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### Hesiod's "The Ages of Man" and Neglect of Human Compassion

Around the year 700 BCE, the Greek poet Hesiod identified his age as one of iron. Hesiod witnessed men shunning and disrespecting their fellow men in favor of material goods, wealth, and crime. Acknowledging this demoralization and downfall of mankind, the poet prophesized and warned all mortals of the fate that lay before them if their behavior was not revised and thus continued to decline. Ultimately, as their technology advanced, Hesiod believed society would grow further from its natural ties to human kindness until it became too riddled with evil and destruction that Zeus would eliminate all races forever. This claim, made nearly three thousand years ago, echoes resoundingly into our twenty-first century where the fears held by Hesiod about how humans relate to each other have only intensified with time. The moral shift in priorities of men and women of the twenty-first century mirrors perfectly the description of the Iron Age laid out by Hesiod. Truly, the loss of compassion explained in Hesiod's Iron Age persists and applies today in America, perhaps more so than ever.

In Hesiod's conclusion to "The Ages of Man," he sets forth a list of conditions which will doom mankind. Among these sins, he describes the loss of compassion and respect for our parents. He says, "When grown children forget what their parents have done for them and instead treat them with disrespect and dishonor, criticizing them and complaining bitterly because they have grown old and weak... then Zeus will destroy our iron race..." (Hesiod 92). Asian cultures characteristically have greater respect for their elderly and play a more active role

in their care and treatment. Known as ‘filial piety,’ the Confucian doctrine of valuing and caring for one’s parents and ancestors is one that is practiced currently. In a 2013 *The Week* article entitled “How the elderly are treated around the world,” writer Karina Martinez-Carter describes the recent Elderly Rights Law in China that mandates that adult children do not neglect their parents, but visit them often. She goes on to state, “Offspring who fail to make such trips to mom and dad face potential punishment ranging from fines to jail time” (Martinez-Carter). Though this tradition seems to defy Hesiod’s concerns, Martinez-Carter further compares this Chinese custom to America’s treatment, or mistreatment, of their elderly people:

Western cultures tend to be youth-centric, emphasizing attributes like individualism and independence. This relates back to the Protestant work ethic, which ties an individual's value to his or her ability to work — something that diminishes in old age. Anthropologist Jared Diamond, who has studied the treatment of the elderly across cultures, has said the geriatric in countries like the U.K. and U.S. live "lonely lives separated from their children and lifelong friends." As their health deteriorates, the elderly in these cultures often move to retirement communities, assisted living facilities, and nursing homes (Martinez-Carter).

The neglect of the elderly community in America and Western culture certainly qualifies as the “disrespect and dishonor” Hesiod spoke about in his Iron Age (Hesiod 92). In addition to the commonality of children disrespecting their parents, nursing care in the U.S. is notoriously strewn with cases of neglect and abuse. In the journal *Dying in America*, Diane E. Hoffmann and Anita Tarzian open their discussion about nursing homes stating,

There is abundant literature indicating that dying individuals do not receive adequate pain medication or palliative care, are tethered to machines and tubes in a way that challenges their dignity and autonomy, and are not helped to deal with the emotional grief and psychological angst that may accompany the dying process (Hoffman 294).

Indeed, it is not uncommon for elderly individuals in America to be stripped of human qualities and treated simply as dependents. Little regard is given for the former lives of these people or their human emotions and need for human interaction, care, and love.

In many cases, the use of nursing home facilities by children is done so out of convenience. Often, there is not an available at-home caregiver or sufficient resources to tend to the needs of their elderly parent on a daily basis. While men and women today possess the same amount of time as those in the Golden Age (any shortness of life is self-inflicted), time in the Iron Age, as prescribed by Hesiod, is more often spent working, rather than in communities or in worship as it was spent in the Golden Age. According to *The Overworked American*, the amount of time that Americans spend at their jobs is steadily increasing. Author Juliet Schor acknowledges that Americans spend more than three times the number of hours in a week at work than they do leisurely and additionally distinguishes this from European cultures where free time is on the incline. Schor attributes this to the fixation on materialism in U.S. culture:

...the American standard of living embodies a level of material comfort unprecedented in human history. The American home is more spacious and luxurious than the dwellings of any other nation. Food is cheap and abundant. The typical family owns a fantastic array of household and consumer appliances: we have machines to wash our clothes and dishes,

mow our lawns, and blow away our snow... On a per-person basis, yearly income is nearly... sixty-five times the average income of half the world's population (Schor 3).

Ironically, despite these "luxurious dwellings" Americans pride themselves on, space is rarely reserved for their elderly and dependent parents. Hesiod predicted this consumerism in "The Ages of Man," stating, "Now each day is filled with work and with grief... we have divided up the earth's surface into a multitude of private properties, and we keep as much as we can for ourselves" (Hesiod 92). This shift in priorities from compassion and care to materialism and greed appears to be the result of greater accessibility to technology and goods. When communities no longer have to work together and live off the earth as the people of Hesiod's Golden Age did, their interaction with one another become scarce and almost secondary.

The "dishonor and disrespect" that Hesiod speaks about in regard to children and their parents is definitely an idea that resonates with me. While it's one of the secondary issues that is discussed in "The Ages of Man," especially compared to crime and environmental destruction, the more research I found on the treatment of parents in American culture, the more I began to reminisce about when my own grandfather was in a nursing home during the last few years of his life. While visiting him was something that my father made sure our family did frequently, it was something my sisters and I needed much convincing to do. The gloom and sterile atmosphere that fills a nursing home environment is one that few individuals enjoy entering. As a young and angst-ridden teenager, I did not understand the importance of visiting a loved one, especially one that was completely unaware I was there. Like Hesiod's description, I was more fixated on "criticizing" and "complaining bitterly" about my parents than on truly understanding their significance and their value. Now, looking back, I am appreciative of my father for encouraging

us to see my Poppy. I reflect on the dozens of elderly people who were never visited, many of whom were perfectly conscious of their surroundings, and, with a keen awareness of my own mortality, I am saddened by the state in which they spent or continue to spend their final days on this earth.

While Hesiod's Iron Age can be applied to our modern day in multiple ways, the abandonment of human compassion is perhaps one of the most chilling. While many cultures today are more socially aware and kind, American culture seems to be rapidly moving in a colder and more isolated direction. When men and women place their standard of living—one that is often excessive and frivolous—above their own kin, it speaks to the human race's inability to progress in an emotionally compassionate way. The people of the Golden Age were so successful because they worked together and shared all that they had. As our collaboration with each other diminishes and our reliance on technology builds, we are, in fact, not advancing at all; instead, we freeze our hearts and souls to be as hard and lifeless as iron.

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