



The Idea of Fire

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The purpose of this paper is to highlight the relationship between uncontrolled fire with emotion and controlled fire with forethought and civilisation. I wish to show how the opposites work together and that our idea of fire is part of our evolution and idea of unity. The idea of fire is different to the fire itself.¹ The former is part of nature in its raw state; the latter is tamed, controlled and used for positive purposes. It is the difference between an emotional or instinctive response to a carefully considered and thought out purpose.

Uncontrolled fire can be catastrophic, yet controlled fire used in beneficial ways and the basis of our civilised world. Fires happen regularly in Australia due to its vast bushlands and desert interior. These current fires are exacerbated by a drought caused by the Indian Ocean dipole where warmer waters accumulate on the East coast of Africa and cooler waters, the west coast of Australia. This causes a lessening of moisture in the air thus drying the earth and vegetation.

Such disasters as the current bush fire connect us not only to our fear, grief, and anger, but also our compassion, generosity, love and fighting spirit and strength. Emotions are common to all humans and are part of our basic functioning and instinctive foundation. They tie us to our nature and relate us to the nature of animals and physical processes. They also have a relationship to fire in that we sense emotion as a bodily function of heat in passion, energy in anger and the urge to fight.

In addition, fire can affect other ideas, which increases emotional output. For example, the idea of fire can have an existence of its own, in that the dread we feel and what we imagine over a distant fire can be more extreme than the actual fire threat. In other words, the idea of the fire may be out of control and the actual fire under control.

Another example is how ideas spread like 'wild fire' when they threaten us. The latest virus or infection can grip a culture with imaginings of mass death and panic on a wide scale, even though the virus is milder than a typical influenza. This shows how an idea can take on a life of its own and go beyond physical reality. On the other hand, we can bring an idea closer to its physical origin through the dampening nature of water, fire's natural opposite. The same is true for the fiery nature of an intuition, which can spark more ideas and have a contagious affect on others. The

¹ This is a basic premise behind the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. He believed that we couldn't know the object in great depth, but only the idea of the object.

watery nature of feeling brings an idea down to earth relating it to its physical reality and tempers its out of control spread.

The story of fire extends to our remotest past and was the major step in elevating us above our instincts and animal nature. Fire has always ravaged the countryside and the idea to explore its nature and learn how to start fires, was a turning point in our evolution. Up until then, fire was part of nature and struck the world through lightning destroying everything in its path. In Greek mythology, the stories of Zeus's and his destructive impulses show how he regularly destroyed the landscape with lightning, fire, storms and floods. The ancient Greeks were masterful at giving such events a relationship to inner impulses, urges, emotions and ideas. This unity of being, albeit in projected form, is still with us as we have the same elemental events with the corresponding instinctual and emotional reactions to those events.

It was the spirit and boldness of early humans to explore the nature of fire. Prometheus, the Titan culture hero and trickster of ancient Greece, represented the spirit of forethought². He is credited with stealing the idea of fire and giving it to humans to encourage their development. With the idea of fire, humans could now build a civilisation, which included cooking food, lighting the darkness, protecting themselves from predators, keeping warm and exploring how fire affected various materials such as metal and glass. Fire enabled humans to experiment with metals and change their physical state to forge, mould and create. Our history is mapped in terms of our evolution and knowledge of fire and the metals we could transform. These include the gold, silver, bronze and iron ages. Prometheus is credited with creating humanity through his initial theft of the idea of fire³ from Zeus as the father ruler over man and nature.

In view of the unchallengeable might of the Olympians, Prometheus' only weapon was cunning. During the revolt of the Titans he had kept a prudent neutrality and had even made overtures to Zeus when it seemed likely that the war would be won by him. Thus Prometheus had been admitted into Olympus and the circle of the Immortals. But he entertained a silent grudge against the destroyers of his race and revenged himself by favouring mortals to the detriment of the gods.

He had, perhaps, other reasons for his interest in the human race; for a tradition - rather late, it is true - said that Prometheus was the creator of mankind. It was he who with earth and water some said with his own tears - had fashioned the body of the first man into which Athena breathed soul and life.⁴

² Etymology- Prometheus means "forethought"

³ The idea of fire is referred to as the "magic fire", "brand of holy fire" and "fire from the sun".

⁴ LAROUSSE, New Encyclopedia of Mythology, Hamlyn Publishing, 1968, page 93

As the creator of civilisation, Prometheus gave humanity an advantage over nature in that harnessing its energy separated us from our animal ancestors, gave us power over them (thought over emotion), and the ability to protect ourselves and create things. Hence, humanity through Prometheus differentiated the idea of fire from fire in its uncontrolled raw state, which was the initial step in our differentiation of idea of fire from natural and uncontrolled fire.

In Quantum Mechanics⁵, fire is stored electromagnetic energy from the sun (light and heat) and through photosynthesis extracts Carbon (C) from the Carbon Dioxide (CO₂) molecule from the air and expels Oxygen (O₂) as a by-product. The sun's energy moves the electrons in the Carbon (C) atom to a higher and less stable orbit. Combining the Carbon (C) with water (H₂O) from the ground creates cellulose and sugar (C₆H₁₂O₆). This is how nature builds plant life. Fire reverses this process; the electrons drop to a lower orbit and release electromagnetic energy in the form of light and heat, the same energy inputted from the sun. The cellulose separates and the carbon (C) combines with oxygen (O₂) to form carbon dioxide (CO₂), water vapour (H₂O) and residual ash (C). The combustion process occurs more easily with less water in the vegetation as water hinders the spread of fire.

Fire tamed and controlled through knowledge as Prometheus stole from the gods (nature), is literally the cause of civilisation. We burn fuel in our cars, we burn fuel to generate electricity, use fire to transform iron ore to steel, heat our homes, cook our foods, remove diseases and so on, just as our ancestors did. This is the spirit or idea of fire. Our knowledge and understanding of fire is as the ancient myth of Prometheus shows, and was the turning point for civilisation and the use of our "forethought" to enhance that civilisation. There is however, a price we pay for the theft of fire as the continuing story of Prometheus shows.

Zeus was angry at the theft and taming of fire from nature, which up to that point had been uncontrolled and destructive, and in the hands of the gods. With the help of Prometheus and forethought, fire could be controlled and used in a creative and beneficial way. Zeus however, acted on his outrage:

Outraged by the theft, Zeus sent a fresh calamity to men. He ordered Hephaestus to fashion clay and water into a body, to give it vital force and human voice, and to make therefrom a virgin whose dazzling beauty would equal that of the immortal goddesses. All the divinities heaped

⁵ FEYNMAN, Richard P. - 'Fun to Imagine' BBC 1983 – transcript by A. Wojdyla

their especial gifts on this new creature, who received the name of Pandora.⁶

Hephaestus created a beautiful woman named Pandora from water and clay (earth and water), which is opposite to fire and air, and Hermes gave her a deceitful heart. Pandora has with her a great vase (Pandora's Box) which contains terrible afflictions, all of which escape from the vase except for one attribute called hope, which stays behind. Zeus was not appeased and sends a deluge to flood the world and destroy humanity. Before he could carry out his destructive impulse, Prometheus warned his son Deucalion who constructed an ark and survived the flood with his wife. On the tenth day they landed on a mountain and Deucalion offered a sacrifice to Zeus and was granted his first wish. He requested that the human race be renewed and restored.

Although peace was restored between Zeus and humanity, he was still angry with Prometheus and destined him to eternal torture, chained him to a rock high on a mountaintop of Caucasus where an eagle was sent to eat his liver every day. His liver would grow back over night to be eaten again the next day with the same cycle repeating itself every day.

In spite of the torture the Titan persisted in his attitude of revolt. Disdaining complaints and humiliating prayers he never ceased to defy the lord of Olympus and to express his hatred in violent outbursts. For was he not in possession of a secret which dangerously concerned the future of Zeus himself?⁷

Finally after thirty years or thirty thousand years, depending on which version of the myth, Prometheus's torture is resolved by Heracles who slew the eagle and broke the chains holding him to the rock (earth). Prometheus could not achieve divine immortality unless an immortal agreed to change destinies with him. The centaur Chiron who Heracles had struck with a poison arrow that would not heal, agreed to the exchange. Zeus consented to the exchange and Prometheus took his permanent place on Olympus as the benefactor of mankind and the father of the arts and sciences.

Although the myth of Prometheus may seem unrelated to the current tragic events occurring in Australia, we can see certain traits and behaviour of the characters that relate to nature and how such disasters affect us. Zeus's anger is the personification of those elementary events. The ancient Greeks related these natural events with an inner character with similar traits, which personified nature's behaviour as an angry

⁶ LAROUSSE, New Encyclopedia of Mythology, Hamlyn Publishing, 1968, page 93

⁷ Ibid, page 95

father. Parents know how children can make us angry and give us the urge for retribution and revenge. That urge is generally tempered with love and not acted upon. The point is, the fatherly character in us can be at once benevolent and another time, vengeful, just as nature gives us sunny days complimented by stormy, windy and rainy days.

Pandora's role in the myth incorporates negative emotions and afflictions that have a devastating affect on humanity, with the exception of hope, which is left behind in the vase. Hope is a trust and expectation of something positive happening in the future in a given situation. Whereas all the contents of the vase (box) were negative, the one positive content that stays behind is hope. So even when everything looks bleak and dark, we still have hope to cling to and that things can only get better.

The disaster of fire and flood as the father of nature's wrath (Zeus) brings forth many negative and positive emotions. The emotion that is always tucked away in us (left in the vase) is hope and the idea that it cannot get any worse and we have reached the bottom. Once reached, it can only turn back towards the light with a brighter and renewed future. This is where the civilising affect of Prometheus brings forth the fighting spirit and strength to rebuild and bring civilisation back from the ashes of destruction.

Prometheus rebelled against the unbridled wrath and power of nature (Zeus) by stealing its secret spirit, fire. In one version he steals a 'brand of holy fire', in another Prometheus claims he lit a torch at the wheel of the sun.⁸ Fire on its own is devastating and releases the stored energy of the sun. A holy version of fire is its idea and how it can be used for constructive civilising functions.

The liver to the ancient Greeks was the seat of the human emotions, which bound them to nature⁹. This is a particular problem in a culture that encourages forethought over emotion.¹⁰ Emotion binds us to nature (ancient gods) and forethought separates us from nature. This is particularly true in our contemporary education system, where emotion is discouraged in place of thought. Emotion is nature's fire that lives within us. When fire becomes an idea and loses connection to the emotion, we lose our connection to that part of nature in ourselves in all its beauty and ugliness.

⁸ Ibid, page 93

⁹ We share emotions with the animal kingdom, particularly the emotions of love, fear, jealousy, anger etc.

¹⁰ Great thinkers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle dominated ancient Greece.

Prometheus lives in the head (forethought) but is chained to the rocks of the physical world of the body and earth. He is continually reminded of his emotions through the eagle (thoughts) eating his liver (emotions) every day. In other words, his thoughts eat (devour) his emotions but they come back every day. This is the very nature of emotion. No matter how much we try and deny or repress them, particularly the difficult ones, they continually return and tie us to our body and humanity.

Fire also has associations to flashes of insight and intuitions like lightning which again relates to the spirit of nature (Zeus)¹¹ and was often referred to as “magic fire”¹². The eagle is an emblem of Zeus and used by countries as a sign of lofty and powerful spirit of strength and foresight. As a predatory bird, the eagle hunts from above with keen eyesight for prey. The eagle, as with most birds, is an aerial creature and therefore is associated to our thoughts rather than emotions. Like most birds, they are most vulnerable when they are on land eating, mating and nesting. The eagle hunts from the air and connects us to our spirit of thinking and insight. The liver is the seat of the emotions and connects us to our nature, and nature in general. It is the age-old conundrum of the way the head relates to the heart, or in this case the liver and body. It is similar to the relationship between the spirit, soul and body.

We cannot underestimate the force of nature that governs us as the current bushfires show. To put these forces into perspective, consider how ineffectual we are in such disasters. Another thing to consider is our place on this earth and how precarious our existence is with respect to nature. We are very small creatures living on a relatively thin crust of a molten sphere of metal and rock moving through space at 107,826 km/hr around a body going through thermonuclear fusion, which in turn provides all the energy for all life on earth.

The myth of Prometheus is instrumental in our understanding of culture and nature. On one hand, the idea of fire creates civilisation, on the other, destroys civilisation when out of our control. The theft of the idea and use of fire through “forethought” separates us from nature and we lose sight of its emotional (liver) relationship to fire. Fire reverts combustible material to the energy of the sun and to its original state, that is energy + CO₂ + H₂O + C. We try and temper its progress with water or its variants but we ignore the legacy of Prometheus and the foresight that the natural environment regularly burns and has no compunction of what’s in its path (Zeus’s wrath)¹³.

¹¹ Zeus threw down lightning bolts, which started uncontrolled fires.

¹² JUNG C.G., *The Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious*, Routledge London, 1955, Page 299

¹³ Zeus regularly destroyed humanity with his thunderbolts.

No one can say that we haven't done enough to prevent these fires. We can however, learn from the indigenous population that lived with fires for thousands of years.¹⁴ They regularly lit low fires to catch escaping wildlife for food, but also to promote new growth and reduce fuel loads. This technique of fire management was in tune with the nature of fire, climate and fuel loads. Regular small burns reduce fuel and help in avoiding large catastrophic fires.

This practical approach to fire management requires the Prometheus spirit and a healthy emotional respect and fear of major catastrophes. It is literally fighting fire with fire and accepting a small amount of pain to avoid a larger one. The same applies to emotions. It is better to accept regular sadness rather than falling into a deep depression, or worst still, disturb the natural cycle through prescription drugs or other stimulants. We cannot oppose nature but we can accept it and adapt. The plant life in the Australian flora has adapted to regular fires in the way heat opens seedpods and the seeds drop to the ground.

Civilisation is built on the energy of the sun and its derivative, fire. The myth of Zeus and Prometheus was told thousands of years ago, but the elementary meaning and unity of the story is still relevant today. Fire destroys civilisation as well as builds civilisation through the spirit of Prometheus. Both are physically and psychically real and we cannot lose sight of either as concentrating on one side angers the other.

¹⁴ <https://www.bushfirefront.org.au/about-fire/aboriginal-use-of-fire/>

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