

The Mortal Condition and “Blind Hopes” in the *Prometheus Bound*

In this paper I solve some interpretive cruxes in lines 247–51 of the *Prometheus Bound* by considering the tensions between mortal and immortal temporalities as dramatized in the action of the play. At lines 247–51 Prometheus explains that one of the reasons why Zeus is punishing him is that he kept mortals from “foreseeing their fate” (προδέρκεσθαι μόρον) by giving them “blind hopes” (τυφλάς...ἐλπίδας). The chorus calls this “a great benefit” (μέγ’ ὠφέλημα). This passage is important: it gives an apparently positive account of hope, against the strong tendency in the Greek poetic tradition to view it negatively or ambivalently (Hesiod *WD* 96, Solon fr. 13.36). And yet, as Griffith writes, in the exchange between Prometheus and the chorus “the discussion of Hope remains curiously brief and undeveloped” (1983: ad 250). Conacher (1980: ad 248) writes, “This short exchange...is powerful but...cryptic” (1980: ad 248); Podlecki (2005: 42): “this rich theme is merely touched on in [an] elliptical manner.” Critical studies of this passage largely remain either brief themselves (as in the remarks above and in Cairns 2016—an otherwise rich study of hope) or they collapse the Aeschylean view with Hesiod’s (Clay 2003: 103, elaborating on Vernant 1974: 194). The most extensive analysis of the passage to date unpersuasively equates the blind hopes with *hybris* (Grossman 1970).

The passage raises several questions that need further examination. It is generally agreed that the “fate” that mortals used to foresee was the time of their deaths (Griffith; cf. Pl. *Gorgias* 523d; but *contra* Podlecki). But what makes this foresight an “illness?” What is “blind” hope? It cannot be identical to Solon’s “empty hopes” (κούφαις ἐλπίσι) if the chorus considers it a “benefit” (ὠφέλημα). How does it cure the “illness” of foreseeing fate? This last question has at its heart a frequently overlooked paradox: blindness, normally itself a disease, is associated with

a cure for something not normally considered a disease—sight. I argue that the most fruitful approach to this paradox and the questions connected to it will be found in consideration of the view of human temporality in the play. Human beings in the present age mediate two polar extremes of subjective temporality: a present-oriented, static perspective and a future-oriented, teleological perspective. Both of these subjective temporalities are essentially synchronic. But the human perspective—notably, after Prometheus gives humans hope—is different: it is open-ended and diachronic.

Throughout the play we see the tension between the two subjective temporalities. The one is represented by those who either wish to arrest the progress of time (Zeus) or who are caught, like an animal, in an unreflective present (Io); the other is represented by Prometheus, who can thwart Zeus' goals in punishing him by adopting a perspective that is removed from present sufferings. Prometheus' knowledge of his ultimate victory allows him to endure. But such foreknowledge cannot comfort mortals since their principal distinguishing feature is that they will die. Death is an inevitably miserable conclusion. Prometheus, by contrast, knows of his eventual restoration and justification. But all human lives will end pitifully.

Humans, therefore, live better in an uncertainty. Hope is directed at the future, but without definite knowledge of the outcome. Hope's "blindness" should thus be considered as a way of describing all human (as opposed to divine) expectations. Because of this, mortals engage in projects. This is a unique, intermediate temporality—a temporality of becoming and change—as opposed to the two static temporalities of Zeus and Prometheus. It is the precisely through the blending of present-oriented temporality with future oriented that we get a temporality of change through time. This open-ended temporality is what distinguishes humans.

Bibliography

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