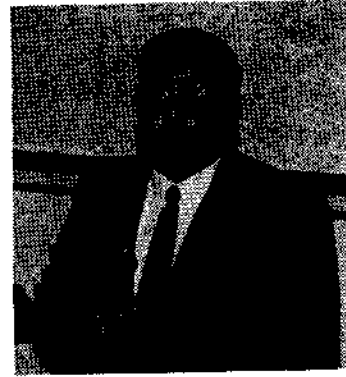


The NATURE of Promethean Ethics *



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Promethean ethics is a proto-theory that emphasizes the approach one should take towards ethics, rather than the exact formulation of a meta-ethics or normative theory. It is based upon Greek mythology and the differences between the brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus. It asks that we be actively concerned about the welfare of humanity as a whole through acts of sympathetic imagination and beneficence. It reminds us that fear, whether it be of the gods or physical nature, ultimately gives rise to a self-defeating conservatism. Most importantly, it insists that we cannot be forbidden to bestow value on the ground that the non-human world does not value it. Nor can we be compelled to admire anything because it is "ordained by nature." Philosophers often express this in technical terms when they say that "ethics is logically independent of nature or metaphysics."

Prometheus means forethinker and commitment to a future world that is considerably better than the one we presently have. Prometheans do not accept preventable misfortune or suffering. When necessary, they defy nature or the gods in order to improve the human condition. They understand that in the absence of knowledge, unexpected harm may be done by a new departure from nature. But they also understand the need for risk taking. For example, I do not think even the most ardent apostle of nature would want Prometheus to return the technology for fire-making simply because it needs to be supplemented by another unnatural institution, namely, the practice of fire safety.

What about the notion of providence? What about the belief that there is a transcendent benevolent god standing outside the world who guarantees that things will always work out for the best? Or the belief that nature, itself, is kindly;

that there is a depersonalized, benevolent immanence in things which guarantees that beneficence will prevail? The Promethean rejects both of these views. He maintains that there is little evidence that "nature" is benevolent and overwhelming evidence that it is not, or at least that it is neutral. He believes that the concept of providence is an illusion, a palliative device. That, aside from the illusions which seem necessary for mental health, humankind has the best chance for enduring happiness by living within the scaffolding of a theory of truth dominated by reliable evidence.

It is true that Prometheus represents the desire for a better world; the will to aspire to the power of the gods and the bold innovator who always stands against unnecessary suffering and the evils of the status quo. But it is one thing to be bold another to be foolish. Prometheanism rejects the claim that "If it is feasible, it is desirable" or that "Science discovers, industry applies and man conforms." Instead, it substitutes the injunction that "Whether it be audacious or not, if there is clear and reliable evidence of benefit, then it is desirable to try it." Similarly, Prometheanism does not believe that "Guilty until proven innocent" is a safe guide to action². It maintains that our task is — not vicariously to know ahead of time what is too much of each good thing but — to understand that innovation involves risk and that great change involves great risks. For example, how many of us would want to deny the value of antibiotics because they are "unnatural" or because they can cause the death of those who have severe allergies? Again, how many would be inclined to argue

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that subway transportation systems are more artificial than buses or automobiles and, therefore, should be done away with? Or that we should avoid this technology because terrorists have come to realize that it is easier to kill more people with sarin gas in crowded than in less crowded environments? Answering these questions in the negative may indicate that we understand the difference between cowardice and prudent vigilance, between the fear of making mistakes and the need for more aggressive forms of watchfulness, including governmental and consumer safeguards.

Nevertheless, when it comes to radical change, there is something to be said in favor of a more cautious stance. Great vigilance is necessary for two reasons: The first is that there always are unforeseen negative consequences of what initially appear to be the friendliest of goods. The second is that some harms may prove to be irreversible and simply cannot be remedied by the introduction of a new artificiality. Artificialities may remedy some technological mistakes, but they do not necessarily have the power to bring back extinct species or to reverse other forms of irreparable ecological damage like loading the atmosphere with gaseous pollutants and the earth and water with long-lived radionuclides.

Because he stole fire from the gods and gave it to man, Prometheus is held up as the archetypal technologist, the father not only of "progress" but also of "meliorism," the belief that we should respect but not revere nature and that when circumstances permit, we can and should change things for the better. There is, however, another important dimension to his legacy. What fundamentally motivates this great Titan is his overriding love of mankind. Aeschylus writes that after Zeus has him chained to the side of a mountain, Prometheus cries out:

Regard me in chains, the suffering god.
The foe of Him who Reigns, foe foredestined
Of all by whom the floor of Zeus is trod:
So greatly have I loved mankind⁵.

Similarly, Byron writes:

Thy Godlike crime was to be kind,
To render with thy precepts less
The sum of human wretchedness⁶.

According to this interpretation, Prometheus was motivated by loving kindness, by the desire to do good for mankind. He so ardently desired this end that it became necessary to intervene and to do battle with Zeus on behalf of his beloved.

This, in large part, explains why Prometheanism is such a formidable moral stance. It combines audacity with the virtues of disinterested sympathy, benevolence and beneficence. It tells us that without power and praxis, love and knowledge are not enough. Expressed differently: It tells us that impersonal self-enlargement, benevolent love for humankind and having the courage to change what can be changed - - is the proper end of morality and politics.

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References

1. For a discussion of how the demands of happiness may differ from the demands of truthfulness, see: Marvin, Kohl, "Skepticism and Happiness", *Free Inquiry* 10:3 (1990), 40-42.
2. Garrett Hardin, *Promethean Ethics*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1980, 8.
3. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. Gilbert Murray, London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1931, 26.
4. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (ed.), *The Works of Lord Byron: Poetry*, vol. 4, New York: Octagon Books, 1966, 50.

羅米修斯的倫理學的本質

Marvin Kohl 著 編者譯

普羅米修斯的倫理學(promethean ethics)是一種強調我們應該怎樣研究倫理學的原理論(a proto-theory)，卻非建立一套形上倫理學(a meta-ethics)或規範理論(a normative theory)。它是以希臘神話普羅米修斯(prometheus)和 璧米修斯(epimetheus)兩兄弟的差異為基礎。它所尋求的是我們如何能夠藉著富同情心的想象和仁愛來積極關心人類整體的利益。它提醒我們無論懼怕眾神或物質的自然界均最終會給我們帶來自我毀滅性的保守主義(a self-defeating conservation)。而最重要的是它強調我們不能夠以非人類的世界並不值得為借口而拒絕賦與它價值，更不能夠因為視某些東西「為自然所規定」而強迫我們去欣賞它。當哲學家們指出「倫理學是邏輯性地獨立於自然或形而上學」時，他／她們是以技術性的詞彙表達這看法。

普羅米修的意思是預先思慮的人(forethinker)，他／她所委身的是一個比我們現在所擁有的更美好的未來世界。

普羅米修斯論者並不接受那些可以避免的災禍和痛苦，他／她們知道在無知的情況下違反自然可能會帶來突如其來的傷害。但是，他／她們亦知道冒險是必要的。例如：我並不認為最激烈的自然擁護者也不會要求普羅亞修斯撤回生火的技術，目的是為了避免因此而產生的。不自然的防火演習制度。

我們應該怎樣面對護蔭的觀念(the notion of providence)呢？或應該如何處理那接受有一位超越和仁愛的、站在世界之外卻保證一切均互相效力的神的信念呢？或那認為自然本身是仁慈；與個人無關卻仁愛地內在於萬物，保證慈愛彰顯的信念呢？普羅米修斯論者拒絕這兩種觀點，他／她堅持祇有極少的證據顯示「自然」是仁愛的，卻有極多的證據證明它不是，或僅是中性的。他／她相信護蔭的觀念是一種幻覺，一種遮掩的工具。除非是為了精神而使幻覺似乎變成需要外¹，人類獲得持久的幸福最佳機會是活於一個由可靠證據所控制的真理理論支架內。

無疑普羅米修斯代表著對更美好世界的渴望；一種追求眾神能力的意志；並為勇敢的創新者，抗拒不必要的痛苦和維持現狀的罪惡。但是，勇敢是一回事；愚蠢卻是另一回事，普羅米修斯主義拒絕「如果可行便值得想望」或「科學所發現的，工業所應用的，人便要遵之而行」等宣稱，卻代以「無論是否具冒險精神，祇要有清楚和可靠的證據明其益處，則值得嘗試的命令。同樣地，普羅修斯主義亦不相信「要證明無辜否則假設服罪」是行動的安全指導²。它認為我們的目標並非替代他人去預先知道甚麼是好事過頭反成壞事，卻是去了解那創新所包含的風險及大變革所含有的大風險。例如：我們有多少人能夠因為抗生素「違反自然」或令那些嚴重對之敏感的人死亡而否定其價值呢？再者，我們有多少會辯稱地下鐵路比巴士及汽車更人工化而主張將之拆毀呢？或說要避免此技術，因為恐怖份子知道在多人的地方比少人的地方更容易用沙淋毒殺更多的人？如果我們所持的答案是否定的，可能正表示我們明白懦弱與謹慎的警戒、懼怕犯錯與更積極監察形式的需要的分別。這些監察形式包括政府的和消費者的保護措施。

然而，當面對激變時，我們便要採取一些較小心的姿態。在兩個原因的考

慮下，極度警戒是需要的：第一、縱使某些事物開始時表面是十分友好的善，卻往往會有某些不能預見的負面結果。第二、某些害處是不能挽回的，即是那些不能夠以引進新的人為技術來彌補某些科技的錯誤。雖然人為技術能夠彌補某些科技的錯誤，卻沒有能力叫絕種的生物復現，亦不能夠挽回其他對環境所造成的。不可轉的傷害。向大氣層放出污染的氣體、將長壽的放射性核素埋在地下或倒進海裏等。

普羅米修斯從眾神處將火偷到人間，他被視為是技術專家的原型。不僅是「進步」，亦是「社會向善論」之父。相信我們要尊重，卻非敬畏自然。認為當環境許可時，我們能夠和應該改進事物。但是，他仍有另一項重要的產業。基本上，這位偉大的泰坦人是被他那份對人類的愛所壓倒的。愛斯基羅斯(Aeschylus)的記載，當普羅米修斯被宙斯(Zeus)鎖在四邊時，他喊道：

我被鏢銬鎖著，
忍著巨大痛苦的神。
我的敵人宙斯，
祂在那被祂踐踏的領域上治理，命定一切：
我之愛苦乃因對人類的深愛³。

同樣地，拜倫寫道：

你那超絕的罪是仁慈，
要表達你的教訓而少了人類不幸的總和⁴。