

Inhumane Philanthropy and Philanthropic Tyranny: Prometheus and Zeus in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*

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Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is traditionally considered to be a play about a brave hero, Prometheus, who is cruelly punished by the despotic god Zeus. The play is tragic because the valiant and philanthropic Prometheus is chained to a rock, but it is also hopeful because Prometheus consistently refuses to submit to tyranny. In short, Prometheus is good and Zeus is bad. While this reading, supported by scholars such as Leon Golden and Andrew Yu, has textual support, it makes little sense in the context of Aeschylus' other plays, in which Zeus is a just god whom it is right to worship, rather than the harsh tyrant of *Prometheus Bound*. This problematic characterization of Zeus has led some scholars to suggest that *Prometheus Bound* is spurious. Therefore, in the standard reading of *Prometheus Bound*, the play must be either un-Aeschylean in its depiction of Zeus or not written by Aeschylus. Is there any true possibility for incorporation of *Prometheus Bound* into the Aeschylean corpus? In his paper, "Io's World: Intimations of Theodicy in *Prometheus Bound*", Stephen White suggests an alternative reading in which Zeus is just – even kind – and Prometheus is not philanthropic. While at times White is overzealous in his reversal of the traditional reading, his overall interpretation is textually supported and makes sense in the theological context of other Aeschylean plays. Prometheus acted wrongly because he "did not cower before the anger of gods, but granted mortals honors to which they had no right."¹ If this lack of divine approval were Prometheus' only fault, the standard reading of Zeus as a tyrannical Luddite would be satisfactory. However, Prometheus has three other problems: his pride, the recipients of his gifts, and the gifts that he omitted. Thus, although Prometheus' punishment is rightly viewed as excessively cruel, Prometheus' gift of *τέχνη* is not philanthropic, nor does Zeus govern simply by force without regard for justice and *φιλανθρωπία*.

Prometheus gives his gifts, all valuable skills (*τέχναι*), with

1. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Deborah H. Roberts (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2012), 29-30.

questionable intentions. There is nothing intrinsically wrong about the gifts that Prometheus lists from 436-505. White acknowledges that Prometheus' gifts, which include astronomy, writing, and medicine, form "a stirring vision of progress."² However, in recounting his gift giving, Prometheus focuses on himself rather than on his recipients (e.g. Aeschylus 443, 467-8, 477-8), and he concludes by saying, "One short word sums up all you need to know: all human arts derive from Prometheus."³ Although Prometheus also mentions his "kind intent" in gift giving,⁴ White uses this speech to argue that "[h]ubris, not generosity, is what [Prometheus] conveys."⁵ Prometheus' punishment might be more understandable if his chief motivation for gift giving was self-interest, but it still seems harsh if Prometheus' gifts helped humans. Further complicating Prometheus' intentionality in the play is his statement, "I meant to go wrong. I meant to. I won't deny it. I helped mortals and found trouble for myself. Still, I didn't expect a punishment like this."⁶ Prometheus acknowledges that he missed the mark or made a mistake (*ἤμαρτον*), but he does not specify how. Since he goes on to say "I helped mortals", it seems that Prometheus does not acknowledge any mistake in giving them *τέχνας*. Therefore, he must realize that he went wrong in his relationship with Zeus, and his impiety is willful. Surprisingly, however, Prometheus, whose name means "forethought", did not expect his punishment. Perhaps this surprise is due to the severity of his punishment, and it is thus true that Zeus is "harsh."⁷ Although Prometheus explicitly states that he helped mortals, his language is largely self-centered, suggesting that his motivations were more hubristic than philanthropic.

A bigger problem for Prometheus' philanthropy (*φιλανθρωπία*) is White's assertion that Prometheus gave gifts to mortals rather than humans.⁸ *ἄνθρωπος* is used only twice in the play, "[b]ut the disparity is even more striking with three narrower words: *φῶς* [occurs] only once (548) vs. 24 times in the six extant plays of

2. *ibid.*, 113.

3. *ibid.*, 505-506.

4. *ibid.*, 446.

5. Stephen White, "Io's World: Intimations of Theodicy in *Prometheus Bound*," in *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 122 (2001): 107-140, see 113.

6. *ibid.*, 268-270.

7. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 35.

8. White, "Io's World," 110-1.

Aeschylus; and ἀνήρ and γυνή only once each (862, together and foretelling much later events) vs. 191 and 82 times, respectively.”⁹ Such a discrepancy between word choice in *Prometheus Bound* compared with Aeschylus’ other plays indicates that the heavy emphasis on words for “mortal” (θνήτοcs, βροτόcs/βρότειοcs, and ἐφήμεροcs) is not simply metrical.¹⁰ Aeschylus is thus drawing a sharp distinction between humans and mortals. Because Prometheus “delivered valuable tools but set no rules for their fruitful use”, he has created a race of inhumane mortals.¹¹ This inhumane world is revealed in Prometheus’ treatment of Io and his description of her wanderings. Against his better judgment, Prometheus gives in to Io’s request to tell her “what [she’s] about to suffer.”¹² After she hears about her future suffering, Io wants to commit suicide.¹³ Her suicidal thoughts could be attributed to Zeus, who started her on this journey, or by Prometheus who tells her what she will endure on the journey. Prometheus instructs Io not to approach the people she will meet on her travels “since they are wild and don’t let strangers near.”¹⁴ However these uncivilized mortals possess “wagon wheels”, “bows”, and “iron”, so they are the recipients of Prometheus’ gifts.¹⁵ By giving τέχνη to mortals, Prometheus has made the world more violent and hostile rather than helping mortals progress towards humanity. It thus seems that Prometheus is the one who instigates Io’s suicidal despair because he is the cause of the suffering Io will endure among mortals. Prometheus is not *philanthropic* because he gives mortals skills without also giving them the human institutions (what White calls “rules”) necessary to use those gifts productively.

Traditionally, the Zeus of *Prometheus Bound* is considered the inhumane character and is called harsh, hard-hearted, arrogant, and a tyrant (e.g. Aeschylus 35, 244, 405, 756). Yu, who follows this reading of Zeus, argues, “No moral justification can be found for the treatment of Prometheus, because that punishment is a repayment of evil for good.”¹⁶ Golden agrees, saying, “In the *Prometheus Bound*

9. *ibid.*, 111.

10. *ibid.*, 110.

11. *ibid.*, 127.

12. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 625.

13. *ibid.*, 747-51.

14. *ibid.*, 716.

15. *ibid.*, 710, 711, 714.

16. Anthony C. Yu, “New Gods and Old Order: Tragic Tragedy in the *Prometheus Bound*,” in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1971):19-42, see 34.

Aeschylus repeatedly calls Zeus a cruel tyrant and unequivocally condemns his treatment of Prometheus and Io.¹⁷ Yu and Golden find textual support in the Chorus, Ocean, and Hephaestus, who all side with Prometheus and bemoan his suffering, although they also acknowledge that Zeus is right to punish him.¹⁸ Io, also punished by Zeus, takes Prometheus' side even more forcefully, not seeing any justice in Zeus' position.¹⁹ Only Power, Force, and Hermes stand firmly on Zeus' side. The support of Power and Force emphasize the tyranny of Zeus' rule, as does Hermes' unthinking obeisance.²⁰ In Yu's reading of the play, "Zeus's [*sic*] righteousness and justice now appear highly dubious", and since this portrayal of Zeus does not work in an Aeschylean context, "Zeus [...] must change."²¹ Golden calls the idea that Zeus changes to a fairer and kinder god later in the trilogy, the "'Evolutionary Theory' of Zeus's [*sic*] character."²² This theory resolves Zeus' different Aeschylean characterizations into a coherent whole, but Golden thinks that there is no textual evidence for Zeus' evolution: "all Aeschylus says is that [Zeus] will yield to necessity."²³ Perhaps necessity involves becoming gentler, but Prometheus gives no such indication when he recounts the fate of Zeus.²⁴ However, if Zeus wants to avoid this fate, he needs the assistance of Prometheus, the only god who "can make it plain to [Zeus] how to avoid this anguish" of being ousted from his rule.²⁵ Since the overthrow of Zeus does not happen, at least before Aeschylus' time, perhaps Zeus does release Prometheus in order to gain his help.²⁶ However such a release, besides being mere speculation, would not necessarily indicate any change in Zeus, who might release Prometheus purely out of self-interest. Without the rest of the Promethean trilogy, Yu's and Golden's depictions of Zeus as a despot, while supported by many of the play's characters, are irresolvable and un-Aeschylean.

An alternative reading that tries to solve the problem of Zeus

17. Leon Golden, "Zeus the Protector and Zeus the Destroyer," in *Classical Philology*, vol. 57, no. 1 (1962): 20-26, see 22.

18. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 14-5, 327-8, 542-3.

19. *ibid.*, 613-4.

20. *ibid.*, 10-1, 968-9.

21. Yu, "New Gods," 35.

22. Golden, "Zeus the Protector," 21.

23. *ibid.*, 22.

24. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 907-27.

25. *ibid.*, 913-4.

26. *ibid.*, 770.

is to view him as philanthropic. Hugh Lloyd-Jones cautions that Zeus should not be anachronistically compared to the Christian God, and that “ruthless and tyrannical” behavior is “hardly surprising” in Zeus when his power is threatened.²⁷ It is true that, in other Aeschylean plays, Zeus’ power is not challenged as it is by Prometheus, but this interpretation does not account for Io’s punishment, nor, given the many scholars who oppose Zeus’ tyranny, is this a satisfactory reading for modern audiences. Perhaps more compelling is White’s evolutionary theory, in which “Io’s world [i.e. the world created by Prometheus] is rather what evolves, as mortals and Titans alike outgrow their native barbarism and learn to prosper by adopting Olympian norms.”²⁸ The “Olympian norms” include justice and religion, both of which are instituted by Zeus in the play. By punishing Prometheus, Zeus gives humans the gift of justice and sets the necessary boundaries for the proper use of τέχνη. These are the rules that Prometheus failed to institute, resulting in mortals with τέχνη rather than humans. By punishing Prometheus, Zeus shows mortals an example of justice and raises them to a human level. Likewise, Prometheus’ punishment condemns impiety. Prometheus acted against the will of the gods, so “[f]or this wrong he must pay the penalty the gods exact.”²⁹ Through Prometheus’ punishment, Zeus warns mortals that, despite their technical skill, they must not consider themselves gods. Zeus also uses Io to demonstrate his philanthropy. When Prometheus describes the descendents of Io, they gradually become more human than mortal, choosing to use τέχνη for worthy goals, such as freeing Prometheus, who by that point will have been punished for long enough.³⁰ Zeus uses Io to found the future human race, and, as stated previously, this foundation process would not be so painful if Prometheus had not interfered with mortal affairs. Thus, while Io is undoubtedly suffering, her suffering derives at least as much from Prometheus, as it does from Zeus, who is using her for a philanthropic mission. The greatest challenge to the claim that Zeus is philanthropic is his plan to “annihilate [ἀιστώσας] the entire population” of mortals.³¹

27. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, “Zeus, Prometheus and Greek Ethics” in *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 101 (2003): 49-72, see 66.

28. White, “Io’s World,” 133.

29. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 8-9.

30. *ibid.*, 871-3.

31. *ibid.*, 234-5.

Because Io also uses the word ἐξαϊστώσοι to describe her family's annihilation by Zeus if Inachus does not banish her,³² White argues that Zeus only intended to annihilate or conceal Inachus' family.³³ If this argument is too technical, White also suggests that Zeus' plan was simply to conceal mortals in Hades (i.e. make sure they remained subject to death), while Prometheus tried to turn mortals into immortals.³⁴ Either way, it is important to remember that Zeus planned to create a new race in place of the one that he destroyed.³⁵ Given the gifts that Zeus offers, it is reasonable to assume that the race Zeus planned to create – and will create through Io – is more just and pious, and thus more human, than Prometheus' technical mortals.

Ocean tells Prometheus, "Your fate's an education", but what does the audience learn from *Prometheus Bound*?³⁶ In a play where Zeus is a tyrant and a philanthropist, and Prometheus is neither simply a champion for humans nor an impious scoundrel, it would be rash to draw black and white conclusions. Nevertheless, because Prometheus created a skilled but inhumane world, his punishment indicates the importance of not valuing τέχνη over humanity. Equally important is the fact that Prometheus opposes the harsh suffering that Zeus inflicts on him, and thus teaches the audience to oppose tyranny. Both lessons, although seemingly opposed, are possible because of the complex characterizations of Prometheus and Zeus. Together, these two lessons indicate that *Prometheus Bound* affirms resisting tyranny, but not at the expense of losing a sense of justice, piety, and humanity.

32. *ibid.*, 668.

33. White, "Io's World," 123.

34. *ibid.*

35. Aeschylus, *Prometheus*, 235.

36. *ibid.*, 393.