also discusses Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, H. G. Wells’ *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and Huxley’s *Brave New World*.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid.

⁷¹⁰ Michael Hauskeller, “Wanna Live Forever? Don’t Pull a Frankenstein,” in *Frankenstein and Philosophy. The Shocking Truth*, ed. Nicolas Michaud, Popular Culture and Philosophy 79 (Chicago, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 2013), 3.

⁷¹¹ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defence of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, 149. I could give many more examples of references to Frankenstein in the enhancement context. Curiously, it is not just the opponents who use the Frankenstein metaphor. In fact, Harris and the other fervent supporter Julian Savulescu employ it themselves in their paper “The Creation Lottery: Final Lessons from Natural Reproduction: Why Those Who Accept Natural Reproduction Should Accept Cloning and Other Frankenstein Reproductive Technologies,” *Cambridge Quarterly of Healthcare Ethics* 13, no. 1 (January 2004): 90–96. The long title of the paper already reveals much about what to expect from the argument. With the fearful images of the opponents in mind, they copy the negative metaphor in order to invalidate its darkness by involving it into an argument in favour of artificial reproduction.

covers all points. To start with the last part, to create life is ‘Frankensteinian’ because it is sinful, *sacrilegious*. As Mary Shelley’s monster said, the scientist becomes an “enemy of God and man”. Further, it is *hubristic*: like Frankenstein, those aiming to create life do not recognise the (natural) boundaries that should limit our aspirations and actions. The problem is that wish for *control*: the opponents compare the pro-enhancement disposition to mastery – what Sandel calls the “Promethean impulse” – with Frankenstein’s desire to, as Mary Shelley phrased it, “penetrate the secrets of nature”. Like her, the opponents question the optimistic faith in the infinite possibilities of science. They foresee failure and misery for both creator and creature if humanity will try to take the divine position of the Designing Master. As Annas says, instead of control, the results of such creation activities may very well produce nothing but chaos – whether on an individual or social level: “[i]n seeking to control our world, we may in fact lessen our control over it”⁷¹². As Sandel emphasises, it will be crucial to take responsibility for our live fabrications, but we may as well run away from it like Frankenstein.⁷¹³ Yet finally, what evokes most disgust is not sacrilege, hubris, chaos or lack of responsibility, but the creatures themselves: the adversaries fear these will be anything but what Mary’s husband called “forms more real than living man” – and even if they *will* be the “nurslings of immortality” he imagined, this is certainly not necessarily something good. In the end, the main message of all references to Frankenstein – ‘or the Modern Prometheus’ – is that as praiseworthy our intentions and motivations may be, the outcome of our creative ambitions may be as wretched as the scientist’s monster.

Finally, both technological creativity and the creation of life underpin the *third* kind of Promethean creativity, self-(re-)creation: they enable us to change, manipulate or re-generate our physical and/or mental state. But that is not all – these self-creating crafts may change our very *nature*. For the opponents of enhancement, “Prometheanism” is such a dark term not just because of the practical dangers of enhancement technologies. It has its most negative flavour because it threatens nothing less than *what it means to be human*.

5.3.2.2. Human Nature: a Moral Imperative

The opponents of enhancement openly defend their concept of humanity and emphasise the value they attach to its naturalness. The moral load of their human concept is clear and so is the ethical message of their argument as a whole, which is visible in their references to Prometheus. The “Promethean impulse [...] *unsettles and erodes...*” (Sandel); “the Promethean gift[s] [...] hold men *unwittingly enchained*”, (Kass); and McNamee prays that “sports *do not* become the vanguard of Hesiod’s Promethean project”⁷¹⁴. In all cases the allusions to the myth are charged with a heavy load of negative associations

⁷¹² Annas, “Mapping the Human Genome and the Meaning of ‘Monster Mythology,’” 139.

⁷¹³ Note that Sandel himself does not explicitly refer to Frankenstein.

⁷¹⁴ My emphasis.

and the main message is that it is ethically *wrong* to act in a Promethean way – or even to *be* Promethean. Therefore, at first sight an analysis of the moral-ontological significance of the Promethean references and themes in the opponents' writings may not appear that useful. However, it is, in two ways.

First, an examination of the references to the myth clarifies what the adversaries of enhancement believe the threat to human nature consists of. The adversaries need to explain that threat, which is complicated because of its immaterial, spiritual nature. They find that the Promethean reference is useful to this task – that is, if recognised by the reader. Let us have another look at Sandel's statement:

“The deeper danger is that [enhancement technologies] represent a kind of hyperagency, a Promethean aspiration to remake nature, including human nature, to serve our purposes and satisfy our desires”.

With my earlier analysis of the Promethean history, themes and functions, we understand Sandel's image of the threat of enhancement much easier than without. Knowing the symbolic meaning of fire and the Titan's creation of humankind we understand the radical character of the enhancement technologies. Knowing the hubris of Prometheus' actions, as well as their miserable consequences, we understand the fear which speaks from Sandel's quote: why the threat to human nature is a form of “hyperagency” and why enhancement could end up in a mere wish for satisfaction of human desires. We immediately understand why, in Sandel's view, enhancement is not a mere change but an alarming, immoral danger to humanity which must be prevented at all costs. In short, our knowledge of the Titan and his story accelerates our understanding of the danger of enhancement. Moreover, it enriches our understanding, for the little phrase of the “Promethean aspiration” opens up a unique, historical background of meaning and associations which is impossible to invoke in another (just as short) way. If Sandel's reference is interpreted through the frame of Promethean themes I outlined above, the threat of enhancement to human nature can be understood in a most profound way, for it offers an immediate context of science, hubris, self-creation, misery and more.

The same goes for our understanding of the threat as envisioned by the other adversaries of enhancement. We retrospectively comprehend the implicit background of Kass' urge to protect ourselves from “the soft dehumanization of well-meaning but hubristic biotechnical “re-creationism””, while he has not yet mentioned Prometheus. McNamee is more explicit about why the “vertical ambition in transforming our very nature as humans” is “a case of Prometheanism”. However, our historical and thematic knowledge still enriches our understanding of the nature of that threatening ambition, since we recognise the implicit connection between the Prometheus myth and McNamee's reference to Bacon. I speculate that McNamee himself may not have been aware of the fact that, this way, he included the gift of perpetual youth from

Bacon's Prometheus in the threat of the transhumanists' "undesirable utopianism".

In our interpretation of the opponents' references to the Prometheus myth our knowledge of him and his tale thus accelerates and enriches our understanding of enhancement's threat to human nature. However, what exactly does that human nature, soul or naturalness consist of? Is it indeed Fukuyama's Factor X, "the species-typical characteristics shared by all human beings qua human beings"⁷¹⁵? This is the second issue which can be clarified by the Promethean references and themes in the adversaries' thinking. With our background knowledge of the Titan as symbol of a hubristic urge for crossing of limits, control, endless progress and perfection, we understand what they consider the valuable essence of human nature: limitations, lack of control and imperfection.

If we compare the opponents' idea of the human to the advocates', at first sight the former is completely opposite to the latter: the human is *not* essentially Promethean, self-creation is *anything but* characteristically human and enhancement only *destroys* our nature. However, if we take a closer look, it is not that simple. As mentioned before, the basis upon which the advocates identify humanity as Promethean and self-designing is a conception of human nature as incomplete, that is, as essentially lacking, imperfect. Now we should note that *so do the opponents*. Both camps attach great value to that natural lack: somehow our frailty is our strength. The important difference is that their reasons for that high evaluation are widely divergent and lead to antithetical judgements and conclusions. The proponents of enhancement argue that our many deficiencies – ignorance, disease, mortality and other limits – are a precondition for improvement: the more improvement, the better, and so natural imperfection is *good*. For the adversaries human imperfection is also ineffably worthy, but for very different reasons. Humankind is at its best being flawed, because of the flaws *as such*. One step from the proponents' argument is absent from the adversaries'. They miss out the part on improvement: imperfection leads directly to the better, for the imperfect condition is good as such.

Prometheus is useful to the opponents to outline an ontology which is difficult to describe. Sandel calls upon the myth to express what it is that enhancement would destroy in human nature: "The Promethean impulse [...] unsettles and erodes the gifted dimension of human experience". He rejects this impulse because it does not acknowledge "the giftedness of life", which is valuable precisely because of the human's *lack* of control over life that it implies. This giftedness – fate, fortune, contingency – and, most of all, the human's appreciation of this giftedness, is essential. For "[a]ppreciating the gifted quality of life constrains the Promethean project": to be aware that "our talents and abilities are not wholly our doing" and that our deficiencies are

⁷¹⁵ Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, 101.

largely fate, is crucial for feelings of humility, solidarity and responsibility. If bioengineering would provide us with control over what used to be gifts and fortune, we would lose the first two sensitivities and dangerously expand the last one. Life's contingency makes us humble and social towards other humans and critical towards the world, whereas, if the Promethean "drive to mastery" would turn us into "self-made" humans, we would lose these sensibilities and become responsible for our whole being. It would lead to the "one-sided triumph of willfulness over giftedness, of dominion over reverence, of molding over beholding"⁷¹⁶. The world would become "inhospitable to the unbidden"; ballplayers would "find themselves "playing naked"; and parents would be "regarded as "flying blind"⁷¹⁷. I suspect that Sandel did not intentionally mean to draw this link, but here our knowledge of the Promethean history adds to our understanding of his ontology. For if we remember the correspondence I outlined above between Sandel's view and the *Gorgias* moral, this gives us a more profound idea of why it is precisely this 'unbiddenness', 'nakedness' and 'blindness' which is most precious about human nature.

Kass' passionate argument against dehumanization – and thus in favour of human nature as it is – also finds its ground in the value of human imperfection and he also calls upon Prometheus to explain what he believes that natural human state is. The Titan's fire and chains make the people in Plato's cave blind to "their true standing in the world and their absolute dependence on powers not of their own making and beyond their control". Like Sandel, Kass appreciates the human's "true standing" precisely because of this dependence, this lack of control – hence the Promethean reference. If we will take complete control over our "minds and hearts" and satisfy all our desires, we will lose "the essence of human nature". In an article entitled "Ageless Bodies, Happy Souls" (2003) Kass further investigates what exactly makes human nature worth defending – a mere appeal to 'the natural' does not suffice. Humans have always been creatures that *naturally* look for ways to improve their lives, so what could be wrong with enhancement, with perfection? First, Kass argues, unpleasant memories or feelings are helpful for future responses and make up someone's identity. Second, humans satisfy their longings not by the mere feeling of satisfaction but by desiring, working to fulfil that desire and in the end achieving it. The inherent worth of the natural lies in the fact that our activities aimed at self-improvement involve effort, choice, work and therefore *meaning*. If some form of enhancement would attain a specific goal – fulfil a wish or heal a wound – without us playing any role in achieving it, it will lose all significance. "Biotechnical (especially mental) "improvers"⁷¹⁷ will disrupt "the normal character of human being-at-work-in-the-world [...], which when fine and

⁷¹⁶ Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection*, 85.

⁷¹⁷ Note that in these phrases one almost literally reads Plato's description of the "naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed" human.

full constitutes human flourishing”⁷¹⁸. Human life is *lived*; and it is precisely this way of being in the world, including all performing and struggling, loving and howling “that make human life rich, deep and fulfilling” – “Promethean man will become also a contented cow”. Even finitude is essential: to be immortal would mean to be “something other than human”. We are mortal, have needs and desires, we are imperfect by nature. But that does not mean we are weak: it makes our lives meaningful, it makes us *human*.

In his plea for human nature McNamee also appeals to imperfection and finitude and “Prometheanism” characterises the unnatural. As he says, “we are mortal beings. Our vulnerability to disease and death, far from something we can overcome or eliminate, represents natural limits both for morality and medicine generally”. Our mortality and vulnerability are not only invaluable, they are indispensable: McNamee dismisses “Hesiod’s Promethean project” because it implies the “denial of the *necessity* of limits in nature”⁷¹⁹. The human is imperfect by nature and as for Fukuyama, Sandel and Kass, this imperfect condition – endangered by the Promethean urge for infinite, boundary-crossing improvement – is of inestimable worth.

To summarise, in an ontologically motivated interpretation of the opponents’ references to the Prometheus myth, my earlier research to the history, functions and themes of the myth accelerates and intensifies an understanding of something as difficult to phrase and understand as first, an immaterial threat to human nature and second, that concept of human nature itself. Our knowledge provides a background of relevant meanings and connotations and adds significance to the opponents’ conceptualisations and arguments by means of, for instance, implicit and perhaps even unintended links with particular historical versions of the myth.

5.3.3. Ambiguity

The idea of the incompleteness of the human as such and the fact that both advocates and opponents of enhancement attach such strong value to this natural lack, brings us to the last Promethean theme: ambiguity. Ambiguity is a defining feature of the debate, an examination of which will once more demonstrate the relevance, usefulness and clarifying nature of the myth of Prometheus.

A certain level of ambiguity is probably characteristic of any debate – if something was not ambiguous, would it generate a debate? However, ambiguity is the central issue the Enhancement Debate is concerned with – and this is not universal. Due to recent technological developments and the potential consequences for human enhancement, distinctions formerly considered as easily determinable have lost all clarity: the difference between human and

⁷¹⁸ Leon Kass, “Ageless Bodies, Happy Souls: Biotechnology and the Pursuit of Perfection,” *The New Atlantis*, Spring 2003, 24.

⁷¹⁹ My emphasis.

machine, the natural and artificial, progress and decline, therapy and enhancement, life and death, etc. In essence, what the debate's participants mean to do is free themselves from the discomfort of the ambivalence in all these questions and establish certainty of meaning. They refuse to remain in vagueness; they take a particular stance and try to motivate their opponents to move over to their side.

The character of the discussion thus very well accounts for the regular use of the Prometheus myth. As always, the broad range of faces of the myth's protagonist, of his theft and creations allows the debater to shape it according to his own understanding and aims and so the same story is found useful by groups as antithetical as transhumanists and bioconservatives. The fact that they pick *this* tale to make their point makes it plausible that they are well aware of its ambiguous nature and it may even be the very reason why they choose it. In fact, as earlier in history, every time the myth appears at least one figure or theme has contrasting characteristics, meanings and values.

The theme of knowledge, for instance, clearly outlines how ambiguity commands the attention of participants of the debate: how they strive to resolve that ambiguity; how they choose a position which, at first sight, allows them to achieve such a resolution; and how they employ the Prometheus myth in this process. All the participants I discussed appear to recognise (what I argued in 4.2. is) the inherent ambivalence of knowledge and its value. This is demonstrated by their use of the myth: Promethean knowledge is depicted as the result of thievery, yet heroic and successful; as a partially beneficent gift, yet hubristic and dangerous. However, one camp accepts the insecurities and risks associated with gaining knowledge that is vastly superior to that which we currently have, and decides to defy the dangers. The other camp rejects these, although they do value and encourage the pursuit of vastly superior knowledge in particular areas, such as the human soul. The different debaters do then not recognise the ambivalence of knowledge in the sense that they accept it, but rather wish to prove that its nature is either *unproblematically* or *seemingly* ambivalent. For their aim is what I wish to call *de-ambiguation*: establish clarity in the chaotic assemblage of understandings and evaluations of wisdom, science, technology, etc. and convince their opponents of the validity of their stance. The proponents' account is roughly that whatever the perils may be, the more knowledge, the better. There is nothing ambiguous about that. They do acknowledge the comparatively more dangerous and ethically confusing character of many new knowledge developments, but "why all the fuss?" (Stock). We simply have "to figure out how to use [our powers] wisely" (Stock) and see our alleged "moral free-fall" as a challenge rather than a threat (Dworkin) – just like Prometheus did and we have always done. They are convinced we will succeed in this, so, in the end, the ambivalent character of knowledge is no problem. In contrast, the bioconservatives hold that there certainly *are* limits to true and ethically valuable knowledge: thorough examination and reflection can clear up the observed ambiguity. Because of

such thorough examinations, they tend to offer more extensive discussion of the issue than the proponents do. I will thus address their ideas in greater detail.

Kass highlights the ambivalent character of knowledge by characterising technology as tragedy: tragedy is “the poignantly human adventure of living in grand self-contradiction. In tragedy the failure is embedded in the hero’s success”⁷²⁰. And it is in this context that he juxtaposes the warming powers of Prometheus’ flames of knowledge and its destructive ones. Further, both Kass and Sandel simultaneously dismiss and encourage ignorance, something clearly visible in their use of the metaphor of ‘blindness’. Kass criticises the blinded ones in Plato’s cave since they miss essential knowledge, whereas Aeschylus’ blinding hopes are very valuable. Sandel rejects ‘unawareness’ of the giftedness of life, yet encourages parents to ‘fly blind’ and remain ignorant of their child’s genetics. Both debaters see the problem of ambiguity but try to separate the positive form of knowledge/ignorance from the negative one. And as we saw, the Prometheus figure provides a great means in the drawing of these boundaries: it is a way to place the hubristic, ever expanding knowledge opposite the more humble, non-commodifying, gift- and soul appreciating knowledge, which sometimes amounts to the wisdom of ignorance.

McNamee’s paper in its entirety provides the most explicit example of the de-ambiguation process. He writes that in the face of the enhancement ambitions of (for instance) transhumanists, he will structure an ethical framework around Hesiod’s and Aeschylus’ interpretations of the Prometheus myth, for these “can help frame the moral limits of sports medicine”. Later, he charges his adversaries with ‘Prometheanism’ and says that

“[i]n order to understand the charge [...] one might begin by asking ‘What is the myth of Prometheus?’ I think the better question is ‘whose myth of Prometheus should we concern ourselves with?’ [...] I merely use [Conacher’s and Kerényi’s accounts] for my own purpose of providing *lenses* to view the *unrestrained* enhancement ideology of TH”⁷²¹.

The above two quotations reflect – or, better, *describe*, almost word for word – the several steps of the process of de-ambiguation: a) McNamee observes the ambiguity of the novel knowledge and its moral worth, as well as of the different views on it; b) he sets himself the objective to examine that ambiguity and find a reference framework for the evaluation of the new sciences; c) he encourages dialogue d) he makes an effort to establish clarity; and e) he consciously chooses to hereby employ the myth of Prometheus, precisely because of its ambiguous nature. For in McNamee’s eyes, the fact that there is more than one interpretation of the tale mirrors the uncertainty with respect to the new technologies and the “unrestrained” enhancement ideas; and simultaneously

⁷²⁰ Kass, *Life, Liberty, and the Defence of Dignity: The Challenge for Bioethics*, 48–49.

⁷²¹ McNamee, “Whose Prometheus? Transhumanism, Biotechnology and the Moral Topography of Sports Medicine,” 189. My emphasis.

offers different “lenses” through which to look at these. It provides a convenient means to cope with the equivocality and “the unfettered use” of science and technology, because the process of figuring out what interpretation to focus on – or, better, focus *with* – will create transparency in what questions we should concern ourselves with and what we should guard against. McNamee tries to undo the myth of its ambiguity by placing the two interpretations side-by-side, separating hubris from daring and the “cause of all man’s woes” from the “saviour of mankind”. Thereby, he clarifies the meaning of Prometheism: this should be understood as Hesiodic hubris – and Hesiodic hubris is what we should beware of in our dealing with and evaluation of the new sciences. By means of his analysis McNamee creates a framework which is demarcated by the metaphorical boundaries of “Hesiod’s Promethean project”. Although they do not yet have a tangible form, now that the boundaries have been labelled, the dialogue between the disputants can be started; and thereby the process is set in motion to find answers to the pressing questions, fill the boundaries with concrete content and “frame the moral limits” so that a “moral topography” may be established.

In short, to both advocates and opponents of enhancement the Promethean story with its inexhaustible realm of possibilities is a useful instrument to handle the ambiguity of knowledge: they either choose the courageous stance and accept the potential perils and uncertainty; or they dismiss the hubristic stance and create a framework within which these possibilities can be investigated and their limits established. Of course, it is not just the ambiguity of knowledge with respect to which the myth plays its role. Ambiguity is interwoven with all themes addressed above, especially with human nature. As we saw, both advocates and opponents – intentionally or not – employ the myth to characterise their philosophical concepts of human nature. There turns out to be a striking overlap between their concepts, but a great difference in their evaluation. With respect to ambiguity this fact may be interpreted in two ways. First, it could be seen as another way in which the exceptional malleability of the Prometheus myth is useful to the debaters to mould it to fit their argument and resolve the ambiguity of the concept of humanity. Second, however, it could evoke the question whether they do not, on the contrary, just strengthen the ambiguity of that concept and undermine their own argument. The resulting definition of the human in both camps comes down to the naturally imperfect being, infinitely self-enhancing (advocates) or “being-at-work-in-the-world” (opponents). Whether this is appreciated or not, both subscribe to the fact that the human can change, evolve or transform in whatever way. This is however, a very undefined, ambiguous concept of the human, reminiscent of Anders’ statement that there *exists* no human nature, that the human is the continuously, ever-changing creation of his own world. Do the debaters not, by means of this ambivalent concept and in contrast to their aim, bring forward an idea of the impossibility to answer the question of the true nature of the human? Unanswerable not only for them, but for anyone

concerned with it? And as their moral stances are largely derived from their concept of human nature: do they then anything more than underline the impossibility to answer the question of what is the right step to take with respect to human enhancement? As McNamee says, the new technologies “need not require us to think a new ethics *ab initio*”⁷²²: the sources for their evaluation can already be found in Antiquity. However, the fact that we still look for our answers in sources that old; or that for as long as we know there has never been found an exhaustive definition of humanity or a moral agreed-upon by all humans – does that not prove exactly the opposite? Has the Prometheus myth not been so useful and clarifying after all? Perhaps, with its infinite amount of potential variations, the myth reveals nothing less than that until the day that the posthuman takes over, our philosophical concepts of the human will always remain ambivalent – and if the debaters are right, so will our ‘real’ being-in-the-world.

Conclusion

By means of my analysis of the Prometheus references in the Enhancement Debate, in this chapter I tried to demonstrate first, the relevance of the myth in contemporary philosophy and second, the usefulness of my findings in disclosing essential concepts and convictions of the author referring to the myth.

First, an extensive argument to support the claim that the Prometheus myth is still relevant in philosophy today is hardly needed. The regular occurrence of the myth in the Enhancement Debate and the serious context of passionate arguments and existential questions in which the myth is brought up prove that it is relevant and significant. The similarities in form and content between various historical interpretations of the myth and the participants’ interpretations, as well as the latter’s literal references to storytellers and philosophers from centuries past confirm the age-old roots of both the pro- and contra-enhancement conceptualisations and argumentation. It proves that the classical Promethean issues are still alive today and that the myth is interesting, meaningful and useful to the contemporary thinker, as it has always been.

Second, I claimed that examining the debaters’ employment of the Prometheus myth with my research as point of departure would provide access to vital conceptualisations and convictions of the participants of the debate – pro- as well as contra-enhancement. My analysis of the (role of the) Promethean themes and functions in their references and thinking confirms this claim. In the Promethean references from both camps the symbolic meanings of fire, rebellion and creation are only partially explicit, yet as I have shown, significant in the debaters’ argumentation. I believe it is unnecessary to repeat the details of these symbolic meanings. Yet I do wish to briefly reiterate the key

⁷²² Ibid., 191.

points of my analysis based on the myth's moral-ontological function/theme as well as on the theme of ambiguity.

The advocates of enhancement attack the meaning and value opponents ascribe to the 'natural'. To the former, Nature is the fiend who needs to be overcome, 'the natural' has no worth, and so a Fukuyaman argument on the human Factor X is considered a naturalistic fallacy. However, I argue that the statement that "stealing fire from the gods [...] is too characteristically human" (Stock) and a phrase such as "Let us be the New Prometheans" (Young) call this position into question. I show that these phrases imply an advocate concept of human nature, which teaches us an important point about their thinking. Nature does not per definition have no value, for in the context of human nature it does. The advocates' concept of human nature has a strong ethical charge: to enhance ourselves is *naturally* human and *therefore*, this is what we ought to do.

The adversaries of enhancement openly present their concept of human nature and emphasise the moral worth of its naturalness. Yet an analysis of the moral-ontological significance of their Promethean references clarifies two less explicit things. In the context of my research on the myth's historical interpretations and themes, opponent phrases such as "a case of Prometheanism" (McNamee) or the Promethean "drive to mastery" (Sandel) accelerate and enrich our understanding of first, the threat of enhancement to human nature and second, what that human nature, soul or naturalness consists of. These phrases invoke characteristically Promethean meanings and associations. Although the concepts of the threat and the human are hard to explain and therefore much remains implicit in the debater's text, against the background of these meanings they can nevertheless be understood more easily and in a most profound way. Prometheus' hubris and punishment clarify the radical, "hyperagent" and frightening character of enhancement technology; and his creative, boundary-crossing urges explain the concept of the imperfect human.

The above analysis of the references to Prometheus in both camps show that by employing my findings about the myth I have uncovered previously unclear yet essential, morally charged, ontological conceptualisations of the pro- as well as contra-enhancement debaters. Moreover, what I could call my 'Promethean knowledge' can even add to the meaning of the debaters' references, as I find (possibly unintended) links with specific historical variations on the story.

I finished the chapter with a discussion of the theme of ambiguity. This once more confirmed the usefulness and revealing nature of (my findings on) the myth of Prometheus. The myth's ambiguity is useful to the debaters because, as always throughout history, it enables them to mould the story to fit their argument. It enables them to (try to) resolve what is the central issue of the debate: the ambiguity evoked by contemporary technological developments, which are blurring boundaries of formerly clear dichotomies such as between

human and machine. The myth provides them with a means to de-ambiguate concepts and boundaries: they observe an ambiguous concept such as knowledge or human nature and use the story to either justify this ambiguity (advocates) or draw the boundaries they are missing (opponents), in order to support their argument with respect to the enhancement question.

The myth's ambiguity is revealing to us as it highlights the ambiguity of the main concepts of the debate – especially the one of human nature. What may at first sight appear useful malleability to the debaters to de-ambiguate the concept of the human may turn out to be the contrary. Both camps, using Prometheus' tale, conclude with a definition of the imperfect, continuously evolving human, which fits what we know are the ancient, ever recurring and never resolved concepts of the essentially ambiguous human nature in Promethean history.

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Appendix to Chapter 4

1. MYTHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS

X Work has this function

XX Work's function discussed in 4.1.

AUTHOR/ WORK	RELATION SOCIETY	KNOWLEDGE FORMATION	ONTOLOGICAL MEANING	MORAL FUNCTION
HESIOD: WORKS AND DAYS	XX	XX	XX	XX
HESIOD: THEOGONY	XX	XX	XX	XX
AESCHYLUS	XX	X	X	X
PLATO: GORGIAS	X	XX	X	XX
PLATO: PROTA- GORAS	X	X	XX	X
PLINY	X	X	XX	
HYGINUS	X	X	XX	
LUCIAN	X	X	X	X
PAUSANIAS	X	X	X	
OVID		X	X	
HORACE		X	XX	XX
PROPER- TIUS		X	X	X
TERTULLIAN	XX	X	X	X
PLUTARCH			X	
EUHEME- RUS	X	X	X	
LACTAN- TIUS		X	XX	X
FULGEN- TIUS		X	X	X
ISIDORE	X	X	X	X
COMESTOR	X	X	X	X
NECKAM	X	X		X
OVIDE MORALISÉ	X	X	X	X

AUTHOR/ WORK	RELATION SOCIETY	KNOWLEDGE FORMATION	ONTOLOGICAL MEANING	MORAL FUNCTION
BOCCACCIO	X	X	X	X
FICINO	X	X	XX	X
PICO	X	X	XX	XX
BOVELLES	X	X	X	X
ERASMUS		X		XX
ALCIATI	X			X
BACON	XX	XX	X	X
HOBBS	X	X	X	X
ROUSSEAU	X	X	X	X
KANT	X		X	
GOETHE	X		X	X
BYRON	X		X	X
P SHELLEY	X		XX	XX
M SHELLEY	X	XX	XX	X
MARX	XX	X	X	X
NIETZSCHE	X	X	X	X
FREUD	X	XX	XX	X
GIDE	X		XX	XX
KAFKA	X	X	X	X
CAMUS	X	X	X	X
ANDERS	XX	X	X	X

2. PROMETHEAN THEMES

X Theme significant in this work

XX Work's theme discussed in 4.2.

AUTHOR/ WORK	FIRE	REBELLION	CREATION	HUMAN NATURE	AMBI- GUILTY
HESIOD: WORKS AND DAYS	XX	XX	X	XX	XX
HESIOD: THEOGONY	XX	XX	X	XX	XX
AESCHYLUS	XX	XX	XX	XX	XX
PLATO: GORGIAS	XX			XX	XX
PLATO: PROTA- GORAS	X		XX	XX	XX
PLINY			XX		
HYGINUS	X		XX		
LUCIAN	X	XX	XX	X	XX
PAUSANIAS	X		X		X
OVID			XX	XX	
HORACE		XX	XX	XX	X
PROPERTIUS			XX	XX	XX
TERTULLIAN			X		
PLUTARCH				XX	
EUHEMERUS			X		
LACTANTIUS			XX		
FULGENTIUS	X			XX	X
ISIDORE			XX		
COMESTOR			X		
NECKAM	XX		X		X

AUTHOR/ WORK	FIRE	REBELLION	CREATION	HUMAN NATURE	AMBI- GUILTY
OVIDE MORALISÉ	XX		X		
BOCCACCIO	XX		XX	XX	X
FICINO	X		XX	XX	XX
PICO			XX	XX	
BOVELLES	XX		X	XX	X
ERASMUS			X		X
ALCIATI	X	XX	XX		
BACON	XX	X	X	XX	XX
HOBBS	X	XX	X	XX	XX
ROUSSEAU	XX		X	XX	
KANT			X	X	
GOETHE		XX	XX	XX	X
BYRON	XX	XX	X	X	X
P. SHELLEY	X	XX	XX	XX	X
M. SHELLEY	X	XX	XX	XX	X
MARX		XX	XX	X	X
NIETZSCHE	X	XX	X	XX	XX
FREUD	XX			XX	X
GIDE	X	XX	X	XX	XX
KAFKA	X	XX	X	X	XX
CAMUS	X	XX	XX	XX	X
ANDERS			X	XX	XX

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