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Divine-Human Relations in the Aesopic Corpus

Abstract: This paper argues that Aesopic fables are an under-used but valuable resource for the study of Graeco-Roman cognitive religiosity. The world of fables is ruled by a restricted group of divinities – an 'oligotheon' – dominated by Zeus, the largely benign creator who gives living beings their characteristic qualities and regulates their behaviour. Divine-human relations typically take place informally and/or in private, rather than in public and/or through cult acts. Fables present the gods as spontaneously interested in human beings and as having a tendency to interfere uninvited in their affairs; one can sometimes even detect development in a divine-human relationship in the course of a story. A few fables play with the tensions endemic in divine-human relations, such as the unequal value of what each party brings to the other, and the paradox of human stories' power to capture in narrative what in principle is beyond the bounds of human control. Carefully handled, fables can be taken seriously as evidence of one, sometimes unexpectedly sophisticated strain in Graeco-Roman religious thinking, which persisted over a long period of time and across a wide spectrum of society.

Keywords: Aesop, Fables, Gods, Monotheism, Cognitive religiosity

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Fables hold a distinctive place in Graeco-Roman culture. Poets and prose writers told and retold them, drawing new morals from traditional stories or allowing audiences to draw their own. Collections under the name of Aesop were made from at least the fourth century BCE,[1] and the early principate saw the development of a new genre, the fable book. Philosophers, rhetors, moralists, educationalists and religious writers all used fables to inform, broaden or challenge the imaginations of those they addressed. Socio-educational elites, moreover, were not fables' only, or even main audience. Fables are one of the few genres repeat-

1 West (1984).

edly described in antiquity as originating in the lower strata of society and as popular there: as vulgar, primitive, and especially suitable for slaves and the uneducated.[2]

Given their popularity across social groups, their use at every level of education and their extensive deployment by *litterati*, it is perhaps surprising that fables have not been more studied by cultural historians as expressions of Greek or Roman *mentalité*.[3] They have obvious, if not unproblematic, potential as evidence for assumptions about many aspects of the ancient world: physical and social, cultural, economic and religious.[4] This essay aims to begin to explore this potential by investigating what fables may be able to contribute to the study of just one aspect of ancient *mentalité*: the way Greeks and Romans conceptualized their relationships with the divine.

Fables have not featured largely in the study of Greek and Roman religions, for understandable reasons: they contain few references to cults or specific rituals, they tend to be less complex and varied than myth, and they are often impossible to locate in a particular social context.[5] Divine-human relations, however, play a significant role in fables, and given fables' cultural omnipresence and

2 E.g. Liv. 2.32.9, Phaedr. 3 *Prol*. 43–7, Quint. 11.19–21, Philostr. *Im*. 1.3, *VA* 5.14–16, Quint. 1.9.2. Proverbs, closely related to fables, are also regularly characterized as popular: e.g. Arist. ad Synesius *Encom. calv*. 22 p. 229; Dem. *De eloc*. 232, Quint. 5.11.21; Sen. *Ep*. 94. 1–2, 5–6; Ps.-Diog. pr.; Ath. 10.86 457c; see Carnes (1988); Zafiropoulos (2001), 36–41; Morgan (2007), 5–8. Ancient authors probably had some justification for their view: cross-culturally, fables are often known or believed to have originated at low levels of society and to have remained popular there.

3 With the important exception of Kurke (2011), especially chs. 2–5 on Aesopic wisdom as an alternative to high philosophy, major studies of recent decades focus on fables as a literary genre: see especially Perry (1936, 1952, 1965); Adrados (1978), 1–81; Goosens and Sodmann (1981); Karadagli (1981); Adrados and Reverdin (1984); Jedrkiewicz (1989); van Dijk (1997); Adrados (1999); Holzberg (1999), 236–42; Holzberg (2002); Zafiropoulos (2001). Many individual fables have also been extensively studied in literary contexts.

4 For this approach see e.g. la Penna (1961); García (1978); Gual (1977); Fisher (1987); Cascajero (1991); Adrados (1999); Zafiropoulos (2001); Morgan (2007); cf. van Dijk (1996); Hägg (1997) (on the *Life of Aesop*, whose fables I omit here, along with other fables embedded in larger works); Horsfall (2003), 81–2. The mediaeval and modern cultural historiography of the fable is a large and expanding field.

5 Even e.g. Mikalson (1983), Veyne (1983) do not discuss them, but Versnel (2011), 327 calls them "One of the literary genres largely ignored as a source for Greek culture and society and not least religion…". Conversely, scholars of fables have taken little interest in their religious aspects: Nøjgaard (1964) is representative when he entitles his brief section on references to the gods (II 525–8) "La religion et le silence de la fable," and continues (527) "Nous ne sommes pas ici en presence d'une conception particulière des dieux." Cascajero (1991) argues that fables tackle the big issues of human existence but identifies the gods as only a minor theme; cf. Morgan (2007), 75–7.

popularity, it would be surprising if the relationships they present had no connection at all with wider Greek or Roman thinking. In the cases of Phaedrus and Avianus, whose collections can be approximately located in time, some work along these lines has been done, tracing Stoic ideas in Phaedrus and reflecting on the absence of Christian ones in Avianus.[6] In what follows, I shall focus on the larger, thematically rich, historiographically challenging but culturally intriguing corpus of Aesopic fables, arguing that they have more potential than has usually been recognized to illuminate certain aspects of Graeco-Roman religiosity.

The Aesopic corpus presents a number of challenges to historians. We cannot be sure when any fable first came into circulation. Almost every surviving collection or fragment of a collection is slightly different, and the largest collections date to the later Roman Empire. We can assume that many fables have not survived. The stories that have come down under the name of Aesop are therefore in some sense a group, in some sense not a group and in some sense a fragmentary group, and to the extent that they are a group, they cannot be located in any one place or time.[7]

Paradoxically, some of these difficulties may also be strengths. Fables, once in circulation, were often highly stable in form and content over long periods of time.[8] Given their strong associations with education and popular morality, assumptions they incorporate about social, economic or divine-human relations may plausibly be taken to have resonated to some degree with many generations of readers and listeners and informed their thinking – a process made easier by

6 Postgate (1919). Babrius' fables are not usually seen as expressing a distinctive religious position. Karadagli (1981), 80, 161; Jedrkiewicz (1989), 208–12; Adrados (1999), I 604–35 connect some Aesopic fables with Cynic thinking, but *contra* see Zafiropoulos (2001), 36.

7 I use Chambry's (1925) edition of the Aesopic corpus, which includes the material of the Augustana recension and other collected fables in circulation by the first century CE, adding Perry's (1984) numbers in brackets where he provides them, for ease of cross-referencing. The Augustana recension is accepted as the earliest Aesopic collection surviving and dated to between the late fourth century BCE (Perry (1936), 156) and the third century CE, almost all scholars dating it to the first century CE or earlier (see the discussion of Adrados (1999), 60–74). Just under 80% of the fables discussed here appear in the Augustana collection, recension 1A or multiple Aesopic collections datable to the first century or earlier. Fourteen are not securely traceable as early as the first century, most of which are well in line with the Augustana in content (but see below, n. 14). The Augustana includes *epimythia*, which were probably regularly attached to fables by the first century CE, since Babrius and Phaedrus incorporate them into their stories (Perry (1940)), but which I shall not discuss here. Any fable could attract a number of different *epimythia*, so those that survive attached to late manuscripts have no special standing in fables' interpretation.

8 Perry (1952), (1964), 419–610.

fables' non-specific socio-temporal location.[9] We do not need to assume that everyone knew every Aesopic fable or read the whole of any collection for fables' dominant themes to have been part of their mental set:[10] as with any language in any culture, the grammar of Graeco-Roman religious ideas transcends, even as it expresses and informs, the imaginations of individuals.[11] This being so, we may posit that Aesopic ideas about divine-human relations, especially those which appear in a number of fables, had a degree of currency and represent a stratum of cognitive religiosity that co-existed over time with many other, more or less intellectually sophisticated and more socio-temporally specific strata. For the reasons already noted, it would be over-optimistic to expect fables to present a fully coherent and consistent picture of the gods or divine-human relations, even if such a thing were a feature of Greek and Roman religions in general. I hope to show, however, that certain trends and patterns of thinking do emerge from the Aesopic corpus, which have some claim to be taken seriously as elements of Graeco-Roman religious *mentalité*.

Before we continue, one further preliminary question should be considered. It has long been accepted that human beings are conceived, at least in some contexts, in the ancient world, as standing between gods and animals.[12] Are divine-human relations, then, the only ones we need to discuss, or are divine-animal and divine-human-animal relations also at issue in the Aesopic corpus? It is also generally accepted that in most fables, animals represent human beings, a point to which we shall return. A number of stories in which animals engage in obviously anthropomorphic behaviour towards the gods, such as offering incense, taking refuge in a temple, or asking Zeus to give them a king, reinforce this assumption.[13] A few fables, however, which concern gods, animals and humans, deserve closer attention. In two, animals and human beings are said, without distinction, to be created and given their distinctive characteristics by Zeus or

9 Fables are not alone in this: texts such as Homer, which remain culturally important over long periods of time, also continue to resonate with listeners and readers and inform their thinking despite ongoing change in their socio-cultural environment. It was only in the Byzantine and early Mediaeval worlds that fables began to be seen as culturally problematic, collections becoming increasingly selective and attracting extensive commentaries.

10 Though there is some evidence that miscellanies such as fable collections may have been read more systematically than we might expect: see Morgan (2007), 257–73.

11 I assume, after e.g. Smart (1989), 12–21, that ideas about the gods and divine-human relations are likely to be a dimension of Graeco-Roman religiosity as they are of religions in general, and, with e.g. Luckman (1971), that such ideas are typically socially constructed rather than individualistic.

12 Vernant (1979); Dierauer (1977); Lloyd (2011).

13 166 (323), 222, 66 (44).

other gods.[14] In another two, human beings and animals are alike created and endowed by the gods, but some distinction is made between them. In fable 57 (311), Zeus creates animals and human beings, and at the end of the process, man complains that he has no special gift. Zeus replies that he has the greatest gift of all, one limited to gods and men: speech. In fable 322 (240), Prometheus makes animals and human beings on Zeus's orders, but finding that there are more animals than people, Zeus instructs him to turn some of the animals into people. Prometheus obeys, but these men retain the souls of animals. Animals, here, are treated corporately as one class of being, humans another, gods a third (and possibly heroes a fourth). It seems, then, that fables show traces of both a binary classification of living beings and of Vernant's triadic classification (and conceivably of a tetradic one). It seems likely, however, that the great majority of fables that concern the gods concern divine-human relations and do not furnish material for investigating divine-human-animal relations.[15]

I The Aesopic Oligotheon

Some seventy Aesopic fables – about a fifth of Chambry's corpus – involve divine beings or religion in some form. The first thing that strikes the reader about the gods who take part in these stories is that they are virtually all Olympians.[16] The only pre-Olympian god to appear (twice) is Earth.[17] Fables therefore restrict themselves rather more than do literary retellings of myth to gods who are widely worshipped from the archaic Greek world onwards – those who might have been worshipped by their listeners and readers. In addition to the gods, a small number of fables feature heroes – Heracles, Prometheus and once Theseus[18] – and divine

14 124 (100), 139.

15 If we were to take the presence of animals throughout the corpus as a reflection of systematic interest in divine-human-animal relations, we might be forced to consider much more than a triadic structure, or one in which some animals are closer to human beings than to other animals, since it is not obvious, for instance, that predators and prey are always less distinct than human beings and animals as a class. I am doubtful that this would be justified, but it would be a larger project than we can pursue here.

16 Though priests of Cybele are mentioned once, in fable 236 (164).

17 19 (8), 109 (102).

18 Heracles: 44, 72 (291), 129 (316), 130 (111), cf. 356; Prometheus: 124 (100), 210 (259), 303, 322 (240); Theseus: 44. Fable 44, in which two men quarrel about whether Theseus or Heracles is the greater hero, and each hero lays waste the homeland of the man who does not worship him, has no obvious connections with the Theseus of myth or cult or other fables of Heracles, and of the stories discussed here is perhaps the least likely to be pre-first century in origin.

qualities or personifications: Horkos, Thanatos, Tyche, Polemos, Hybris, Aletheia, Plutus and Momus, along with Winter and Spring and The North Wind and Sun.[19]

Among the gods, fables confine themselves to the more powerful Olympians, and not all of those: Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Aphrodite, Athena, Demeter, Hermes and Hades. Most of these only appear once or twice and only Zeus, Hermes, Aphrodite, Athena and Apollo play an active part in stories. By far the greatest number of references to individual gods is to Zeus, who appears in twenty-eight fables, followed by Hermes, in twelve; in four stories they appear together.[20] By comparison with the range and complexity of cult, or of myths and stories about the gods, this is a limited pantheon, with some notable omissions: a number of fables take place at sea, for instance, but there is no mention of Poseidon. Nor are the complexities of divine interactions in other genres replicated in fables: with the exception of Zeus and Hermes, fables rarely feature more than one god.[21]

In a handful of stories, the religious action is a sacrifice or an act of divination: everyday activities in the ancient world, but ones which do not involve gods as actors in the story.[22] The corpus also shows awareness of a small number of major cults and festivals – the Olympic Games, the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Panathenaia – but with the exception of one story about a man testing the Delphic oracle, and one whose location is unclear, no fable is set at a public shrine, ritual or festival.[23] Instead, nearly all divine-human interactions take place in private or informal contexts. Characters set up statues to gods or heroes in their homes. They

19 Horkos 298, Thanatos 133, Tyche 261 (174), Polemos and Hybris 319 (367), Aletheia 259 (355), Plutus 130 (111), Momus 124 (100), Winter and Spring 346 (271), The North Wind and Sun 73 (46). See below, n. 46.

20 Versnel (1983), 328 gives different figures, based on all surviving ancient fables. A similar pattern emerges in the earliest surviving Greek proverb collections, dated to the first-second centuries, in which Zeus appears several times, Hermes three, Heracles five times, a scattering of other Olympian deities once or twice and Cronus once.

21 Exceptions are 124 (100), in which Zeus, Prometheus and Athena stage a competition to create the best living thing; 121 (104), a competition between Zeus and Apollo; and 109 (102), when Zeus, Hermes and Earth all play a role in the creation of men and women (cf. 19 (8)). Heracles appears with Athena in 129 (316) and Hades in 130 (111); Heracles and Theseus are the subject of a quarrel in 44.

22 E.g. 55 (28), 292 (sacrifice); 294 (divination). 246 (66) refers to the gods as guarantors of oaths.

23 10 (5) refers to the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Panathenaic festival, 51 to the Olympic games. Fable 18 (301) does not specify whether the ugly slave girl who sacrifices to Aphrodite does so at a temple or a domestic shrine. In the fable of the man who tested Delphi (50 (36)), the god speaks to the tester directly, not through the Pythia or priests, so even in this formal cult setting the emphasis is on the personal nature of the divine-human relationship. Kurke (2011), 53–94 sees the *Life of Aesop* as contesting the authority of Delphi, particularly in comparison with

pray to a god, or encounter a god, at home or when going about their business, in their dreams, on the road, in a wood, on a riverbank, in a garden, at sea or when caught in a trap.[24]

Given that many fables must have been lost, it would be rash to put too much weight on the absence of some Olympian gods from the scene. The dominance of Zeus and Hermes, however, and the overwhelming interest of fables in divine-human interactions in informal contexts, do not look likely to be accidental. Nor does the range of activities in which the gods engage.

Cosmogony and the creation of the world are a recurring theme in myth, where they usually involve a number of different divinities and often several divine generations. In fables, this complexity is radically simplified: the creative power is always Zeus, occasionally helped by Earth or a hero. In fable 19 (8), for example, Zeus causes Earth to create the mountains and plains.[25] In fable 109 (102), he creates human beings and sends Hermes to show them how to till the earth (to which Earth objects and which she makes as difficult as possible).[26] In fable 57 (311), as we have seen, Zeus creates animals and human beings, and gives each their distinctive characteristics.[27]

The idea that Zeus gives every creature its special qualities – strength or speed, flight, speech or intelligence – recurs in several stories, and is evidently a significant part of fables' world view.[28] These qualities are almost always characterized as useful and desirable, implying that Zeus is not only powerful, but also benevolent.[29] Men, horses, oxen are variously presented in fable 139, for instance, as being pure and good (ἀκεραίους τε καὶ ἀγαθοὺς), glorious and proud (ἀλαζόνας τε καὶ ὑψαυχένας), and willing to accept discipline (ἀρχικοὺς ὑπάρχειν).[30] "Recognizing the god's gift [of speech]," ends fable 57 (311), "the man did obeisance and left rejoicing." (καὶ τότε ἐπιγνοὺς τὸ δῶρον ὁ ἄνθρωπος προσκυνήσας καὶ

that of individuals' dreams; in fable 50 (36) the authority of Delphi is upheld, but both share a sense of the importance of informal divine-human interaction.

24 At home: 61 (285), 76 (50), 131; on the road: 72 (291); in a wood: 74; on a riverbank: 253 (173); in a garden: 273 (179); at sea: 53 (30); caught in a trap: 166 (323). Prayers are always simple requests for help, but when gods appear and engage mortals in conversation, more extended and varied exchanges occur (see below).

25 This is one of a small number of fables-within-fables, this one put in the mouth of Aesop himself.

26 Cf. 118, 120.

27 Cf. 139, 322 (240).

28 118 (109), 120 (108), 139.

29 Paralleled in Greek proverbs, e.g. Zen. 1.26, 2.44, 2.48, 4.20, 4.99; Ps.-Diog. 2.84.

30 Though dogs are grumbling and bad-tempered (ὀργίλους καὶ ὐλακτικοὺς).

εὐχαριστήσας ᾠ̃χετο.) Just one fable of creation is darker in tone, and shows Zeus's actions in a more ambiguous light:[31]

> Prometheus, at the command of Zeus, created human beings and animals. But Zeus, seeing that animals were far more numerous than people, ordered him to destroy a number of the animals and convert them to human beings. When he had carried out this order, it emerged that those men who had not originally been made as men had the form of men but the spirits of beasts.

In this story, Zeus's orders are carried out by Prometheus, and it may be the involvement of the hero which causes creation to take a more problematic turn, a theme to which we shall return.[32]

Linked with Zeus's power and his role as the creator of animals and human beings is his regular appearance as the receiver of complaints and appeals from his creatures, and arbiter of their disputes. In fable 99 (302), the oak trees complain because they are constantly being cut down. In fable 291 (198), the snake complains that he is forever being trodden on. The frogs (66 (44)), dissatisfied with the anarchy in which they live, appeal to Zeus to give them a king. The camel (146 (117)), envious of the bull with his fearsome horns, asks Zeus to give him horns too. The bees (234 (163)) apply to Zeus for more powerful stings, to deter people from stealing their honey, while the asses (262 (185)), tired of carrying heavy burdens, send a delegation to request that a limit be put on their workload. In the world of fables, it seems, not only are living beings created by Zeus, but they take a high view of his continued interest in their affairs and responsibility for them.

In literary retellings of myth, the gods sometimes respond to complaints or appeals, and sometimes do not, while in cult practice it is left to the worshipper to infer from subsequent events whether a communication has been favourably received. In fables, whether or not Zeus acts in response to a plea, he confirms his interest in mortals by seldom missing the opportunity to give advice, deliver a home truth or tick a suppliant off. He blames the oak trees for their own problems, because they supply the wood that makes axe handles, and tells the asses that they will not lose their burdens until they can make a river of their urine (which explains why whenever one ass stops to urinate, others follow suit). The gods, it seems, have little patience with creatures who do not accept the role for which

31 322 (240); first attested elsewhere at Pl. *Prt*. 320d.

32 Prometheus is known elsewhere as a trickster (Hes. *Theog*. 506–616, Aes. *PV* 442–525) and creator (first in Ar. *Av*. 686). In the Aesopic corpus, he is always associated with creation (210 (259), 303, 322 (240)). Only one fable (303) hints at his character as a trickster, when he makes human beings so that they can see each others' faults, but not their own.

their nature has prepared them. The snake has caused his own problems by not being assertive enough: Zeus tells him that if he had bitten the first human being who trod on him, he would have had no more trouble. The frogs appear to be making a reasonable request for help with a political change which they cannot make by themselves, and are heard sympathetically.[33] The bees' request seems to be in some ways reasonable and in others selfish, so they get what they ask for, but at a price: Zeus gives them stings, but so designs them that when the sting is used, the bee dies.

Much of Zeus's advice – stand up for yourself when you can, and accept your lot when you cannot – echoes themes familiar from popular moralizing in other contexts. It belongs to "ethics wide," the class of all the ways in which it is right for us to behave.[34] In a few stories, Zeus rewards or punishes suppliants on the basis of qualities which we might characterize as ethical or moral in a narrower sense. He is angered, for instance, by the greed of camel and the bees' envious reluctance to share their honey.[35]

Zeus is also portrayed as moral when he dispenses justice, consisting in the punishment of misdeeds. One of the most vivid images in the corpus is that of Zeus in fable 126 (313), sitting beside a box of ostraka on which Hermes has inscribed the misdeeds (ἁμαρτίας) of human beings, and working his way through it, "so that he may do justice to each" (ὅπως ἑκάστου τὰς δίκας ἀναπράσσηι). The ostraka get mixed up, says the fable, "and some come sooner, some later into the hands of Zeus, for him to make just judgements" (εἴποτε καλῶς κρίνοιτο).[36] Fable 240 describes an act of summary justice by the god, when he turns a greedy farmer who steals his neighbour's wheat and barley into an ant. (Ζεὺς δὲ ἀγανακτήσας κατὰ τῆς πλεονεξίας αὐτοῦ μετεμόρφωσεν αὐτὸν εἰς τοῦτο τὸ ζῶιον ὃς μύρμηξ καλεῖται).

Occasionally, a moral message is more ambiguous. Fable 123 (312) tells how Zeus enclosed all good things in a jar and gave them to a man to look after. The man was curious and opened the jar, whereon all the good things flew away to the gods.[37] On one level, this story seems to say that Zeus is generous and it is not

33 Their request has well-known parallels in Greek history (e.g. Hdt. 4.161, Diod. 70.5, 82.6).

34 Edel and Edel (1959); in Greek popular morality, the right way to behave is always partly determined by one's social position (Morgan (2007), 163–9).

35 Both the camel and the bees suffer from φθόνος; the bees also from βασκανία cf. 124 (100) (Zeus is angered by Momus' jealousy of what other gods have created), 125 (106) (Zeus is angered by the ingratitude of the tortoise whom he has invited to a feast).

36 Derived from *Il.* 24.527–8 and related to Hesiod's Pandora story (*Op.* 90–8).

37 Otherwise earliest attested at Babr. 58; an *epimythium* in the Augustana collection, influenced by Hesiod, adds that hope remained with human beings. Hesiod's version, of course, has

his fault if human beings fail to enjoy the good things of life.[38] On another, we may wonder how generous it is of the god to give gifts which cannot be accessed without their taking flight.[39]

Even taking into account difficult cases such as this, however, in the large and complex field of Graeco-Roman cognitive religiosity, fables reveal some well-defined and distinctive features. Their world is dominated by what we might call an oligotheon: a restricted group of divinities in which one powerful (if not quite all-powerful) god, Zeus, plays by far the largest part, supported principally by Hermes, the traditional mediator between Olympus, earth and the underworld. Zeus is on the whole a benign, if sometimes formidable figure, creating living beings, giving them their characteristic qualities, and regulating their behaviour.[40] Access to Zeus is open to all, however lowly, and typically takes place informally and/or in private, rather than in public and/or through cult acts. Apart from Zeus and Hermes, Aphrodite and Athena appear most often as actors in fables, suggesting that after existence itself, the social order, justice and commerce, (practical) wisdom and love or sex are the areas of life in which human beings imagine themselves as interacting most with the divine.[41] The complexity of ancient public, elective and domestic cult, myth, literature and philosophy, are reduced to a simple, in some ways reassuring system, which offers an account of existence and morality, affirms the interest of the divine in human affairs, and presents the divine as accessible to human beings – though it also suggests that Zeus' concern is more often with maintaining the order of creation as a whole than accommodating the desires of individual mortals.[42]

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generated long and rich debate over the significance of Pandora, her jar and its contents; Aesop's version has been less discussed, beyond the drawing of the parallel.

38 Cf. 99 (302).

39 Giving the jar to Pandora, and identifying her with Earth (e.g. Harrison (1900)) simplifies the paradox slightly, especially if, as we have seen, Zeus and Earth are sometimes at odds. Harrison (p. 108) notes that Babrius gives the jar to Zeus and fills it with good things, but sees this tradition as late and minor; its presence in the Aesopic corpus suggests it may be earlier and more important.

40 Teixidor (1977), 7–17 argues that Near Eastern popular religion in the Graeco-Roman period shows the gods as generally benign and helpful, and has a tendency towards monotheism (cf. Mitchell and van Nuffelen (2010)). He does not discuss fables but suggests that Lucian's satire *Icaromenippus* attests a similar strain of thinking in the Greek world and notes that the gods in Greek are often called οἱ ἐπηκόοι, "those who listen to prayers." Cf. Karadagli (1981), 140–87 on the dominance of Zeus in fables, and Osborne (2007), 24–40. See further n. 46, below.

41 Both, especially practical wisdom, are also central themes in other wisdom genres (Morgan (2007), 168–9, 172–3).

42 Also the conclusion of Lloyd-Jones (1983), though his picture of Zeus is harsher than the one which emerges from fables, perhaps because he focuses on "high" literature, which may proble-

If the Aesopic corpus were the product of a particular religious group or even an individual, we might take its religiosity as an expression of that group's or individual's views. Since it evolved over time, probably across more than one stratum of society, we may tentatively suggest that it captures ideas which appealed to a wide range of Greek speakers over a long period, and perhaps particularly to non-elites.[43] If so, then fables offer us a rare window onto the thinking of parts of Greek-speaking society which literary sources rarely reach.

Occasionally, Zeus' gifts to human beings are not restricted to good things. In fable 111 (103), Hermes, on Zeus' instructions, gives the "poison of lies" (ψεύδους φάρμακον) to all artisans. He reaches the cobblers last, and having a good deal of the poison left, gives them an extra portion. Fable 112 (309) describes Hermes travelling through the world with a wagon of lies, knavery and trickery (ψευσμάτων καὶ πανουργίας καὶ ἀπάτης). He is distributing this between regions when he breaks down in Arabia; the Arabs, thinking that he is carrying something valuable, plunder the wagon and so become the worst liars and cheats in the world. We may note that in both stories, as in the one above involving Prometheus, a third party mediates between Zeus and his creatures, but both these fables specify that Hermes is carrying out Zeus's orders, so there is no doubt here that Zeus is responsible for something which human beings find morally problematic.

These stories sharpen two questions which have been implicit throughout the discussion so far. Can we justify treating the Aesopic corpus as an entity for the purpose of discovering in it historical patterns of thought about the gods, or any other subject? In addition to all the uncertainties surrounding the dating and collection of the fables, are they not too thematically diverse, even mutually contradictory to justify this kind of treatment?[44] Even more fundamentally, can we realistically treat fables as saying anything about divine-human relations at all? Are they not rather using the gods, as they (often, if not always) use animals, as a device to talk about human behaviour?

The Aesopic corpus, like all fable collections, is thematically diverse, and sometimes includes apparently contradictory ideas about the gods along with many other subjects. It would be hasty, however, to assume that they do not

matize the actions of the gods more sharply than popular ethical material. See below, however, for elements of problematization in fables; cf. Havelock (1978). On the justice of the gods in proverbs see e.g. Zen. 4.11, 5.81, 5.82, Ps.-Diog. 3.20, 7.98.

43 The many fables in which human characters' work is mentioned add some support to the idea that fables develop more in lower social strata: we meet many more slaves, farmers, woodsmen, ploughmen, rank-and-file soldiers and craftsmen than rich men or *litterati*.

44 Assumed e.g. by Jedrkiewicz (1989), 277–80.

therefore bear any relation to the way listeners or readers thought. Thinking about divine-human relations is challenging and, in all traditions, encompasses tensions and paradoxes. If anything, the relative coherence of fables' picture of the gods is more striking than its inconsistencies. All genres of popular morality, moreover, are tolerant of a degree of internal conflict, as users across place and time grapple with the complexities of existence, but they are also widely attested as having social currency, and amid their complexities, trends and patterns of thought do frequently emerge.[45] We do not need to assume that fables cannot illuminate patterns of Graeco-Roman thinking about divine-human relations because they are not unfailingly consistent.

There remains the question whether gods in fables actually represent gods at all, or whether, as animals usually do, they represent human types and relations. Fables about animals fall into two categories: those in which all the actors are animals, and those in which animals interact with humans and/or gods. In the first group, we usually assume that animals stand for types of people, but, even so, stories, for instance, about dogs and wolves or lions and deer must say something about those animals as well as the human types they stand for, or the metaphor has no traction. In the second group, animals sometimes seem to represent types of people and sometimes themselves, but even where the animals represent people, the story needs to make some sense as a depiction of human-animal relationships, or the metaphor again lacks traction. Fable 313, for instance, in which a shepherd rears a family of wolf cubs hoping to train them to ravage his neighbours' sheep, but one day finds them ravaging his own, may warn us not to try to bend bad people to our own ends; but the story works because we can imagine real wolves behaving like that; it does not work if one replaces the wolves with hares. In the same way, fables about gods and human beings, even if they can be read on some level as concerning human-human relations, depend for their force on drawing a picture of the gods that their readers also recognize in its own right.[46]

Fables, being typically short, introduce their characters as briefly as possible, relying on what people already understand about them to set up the story. The way fables present gods must therefore be related to the way they are understood

45 On the ability of popular moral genres cross-culturally to generate systematic ideas, see e.g. Benedict (1934), 200; Ladd (1957); Barnsley (1972); García (1978); Hägg (1997); Humphrey (1997); Morgan (2007), 2–13.

46 See e.g. Tyler (2007) on Aesopic characters in fables as indices (which have a natural connection with their subject) rather than ciphers (which do not), and Hunt (2009) on the literary form of fable as moral argument. Most commentators on ancient fables assume that all characters stand for human beings (though Nøjgaard (1964), II 284–319 is unusual in saying so explicitly).

by potential audiences. Even if we take the extreme sceptical position that fables use stories about gods purely to talk about human relationships, they must still, incidentally, tell us a good deal about their conceptualization of the gods. I doubt, however, that the extreme sceptical position is justified. If we accept, as most commentators do, that fables have something to tell us about conceptualizations of human social relations in antiquity, then there is no reason to assume that they have nothing to say about human relations with the gods.[47] Divine-human relations were as central to Greeks' and Romans' view of the world as relations between human beings, and every bit as much represented, discussed, debated and agonized over. Elsewhere in Greek and Latin literature we find it more surprising if divine-human relations are not represented or discussed than if they are, and there is no obvious reason why fables should be less interested in them than other genres.[48]

To return to the morality of fables: apart from the morally problematic idea that Zeus gives human beings the capacity to lie and deceive, fables 111 (103) and 112 (309) introduce a further theme. Although Zeus is the creator of living things, communication between gods and human beings is not perfect, and sometimes human beings develop characteristics or problems unintended by the deity. When this happens, it is typically through the agency of a minor god or hero to whom Zeus has entrusted some responsibility. Fable 120 (108) provides another example. Zeus entrusts Hermes with the job of giving human beings intelligence (νοῦν). Hermes pours the same quantity of intelligence over every person, with the result that short people become more intelligent than tall ones.

Fables may show here traces of an idea which we find, much more elaborated, in some philosophical and theological writings.[49] The highest god or gods are benign, just, and efficient; they create and maintain the world well. Between these high gods and created beings, however, come lesser divinities, who are capable of making mistakes, and who make human lives less predictable, less equitable, more difficult or less pleasant. Stories about such lesser divinities are

47 One could argue along the same lines, not without some plausibility, that fables also represent something of how human beings conceptualize their relations with animals and even plants.

48 Two fables of Heracles add nuance to this picture: 129 (316), where he encounters strife in a mountain pass and tries to fight it until Athena appears and tells him that strife cannot be overcome by strife, and fable 130 (111), where Heracles, deified, refuses to be introduced to Plutus because he associates him on earth with evil men. In these stories, Heracles' liminal status may allow him in some sense to represent human beings, expressing an attitude to wealth which a virtuous man might express, and learning a lesson about strife which human beings need to learn.

49 E.g. Pl. *Tim.*, Plu. *Mor.* 409e-38e, Galen *UP* 1.174.5–17 Helmreich Ed.; Harnack (1924).

perhaps intended to account for the human perception that life is often difficult, chaotic and unfair, while preserving the principle that the god or gods who oversee it is or are ultimately just and benign.

The concept of a benign "high god" is one of several cognitive models through which Greeks and Romans could focus on (their relationship with) one god without forfeiting the idea of multiple gods. Recent years have seen increasing interest in "pagan monotheism" and particularly in its complexity, which ranges from rigorous logical monotheism to theories of the unity of the divine, from elective devotion to particular divinities to calling one's city's tutelary god the "greatest" or "highest".[50] The Aesopic corpus has not featured much in these discussions, but the evidence we have seen suggests that thinking about Zeus in fables has not just oligotheistic but even monotheistic tendencies, in something like the sense characterized by Angelos Chaniotis as "megatheism" and explored by Nicole Belayche in connection with *heis theos* inscriptions.[51] If so, then given the socio-cultural reach of fables, a tendency towards monotheistic thinking may have been even more widespread and persistent in Greek thinking than we have hitherto recognized.

II The Gods As Interested and Interfering in Human Affairs

The Aesopic corpus portrays the gods not only as accessible to created beings, but as spontaneously interested in them and having a tendency to interfere uninvited in their affairs.[52] From the birds who are told by Zeus that it is time for them to have a king, to the woodsman to whom Hermes appears to help find his axe, mortal characters in fables rarely have to work to cultivate a relationship with the gods.[53] Rather, the impression is that they cannot avoid the gods, and their concern is how to manage their sometimes overpowering attentions.

This divine interest in mortal affairs is sometimes exploited for comic effect. In fable 110, Hermes decides to test how good a prophet Teiresias is. Disguised as

50 See e.g. Athanassiadi and Frede (1999); Mitchell and van Nuffelen (2010a, b).

51 Chaniotis (1999), Belayche (1999); cf. Cerutti (2010) on "hierarchical" paganism. Since monotheistic thinking is often seen as increasing through the Hellenistic period, one might speculate that this dates the relevant fables as post-classical, but it is also possible that fables attest monotheistic trends in earlier popular culture.

52 Explored extensively by Versnel (1983).

53 162 (324) (the birds); 253 (173) (the woodsman); cf. 119 (107).

a man, he steals Teiresias' cattle, then goes to tell him and suggests that Teiresias try to find them by divination. Teiresias agrees; the two travel to the edge of the city to look for significant birds; and when Hermes sees a crow, Teiresias uses it to show that he knows Hermes is the thief.[54] In fable 108 (88), Hermes wants to discover how highly he is valued among human beings. In disguise, he visits a sculptor's workshop, where he discovers that statues of Zeus and Hera cost a drachma or more, but that a statue of Hermes is so cheap it can be thrown in free with the other two.

We shall return to fables' portrayal of Hermes and their inversion of the *topos* of the human being who tries, unsuccessfully, to test the gods, but it is worth noting here that we encounter gods visiting human beings in disguise and being treated with disrespect elsewhere, notably in comic drama.[55] In comedy, it is often understood as a form of transgressive humour which can take place in certain well-defined contexts, such as a religious festival, but which ultimately reinforces a very different model of divine-human relations. Fables, though, operate outside any such defined religious context. Does their marginality as a literary form, and perhaps the tradition of Aesop as a licensed buffoon, give them something like the status of comedy as a genre in which transgressive humour can safely occur? Or do both fables and comedy hint at a strain of thinking about the gods in which their undignified behaviour is more than a temporary reversal of norms?

The gods' spontaneous interest in human beings puts human beings, in some ways, in a strong position. The gods, it seems, are not liable to abandon, or even to punish people because they try to test gods' divinatory powers or give away their statues. In some fables, characters get away with a surprising level of deliberate disrespect to the gods. Fable 260 (178), for instance, begins with a traveller vowing to Hermes at the start of a long journey that he will offer the god half of anything he finds on the way. The only thing he finds is a wallet full of dates and almonds. Annoyed that the wallet is not full of money, he eats the almonds and dates and puts the shells and stones on an altar at the end of his journey, saying: "Hermes, I have fulfilled my vow: I have shared with you both the inside and the outside of what I have found." The reader of high literature waits for divine vengeance to fall – in vain.[56]

54 Otherwise earliest attested at Ar. *Av*. 49–90.

55 Fables' connections with comedy are well recognized: e.g. Adrados (1999), 96; Pervo (1998), 119; Holzberg (1992), 43–50.

56 Though cf. 55 (28), in which a would-be cheat gets his come-uppance. It seems possible that some popular thinking imagines the gods as needing human attentions (cf. e.g. Artemid. 2.33). Nøjgaard (1964), II 528–55 takes these stories as evidence of an "anti-religious" strain in fables,

Although the gods are tolerant of human activities up to a point, if people mistreat them repeatedly, the gods eventually respond. The raven caught for a second time in a snare (166 (323)), for example, who promises Hermes an offering if the god helps him, is told, "How shall I trust you, worthless creature, who foreswore and did injustice to (ἠρνήσω καὶ ἠδίκησας) your previous master [Apollo]?" The formula of Hermes' rebuke here is revealing and exemplifies another theme which runs throughout the Aesopic corpus: the gods are concerned not just to help pious individuals or punish the unjust, but also to educate them.

We have already seen some examples of this theme, in Zeus's responses to complaints and appeals. In those cases, Zeus was instructing petitioners in their own nature and the ways of the world. Elsewhere, the gods' aim is to educate mortals in the nature of the gods themselves and proper divine-human relations.

In fable 18 (301), an ugly slave girl, beloved of her master, sacrifices to Aphrodite and asks the goddess to make her beautiful. Aphrodite appears to her in a dream to say that she does not want to make her beautiful; she is angry with the man for thinking her beautiful already.[57] When a man offers rich sacrifices to the image of a hero in his house (131), the hero appears to him one night, telling him to stop: if he becomes poor, he will blame the hero, and the hero would rather receive no cult than receive both cult and blame. Tyche (261 (174)) appears to a man who has fallen asleep by a well and wakes him up, pointing out that if he had fallen down the well in his sleep, he would, unjustly, have blamed her.[58] When an ox-cart driver runs his cart off the road (72 (291)) and prays to Heracles for help, Heracles appears to tell him to put his own shoulder to the wheel,

but they may be better seen as belonging to a complex field of religious thinking with some internal tensions.

57 Otherwise earliest attested in Babrius (10).

58 Perhaps related to a number of Cynic *chreiai* on Tyche (see Adrados (2003), vol. 3, 84); Harris (2009), 23–66 shows how commonly the gods appear in dreams to admonish the dreamer or make an announcement, but does not discuss fables or the gods' desire that dreamers understand them. Tyche is the divine quality whose behaviour in surviving fables is most complex, and the only one with a well-developed divine identity outside fables, though she does not receive cult in the Greek east until the late second century CE, probably in imitation of the cult of *Fides*: Piccaluga (1981); Reusser (1993). Most fabular divine qualities are simple personifications: the sun is hot, the north wind cold (73 (46), cf. 127); Winter is cold and harsh, Spring lively and beautiful (346 (271)); Polemos is warlike and Hybris violent (319 (367)); Horkos punishes people who break their oaths (298); Aletheia does not flourish among liars (259 (355)); Aidos produces shame in human beings (118 (109)); Momus criticizes other gods' handiwork and is rebuked by Zeus (124 (100)); and Thanatos comes for the dead (78 (60), 133). Perhaps their greatest interest is as indications of what qualities fable-users conceived as having the power and limited negotiability of the divine.

because the hero only helps those who help themselves. The gods and other divinities, it seems, want not only the attention of human beings, but their right understanding as well.[59]

Fables are rarely long enough to present much development in divine-human relationships. The fable of the house weasel and Aphrodite (76 (50)) is an exception:[60]

> A weasel, who had fallen in love with a good-looking young man, prayed to Aphrodite to change her into a woman. The goddess took pity on her passion (ἐλεήσασα αὐτῆς τὸ πάθος) changed her into a beautiful girl, and when the young man saw her, he fell in love with her and took her home. As they lay in their bridal chamber, Aphrodite wanted to know whether the weasel had changed both her body and her character (τρόπον), so she released a mouse into the middle of the room. The woman, forgetting her present circumstances, leapt out of the nuptial bed and pursued the mouse, wanting to eat it. The goddess, angered, changed her back to her original identity.

For a god to answer a prayer is routine. For the god to follow the progress of the worshipper after the prayer has been granted is more unusual. Aphrodite, says the fable, wanted to see (γνῶναι βουλομένη) whether the weasel had really changed. Her interest has been engaged by the weasel; she is involved with her future. Even more strikingly, Aphrodite wants to know if the weasel has changed in *character*. Not only her actions, but also her state of mind is of interest to the god. And when it transpires that the weasel has not changed inside, Aphrodite cares: she is angry (ἀγανακτήσασα). It is as if by answering the weasel's prayer Aphrodite sees herself as having entered into a relationship with her which has certain implications for the future, and when the weasel does not fulfil her part of (what the goddess understands as) the bargain, the goddess is disappointed and punishes her.

This fable is unusual but not unique in the extended relationship it portrays between a mortal and a divinity. Fable 119 (107) tells a similar story of the fox whom Zeus, impressed by his intelligence, makes king of the beasts (not, this time, at the fox's request). Zeus subsequently wants to know whether becoming king has cured the fox of his greed, a vice which encompasses external behaviour and interior state, so when the fox is passing by in a litter, Zeus releases a beetle in front of him. The fox cannot resist leaping out of the litter to chase the beetle and

59 Cf. 53 (30), 48 (306), the latter a rare example in a fable of the gods being portrayed as ruthless or uncaring towards human beings. As striking as what Hermes says about the gods, however, is that he materializes to say it: even when the gods act ruthlessly, they seem to want human beings to understand them.

60 Related to the proverb Zen. 2.93.

Zeus, like Aphrodite, angered (ἀγανακτήσας) by his failure to change, reduces him to his former state. ἀγανακτεῖν, with its overtones of grief, pain and irritation, is a powerful choice of word to express the emotions of these gods. It implies vexation at something that has affected one, and adds to the impression created by the story that the gods feel involved with the mortal characters, and not merely crossed by them but let down and disappointed by them.

A number of other fables show some development in the relationship between a god and mortals. When the frogs go to Zeus to ask to be given a king (66 (44)), he is initially tolerant of their request and gives them what he thinks is an appropriate monarch for their simple nature: a block of wood. When, however, they reject this king (not because it is a log of wood but because it allows them to climb on its back, which they regard as a sign of weakness) and ask for another, he becomes angry (ἀγανακτήσας) and sends a water-snake which eats them all.[61] When Zeus invites all the animals to his wedding feast (125), he wonders why the tortoise does not attend and enquires why: "She replied: Home is dear; home is best (οἶκος φίλος, οἶκος ἄριστος)." Angry, Zeus condemns her to carry her home everywhere on her back. In each of these cases, we may note that the god is initially generous towards his creatures, and only becomes irritable when his generosity is rejected, apparently without good reason. In each, too, it is not just the behaviour but the attitudes of creatures to the gods that the gods seem to care about. This also emerges in the story of the man who tried to prove the Delphic oracle a fraud (50 (36)). The man is initially described as κακοπράγμων, an "evil-doer", but at the end it is his deceitful intentions (κακότεχνον γνώμην) that Apollo objects to, when he calls his bluff.

As short popular stories fables show an unexpected degree of complexity, not only in the way they present human views of the gods but in the way they portray divine views of human beings, and in the way those views sometimes develop in the course of a divine-human relationship. To speculate about what the gods feel about human actions, beyond whether they are pleased or displeased with them, is a sophisticated process of religious thinking of a kind which is not easily accessed in other sources of "popular culture".[62] The idea that the gods might care about their worshippers' interiority points to more layers of religious imagination in play than we might have expected in such apparently simple narratives. To

61 Cf. 273 (179), cf. Ph. 1.2.

62 Though on connections between fables and proverbs and e.g. folktales or fairytales see Horsfall (2003), 81–2, cf. Anderson (2000). Morgan (2007), 207–11 suggests that similar trends can be found in other wisdom genres, proverbs, *gnomai* and *chreiai*. Wisdom genres also freely personify and divinize good (and sometimes bad) qualities to express their power over human beings and the dynamic nature of battles between virtues, vices, gods and human beings.

the extent, therefore, that fables express ideas in wider social circulation, they suggest that a greater complexity of cognitive and affective religiosity may have been available to practitioners of Graeco-Roman religions across a wider social spectrum than we often assume.

III The Ambiguity of Fables

In the last few paragraphs, we have begun to reflect on the narrative structure of certain fables. A number of modern critics have seen structure as the key to fables' interpretation,[63] so it is worth considering whether focusing on structure might affect our interpretation of fables' religiosity. In this connection, few fables are more interesting than that of Hermes and the sculptor (108 (88)):[64]

> Hermes, wanting to know in what honour he was held by human beings, went, disguised as a man, to the workshop of a statue-maker. Seeing a statue of Zeus he asked its price, and was told that it was a drachma. Smiling, he asked the price of a statue of Hera, and was told it was more expensive. Seeing a statue of himself as well, he assumed that he, being the messenger of Zeus and the god of profit, would be highly valued by human beings. So he asked how much the statue was, and the sculpture said, "Oh, if you buy the other two, I'll throw that one in for free."

This story incorporates a number of intriguing structural tensions. Hermes must have power, as a god, but he does not use it here: the focus of the story is on his desire, perhaps even his need to be honoured by human beings, which gives them power as worshippers. As the divine messenger and god of profit, Hermes sees himself as highly valued by human beings, but human beings are apparently happy to represent him by the least valuable of statues. The sculptor is happy to evaluate his statues comparatively, though presumably he might be slower to evaluate the gods themselves comparatively, at least when he needs a particular god in a particular situation.[65]

The story plays with the many kinds of value involved in religious activity: the apparently unequal value of what gods give to human beings (in this

63 Notably Vygotsky (1971), 89–117; cf. Nøjgaard (1964), I 11–16, 76–80; Karadagli (1981), 97–139; Jedrkiewicz (1989), 260–94.

64 Otherwise earliest attested at Babr. 30.

65 Versnel (2011), 328–35 uses this and other stories of Hermes being treated disrespectfully to characterize Hermes as "the most human of all gods." I see Hermes as displaying here characteristics shared to some extent by all gods in fables: their interest in people, desire to be understood, and near-comic involvement in human scrapes.

case, profit) and what human beings give to the gods (in this case a worthless statue,[66] in other fables, worthless sacrifices[67]), the value human beings place on divine favour (presumably high), the value of what they are willing to exchange for it, and the difference between the value of a statue as a religious image and as a commodity in the marketplace. Last but not least, the fable inscribes the ultimate paradox which it shares with all stories about the gods: the story's power to capture in narrative that which in principle is beyond the bounds of human control.

Within the brief compass of the fable, these tensions are sketched but scarcely explored, and they may not be meant to be resolved. We could, indeed, trace the same tensions in other genres of literature and elicit them from cult practices too, so they should probably be understood as innate in Graeco-Roman religiosity.[68] More pressing is the question whether exploring the tensions and ambiguities inherent in the narrative of fables in this way is methodologically preferable to analyzing them thematically. It would certainly fit the strand of contemporary scholarship which emphasizes multivalency, irony and ambiguity in the interpretation of a wide range of texts. There are, moreover, authors (such as Ovid and Lucian) who are fond of fables and fable-like stories and whose fascination with multivalency and ambiguity is undeniable. It is less clear, however, that this approach to interpretation is appropriate to the Aesopic corpus, or the cultural historiography of fables in general. We have already seen that fables are widely identified as both ethical and educational. When they appear embedded in other literature, they are nearly always assigned a single meaning. The same fable may receive different interpretations in different contexts, but it does not follow that fables were normally seen as intrinsically multivalent, ironic or subversive; most of the evidence suggests the opposite.[69] We can, I suggest, be reasonably confident in identifying certain themes as of interest and significance to fable-users, while recognizing that in some stories, such as that of Hermes and the sculptor, ambiguity or paradox is itself a theme.[70]

66 Cf. 61 (285), where a man smashes the statue of a god who has not brought him the wealth he prayed for – only to find a hoard of gold inside it; also 2 (99) where a man tries to sell a statue which has not brought him the wealth he hoped, and is challenged on the value of such an image. Here the paradox is that selling a statue is in some sense selling the god and his beneficence, which is impossible or, if possible, is self-defeating.

67 Cf. 55 (28), 260 (178).

68 Some, with others not discussed here, are subtly analysed by Versnel (2011), *passim*.

69 See above, n. 2 and Morgan (2007), 18–22.

70 Alongside the complexities of this story, it also testifies, as noted, to the spontaneous interest of the gods in human beings and their affairs.

We may go further and speculate that fables in which ambiguity or paradox are on display point us to areas of religious thinking which were particularly problematic or controversial. The relative value of gods and human beings, and their gifts, to one another, is a tricky question; perhaps the ambiguity of certain fables answered users' sense of its complexity. The dismay of Heracles that Zeus could share heaven with Plutus, a god who on earth constantly associates with bad men, may express an uneasiness among fable-users that the god of justice does not always seem to be as hard on wickedness as the good might like.[71] In those characters who try to cheat the gods with dud offerings or false promises, and usually do not get away with it but occasionally do, fable-users perhaps articulate their ambivalence about committing resources to gods whose help or protection is not always beyond doubt.[72] And they may recognize something of their own experience in the experience of those characters who, calling on the gods for help, are advised to help themselves. Helping oneself is no doubt prudent, but does being told to do it hint that the gods may be unreliable, or that sensible people should not need them?[73] Questions like these are endemic in all religious traditions and never have simple answers; fables may have been one means by which they were explored, if not solved, in Graeco-Roman thinking.

IV Conclusion

Fables can never have been more than one strand in the thick and richly-patterned fabric of Graeco-Roman religious culture. Fable-users, moreover, whether writers, listeners or readers, will have elicited from them diverse meanings, some more complex than others. This is not a reason for cultural historiographers not to investigate them, of course: the same is true of all discourse, religious and otherwise. In the study of any aspect of ancient *mentalité*, we rarely if ever speak definitely of how people thought; rather we try to map fields of meanings in which individuals' and groups' ideas may have been variously located, and more or less dominant patterns in the evidence which may point to more or less well-trodden pathways of cognition.

71 130 (111), cf. 1, 18 (301), 44, 319 (367). The latter four stories do not appear in the Augustana collection, which might support Nøjgaard's view ((1964), I 519–25) that fables become more moralistic in late antiquity. Nøjgaard himself, though, regards fables as so difficult to date (II 135–8) that this remains speculative: Zafiropoulos (2001), 35 is unpersuaded. All these stories have Babrian versions, so they date at least to the early principate.

72 50 (36), 55 (28), 166 (323), 260.

73 53 (30), 72 (291).

In this essay, I have argued that the fables of the Aesopic corpus have some claim to be taken seriously as part of such a project – as evidence of a strain in Graeco-Roman religious thinking which may have flourished, alongside others, over many centuries and across a wide social spectrum – and I have tried to draw out some of the more striking and persistent patterns in that thinking. Fables attest a lively interest in divine-human relations, especially in private or informal contexts. They show evidence of what may be a widespread tendency towards monotheistic thinking, focusing particularly on Zeus. Zeus is characterized as creative, benign, just and accessible to mortals. His, and other gods' interest in human beings gives them at times a notable degree of power in the relationship, and this forms one of several ways in which fables recognize the complexity of divine-human relations. They evince more subtle thinking than we might expect, speculating about how the gods feel about human actions, exploring the paradox that bad things happen in a world ruled by benign gods, and highlighting the strangeness of the human project of capturing the divine in human constructs of cult and story.

We could do more to link the construction of divinities in fables with their conceptualization elsewhere in literature, cult and iconography, and to compare the Aesopic corpus with other collections more locatable in place and time. We might also make more use, as I have occasionally here, of other genres of popular morality, which also have a good deal to say about the gods. The more sources we bring into play, as we plot the ways in which Greeks and Romans imagined the divine and described their relationships with it, the more detailed and illuminating our map of ancient religiosity becomes.

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