



Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought

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Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought

A dissertation presented
by

Tae-Yeoun Keum

to
the Department of Government

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

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Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought

Abstract

Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought examines a tradition of political thinkers who sought to understand the place of myth in politics, and who in particular turned to Plato for guidance in their efforts. At different junctures in the history of the reception of Plato, the myths that Plato wrote inspired both imitation as well as theoretical reflection on the relationship between myth, philosophy, and politics. As such, it is possible to speak of a coherent, specifically Platonic tradition of writing and thinking about myth. If Plato has long been celebrated for making reasoned argument the foundation of philosophy, this dissertation recovers a neglected tradition in the reception of Plato, in a discipline dominated by a different aspect of both Plato and his legacy.

In turn, a revised understanding of Plato's legacy on these terms opens up a broader theoretical discourse concerning the role of myth in political thought. Myth is often construed as the opposite of reason, and is thought to be alternately irrelevant to, or undesirable in, a politics committed to ideals of rational progress. *Plato and the Mythic Tradition* challenges this prevailing bias. It shows how some of the most pivotal figures in the history of political thought have perennially raised the question of whether there might be a more nuanced, constructive role for myth to play in political theory.

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For my parents

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Introduction

Plato's Legacy and the Problem of Myth in Political Thought

What follows is a study of myth through Platonic eyes. The endeavor may seem surprising to students of Plato and the Platonic tradition; Plato's legacy, often equated with the history of Western philosophy itself, is conventionally taken to be a rational and critical enterprise divorced from myth. But the well-known fact that Plato deliberately interlaced his philosophical writings with his own myths suggests a portrait of Plato in tension with his canonical reputation, and suggests, in turn, that the ramifications of this friction have not yet been fully drawn out in political theory.

Against the grain of predominant portrayals of Plato's legacy, both in the popular and the philosophical imagination, the chapters that follow chart a tradition of authors for whom Plato's myths were a vital resource for investigating the role of myth in philosophy and political thought. Plato's myths helped teach these authors to make myth a subject of philosophical inquiry, and to treat it as a medium through which to explore the full range of functions that unconditioned narratives can serve in the formation and maintenance of our world views. Thus conceived, constructing a more complete account of Plato's legacy is also a way of confronting broader questions regarding the place of myth in political thought.

In the summer of 1952, a British family of three was murdered by the roadside while on holiday in France. One of the victims was a prominent scientist who had been knighted for his work with the Ministry of Food during the Second World War; the others were his wife and their daughter, who was only ten years old. The child's head had been smashed in so badly that handling her skull, according to the autopsy, "was like moving a bag of nuts."¹

The man accused of the triple murder was Gaston Dominici, an illiterate 75-year-old farmer. His trial, which took place in November 1954, was one of the greatest public scandals of 1950s France. It was allegedly remarked at the time that, in comparison to the drama that unfolded at court, "the theaters of Paris are dull."²

There were many things about the trial that were unusual, including, among them, a hopelessly botched body of forensic evidence, and a conspicuous communicative barrier between the legal language of the magistrates and the rural dialect of the accused. But perhaps the most striking feature of the trial was the naturalness with which, in the absence of any concrete evidence or an identifiable motive, a sensationalist narrative began to settle around the events in question. This narrative painted an intricate picture of a rough and uncouth farmer who presided over his clan and his land with a kind of raw brutality, and who, upon discovering the hapless tourists on his property, simply disposed of them as he willed. In lurid detail, the prosecution kept going over a confession that Dominici had made during police interrogation, apparently

¹ Alix Kirta, "J'accuse," *The Guardian*, April 17, 2004, sec. Guardian Weekend Pages: 34.

² "The Guilty Party," *Time* 64, no. 23 (December 6, 1954): 43.

under duress, in which he admitted to having initiated an erotic encounter with the wife, and subsequently doing away with her husband and child the moment he deemed them a nuisance.³

For all its absurdity, the story forced onto the case of Gaston Dominici wasn't at all an unfamiliar one. It might easily recall, for instance, a scene from any number of films in which a farmer with a gun threatens to administer his own law onto anyone who wanders onto his property. Or, even if the echoes of such popular tropes in the prosecutor's account could be dismissed as merely one of several embarrassments in an exceptionally dysfunctional trial, there was still no way of denying the familiarity of another, more general pattern in that narrative, one that was endemic to the language of the courts. This was the story of a criminal who is singlemindedly fixated on one motive to the point of losing hold of all reason in its pursuit, as though overcome by a kind of animal or "monstrous" passion.⁴ According to this sort of story, crimes are committed for specific reasons, and criminals are individuals who sacrifice their higher cognitive faculties to certain identifiable objects of obsession.

When the French philosopher and cultural critic Roland Barthes wrote about the so-called Dominici Affair two months later, he did so with the conviction that the outrageous story spun by the court was no accident, but rather the determined product of a greater network of "mythologies" pervading our society.⁵ By this he meant that the stories we end up telling about

³ Rupert Furneaux, "Gaston Dominici, Killer of the Drummonds," in *Famous Criminal Cases 2* (London: Wingate, 1955), 113–26.

⁴ Maitre Rozan, the public prosecutor, repeatedly phrased his account in such terms: "Our charge against Gaston Dominici," he said, "is that for one second in his life he behaved like a monster." Furneaux, "Gaston Dominici," 123.

⁵ Roland Barthes, "Dominici, ou le triomphe de la littérature," *Les lettres nouvelles* 23 (Janvier 1955): 151–54. By this point, Barthes had already published a number of the essays that would come to be collected into *Mythologies* (1957). Like the majority of the other essays that were first published in periodicals, "Dominici" was released as part of an installment that would make up the regular column, "Petite Mythologie du Mois" – *little mythology of the month*.

our world are conditioned by a tangle of assumptions, frames of mind, and narrative patterns that have already been made familiar to us.

Such frameworks were both insidious and pervasive: while they might find incidental expression in any one story that happens to be told at a given time, like the one told about Gaston Dominici at his trial, they would by and large form the implicit background to our social norms and expectations, a tissue of cognitive habits so basic to the way we make sense of things that we don't even notice their existence, or the extent to which they influence our thinking. Though they might seem to be an amorphous assemblage of subconscious biases, symbolic associations, and wishful thinking, they often clustered around a narrative mold – like the one about a brute with a gun, or the one about a singleminded criminal; the story of the cheating villain who will eventually get his comeuppance and the hero who survives the fight, or the one about the conspiracy of an overeducated elite encroaching on the livelihood of the common folk.⁶

And, strangely, for Barthes, when such hidden narratives would surface in our courts, our political rhetoric, our films and our advertisements, they would often seem to evoke the fabulous qualities of certain fantastical tales. The Dominici trial, for example, felt to him like the failed staging of a “rustic tale” in which “shepherds converse with judges without embarrassment.”⁷ The prosecution, for its part, was quick to depict the old goat-farmer as a lecherous half-beast, a kind of modern-day Pan. He was a “crafty trickster” perpetually “juggling with human souls and bestial thoughts,” and it was this enchanted figure, rather than Gaston Dominici, who was being

⁶ For these examples see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), esp. “Dominici, or the Triumph of Literature” (48–52) and also “The Dupriez Trial” (113–15); “In the Ring” (3–14), “A Few Words from Monsieur Poujade” (92–95), and “Poujade and the Intellectuals” (206–14).

⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 49, 51.

condemned at court: “He has not a few faces, this false patriarch of the Grand’ Terre, he has a hundred!”⁸

Critically, these evocative and fantastical narratives, which were embedded everywhere in our culture and which could be dismissed so innocuously, were in fact immensely consequential. To the extent that prevailing narrative patterns undergirded the things that feel normal or natural to us, they controlled our expectations, and in turn helped determine what we see and don’t see. Had society not already been predisposed to finding certain kinds of stories coherent, plausible, or worth imagining, the Dominici court could not have viewed the case through those lenses; instead, the account that it came up with would have been altogether unimaginable.

At their worst, these commonplace templates could hamper justice, and they could ruin lives. At the end of the eleven-day trial, Gaston Dominici was sentenced to execution by guillotine. Eventually – as his health languished to a point where it was deemed inhumane for him to remain in prison – he was released by Charles de Gaulle to live out his last years in a local hospice, where he died in 1965.⁹

⁸ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 51. Barthes estimated that the prosecutor’s account as “was plausible as the temple of Sesostris is plausible.” Barthes, *Mythologies*, 49. See also his more elaborate discussion of elemental imagery conjured in the language of Pierre Poujade, the populist politician: the common folk was associated with the earth, and the intellectuals and technocrats with the air. Barthes, *Mythologies*, 206–7, 209.

⁹ Five years after the infamous trial, Dominici’s sentence was commuted to a life sentence with hard labor, and de Gaulle released him on humanitarian grounds in 1960. He was never pardoned.

In an interview with the *Guardian* in 2004, Gaston Dominici’s grandson testified that the family name is still haunted by superstition. “Many still believe a vice runs in our blood ... Listen, even today, some fathers forbid their daughters to go out with anyone called Dominici.” Kirsta, “J’accuse.”

Tacit Myths and Narrated Myths

Barthes' insight was that our socio-political world is full of those deeply embedded narratives that we take for granted, and which condition our perception of our environment and the events that take place in it. Those tacit narrative frameworks that Barthes associated with "mythology" might go by other names, or are otherwise linked to a loose family of concepts understood to operate at the level of deep culture.¹⁰ To the extent that they are implicit lenses through which we view reality, and have the effect of determining what is natural and to be taken for granted, they might resemble those irrefutably deep-seated world views that Pierre Bourdieu calls *doxa*,¹¹ or the schematic medium of the symbol in the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer.¹² Put together, they would help constitute the broader web of tacitly shared understandings and representations that Charles Taylor calls a social imaginary.¹³ Various and more contentiously,

¹⁰ Because Barthes' project in *Mythologies* was the application of structuralist linguistic theory to popular culture, he had a very specific definition of myth, and it should be noted that he himself did not exactly identify these implicit narrative frameworks as myths. Rather, he used the term "myth" to denote a particularly pernicious conflation of both the deep, implicit narrative as well as its more explicit expression in the products of culture.

Some theorists of myth have designated specific terms to describe the underlying narrative component of cultural artifacts. These theorists were working from the position that "myth" referred to only the explicit literary manifestations of these deeper narrative frameworks. Instead, the implicit frameworks underlying these stories were given names like *archetype*, *mytheme*, and *mythologem*, by Carl Jung, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and Hans Blumenberg, respectively. These concepts are set apart, of course, on a number of dimensions, such as the question of whether they are eternal or dynamic, universal or particular to specific cultures and contexts, strictly narrative in nature or consist in more general clusters of symbolic elements. Where they overlap, however, is that they are understood to be discrete units of an essential substratum to what these theorists accepted as myth.

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 164-172.

¹² Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, vol. 1: Language*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), e.g. 75-6.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23-30. See also the forerunner of the concept in Cornelius Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1998). Taylor's own conception of the social imaginary is influenced heavily by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

they have also been tied to ideology,¹⁴ often in relation to discussions of nationalism,¹⁵ as well as to institutions¹⁶ and belief systems.¹⁷

But by and large, they are called myths, in theoretical discourse as well as in common use.¹⁸ Theorists of myth tend to refer to something as a myth when it can be described as a narrative about conditions or events in our world that is taken for granted, and is not readily available for critical examination.¹⁹ In that regard the theoretical understanding of the word

¹⁴ Christopher Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1996), 44; Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1991); Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126; see also discussions in Andrew Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 278–304; Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 188ff. Barthes also understood his "mythologies" to be ideologically motivated.

¹⁵ Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Arash Abizadeh, "Historical Truth, National Myths and Liberal Democracy: On the Coherence of Liberal Nationalism," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 12, no. 3 (2004): 291–313; Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); Duncan S.A. Bell, "Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity," *British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (2003): 63–81; David Miller, *On Nationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 35–41; David Archard, "Myths, Lies and Historical Truth: A Defence of Nationalism," *Political Studies* 43, no. 3 (1995): 472–81.

¹⁶ G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths* (New York: Penguin, 1974); John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," *American Journal of Sociology* 83, no. 2 (1977): 340–63.

¹⁷ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995); Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology," in *Magic, Science and Religion, and Other Essays* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1954): 72–124; Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*, 32.

¹⁸ Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society*; Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live by* (London: Routledge, 2003); for politicized instantiations, see Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (New York: Praeger, 1972); and Flood, *Political Myth*.

¹⁹ Tudor, *Political Myth*, 3, 137–38; W. Lance Bennett, "Myth, Ritual, and Political Control," *Journal of Communication* 30 (1980): 166–79, 167; Flood, *Political Myth*, 44; Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 7.

Discourse around the definition of myth has produced a number of important faultlines of contention: for instance, whether myth is strictly narrative or more loosely figurative in nature; whether the designation of myth can be used to describe modern phenomena, or whether myths can arise in modern societies to begin with; whether the subject of myth is sacred to the culture in which it arises; whether the significance of myth is specific to its cultural context or more universal in its reach; and whether the audience of myth sincerely believes its content. For a survey

“myth” retains a substantial share of the connotations it carries in common usage. That is, myths are tacit narratives, or at least parts of narratives, that circulate widely and are made familiar to us – in the way hearing a phrase like “the myth of the lone genius” might evoke in us a surprisingly precise array of images and storylines for imagining the career, personality, and even the physical attributes of such a figure. But, despite their familiarity, these narratives are not grounded in reasons or verifiable facts – like the myths invoked in any number of newspaper headlines broadcasting the need to expose and debunk them.²⁰

But both the theoretical and the common use conceptions of myth bear a close association to an older meaning of the word, not of a tacit imaginative formula quietly in cultural circulation, but of a narrated tale conforming to the conventions of a distinct genre. This is the definition of myth as a unique form of orally transmitted narrative fiction, featuring fantastical or supernatural elements, which we tend to encounter as the cultural artifacts of ancient or remote civilizations. Myths of this kind are not evocative templates for stories, but elaborated stories whose details have already been more or less filled out – with specific, often recurring, casts of fantastic characters or settings, sometimes with complex, interconnected plots.

These two distinct ideas of myth – one a tacit substratum, the other a cultural relic of a narrated form – are often mixed up together for reasons both intuitive and historically contingent. At one level, the two meanings share an entwined history: the concept of myth in the former

of some of these definitional debates, see Percy S. Cohen, “Theories of Myth,” *Man* 4, no. 3 (1969): 337–53; and also n10 above.

²⁰ For Bottici and for Tudor, myth in common usage is characterized by “fictitiousness, unreality, and untruth”, and both go on to decouple the criterion of falsehood from the definition of myth. Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), quotation at 10. Tudor, *Political Myth*, 13, 16-17.

sense was a modern construction, one that grew out of the study of pagan mythologies.²¹ It wasn't until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – with the discovery and proliferation of myths from indigenous cultures outside of Western Europe, and the interest that intellectuals took in comparing them both to the Greco-Roman myths pervading their own cultural heritage as well as to superstitious beliefs found in contemporary European society – that myths came to be associated with a distinct mode of thinking that opposed critical and scientific reasoning. That which moderns may identify as a myth, whether casually or from a theoretical standpoint, would be a kind of dense and fraught cognitive habit, a tendency to approach any given aspect of reality one way, that is formed in that uncritical mode.

At the same time, there are also more intuitive connections that can be drawn between the modern meaning of myth, as a kind of tacit framework, and the older meaning of myth, as a specific kind of narrated tale. Myths of the latter category are just-so stories, which characteristically portray certain states of affairs as part of the natural order of things, as though they already hold the status of those deeper aspects of one's world view that are most taken for granted, and rarely come up for questioning. Moreover, the realities presented in such traditional tales are presented fantastically, often featuring deities, magic, and other supernatural or fanciful elements. When stories wear fantasy so prominently on their surface, they do not readily invite critical scrutiny; rather, it would seem beside the point to take apart such tales using the rules of logic and fact. And so it can be said of the two concepts of myth that they share a structural parallel. Even though one refers to that which is latent in societies more generally, and the other to the distinct cultural products of societies considered remote, those socially embedded

²¹ Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*; Fritz Graf, *Greek Mythology: An Introduction*, trans. Thomas Marier (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 9-56.

frameworks that constitute myth in the first sense are narratives that are similarly resistant to scrutiny as that specific genre of fantastic tales that constitutes myth in the second sense.

It may be possible, at this point, to write off the traditional tales of distant civilizations as otherwise irrelevant to the issues confronting contemporary societies. If narrated myths are a distinctly pervasive feature of non-modern cultures, where they appear to permeate not only aesthetic content, but cosmological accounts and norms of social organization, they occupy a comparatively marginal place in contemporary culture, where we tend to encounter them as an inherited vocabulary of images, figures, and stories that are occasionally appropriated or alluded to in art and discourse. As Fontenelle, writing at the end of the seventeenth century, observed about the status of such stories in his time: modern society produces no new myths, and is “satisfied with preserving the old ones.”²² While some theorists of myth have since sought to identify contemporary counterparts to the narrated myths of remote civilizations, their efforts have struggled to dislodge a prevailing suspicion that myths of this kind are effectively obsolete in modernity – if not in form, at least in the sense that the genre itself commands a radically diminished role in contemporary culture to the point of being extremely difficult to recognize, if we were to look for it using only its traditional markers.²³ By contrast, myth, as a tacit and opaque substrate conditioning our world views, does manifest today in myriad everyday situations like the ones that exercised Barthes; but this phenomenon seems to share with the narrated genre of myth little more than a name, a genealogy, and a loose, potential parallel in the structure of its psychological operation.

²² Bernard de Fontenelle, “Of the Origin of Fables,” in *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680-1860*, ed. and trans. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 10–18, at 18.

²³ Graf, *Greek Mythology*, 54.

And yet, while only one of these two concepts of myth, tacit and narrated, might properly bear contemporary relevance, contemporary discussions of myth as a consequential force in modern social life continue to make reference to both meanings. Though arguably obsolete, narrated myths remain pertinent because such discussions use them to talk about the other, tacit type of myth that permeates the modern landscape. And as much as there is theoretical resistance to wholly separating them from one another, these two meanings of myth have been compounded together, and posed as a unified problem in philosophy and politics.

The Problem of Myth in Philosophy and Politics

The problem rests on the presupposition that those deeply entrenched narrative frames that persist in contemporary society are modern analogues for that which was expressed in the narrated myths of remote cultures. In turn, the analogy suggests that, even if contemporary cultures do not generate myths of that kind, those underlying narrative frameworks that do endure today are being discharged in poorly delineated expressive outlets – in political rhetoric, in popular media, and in everyday speech – that nonetheless retain the characteristic impenetrability of the traditional genre.

At the same time, such expressions can be said to run counter to a contemporary set of norms held about the structure of theoretical knowledge and rational discourse. For something to qualify as knowledge, we tend to expect that it shares in the grammar of rational argumentation: we must be able to formulate it in the form of a claim that advances a proposition, which in turn allows it to be examined critically and, should it prove inadequate to our experience of reality,

replaced with a better proposition. Stories from distant cultures that fall into the narrated genre of myth, on the other hand, do not do this; and if the original analogy holds, neither do contemporary expressions of deep narrative content latent in society (*see* **TABLE 1**).

TABLE 1.
The problem of myth for contemporary political theory

	<i>ancient or otherwise remote civilizations</i>		<i>contemporary society</i>
<i>Frameworks for ordering reality</i>	tacit myths, as socially embedded template narratives that are taken for granted	tacit myths, as socially embedded template narratives that are taken for granted	paradigms, norms and ideas open to criticism and revision
	↓	↓	↓
<i>Form of expression</i>	narrated myths, as orally transmitted tales of a fantastic nature	circulation in stunted or poorly delineated expressive outlets, such as popular media, political rhetoric, everyday speech	criticizable validity claims, amenable to logical argumentation
		→	
		<i>direction of modernization</i>	

This linguistic differentiation, between what can and cannot be expressed in a mode that opens an idea to criticism and revision, is central to understanding why contemporary political theory continues to have a stake in the peculiar, effectively obsolete literary genre of myth. The particular conditions of contemporary culture – which might be considered devoid of those traditional narrated stories that often pervade non-modern societies, but which is at the same time steeped in the tacit arational frameworks thought to engender them – open up two broad ways of thinking about the status of myth in politics and philosophy.

Myth as a problem of modernization

The first, mainstream perspective poses the problem of myth as a problem of progress towards the ideals and expectations of the modern age. According to this account, the effective absence, in modern society, of fanciful fictions that fall readily into the genre of traditional myths, speaks to a process of modernization that is only half-complete. In order to see that process through, contemporary society ought to eliminate the tacit frameworks it takes for granted, just as it has found a way to shed its strange, magical tales. And instead, these residual narrative structures ought to be replaced with paradigms and propositions that can be expressed in a corresponding language that makes them available for critical examination.²⁴

In turn, it is problematic for narratives that are not grounded in reasons to be making their way into circulation in the various and amorphous discursive outlets of contemporary life, because expressed forms of such narratives pull us further away from the goal of transforming the background to our world views into systems that are open rather than closed to critical scrutiny. Lending expression to the narratives at stake neither dismantles them nor brings them into the light of reason, but rather has the effect of pushing them deeper into the mystifying

²⁴ “Thus science must begin with myths, and with the criticism of myths ... The scientific tradition is distinguished from the pre-scientific tradition in having two layers. Like the latter, it passes on its theories; but it also passes on a critical attitude towards them. The theories are passed on, not as dogmas, but rather with the challenge to discuss them and improve upon them.” Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), 50.

For Habermas, modern rationality similarly requires the shedding of “mythical worldviews,” which, “with respect to the conditions for a rational conduct of life ... present an antithesis to the modern understanding of the world.” This is because mythical worldviews make it impossible for a society to achieve the conditions for rational communicative action between its members: they “are not understood by members as interpretive systems that are attached to cultural traditions, constituted by internal interrelations of meaning, symbolically related to reality, and connected with validity claims – and thus exposed to criticism and open to revision.” Hence, the modernizing and rationalizing process that Habermas calls the “linguistification of the sacred” entails the conversion of the trappings of myth into norms that invites criticism, whereby the “aura of rapture and terror that emanates from the sacred, the *spellbinding* power of the holy, is sublimated into the *binding/bonding* force of criticizable validity claims.” Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vols. 1 and 2, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 and 1987), I:44, I:52-3, and II:77.

realm of the opaque and unchallenged. Modern manifestations of these embedded frameworks, then, are in fact perpetuating expressions. They reinforce certain narrative patterns and harden their hold on our capacity to imagine things any other way.

For theorists who attached the designation of myth to such modern phenomena, the opacity of these expressions appeared to be sustained, fundamentally, through the same mechanisms behind the trappings of the old fantastic stories. Just as Barthes saw echoes of certain arcane tropes and images in the drama that unfolded at the Dominici trial, it was a telltale sign of the regressive status of these modern expressions that they periodically contained evocative elements that seemed to appeal to the magical or otherworldly. The most prominent and shocking examples materialized in the twentieth century, with the rise of fascism and its distinctive reliance on propaganda that made explicit reference to national mythological traditions – such as the adoption of runic signs in Nazi symbolism – or otherwise recalled mystical tropes and patterns common to the genre of such stories – such as the appeal to the destiny of a chosen race of people, and the thousand-year kingdom it was to inherit.²⁵ As contemporary commentators repeatedly drew comparisons between fascist propaganda and the narrated myths of remote cultures, they made a case for conceptualizing the former in terms of the latter, and in turn, as belonging to a more primitive society than to the modern industrialized nations in which they did appear.²⁶

²⁵ See, for example, Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts: eine Wertung der seelisch-geistigen Gestaltenkämpfe unserer Zeit* (München: Hoheneichen-Verlag, 1933); Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Das dritte Reich*, ed. Hans Schwarz (Hamburg: Hanseatische verlagsanstalt, 1931); Jörg Lanz-Liebenfels, *Theozoologie, oder Die Kunde von den Sodomsäfflingen und dem Götter-elektron* (Wien: Moderner Verlag, 1905).

²⁶ For instance, Adorno and Horkheimer regarded the ceremonies of Nazism as “imitations of magical practices” with “the *Führer* ... lead[ing] the dance.” Karl Popper likewise accused fascism of having resurrected “the tribal ideal of the Heroic Man” into new forms. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 152, emphasis original; Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 1:*

If these examples and the efforts of concerned theorists helped to lend urgency to the study of myth for better understanding aspects of contemporary culture, they were also issuing, on the one hand, a grave warning against the drastic consequences of cultural regression, and, on the other, affirming the prescriptive account of progress that tends to motivate contemporary theoretic interest in myth. Here the fantastic tales of remote civilizations remain entangled in the problem of myth to the extent that they serve as the most tangible model for thinking about contemporary expressions of the uncritically held frameworks undergirding modern culture. As contemporary society progresses toward more rational institutions, we would expect it not only to abandon all such tacit frameworks that repel critical scrutiny; it would in turn control the outlets in which they might find expression and harden over our world views. And so, according to this line of reasoning, a commitment to rational progress entails combating two kinds of contemporary phenomena associated with myth: the persistence of a tacit cultural substratum of indemonstrable narrative templates, and their expression in forms that are analogous in their inscrutability to the narrated myths of non-modern societies. The former is what contemporary societies must seek to eradicate, and the circulation of the latter is what hinders that goal.

This teleological argument against myths, both tacit and narrated, is a contemporary descendant of an evolutionary account of culture that goes back at least to Greek antiquity, but which was most fully articulated in eighteenth century theories of social progress that sought to distinguish modern European civilization from societies deemed primitive by comparison.²⁷

These theories presented a linear picture of cultural progress, whereby societies that possessed a

The Spell of Plato (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966), 277. See also Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism," *The New York Review of Books*, February 6, 1975.

²⁷ Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959).

coherent body of mythology, like Greco-Roman antiquity, or indigenous tribes in the New World, represented an earlier stage of cultural development than that inhabited by modern European society. The process by which a society transitions from a more primitive to a more advanced stage of development, in turn, was conceived in terms of an epistemic transition in the character of thought itself, in which the confused and superstitious thinking that gives rise to myth comes to be replaced by the rigor of scientific reason. Where the arc of societal progress from barbarism to civilization is envisioned as an escape from myth, philosophy, too, becomes an act of purification and a shedding of its mythic beginnings – a conceit most memorably captured in a formulation coined by the twentieth century classicist, Wilhelm Nestle, who proposed that the advent of Greek philosophy supplied the pivotal turning point at which western thought began to advance “from *mythos* to *logos*.”²⁸

There was also a religious dimension to this linear vision of progress. If eighteenth century theories of social progress had looked to myth as a way of differentiating more developed societies from less developed ones, they were also preoccupied with distinguishing Christianity from the religious, often polytheistic, content of pagan mythology. When combined, however, with the evolutionary view of social development, the difference between Christianity and pagan religion lent itself to the extended logic that religion, too, is subject to the same processes of change that drove modern European civilization towards increased rationalization. For the intellectual heirs of the eighteenth-century preoccupation with myth, the trajectory of progress also aligned with increased secularization – as seen, for instance, in Auguste Comte’s proposal that societies pass through stages of development beginning in an age of fetishism and

²⁸ Wilhelm Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos: die Selbstentfaltung des griechischen Denkens von Homer bis auf die Sophistik und Sokrates* (Stuttgart: A. Kröner, 1975 [1940]).

polytheism that eventually gives rise to monotheism, metaphysical philosophy, and finally to an age governed by scientific principles. To live in modern society was to live, as Weber put it, in a disenchanted world.

It would be naive and reductive to claim these things today: that there is just one way societies come to be modern, or that cultural transformation occurs along a single axis with primitivism, myth and religion on one end, and civilization, science and secularism on the other. But it nonetheless bears emphasizing that contemporary political theorists are still very much working with inherited notions about what constitutes progress, the distinctiveness of modernity, and the extent to which a conception of scientific reason is bound up in both of these ideals. In particular, the theoretical discourse on myth has always been dominated by a concern for rational progress and the threat that myth poses to its various incarnations. As such, the general contours of the argument against myth has remained largely unchanged since the eighteenth century: whenever theorists subscribed to the premise that the form and content of myths are out of place in a modern society, they have appealed to the ideals of rationality and progress in order to call for their eradication.

Perhaps the most enduring legacy of the teleological account of social progress is an optimism around the possibility that the mythic frameworks that persist in contemporary society can in fact be dismantled rationally. This is true of the account of myth in Hegel's philosophy of history, which famously tracks a trajectory of increasing rationalization and freedom. For Hegel, earlier and less developed forms of human thought relied on the devices of myth for expression; accordingly, he equated myth with "the powerlessness of Thought which does not know yet how

to hold itself for its own self and is not self-sufficient.”²⁹ But in a modern landscape, advances in knowledge allowed for humans to think at increasingly higher and clearer levels of abstraction without leaning on the crutches of sensory expression, and both the cognitive powerlessness he associated with myth, and the fantastic forms it assumed when it manifested in culture, were things that were in the process of being traded for superior modes of thought and representation.

Even after the Second World War, when the advent of new ideologies had intensified theoretical interest in the topic of myth, the basic shape of this argument continued to dominate debates, and those who declared a renewed urgency to eliminate myth from contemporary civilization did so because they accepted the premise that mythic frameworks can in fact be eradicated, or demystified and converted into ideas that can be expressed in a form that lends itself to criticism and scrutiny. Popper, for whom myth and scientific knowledge existed on the same spectrum, called for the conversion of the former into the latter through critical refutation³⁰; Habermas, who, unlike Popper, set aside myth into a special category of thought, was nonetheless optimistic that their modern counterparts would still be made more transparent and open to rational examination.³¹

In turn, a specific set of political prescriptions follow from construing myth as a pre-modern form of thought and expression that demands, but has not yet achieved, conversion into more rational forms. If a goal of philosophy and culture is to make the background to our world views increasingly available for critical dissection, politics must similarly aid that process by

²⁹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, vols. 18-20 in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), II: 29, ctd. in Michael Rosen, *Hegel's Dialectic and Its Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

³⁰ Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*.

³¹ Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, 44-53.

aspiring to norms of discourse that have more in common with logical propositions than with the strange, whimsical tales of remote civilizations. It must, in particular, guard against the thoughtless reinforcement of existing narratives in the political sphere by a naive and uncritical public, as well the mobilization of new ones by an opportunistic elite looking to usurp the psychological power of such stories. In turn, working to diminish the activation of these narrative frameworks in political life is not only a means of assisting their eradication from contemporary society; it is also a way of affirming a democratic vision organized around a philosophical ideal of the autonomous rational subject.

One aspect of this political vision is epistemic. Appeals to narratives that resist further scrutiny repel both criticism and the diversity of alternate opinions that are crucial to a democracy marked by the free exchange of – and competition between – ideas. Hence, the deep aversion to myth in political theory is in large part rooted in the position that the promulgation of such stories amounts to the obscuring of truths that might be otherwise reached through channels both democratic and rational. By a similar logic, myth also carries associations that are anti-democratic on deliberative grounds, because perpetuating, rather than dismantling, these stories obstructs deliberative discourse and debate. From a liberal perspective, this would also seem to erode at the integrity and autonomy of the individual citizen, who ought to be free to reason against the grain of that which is merely taken for granted in collective culture. Similarly, whenever a society tolerates or perpetuates narratives beyond questioning, this would seem to oppose an ideal of political participation, insofar as it encourages passive rather than active citizenship. And whenever stories of this kind are mobilized by particular political actors, they make us vulnerable to the kind of inequality built into the relationship between the elite creators and promulgators of myth, and their unsuspecting public.

For all of these reasons, conceiving of myth as a problem of incomplete modernization entails, above all, committing to a vision of political progress devoid of myth. As we continue to dream of building political communities that are more democratic, more egalitarian, more conducive to participation and effective deliberation, and better at conveying respect for its individual members – it seems we should also hope to eliminate from political life both the deep narrative patterns and the modes of expression we associate with myth.

Myth as a problem of the human condition

Against the predominant account of myth as a problem of modernization, there is a second strand of thought that rejects the thesis that liberation from myth is a defining feature of modernity. This view suggests instead that all societies, ancient and modern alike, are characteristically imbued with narrative frameworks resistant to critical scrutiny; and it rejects in particular the premise that such frameworks are capable of being distilled into logical content without injury to the coherence of our social world and systems of thought. If the enduring presence of tacitly held mythic frameworks in modernity had been the puzzle motivating the mainstream argument against myth, it may be said that, for theorists who take this second approach, the relative absence of narrated forms of myth in modernity is the more unusual puzzle.

There are two broad reasons for believing that narrative frameworks that do not lend themselves to critical examination are an indelible and irreducible component of modern society. The first emphasizes their social function; the second the ways in which they are prefigured into the psychological or linguistic structure of thought itself.

Accounts that attribute an important social function to narratives entrenched in contemporary society are rooted, on the one hand, in early romantic ideas of myth as expressions of national character,³² and, on the other, in the work of early twentieth century anthropologists, who linked the traditional myths of non-modern societies with collective rituals and ceremonies that seemed to cement social bonds and hierarchies in the group.³³ Though both the romantic and the early anthropological accounts of myth had largely kept to the view that myth belonged to a primitive age that modern civilization had already left behind, the respective intellectual heirs to both traditions have extended their hypotheses on the social functions of myth to contemporary contexts.

In particular, they have suggested that the narratives that are taken for granted in modern societies perform the indispensable task of conferring social meaning upon relations and practices that hold them together. For instance, sociological studies of institutions often employ the terminology of myth to describe the processes by which social and political norms come to accrue value and stability.³⁴ A somewhat different argument ascribes a more dynamic function to narrative frames that repel criticism, as a force of social change rather than of social

³² Johann Gottfried Herder, "Iduna, oder der Apfel der Verjuengung," in *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Bernhard Ludwig Suphan, 33 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877-1913): XVIII:483-502; "Von den ältesten Nationalgesängen," in *Sämmtliche Werke*: XXXII:148-152; "Vom Geist der Ebräischen Poesie," in *Sämmtliche Werke*: XI:213-466 and XII:1-308; "Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts," in *Sämmtliche Werke*: VI:193-511; Christian Gottlob Heyne, "An Interpretation of the Language of Myths or Symbols Traced to Their Reasons and Causes and Thence to Forms and Rules," in *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680-1860*, ed. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1972), 220-23; Christian Gottlob Heyne, "Vorrede," to Martin Gottfried Hermann, *Handbuch der Mythologie aus Homer und Hesiod als Grundlage zu einer richtigern Fabellehre des Alterthums* (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1787).

³³ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*; Georges Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. and trans. Einar Haugen (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973).

³⁴ Meyer and Rowan, "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony."

reinforcement. This was the widely influential view originally advanced by Georges Sorel, who invented the term, “political myth,” to argue that collective political action was impossible without the galvanization of such narratives.³⁵

Common to both these conceptions of myth was not only the thought that the unexamined narratives embedded in the contemporary landscape cannot be broken down and articulated in a more logical form, but that something essential to the social fabric would be lost should they cease to exist, be it the social bonds between a society’s members, or their capacity to come together in social movements to enact meaningful political change. As such, for some, the absence of a distinct expressive venue for these vital frameworks – as non-modern societies found in their narrated genre of traditional tales – has come to signify a deeper crisis in the nature of sociability in the modern world.

If these accounts suggest that contemporary societies will not rid themselves of their mythic frameworks so long as their significance as collective communities depends on upholding some level of social cohesion, a different set of arguments comes to a similar conclusion through an alternate path, by pointing to the limitations built into the structures of human psychology and cognition.

One such limitation was suggested by a set of traditions that believed humans possessed a universal need to respond expressively to the world in which they live, be it their natural physical

³⁵ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. Jeremy Jennings (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

environment,³⁶ or the inner drama of their psyche.³⁷ Myth, according to these traditions, was the product of that primal expressive impulse in human nature. Authors who thought of myth this way certainly did not rule out the possibility that such impulses might be overcome, as a child grows out of his childhood habits, and superseded with more sophisticated and reflective forms of interacting with the world. But presenting myth as a product of human nature nonetheless makes a difference to the modernization account, and helps to dampen the optimism with which it is asserted. For one, it helps to universalize myth across human contexts, such that the drives responsible for it remain latent in the modern individual and in modern society: should either fall prey to any pathological forms of regression, those tendencies toward myth can be expected to resurface in fairly consistent ways.³⁸

A related line of thought also indicated that there was something universal to the processes that give rise to myth, but specifically located this universality in a number of discrete patterns that human cognition tends to follow, and which were reflected in the content of myths. A special point of interest here was the observation that myths from disparate cultures often shared striking similarities in the images or motifs they employed: these theories offered by way of explanation the hypothesis that human thought tends to cluster around particular patterns that were universally significant to the human experience, and frequently recurring mythical elements

³⁶ e.g. Giambattista Vico, *New Science*, trans. David Marsh (London: Penguin, 2001); Johann Gottfried Herder, "Fragment of an Essay on Mythology (c. 1782-92)," in *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language, and History*, ed. and trans. Marcia Bunge (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 80–83.

³⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989).

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); see also Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, ed. Charles William Hendel (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946), 295-98.

– like the figure of the trickster, or the story of a great deluge – were ways of representing those patterns. For Jung, who used the term “archetype” to describe the tendency for certain such cognitive patterns to be represented in certain ways, saw in this relation an innate link between the content of myth and universal shapes of thought³⁹; for Lévi-Strauss, what was universal was not the particular links between individual elements of myth and what was being expressed in them, but rather the laws governing the structures of cognitive relations, and it was the structure of relationships, rather than their content, that was being replicated in the mythic motif-clusters that he called “mythemes.”⁴⁰

When theories locate the origins of myth in universal impulses, patterns and structures of the human mind, they are put in the position of having to either affirm or find ways around what this implies: namely, that these universal factors are also present in modernity, and contemporary societies cannot truly rid themselves of all traces of myth. But the most explicit rebuttal of the modernization thesis was a philosophical one, which was most memorably articulated in Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944) that “[m]yth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology.”⁴¹ This was the diagnosis that modern, enlightened civilization has been hitherto unsuccessful in its efforts to extricate itself from the mode of thought that generated and sustained the traditional myths of non-modern societies.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, both myth and the civilizing movement to replace it with

³⁹ Carl Jung, “Approaching the Unconscious,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl Jung (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 1–94; see also Carl Jung, *The Essential Jung*, ed. Anthony Storr (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 88–127.

⁴⁰ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Structural Study of Myth,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 68, no. 270 (1955): 428–44; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966); Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques* (Paris: Plon, 2009).

⁴¹ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

scientific content shared a fundamental similarity in the way each approached the world: not just the rational impulse with which both sought to master nature and render it more familiar, but also the fatalistic tendency with which they regarded their own creations as somehow immutable. For the modernization thesis, this meant that the rational achievements of modern society over the course of its historical trajectory have not only failed to provide an antidote to these latter mythic impulses, but had themselves given way to a veiled version of myth.

A possible explanation as to why exactly this might be case stems from a larger debate on the feasibility of divorcing analytic concepts from the figurative qualities of the language in which they are articulated. Hans Blumenberg, the foremost philosopher of myth in the second half of the twentieth century, observed the myriad ways in which language, including the language of philosophy, is continually drawn to the same pregnant metaphors and figurative patterns found in mythological expressions.⁴² These studies suggest that the content of philosophy cannot exist in a purely abstract sphere divorced from all traces of myth. Rather, the tacit frameworks underlying ancient myths cannot be left behind because the expressions they generate form the basic fabric of the language we use to talk about philosophical concepts, which in turn constrains the way we think, even when we believe ourselves to be reasoning freely and independently.⁴³

⁴² Hans Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation," in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, ed. David Michael Levin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 30–62; Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010); Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997); Hans Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, trans. Paul Fleming (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010).

⁴³ For Derrida, it was itself a brand of myth – or what he called a "white mythology" – to ignore the extent to which the projects of philosophy continued to carry the residual meanings of their borrowed metaphors. Jacques Derrida, "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy," trans. F.C.T. Moore, *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 5–74. Consider also Carl Schmitt's study of the mythical symbol of the leviathan, as appropriated by Hobbes: Schmitt suggests that such symbols will ultimately elude rational attempts to control them for instrumental

For Blumenberg, philosophy's reliance on mythological expressions revealed a deeper need, on the part of philosophy, to impart meaning onto reality through narratives that are reworked, time and again, to frame the unfamiliar and inexplicable in terms of the familiar and significant.⁴⁴ As such, he downplayed the observation, so central to the evolutionary argument against myth, that contemporary societies lack concrete examples of myths of the kind in abundance in ancient and otherwise remote civilizations. He suggested, rather, that modernity continues to tell these old stories in new forms – as Goethe and scores of forgotten Romantics did with Faust, or Freud with the Oedipus story – that, in essence, are not radically different from the myths of ancient Greece and Germania.

A more general trend, characteristically shared by theorists of myth who reject the modernization thesis, underlies Blumenberg's insistence that contemporary culture continues to generate specifically mythic expressions for narrative content that lacked rational foundations. This is the belief that draws a more essential link between mythic frameworks and mythic expressions: there was a reason why the former tended to manifest, in modern and non-modern societies alike, in opaque, symbolic, and figurative expressions, rather than in reasoned arguments. If, as these authors believed, there are enduring factors built into the structure of sociability or of the nature of thought that necessitate the endurance of frameworks that escape rational grounding, so are the corresponding expressions also here to stay, perpetually unable to be reconciled with the language of critical reason.

use. Carl Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes: Meaning and Failure of a Political Symbol*, trans. George Schwab and Erna Hilfstein (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990); see also Bernard Yack, "Myth and Modernity: Hans Blumenberg's Reconstruction of Modern Theory," *Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (1987): 244–261; Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* (London: Routledge, 2014).

For authors who opposed the modernization account, the problem of myth was much more nuanced. Because they did not believe that the mythic frameworks persisting in contemporary culture could ever be eradicated or converted into more rational content, lending expression to them could not constitute a barrier to progress. Their position does, however, condemn modern life to a fractured future, in which a separate sphere of cognitive tendencies that can only be expressed figuratively hovers alongside the critical-rational system that forms the bedrock of modern thought and discourse. If it is indeed impossible to reconcile these two spheres, our existing philosophical resources provide no guidance on coping with this dualism, and, in particular, no means of access to those mythic frameworks that continue to wield influence over our world views. As such, when theorists of myth reject a prevailing account that equates political progress with the progressive shedding of myth, they do so without offering an alternate vision of what might constitute progress. In turn, even when one does not malign myth as incompatible with modernity, it remains difficult to wave away the progressive ideals and the optimism entailed in the modernization thesis.

Plato's Legacy and Plato's Myths

The thought that our philosophical and political ideals cannot afford a place for commonplaces that are taken for granted is a defining feature of Plato's legacy. It is no novelty to observe that Plato invented an ideal of philosophical citizenship in the figure of Socrates.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Dana Villa, *Socratic Citizenship* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

According to this ideal, the philosopher's contribution to political society is the rational evaluation of convention, whereby the most basic beliefs and customs structuring the city's practices are subjected to critical challenge.⁴⁶ And so, Plato depicts a Socrates who, breaking with the convention of his contemporary Athenians of seeking wisdom from poets and traditional sources of authority, relentlessly questions the gatekeepers of received knowledge to expose assumptions that are accepted passively without being grounded in reasons.⁴⁷

There is a way of equating the history of western philosophy with the legacy that Plato left after him. The foundational position attributed to Plato in the history of philosophy has certainly been overstated,⁴⁸ but undeniably philosophy has at several pivotal moments of crisis understood itself, for better or for worse, in relation to an idea of its beginning embodied in this single author.⁴⁹ And when western philosophy is conceived this way, as a tradition with essential roots in Plato, the legacy that is being celebrated is that specifically rational legacy that called for the elimination of unexamined beliefs and frameworks, of unfounded pretenses to knowledge, and of the vague and the mystifying.

⁴⁶ John Stuart Mill, "Grote's Plato," in *The Collected Works*, ed. John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963-91), XVIII: 375-440, 403ff; see also "On Liberty," in *The Collected Works*, XVIII: 213-310, 251; "Inaugural Address Delivered to the University of St. Andrew's," XXI: 215-57, 229-230.

⁴⁷ Julia Annas, "Plato the Skeptic," in *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*, supplemental vol. (1992), ed. James C. Klagge and Nicholas D. Smith.: 43-72; Hannah Arendt, "Philosophy and Politics," *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 73-103; Dan Avnon, "Know Thyself: Socratic Companionship and Platonic Community," *Political Theory* 23, no. 2 (1995): 304-29; Ryan Balot, "Socratic Courage and Athenian Democracy," *Ancient Philosophy* 28 (2001): 49-69; J. Peter Euben, *Corrupting Youth: Political Education, Democratic Culture, and Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); S. Sara Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 164-5; Mary Nichols, *Socrates and the Political Community* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987); Villa, *Socratic Citizenship*.

⁴⁸ "The safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato." Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978), 39.

⁴⁹ Melissa Lane, *Plato's Progeny: How Socrates and Plato Still Captivate the Modern Mind* (London: Duckworth, 2001).

For many, that original Platonic accomplishment presented itself specifically as the liberation of philosophy from myth.⁵⁰ By this they meant that both the nature and methods of philosophical knowledge as we know it are held to a standard of logical rigor that Plato invented by disassociating it from the influence of myth that had pervaded Greek culture in his time. In a concrete sense, Plato, according to this account, was rejecting a specific body of traditional narratives about the gods as inappropriate, if not pernicious, to the pursuit of true knowledge about the world and our places in it. But tied to the exclusion of a narrative genre from the domain of philosophy was the more significant renunciation of all uncritically upheld cultural frameworks that could be associated with the tacit, more modern meaning of myth. It is often suggested that, prior to Plato, Greek culture had made no systematic distinction between *logos* – the root of ‘logic’ – and *mythos* – myth; both words had synonymously meant ‘speech.’⁵¹ The two terms have since acquired more abstract connotations that point toward two distinct modes of thought: one is active, logical, and objective; the other passive, imprecise, and impressionistic.⁵² And when Plato is credited with the invention of what is now a well-worn

⁵⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*; Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), 221-22. See also Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. Michael Tanner, trans. Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2003); and Alexander Nehamas, *Virtues of Authenticity: Essays on Plato and Socrates* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999), 316–318.

⁵¹ Kathryn A. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy: From the Presocratics to Plato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 17-24; Bottici, *Political Myth*, 20-21; Axel Horstmann, “Mythos, Mythologie,” *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel: Schwabe, 1971), VI: 218-318.

The first known use of “mythology” also occurs in Plato, though commentators are divided on the significance of this observation. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 289n79; G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 8; see also Robert L. Fowler, “Mythos and Logos,” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 131 (2011): 45–66, 65.

Famous dismissals of *mythos* prior to Plato occur in Herodotus (2.23.1 and 2.45.1) and in Thucydides (1.21), though the critique is not systematic. For an extensive survey of the mythos-logos dichotomy in antiquity see Fowler, “Mythos and Logos”; and also Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*.

⁵² Nestle, *Vom Mythos zum Logos*, 1, 17.

opposition between *logos* and *mythos*, he stands for a way of doing philosophy that has not only broken away from the authority of a genre of traditional tales, but is guided above all by the demand, prominently displayed in his depiction of Socratic conversation, that beliefs are grounded in rational justifications.

In this regard, a prevailing story told about Plato and his importance aligns with the vision of rational progress that supplies the argument against myth in political theory. Just as striving towards a more rational political society entails the eradication of unconditioned narrative frameworks, and any avenues of expression that reinforce their opacity, the position of primacy that Plato occupies in the canon of philosophy owes to a reputation for methodological purification, consisting in the rejection of all patterns of thought that do not stand up to critical scrutiny.

Yet Plato famously wrote his own myths, which reworked or otherwise mimicked existing tales of the genre. In Plato's writings, myths burst forth as a respite from the meticulous, detail-oriented arguments comprising the central philosophical investigations.⁵³ For the most part, they are stylistically differentiated from the rest of the work,⁵⁴ and, to the extent that they are vivid stories, they are accordingly exempt from the standards of argument: they are not logically rigorous, and they posit ideas without grounding them in reasons. They resemble the traditional myths in that they are imaginative narratives, often featuring supernatural

⁵³ J.A. Stewart, *The Myths of Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1905), 1-2; Seth Benardete, *Socrates' Second Sailing: On Plato's Republic* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4; see also Penelope Murray, "What Is a Muthos for Plato?," in *From Myth to Reason?: Studies in the Development of Greek Thought*, ed. Richard Buxton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999): 151–262, 254-257.

⁵⁴ Some scholars have tried to push back against the rigidity of the opposition between myth and dialectic argumentation in Plato's works, by denying much of a stylistic boundary at all between the two. J.N. Findlay, "The Myths of Plato," *Dionysius* 2 (1978): 19–34; Plato, *Dialogues*, ed. and trans. Benjamin Jowett, 4th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), III: 698, ctd. in Murray, "What is a Muthos for Plato?", 151, see also 259ff.

elements, that impart on their audience an impression of the coherence of an idea in its entirety rather than the factual accuracy of the parts that build up to it.⁵⁵

Plato's borrowing from the genre of myth and its tropes in his philosophical writings sits oddly against the standard of rigor that he is said to have invented for philosophy.⁵⁶ And indeed readers have alternately criticized them or felt the need to make excuses for them. Hegel, for instance, saw in Plato's myths a "pollution of thinking through sensory forms," whose use represented Plato's own philosophical limitations, which had prevented him from expressing the same ideas more freely, consciously, or rationally.⁵⁷ At the same time, there is no way to deny the deliberate construction of Plato's myths, their placement in the immediate philosophical contexts of the dialogues to which they belong, and the purposiveness with which Plato appears to be appropriating the trappings of a distinct literary form for his own philosophical ends. Nor is it easy to dismiss their memorability or their cultural influence: surely the most lasting impressions of Plato's *Republic* for the casual contemporary reader are supplied by the Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave⁵⁸; myths like the Atlantis myth in the *Timaeus* and *Critias*,

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Poetics* 1451a31; Luc Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, trans. Gerard Naddaf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 59-60; Plato, *Gorgias*, ed. E.R. Dodds (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 332; Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 179.

⁵⁶ Bottici, *Political Myth*, 30-31; Ludwig Edelstein, "The Function of the Myth in Plato's Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10, no. 4 (1949): 463-81, 463-64.

⁵⁷ "Die mythische Darstellung, als älter, ist Darstellung, wo der Gedanke noch nicht frei ist: sie ist Verunreinigung des Gedankens durch sinnliche Gestalt." Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, II: 20.

⁵⁸ Readers disagree on whether the Allegory of the Myth is a myth. For instance, J.A. Stewart does not include it in his classic study, *The Myths of Plato*, though his list is already more conservative than most. For reasons that will become clear in Chapter 1, I follow Jonathan Lear, among others, in considering the Cave a myth. Jonathan Lear, "Allegory and Myth in Plato's Republic," in *The Blackwell Guide to Plato's Republic*, ed. Gerasimos Xenophon Santas (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 25-43; see also Bottici, *Political Myth*, 31.

or the Myth of the Charioteer from the *Phaedrus*, were likewise the things for which Plato was best known in popular culture for the greater part of the history of his reception.⁵⁹

The argument against myth had claimed that political society would do well to rid itself of a certain class of tacit narrative frameworks that resist critical examination, and, by extension, also of the amorphous outlets in which they might find expression – modern analogues for an effectively obsolete genre of fantastic tales. If we hold on to the argument that these two conceptions of myth are related in such a way that our political ideals are not compatible with either kind, and if we also accept the characterization of the western philosophical tradition as a Platonic legacy of decoupling philosophy from the uncritical mode of thought particular to myth – then the fact that Plato wrote his own myths becomes problematic.

At one level, it opens the exact nature of Plato's accomplishment up for dispute, and in turn, pushes us to reconsider the prominence of Plato and his legacy in our understanding of the history of western philosophy. We need only to look to Plato's most famous critics of the last two centuries to appreciate the extent to which the evaluation of Plato's legacy hangs on an evaluation of his relationship to myth. For Nietzsche, Plato inaugurated an entire philosophical tradition devoted to the exclusion of myth: he single-handedly instigated the regrettable separation of philosophy from its mythic, Dionysian past and its reduction to mere rationality.⁶⁰ For Karl Popper, however, writing at the height of the Second World War, Plato and his philosophical successors had to be condemned for the very opposite reasons: Plato was the first and the most influential of the enemies of the open society, an opponent of both democracy and

⁵⁹ Elizabeth McGrath, "Platonic Myths in Renaissance Iconography," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 167–86.

⁶⁰ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

of “the critical powers of man.”⁶¹ In particular, Plato’s political vision relied on the deceptive power of myth to engineer a decidedly non-democratic social order, arranged around a dogmatic philosophic system. The ease with which Plato can be dressed into either role – a notorious mythmaker, on the one hand, and a champion, on the other, of a demythologized, rational philosophy – speaks to the prevalence of a deep uncertainty about the nature of Plato’s legacy, even as he continues to serve as a primary touchstone in arguments about the identity and trajectory of the western philosophical tradition.

At another level, a reconsideration of Plato’s myths and the Platonic legacy reopens the question of the place of myth in political thought. In particular, it should reconcile us to the impossibility of perfectly triangulating the three themes of the foregoing discussion: the argument against myth in political theory, the identification of Plato’s legacy with the history of western philosophy, and the philosophical significance of Plato’s myths. Fully committing to two of these premises will necessarily entail discarding or qualifying the third. Prioritizing the argument against myth and aligning it, in turn, with Plato’s rational legacy, leads to what has been the dominant interpretive position on Plato’s myths since the enlightenment: that they are incidental to the rational content of Plato’s philosophical accomplishment. Authors who subscribe to this view either ignore the myths entirely, or treat them as rhetorical embellishments to the philosophical arguments, but do not find them consequential to Plato’s philosophy or political theory.⁶² On the other hand, when one commits to taking Plato’s myths seriously while maintaining the position that our philosophical and political ideals cannot afford a place for

⁶¹ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, I:1.

⁶² For example: Louis Couturat, *De Platonis Mythis* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1896); G.M.A. Grube, *Plato’s Thought* (London: Methuen, 1935); Eric A. Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); see also Kent F. Moors, *Platonic Myth: An Introductory Study* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1982), 2-3.

myth, it becomes impossible not to adopt some version of Popper's indictment: Plato's recourse to myth merits condemnation, and a tradition built on those Platonic foundations can be neither rational nor desirable.⁶³

The only way, it seems, to entertain the possibility that Plato's myths were philosophically significant without denying the centrality of reason to our political and philosophical ideals, or the centrality of Plato's contributions to a tradition built around that ideal, would require exploring a third option that offers a chastened version of the first two premises. Insofar as this position seeks to better appreciate the philosophical intent behind Plato's appropriation of the narrative genre of myth, it would offer an interpretation of Plato and his legacy that, without diminishing the distinctiveness of the myths or their influence *as myths* in the history of the reception of Plato, reconciles them against the rational accomplishment for which Plato is known and celebrated. In turn, a revised understanding of Plato's legacy on these terms would also call for a reconsideration of the trajectory of western philosophy as being merely one of shedding myth, and it would ask anew whether there remains a different role for myth to play in political theory.

Finally, if we can accept, in light of these considerations, that the problem of myth in political theory warrants revisiting, this would also require decoupling the two conceptions of myth with which we began. Myths, as fantastic stories that fall into a genre of narrative fiction, and a modern notion of myth, as a designation reserved for a constellation of socially embedded

⁶³ e.g. Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 113; see also Bertrand Russell, "An Outline of Intellectual Rubbish," in *Basic Writings*, ed. Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn (London: Routledge, 2009), 45–71, 59.

The extreme counterpart to this position would be one that prioritizes a strand of Neoplatonism in which Plato's myths are taken so seriously as to be considered divinely inspired – that is, of a superior nature than knowledge arrived at through rational channels. See, for example, Joseph Pieper, *Über die platonischen Mythen* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1965).

narrative frameworks, both figure in opposite ways into the interpretation of Plato: he made literary use of the former, and is celebrated primarily for rejecting the latter from the province of philosophic inquiry. If reconfiguring our understanding of Plato's accomplishment through the lens of myth is at all going to be relevant for reevaluating the place of myth in political thought more generally, it cannot be enough to take as given that tacit myths and narrated myths are necessarily related in such a way that they can be posed as a single problem. Instead, working out these questions will first have to identify what it was that Plato – and, as we will see, his successors – found compelling about the narrative genre of myth, and whether they felt these fantastic stories could bear a more nuanced and constructive relationship to the deeper frameworks undergirding our world views.

Three central questions, then, emerge from the friction between Plato's myths and his foundational status in our conception of the western philosophical tradition:

1. In light of the myths that Plato wrote, how are we to interpret Plato's legacy?
2. What can Plato's legacy teach us about the place of myth in political thought?
3. What is the relationship between myths, as traditional tales of a very specific form, and those implicit narrative frameworks that persist even in contemporary society?

Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought

1. The central aim of this dissertation is the reconstruction of an alternative understanding of Plato's legacy that provides an account, on the one hand, of the compatibility of

Plato's myths with a philosophically coherent political vision, and, on the other, of the long and significant trajectory that this idea exercised in the history of the reception of Plato. At critical junctures in Plato's modern reception, some of Plato's most devoted readers were imitating Plato's myths in their own philosophical writings, or were otherwise engaged in asking difficult and fundamental questions regarding the place of myth in philosophy and politics. The authors who were part of this tradition were heavily influenced by Plato's philosophy in some way, and were deeply invested in investigating the political and philosophical potential of myths, as a narrative genre. In turn, with the exception of the authors in Chapter 4, who had their own philosophical reasons for not doing so, these authors wrote myths in their philosophical work after the model of Plato. As such, it is possible to speak of a coherent, specifically Platonic tradition of writing and thinking about myth.

For contemporary political theorists, who are not accustomed to thinking of Plato's legacy in these terms, the recovery of this mythic tradition would serve as a reminder of what students of Platonic reception have known for a long time: that the rationalist legacy we attribute to Plato was a relatively late construction, and that, for the greater part of the history of the reception of Plato, he was celebrated not for the precision of his logical arguments, but for his myths, which were thought to have been divinely inspired.⁶⁴ However, the set of authors treated here are different still. Their interest in myths, Plato's or otherwise, did not stem from a view of myth as a divine medium somehow above human reason. Instead, the authors who participated this Platonic, mythic tradition were very much wedded to the centrality of reason in philosophy

⁶⁴ Michael J.B. Allen, "Renaissance Neoplatonism," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, vol. 3: *The Renaissance*, ed. Glyn P. Norton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 435-441.

and politics, and were interested in exploring how this distinct narrative form could be deployed constructively toward that ideal.

The Plato they were inspired by was a philosopher who viewed the contributions of myth as complementary, rather than antithetical, to the kind of critical reasoning that has been celebrated as the defining feature of philosophical activity, including philosophically informed politics. In particular, these authors shared with Plato a sensitivity to the full range of myth's potential to be either harmful *or* salutary for political thought. In that regard this tradition runs alongside, and not against, the traditional and canonical view of Plato's legacy as one primarily defined by the emphasis on critical reason; and to the extent that myths are by definition resistant to critical examination, these authors also held the relationship between myth and critical reason to be delicate and complicated.

2. Where, then, does a reconstruction of the mythic tradition in Plato's legacy leave the larger question of the place that political theory can afford to those deep, opaque social frameworks that carry the designation of myth?

If Plato had served as an influence on a tradition of authors who grappled with the question of myth's role in philosophy and politics, a central feature of this tradition is a shared appreciation for the ways in which myth and its underlying tendencies were so entrenched in our patterns of relating to our natural and social environment, that engaging with them philosophically was not merely a matter of exposing their groundlessness through criticism.

We recall that the argument against both kinds of myth had grown out of a story of progress and rationalization, and that a countervailing position had rejected the possibility that either could ever be eliminated from modern life. Considered together, the authors who contributed to Plato's mythic legacy bent towards the latter view. To varying degrees, they felt

that our reliance, in social and political life, on certain tacit, rationally unconditioned frameworks was an inevitable consequence of the human condition; and to that extent, they felt that such frameworks would neither be discarded nor rationalized in the foreseeable future.

As such, what this tradition of authors has to offer on question of the place of myth in political theory is the suggestion that the enduring presence of tacit myths in human environments, in some form or another, was something to be acknowledged actively, rather than entrusted to the mechanisms of progress to extinguish. On this view, it is not enough, for example, for political philosophers to respond to the mobilization of uncritically held and symbolically charged narratives in politics, especially in mass politics, by lamenting that the rationality of political agents falls short of their philosophical ideals. Furthermore, it is not enough for political philosophers to trust that the critical toolkit of philosophy renders them immune from being influenced by myths and their contemporary counterparts. Rather, the authors in the mythic tradition stemming from Plato suggest that there are ways in which philosophy itself relies on myth and its associated functions to navigate territory that cannot be covered by critical reason alone, but which remains integral to the cultivation of its own projects.

The nature of these cases vary as much as the authors' own conceptions of philosophy varied, as did the motivations driving their shared interest in myth. First, there was the broad understanding of philosophy as a distinct type of theoretical activity that required greater depth of thought, and different objects of thought, than do the demands of ordinary social and political life. If the practice of philosophy constituted a unique enterprise set apart from other occupations, one strand of thinking about myth, as an instrument for social organization, made it an indispensable resource for creating and stabilizing the kinds of political environments that make it possible for philosophers to devote themselves to philosophizing. The instrumental

dependence of philosophy on myth, where the latter sustains the external conditions of the former, can be seen in the function of myth in the politics of Plato's *Republic* and of the utopias of More and Bacon, where philosophers make up a separate class and are given a distinct political role in their respective societies.

Such an understanding of the relationship between philosophy and myth may seem superficial at one level, and cynical at another: superficial, because the use of myth to manipulate and to affirm political institutions may, in certain configurations, happen to benefit philosophy without being truly indispensable to it; cynical, because such use risks running dangerously close to being a means of social oppression. However, Plato offers, as do More and Bacon, a deeper and more earnest vision of this relationship – not only because they believed the kind of social stability afforded by myth was an integral condition for philosophical activity, but because they speculated that philosophers themselves relied on the moral frameworks shaped and sustained by myth to orient their understanding of themselves, and of what it means to be a philosopher. Furthermore, just as they were cognizant of myth's potential for political abuse, they also ascribed to myth a dynamic social power that could not only uphold existing institutions, but introduce profound shifts of meaning into the political order without destabilizing it altogether. A radical extension of this thought is to be found in the programmatic vision for a new mythology in German Idealism, which emphasized the capacity of myth to bond individuals together in a social community, but which also took myth to be an endlessly dynamic medium that could demolish barriers between philosophers and non-philosophers, and carry entire peoples through epochs of epistemic change.

A second theme running through the philosophies of the authors in this study is, inevitably, a teleological conception of philosophy informed by Platonic metaphysics. Here, the

task of philosophy amounts to the approximate and asymptotic striving for more perfect knowledge – whether that ideal of epistemic perfection was to be conceived in terms of access to the Platonic Forms, or, as in the case of Leibniz, participation in divine reason, or, as in the German Idealist case, the representation of a highest Idea. These conceptions of philosophy tended to emphasize the primacy of a critical faculty of reason, which could properly discriminate between mere semblances of knowledge – as one might encounter in received wisdom, or in the sensuous and emotive – and knowledge that was in fact progressive. However, as long as there remained progress yet to be made in order to bring knowledge closer to a higher ideal, it fell upon faculties associated with myth to furnish an important complement to reason's critical function.

For Plato and for Leibniz, myth could be used, in the service of higher ideas, to convey content that might function as a placeholder for future knowledge that could not yet be secured in reasons that held up to scrutiny, and which demanded acceptance for the time being until it could be replaced with knowledge that could. For the proponents of the program for new mythology in German Idealism, that order was reversed: they, too conceived of myth's philosophical contribution in terms of future knowledge, but it was the work of a purely active and conscious critical reason that was to be succeeded by a more holistic epoch of knowledge ushered in by myth. What bears emphasizing here is that, for philosophies famously arranged around abstract metaphysical ideals, these were all philosophies that did not lose sight of the human endeavor of their pursuit; and the function of myth, for these authors, was not to cordon off esoteric areas of knowledge foreclosed to rational agency – like divine revelation – but rather to supply means of bridging the gap between a very distant ideal and a work eternally in progress toward it. The spirit of this limitation comes to form an important component of the conflicted account of myth

in the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer, who, while no proponent of Platonic metaphysics, was committed to a model of the progress of knowledge that saw in myth a unique and necessary stepping stone to the development of more sophisticated forms of thought.

Finally, intimated between all of the accounts of myth put forth by these authors is a constitutive picture of its relationship to a third conception of philosophy, as an endeavor to impose meaning on our environment. So understood, myth itself stands for a way of doing philosophy, whereby it furnishes individuals and communities with the stories they tell about themselves and their place in the world, and these, in turn, help form the units of meaning on which all other such activities rest.

If this recalls Adorno and Horkheimer's bleak vision of a political and philosophical future beholden to myth, the overriding tone running through Plato's mythic legacy, by contrast, is one that cautiously embraces rather than despair the inescapability of myth. Shared between these authors to greater and lesser extents was a sense that we are not so much condemned to myth as we have a need for it, and the appropriate response was not to deny it, but to acknowledge it and to make theoretical space for it. In that regard, the authors in this tradition prescribe a position on the opaque narrative frameworks undergirding society that bears comparison to Hans Blumenberg's verdict on myth, as a phenomenon that answers a human need for significance against the absolutism of an indifferent world.⁶⁵ Like Blumenberg, they made a cautious case for appreciating the capacity for such passively accepted, criticism-resistant narrative frames to provide a stable ground for both philosophical and political activity.

3. The authors in the tradition that this study seeks to reconstruct were ultimately concerned with the nature of these socially embedded frameworks that are taken for granted,

⁶⁵ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*.

their relationship to critical reason, and how best they may be directed towards desirable ends in our political life. But accompanying their concern for those deep, implicit frames was also the shared conviction that they could be accessed constructively through myths, the peculiar and obsolete genre they saw mimicked and repurposed in Plato's philosophical writings. The authors of this tradition, then, in confronting the traditional argument against myth in political theory, were also rethinking the relationship between the two conceptions of myth built into that original problem.

In particular, they were pushing back against an assumption that myth, as a literary form, was necessarily a perpetuating expression of a deeper narrative mold that rendered it somehow inevitable, natural, and beyond critical challenge. To the extent that they perceived a human need for those deeper frameworks to provide a stable ground for our philosophy and politics, they were cautiously appreciative of the possibility that myths could help reinforce their stability. This appreciation was limited, because these authors were also keenly aware of the precarious position they were taking up in permitting a place in their political theory for that ossifying effect that myths, as just-so stories, have on the way reality is imagined.

This meant that, at another level, whenever these authors wrote myths in the Platonic vein, or were otherwise thinking theoretically about the importation of the genre in philosophic contexts, they were exploring a distinctively self-conscious use of myth in philosophical writing. It could be said that they were constructing new genres of philosophic myth that drew attention to the possibilities and limitations of its own form; and this, in turn, was also a way of drawing attention to the contingent epistemic status of the deeper frames with which they were concerned.

Finally, their self-conscious approach to myth suggested a further qualification to the orthodox assumptions about the relationship between myths and those narrative frameworks entrenched in the background to our world views. While myths, as a form of expression, had the capacity to mobilize certain implicit narratives about our world that repel critical examination, this did not necessarily mean that such background narratives were then also beyond revision. For the authors in the Platonic mythic tradition, it was important that those narrative frames fortified by myths were sufficiently authoritative as to provide a stable grounding to our philosophical and political experiences; but it was also important that, their unconditioned authority notwithstanding, their normative status was sufficiently provisional that, should the need arise, they would be able to be reworked by subsequent myths. The overall vision may point in the direction of Hans Blumenberg's recommendation that myths are taken to be dynamic rather than static, as forms of discourse that demand constant work and reappropriation in shifting historical contexts.⁶⁶ The particular approach that these authors took toward it, however, entailed imagining the construction of a distinct class of philosophically tailored myths aimed at striking the paradoxical balance between the authoritative and the provisional articulation of certain necessary narrative frameworks.

What their efforts tell us is that a philosophical interest in the narrative genre of myth could ultimately be a vision of hope. Myths did not have to be merely irrational, nor did they entirely oppose the central ideals of philosophy and philosophically informed politics, but offered ways of reconfiguring the deeper substratum to our world views in alignment with those ideals. For Plato and the successors to his mythic legacy, the selective philosophical

⁶⁶ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*.

appropriation of myth opened up new avenues of philosophical access, otherwise closed to critical reason, to that which we most take for granted in philosophical activity and political life.

Part 1

Political and Philosophical Boundaries

Chapter 1

Nature and Myth in Plato's *Republic*

MYTH AS A DYNAMIC MEDIUM FOR REWORKING FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

Readers of Plato's *Republic* often respond to the myths in it with a kind of unease that falls somewhere between Karl Popper's condemnation of the Myth of Metals as an "exact counterpart" to Nazi racial policy,⁶⁷ and Julia Annas' infamous appraisal of the Myth of Er as a "lame and messy ending" to "an otherwise impressively unified book."⁶⁸

At the heart of our discomfort around the myths of the *Republic* is the objection that Plato's resort to the language of myth is in and of itself problematic. At one level, myth seems to be a vague and imprecise medium for conveying philosophical ideas. The tension between the stylistic conventions of myth and those of logical argumentation, for instance, is what makes the Myth of Er such a perplexing, if not disappointing, ending to the *Republic*. One might observe that the long and careful philosophical argument preceding the myth should have sufficed on its own to deliver a convincing defense of justice and the just life, such that the turn to myth seems to undermine what had come before. To not only accept the myth as necessary, but to give it the

⁶⁷ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, I: 61.

⁶⁸ Julia Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 353. Annas has since sought to withdraw these notorious remarks, i.e. in Julia Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgment," *Phronesis* 27, no. 2 (1982): 119-143, 141n25.

last word, suggests a kind of failure on the part of philosophy to communicate with its audience on its own terms.⁶⁹

Then there are the fantastical literary excesses that lend myth its characteristic inscrutability. The content of the Myth of Er is sufficiently convoluted that readers find themselves divided on the question of whether it supports or subverts the main arguments of the *Republic*. Neither answer is quite satisfying: in the former case, the myth becomes a redundant reiteration, in a different medium, of the preceding lessons, and an unnecessarily confusing one at that.⁷⁰ But the alternative in the latter case also raises more questions than it settles, as it takes on the burden of having to explain why Plato would intimate, in this roundabout manner, the opposite of what he means to say.⁷¹ To the extent, then, that mythic narratives are not as clear or

⁶⁹ For instance, Allan Bloom's essay accompanying his translation of the *Republic* contends that "only the philosopher has no need of the myth," which suggests that the myth is told with a certain reluctance on the part of philosophy, merely for the benefit of non-philosophers like Glaucon. Allan Bloom, trans. *The Republic of Plato* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 436.

⁷⁰ The myth leads Allan Bloom to conclude, for example, that the *Republic* "has taught us nothing other than the necessity of philosophy and its priority and superiority to the political life," where "[t]he myth of Er merely reiterates this message." Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 435.

Julia Annas also takes this position, though unlike Bloom, she finds it deeply disconcerting that "[i]deas that have powerful expression in the main coherent body of the book are presented at the end in a much cruder form." Part of the crudeness that troubles Annas about the mythic form is a substantive complaint: that while the myth restates the philosophical case for choosing justice over injustice, it paints a severely misleading picture of the reasons for doing so. Readings that take the myth to be coherent with the philosophical argument would have to answer to the open question as to why its moral lessons would be "cast in the most misleading possible form from the point of view of its message." Annas, *An Introduction to Plato's Republic*, 353; see also 349.

⁷¹ For John Evan Seery, for example, the Myth of Er is "supremely and profoundly ironic" because it allows for the possibility that Plato's readers are exposed to a certain ideal of the just life without the directive that they *merely* mimic it, for then that would be a betrayal of the ideal. John Evan Seery, "Politics as Ironic Community: On the Themes of Descent and Return in Plato's *Republic*," *Political Theory* 16, no. 2 (1988): 229–256, 240–248, quotation at 241.

Stanley Rosen offers a similarly ironic reading of the myth as a reminder "against taking too seriously the odd proposals that are presented in the main books of the dialogue." Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Republic: A Study* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 387–388.

as direct in presenting their message, it is difficult to tell if the myths of the *Republic* make a distinct philosophical contribution that would not have been better made in a more analytic form.⁷²

There is a further level at which the myths of the *Republic* invite skepticism, and it is that the deliberate deployment of myth, especially for political use, can be seen to be manipulative, deceptive, or dangerous. This is a philosophical betrayal of a different kind, consisting not only in the choice of an inefficient medium of expression, but in the calculated abuse of myth's obscuring qualities to help close off certain claims from further scrutiny. One of the more disturbing effects of stories like the Myth of Metals is their capacity to mislead their audience into conflating certain social or political arrangements with the natural order of things, so that they seem beyond revision or challenge through critical examination and other philosophical channels. For this reason, myth, employed or tolerated in a political context, is often synonymous with a kind of falsehood told in the service of an end that only alleges to be noble. Plato's defenders, in turn, are put in the position of having to excuse his myths by first justifying his political agenda, which has not been immune to charges of authoritarianism.⁷³

A related family of arguments pose that the myths subvert their own surface messages, so that their true intentions are once again aligned with those of the main arguments. e.g. Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgment," 130-1; Lear, "Allegory and Myth in Plato's *Republic*."

⁷² See Perceval Frutiger, *Les Mythes de Platon: Étude Philosophique et Littéraire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1930), 218-19; Julius A. Elias, *Plato's Defence of Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1984), 119. For characterizations of Plato's use of myth as a way of eluding rigorous philosophical argument, see W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2.

⁷³ Popper's depiction of Plato as the original architect of the "closed society" is perhaps the best-known reading of Plato as a proponent of authoritarian politics. A variant of this line of thought is Leo Strauss' response, which, though it unequivocally rejects Popper's reading, nonetheless attributes to Plato a distinctly elitist view of politics that presupposes a distinction between true philosophers and the democratic masses. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 1: The Spell of Plato*; Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

More recent studies that make a case for a specifically democratic Plato are often framed as a response to such charges. e.g. Arlene W. Saxonhouse, "The Socratic Narrative: A Democratic Reading of Plato's Dialogues,"

If these are grounds for being suspicious of the myths interspersed between the arguments of the *Republic*, they are exacerbated by Plato's own seeming dismissal of myth, and his reputation for having inaugurated a distinction between language of myth and the language of logical argumentation.⁷⁴ The canonical position that Plato occupies in the western intellectual tradition is tied to his seminal efforts to define philosophy as an enterprise that deals in the latter rather than in the former, and demands, in turn, that knowledge is grounded in reasons rather than in unexamined conventions. When Plato critiques the Greek mythological tradition as being morally incoherent and intellectually arbitrary,⁷⁵ or, in passing formulations, unfavorably contrasts *mythos* to *logos*,⁷⁶ he appears to dismiss the discursive qualities specific to the genre of myth as inadequate, if not counterproductive, to the aims and tasks of this new enterprise. On this view, Plato's use of myth becomes at best a concession to a reality in which not everyone is capable of philosophy in its purest form, and must instead be reached through an inferior rhetoric.⁷⁷

Political Theory 37, no. 6 (2009): 728–53, see esp. n7. See also Euben, *Corrupting Youth*; Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements*.

⁷⁴ e.g. Lowell Edmunds, "Introduction," in *Approaches to Greek Myth*, ed. Lowell Edmunds (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 1–22; Vernant, *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, 221–2; see also n50 above.

⁷⁵ e.g. *Rep.* II 377a – *Rep.* III 392c; *Ap.* 5e–8a; see also *Phaedr.* 229b–230a.

⁷⁶ e.g. *Prot.* 320c and 324d; more ambiguously, *Gorg.* 527a; *Tim.* 22c–d; *Rep.* VII 522a; see also *Soph.* 242c–e; *Phileb.* 14a; *Phaedo* 61b. See also Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, 9–11, 112–15, and the appendixes cataloguing instances of *mythos* and its derivatives in the Platonic corpus.

Commentators point out that the two words are just as often used interchangeably, for example, in Glenn W. Most, "Plato's Exoteric Myths," in *Plato and Myth: Studies on the Use and Status of Platonic Myths*, ed. Catherine Collobert, Pierre Destrée, and Francisco J. González (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 13–24, 14.

Recent scholarship has shown how the trope of the *mythos-logos* distinction is one that Plato inherits from the Sophists. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*; Fowler, "Mythos and Logos."

⁷⁷ A general dichotomy of this sort between philosophic and non-philosophic audiences of Plato's myths is common, for example, in Brisson, *Plato the Myth Maker*, 11, and 87; Janet E. Smith, "Plato's Use of Myth in the Education of Philosophic Man," *Phoenix* 40, no 1 (1986): 20–34; see also n69 above.

What would constitute a more satisfying reading of the myths of the *Republic*? A defense against these objections would have to recognize that the myths are an important, integrated part of the *Republic*, rather than pieces of rhetorical ornamentation tacked on as an afterthought: the myths cannot be read separately from the whole, and the whole would be incomplete without the myths.⁷⁸ But such a reading would also have to respect the distinctiveness of the myths as *myths*, rather than passages that are stylistically undifferentiated from the rest of the work: their literary status as myths has something to add to the coherence of the *Republic* as a philosophical work.⁷⁹ In particular, it would have to answer to the suggestion that the use of myth is at some level antithetical to our commitment to the philosophical ideal that no one view of the world, however deeply entrenched in a society, is immune to criticism and revision.

I believe that the most promising approach toward meeting these requirements would have to give an account of the larger philosophical project uniting the myths of the *Republic*.⁸⁰ As it happens, myths cushion the *Republic* at its most critical junctures. The question of justice, the primary topic of investigation in the dialogue, only enters the discussion with Cephalus' mention of "the tales told about what is in Hades" and their effect on how one might perceive

⁷⁸ See, for instance, Stephen Halliwell's proposal that Platonic myths not be reduced to literary reiterations of lessons already articulated elsewhere in the philosophic argument. Stephen Halliwell, "The Life-and-Death Journey of the Soul: Interpreting the Myth of Er," in *The Cambridge Companion to Plato's Republic*, ed. G.R.F. Ferrari (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 445–73.

⁷⁹ See Jonathan Lear, "Mythic Justice" (unpublished manuscript, 2009).

⁸⁰ A small contingent of scholarship has examined the continuity between the myths of the *Republic*. See, for example, Lear, "Allegory and Myth in Plato's *Republic*." Largely inspired by Lear, Elizabeth Markovits also treats the same three myths together, even discussing the Allegory of the Cave as a transition between the Myth of Metals and the Myth of Er despite her belief that the Allegory of the Cave is not a myth: Elizabeth Markovits, *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech, and Democratic Judgment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008), 130–165.

life, both retrospectively and in anticipation of what follows.⁸¹ The decisive challenge that Glaucon poses to Socrates to defend justice on its own terms, stripped of its rewards, takes the form of a myth about a ring that turns its master invisible.⁸² When Socrates answers that challenge, he defines justice in terms of three parts that make up a soul, first introduced into his city as three societal classes in the Myth of Metals. And the so-called philosophical digression spanning Books V to VII of the *Republic* culminates in what is perhaps the most famous image of philosophy yet written, the Allegory of the Cave. Hence the Myth of Er concludes not only the *Republic*, but also a continuous sequence of philosophically significant myths running through it.

When the Myth of Er is read in conjunction with the other myths of the *Republic*, several new observations come to light. First, it shares an identical plot structure with the Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave, both of which recount experiences that are described in terms of being delivered out of the earth, during sleep, into a different world. Second, it also addresses the subject of these two earlier myths, which concern the effect of education on the

⁸¹ *Rep.* I 330d-e and 331c. Many scholars have observed that the Myth of Er, a myth about the afterlife, responds to the very concerns Cephalus raises at the beginning of the *Republic*. See, for example, Rachel Barney, “Platonic Ring-Composition and Republic 10,” in *Plato’s Republic: A Critical Guide*, ed. Mark L. McPherran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 32–51; Lear, “Allegory and Myth in Plato’s *Republic*.”

⁸² With this challenge, Glaucon is said to have “borrowed” from the argument the external rewards of justice, which must be returned in order for Socrates to tell the Myth of Er. *Rep.* X 612b-614a.

G.R.F. Ferrari traces the motif of debt from the first definition of justice in the *Republic*, Glaucon’s challenge in Book II to isolate the benefits of justice by itself, and the rewards presented to the just in the myth of Er. G.R.F. Ferrari, “Glaucon’s reward, philosophy’s debt,” in *Plato’s Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 116-133, at 123.

As for the bookending effect of the *Republic* at large, Myles Burnyeat also proposes a “ring composition,” but one that arcs over Books II to X. Although Book I stands on its own as a “prelude” to the rest of the text under Burnyeat’s scheme, he also reads Book X as a continuation of discussions begun in earlier books. Myles Burnyeat, “Culture and Society in Plato’s *Republic*,” in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values*, vol. 20 (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1999): 215-324, at 288 and 288n; for the full argument, see 286-319.

nature of an individual. These observations come together in an account that places the central inquiry of these three myths at the threshold of the political project of the *kallipolis*. In this account, the Myth of Er forms the third part of a continuous philosophical meditation that begins with the Myth of Metals and continues with the Allegory of the Cave. Sustained across these three myths is a philosophical question regarding the formation of citizens: can and to what extent can political education shape the natures of their subjects?

This chapter proposes that the three major myths of the *Republic* are at their most compelling and intelligible when they are read together this way. In so doing, it offers novel interpretations of individual myths, especially of the Myth of Er. But it also aims to draw attention to a particular philosophical function that myth fulfils in Plato's political writings. Plato writes myths in various forms and for different purposes across the dialogues,⁸³ but our understanding of the range of possibilities that Plato saw in myth will be significantly expanded by such an account of the myths in the *Republic* – not only because it is in the context of Plato's most widely-read work of political theory that his recourse to myth has attracted the most controversy, but also because these myths instantiate a particularly intriguing use of the genre.

By tracking how each myth in the sequence builds on the previous myth's efforts to assert a definitive account of the content of an individual's nature, this chapter shows that Plato is deeply preoccupied with the unique capacity of myths to ossify reality in ways that resist critical engagement. However, the myths of the *Republic* also betray that this is an incomplete account of the place of myth in Plato's political philosophy: first, it underestimates the ways in

⁸³ For an introductory selection: Stewart, *The Myths of Plato*; Edelstein, "The Function of the Myth in Plato's Philosophy"; Frutiger, *Les Mythes de Platon*; Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*; Murray, "What Is a Muthos for Plato?"; Catalin Partenie, ed., *Plato's Myths* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); see also an overview of some of the history of the study of Plato's myths in Moors, *Platonic Myth: An Introductory Study*.

which philosophical activity itself depends on the stability brought on by mythic views of the world; second, it also underestimates the extent to which those deeply entrenched views that are molded by myths can be further revised by other myths. Read this way, the myths of the *Republic* offer an insight into the capacity of myth to convey both the authority and the provisional status of the unconditioned norms underlying political life.

The Myth of Metals

At some basic level, the Myth of Metals in Book III of the *Republic*, the Allegory of the Cave in Book VII, and the Myth of Er at the end of Book X all tell a similar story: the protagonists are underground, asleep, until they ascend to an upper realm and wake up there.⁸⁴ The Myth of Metals asks the citizens of the *kallipolis* to think of their early upbringing as something they dreamt up while being fashioned in the earth, and now, fully formed and awake,

⁸⁴ Several commentators have observed that descent is a recurring motif throughout the *Republic*, found in two of the myths identified here (the philosopher's return to the cave, and Er's descent into Hades), but thematized also in the opening word of the book, in the Ring of Gyges, and, for some, in the description of the dialectical descent from principles to conclusions in the discussion of the Divided Line at *Rep.* VI 511b [οὕτως ἐπὶ τελευτὴν καταβαίνει]. Seery, "Politics as Ironic Community"; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History, Vol. 3: Plato and Aristotle* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 107-116; Rosen, *Plato's Republic*, 19; Diskin Clay, "Plato's First Words," in *Beginnings in Classical Literature*, ed. Francis M. Dunn and Thomas Cole (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992): 113-130.

The motif of descent is certainly suggestive; however, as I will argue, the similarities between the Myth of Metals, Allegory of the Cave and the Myth of Er are even more substantive. First, waking up and being delivered to a new world above ground are not mere elements found in these myths, but constitute their plot. Second, that plot corresponds – more explicitly in the first two myths – to specific junctures in the educational curriculum of the *kallipolis*. The recurring plot of awakening and ascent can hence be read to progress analogically from one myth to the next in a self-contained series.

they have been brought up into the world. The freed prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave makes a famous ascent, also likened to the process of waking up, from an underground cave into the more perfect world above; and in the Myth of Er its eponymous protagonist journeys through the afterlife before he ascends back to the world of the living, and wakes up on his funeral pyre.

Why this periodic retelling of the same story? The parallel plots shared between the three myths suggest that they are doing similar work – that each telling of a myth about waking up above ground marks a new attempt to achieve a similar end. The Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave occur at two pivotal moments in the education of the guardians who are to rule over the *kallipolis*: the former after a basic education in music and gymnastics, and the latter with an elite education in dialectic, the highest level of philosophical training offered to the city’s potential philosopher-kings. At these stages, the pool of prospective guardians is periodically flushed of its less promising candidates. My hypothesis is that the periodic recurrence of the plot common to the three myths and the periodic sorting of the city’s leaders are related, and that this relation will illuminate both the content of the Myth of Er as well as the larger mythic endeavor it concludes.

The appeal to the rigidity of nature

The Myth of Metals is an answer to the question of determining who, among those citizens who have undergone the musical and physical educations described in Books II and III, “will rule and who be ruled?”⁸⁵ It is a myth about the natures of individuals, and about using them as a foundation for organizing a city, requiring each citizen to practice that role for which

⁸⁵ *Rep.* III 412b. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are from Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*.

he is most naturally equipped. According to the myth, a god has mixed gold into the construction of the rulers, and silver, iron and bronze into the assistants, farmers and craftsmen, respectively. The myth demands that its audience thinks of these natures as fixed, like pure metals that cannot be transformed from one to another. The city is to be arranged around these natural aptitudes, so that all its citizens are instated to their rightful places.

The rigid understanding of individual nature in the myth gives it the gloss of radicalism for which the *Republic* is so often criticized – most famously by Karl Popper, who found in this myth an “exact counterpart” of Nazi racial policy.⁸⁶ Like race, the comparison suggests, the natural dispositions of the citizens cannot be helped and are determined from birth. The thought that individuals are naturally one way or another has been ascribed to the Myth of Metals even by commentators who thought much more highly of Plato than Popper did, and remains implicit in most conventional readings of the myth.⁸⁷ And when nature is held to be something that is determined and permanent, it is easy to see why appealing to its authority may be a particularly effective political tool: by invoking the idea of a natural order, those propagating the myth to the citizens of the *kallipolis* can claim to restore politics to a state somehow less arbitrary than one offered by existing human institutions.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, II:61; echoed in Daniel Dombrowski, “Plato’s ‘Noble’ Lie,” *History of Political Thought* 18, no. 4 (1997): 565–78; C.C.W. Taylor, “Plato’s Totalitarianism,” in *Plato’s Republic: Critical Essays*, ed. Richard Kraut (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000): 31–48; Malcolm Schofield, “Fraternite, Inegalite, La Parole de Dieu : Plato’s Authoritarian Myth of Political Legitimation,” in *Plato’s Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge University Press, 2008): 101–15.

⁸⁷ See, for example: Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 366; Monoson, *Plato’s Democratic Entanglements*, 128; Arlene Saxonhouse, “Democracy, Equality and Eidê: A Radical View from Book 8 of Plato’s Republic,” *American Political Science Review* 92, no. 2 (1998): 273–83, 279.

⁸⁸ Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 365–6.

Mythic stories that make such appeals to nature, in turn, tend to work differently on the psychology of their audience than would propositions that come up in ordinary arguments. They present a set of circumstances as part of the natural order of things, as though they already hold the normative status of those deeper aspects of one's world view that are most taken for granted, and rarely come up for critical examination. As Plato was well aware, the psychological effect of such stories is that they influence one's thinking even when they aren't taken entirely seriously.⁸⁹ It may be the case that these fanciful stories invite us to let down our critical guard – for what would be the point of taking apart such tales using the rules of logic and fact? – and that the ideas they depict as static, unchanging realities consequently sit all the more easily on our subconscious. It is in this way that a myth created by the founders of the *kallipolis* can be accused, as it is in Popper's account, of usurping the powers of traditional myths for gains that are political rather than philosophical.⁹⁰ Even if it claims to serve philosophical ends, like the rule of philosophers in the city, a political myth like the Myth of Metals may in fact be an obstruction to philosophical thinking, to the extent that it portrays certain realities as fixed into the natural order, and beyond criticism or revision through close scrutiny.

What the traditional interpretation of the Myth of Metals gets right about the myth is that stories like this can make meaningful claims about the natural order of things only when they presume nature to be something that is stable and normative. And because stories like the Myth of Metals end up borrowing from the authority of such static conceptions of nature, they will

⁸⁹ *Rep.* I 330d-3; Lear, "Allegory and Myth," esp. 28-30; Danielle S. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 33; Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁹⁰ According to Fritz Graf, implicit in Socrates' introduction of the Myth of Metals is a theory of the origin of myth, as one invented by an individual for the purposes of moral guidance or social control, and later believed by subsequent generations. Graf, *Greek Mythology*, 191.

always have difficulty shaking off the charge of being unphilosophical, and even politically dangerous. What this line of interpretation misses, however, is that the Myth of Metals is simultaneously working with a second, much different conception of nature, even as it continues to draw on the stability of the first.

The appeal to the malleability of nature

The Myth of Metals is also known as the Noble Falsehood because Socrates prefaces it as such. The word he picks, γενναῖόν, translates to “noble” in the sense of well-born, or of a character befitting one’s birth or descent.⁹¹ The falsehood may be γενναῖόν in the sense that it is borne out of noble intentions, the deception notwithstanding, but also in the sense that the thing being lied about concerns the circumstances of the citizens’ birth: the myth tells them that metals have been mixed into their “genesis [γένεσις],” or their manner of birth.⁹² As it happens, the falsehood of the myth consists not only in the claim that the citizens were born with metals in their souls, but in a total revision of what it means to be born in the first place. In the myth, birth is essentially redefined as an event that occurs not at the moment of biological birth, but after a certain education. This is made clear in the first half of the myth, which readers often overlook or subsume into the rest of the story, as it goes on to list the various metals and the classes

⁹¹ LSJ, s.v. γενναῖος; see also Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 455n65; and Kateri Carmola, “Noble Lying: Justice and Intergenerational Tension in Plato’s *Republic*,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 1 (2003): 39-62, 40; Catherine Rowett, “Why the Philosopher Kings Will Believe the Noble Lie,” *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 50 (2016): 67–100, 67.

⁹² ἀλλ’ ὁ θεὸς πλάττων, ὅσοι μὲν ὑμῶν ἱκανοὶ ἄρχειν, χρυσὸν ἐν τῇ γενέσει συνέμειξεν αὐτοῖς, at Rep. III 415a; LSJ, s.v. γένεσις

corresponding to them. As such, it is worth revisiting these lines carefully, though they may already be familiar to us.

“I’ll attempt to persuade first the rulers and the soldiers, then the rest of the city,” the myth begins,

that the rearing and education we gave them were like dreams; they only thought they were undergoing all that was happening to them, while, in truth, at that time they were under the earth within, being fashioned and reared themselves, and their arms and other tools being crafted. When the job had been completely finished, then the earth, which is their mother, sent them up.⁹³

According to these opening lines, the citizens of the *kallipolis* have not truly lived until this moment in their lives. Rather, they are told that they have been asleep through the first years of their upbringing, during which they have undergone a basic education in music and gymnastics, and that these years were not really lived in this world, but inside the earth. It is there that their natures were formed. Only upon the completion of this process were they released above ground, to awaken into their current reality.

The nature of a citizen, according to the myth, is defined by those qualities with which he is born – *this time around*. It is what comes through at the end of a basic education, and not necessarily the attributes one has at the beginning of his biological life.⁹⁴

⁹³ καὶ ἐπιχειρήσω πρῶτον μὲν αὐτοὺς τοὺς ἄρχοντας πείθειν καὶ τοὺς στρατιώτας, ἔπειτα δὲ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην πόλιν, ὥς ἄρ’ ἃ ἡμεῖς αὐτοὺς ἐτρέφομεν τε καὶ ἐπαιδεύομεν, ὥσπερ ὀνείρατα ἐδόκουν ταῦτα πάντα πάσχειν τε καὶ γίγνεσθαι περὶ αὐτοῦς, ἦσαν δὲ τότε τῇ ἀληθείᾳ ὑπὸ γῆς ἐντὸς πλαττόμενοι καὶ τρεφόμενοι καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ τὰ ὅπλα αὐτῶν καὶ ἡ ἄλλη σκευὴ δημιουργουμένη, ἐπειδὴ δὲ παντελῶς ἐξεργασμένοι ἦσαν, καὶ ἡ γῆ αὐτοὺς μήτηρ οὖσα ἀνῆκεν, at *Rep.* III 414d-e.

Danielle Allen has brought to my attention that the opening line of the myth marks a unique moment in the narration. Here, while continuing to talk to Glaucon, Socrates exceptionally projects himself as a narrator into the city to address its hypothetical citizens – something he doesn’t do anywhere else in the *Republic*.

⁹⁴ Also observed in Rowett, “Why the Philosopher Kings Will Believe the Noble Lie,” 68-9.

Two different ideas about nature are at play here. The first is the idea, familiar to the conventional reading of the myth, that the natures of individuals are fixed from birth and remain stable thereafter, that an entire society can be reliably organized around their endurance. The second is the rather different idea that political education is capable of changing the natures of citizens. The educational program outlined in the preceding two books of the *Republic* had in fact hinged on this latter assumption, that the natures of individuals, especially at youth, are rather malleable; imitation of certain behaviors practiced from a young age “become established in habits and nature, in body and sounds and in thought,”⁹⁵ and the primary education of the citizens must be so designed as to shape their natures for the best. Once molded, the natures are then tested in various competitions “far more than gold in fire”⁹⁶ – by the terms of the myth in question, to sift out those golden souls most suited to be guardians of the city. But after the completion of this basic education and testing – that is, the completion of the earth’s work in the myth – the citizens’ natures are to be understood as static, as though they had always been that way. This moment of awakening signifies a new birth, the actual beginning of the citizens’ lives on (and not inside) the earth. Education, personified as an earth-mother, quite literally makes them.

This is not to claim that biology plays no role in Plato’s conception of individual nature; the myth still assumes that members of the several classes in the city will “for the most part” produce offspring like themselves,⁹⁷ and poor observation of the city’s breeding regulations is to

⁹⁵ αἱ μιμήσεις, ἐὰν ἐκ νέων πόρρω διατελέσωσιν, εἰς ἔθνη τε καὶ φύσιν καθίστανται καὶ κατὰ σῶμα καὶ φωνὰς καὶ κατὰ τὴν διάνοιαν; at *Rep.* III 395d.

⁹⁶ *Rep.* III 413e.

⁹⁷ *Rep.* III 415a.

blame for the eventual deterioration of the *kallipolis*.⁹⁸ Rather, the point is that the circumstances of biological birth alone are inadequate for determining a citizen's place in society, and that institutions in the city must redefine the measures of a person's nature so as to remedy this inadequacy. What the myth emphasizes is not the norm whereby a child inherits the nature of his parents, but the possibility of exceptions and the measures they call for. Bronze or iron children will occasionally be born to golden or silver parents, and vice versa, and such aberrations are to be expected precisely "because [ἄτε]" the citizens "are all related": because they have undergone the same program of education and testing, and were hence borne out of the same earth-mother.⁹⁹ Hereditary anomalies occur because the effects of education override the imperfections of biological inheritance. And in all such cases, the city is to ensure that the deviant child is assigned "the proper value to its nature."¹⁰⁰

Even as the myth asserts an account of the nature of a citizen as something reshaped by education, a static conception of it prevails at the same time. In both the view that an individual's nature refers to the attributes with which one is born biologically, and the assertion in the myth that it instead refers to those attributes one is left with at the end of a primary education, there is an implicit understanding of nature that stands in for a default prior to the design of the city. It is a set of circumstances that the citizens are to regard as natural, part of the way things are, somehow irreducible or beyond question. Hence in the Myth of Metals, one status quo comes to be replaced with another. The citizens have gone from taking the manner of their lives for granted, to being told to take as given a different political reality and their places

⁹⁸ *Rep.* VIII 546a-547a.

⁹⁹ ἄτε οὖν συγγενεῖς ὄντες πάντες τὸ μὲν πολὺ ὁμοίους ἂν ὑμῖν αὐτοῖς γεννῶντε, ἔστι δ' ὅτε ἐκ χρυσοῦ γεννηθεῖη ἂν ἀργυροῦν καὶ ἐξ ἀργύρου χρυσοῦν ἔκγονον καὶ τᾶλλα πάντα οὕτως ἐξ ἀλλήλων, at *Rep.* III 415a-b.

¹⁰⁰ τὴν τῇ φύσει προσήκουσαν τιμὴν ἀποδόντεσι at *Rep.* III. 415c.

within it. The extreme invalidity of an old reality dismissed as dream, as well as the extreme validity of a new political reality constructed to replace it, are two sides of a radical conceptual shift that hinges, all the same, on an assumption about the legitimacy and relative permanence of appeals made to nature. The paradoxical combination of these ideas about the nature of a citizen – as at once subject to transformation as well as a fixed source of authority – can be understood to drive the principal political achievement of the Myth of Metals. At one level, the myth remains a political myth in the most familiar sense: sharing in both the form and the psychological effect of traditional myths, it poses a certain political arrangement to be taken for granted within the natural fabric of the world, and not readily available for critical scrutiny. But at another level, the myth is replacing the content of the concept grounding that natural order, all the while without diminishing the stability of that concept or its capacity to give meaning to a coherent view of the world.

The Allegory of the Cave

Three books later,¹⁰¹ a new awakening takes place in the *Republic*.¹⁰² The myth is all too well known.¹⁰³ A prisoner who has dwelled in an underground cave all his life is suddenly

¹⁰¹ The Myth of Metals is told at the end of Book III, and the Allegory of the Cave at the beginning of Book VII. Without belaboring the observation or devolving into pedantry, it may yet be worth noting that the three myths in question are roughly evenly spaced out.

¹⁰² For different reasons, Jonathan Lear believes “Socrates’ account of the Cave is a repetition and re-creation of the Noble Falsehood.” Lear, “Allegory and Myth in Plato’s *Republic*,” 34.

¹⁰³ “When I survey alumni of distinguished universities and ask them what they remember of Plato’s *Republic*, I routinely get the answer, ‘Something about a Cave’.” Jonathan Lear, “Mythic Justice,” 10n.

forced to turn around and scale the path to the world above. Whereas he had known only the darkness of the cave before, now his eyes open to the light of the sun for the first time in this upper realm. These strange prisoners of the cave, Socrates emphasizes, are “like us”¹⁰⁴ to the extent that we, too, have yet to open our eyes to knowledge. A person informed by opinion but not knowledge may be said to be merely “taken in by dreams and slumbering out of his present life,” so that he is at no point ever awake: “before waking up here he goes to Hades and falls finally asleep there.”¹⁰⁵ It takes a wakeful mind to see past the illusions of the things people tend to believe, and the myth tells us that the politics of the *kallipolis* or any desirable regime must amount to rule “in a state of waking, not in a dream as the many cities nowadays are governed by men who fight over shadows with one another.”¹⁰⁶ Like the earth-born in the Myth of Metals who wake up from the dream of their previous lives, the freed prisoner in the so-called Allegory of the Cave is delivered out of the earth from his state of slumber and into a different reality.¹⁰⁷ To decree, as the myth does, that he is to return to the cave and rejoin the community of its denizens, is to envision the possibility of reordering politics around this new reality.

Once again, at stake is the recalibration of the nature of individual citizens. Socrates designates the cave as an “image of our nature in its education and want of education”¹⁰⁸ – the

¹⁰⁴ *Rep.* VII 515a.

¹⁰⁵ *Rep.* VII 534c. Hence the process by which such a prisoner will be led “up to the light, just as some men are said to have gone from Hades up to the gods” is like “the turning of a soul around from a day that is like night to the true day,” at *Rep.* VII 521c.

The metaphor of sleeping through life is used in a similar sense in the *Apology*, in which Socrates, famously comparing himself to a gadfly rousing a sleeping horse, warns his audience that killing him would allow them to “sleep on for the rest of [their] days,” τὸν λοιπὸν βίον καθεύδοντες διατελοῖτε, at *Ap.* 31a.

¹⁰⁶ *Rep.* VII 520c-d.

¹⁰⁷ Many scholars claim it is misleading to refer to this myth as an allegory; I do so for the sake of simplicity.

¹⁰⁸ ἀπέικασον τοιοῦτῳ πάθει τὴν ἡμετέραν φύσιν παιδείας τε περί καὶ ἀπαιδευσίας at *Rep.* VII 514a.

light-filled reality of the world above ground represents educated nature, and the sleepy darkness of the cave its privation. The prisoners' understanding of their own natures is tied to their perception of reality. They have not "seen anything of themselves and one another other than the shadows" they cast on the cave wall,¹⁰⁹ whereas one who has escaped the cave knows his soul to be most truly at home in the upper realm and nowhere else.¹¹⁰ The myth offers that the nature transformed by a certain education is the more legitimate and true. In that regard, the Allegory of the Cave is a retelling of the Myth of Metals, in which education had inaugurated for the citizen a new and more valid nature to replace the authority of biological nature.

That education collapsed into a dream in the Myth of Metals had concerned music and gymnastics – the first rung in the educational curriculum set out in the *kallipolis* for its potential guardians. Like the Myth of Metals, the Allegory of the Cave occurs at a critical turning point in this curriculum. Having undergone the preliminary education in music and gymnastics and subsequently sorted on its basis,¹¹¹ this select pool of potential guardians now face a second round of selection,¹¹² in which they are to be educated in the abstract sciences (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and harmony) leading up to the study of dialectic. Progressing through these studies, Socrates tells us, is akin to being led out of the cave in the Allegory, and learning to see in the light of the sun. The Allegory of the Cave hence continues a project begun in the Myth of Metals, whereby a mythic account is given regarding the effect of education on the natures of the potential guardians. Those candidates chosen to advance to the next stage of the

¹⁰⁹ *Rep.* VII 515a

¹¹⁰ *Rep.* VII 517c-d, see also the *Phaedrus* myth.

¹¹¹ *Rep.* VII 521e.

¹¹² *Rep.* VII 537d.

curriculum are those whose natures had successfully undergone the transformation intended by the relevant education. Both myths give an account of this transformation, by presenting the successfully educated nature as categorically more natural than its uneducated counterpart.

The progression from a cultural to a dialectical education

Two noticeable differences between the Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave deepen their relationship. The first concerns the representation of education in each myth; the other, the audience to whom each is told. In the Myth of Metals, the experience of education is likened to dreams, whereas it constitutes the waking journey upwards in the Allegory of the Cave. In this later myth, it is only uneducated nature itself that is represented as a dream or a state of diminished reality; the education in dialectic stands for the slow and painful process of waking up, and the nature transformed by this process the final and desired condition of being awake. In one myth, the old reality that had been in place before a preliminary education is permanently lost, like a dream one cannot return to; the other myth works to maintain the contrast between educated and uneducated nature, so as to emphasize the difficulty of breaking away from one to transition into the other.

The readily available explanation is that the difference speaks to the nature of dialectic, or the content of a philosophical education understood in opposition to a cultural one. Gymnastics and music, Socrates tells us, had educated the potential guardians “through habits ... not knowledge.”¹¹³ Dialectic, by contrast, is introduced into the educational curriculum at a later

¹¹³ *Rep.* VII 522a. The word translated here as “habits” is ἔθος, or *ethos*, alternatively translated as “custom.”

age,¹¹⁴ when a student's thought would have sufficiently matured, that he might undergo a "turning [of] the soul itself around from generation [γενέσεως] to truth and being."¹¹⁵ If a cultural education steeps the soul in an environment that seems to have been generated happenstance, dialectic transforms it so that it can see beyond the surface phenomena of the world to the principles underlying them. In turn, a dialectical world view allows for the integration of the world of appearances into the new order, rather than a sudden rupture marking the transition from one to the other. The distinguishing characteristic of a dialectical nature is the ability to see the whole containing the particulars,¹¹⁶ and Socrates accordingly insists that those guardians who now embody this nature learn to see both in the light of the upper realm as well as in the darkness of the cave. Unlike educations in habit, dialectic equips them to traverse dream and reality precisely because they can distinguish between those realms. "But you we have begotten [ἐγεννήσαμεν]," he says, to "... have been better and more perfectly educated and are more able to participate in both lives."¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ Socrates is very adamant about not allowing people to taste arguments when they are too young, and similarly suggests that there is a critical age in childhood when human nature is at its most impressionable, but also that past a critical threshold, it is simply too late to change the nature of character of a person. *Rep.* VII 539b-d; 538a; *Rep.* II 378d-e.

Taking note of Socrates' age qualifications is important, because they tell us that the people with whom the Allegory of the Cave is concerned already possess natures informed by a kind of cultural education. This is not, of course, the ideal cultural education that their counterparts in the *kallipolis* would have received, but some informal indoctrination in the culture of the society within the cave. At some practical level, the simple supplanting of a cultured nature with a philosophically educated nature might not be a viable option at this stage of development. The education in dialectic must of necessity come later in life, but also when culture has set in and one's nature is no longer so malleable. On this view, see Lear, "Allegory and Myth."

¹¹⁵ αὐτῆς τῆς ψυχῆς ... μεταστροφῆς ἀπὸ γενέσεως ἐπ' ἀλήθειάν τε καὶ οὐσίαν, at *Rep.* VII 525c. Here I've substituted Allan Bloom's translation of γενέσεως as "becoming" for Paul Shorey's, who translates the entire line as, "the conversion of the soul itself from the world of generation to essence and truth."

¹¹⁶ καὶ μεγίστη γε, ἣν δ' ἐγώ, πείρα διαλεκτικῆς φύσεως καὶ μή: ὁ μὲν γὰρ συνοπτικὸς διαλεκτικός, ὁ δὲ μὴ οὐ, at *Rep.* VII 537c.

¹¹⁷ *Rep.* VII 520b-c.

According to this explanation, the substantive difference between the two kinds of education is sufficiently great that each results in a radically different ontological outlook, which determines whether a new world view generated by that education can accommodate the one that came before it. Moreover, a philosophical education that subsumes – instead of replacing – the totality of experience up to that point accordingly has something to say about it. It tells us that the previous myth was right to depict an unreflective education in custom as a dream, for it takes a philosophical education to be truly awake, but, for precisely the same reason, it also tells us that the potential guardians who had allegedly woken up to their true natures after this preliminary education had not, in fact, done so at the time. (Rather, that experience would have been akin to dreaming about waking up, and being able to correctly recognize this false awakening only after one *actually* wakes up.¹¹⁸) Giving weight to the difference between an education in dialectic and one in music and gymnastics establishes the relative authority of philosophy over habit, and casts the more basic education as a temporary prelude to the definitive transformation of the guardians and their initiation into *true* reality.

The inauguration of philosophy as a conclusive endpoint in the psychic development of the guardians is hardly a surprising proposal to find in the *Republic*. But the same work also invites suspicion of its finality, or the permanence of its impact on the soul – and that is more surprising. To a reader made familiar with the structure of the Allegory of the Cave through the Myth of Metals, the authority of a dialectical awakening is put into question by the very fact that it deposes an analogous awakening from a previous myth along the way. This brings us to the second major aspect in which the Allegory of the Cave diverges from the pattern set forth by the Myth of Metals. The Myth of Metals is presented as a myth to be addressed directly to the

¹¹⁸ See Lear, “Allegory and Myth,” 30-31.

citizens of the *kallipolis*, whereas the Allegory of the Cave is told to Socrates' interlocutors, Glaucon and Adeimantus. By the time they have completed the dialectical stage of their educational curriculum, the guardians of the *kallipolis* would have heard no more than one myth aimed at shaking up their fundamental view of the world and themselves. In turn, the lessons of the Myth of Metals are gradually written over by their subsequent education, which has the final word on their understanding of their own individual natures. An education in dialectic, then, allows the guardians to integrate into a more expansive, stable, philosophically informed world view a crude self-conception that had been dictated to them mythically at the end of their preliminary education.

But Glaucon and Adeimantus, and through them, we the readers, encounter this dialectical transformation in the form of a myth not unlike the Myth of Metals. The analogous structure of the two myths we have read reflects the analogical progression of the educational curriculum in the *kallipolis*. If a nature formed by the education concerned in the earlier myth is something that can be subordinated to the effects of a higher stage of education, the same might be said of the nature shaped by dialectic. For the audience of the Allegory of the Cave, the natures of the dialectically educated guardians may seem, despite the myth's claims otherwise, just as provisional as the natures they were told they had in the Myth of Metals.

What the Allegory of the Cave tells us is that all practices and institutions taken for granted in the culture of the cave, or of any society, are, to some extent, like the Myth of Metals. When the background conditions of one's social environment come to be perceived as natural, they are, in fact, founded on much shifter ground than they project themselves to be. These uncritically held beliefs predictably include the accepted norms and practices of Athens that Socrates regularly dismantles, as well as the preliminary cultural education in the *kallipolis* that

amounts to a training in habit without knowledge. But at another level, they also include the very educational enterprise with which the Allegory of the Cave is concerned. Socrates purports to distinguish dialectic from more basic stages of education as a distinction between knowledge and habit, but this supreme form of education remains one that seeks to make knowledge a kind of habit. At the end of the day, “steady and strenuous participation in arguments” – the content of dialectical training – is, for Socrates, “a gymnastic that is the antistrophe of the bodily gymnastic.”¹¹⁹

The transformation in the soul required of the student of dialectic, the protagonist in the Allegory of the Cave, has the same structure as the revisionary assertions made in the Myth of Metals about what the nature of an individual citizen consists in. The natures of the guardians are remolded according to a new standard, upsetting the content of the concept that came before it, while yet seeking to maintain its stability in the world view accompanying this change. Education is not a matter of “putting sight into blind eyes,” but, “just as an eye is not able to turn toward the light from the dark without the whole body,” requires a turning of “the whole soul.”¹²⁰ At the same time, this total reorientation of the soul ultimately aims for its subjects to have “orderly and stable natures.”¹²¹ What had been reconceptualized in an earlier myth is revised again in a new retelling, with the implicit promise for those directly affected by the process that this philosophical intervention into the formation of their natures will be conclusive and final. Yet the authority of this claim, that a nature transformed by a dialectical education is one’s true nature, is undermined for Socrates’ interlocutors and Plato’s readers by the fact that

¹¹⁹ *Rep.* VII 539d.

¹²⁰ *Rep.* VII 518c.

¹²¹ *Rep.* VII 539d.

the content of an individual's nature had been redefined in a very similar way before, in an earlier stage of the *kallipolis*' educational curriculum. Built into the promise of a true philosophical nature is also a sense of the provisionality of all claims that demand that certain political realities and institutional norms take on ontological status.

The Myth of Er

The prelude to the myth

The Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave concern the educational curriculum of the city and its impact on the natures of its citizens. Both myths pose a radical and conclusive reconceptualization of the content of an individual's nature in accordance with the relevant stage of education. This movement is at once legitimizing and destabilizing, and a tension emerges around the provisionality of the most recently inaugurated standard for thinking about a citizen's nature. The longevity of the impact of education on the nature of individuals is an important question because the time frame with which the *Republic* is concerned goes beyond a single lifetime.¹²² When Socrates is held to give an account of the rewards of justice, both in this life and afterward, the scope of the challenge also asks whether anything of the complex educational program geared at creating justice in souls and cities matters in the long run. Certainly Socrates has something of the afterlife in mind in the design of the educational curriculum of the

¹²² Kathryn Morgan notes the places in the *Republic* where Socrates indicates that a single lifetime is insufficient time for a philosopher to learn about the soul and the world. Morgan, *Myth and Philosophy*, 176-77.

kallipolis' guardians. After the preliminary training in music and gymnastics, and a sequence of intermediate studies leading up to an education in dialectic, the guardians descend into the cave to apply their lessons to the political affairs of the city – including fifteen years of service in the offices related to war, and “the rest of their lives” in a less systematic mix of philosophical engagement, the ruling of the city, and educating the next generation of guardians.¹²³ But rather than conclude his summary of the guardians' curriculum there, Socrates brings them instead to a curious place: the Isles of the Blessed, where they are to dwell for eternity as they continue to receive public honors from the city.¹²⁴ In so doing, Socrates extends the story of the guardians' education and testing into the afterlife – the subject of the myth that concludes the *Republic*.

How are we to think about individual human nature on such a scale? Socrates' prefatory remarks to the closing myth frame the so-called Myth of Er as an account of the rewards of justice in the afterlife,¹²⁵ but also as a reflection on the true nature of the soul. Until this moment in the *Republic*, the discussion had considered the soul only as it is embodied in the material world and, significantly, in political society. The soul, however, being immortal, outlives the conditions of the lives it inhabits. As such, Socrates maintains, its true nature has yet to be revealed. Rather, the embodied soul is not unlike an ancient sea-god, who appears to us buried in aquatic debris:

Just as those who catch sight of the sea Glaucus would no longer easily see his original nature because some of the old parts of his body have been broken off and the others have been ground down and thoroughly maimed by the waves at the same time as other things have grown on him – shells, seaweed, and rocks – so that he

¹²³ *Rep.* VII 540a-b.

¹²⁴ *Rep.* VII 540b.

¹²⁵ *Rep.* X 612b-614a. See also n9 above.

resembles any beast rather than what he was by nature, so, too, we see the soul in such a condition because of countless evils.¹²⁶

To isolate the soul from human life and examine it from an eternal vantage point, like that of the afterlife, would be to draw it “out of the deep ocean in which it is now, and the rocks and shells were hammered off ... And then one would see its true nature.”¹²⁷

Socrates hypothesizes that the true nature of the uncorrupted soul is a perfectly philosophical soul.¹²⁸ If philosophy, as the love of wisdom, draws the soul toward truth and the eternal, the soul in its natural state is a soul stripped of all that is transitory in the world.¹²⁹ But Socrates’ presentation of both nature and philosophy comes into odds with an understanding sustained throughout the first two myths of the *Republic* – that a political education, publically administered in a temporal city, not only shapes a soul’s nature, but can also make it more philosophical. Instead, equating the philosophical soul with a state of being removed from the influences of political society resonates with a different suspicion that emerges in these same myths: namely, that all education, even one in dialectic, is ultimately provisional in its impact on the soul. Are the established practices and institutions taken for granted in a society, even those geared towards philosophy, mere seashells and rocks grafted onto the soul? Or can some things imposed upon the soul in this world make a positive mark on its nature that lasts beyond a single lifetime?

These questions, I hope to show, are at the heart of what is at stake in the eschatological myth concluding the *Republic*. The Myth of Er arises as a response to two demands that have

¹²⁶ *Rep.* X 611c-d.

¹²⁷ *Rep.* X 611e-612a. See also the geography of the cosmos in the *Phaedo* myth.

¹²⁸ *Rep.* X 611e.

¹²⁹ See the *Phaedrus* myth, where souls are at home in the realm of the Forms.

emerged from these prefatory observations: first, that the project of the guardians' education is to be evaluated at the scale of the afterlife; and second, that the nature of the soul in the afterlife and the place of philosophy there have yet to be investigated. The Myth of Er can thus be read as a meditation on whether education acquired in a political setting may be conducive to the construction of a genuinely philosophic nature that persists through time, even in the absence of the societal structures that helped cultivate it. The myth thus takes up a coherent line of inquiry, raised in the previous two myths of the *Republic*, on the extent to which citizens can be formed by the educational apparatuses of the city.

The thousand-year journey: an education in cosmic justice

Like the Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave before it, the Myth of Er is structured around an awakening from a dream and a rebirth out of the earth. Its hero-messenger, Er, is killed in a battle but then comes back to life in order to tell the story of what he had seen in the other realm, as though he had merely slept through the ordeal and had “all of a sudden ... recovered his sight and saw that it was morning and he was lying on the pyre.”¹³⁰ The journey from the afterworld back to the world of the living is an ascent, which Er travels with the souls sent to be reincarnated as they are carried “up to their birth.”¹³¹ The dynamic of dreaming and

¹³⁰ *Rep.* X 621b.

¹³¹ φέρεσθαι ἄνω εἰς τὴν γένεσιν, at Ibid.

It has been suggested to me that, both in light of the Glaucus image prefacing this myth and the cosmography of the *Phaedo* and *Phaedrus* myths, the world of the Myth of Er is situated above the mortal realm; this view is held, for example, by Stephen Halliwell. Plato, *Republic 10: with translation and commentary*, ed. Stephen Halliwell (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1988), 190.

The more popular reading, however, is that Er descends into Hades and ascends back into life when he returns: Lars Albinus, “The *Katabasis* of Er: Plato’s Use of Myths, Exemplified by the Myth of Er,” in *Essays on Plato’s*

waking in the Myth of Er follows the pattern of the previous two myths in the sense that the myth in its entirety describes a cycle of reincarnation, and the souls in question face a choice concerning the lives into which they are to be reborn when they next open their eyes. According to the myth, the “ordering of the soul” changes as it makes its way through the life it chooses,¹³² and what happens in the afterlife, presented as a thousand-year dream between waking lives, has an effect on the content of that choice.

The first half of the Myth of Er describes the journeys of the souls in the afterlife; a report of how they choose their next lives makes up the second. At one level, one half of the myth follows from the other because the primary purpose of the souls’ journeys is judgment and retribution for justices and injustices committed in the previous life. These journeys last a thousand years, and they contain ten lifetimes’ worth of pleasures or terrors, for those judged just and unjust, respectively. Only when these moral debts are paid do the souls have a clean ledger from which to begin their next lives. At another, more sophisticated level, these thousand-year journeys are more directly connected to *how* the souls make their choices. Significantly, it is this second, rather than the first, connection between the two halves of the myth, that accounts for the alarming intricacy of the configuration of its world.

In the Myth of Er, the afterlife boasts a deliberate and convoluted geography. The journey of the souls begin at a “certain demonic place,” with two openings in the ground and two

Republic, ed. Erik Nis Ostenfeld (Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus University Press, 1998), 91–105; Seery, “Politics as Ironic Community,” 241-2 and 250n11; Voegelin, *Order and History*, 108; Rosen, *Plato’s Republic*, 19.

A way to acknowledge both readings may be to differentiate between an eternal realm imbued with the Forms, and an imperfect afterlife divorced from them. The afterlife in the Myth of Er would then fall into the latter category.

¹³² *Rep.* X 618b.

more in the heaven above.¹³³ There, they are judged, and their judgments are attached to them as signs, and they commence their journeys of retribution – the just through one of the heavenly openings toward a path full of pleasures and rewards, and the unjust through an opening in the ground to a path full of terrors and punishments. A thousand years later, a curious thing happens: the journeys loop back to the demonic place of judgment. Two groups of souls, returning from their separate journeys through the second pair of openings in the heaven and the earth, reunite to tell each other about what they had seen on their respective paths. They go together to a meadow, where their numerous stories, too many to recount in the myth, are devoured eagerly.¹³⁴ Then they journey to a certain vantage point from which they get a good view of the Spindle of Necessity that holds the cosmos together. Finally, they are taken to the Spindle’s daughter, Lachesis, where they begin the process of choosing the patterns of their next lives.

If the point of the journey thus far is solely about retribution for the ills and merits of one’s life, there is no obvious explanation, on logical grounds or from Greek eschatology currently available to us, as to why the thousand-year journeys must circuit back to the place of judgment, or why the myth emphasizes, to the extent that it does, the exchange of information that takes place between the souls who have completed their respective journeys. The signs carried by the souls also figure into the confusion: clearly, they are meant to be read – but by

¹³³ *Rep.* X 614c. See James Adam’s diagram of the place of judgment in his commentary. Plato, *The Republic of Plato, Edited with Critical Notes, Commentary and Appendices*, ed. James Adam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 435. See also Halliwell, ed., *Republic* 10, 174.

¹³⁴ There is some controversy regarding the exact geographical relation in the myth between the place of judgment and the meadow, two distinct tropes in the Greek eschatological tradition. The meadow appears independently, as a place unrelated to judgment, in Homer, Empedocles, Plutarch, and notably in the *Phaedrus* myth. Homer, *Odyssey* XI. 539; Empedocles, *Fragments* B. 121; Plutarch, *De Facie in Orbe Lunae*, 943c; *Phaedrus* 248b.

whom, and to what end?¹³⁵ Read on its own, the careful construction of these details in the myth seems excessive, in the way of pointlessly fanciful stories, and commentators have accordingly refrained from ascribing any philosophical purpose to them.¹³⁶ But when the Myth of Er is considered in light of the educational project of the *Republic*, the oddly elaborate program set out for the souls in the afterlife begins to make more sense. If, after Socrates' vision, the afterlife is the final destination for the guardians of the *kallipolis* following a lifetime of learning, and if this educational curriculum had been the subject of the earlier myths of the *Republic* with which the present myth shares a common plot, it would be unsurprising to find a similar agenda of education and testing in the Myth of Er and its universe.

The convergence of the souls' journeys at the place of judgment, the signs they are made to carry from and back to this place with the strange geography, and the vibrant exchange of stories about each journey, can be read as contributing pieces to a systematic education in the rewards of justice, and the role that this relation plays in the greater organizing principles of a harmonious universe. Even as one soul experiences first-hand the rewards or punishments particular to the conduct of his own life, he does so in a fashion that juxtaposes his subjective journey against those of others, and the organizing principles by which they all fit together. This is because the demonic place, where each thousand-year journey begins and ends, is set up in such a way that calls for the co-mingling of a multiplicity of perspectives (*see* **TABLE 2**). As a consequence of both the time they have spent in the afterlife and the judgments passed on them, souls have differently limited perspectives on the details of the retributive system in this world. Souls who traveled the heavenly path, for instance, have no experience of the underground path,

¹³⁵ See discussion of a similar feature in the *Gorgias* myth below.

¹³⁶ "Socrates seems to complicate the myth needlessly." Benardete, *Socrates' Second Sailing*, 226.

TABLE 2.
The educational spectacle at the demonic place of judgment

<i>Souls at various stages of their journeys through the afterlife</i>	<i>What they look like to others</i>	<i>What they see</i>
(1) newly arrived souls awaiting judgment	unmarked	signs carried by the souls in (2) and (3) the contrast in the conditions of the souls in (3a) and (3b) [*to the extent that the souls in (1) don't know how they will be judged, both groups of returning souls, (3a) and (3b), should be of equal interest]
(2) souls who have just been judged, about to depart on their thousand- year journeys	(2a) just	signs of the judgments attached in front of them (614c) the differences between the two halves, (2a) and (2b), of their newly split group
	(2b) unjust	“signs of everything they had done” attached behind them (614c-d) a pronounced causal connection between the judgments and deeds indicated in the signs they carried by the souls in (2) and (3), and the conditions of the souls in (3) [*as such, the souls in (2a) and (2b) would be particularly interested in those souls returning from the paths designated to them, (3a) and (3b), respectively]
(3) souls returning from their thousand- year journeys		presumably still carrying signs and looking “as though they had come from a long journey” (614e)
	(3a) just	coming down looking “pure from heaven” (614d) reminders, in (1) and (2), of the earlier stages of the journey they had just completed
		also seen sharing stories of what they had seen on their journey through heaven (615a) the conditions of the souls in either (3b) or (3a), returning from paths they themselves did not take
	(3b) unjust	presumably still carrying signs and looking “as though they had come from a long journey” [*the souls in (3a) and (3b) are more explicitly interested in both the appearances and the stories of the souls in the other group, (3b) and (3a), respectively] coming up “out of the earth, full of dirt and dust” (614e) also seen “lamenting and crying” as they share stories of what they had seen on their journey under the earth (615a)

and the souls yet awaiting judgment do not even know which of the paths will be theirs. But their convergence in one place also permits them to access, at the same time, an abundance of information about experiences beyond their own. When, for example, souls return from their journeys, presumably still carrying their telltale signs – appearing “full of dirt and dust” if they had been judged unjust, and “pure from heaven” if they had been just¹³⁷ – they are seen, and their stories of terror or pleasure eagerly devoured, not only by other returning souls but by those newly arrived souls, yet to depart on their own thousand-year journeys. Hence for departing and returning souls alike, the demonic place of judgment offers visual and auditory instruction in the unmistakable advantage of falling in the group that wears signs of justice and travels through the heavenly path.

Of course, the deceptively simple moral lesson that it is better to be just than unjust, has been told in less roundabout (though perhaps no less problematic) ways elsewhere. The myth at the end of the *Gorgias* features an explicitly educational program, also involving the visible branding of souls with a list of their deeds, in which “everyone who is subject to punishment rightly inflicted by another ... become[s] better and profit[s] from it, or else [is] made an example for others, so that when they see him suffering whatever it is he suffers, they may be afraid and become better.” Those who fall in the latter category are “simply strung up there in the prison in Hades as examples, visible warnings to unjust men who are ever arriving.”¹³⁸ But the mode of instruction at the place of judgment in the Myth of Er is less didactic than that of the

¹³⁷ *Rep.* X 614d-e.

¹³⁸ *Gorg.* 525a-c. Exactly how or why the souls benefit or are made better from these lessons is frustratingly unclear, especially since the *Gorgias* myth lacks an account of resurrection. See Alessandra Fussi, “The Myth of the Last Judgment in the *Gorgias*,” *The Review of Metaphysics* 54, no. 3 (2001): 529–552.

Gorgias myth.¹³⁹ The structure of the myth mandates that the each of the different paths to the same lesson is always an exercise in drawing connections, in learning where one's own experience and subjective viewpoint fit into the greater scheme of things. In the Myth of Er, the souls themselves actively inquire others about journeys that were not their own, and must discern what is relevant in the wealth of information at the crowded site.

Moreover, there is more to the lesson in the Myth of Er than the retributive advantages of justice. The exercises at the demonic place of judgment prepare their subjects, at the end of their thousand-year journeys, for a vision of the coherent universe held together by the Spindle of Necessity. Along the arc of that journey, the perspective that the souls have on the world of the afterlife progressively widen, between the limited gaze they have on their own paths of retribution, to the exchange of information that occurs back at the place of judgment, and to the view of the structure of the universe. Even the passage to the Spindle is approached gradually; the souls at first see it as a column of light, and the intricate stem and nested whorls of the spindle do not come into visibility until the following day, when the souls move closer.¹⁴⁰ For each soul subject to this journey, these shifts in perspective correspond to shifts in the meaning of justice. The structure of the souls' journeys tracks a lesson in the unity of cosmic justice as experienced from vantage points that gradually progress from the subjective to objective: what is at first the retribution for the deeds committed in one's own life develops into a comprehensive

¹³⁹ Christina Tarnopolsky believes that the *Gorgias* myth remains, all the same, a way of gradual rather than didactic education, premised on "the insight that people must be met on their own ground and that the soul must be led not just by turning the eyes, but rather by turning the whole soul" so as to "then slowly lead them to new ways of seeing the world." Christina Tarnopolsky, *Prudes, Perverts, and Tyrants: Plato's Gorgias and the Politics of Shame* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 119.

The *Phaedo* is the third dialogue that ends with an eschatological myth about judgment in the afterlife. For a comparative study of the three myths, see Annas, "Plato's Myths of Judgment."

¹⁴⁰ *Rep.* X 616b-c.

system of retribution for all souls in the afterlife, until justice finally corresponds to the harmony of the whole cosmos (see TABLE 3). The world of the Myth of Er thus subjects its souls to an education in cosmic justice before they are sent to choose the pattern of their subsequent lives.

TABLE 3.
The progression of the meaning of justice in the eschatological journey

<i>Location in journey</i>	<i>Quality of perspective</i>	<i>Meaning of justice</i>
judgment	more subjective	the name given to my deeds in life (or, if I am judged unjust, its opposite)
retributive thousand-year journey		retribution for my own deeds, which is an experience I have in common with others on my journey
return to demonic place of judgment and the neighboring meadow		the logic that everyone receives the appropriate retribution for their deeds of their lives, despite the variety of both the lives they led and the journeys they traveled in the afterlife
gazing upon the spindle of necessity	more objective	the harmonious principle holding together the cosmos

The choice of the next life: the test of the educated soul

The Myth of Metals and the Allegory of the Cave had told stories about waking up into new natures, in which the totality of experiences that came before led up to this teleological endpoint, and which corresponded to a juncture in the educational curriculum of the *kallipolis* that selected for the natures that had been successfully transformed at the relevant stage. The moment when the souls in the Myth of Er choose the lives into which they will be reborn can be construed in similar terms. This choice requires “looking off toward the nature of the soul” with special care and – as Socrates interjects in the myth to stress – amounts to the ultimate test of a soul’s mastery of

that study by which he might be able to learn and find out who will give him the capacity and the knowledge to distinguish the good and the bad life, and so everywhere and always to choose the better from among those that are possible.”¹⁴¹

Choosing well would require the capacity to resist packing one’s subsequent life with superficial advantages, and to make one’s calculations at the scale of the thousand-year journey that follows at the heels of a single lifetime. It would require knowing the shape of a just soul and the ability to discern it when it is embedded in lives as diverse as those belonging to all who traveled the heavenly path. The intricacy of the journey in the afterlife leading up to this moment may be accounted for because its educative agenda prepares the souls for the choice, and the content of the choice itself serves as a test for the effects of that cosmic education.

And yet, nearly all the souls in the myth fail that test. When the souls are finally tasked to choose the patterns of their next lives, neither the harmony of the universe nor even the rewards of virtue seem to be taken into particular consideration. Rather, for many, the lessons of the convoluted journeys of judgment and retribution are lost, and they make their decisions “according to the habituation of their former life” – a life they had more than a thousand years to forget.¹⁴² Only those souls who had suffered greatly during their journeys of retribution fare a little better: they make more careful, unhurried choices not only “because they had labored” themselves but also because they “had seen the labors of others.”¹⁴³ But there are accompanying

¹⁴¹ *Rep.* X 618c-d.

¹⁴² *Rep.* X 620a.

Even the case of Odysseus, who makes a careful and well-considered choice, also falls into this category. *Rep.* X 620c-d. Scholars are divided on how to evaluate Odysseus’ choice. Allan Bloom, for example, considers Odysseus’ new life to resemble Socrates’ life. Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, 436. Many readers believe none of the souls in the myth choose a philosophic life: e.g. Bernardete, *Socrates’ Second Sailing*, 229; Ferrari, “Glaucón’s reward, philosophy’s debt,” 129; Rosen, *Plato’s Republic*, 387.

¹⁴³ *Rep.* X 619d.

dangers to being affected in this way by the experiences and spectacles of only one's own journey, as those souls who had instead traveled along the heavenly path are just as likely to rush their decisions.¹⁴⁴ One such soul hastens to choose the tyrant's life because he had not experienced those labors for himself but was instead "one of those who had come from heaven, having lived in an orderly regime in his former life, participating in virtue by habit, without philosophy."¹⁴⁵

The story of this soul is particularly illuminating because it stresses the role that the character of a city plays in forming a person's habits, which, at the critical moment, are to be understood in opposition to philosophy.¹⁴⁶ The failure of a soul from a virtuous city to choose wisely is cause for concern, because it suggests that even citizenship in a city like the *kallipolis* may offer no guarantee of the kind of wisdom one needs to pass the cosmic test. In fact, it may even hinder one's capacity to choose well, as a thousand years of journeying through heavenly sights and experiences can bring a soul to underestimate the stakes of the choice, and life in a city where virtue is the norm may dull the moral senses.¹⁴⁷ But it would be inaccurate to then suggest that living in a virtuous city causes moral laziness both in this world and in the afterlife. Rather, the hazards that await even the soul from such a city can be understood as part of a test akin to those administered in the *kallipolis* itself. So much of the educational curriculum

¹⁴⁴ Michael Inwood suggests that the structure of the myth has an equalizing function. Michael Inwood, "Plato's eschatological myths," in *Plato's Myths*, ed. Catalin Partenie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 28-50.

¹⁴⁵ *Rep.* X 619c-d.

¹⁴⁶ It recalls the tale of Themistocles retold by Cephalus in Book I – which maintains that an individual's own merit and the handicap of his birthplace are both important, if not inseparable. *Rep.* I 329e-330a.

¹⁴⁷ Consider Kant's insistence on the deeper moral content of moral actions motivated by duty over inclination. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1981), 12-14 [Ak. 399-401].

outlined in the *Republic* – and the subject of the two myths preceding the Myth of Er – had thus far been devoted to the filtering of unworthy natures through increasingly rigorous tests of character. The moment of choosing in the Myth of Er, then, further raises the bar for philosophy: there is reason to suppose that not every guardian who has passed the test at the end of his or her education in dialectic would be able to meet the new standards set in the Myth of Er. Due to the difficulty of the test, not many souls in the myth make an informed choice, and it is unclear if any of them even chooses a philosophic life.¹⁴⁸ In the correctly aligned nature, however, the educational curriculum of a well-ordered city should serve as a foundation, rather than a liability, for higher levels of instruction and testing that take place in the afterlife. A soul trained in the forms of justice in the city and the soul would be better equipped to recognize it in the cosmos he gets to know in the afterlife. The Myth of Er is hence a continuation of the project of education begun in the *kallipolis*, and in seeking to select for the thoroughly philosophic soul who remains so through multiple cycles of reincarnation, the myth pushes the limits of the question of what, if anything, among the effects of education on an individual's nature can last in this continuous flux.

On whether the things of the world mark our immortal souls

Running through the three major myths of the *Republic* is a coherent inquiry about the extent to which education can change human nature. This is evinced by the narrative structure common to the myths; in each, a new awakening corresponds to a shift in the content of individual nature that occurs after a certain education. In the Myth of Metals, the citizens of the

¹⁴⁸ See n142 on Odysseus above.

kallipolis wake up into natures that had in fact been fashioned during a prior education in music and gymnastics, just as the freed prisoner in the Allegory of the Cave realizes that his true nature belongs in the realm of the Forms that he encountered through his dialectic education. Both these shifts in the designation of nature occur in the *kallipolis* and in the context of its educational curriculum. But in the Myth of Er, souls that have traveled through the afterlife also wake up to newly minted natures, which are a function of the life patterns they choose following what looks to be an intricately systematic program of instruction on the unity of the cosmos. If the Myth of Er mimics the setup of the preceding myths that had been more explicitly about the public education of the citizens of the *kallipolis*, it would then also appear to continue the same experiment by which the natures of individuals are educated then tested for the effects of that education. The ultimate test of the aggregate effect of education on an individual soul, the Myth of Er would then suggest, would occur outside of the particular political context in which the majority of the enterprise was executed.

The question of whether political education can leave a lasting effect on the nature of its subjects should be a matter of urgency in a book about the nature of justice writ large and small, in both the city and in the individual soul. It asks whether the just city can in fact help make the soul more just. The answer offered by the Myth of Er is ambiguous at best: because habituation in the ways of a virtuous city is an insufficient guarantee for virtue that endures through the greater scheme of things, the experiences of the afterlife must supplement the education of cities to pick out the possessors of true justice and philosophy, who are few and far between. And yet, even the combined effects of education in both the city and the afterlife seem to have been lost on the vast majority of the souls in the Myth of Er. The ambiguous ending of the myth leaves

much room to wonder if any soul could or does in fact end up with a nature permanently reformed by the education imposed upon it.

But there is a deeper significance to the unresolved outcome of the educational apparatus of the afterlife. The myth's response is consistent with the recurring pattern of education and testing that had dominated the project of the *Republic*, which hinged on an understanding that education is a continuing, aggregative endeavor that builds over the course of an entire lifetime, if not even longer. At certain critical junctures in this process, the standard for determining the content of an individual's nature is regularly written over, demonstrating the plasticity of a seemingly rigid concept and the possibility of still further revisions, even as each new redrawing of the standard claims a hitherto unsurpassed level of ontological authority.¹⁴⁹ Even an education culminating in the alignment of one's soul with the harmonious universe, the pattern would suggest, is part of an ongoing mission undertaken in a cosmos eternally in flux. If this is the case, claiming that our nature is essentially philosophical, as Socrates poses in his meditation on the sea-god Glaucus, is not so simple. While the dream of a truer nature somehow more indelible than one shaped by impermanent institutions may be a crucial philosophical ideal to which to aspire, the myths of the *Republic* lean heavily toward the position that there is no essential human nature as such,¹⁵⁰ and that the durability of a philosophical nature depends more on the continual striving toward that ideal than in any possibility of its ultimate realization.

In turn, the myths intimate something of the fragility of Plato's philosophic enterprise, and how closely it is intertwined with the inquiry pursued by its myths. If the central project of

¹⁴⁹ On the plasticity of concepts and their susceptibility to being shaped by symbolic language, including that found in myths, see Danielle S. Allen, "Envisaging the Body of the Condemned: The Power of Platonic Symbols," *Classical Philology* 95, no. 2 (April 1, 2000): 133–50.

¹⁵⁰ I thank Oded Na'aman for helping me clarify this point.

the *Republic* concerns the progressive formation of the philosophical soul to whom the stewardship of the *kallipolis* may be entrusted, the kind of normative assertions made in the myths about the citizens' natures plays a critical role in how that process is to be understood. The distinctive feature of the myths' efforts to recalibrate what counts and does not count as natural to an individual, is that they are at once authoritative and provisional. That is, in the myths of the *Republic*, a nature reformed by education is presented as stable, accompanied by a sense of inevitability or destiny. Yet recurring revisions in the sequence of myths, of what gets to be designated as the nature of an individual, bring attention to the provisional character of such claims; a state of the soul accepted as an individual's true nature might come up for revision later on in the educational curriculum. This paradoxical combination of authority and provisionality has the effect of demarcating the contours of strict, yet elastic, norms and expectations around the constitution of a city and its people. In this way the myths accommodate the tension between unconditioned and conditioned thinking – the need to take a certain political reality for granted in order to operate within it, and admitting to its limits without knowing where those limits might be.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ Claude Levi-Strauss identifies the advantage of myth over science in a similar capacity to withstand and even temper contradictions. Paul Veyne also discusses the ways in which myths open up the possibility of juggling different levels of meaning. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths*, 43.

The Mythic Project of the Republic

Those paradoxical qualities, present in the myths of the *Republic*, are characteristic of myths more broadly, understood in opposition to a certain mode of critical thinking celebrated in the meticulous, detail-oriented arguments that make up the bulk of Plato's work. First, the myths of the *Republic* posit certain claims about the content of the natures of individuals, in such a way that these assertions are impervious to further interrogation. Because myths are imagined stories, pressing them for reasons or facts, as one might in an argument, is beside the point. Indeed, Socrates – whose philosophical examinations are otherwise known to revert to a method of relentless questioning¹⁵² – is careful to shield his myths from claims to truth or authorship, that he may not be called to answer for them.¹⁵³ Second, the provisional status of the myths' claims about the content of individual nature may be noncommittal, even irresponsible, in a way that rational systems are not. Socrates' method famously catches interlocutors when they contradict themselves, presumably on the reasoning that arguments build on each other without contradiction.¹⁵⁴ Myths, by contrast, are not held to standards of consistency, such that each

¹⁵² The capacity to always question further is often included in the definition of the Socratic *elenchus*. See *Gorgias* 416d; Gregory Vlastos, "The Socratic Elenchus," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1983): 27-58.

¹⁵³ The Myth of Metals is a "noble lie" and "Phoenician thing" uttered by poets (*Rep.* III 414c); the Allegory of the Cave the culmination of a sequences of images that offer an illustration not of "what the good itself is" but instead of "a child of the good" (*Rep.* VI 506e); and the Myth of Er not "a story of Alcinous," a Homeric hero, but of a distantly foreign hero from Pamphylia (*Rep.* X 614b).

¹⁵⁴ See Richard Robinson, *Plato's Earlier Dialectic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 7 and 15-17; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, "Socrates' Elenchic Psychology," *Synthese* 92, no. 1 (1992): 63-82., 63; Thomas C. Brickhouse and Nicholas D. Smith, *Plato's Socrates* (New York, 1994), 10-11; Harold Tarrant, "Elenchus and Exetasis: Capturing the Purpose of Socratic Interrogation," in *Does Socrates Have a Method?: Rethinking the Elenchus in Plato's Dialogues and Beyond*, ed. Gary Alan Scott (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press): 61-77, 61-3.

subsequent myth in the *Republic* can supplant the description of individual nature in the myth that came before it.

Given certain pronounced differences between the myths Socrates tells and his critical investigations, those scholars who rightly attempt to account for the myths in the *Republic* tend to argue for the compatibility of myth and philosophy in one of two ways. In the first, myths can convey those same conclusions otherwise reached through logical argumentation and, by virtue of their appeal as stories, they may even communicate these lessons more memorably to a wider audience.¹⁵⁵ In the second, myths can also be constructively unsatisfying to a philosophically inclined audience. A myth's inscrutability, the nature of the events depicted or claims made in it, or any other feature that can be engineered to generate dissatisfaction with the seemingly unphilosophical elements of myth – can ironically direct its audience the other way, better preparing them to recognize naïve beliefs and sharpening their faculties for critical thinking.¹⁵⁶

Myth certainly has the potential to serve philosophical ends in both these capacities, but when applied to case of the *Republic*, such accounts miss the larger picture. Here, the respite from critical thinking that myth permits is part of the point, not something to be apologized for. Taken together, the myths of the *Republic* demonstrate how myth can create spaces for taking certain concepts – like one's own nature – for granted in ways that are critical to Plato's understanding of what it means to be a philosopher. To take a concept, practice or institution for granted is admittedly dangerous for philosophy, and the pains Plato takes to warn against the temptations of falling into habit, even those of virtuous cities, are testament to his caution. All

¹⁵⁵ e.g. Allen, *Why Plato Wrote*.

¹⁵⁶ e.g. Lear, "Allegory and Myth in Plato's *Republic*"; Seery, "Politics as Ironic Community"; see also n71 above.

the same, the *Republic* also assumes that a philosopher cannot be made overnight, but requires a lifetime or more of practice and habituation natures like those posited in the myths. And so in Book II of the *Republic*, when the discussion of the educational program of the *kallipolis* begins in earnest, Socrates likens the project to the creation of myths: “Come now,” he exhorts his interlocutors, “let us educate our guardians as if we were at leisure and telling myths.”¹⁵⁷

Posing that a particular concept of one’s nature is to be taken for granted, as the myths do – that is, at once authoritatively yet provisionally – must be considered foundational to the formation of a philosopher through education. In the myths of the *Republic*, individuals seem to be told what they are before they are expected to grow into those roles. The coherence of a person’s idea of herself and her place in the world is not given, but constructed and reinforced through narratives that already assume an illusion of unity that isn’t in fact there.¹⁵⁸ If myths assist in providing such concepts through which a philosophic nature builds its own understanding of itself, they can also ground the philosophic activity of one who thinks of himself in these terms.

The three myths of the *Republic* fall together in a coherent inquiry regarding the political manipulation of individual human nature. The inquiry alone should be of interest to readers of the *Republic*, who tend to have a difficult time with the city-soul analogy because they often feel

¹⁵⁷ ἴθι οὖν, ὥσπερ ἐν μύθῳ μυθολογοῦντές τε καὶ σχολὴν ἄγοντες λόγῳ παιδεύωμεν τοὺς ἄνδρας, at *Rep.* II 376d. For emphasis, I have altered Bloom’s translation of *muthoi muthologountes* as “telling a story” to “telling myths.” See also Murray, “What Is a Muthos for Plato?,” 258.

¹⁵⁸ A similar idea might be found in Aristotle’s famous connection between virtue and *ethos* – habit – in the proposal that one attains virtue by acting as though he were already a virtuous man. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II.

See also Tamar Schapiro’s discussion of the provisional status of the selves adopted by children. Tamar Schapiro, “What is a Child?” *Ethics* 109 (July 1999): 715-738, esp. 733. I thank Eric Beerbohm for recommending this article.

pressured to choose which of the two embodiments of justice the book is really about. Justice in the soul and justice in the city are treated as two parallel manifestations of the form that do not quite converge.¹⁵⁹ But the myths attest to Plato's investment in the effect of the institutions of the city on the soul. They also reveal a paradoxical doubleness to the endeavor, whereby a myth can posit a normative assertion about the nature of the citizens and the political reality in which they reside, while simultaneously admitting to its provisionality.

In so doing, they tell us something more general about the potential of myth. Certainly Plato uses myth across the dialogues in a myriad of ways that are not exhausted by this account, just as he expresses famous misgivings about the way myths are received in his time. But the myths of the *Republic* pose the possibility of a mythic project that is particularly coherent and compelling from the perspective of political theory. Political myths may appear to be essentially unphilosophical, because they seem to present certain political conditions as being fixed into nature, beyond critical challenge or revision. What Plato's use of myth in the *Republic* demonstrates is the extent to which a philosopher's self-understanding and activities rely on the stability of such implicit narratives about one's environment that are taken for granted. At the same time, the unified inquiry pursued in the myths of the *Republic* also speak to the paradoxical plasticity of such narratives and understandings, and their capacity to be revised by other, subsequent myths. In forging an intimate connection between the myths and the educational curriculum of the philosophical city, the project demonstrates the power of myth in shaping how its audiences understand themselves and their political reality. In this instance, myth also comes to bear a more complicated relationship to Plato's philosophy. Plato's myth and his philosophy

¹⁵⁹ For a convincing account that does integrate the two, see Jonathan Lear, "Inside and Outside the 'Republic,'" *Phronesis* 37, no. 2 (1992): 184–215.

are neither directly opposed to each other, nor is the former a force to be merely made subservient to the ends of the latter, but the two are very much mutually entwined.

Chapter 2

The Utopian Founding Myths of More and Bacon

MYTH AS A STABILIZING FORCE

When Hobbes sought to distinguish his *Leviathan* from a way of writing about politics that struck him as more wishful thinking than of practical relevance, he cautioned to his readers that his work was not to be counted among “the Platonic, the Utopian, and Atlantic republics.”¹⁶⁰ In the business of writing about imagined commonwealths, it was an unsurprising trinity of precedents to evoke – and dismiss – in the same breath: it is a well-known and oft-repeated observation that utopia, the genre of speculative political fiction invented by Thomas More, was inspired by the model of Plato’s *Republic*.¹⁶¹

The Platonic precedent would certainly have been on Francis Bacon’s mind when he wrote *New Atlantis* (1626), his own seminal entry to the burgeoning tradition of stories that

¹⁶⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Latin Works* [Thomae Hobbes Malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia: in unum corpus nunc primum collecta studio et labore], ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohm, 1839-1845), III: 263-264. I am grateful to Samuel Zeitlin for pointing me to this reference.

¹⁶¹ James Steintrager, “Plato and More’s ‘Utopia,’” *Social Research* 36, no. 3 (1969): 357–72; Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 118-122; J. H. Hexter, *More’s Utopia: The Biography of an Idea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952); Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Intellectual World of Sir Thomas More,” *The American Scholar* 48, no. 1 (1979): 19–32; Lewis Mumford, “Utopia, The City and The Machine,” in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 101–15; see also Thomas I. White, “Pride and the Public Good: Thomas More’s Use of Plato in Utopia,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (1982): 329–54, esp. n1.

sketched out designs of ideal commonwealths.¹⁶² The comparisons to both *Utopia* (1516) and the *Republic* were inescapable in the reception of *New Atlantis*; references to it, including many that were much more favorably disposed to its genre than Hobbes had been, habitually grouped it with its most famous predecessors. For example, an anonymous effort from that same decade to imitate and to supply an alternative ending to *New Atlantis* presented itself as “an Atlantic scheme” that hoped to outdo the constitution and laws “of Plato’s community, revived by King Utopus or any later Republican.”¹⁶³

Together, these three works could be said to constitute the best-known, as well as the most influential, specimens of utopian literature for political theorists: the original work by More that coined the term, the classical model on which it was based, and its most famous imitation. The publication of More’s *Utopia* had the effect of recovering, on the one hand, a constellation of Greek – and pointedly Platonic – political ideas, and spawning, on the other, a chain of imitations that similarly reached back to the Greek traditions that had been amplified in More’s work.¹⁶⁴ This was true especially on the continent, where the influence of *Utopia* culminated in such works as Tomasso Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (1602), the theocratic utopia arranged around a natural religion and the community of wives and property familiar to readers of the *Republic*.¹⁶⁵ But it wasn’t until the posthumous publication of *New Atlantis* that utopian writing

¹⁶² *New Atlantis* was appended to the end of *Sylva Sylvarum* (1626), a posthumous collection of essays published within a year of Bacon’s death, but the first draft could have been written as early as 1614, and his editor dated the final version to 1624. Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, 243, 251.

¹⁶³ “New Atlantis, begun by the Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Albans, and continued by R.H. Esquire” (London, 1660), ctd. in R.W. Gibson, *St. Thomas More: A Preliminary Bibliography of His Works and of Moreana to the Year 1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), 355-6.

¹⁶⁴ Eric Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁶⁵ Notable works of utopian literature after the publication of *Utopia* and prior to Campanella’s *City of the Sun* include Anton Francesco Doni’s *I Mondi* (1552), Francesco Patrizi da Cherso’s *La Città Felice* (1553), and Johann Valentin Andreae’s *Christianopolis* [Reipublicae Christianopolitanae descriptio] (1619). See J.C. Davis, “Utopianism,” in *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700*, ed. J. H. Burns with Mark Goldie

properly caught on in England, and it was in this later, seventeenth-century English context that the genre thrived and left a lasting, continuous legacy. While the immediate popularity of *Utopia* had resulted in the swift importation of the term ‘utopia’ into the English vocabulary, English imitations of it had been notably scarce. Over the course of a seven-decade period following the publication of *New Atlantis*, however, “dozens” of utopias were being written. Numbering among them were James Harrington’s *Oceana* (1656), Margaret Cavendish’s celebrated work of early science fiction, *The Blazing World* (1666), and Henry Neville’s *The Isle of Pines* (1668); the publication of *Leviathan* itself coincides with the peak of this productive period.¹⁶⁶ *New Atlantis*, it has accordingly been suggested, marks a critical turning point that helped to transform utopia from a concept to a literary genre.¹⁶⁷

Less frequently brought together, however, are the disparate myths that have been written into each of Plato’s, More’s, and Bacon’s utopias. Both *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* feature a set of myths told about iconic or seminal moments in the history of each fictive country, to which presently existing institutions can be traced, and in reference to which they are legitimized. The aim of this chapter is to show the thematic threads of influence connecting these founding myths to Plato’s myths, and in particular to the myths of the *Republic*.

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 329–44. For the reception of *Utopia* in Renaissance Italy, see Eric Nelson, “Utopia through Italian Eyes: Thomas More and the Critics of Civic Humanism,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2006): 1029–57; Paul F. Grendler, “Utopia in Renaissance Italy: Doni’s ‘New World,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 26, no. 4 (1965): 479–94; see also Eleanor Dickinson Blodgett, “Bacon’s New Atlantis and Campanella’s Civitas Solis: A Study in Relationships,” *PMLA* 46, no. 3 (1931): 763–80.

¹⁶⁶ Amy Boesky, *Founding Fictions: Utopias in Early Modern England* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 11.

¹⁶⁷ Paul Salzman, “Narrative Contexts for Bacon’s New Atlantis,” in *Francis Bacon’s The New Atlantis: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Bronwen Price (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 28–47, 30.

The Platonic lineage of these utopian founding myths is notable, because More and Bacon were inaugurating a way of thinking about myth within a Platonic framework that breaks sharply with what had been the traditional and dominant approach to Plato's myths in their reception. Rather than interpret Plato's myths as vehicles of divine revelation, More and Bacon effectively recast the significance of myth within a this-worldly, political framework.

At one level, the founding myths they wrote into their utopias suggest an insight that More and Bacon seem to have shared with Plato, concerning the capacity of myth to shape the norms that define the characters of political communities. In particular, the norms in question in *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* help to create and to stabilize political environments conducive to the protection of philosophy, as a distinct sphere of intellectual activity with different demands from those of ordinary life.

At another level, as had been the case with the myths of the *Republic*, the myths of More's and Bacon's utopias betray a more self-reflexive understanding of their own constructed status. In particular, Bacon's engagement with the genre of the Platonic myth can be understood to be part of a greater program of literary experimentation, which sought to channel some of the resources of mythical expressions in an effort to overcome the shortcomings particular to logical argumentation.

Plato's Myths in the Platonic Tradition

Before we turn to More's and Bacon's decisions to incorporate myths into those works they were writing after the model of Plato's *Republic*, the significance of such a gesture must be

understood against the background of the reception of Plato and his myths leading up to their time. More, and later Bacon, were heirs to a multifarious and conflicting array of Platonic legacies, throughout which Plato's myths held value for different reasons, or not at all. Readers of Plato were divided, among other issues, on the coherence of his philosophical system, on its compatibility with Christian theology, and on the necessity of engaging directly with Plato's dialogues as literary texts. By the Renaissance, philosophical interest in Plato's myths had been nourished predominantly within the context of a tradition that answered in the affirmative to all three of these points of contention; it was the product, in particular, of a negotiation between strands of interpretation inclined to emphasize the primacy of reason in Platonic philosophy, and those committed to a theological claim to the superiority of revealed wisdom.

More and Bacon had variable degrees of investment in the ancient debates over Plato's philosophical coherence or his compatibility with Christian doctrine. However, it was in their appreciation of Plato as a stylist that they were in agreement, and both were, in their own ways, interested in cutting through the veneers of the interpretive traditions in which Plato's texts were often mediated. As such, the legacy of Platonic myth in *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* manifests in a very different way than it does in the framework in which it was traditionally received: to locate the significance of Plato's myths in a sociopolitical context divorced from the language of divine revelation, was to chart out a very different possibility for myth that was human and earthbound in its focus.

The skeptical tradition in Platonic reception: resisting philosophical coherence

The most important question confronting Plato's early interpreters was arguably the issue of whether his writings presented their readers with a coherent system of philosophy. Those inclined to answer in the negative drew on the skeptical spirit of Socrates' inquiries and the aporetic endings of the Socratic dialogues, which, in Plato's depiction, seemed to explore problems of philosophical significance without settling on any conclusive answers.¹⁶⁸ The portrait of a Plato who resisted systems in favor of the critical suspension of judgment was at the center of the interpretive tradition upheld by the central figures associated with the institutional afterlife of Plato's Academy, which adopted this position about three generations after Plato's death and continued to develop it into the First Century BC.¹⁶⁹

For this tradition of so-called Academic Skeptics, Plato's myths seem to have taken on a relatively marginal role for understanding his thought. While some of its early proponents followed Socrates' example in writing down nothing of their own philosophies,¹⁷⁰ and the texts

¹⁶⁸ While Plato was not the only one among Socrates' admirers and followers to write about him, he was the only one to repeatedly draw attention to Socrates' claim of knowing nothing himself, and that he consequently holds no epistemic advantage over his interlocutors. A.A. Long, "The Socratic Legacy," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): 617–41, 639.

For passages of particular interest for the skeptical reading of Plato, see Harold Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 10–16.

¹⁶⁹ The skeptical phase of Academy was launched under the leadership of Arcesilaus and lasted for over a century and a half, settling into a softened version under Philo of Larissa, the last known head of the Academy. On the singular contributions of Arcesilaus (c. 316–241 BC) in allying Socrates with skepticism, see Long, "The Socratic Legacy," 639–640; see also John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy (347–274 BC)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Harold Tarrant, *Scepticism or Platonism: The Philosophy of the Fourth Academy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–65.

For a helpful chronology of Plato's immediate successors in the Academy, see Tiziano Dorandi, "Chronology," in *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy*, ed. Keimpe Algra et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 31–54.

¹⁷⁰ This is true of both Arcesilaus and of Carneades (214–129 BC), perhaps the most radical and most famous figures associated with the skeptical phase of the Academy.

of those others who did leave written work did not survive, they would have been largely suspicious of the supernatural motifs in the myths, which largely drew from religious images suggestive of dogmatic world views, and they would have been especially averse to the myths' characteristic resistance to further inquiry. To the extent that they studied Plato's dialogues, those passages that exhibited the tenacity of Socratic refutation would have received far more attention, and at best, the myths would have served their cause only as admissions of the impossibility of certain knowledge.

But against the skeptical Platonic tradition centered around the Socratic spirit of critical inquiry, a rather different interpretive approach sought to locate a unified philosophical system in Plato's thought by focusing on the metaphysics of the Theory of the Forms.¹⁷¹ Being thus able to affirm and defend the coherence of Plato's philosophical system was a defining element of the tradition that would eventually come to be known under the heading of Neoplatonism.¹⁷²

The Neoplatonic tradition in Platonic reception: theological metaphysics

This rich and varied tradition, which flourished in late antiquity from the third to seventh centuries AD, and which later experienced a dramatic revival in fifteenth-century Renaissance

¹⁷¹ See E. N. Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato*, Commentationes Humanarum Litterarum 52 (Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1974).

¹⁷² Plato's most immediate successors had, in fact, been engaged in the effort to further unify Platonic metaphysics, before the Academy took its skeptical turn under Arcesilaus. In many ways what we know of their philosophies anticipates the central themes of the Neoplatonic tradition; though, critically, they did not fully embrace the Theory of the Forms, and it is difficult to say if they had had a direct influence on the Neoplatonists. See the passages on the Academy under Speusceus, Xenocrates, Palemo, and, briefly, Crates, in Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters*, 44-53; see also Philip Merlan, "The Old Academy," and "The Later Academy and Platonism," in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. A.H. Armstrong (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969): 11-38 and 53-83.

Italy, might be best characterized by reference to a shared metaphysical principle: that the universe was unified around a single highest Form, the goodness of which manifested in varying microcosmic degrees in the diversity of all the things and creatures in existence.

The most comprehensive and influential effort to assert the coherence of Plato's philosophy in such terms appeared in the writings of Plotinus, who crystallized an image of the world that derived its content not just from a constellation of Forms referenced throughout Plato's corpus, but in particular from a supreme and singularly unifying idea akin to the Form of the Good discussed in Book VI of the *Republic*, the idea of "the One" in the *Parmenides*, and the anthropomorphic figure of the Demiurge in the *Timaeus*.¹⁷³ Plotinus' gloss on Platonic metaphysics had the accidental effect of rendering it more easily compatible with religious trends in late antiquity, but also with monotheistic traditions in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This association would in turn prove to be critical to the survival of Plato in late antiquity and beyond.

Assimilating Platonic ideas to a landscape dominated by Christianity in particular did, of course, come with additional hurdles: Plato's Christian defenders first had to find ways of explaining the value of the thought of a pagan thinker who was born before the birth of Christ and who bore no relationship to biblical scripture; and even if it could be granted, along Plotinian lines, that Platonic metaphysics promoted devotion to a single, unifying ideal of goodness vaguely resembling the Christian conception of God, it was still more difficult to reckon with the

¹⁷³ *Rep.* VI 508e; *Parm.* 129c, 142a; *Tim.* 28a. On the centrality of the *Parmenides* to the Neoplatonic tradition see Raymond Kibbansky, *Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance: A Chapter in the History of Platonic Studies* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1981); Brian P. Copenhaver and John Monfasani, "Platonism," in *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Popkin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 303–15, 305–6.

A focus on the absolute and eternal unifying ideas in Plato often drew his early readers to those myths that contained passages on cosmology, eschatology, mystical encounters, and the nature of the soul. Tarrant, *Plato's First Interpreters*, e.g. 85, 95, 136–7, 196, 199.

primacy that Plato placed on human reason, rather than on the aid of divine grace, as a sufficient means of accessing that ideal.

As such, a second question that split the reception of Plato was the issue of whether his philosophy was indeed compatible with Christianity. Those who would answer in the negative would condemn the infiltration of Platonic influences in Christian theology as a pagan corruption of true religion.¹⁷⁴ But for the heirs and protectors of the intellectual tradition that paid homage to Plato and Plotinus, their essential compatibility with Christian doctrine could yet be defended using a combination of two lines of thought. They could insist that reason, for Plato, had allowed him to arrive at a set of true ideas about the divine during an epoch when the providential guide of Christian religion was yet unavailable; but that these ideas were those which Christians would already know through faith alone.¹⁷⁵ They could also insist that Plato's thought contained religious truths because he had in fact been divinely inspired, as a prophetic instrument of God's design for human history. For this latter account, the descriptions in the *Ion* and *Phaedrus* of divine poetic inspiration acquired special importance, as they seemed to validate Plato's awareness of his own role as a vessel of a higher power, and, by extension, his writings as records of the esoteric wisdom to which he had been privy. It was in this context that an older designation for the philosopher as "the divine Plato" [ὁ θεῖος Πλάτων] – weaponized, ironically, in Proclus' attempts to assert the superiority of Platonic theology against the growing popularity of Christianity in late antiquity – became newly resonant.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁴ See Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato*; and also James Hankins, "Antiplatonism in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages," *Classica et Mediaevalia* XLVII (1996): 359–77.

¹⁷⁵ e.g. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1984), VIII.4-16 [303-321], esp. VIII.10 [313].

¹⁷⁶ Carlos Steel, "Proclus," in *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 630–53, 631-34 and 648-53.

The interpretive consequences of the negotiation of Platonic philosophy with Christianity had important implications for the relationship between Plato's logical arguments and his myths. In contrast to the place of primacy occupied by the critical spirit of the former in the skeptical Platonic tradition, later Neoplatonism ended up diminishing both the assumption that reasoning in this vein is the singular – if not sufficient – path towards wisdom, as well as Plato's own agency in writing up a philosophical corpus that lent itself to valuable knowledge. Conversely, in subscribing to the model of the divinely inspired philosopher, the Neoplatonic tradition came to elevate the epistemic status of Plato's myths as a medium that contained revelatory wisdom going beyond knowledge that might be reached through argumentation alone.

Philosophical interest in Plato's myths, then, was overwhelmingly nurtured in the context of a Neoplatonic tradition. In contrast to an interpretive approach that emphasized the skepticism at the heart of the Socratic investigations depicted in Plato's dialogues, the path that led to the embrace of Plato's myths was one that chose the radical coherence of Plato's metaphysics, over the attribution of moral value to the suspension of judgment in one's conduct in life; the theological extension of that metaphysics over the rejection of dogma; and the model of an inspired philosopher, conversant in the mystical language of divine mysteries, over that of a critical philosopher dealing in the precision and rigor of logical disputation.

Approached from this framework, Plato's myths, to the extent that they were byproducts of the philosopher's encounters with eternal religious truths, were above the ordinary reach of human reason, but were also capable of being deciphered through reason. Rationalized this way, Plato's myths in the Neoplatonic tradition were famously allegorical, with exact connections drawn between specific elements in the stories and the deeper religious meanings they represented.

This conception of the significance of Plato's myths, as allegories of revealed truths, helped form, in different incarnations, the background against which More and Bacon were each reading Plato: More against the intellectual ripples, acutely felt in his own Erasmian circles, of the Renaissance revival of Plato and Plotinus in Italy¹⁷⁷; Bacon against the background of the popularization of Neoplatonic ideas in English literary culture, and in classical scholarship on the continent.¹⁷⁸

But it also brings into relief a third question that had emerged as a pertinent consideration in the interpretation of Plato's philosophy by this time, and this was the question of whether studying Plato's ideas necessarily demanded close engagement with his original texts. It was possible, both within and without the Neoplatonic framework, to place no particular importance to the texts of the dialogues, and to accept that the ideas they contained were valuable regardless of their form – whether because these ideas were eternal and divine, or, as later readers would suggest, because rationality itself was universal.¹⁷⁹ However, the Italian Renaissance had borne witness, on the one hand, to the celebration of eloquence as a virtue in and of itself, and, on the

¹⁷⁷ For the possible links between Ficino and John Colet, a friend of Erasmus, see Sears Jayne, "Ficino and the Platonism of the English Renaissance," *Comparative Literature* 4, no. 3 (1952): 214–38, 216–17.

¹⁷⁸ Neoplatonic themes were prominent in, for instance, the poetry of Edward Spenser, and the prose of Sir Walter Raleigh. Jayne, "Ficino and the Platonism of the English Renaissance"; Elizabeth Jane Bellamy, "Plato," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*, ed. Patrick Cheney and Philip Hardie, 4 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015): II 503–16.

The bilingual edition of Plato's Complete Works, published by Henri Estienne and translated into Latin with commentary by Jean de Serres, whose "Stephanus" pagination is still in use today, was published in 1578. It was this Serranus edition of Plato's works that Bacon purchased for five pounds as a gift to St. Albans, deeming it the "best edition" of Plato. Thomas W. Baldwin, *William Shakespeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1944), I: 394; ctd. in Jayne, "Ficino and the Platonism of the English Renaissance," 220–221.

¹⁷⁹ See Gerard Press, "Continuities and Discontinuities in the History of Republic Reception," *International Studies in Philosophy* 28, no. 4 (1996): 61–78.

other, the first complete Latin translation of Plato's works by Marsilio Ficino (1484).¹⁸⁰ Newly available means of direct access to Plato's prose, and thereby of appreciating its eloquence firsthand, not only made it feasible to devote sustained attention to the literary construction of the dialogues, but methodologically preferable to do so.

In particular, the flourishing of the Neoplatonic tradition in fifteenth-century Italy had the effect of bolstering the special status of Plato's myths and their literary qualities. Collecting together all of the extant dialogues of Plato did little to shift back the balance of attention to the Socratic dialogues in which the skeptical spirit of Socrates' refutation was fully on display.¹⁸¹ Instead, Platonic philosophy in the Italian Renaissance supplemented the monotheistic metaphysics derived from the more mystical instantiations of the Theory of the Forms in the later dialogues with a theory of Christian love, drawn from the accounts of love and beauty in the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. Crucially, emphasis on the emotive and aesthetic dimensions of the mania of love served as counterweight to the rationalism found elsewhere in the Platonic corpus, and elevated the status of poetry as a necessary extension, not only of Plato's philosophy, but also of his politics.¹⁸² In his commentary to the *Republic*, Ficino maintained that the banishment of the poets from the *Republic* is not a total banishment, but merely a partial one: the poets have no place in the city, where they are prone to inflaming the worst passions of the throngs inclined to misinterpret them, but they may remain in exile, outside of the city but still within the bounds

¹⁸⁰ James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 1991), I: 300-318.

¹⁸¹ Copenhaver and Monfasani, "Platonism."

¹⁸² Copenhaver and Monfasani, "Platonism," 308-9; Allen, "Renaissance Neoplatonism," 339.

of the state itself, so that virtuous philosophers may consult them and discern the true allegorical meaning of their inspired poetry.¹⁸³

Departures from the Neoplatonic approach to Plato's myths

If prevailing tradition in both More's and Bacon's intellectual and cultural inheritance treated Plato's myths as allegories for revealed wisdom, at once above ordinary human reason and in need of decoding by elite philosophers, More and Bacon themselves approached them somewhat differently. They held scattered views on the central questions that had been formative in shaping the Neoplatonic approach to Plato's myths. But on the question of whether engaging with Plato's ideas necessarily demanded reading his texts directly, both were committed to answering in the affirmative. More's and Bacon's decisions to emulate the literary construction of the *Republic* testify to a shared appreciation for Plato as a stylist, and the value they saw in Plato's myths must be understood in this context.¹⁸⁴

More, in particular, was an early proponent of reading Plato in the original Greek; alongside Erasmus and their shared associates, he taught himself the language and advocated strongly for Greek education in the university curriculum.¹⁸⁵ Bacon is more explicit in his rejection of the reigning conventions and biases mediating interpretation of Plato's philosophy.

¹⁸³ Allen, "Renaissance Neoplatonism," 339.

¹⁸⁴ Though it was common among admirers of Plato to imitate the form of the philosophical dialogue, imitation of the myths was not. The exception is the Dream of Scipio concluding Cicero's own *Republic*, although, the political nature of the work notwithstanding, the myth itself was celebrated in its reception as a source of cosmographical information.

¹⁸⁵ Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*; on More's admiration for the combination he likely saw in Plato, of philosophical wisdom and literary eloquence, see White, "Pride and the Public Good," 336.

On the one hand, he criticizes “Plato and his school,” by which he meant the Neoplatonic tradition and its theologically inflected metaphysics, for their “dangerous and subtle” tendency to mix philosophy with “theology and traditions.” Such an approach, he insists, has produced “fanciful and tumid and half poetical” results, which he alternately calls a “false” or “fantastic” philosophy.¹⁸⁶ On the other hand, he is equally critical of the opposite tradition, stemming from what he believes to be a misreading of Plato’s skeptical statements, which Bacon insists were made “in jest and irony, and in disdain of the older sophists.” He charges the skeptical tradition of having “made a dogma” of the disavowal of certain knowledge, and in so doing, “doomed men to perpetual darkness.”¹⁸⁷

In advocating instead for a middle path that avoids the extremism of both these rival Platonic traditions, Bacon passes over much of the metaphysical and theological concerns that had grounded the traditional appreciation for Plato’s myths.¹⁸⁸ Both he and More are largely unencumbered by those Neoplatonic commitments, but are still attentive to the literary features of Plato’s writing, when they set out to rework the *Republic* on their own terms. This is the background against which they initiate a departure in the reception of Platonic myth. As the following section will show, the legacy of Plato’s myths on *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* partakes in the Neoplatonic premise, absent in the skeptical tradition, that Plato’s myths were significant at all. However, they effectively transfer the significance of Platonic myth from the realm of divine revelation to an explicitly sociopolitical context. Its esotericism radically diminished, Platonic

¹⁸⁶ Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 15 vols. (Boston: Taggard & Thompson, 1861): VIII: 57–351, 79 and 90–91.

¹⁸⁷ Bacon, *The New Organon*, 98 and 107.

¹⁸⁸ This is not to suggest, however, that Bacon’s interest in myth at large was unconcerned with philosophy. Nor, as we shall see in the final section, was his approach to myth wholly divorced from the legacy of the Neoplatonic models.

myth, in this framework, ceases to be concerned with divine mysteries, and deals instead in the norms of communities lodged staunchly in a this-worldly realm.

The Platonic Legacy of the Utopian Founding Myths

The early editions of *Utopia* came encased in supplementary material framing the work as a revival of and improvement upon the *Republic* – one that, on the one hand, breathed new life into an old work most deserving of resuscitation, but which, on the other hand, also brought to completion a project Plato had only just begun.¹⁸⁹ The comparison was even put in verse, attributed to Utopia’s purported poet laureate, and included in the front matter of the first edition:

‘No-Place’ was once my name, I lay so far;
But now with Plato’s state I can compare
Perhaps outdo her (for what he only drew
In empty words I made live anew ...)¹⁹⁰

More had not authored all of these notes himself – much of it had been the work of friends called upon to commend the book to its readers – but the self-conscious references to the *Republic* were clearly something of an inside joke he shared with the other Philhellenists in his circles; no other author is referenced as often in *Utopia* as Plato.¹⁹¹ Utopian writing was, if anything, a self-

¹⁸⁹ “Giles to Busleyden,” Ancillary Material from the Early Editions, in Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 120-122, 120; see also n161 above.

¹⁹⁰ “Six Lines on the Island of Utopia,” Ancillary Material, in More, *Utopia*, 117.

¹⁹¹ On the significance of humor to the Philhellenism of More’s circles, especially with regard to Plato, see Nelson, 19-28.

referential genre, where new utopias freely embraced the fact that they were imitating something that came before, often going so far as to insert themselves into the fictional universes created by their predecessors.¹⁹² *Utopia* makes an appearance in *New Atlantis* as a foreign book familiar to a merchant of the city intent on distinguishing the marriage customs in Bensalem from those in the “Feigned Commonwealth” described by “one of your men,”¹⁹³ and the history of Bensalem, in turn, is integrated into a chronology laid out in Plato’s *Timaeus* and *Critias* – dialogues often read as sequels to the *Republic* – surrounding the myth of Atlantis, from which Bacon’s work derives its title.¹⁹⁴ So it was that the tradition of utopian writing that More launched was built on recognizably Platonic foundations, and constituted a renewal and reworking of the *Republic*.

What features of the *Republic* might we expect to be preserved or discarded when it is reinvented this way? One remarkable parallel between these three works is the presence of a distinct set of myths interspersed throughout the text of each. Both *Utopia* and *New Atlantis*

¹⁹² For instance, *A Description of the Famous Kingdom of Macaria* (1641) of Samuel Hartlib – one of the central figures associated with the movement to translate the vision of *New Atlantis* into the formation of the Royal Society – is an elaboration on a fictional nation mentioned in *Utopia*. Samuel Hartlib, *A description of the famous Kingdome of Macaria* (London, 1641); see also More, *Utopia*, 34.

Such efforts on the part of More’s and Bacon’s imitators to emulate the tropes, if not the original details, of their antecedents were often complemented by claims to outdo or improve upon them – for instance, in Hume’s own “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” which claims to be of a more practical nature than “the Republic of Plato, and the Utopia of Sir Thomas More.” Many, of course, tried to do both. David Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth,” in *Essays*, ed. Stephen Copley and Andrew Edgar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 301–14, 301.

¹⁹³ Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 457–89, 478.

¹⁹⁴ The *Timaeus* famously opens with an allusion to a conversation that purported took place the previous day, in which Socrates reports having described an ideal state organized around principles that match those of the *kallipolis*. The incomplete *Critias* is generally paired with *Timaeus* for the continuity of their characters and, of course, for the myths that they both tell about Atlantis.

In *New Atlantis*, Plato’s myth of Atlantis is attributed to “a great man with you.” Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 467. See also Eric Nelson’s remarks on a parallel moment in *Utopia*, when its narrator aligns Hythloday’s opinions with that of “your friend Plato.” Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*, 38; and More, *Utopia*, 28.

conspicuously make reference to a set of traditional stories best described as the respective founding myths of each polity. These are accounts of discrete, foundational moments in the purported histories of the island nations, to which all their institutions in their present forms can be traced, and in reference to which they are justified. They borrow and emulate familiar tropes typical of classical myths: both sets of founding myths include a story about a legendary lawgiver of exceptional virtue, and one of the myths in *New Atlantis* is a reworking of the aforementioned myths from the *Timaeus* and *Critias*.

The comparison, of course, is complicated by the fact that *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* are unambiguously intended to be read as works of fiction that, in particular, make no overt claims to the kind of rational argumentation that had demarcated the myths of the *Republic* from the rest of the dialogue.¹⁹⁵ Rather, the Platonic tension between argumentative and fictional modes of philosophical presentation ceases to be a meaningful distinction in utopian writing, whose ostensible stake in the *Republic* has less to do with Plato's original point of departure – the more abstract question of what justice is – than with the project of envisaging a fictional polity in as

¹⁹⁵ *Utopia* is split into two books, the first of which does consist in a contemplative conversation that serves to frame the ensuing description of Utopia in the second book. However, there's no question that More fully intended to present *Utopia* as a work of fiction, and to celebrate it as such. According to a Utopian poem inscribed in the first page of the first edition (likely written by Peter Giles), the unique accomplishment of Utopia was in managing, "without philosophy," to portray "the philosophical city" – that is, in bringing such a city to life for its readers without the aid of abstract arguments. "A Quatrain in the Utopian Language," Ancillary Material, in More, *Utopia*, 119; see also Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, 120.

For the suggestion that Book II of *Utopia* was written first, and Book I added later, see Hexter, *More's Utopia*, xv-xiii; George M. Logan, "Introduction," to Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Robert M. Adams and George M. Logan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): xi–xxix, xvi–xvii. The three earliest translations of *Utopia* into German, Italian and French, respectively, all omitted Book I. J.C. Davis, "Thomas More's Utopia: Sources, Legacy, and Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 28–50, 30.

Finally, for a discussion of the significance of the literary status of *New Atlantis* as a work of fiction, see Tobin L. Craig, "On the Significance of the Literary Character of Francis Bacon's 'New Atlantis' for an Understanding of His Political Thought," *The Review of Politics* 72, no. 2 (2010): 213–39.

much concrete detail as the author's imagination will allow.¹⁹⁶ As such, the founding myths in *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* cannot complement the rest of the exposition in the same distinct way as do the myths of the *Republic*, when the former are part of works that are *already* fanciful fictions. Certainly readers of both *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* have received both works in their entirety as being akin to myths in and of themselves, referring to either as a “fable,”¹⁹⁷ a “fairy tale,”¹⁹⁸ or, as in Howard B. White's characterization of *New Atlantis*, as “a rewriting of a Platonic myth.”¹⁹⁹

But to the extent that the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem are fashioned after recognizable templates in the ancient mythological tradition, they indicate that both More and Bacon regarded such stories to be an important element for inclusion in a sketch of an ideal commonwealth. As a literary feature that endures across the reinvention of the *Republic* into More and Bacon's respective utopias, these fictions within fictions are noteworthy in their new contexts – not because they are written in a separate language for exploring a kind of

¹⁹⁶ This, of course, is not to deny the literary character of the *Republic* as a whole. Nor is it to downplay the centrality of moral questions in utopian writing – as explored thoroughly, for instance, in the rich literature on the nature of and conditions for virtue in *Utopia*. On virtue in *Utopia* see, e.g. Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978): I: 235ff; “Political Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmitt, Quentin Skinner, and Eckhard Kessler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 389–452; “Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Language of Renaissance Humanism,” in *The Languages of Political Theory in Early-Modern Europe*, ed. Anthony Pagden (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 123–57; David Wootton, “Friendship Portrayed: A New Account of Utopia,” *History Workshop Journal* 45 (1998): 29–48; White, “Pride and the Public Good”; Nelson, *The Greek Tradition in Republican Thought*.

¹⁹⁷ William Rawley, Bacon's secretary and editor, who oversaw the posthumous publication of *New Atlantis*, appended a prefatory note to the reader introducing the work as a fable. W. Rawley, “To the Reader,” in Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London: Longman, 1857), III: 119–67, 127.

¹⁹⁸ In a famous phrase, J.W. Allen called *Utopia* the “saddest of fairy tales.” J.W. Allen, *A History of Political Thought in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2010), 154.

¹⁹⁹ Howard B. White, *Peace among the Willows: The Political Philosophy of Francis Bacon* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968), 112.

philosophical question resistant to logical scrutiny – but because they employ the institutional authority of myth to fulfil a central social function in those political communities.

The founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem

In *Utopia*, the event at the center of its founding myths is the conquest of the land by one King Utopus, who proceeds to give Utopia its name, its superior culture, and its island geography. References to Utopus occur three times in *Utopia*. The first occurs near the opening of Book II, almost immediately after Hythloday has commenced his descriptive account of Utopia, and recounts Utopus' successful invasion of the land, and its subsequent transformation under his command from a peninsula into its present island form.²⁰⁰ Utopus makes a brief reappearance a few pages later, in a description of the design of Utopian houses, where it is revealed that Utopus had drawn up the more foundational aspects of the standardized 1760-year-old city plans, but had left room for flexibility on smaller matters like ornamentation and building height.²⁰¹ The third and final mention of the monarch occurs towards the end of the book, in a discussion of Utopian religion: whereas the indigenous population had been deeply divided over religion prior to his conquest, Utopus puts an end to civil strife by setting laws that, within some loose constraints, promotes religious freedom and toleration.²⁰² Additionally, even outside the text of *Utopia*, Utopus appears to have been a popular point of reference for any

²⁰⁰ More, *Utopia*, 42.

²⁰¹ More, *Utopia*, 46-7.

²⁰² More, *Utopia*, 94-5.

reader looking for a stylized way of invoking the imaginary island, and references to the republic revived by King Utopus supplied easy synonyms for Utopia itself.²⁰³

The equivalent figure in *New Atlantis* is a lawgiver named King Solamona, the founder of Bensalem's most central institution, a center for scientific research that bears his name, and whose elusive members hold positions of unparalleled honor in Bensalemite society.²⁰⁴ The account of Solamona's achievements, however, is only the last in a larger sequence of elaborate stories presented to the shipwrecked European sailors when they first pose questions about the island to a local governor. The first of these stories recounts the miraculous event that prompted the conversion of Bensalem to Christianity, in which a volume containing the Old and New Testaments, universally comprehensible to the entire, multilingual population, floats to the coast of Bensalem beneath a great column of light.²⁰⁵ Following a brief interruption, the governor returns to the sailors the next day and narrates two episodes from Bensalem's pre-Christian history: Bensalem's bloodless victory, led by one King Altabin, over the mythical Atlantis²⁰⁶; and King Solamona's founding of Bensalem's laws and major institutions.²⁰⁷ The latter event occurs about a millennium after Atlantis is eventually destroyed by a flood, and this span of time tracks the fragmentation of the world from a more connected past, made possible by a distant, golden age of navigational technology, and the retreat of Bensalem from the rest of the world

²⁰³ e.g. "A Quatrain in the Utopian Language," 119; "New Atlantis, begun by the Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Albans, and continued by R.H. Esquire" (1660).

²⁰⁴ Bacon's text cloaks the etymology of Salomon's House in some ambiguity, suggesting it is either a corruption of its founder's name, or derived from the biblical Solomon. Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 471.

²⁰⁵ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 464-5.

²⁰⁶ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 467-9.

²⁰⁷ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 469-72.

and its shifting fortunes. Together, the governor's stories depict the origins of Bensalem's most defining features: its identity as a Christian nation, and its unique policy of isolationism, combined with an unequivocal commitment to the gathering and protection of knowledge.

Perfect beginnings and political preservation

The previous chapter on Plato had shown how, in the *Republic*, myths were linked closely to ideas regarding the status quo that are taken for granted within cultures and world views, and that they constituted a medium that was both expressive and regulative: they expressed certain ideals about the nature of citizens and their place in their environments, and the circulation of those expressions would in turn be reinforcing, so that individuals understood themselves by reference to these ideals.

In the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem, we see the medium of myth once again put to use in congealing a set of essential norms and expectations that are to take hold and harden over their respective societies. As myths of founding, the stories about Utopus and the origins of Bensalem's institutions galvanize a preservationist ethic that defines the character of Utopian and Bensalemite politics. They assert a sociopolitical ideal fully realized from the very beginning, and intended to remain in its original form for perpetuity: they describe events to which the most central institutions of the respective countries purportedly owe their origins, and in so doing, frame present political arrangements in terms of a concrete, rather than unknown or arbitrary, beginning in the distant past. At the same time, these myths present those same political institutions as being worthy of maintenance, insofar as they are said to have providential or otherwise special origins, and have since withstood the test of time. Very little has changed in

either country since the introduction of the reforms described in their respective myths; we are told that all cities in Utopia are more or less identical reproductions of a template first laid down by Utopus.²⁰⁸

The project should be familiar to students of Plato, not only because it is a vision espoused and upheld in myths, but because built into its conservatism are a set of Platonic assumptions about what ideals look like when they are projected onto the sphere of politics. The first is the presupposition that there exists not only a good, but a uniquely correct way of founding a society, so that fidelity to those inaugural conditions is what defines political virtue in Utopia and Bensalem. A combination of Platonic themes is contained in this thought, including the perfectionism suggested by an understanding of the *kallipolis* as the best political regime that claims superiority over all other possibilities, as well as the celebration of self-sufficiency as a moral virtue, modeled not only in an economically self-sufficient city, but most prominently in the figure of the philosopher who cares for his own soul in a world otherwise vulnerable to corruption.²⁰⁹

These themes find expression in the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem by way of a familiar motif. If the myths of the *Republic* had deployed a recurring image – delivery out of the earth – to represent those moments in the political-philosophical investigation that called for a revision of the content of a foundational concept, the accomplishments of Utopus and Solamona are famously stories about the conquest of nature through the conquest of geography. Just as

²⁰⁸ More, *Utopia*, 44 and 46.

²⁰⁹ Many identify the longing to preserve the political conditions of a perfect beginning both as something essential to the legacy of *kallipolis* over the genre of utopian writing, as well as a central element of what has alternately been called utopianism or “the utopian tendency,” e.g. Northrop Frye, “Varieties of Literary Utopias,” in *Utopias and Utopian Thought*, ed. Frank Edward Manuel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966), 25–49, 31; Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*, 5; Davis, “Utopianism.”

Utopus' first founding act is the digging of a channel that cuts off Utopia from the mainland, the equivalent passage in *New Atlantis* depicts Solamona scanning his island's size, quality of soil, waters and ports to gauge its agricultural and industrial potential, and, ultimately, its capacity to support itself without further contact with the rest of the world.²¹⁰ These are mythical feats of isolation, which protect the respective lands from potential forces of change that might cause them to deviate from the perfection of their original form. As he contemplates the landscape of his island, Solamona sees that his island "might be a thousand ways altered to the worse, but scarce any one way to the better," and it is this conclusion that leads him to lay down a final set of quarantine laws, that they may "give perpetuity to that which was in his time so happily established."²¹¹

A second assumption built into the political ideals asserted by the founding myths is a picture of time as being essentially antagonistic to the longevity of human creations. If they share a common vision, of inaugural acts that are perpetually self-sustaining, such acts are extraordinary political triumphs because institutions, once inaugurated, cannot otherwise be expected to preserve their original form. Rather, the myths presuppose time to be essentially cyclical or in flux, and the feats described in them consist in an overcoming of the degenerative nature of time.²¹² Commentators of utopias have often suggested that the Hesiodic core of the Myth of Metals translates easily to a Christian point of departure, whereby humans reside in a fallen world, and the project of early modern utopias had been the restoration of politics to an

²¹⁰ For a comparison and discussion of a point of contrast between Utopus and Solamona, see Anna-Maria Hartmann, "The Strange Antiquity of Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*," *Renaissance Studies* 29, no. 3 (2015): 375–93, 389–391.

²¹¹ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 470.

²¹² See also Bacon's reflections on the nature of time in Francis Bacon, "Of Innovations" and "Of Vicissitude of Things," in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 387–388 and 451–53.

Edenic state of nature somehow truer than the fallen state in which we find ourselves.²¹³ The static character of Utopian and Bensalemite politics, then, are a corrective to a default condition of nature, in which civilizations wax and wane, and all things inevitably come to decay in the way of Hesiod's account of the ages of man, or of the eventual trajectory of *kallipolis*, with its lineage of progressively unimpressive leaders.²¹⁴

Here Bacon's reworked version of Plato's myths of Atlantis deserves more sustained treatment. Plato's original myths, spread between the *Timaeus* and the *Critias*, are said to have been passed down from Solon, the legendary lawgiver of Athens, who in turn learned of Atlantis from an Egyptian priest he met on his travels.²¹⁵ When the governor of the House of Strangers tells the story of Bensalem's ancient victory over Atlantis, he presents it as a more accurate account of the "poetical and fabulous" record familiar to the European sailors through the writings of "a wise man with you."²¹⁶ He begins by dismissing many of the descriptive details about Atlantis laid out in the *Critias*, but sticks closely to the sequence of events narrated in the corresponding myth in the *Timaeus*: in an ancient time predating the memory and records of the

²¹³ Davis, "Utopianism," 329-330; see also Manuel and Manuel, *Utopian Thought in the Western World*.

²¹⁴ The Atlantis myth in the *Critias* features a similarly degenerative lineage of kings.

²¹⁵ Bacon was particularly fascinated by these myths, and reflects on the events recounted in them in "On the Vicissitude of Things." Bacon, "On the Vicissitude of Things." For Bacon's fondness for the opening line of the Atlantis myth in the *Timaeus*, see Hartmann, "The Strange Antiquity of Francis Bacon's New Atlantis."

Notably, the Atlantis myth in the *Timaeus* arises out of a discussion of traditional Greek myths: Solon goes through some of them as a historical exercise in reconstructing the events of antiquity, and is thereupon told by the Egyptian priest that the "Greeks are ever children," because their knowledge of history only goes back a comparatively short span of years. He proceeds to tell the story of Atlantis, which predates Greek historical memory. The thought here is that a people's repository of knowledge is only as old as its myths, which purport to contain its most ancient wisdom. Among the several levels of irony contained in the framing of the Atlantis myth, the accusation of childishness that the priest levies against the Greeks applies also to the quality of their myths, which, in their failure to provide accounts of earlier events, supply information that is "just like a nursery tale [παίδων ... μύθων]." *Tim.* 22b, 23b.

²¹⁶ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 467.

Greeks, the world's oceans had been more navigable; Atlantis, one of the great civilizations that flourished in that time, made an attempt to conquer and enslave the rest of the known world, but was eventually put down; and sometime afterward Atlantis was destroyed by a natural disaster. In being faithful to Plato's outline, Bacon's updated version of the Atlantis myth preserves the dominant theme of the original as it is framed in the *Timaeus* – that the trajectories of human civilizations are, by default, governed by cycles of destruction and recovery, so that nations as great as Atlantis at its peak might be destroyed overnight, their cultural achievements lost, and human knowledge left to start over.

There are two places in this template where Bacon has the Bensalemite governor explicitly correct Plato's account. First, he insists that it had not been the ancestors of the Athenians, but rather the forces led by the Bensalemite King Altabin, who stopped the invasion of Atlantis²¹⁷; and second, that the cause of Atlantis' final demise was not an earthquake, but a great flood.²¹⁸ In making the latter alteration, Bacon seems to have been motivated by a desire to transpose the more varied cycle of natural disasters in Plato's myth – which goes through floods, earthquakes, and the destruction of the world by fire²¹⁹ – onto a streamlined cycle of recurring floods that begins with the Biblical flood.²²⁰

²¹⁷ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 468.

²¹⁸ Ibid. The *Timaeus* mentions both earthquakes and floods in its description of the fall of Atlantis, and it seems the ancient ancestors of the Athenians are victims of the earthquakes in Plato's actual account, whereas Atlantis is drowned by a flood. This is simplified in the *Critias*, where Atlantis is simply "sunk to earthquakes." *Tim.* 25d and *Crit.* 108e.

²¹⁹ *Tim.* 22d-e.

²²⁰ See Brian Vickers' note on this revision, which suggests that the change was informed by Bacon's understanding of the geology of South America, which he read about in Joseph de Acosta's *Naturall and Morall Historie of the East and West Indies* (1590), a major source of the historical and geographical details of *New Atlantis*. Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 793. See also the detailed reconstruction of the chronology of the flood in Hartmann, "The Strange Antiquity of Francis Bacon's New Atlantis," 382-389.

The combined effect of these changes is that the myth told by the Bensalemite governor asserts the singular superiority of Bensalem on a value scale original to Plato's myth, updated with a Christian timeline so as to elevate Bensalem's exceptionalism onto a providential register.²²¹ The greatness of Bensalem, Bacon's revised myth tells us, had always surpassed that of any other civilization mentioned in Plato's account, and its continued preservation, in turn, is a providential exemption from the natural course of time.²²² It is in this sense, according to the myth, that Bensalem might be considered a new and superior Atlantis: one that saves itself from the fate of the first Atlantis, if not the fate of all other civilizations.²²³

Intellectual aristocracy

Our discussion, thus far, of the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem had made a case for reading them as a legacy of the Myths of the *Republic*: like their Platonic antecedents, these myths give narrative expression to aspects of the central sociopolitical norms defining their respective societies. But if the specific influence of Plato's myths on these founding myths consists in the use of myth's resources for asserting a fixed political ideal and stabilizing society

²²¹ Bacon further pursues the metaphor, taken from the Egyptian priest's remarks in the *Timaeus*, of the cyclical flooding of the Nile as being akin to the cyclical ebb and flow of human knowledge. Notably, the first of the *New Atlantis* myths, about the miraculous arrival of Christianity to Bensalem, describes the gospels that float their way to the coast of Bensalem as an "ark" that saved the island "from infidelity," just as the "the remain of the old world was [saved] from water" during the Biblical flood. Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 465.

²²² Anna-Maria Hartmann also reads Bacon's use of the Atlantis myth as a celebration of Bensalem's exceptional longevity as a civilization, aligning the Bensalemite governor's claims with the parallel boast made by the Egyptian priest in Plato's original myth. Hartmann, "The Strange Antiquity of Francis Bacon's New Atlantis." Jerry Weinberger's useful formulation presents Bacon's depiction of Bensalem in these passages "combin[ing] the deeds of the Athenians (Greeks) and the surviving antiquity of Egypt" highlighted in Plato's original myth. J. Weinberger, "Science and Rule in Bacon's Utopia: An Introduction to the Reading of the New Atlantis," *American Political Science Review* 70, no. 3 (1976): 865–85, at 878.

²²³ Boesky, *Founding Fictions*, 20.

around it, the particular political arrangement sustained by such an endeavor is one that, just like in the *kallipolis*, identifies and privileges a distinct class of citizens who devote their time to scholarship.

In both Utopian and Bensalemite society, such individuals are exempt from other forms of labor, so that they may be employed full-time in intellectual pursuits, and they otherwise command positions of great honor.²²⁴ They are selected specially, in accordance with a hierarchical political vision that insists that the order of scholars is filled by those most suited for the task. In turn, the political leaders of Utopia are elected from the ranks of this designated class²²⁵; and while the fellows of Salomon's House do not hold political office, their social station in Bensalemite society befits that of membership in the institution called by turns the "eye" and "lanthorn" of the kingdom of Bensalem, if not "the noblest foundation ... that ever was upon this earth."²²⁶ They make regular, if infrequent and unpredictable, circuits of Bensalem's principal cities to give counsel²²⁷; the reasons behind their visits and requests are protected in secrecy, as are the aspects of their research they choose to withhold from the

²²⁴ In the Utopian context, the scholars' exemption from labor is all the more remarkable given the care More takes to emphasize that Utopia's economic self-sufficiency depends in large part on maximizing the efficiency of citizen body, in particular by eliminating idleness and putting to work all members of the population capable of it. More, *Utopia*, 48-52.

At the same time, in a departure from the principle of specialization around which the *kallipolis* is organized, public lectures in Utopia are attended by both scholars, who are required to be there, and lay citizens, who might volunteer to go at their own leisure without commitment, as it is equally commendable in Utopian society to spend one's free time working at his trade. More, *Utopia*, 50; see George M. Logan's note at More, *Utopia*, 49n28.

²²⁵ With the exception of the syphogrants, the elected officials representing groups of households, all other named public offices in Utopia – "ambassadors, priests, tranibors and the governor himself" – are filled by such scholars. Admission to the class of scholars is a two-step process: one must first be recommended by the priests, upon which the syphogrants take a secret vote. More, *Utopia*, 52. See also White, "Pride and the Public Good," 349.

²²⁶ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 464 and 471.

²²⁷ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 478 and 486.

State²²⁸; they are exempt from standard protocol in seating arrangements at feasts²²⁹; and when one resplendently dressed member of Salomon's House makes a rare appearance in the city where the European sailors are stranded, he is met with a parade in which "all the officers and principals of the Companies of the City" trail behind his cushioned chariot.²³⁰

How are we to interpret the relationship between the use of myth, as a resource for upholding a political ideal on the one hand, and the fact that the specific political arrangement sustained by this project is one that demarcates a class of intellectual elites? Maneuvering the traditional powers associated with myth in the service of establishing a separate intellectual class is, of course, the famous accomplishment of the Myth of Metals in Plato's *Republic*. The influence of this myth is evident in the class systems of both Utopia and Bensalem: the passage in which Hythloday introduces the Utopian scholar class borrows directly from the language of the Myth of Metals,²³¹ and one of Bensalem's founding myths is directly concerned with the creation of Salomon's House.²³²

²²⁸ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 478, 479, and 487.

²²⁹ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 475.

²³⁰ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 479.

²³¹ Compare *Rep.* III 415b-c with More, *Utopia*, 52, noting especially the constructions of demotion and promotion to describe mobility between laboring and intellectual classes. Where More diverges from Plato in these passages is a difference in emphasis: if an idiosyncratically defined conception of nature had been Plato's criterion for membership in one class over another in the *kallipolis*, More stresses the value of individual effort; this also means that, unlike in the *kallipolis*, promotion or demotion from the Utopian scholar class can occur at any time, rather than after a particular juncture of the educational curriculum instituted by the state.

²³² It is the basic equality of the citizens, rather the difference between kinds of labor, that is emphasized in Utopia's founding myth, and in that regard the myth bears a somewhat different relationship to the scholastic order. Like the equivalent myths in the *Republic* and in *New Atlantis*, the Utopian founding myth is one that seeks to stabilize society around a fixed political vision, but in Utopia this vision is one that smooths out class differences under a new common denominator: an appeal to unity not unlike the part of the Myth of Metals that asserts the basic fraternity of the earthborn citizens, before it goes on to sort them into distinct classes.

A certain picture of the relationship between myth and philosophy emerges from the nexus of these Platonic echoes: this is a relationship of instrumentality, whereby the founding myths appear to serve as an effective means of stabilizing those political conditions that permit individuals to engage in theoretic activity with special focus. Here, philosophy, insofar as it is represented in Utopia and Bensalem, might be broadly construed as an activity with different needs and aims from those of other pursuits in the commonwealth, such that it requires its own space and devoted practitioners if it is to be engaged properly. Giving primacy, then, to this kind of activity, as both commonwealths do, is an enterprise that comes at no insignificant cost for the state, especially when whatever benefits it might confer on the commonwealth, or on the formation of its leaders, are less tangible, more difficult to isolate, and are taken to work over longer stretches of time.

It is in turn expedient to have the services of myth at the disposal of philosophy, so conceived, because myths that work to normalize the way things are as they stand also end up protecting existing institutions from perennially coming up for renewed justification. Instead the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem help their respective societies to take for granted that the provisions they make for the autonomy of philosophy, as a separate sphere of activity, are part of a default that is worth preserving.

Such an instrumental conception of the relationship between myth and philosophy, in turn, suggests an intuition, on the part of both authors, concerning the capacity of myth to be specially effective in expressing deeper social ideals in such a way that they become normative. It is not clear whether More or Bacon troubled themselves to question why myth might have this kind of institutionalizing power. But if the political appropriation of its social force in Utopia and Bensalem strikes us as a familiar or unsurprising use of myth, it might also raise a prospect

about the perceived relationship between myth and philosophy in More and Bacon's thought that is at once shallow and troubling. Did More and Bacon believe the proper practice of philosophy necessarily depended on the crutches of certain external political conditions that could only be guaranteed through the telling of myths? Or, did they merely see myth as a convenient shortcut for exonerating philosophy from self-justification, and the elite practitioners of philosophy from the everyday hardships, demanded of the rest of the citizenry, involved in meeting the basic material needs of the commonwealth? And if the latter, wouldn't such a use of myth amount to being a means of social oppression that betrays a set of political values from which philosophy ought not to consider itself exempt – a charge Popper levied against Plato's invocation of the Myth of Metals in the *kallipolis*?

It may be the case that this line of criticism cannot be dismissed entirely – not as long as the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem are instrumental to a conservationist social order, which in turn grants special protections to philosophy as an autonomous sphere. However, some of the more subtle aspects of the myths do suggest that the use More and Bacon make of the medium is not exhausted by such readings.

For one, while the myths are essentially tied to the project of perpetuating an established set of political arrangements, it bears noting that the founding myths of both *Utopia* and *New Atlantis* are stories of refoundings. Utopus is a conqueror who successfully navigates the integration of his soldiers with the indigenous population, and the reform of an existing political community; the subjects of Bensalem's myths are likewise institutions that, for all their enduring importance, are introduced without great political upset at variously spaced intervals in the continuous history of the island.²³³ The doubleness by which these myths convey both

²³³ On a related note, tales of Utopus' other deeds emphasize the ways in which he made provisions for flexibility within the enduring institutions he created: although the foundations of the city were laid by Utopus,

conservatism as well as reform suggests that More and Bacon held a more dynamic view of myth, as instruments of radical social change as well as of social preservation, and was keen to remind their readers of both of these functions.

Second, there is also reason to suspect both authors saw in myth a capacity for self-reflexivity, by which myths might further a seemingly fixed set of political narratives, while also pointing toward their own constructed status. We see this in the proper names Bacon and More chose for the figures that serve as the subjects of their myths. While the myth claims that Utopus gave the island its name, it would be clear to More's audience – aware of the pun behind the etymology of Utopia – that it was the mythical figure of Utopus who was named after the commonwealth, rather than the other way around. By a similar logic – and given, in particular, the subsequent discussion in *New Atlantis* of the two competing etymologies behind Salomon's House²³⁴ – it doesn't seem an accident that King Altabin has a name that is not only a pun on the Latin, *bini-alta*, for “twice-lofty”, but potentially derives its root from “Atlantis” itself.

Finally, Bacon himself was very much invested in exploring the relationship between myth and knowledge in such a way that suggests the practice of philosophy, on his view, did in fact depend on functions essential to myth: not just as a crutch external to philosophy, but also as phenomena more essentially entangled with and internal to the tasks and aims of philosophy. In particular, the relationship between knowledge and the unique characteristics of myth was a subject of endless fascination for Bacon, and a topic to which he devoted extended, focused study.

buildings within the overall design can be adorned and improved to taste; although all citizens must believe in the immortality of the soul and in divine providence, there is religious freedom within these bounds.

²³⁴ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 471.

“The crowne” of mythographers

It was a small collection of essays written in late middle age, about a decade and a half before the composition of *New Atlantis*, that launched Bacon's reputation among his contemporaries as “the crowne” of mythographers.²³⁵ *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), dedicated to Bacon's “nursing-mother the famous University of Cambridge,” offered his commentary on thirty-one classical myths he took to be allegorical stories about more general truths about the ways of the world.²³⁶ For example, the myth of the ill-fated flight of Icarus, who fails to heed his father's warning to fly neither too close to the sun nor too close to the sea, was a parable, according to Bacon, about the virtues of moderation, or the “middle way”, and the dangers of excess in any pursuit. Such allegorical analyses of familiar myths were hardly a novelty; Bacon's collection had a direct antecedent in Natale Conti's celebrated *Mythologiae* (1567), which was a standard source in the Renaissance for the interpretation of Greco-Roman mythology.²³⁷ Nonetheless Bacon's book was a bestseller, even more so than *New Atlantis*, and

²³⁵ George Sandys, *Ovid's Metamorphosis Englished, Mythologiz'd, and Represented in Figures* (London, 1632), 18; ctd in Rhodri Lewis, “Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth,” *The Review of English Studies* 61, no. 250 (2010): 360–89, 373.

²³⁶ Francis Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” trans. James Spedding, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1857), XIII: 67–172, dedication at 71-2. There are thirty-one essays in the collection, each devoted to a separate myth. However, the twenty-seventh, on Icarus, also claims to double as an essay on Scylla and Charybdis.

²³⁷ Natale Conti, *Mythologiae*, trans. John Mulryan and Steven Brown (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2006); Barbara Carman Garner, “Francis Bacon, Natalis Comes and the Mythological Tradition,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 33 (1970): 264–91; Charles W. Lemmi, *The Classic Deities in Bacon: A Study in Mythological Symbolism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1933); Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (London: Routledge, 1968), 74-75; H. David Brumble, “Let Us Make Gods in Our Image: Greek Myth in Medieval and Renaissance Literature,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. Roger D. Woodard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007): 407–26, 420-21.

Bacon took pride in the commercial success it enjoyed across Europe. “A little work of mine ...hath begun to pass the world,” he wrote to a friend. “They tell me my latin is turned into silver, and become current.”²³⁸

Of the Wisdom of the Ancients marked the high point of a prolonged period, lasting nearly two decades, in which Bacon showed conspicuous interest in the study of myths.²³⁹ But if the work secured the coronation of Bacon as an authority on and defender of the hidden wisdom contained in classical mythology, it is also a crown that seems to fit ill against his reputation as the father of the modern scientific method. This dissonance is felt most acutely if one subscribes to the thought that there is an essential connection to be drawn between the narrated genre of classical myths in which Bacon sought allegorical wisdom, and a much more contemporary designation of myth to describe the opaque, indemonstrable frameworks undergirding unreflective views of the world. In particular, the rational conquest of nature – the unifying ambition running through the entirety of Bacon’s intellectual project – has been taken to exemplify, most prominently in the first pages of Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the prototypical spirit of the enlightenment struggle to escape myth.²⁴⁰ In this

²³⁸ Bacon to Matthew, 17 February 1610; ctd. in Lewis, “Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth,” 364.

²³⁹ See Lewis, “Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth,” 364-5; Rossi, *Francis Bacon*.

Bacon’s term for myth throughout these studies is “fable.” For an overview of the gradual replacement of the word “fable” with “myth” in common usage between the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries, and the implications of this development, see Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 1-24, esp. 2-3; 1. Jean Starobinsky, “Fable and Mythology in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Literature and Theoretical Reflection,” in *Mythologies*, ed. Yves Bonnefoy, trans. Wendy Doniger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), II: 722–32.

²⁴⁰ “Enlightenment’s program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge. Bacon, ‘the father of experimental philosophy,’ brought these motifs together. He despised the exponents of tradition, who substituted belief for knowledge and were as unwilling to doubt as they were reckless in supplying answers. All this, he said, stood in the way of ‘the happy match between the mind of man and the nature of things,’ with the result that humanity was unable to use its knowledge for the betterment of its condition. ...” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

vein, scholars of myth have pointed to Bacon's theory of idols as an early articulation of one such modern understanding of myth, as that which is opposed to intellectual progress: just as Bacon believed the path to scientific knowledge demands of those who seek it that they first clear their minds of the distorting effects of the idols that influence their perception of the world, so must modern thought work to break down and overcome the biases of the tacit frameworks entrenched into our world views.²⁴¹

The remainder of this chapter will examine Bacon's theory of myth, and suggest that both his interest in myth more generally and his reworking of the Platonic myth in particular are part of a broader program of literary experimentation. While Bacon's theory of myth makes a distinction between the valuable wisdom at the core of myth and the fabulous expressions in which it is encased, the connection between them is not entirely arbitrary, and mythical expressions offer communicative resources unique to the form. In particular, the appropriation of such resources in literary experiments can be read as part of an effort to overcome the shortcomings he diagnosed in logical argumentation.

The two-part model of myth

Of the Wisdom of the Ancients and Bacon's other remarks on myth advance a model of myth made of two constituent parts: a core, consisting in a kernel of natural wisdom, and an encasing of corrupted, fabulous expressions that stands as a barrier between a myth's true, ancient meaning and its modern interpreters. Bacon believed that there once existed an ancient

²⁴¹ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 67-8; Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*, 4. See also Mannheim's claim that the modern criticism of ideology, a concept he relates closely to myth, is anticipated by Bacon's systematic critique of idols. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, 55.

time, predating Greek antiquity and written records, when humanity still retained memories of Edenic knowledge, or the natural knowledge that Adam possessed when he had mastery over all nature in the Garden of Eden.²⁴² The wisdom of this ancient age, otherwise buried in “oblivion and silence,” was in turn preserved in the myths of classical Greece, and what written records modern audiences have of these classical myths were the only remnants available to them outside of scripture of that original state of knowledge from which humanity had fallen away.²⁴³ While each successive phase in this chain of preservation signified the introduction of a new element of corruption onto the original slivers of prelapsarian knowledge passed down to modern times,²⁴⁴ it was in that golden epoch preceding classical antiquity that ancient wisdom was encoded in fabulous stories, which their Greek inheritors believed literally and celebrated in their religion.

So it was that, in Bacon’s account, “sacred relics and lights airs breathing out of better times” came to be “caught ... and so received into the flutes and trumpets of the Greeks,” forming their mythology.²⁴⁵ The task of the modern scholar was to devote serious attention to the seemingly frivolous subject of myth, which in fact contained lost wisdom in need of recovery. But such study was also to entail extracting what is valuable knowledge from the fabulous expressions encrusted around it. Myth, then, called for a method of interpretation like the kind of allegorical analysis that Bacon undertakes in *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients*, whereby the fantastical narrative elements in myths are stripped away to reveal essential lessons about the natural workings and moral order of the universe.

²⁴² See the helpful chart mapping Bacon’s conception of the history of knowledge in the appendix to Garner, “Francis Bacon, Natalis Comes and the Mythological Tradition,” 291.

²⁴³ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 75.

²⁴⁴ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 77-8.

²⁴⁵ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 79.

Here, Bacon's method may bear striking resemblances to a Neoplatonic approach to myth centered around divine revelation, and the Neoplatonic tradition was indeed a major source of influence for the mythographical conventions that Bacon adopted when he looked for allegorical meaning in classical myths. Just as Bacon sought to apply rational tools to the expressions of myth to unveil their true, hidden meaning, Neoplatonic interpreters of Plato's myths had presumed they contained divine truths that could only be accessed if they were taken apart in this allegorical vein. However, if Bacon's theory of myth diverged from that of the Neoplatonic tradition in one key respect, it is that the valuable wisdom he believed to be at the core of myths was not, as it was for Neoplatonic readers of Plato's myths, knowledge that was dependent on the providence of divine revelation, and which ordinarily fell beyond the reach of human reason. Rather, he seems to suggest that the resources of modern reason were in and of themselves sufficient for recovering a body of natural knowledge that had been lost or corrupted over the course of human history.

On this view, mythical expression itself is, for Bacon, less the language in which divinity chose to reveal itself to its chosen vessel, and more an incidental inconvenience for the modern scholar, who is forced to sort through the seeming nonsense in order to retrieve the kernel of true knowledge hidden in its midst. And if these same lessons embedded in the myths that have been passed down to modern culture could instead be articulated in a more straightforward and transparent fashion, this would seem to be Bacon's preference; and translating ancient wisdom into that mode of presentation more readily accessible to reason would be the corrective that modern scholarship could offer to the imperfection of the mythic form. Bacon alternately describes the myths of antiquity as "a veil ... of fables" standing between perished wisdom and

the reach of extant knowledge,²⁴⁶ and as “grapes ill-trodden,” where “something is squeezed out, but the best parts are left behind and passed over”²⁴⁷ – as though the task of the modern student of myth were a matter of lifting a veil, and undoing, to the best of one’s ability, damage incurred by the unfortunate treatment to which the grapes of wisdom had been subjected. In turn, it would seem that, for the valuable content of myth to be integrated into a modern and progressive body of scientific knowledge, it would have to discard many of the literary characteristics associated with the genre. Notably in *New Atlantis*, Salomon’s House has a strict prohibition against rhetorical adornment, exaggeration, or “affectation of strangeness” in the description of nature and its workings, which are to be presented by the Fellows “only pure as is.”²⁴⁸

The relationship between myth’s content and its form

Does Bacon’s theory of myth then suggest that the connection linking the content of myth to its form is purely arbitrary, and that its core of significance can and ought to be reconstructed in an altogether different mode of expression? Bacon’s dissatisfaction with the expressions of myth notwithstanding, however, his account of myth would resist both of these suggestions. As he imagines it, that connection between mythic content and mythic expression was anything but arbitrary for the ancient creators of myth. At one level, this is merely because the cognitive

²⁴⁶ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 75.

²⁴⁷ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 169.

²⁴⁸ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 486.

capacities of the ancient mind were limited to such expressions.²⁴⁹ But at another level, the expressions of myth were uniquely useful in their own right for their ancient authors, and the lessons Bacon drew regarding their function would appear to be just as applicable to a modern context.

Bacon isolates two “strange” and “contradictory” uses of myth as a device for communication: the first was to “disguise and veil the meaning,” and the second was “also to clear and throw light upon it.”²⁵⁰ The clarifying function of myth is largely pedagogical, and Bacon takes it as an uncomplicated truth that myths allow complicated ideas to be presented in ways that are both simpler and more palatable: he notes in *The Advancement of Learning* that King Solomon made a practice of teaching through “excellent Parables and Aphorisms.”²⁵¹ Of special interest here might be the capacity Bacon recognizes in myth to cast inventions and abstract ideas in “vulgar” images, that they might “find an easier passage to the understanding.”²⁵² This view suggests that Bacon saw myth as a medium that was dynamic without being destabilizing, insofar as it could help ease the transmission of novel ideas into a familiar cultural landscape.

What Bacon means by the utility of myth’s obscuring function is less clear, but to the extent that he finds it constructive, it makes a case against the desirability, if not feasibility, of

²⁴⁹ His reasoning seems to attribute to myth not only a historical but a logical primacy. “For as hieroglyphics came before letters, so parables came before arguments.” Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 80; see also Rossi, *Francis Bacon*, 80-87.

²⁵⁰ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 79; see also Lewis, “Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth,” 369.

²⁵¹ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002): 120–299, 151; Lewis, “Francis Bacon, Allegory and the Uses of Myth,” 369.

²⁵² Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 80.

entirely separating the valuable content of myth from its expressions. Bacon observes that, like myth, religion “delights in such veils and shadows,”²⁵³ and it may be the case that he believed that an element of mystery was necessary in the presentation of certain ideas. Support for this line of thought, however, comes not from Bacon’s writings on myth, but on his remarks on logical argumentation found throughout his criticism of the cognitive “idols” that hamper the progress of human understanding. To be sure, Bacon is unequivocal in his position that mythical language has no place in natural inquiry.²⁵⁴ However, he takes pains to emphasize that the language of logic is inadequate to the task of freeing the mind from the influence of its idols. Such idols, or the various implicit distortions that the human mind imposes on its view of the world, are like false foundations on which the work of present scientific methods, no matter how rigorous, would amount at best to “some magnificent structure without any foundation.”²⁵⁵ In particular, when attached to such false starts, the language of logic has the adverse effect of further reinforcing their distortions, and making them all the more difficult to overcome: “that art of logic,” when it comes “too late to the rescue, and no way able to set matters right again, has had the effect of fixing errors rather than disclosing truth.”²⁵⁶ On these grounds Bacon calls the “vicious demonstrations” of logic “the strongholds and defenses of idols,” so that their combined effect “does little else than make the world the bondslave of human thought, and human thought the bondslave of words.”²⁵⁷

²⁵³ Bacon, “Of the Wisdom of the Ancients,” 76.

²⁵⁴ i.e. Bacon, *The New Organon*, 345.

²⁵⁵ Francis Bacon, *The Great Instauration*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 15 vols. (Boston: Taggard & Thompson, 1861), VIII: 15–56, 18.

²⁵⁶ Bacon, *The New Organon*, 60.

²⁵⁷ Bacon, *The New Organon*, 99.

The proper language of natural inquiry, for Bacon, is one that avoids such risks – one whose veneer of authority and methodological rigor do not inadvertently cover up its own limitations. Instead, Bacon envisions a mode of presentation that accomplishes several related effects: it ought to be clear, not only with regard to the content it seeks to convey, but also with regard to the epistemic status of that article of knowledge. It ought to be able to signal where that knowledge is incomplete and ripe for further investigation by prosperity; it ought to inspire its audience to examine its claims critically and against evidence, rather than to accept them passively.²⁵⁸ Bacon does not seem to believe the resources of any one existing genre or form of expression are adequate to his vision, and as such, his works indicate a range of literary experimentation to match his zeal for scientific experiments. The construction of *The New Organon*, for instance, is explicitly not “in the Form of a regular Treatise,” but presents itself as a collection of aphorisms, whose fragmentary form might leave “room for suspicion that there are many more behind,” and encourage readers “to contribute and add something in their turn.”²⁵⁹

It is from within this experimental framework that Bacon’s fascination with myth might be better understood, and with it, his own experimentation with the genre of Platonic myth in *New Atlantis*. The particular expressive form of myth, though flawed and inappropriate to modern scientific inquiry, is neither arbitrary nor insignificant, and its model may offer resources that more traditional modes of presenting knowledge do not. The founding myths in *New Atlantis* attest to the potential of the genre for reinvention and appropriation toward new ends.

²⁵⁸ Lisa Jardine, *Francis Bacon: Discovery and the Art of Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 174-178.

²⁵⁹ Jardine, *Francis Bacon*, 176-7; Bacon, *The New Organon*, 55.

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The founding myths of *Utopia* and *New Atlantis*, then, are at once a conservative and a progressive extension of the possible functions of myth that were brought to light under Plato's use. As More and Bacon took the model of the *Republic* and transposed it into the novel literary genre of utopian writing, they also imported recognizable aspects of the Platonic myth into *Utopia* and *Bensalem*: notably in employing myth as a stabilizing force in politics, in the service of a political vision that, in part, reserves a protected space in society for the pursuit of knowledge.

At the same time, the literary construction of the founding myths betray that they are more dynamic and self-reflexive than might be suggested by their conservationist function. In More's and Bacon's use, the genre of myth also represents a site of play, double meanings, self-awareness, reinvention and refoundings. In turn, the capacious range of myth's possibilities and the richness of its resources help inform Bacon's interest in mythography. Myth is worth studying, for Bacon, at some level because there may be ancient wisdom hidden in it, but at another level because it is important to experiment in our literary expressions. Only by applying ourselves diligently to this more ambitious project might we hope to transcend the limitations of existing modes for presenting knowledge.

Chapter 3

An Enlightenment Fable: Leibniz and the Boundaries of Reason

MYTH AS A NECESSARY SOLUTION TO
THE DISCONTENTS OF RATIONALISM

The previous chapter had shown how, when More and Bacon looked to the example of Plato's *Republic* as a model for the genre of utopian literature they developed, they were also confronted with the decision to import elements of the Platonic myth into their work. The central role played by the founding myths of Utopia and Bensalem suggest that More and Bacon took from Plato's examples an appreciation for the political value of myth – an appreciation that distinguished itself, in particular, from the revelation-orientated reverence for Plato's myths in the Neoplatonic tradition, which had placed the significance of myth in a realm beyond politics and human agency. But what More passed over, and what Bacon was only beginning to intuit, were the philosophical, rather than political, implications of their cautious embrace of myth and its contributions.

The relationship between philosophy and myth was a pressing concern of the Enlightenment, as philosophy endeavored to reconfigure the boundaries of reason, and in so doing, positioned itself in stark opposition to myth.²⁶⁰ Myths, as the grotesque cultural artifacts

²⁶⁰ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1977), I: 145-150; Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, eds., *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680-1860* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana

of unenlightened peoples, came to stand for the extreme perils in store for a culture that fails to draw firm distinctions between reason and unreason.²⁶¹ At the same time, as Enlightenment thinkers began to draw broader associations between myth and the uncritical mode of thought believed to underlie such stories, myth came to be associated, not only with the extreme consequences of an ill-defined reason, but also with the present-day obstructions to the progress of rational thought.²⁶² Correctly configuring the boundaries of reason was important, not only because failure to do so could open the floodgates to the kind of crude and superstitious thinking that may have led primitive peoples to create and to believe in myths, but because the toleration of such impulses in modern culture would stymie philosophy's own efforts to comprehend the world with ever increasing rigor and cogency. Put another way, Enlightenment interest in myth was tied to a question concerning the identity of reason and the trajectory of philosophy: how ought reason to be conceptualized, so that the projects of philosophy are genuinely progressive, rather than stagnant or even regressive?

For students of the Enlightenment, two historical moments, tied to two extraordinary natural events, stand out as iconic turning points in deciding this question. The first is the publication of Bayle's *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* (1682), a philosophical rejection of the kind of superstitious thinking that pervaded popular sentiments surrounding the

University Press, 2000); Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 176-79; Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 62-82; Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1-12.

²⁶¹ Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables"; Starobinsky, "Fable and Mythology in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Literature and Theoretical Reflection"; Horstmann, "Mythos, Mythologie," 285-6.

²⁶² Von Hendy, *The Modern Construction of Myth*; Feldman and Richardson, eds., *The Rise of Modern Mythology*.

Great Comet of 1680²⁶³; the second, the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, an occasion in which, as captured in Adorno's famous characterization, one of the great heroes of the Enlightenment was "cured of his Leibnizian theodicy."²⁶⁴ Both moments represent landmarks in the purification of the concept of reason, in particular, in the freeing of reason from the obligation to occupy itself with divine matters – from the need to decipher celestial signs of divine fury, or to comprehend the mysterious intentions behind divinely ordained disasters. In helping to render such endeavors irrelevant to the concerns of reason, these moments also advanced a conception of reason that was limited rather than limitless.

The opposite position, represented by Leibniz's Theodicy, was that of a reason that was unlimited in its reach, so that it was perfectly continuous with faith. This involved, famously, subjecting God to a rational law, such that it would go against his rational nature to create anything less than the best of all possible worlds. To assign to human reason the overarching powers of knowledge traditionally attributed to divine revelation was to commit to what Christia Mercer describes as a "radical rationalism": a conception of reason's boundaries that denies any limitations to what humans are capable of knowing through rationality alone.²⁶⁵ For Leibniz's detractors, as for his modern readers, that unlimited view of reason would also represent the last breath of a philosophical position that had become untenable against the force of an intellectual tide unmistakably headed in the opposite direction.

²⁶³ Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000); Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 62-3.

²⁶⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 361.

²⁶⁵ Christia Mercer, "Prefacing the Theodicy," in *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, ed. Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014): 13–42.

If the need to reject myth and its underlying causes from the premises of philosophy had helped motivate the question of the boundaries of reason, it seems particularly inauspicious for Leibniz's cause that, at the end of *The Essays on Theodicy* (1710), he saw fit to present the doctrine of Theodicy in the form of an elaborate myth. Loosely modeled after the Myth of Er concluding Plato's *Republic*,²⁶⁶ the so-called Petite Fable was clearly intended as an important supplement to the argument for Theodicy laid out early in the book.²⁶⁷ However, the author's intentions notwithstanding, the fantastical fiction of this ending also seems to help reinforce Leibniz's reputation as a thinker who placed his bets on the losing side of philosophical history. When the young Voltaire was firing his first tentative shots at Leibniz's Theodicy, for instance, it was the Petite Fable at which he took aim: a partial parody of the myth appears at the end of *Zadig* (1747), where a goddess from the Petite Fable is reinvented as an angel reading from the book of destinies.²⁶⁸

Indeed the reception of the Theodicy suggests that some of the fanciful qualities of the Petite Fable end up being reflected in Leibniz's philosophical system, so that it shares with the myth a certain muddled and fantastic mentality associated with the genre of such stories. The most common critiques of the Theodicy tend to converge around the charge of advancing a lofty account of the universe that is removed from realities of the experienced world: to declare that the created world as is is the best among all possibilities seems to deny, if not excuse, all the

²⁶⁶ Patrick Riley, *Leibniz' Universal Jurisprudence: Justice as the Charity of the Wise* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 133.

²⁶⁷ See Leibniz's own remarks advertising the Petite Fable. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, trans. Austin Marsden Farrer (La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1985), 72 and 365-66.

²⁶⁸ Voltaire, *Zadig*, in *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. Ben Ray Redman (New York: Penguin, 1977): 329-412, 402-408; Daniel Stempel, "Angels of Reason: Science and Myth in the Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36, no. 1 (1975): 63-78, 68.

ways in which it comes up short. This was Voltaire's discomfort with the Theodicy, immortalized in *Candide* (1759), and it was Hume's when he suggested no philosopher had been so "extravagant" as to claim "so bold and paradoxical an opinion" as Leibniz's apparent denial of senseless suffering in the world.²⁶⁹ When seeming evils (like the Rape of Lucretia at the center of the Petite Fable) are rationalized in anticipation of yet-unforeseen goods (like the aggregate beauty of the world), what was intended to be a capacious and powerful account of human rationality ironically comes out helpless before the opacity of divine reason. Instead, it risks giving false designations of intelligibility to the senseless things of the world.²⁷⁰ If Leibniz's contemporaries and interlocutors were committed to the Enlightenment ideal of purifying philosophy from intellectual laxity, superstition, and the cognitive tendencies they associated with myth, Leibniz's philosophy and metaphysics, by contrast, come out seeming, as captured in Bertrand Russell's well-known description, like "a kind of fantastic fairy tale, coherent maybe, but wholly arbitrary."²⁷¹

The aim of this chapter is to explore the relationship between the doctrine of Theodicy, as a philosophical position on the nature and limitations of human reason, and the decision on the part of its author to compose a myth around this doctrine. I suggest that the two things are

²⁶⁹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 69. Consider also Adrian Moore's more contemporary characterization of Leibniz's metaphysics as a "repellent lie about what our actual lives are really like." A.W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 70; ctd. in Paul Lodge, "Theodicy, Metaphysics, and Metaphilosophy in Leibniz," *Philosophical Topics* 43, no. 1 & 2 (2015): 27–52.

²⁷⁰ Indeed more than two centuries later, Karl Popper would define myth as an "attempt to rationalize the irrational." Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies, Vol. 2: The High Tide of Prophecy: Hegel, Marx, and the Aftermath* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 245.

²⁷¹ Bertrand Russell, *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz*, xxi. Russell's remarks are directed at Leibniz's Monadology.

indeed related, but not for the reasons one might think. The myth is not, for example, a more palatable way of rearticulating a doctrine that had already been presented in a more rigorous language earlier in the treatise. Nor, more significantly, is the myth an inadvertent admission of a lapse in philosophical rigor, whereby the imprecision of the myth's presentation either reflects or disguises the doctrine's inherent weaknesses. Rather, Leibniz deploys the myth as a deliberate, philosophical solution to the problems generated by his own commitment to rationalism.

Leibniz's unlimited conception of reason envisions a universe that humans have the capacity to know fully using only the power of their own reason – a promise that is as ambitious in theory as it is impossible in practice to meet within human lifetimes. Reconciling the disconcerting gap between what is theoretically intelligible and what is practically knowable leads Leibniz to arrive at a Theodicy that is inherently paradoxical, whereby an active and emancipatory vision of reason's activities ultimately rests on an unconditioned story that makes provisions for its suspension in the name of the divine. The Petite Fable can be read as a diagnosis and expression of this paradox. It is, in essence, a philosophical myth in the Platonic tradition, which, in telling a story about the way things are in the world, also tells of why such a story is both provisional and necessary.

The Two Halves of the Petite Fable

The Essays on Theodicy was the only book Leibniz published in his lifetime, and it was born out of his conversations with his patroness, the Electoress Sophie-Charlotte, over Europe's most talked-about book of the 1690s, the *Historical and Critical Dictionary* (1697) of Pierre

Bayle. Accordingly, the greater part of the *Theodicy* reads as a point-by-point commentary on passages of interest from Bayle's *oeuvre*. But the writing of the *Theodicy* was also an occasion for Leibniz to showcase his position on a longstanding point of contention between himself and the late Bayle.²⁷²

At stake in their disagreement was nothing less than the boundaries of reason: Bayle had argued for setting limits on reason's realm; Leibniz was against. For both philosophers, reason consisted of an active and critical faculty, independent from the senses, which could help sift truth from untruth through sustained reflection and examination. Bayle turned the full power of this critical faculty against superstition and the unsubstantiated beliefs of his day, relentlessly exposing the absurdities at the heart of so many conventions in the cultural heritage of Europe that are merely upheld for the sake of tradition. But Bayle, unlike Leibniz, spoke of reason as a purely destructive force, which could set its user on the path toward certain knowledge only to the extent that it identifies false or poorly grounded beliefs, but was "too feeble" on its own "to be led back to the truth." Reason, he suggested, "is only proper for raising doubts, and for turning things on all sides to make disputes endless."²⁷³ This meant, at one level, that reason required the guidance of revelation in order to arrive at truth, but it also meant, at another level, that religious doctrine had to be kept at a safe remove from the disruptive capacity of reason for raising endless doubts.²⁷⁴ Bayle's solution had been to limit the scope of reason so as to decouple it from matters of faith.

²⁷² Leibniz's correspondences with Bayle, in the form of private letters as well as published work, extended over two decades, and ended only with Bayle's death. Richard H. Popkin, "Leibniz and the French Sceptics," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 20, no. 76/77 (2/3) (1966): 228–48, esp. 235–38 and 245–46.

²⁷³ Pierre Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, ed. and trans. Richard H. Popkin (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991), "Manicheans," Remark D, 151.

²⁷⁴ Whether or not Bayle had been sincere in his claims to protecting religion from the destructive effects of reason is a matter of some dispute. The reception of Bayle's ideas have pointed in the other direction, and Bayle has

Leibniz did not share Bayle's destructive view of reason, but emphasized its constructive function as a faculty engaged in "the linking together of truths."²⁷⁵ Through the gradual and systematic assembly of its own discoveries, reason would build up knowledge toward those divine truths that are otherwise known through faith.²⁷⁶ For reasons that will become clearer later in this chapter, Leibniz was especially disturbed by the restrictive implications of Bayle's solution: he believed that limiting the realms of both reason and of faith was no way of empowering either one. Accordingly, by insisting on the continuity between reason and faith, Leibniz sought in the *Theodicy* to restore to reason its expansive capacity to know the highest good and everything that fell under its dominion.

The Petite Fable at the end of the *Theodicy* is structured around two layered parts, with each part corresponding to the two sides of the debate that Leibniz sets up between himself and Pierre Bayle on the question of reason's boundaries. The first half of the Petite Fable consists of a retelling of a fable taken from Lorenzo Valla's *Dialogue on Free Will* (ca. 1439): Valla, the fifteenth-century humanist, had written the dialogue to protest the growing presence of philosophy in theological disputes,²⁷⁷ and the original fable was meant to help illustrate the

often been hailed as a vital contributor to subsequent movements in Enlightenment intellectual culture that shifted authority away from religion. See Richard Popkin's Introduction to Bayle, *Historical and Critical Dictionary*.

²⁷⁵ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 73 [§1].

²⁷⁶ On the special, if complicated, role of divine revelation in Leibniz's account of reason, especially as compared with Bayle's, see Paul Lodge and Benjamin Crowe, "Leibniz, Bayle, and Locke on Faith and Reason," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 4 (2002): 575–600.

²⁷⁷ Lorenzo Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," trans. Charles Edward Trinkaus Jr., in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 155–82.

limitations of philosophy in settling matters of faith.²⁷⁸ Having reconstructed a fable depicting a limited conception of reason, Leibniz proceeds, in the second half of the *Petite Fable*, to continue this same story where it breaks off. In the original extension he appends to Valla's fable, Leibniz supplies an elaborate illustration of the doctrine of Theodicy, or, the position that the scope of reason is not limited by faith.

There is another level at which Leibniz remains in dialogue with Bayle in the *Petite Fable*. Not only does Valla's case for separating philosophy from theology align with Bayle's position on the question, but the two-part structure of the *Petite Fable* mirrors the format to which the essays of the *Theodicy* preceding the myth had kept for some time: with a lengthy quotation excerpted from Bayle's work, followed by Leibniz's dutiful retort. Reproducing this pattern in the concluding myth has the effect of recasting Leibniz's conversation with Bayle as part of a long series of historical conversations on the boundaries of reason and faith. Although the *Petite Fable* is introduced at a moment in the *Theodicy* when Leibniz believes himself to have "met ... all the objections of M. Bayle on this matter that I could find in his works,"²⁷⁹ the subsequent turn to Valla's fable suggests that Leibniz drew parallels between this exchange and the debate sustained in "the work of Laurentius Valla against Boethius and by that of Luther against Erasmus."²⁸⁰ By more or less quoting Valla at length in the first half of the *Petite Fable*,

²⁷⁸ In Valla's dialogue, the inquiries of Sextus Tarquinius are to a limited extent also a stand-in for the inquiries of philosophy itself. Valla favorably compares the exile of the sinful Tarquin to the exile of philosophy from the realm of theology during times of "the most pious antiquity." Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 156.

²⁷⁹ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 365 [§405].

²⁸⁰ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 365 [§405], 72 [Preface]. The parallel that Leibniz saw between his own debate with Bayle and those of these authors also means that the shadow of Boethius looms like an additional interlocutor over Leibniz' appropriation of Valla in his response to Bayle. For a systematic treatment of Boethius' influence on this passage, see the excellent Margaret Cameron, "Ac Pene Stoicus: Valla and Leibniz on 'The Consolation of Philosophy,'" *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (2007): 337–54.

and then continuing to expand the story where the earlier author had left off, Leibniz was in effect continuing to spar with Bayle on an enduring question regarding the relationship between philosophy and theology.

The first half of the Petite Fable: the case for a limited conception of reason

The pressing question on which Leibniz recruited Bayle and Valla as interlocutors, was the question of whether it was possible to find a philosophical way of reconciling the three subjects of *The Essays on Theodicy*: God's benevolence, the freedom of the human will, and the fact of the presence of evil in the world. If it were to fall beyond the power of philosophy to arrive at such a solution, philosophy would seem at odds with Christian doctrine, which demands belief both in the benevolence of God as well as in human freedom and culpability. Bayle and Valla each believed the problem could not be solved rationally, and both consequently argued for the necessity of separating matters of faith from those of philosophy.

In the passage on which the Petite Fable is based, Valla's dialogue settles on this conclusion upon reaching what appears to be a philosophical limit. The scene, which Leibniz reconstructs in its entirety, imagines an allegorical conversation between Apollo and Sextus Tarquinius, the Roman tyrant made famous for the Rape of Lucretia. The compatibility of human freedom with divine benevolence comes into question when Apollo reveals to Sextus the sin he is destined to commit in the future, and the life of exile that awaits him as punishment for his crime.

Here, the clairvoyant Apollo represents God's omniscience, and Sextus the human wrongs and suffering that God knowingly seems to permit in the world. Recasting a problem of

Christian theology using pagan deities, with their demarcated realms of dominion, helps to divide up the idea of the Christian God into powers that can and cannot be reconciled with human freedom.²⁸¹ Hence Apollo is able to offer a response to Sextus' protestations: his ability to foretell the future does not excuse Sextus from being the source of his own sins, and likewise, divine foreknowledge of evil has no bearing on human freedom, or on the responsibility humans bear for their free actions. The philosophical difficulty, rather, lies not with the compatibility of human freedom with divine omniscience, but with a different aspect of the concept of divinity.

When the encounter concludes with Apollo's advice that it is meaningless for Sextus to object to his prophesy, and that he really ought to be complaining to Jupiter instead, even the interlocutor in Valla's own dialogue is dissatisfied with the answer. "It seems to me," he observes, "that Apollo in excusing himself accuses Jupiter more than he accuses Sextus."²⁸² Valla's point is that philosophy is limited in its capacity to fully answer the question.²⁸³ It may go so far as to reconcile human freedom with certain attributes of divinity, like Apollo's foreknowledge, but no rational account exists on "the decrees of Jupiter's will, that is to say, on the orders of providence."²⁸⁴ The "failure" of philosophers who thought otherwise lay in their having "[h]eardened more to the answer of philosophy than to that of St Paul."²⁸⁵

²⁸¹ Charles Edward Trinkaus Jr., "Introduction" to Lorenzo Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 147–54, 150.

²⁸² Leibniz, *Theodicy* 368 [§411]; Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 174.

²⁸³ Clearly the dissatisfaction with philosophy's limits is Valla's own: on this see also Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 173; and Cameron, "Ac Pene Stoicus," 342.

²⁸⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 368 [§411]. Leibniz's paraphrasing of Valla at §§411–12 is freer and more condensed. Compare with Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 174.

²⁸⁵ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 369 [§412]. Valla's objection is more colorful: Boethius, the philosopher in question, had "sail[ed] north instead of south," and "did not bring the fleet laden with wine into the port of the fatherland but dashed it on barbarian coasts and on foreign shores." Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 179.

The second half of the Petite Fable: the case for an unlimited conception of reason

It was because Leibniz disagreed with Valla's conclusion that he felt compelled to extend his fable. If the aporetic ending of Valla's fable is intended to demonstrate that reason is limited – that the tools of philosophy can at best aspire to only a partial resolution to the question of human freedom and divine benevolence – the continuation of the story in Leibniz's version serves to show that philosophy can go yet further in an investigation that had been abandoned prematurely. As such, the solution that Leibniz puts forth, in the form of the Theodicy, is illustrated in the second half of the Petite Fable as a way of rebutting a limited conception of reason against matters of faith.

Whereas Valla's fable consists solely in the imagined exchange between Sextus and Apollo, Leibniz's sequel depicts Sextus going to Jupiter with his complaint after all. Eventually, the inquiry is relayed to Pallas Athena, who presents Jupiter's high priest, Theodorus, with a dream vision of the rational universe. The dream constitutes the heart of the Petite Fable. Theodorus, who wants to know why the omnipotent Jupiter did not simply grant Sextus a nature incapable of sin, is transported in his dream to the palace of the fates. The halls of the palace contain all the possible universes that God could have created; it is also a realm of abstractions. Its warden and guide, Pallas Athena, is meant to embody God's "knowledge of simple intelligence (that embraces all that is possible),"²⁸⁶ and moving through its halls is a theoretic exercise in entertaining and analyzing an infinite number of hypothetical scenarios, all brought together "here, that is, in ideas."²⁸⁷ When Theodorus enters the most beautiful hall among them all, he learns that it contains the created world as is, whose sinning and suffering Sextus is a mere

²⁸⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 373 [§417].

²⁸⁷ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 371 [§414].

speckle in the grand vision of a deity who has, quite literally, thought through everything in the process of choosing the best among all the possible worlds.

The lesson of Theodorus' dream, is that God's will is in fact knowable – like a palace of ideas whose rooms are open to visitors – and that this is precisely the case because God is a rational being. Harkening to answer of philosophy, then, cannot be a cause of failure because faith is not at odds with reason. Rather, Leibniz considers it a “defect” on the part of Valla that he gives up too soon on the puzzle, and admits prematurely to the limits of philosophy.²⁸⁸ In continuing to use the fable to find a rational reconciliation of divine benevolence, free will, and the existence of evil, Leibniz writes over Valla's answer in the same fictional medium.²⁸⁹

What is striking, however, is that in extending Valla's fable, Leibniz also ends up extending the literary possibilities of his medium. Valla's original fable is presented as a dialogue, a form that Leibniz faithfully retains in his reconstruction, and which restricts itself to reporting only the hypothetical arguments that might be exchanged between Sextus and Apollo.²⁹⁰ However, in the second half of the Petite Fable, Leibniz shifts to uninterrupted narration, which in turn permits him to indulge in an entirely new level of descriptive detail, going through not only what was said by the expanded cast of characters, but what they did, and what they saw. For the most part, Leibniz concentrates his literary efforts on furnishing details that emphasize the rational nature of God's creation, and, by extension, its accessibility to human reason. In each hall of the palace of fates, for instance, is a stage, on which the history of the corresponding world plays out, and its every scene is catalogued in a large book, “the book of its

²⁸⁸ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 365 [§413].

²⁸⁹ See Cameron, “Ac Pene Stoicus,” 349.

²⁹⁰ It is clear from Leibniz's introduction of the fable that “retaining the dialogue form” of Valla's original was a deliberate choice. Leibniz, *Theodicy* 365 [§405].

fates,” with a meticulous indexing system for navigating the events on stage.²⁹¹ Because all the possible worlds have been brought together in one building, and the trajectory of each world is collated in a comprehensive volume, thinking through any possibility of existence is never a matter of whether it is knowable to begin with, but of directing one’s attention to the appropriate object: entering the corresponding hall, and locating the correct scene in the book to summon to stage.²⁹² Seen from this privileged vantage point, the universe and its possibilities are like a book: even when one is not reading it, the text and knowledge contained there nonetheless exist.²⁹³

As the *Petite Fable* gains in literary complexity in its second half, this amounts, in particular, to an overt imitation of the genre of myth. If Valla’s half of the fable consists of an allegorical conversation between figures that he happens to borrow from Greco-Roman mythology, Leibniz’s extension is, for all intents and purposes, a fully developed eschatological myth: there is greater stylistic contrast between the fable and the philosophical arguments preceding it, so that the fable stands on its own as a coherent story; there are more borrowed details from preexisting mythological tropes, more fantastic and supernatural elements, more vivid and intricate imagery; and above all, there is an overarching sense that the level of narrative elaboration is somehow disproportionate to its stated message.

To be sure, the casting of mythical deities in the original fable was itself a striking

²⁹¹ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 371 [§415]. This is the detail that comes to bear the brunt of Voltaire’s irony in *Zadig*.

²⁹² It is worth noting the worlds contained in the palace are illustrated using a number of evocative images, which, like the image of the book, are taken from a familiar vocabulary of tropes for depicting human knowledge. In particular, geometry figures prominently in representing the relationship between the worlds. See Leibniz, *Theodicy* 371-2 [§414, §416].

²⁹³ The most famous image of universe as a comprehensive book was Galileo’s; his “book of the universe” is also famously written in a mathematical language.

decision on Valla's part. Ernst Cassirer lauded the undertaking as a reclaiming of the medium of myth for philosophical purposes, one in which "[a]ncient myth ... receives a new role; it becomes the vehicle of logical thought."²⁹⁴ But in contrast to Leibniz's liberal use of mythological materials in the second half of the *Petite Fable*, the mythical figures under Valla's employment in the first half are little more than mouthpieces for the delivery of arguments. The subdued and instrumental use of mythical elements in Valla's dialogue would not have been atypical for a humanist writing in the fifteenth century: borrowing from pagan myth to illustrate arguments of Christian theology was permissible to the extent that the former is employed as a rhetorical device for better communicating the latter to a general readership.²⁹⁵ Here, being able to justify the use of mythic elements in terms of their rhetorical function was an important limitation. Valla himself cautioned against the danger of taking immoderate comfort in the feelings that myth tends to inspire. In an exchange that occurs later in the *Dialogue on Free Will*, the narrator of Valla's fable suggests that the "ambrosia" and "nectar" of "poetic and fabulous things" offer false promises of resolution on matters that cannot, in fact, be resolved, and he ends with an injunction to "leave this emptiness to the empty and fictitious gods, Jupiter and Apollo."²⁹⁶

The two conceptions of reason under debate in the *Theodicy*, then, are represented differently between the two halves of the *Petite Fable*, with myth being used differently in each half. What, if any, is the relationship between the literary expansion of the medium of myth in Leibniz's rendition of Valla's source material, and the philosophical extension of the powers

²⁹⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, trans. Mario Domandi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 80.

²⁹⁵ Trinkaus, "Introduction" to Lorenzo Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 147–50.

²⁹⁶ Valla, "Dialogue on Free Will," 175.

allotted to reason, as a reader of the Petite Fable moves from a limited conception of it to an unlimited one?

The foregoing discussion should have suggested something of the deliberateness with which Leibniz went out of his way to fashion a myth from source material that was far more reserved in what it borrowed from the genre; and that deliberateness, in turn, makes it more difficult to read the Petite Fable so as to deny a substantive relationship between the particular conception of reason that Leibniz holds, and his decision to represent his position in the way he does. The construction of the myth is too meticulous for it to be a careless afterthought, and the details of the narrative too complex for it to be a mere ornament to the argument. Had the purpose of the Petite Fable been to reiterate a rhetorically effective, but substantively unaltered, translation of the principles of Theodicy that had been argued earlier in the treatise, then the complexity of the myth is, at a minimum, disproportionate to the task, if it does not detract from it by introducing unnecessary clutter to the delivery of the argument.²⁹⁷ The alternative, however, is that there is indeed a substantial reason as to why Leibniz's unlimited conception of reason, and the overtly mythic form in which it is expressed, might necessarily go together. Exploring this possibility requires taking up a more detailed account of what myth meant for Leibniz's intellectual milieu, and what it meant in particular for philosophical writing.

²⁹⁷ This, of course, is not to deny the charm or the rhetorical efficacy of the myth as a conclusion to a philosophical treatise intended for a more general audience than were some of Leibniz's other writings that anticipated many of the same arguments, for example, the *Philosopher's Confession* and the *Causa Dei*. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Confessio Philosophi: Papers Concerning the Problem of Evil, 1671-1678*, ed. and trans. Robert C. Sleigh (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Causa Dei," in *Die Philosophischen Schriften*, vol. 6, ed. C.I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1885).

Myth as an object of theoretical interest

Leibniz composed the *Theodicy* at a time when attitudes toward myth was at a critical crossroads. The cultural debates culminating in the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns had brought into question the merits of the mythological repertory that pervaded ancient Greek and Roman literature. At the same time, the genre of myth itself had undergone an expansion: where myth had formerly referred almost exclusively to myths from Greco-Roman antiquity, the proliferation of travel narratives from the New World and the Orient also brought an onslaught of new myths into cultural consciousness. Leibniz was necessarily steeped in the discussions on myth undertaken by his chief interlocutors – even his famous rival, Newton, had written a work of mythography²⁹⁸ – and shared with the budding mythographers of his day a fascination with the belief systems and practices of non-western cultures,²⁹⁹ genealogy,³⁰⁰ oral history, and indigenous languages.³⁰¹

²⁹⁸ Isaac Newton, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (London, 1728). See discussion in Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 85-125.

²⁹⁹ Leibniz's fascination with China is well known; he famously corresponded with Joachim Bouvet, the Jesuit missionary who worked extensively in China, and shared the latter's interest in studying the I Ching. Franklin Perkins, *Leibniz and China: A Commerce of Light* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Leibniz: An Intellectual Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 433-6.

³⁰⁰ Leibniz's primary occupation from 1685 until his death was researching the history of the Guelf household, from which his employers, the House of Hannover, was thought to have succeeded. Antognazza, *Leibniz*, 230-33; Justin E. H. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference: Race in Early Modern Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 200.

³⁰¹ Leibniz collected language samples of indigenous tongues, occupying himself, for instance, in collecting oral histories of the Samoyed people. He similarly threw himself into the study of the ancient language used by the mining community at Harz, where Leibniz had been tasked with the doomed project of coming up with a drainage system for the mines that belonged to the Hanoverian throne. Smith, *Nature, Human Nature, and Human Difference*, 194-95; Antognazza, *Leibniz*, 229. On Leibniz's ambitions to develop a universal symbolic language, see also Antognazza, *Leibniz*, 92ff.

Prior to this turn, myth had traditionally been regarded from a cultural and aesthetic, rather than theoretical, framework. This traditional treatment of myth, associated with baroque aesthetics, was one that took the figures, motifs and scenes from Greco-Roman mythology as a collection of aesthetic vocabulary inherited from classical antiquity, familiarity of which allowed educated individuals to both comprehend and participate in high culture.³⁰² The new approach to myth characteristic of the Enlightenment, by contrast, helped consolidate the concept of myth as a category of critical study, rather than a timeless component of the cultural heritage of modern Europe. This disassociation manifested in an emphasis on the historical distance between modernity and the cultural epochs, like classical antiquity, in which societies generated myths. If Greek and Roman antiquity had hitherto comprised what European society largely knew of its past, and if myths from new and distant cultures seemed to resemble Greco-Roman mythology in some essential way, it also seemed to follow that these foreign cultures were in a state of development that was very much like Europe's own past. Cultural progress toward modernity, then, could be understood as the passage of a society through a set trajectory connecting a more primitive phase of being imbued with myth, to an advanced phase of having outgrown them.

In particular, Enlightenment theories of myth looked for myth's significance beyond its surface content, and instead in the particular mode of thought that might underlie the distinctively fantastical quality of such stories. On this view, myths were stories that reflected

³⁰² See the excellent discussions of Charles Rollin, Louis de Jaucourt, and the anonymous author of the *Elementary Encyclopedia* (1775) in Starobinsky, "Fable and Mythology," 722–28.

While the use of mythological elements in a range of cultural products – from operas to ceiling decoration – had the effect of ennobling the subject matter on which such ornaments were applied, mythological elements were also used heavily in satire, as a way of parodying the pretensions of a culture that made mythological allusions to signal decorum or grandness. See Starobinsky, "Fable and Mythology," 725–7.

the absurd world views of their creators, which were in turn the products of an insufficiently rigorous, or otherwise erroneous reasoning about reality.

Myth between the error of reason and the unreflectiveness of reason: Bayle

It was Pierre Bayle, Leibniz's chief interlocutor in the *Theodicy*, who voiced what was arguably the most influential view of myth in the late seventeenth century. Bayle advanced and popularized a dismissive account of myth that condemned the grotesque absurdity of its content, and hinted at the possibility that the characteristic absurdity of myths might be in turn rooted in an underlying erroneousness or inadequacy of reasoning that continued to present substantive threats to the progress of knowledge. In particular, he emphasized the necessity of separating myths – and intellectual speculation about myths – from the discourse of enlightened culture.

At one level, Bayle merely regarded myths as stories lacking intelligible content, and of no discernible use to the modern intellectual. In a section on “Jupiter” in the *Historical and Critical Dictionary*, Bayle directed his acumen to the most salacious scandals in Greek and Roman mythology and, indulging in particular in an extensive list of the moral crimes of Jupiter, sought to expose the bizarre, nonsensical nature of these ancient stories that depicted deities committing incest with family members one moment, and devouring them the next – maintaining, all the while, that they were deities worthy of veneration. These heathen tales, Bayle relates, had struck him as “so strange” that further reflection only made them seem “more monstrous.”³⁰³ For Bayle, the stories depicted in myths were sufficiently devoid of meaning that

³⁰³ Bayle, *Dictionary*, abridged Popkin trans., “Jupiter,” 109. The irony, of course, is that Bayle took so much delight in going through the scandalous details of Greek and Roman myth in the *Dictionary*, that his efforts to depict

continuing to make unreflective references to them in modern culture, or otherwise treating them as though they were somehow profound, did not behoove an enlightened society.³⁰⁴

As such, much of Bayle's program to insulate modern discourse from myth was directed specifically at the efforts of philosophers, both ancient and contemporary, who tried to derive allegorical meaning from myths.³⁰⁵ He ridiculed the intellectual contortions that these authors performed to make sense of myths, and felt they were wasting their energies in attempting to wrest meaning from stories that never contained any to begin with. These efforts "cannot be read," Bayle judged in a dry remark, "without feeling pity for those philosophers who used their time so badly."³⁰⁶

But with each rhetorically colorful dismissal of myths as trivial, grotesque, and unworthy of intellectual attention, Bayle was inadvertently helping to construct a theoretical explanation as to why it was that these stories told of such fantastically implausible happenings. Even as he fixates primarily on cataloguing the gross absurdities recounted in classical myths, Bayle suggests in the *Dictionary* that ancient belief in such things may have had a distinct cause in an "error" of argumentative reasoning.³⁰⁷ Bayle goes on to identify two "hypotheses" concerning the nature of material substance and of the soul, mistakenly held by the original creators and

myth as a subject unworthy of interest ended up having the opposite effect. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson eds., *The Rise of Modern Mythology, 1680-1860* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 19.

³⁰⁴ This account of myth, as merely absurd and unworthy of philosophical interest, would come to be passed down in more or less unaltered form to Voltaire, who in turn would become Leibniz's most famous critic. Like Bayle, Voltaire believed myth to be merely foolish, if not immoral, and went on to write mocking and burlesque parodies of mythical material, a practice he extended to his treatment of Christianity. See Feldman and Richardson eds., *The Rise of Modern Mythology*, 151-6; but also see Starobinsky, "Fable and Mythology, 727-78.

³⁰⁵ Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 27.

³⁰⁶ Bayle, *Dictionary*, abridged Popkin trans., "Jupiter," note N, 116.

³⁰⁷ Bayle, *Dictionary*, abridged Popkin trans., "Jupiter," 109.

audiences of classical mythology, and which he believes essential to myth's underlying logic. Having erroneous beliefs about these matters, he suggests, will lead to the impossible premises of those stories in which material objects seem to have souls, or are inhabited by divinities. From this he concludes that "nothing is more dangerous or more contagious than starting from some false principle":

... An absurdity once set forth leads to many others. Err only about the nature of the human soul; imagine falsely that it is not a substance distinct from extension; this error is capable of making you believe that there are gods who first sprung from fermentation who afterwards multiplied through marriage.³⁰⁸

The suggestion that false principles are at the root of myth's absurdities carried significant implications for philosophy. If being wrong about one or two principles was all it took for an entire belief system to unravel into the realm of fantasy, this diagnosis did not so much condemn the errors pervading myths than attest to the fragility of rational systems.

In particular, Bayle drew a link between myths and superstitious thinking, or a timorous susceptibility to beliefs that are not grounded in reasons. In the *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* (1682), Bayle had denounced popular superstitions around comets as supernatural harbingers of calamity, and had in turn put forth a more general condemnation of all beliefs that fail to hold up when "examin'd ... impartially by the Principles of Philosophy."³⁰⁹ There, he charged myths – as well as their more modern cousins, like fantastical romances – of exacerbating these tendencies toward superstition, by stylistically blending "Truth with Fable" in ways that made it difficult to distinguish one from the other.³¹⁰

³⁰⁸ Bayle, *Dictionary*, abridged Popkin trans., "Jupiter," note G, 114.

³⁰⁹ Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 13.

³¹⁰ Among the claims fueling the sensationalism around the Comet of 1680 was the linking of the fall of the Roman Republic to a series of comets; charging poetic sources of having advanced such claims, Bayle vowed "that far from believing upon their bare Credit that the Subversion of the Roman Commonwealth was the Work of two or

It seems that, for Bayle, the kind of credulous mentality with which people believe and spread superstitions instead of subjecting them to more careful examination, was at once a contributing factor to the process by which false principles swell into myths, as well as a psychological effect activated and further perpetuated by myths. Bayle's reasoning seemed to be that stories that told of the affairs of divinities in conjunction with descriptions of observable happenings in our environment, like the changing of seasons or the fact of the world's existence, were stories in which all kinds of information, some grounded in reality, some fantastical and speculative, were left confused and undifferentiated in ways that encouraged indifference to the necessity of sifting truth from untruth.

The myths of antiquity, then, stemmed from particular erroneous principles of reason, but they also formed because of an unreflective epistemic orientation – which myths in turn fomented – that was incapable of identifying and correcting those principles. As such, Bayle's criticism of philosophers who paid undue attention to myth had not only to do with a concern for their misdirected efforts, but also with a concern for the dangers of ennobling a genre of narrative whose underlying essence presented an obstruction to the progress of human knowledge. Myth was fundamentally regressive, and to pretend otherwise was both misleading and dangerous. That approach to knowledge necessary for the advancement of modern enlightened culture, on the other hand, was to be understood in sharp contradistinction to myth and its underlying tendencies: lucid and questioning rather than inchoate and superstitious, invested in the truth of one's own beliefs rather than indifferent to it, critical rather than resigned to the status quo.

three preceding Comets, I shou'd not for my part have the Faith to believe there was any such thing as a Comet about that time, were there no better Authority than theirs." Bayle, *Various Thoughts* I:4; "Truth with fable" at I:207.

Myth's psychological catalysts and the universality of the human psyche: Fontenelle

If Bayle ruled myth a menace to modern reason because simple errors of reasoning amplified and stood uncorrected in myths, and further fosters a passive and uncritical mentality opposed to that of the modern enlightened mind, these arguments against myth were rearticulated in the work of Bernard de Fontenelle, and filled in with a more detailed psychological account of those mechanisms by which chance errors might amplify and congeal into myths. But just as Bayle's condemnation of myth turned on a diagnosis of its origins in seemingly innocuous, unmistakably human ways of reasoning, those aggravating psychological factors to which Fontenelle pointed were hardly foreign to modernity. This meant that the foundational treatments of myth during the Enlightenment perceived both a surface opposition and an underlying similarity between myth and modern culture. On the one hand, the contents of myth spoke of fantastical beliefs about the world that could not be farther from those informed by enlightened reason, beliefs which modern culture was fortunate to have overcome. On the other hand, these myths were also the result of causes and processes that were somehow endemic to human nature; and if myths, in addition, had the self-perpetuating effect of making it more difficult for a people to correct for those underlying causes, it seemed to follow that even an enlightened and rational society that had long shed its primordial myths was not immune to the threat of regression.

Bernard de Fontenelle, perhaps the first great modern theorist of myth,³¹¹ served as the first secretary to the newly established French Royal Academy of Sciences, of which Leibniz

³¹¹ Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 42.

was a proud inaugural member.³¹² Fontenelle was Leibniz's chief connection to the Academy, and often procured books for him.³¹³ Although his writings on Greco-Roman and native American myths were not nearly as immediately influential as Bayle's remarks in the *Dictionary*, Fontenelle, much more so than his predecessor, endeavored to paint a coherent psychological picture of the mind captivated by myths, both as a creator and a consumer of such stories.³¹⁴

According to Fontenelle, one of the aggravating factors at work in the generation and circulation of myths was a psychological tendency to excuse the absurdities of their contents if one has already accepted the precedent set by the absurdities in another such story.³¹⁵ This tendency was not merely a logical fallacy, but was driven by the power of myths to both fulfill and shape psychological needs. At one level, Fontenelle posed that it is naturally pleasurable to have our "fancy [*esprit*]" tickled by fantastic and marvelous stories. At another level, such stories, to the extent that they were often about common natural phenomena that lacked easy explanations, also provided distraction from the natural discomfort we experience in confronting our ignorance of the unknown.³¹⁶ Hence it was that myths were "doubly pleasing" for the universal human psyche, and the production of such stories in a culture dominated by myth was

³¹² Antognazza, *Leibniz*, 431–2.

³¹³ After Leibniz's death, when academies of sciences elsewhere did nothing to mark the occasion (including the Berlin Academy of Sciences, which Leibniz had helped found), Fontenelle would make a point of delivering his celebrated eulogy before the French Academy. Antognazza, *Leibniz*, 1–2; Gregory Brown, "Leibniz's Endgame and the Ladies of the Courts," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 65, no. 1 (2004): 75–100.

³¹⁴ Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 42.

³¹⁵ "You already believe the one, why not the other as well?" The result of this fallacious logic, according to Fontenelle, is "an inexhaustible source of prodigies that one cannot call absurd." Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables," 15. *De l'origine des fables* was published in 1724 but he certainly started work on it much earlier.

³¹⁶ Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables," 14.

fueled, according to Fontenelle, by the adaptive tastes of their audience, who developed an appetite for the absurd and fanciful narratives the more they were exposed to their pleasures.³¹⁷

At the same time, Fontenelle suggested that the bizarre quality of myth's contents was further perpetuated by a cultural propensity toward the blind respect for tradition. If the pleasurable leniency toward the absurdity of mythical narratives end up "extend[ing] a stupidity to infinity," the unwillingness to look critically upon inherited stories "preserves it forever."³¹⁸ Hence for Fontenelle, natural facts of human psychology helped casual errors of reasoning grow into myths and ease their way into culture, and the only defense against them was a willingness to criticize rationally that which comes to be taken for granted in a society's cultural inheritance.

The call to modern European societies to turn a critical gaze onto their own culture entailed, in particular, asking difficult questions about what sets the modern mind apart from the mind enthralled by myth, and being prepared to admit that the only reason myth does not take up a greater share of modern life is that the former is "enlightened by the true religion and ... by some rays of true philosophy."³¹⁹ Like Bayle, Fontenelle was eager to brush myths aside as "nothing but a pile of chimeras, dreams and absurdities"³²⁰; but in so doing he, too, ended up calling attention to a more general fragility in the human mind and its creations, one that necessitated questioning even the most familiar aspects of one's own culture. Ultimately, the

³¹⁷ Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables," 13-14.

³¹⁸ "The first, because we are already in error, leads us to become more so, and the second prevents us from extricating ourselves because we have been stuck for some time." Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables," 15.

³¹⁹ Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables," 15.

³²⁰ Fontenelle, "Of the Origin of Fables," 10.

errors of myth served as a warning for his modern readers: that “[a]ll men are so much alike, that there is no people whose folly shouldn’t make us tremble.”³²¹

The new critical vigilance: religion and philosophy as purification from myth

Running beneath the cavalier dismissal of myth on the parts of its first theorists in the Enlightenment, then, was a growing anxiety about what myth might imply for the status of modernity. Efforts to get at the root of myth’s pathologies led these authors to discover, on the one hand, the universality of those basic impulses within the human psyche, both ancient and modern, that took pleasure in such stories. But on the other hand, these same efforts also ended up exposing the extent to which systems of knowledge and belief seemed to rest on but a few principles, errors about which threatened to topple the whole thing, but whose truth would be genuinely difficult to evaluate from within. The more these authors picked apart the scandals of myth, the more they ended up uncovering an underlying similarity between the mind guided by modern reason and the mind guided by primitive myth and its aggravating impulses – and with it, the sense that, while myths may seem to belong to a bygone age, the cognitive and psychological tendencies that gave rise to them were still very much a part of modern life.

Errors of reasoning can take various forms, as do the ways in which the human mind can be negligent of its own capacity to err. The regressive mentality that, according to the Enlightenment account, ultimately allowed such errors to grow into the beliefs manifested in myths, was by turns unreflective, superstitious, passive, lacking in rigor, fatalistic, tickled by fancy, conformist, self-perpetuating – but perhaps the easiest characterization of myth’s essence

³²¹ Fontenelle, “Of the Origin of Fables,” 18.

was that it consisted in a fundamental privation of that active and critical form of reasoning that allows us to recognize and correct for the errors in our world views.

As such, it became all the more urgent to cling to what truly defines the modern consciousness, and the study of myth hence also gave rise to a new spirit of critical vigilance. The need to guard the modern mind from the same processes that give way to myth called for a purification of both philosophy and Christian religion. Characteristic to this movement in particular was the centrality of the conviction that the faculties of reason must be active, rather than passive, at all times in these matters. If myths were the products of small errors and common tendencies left to fester too long, only a sufficiently active reason, willing to shine a critical light on all aspects of society, would be able to catch any potential causes of myth in modern culture before they have had a chance to grow and obstruct its progress. In religion, this entailed looking askance at unnecessary rituals and superstitious elements in contemporary religious practice, and rejecting those beliefs held merely for the sake of conformity. Religious beliefs and practices, rather, were to arise from a state of active affirmation.

The purification of philosophy from the threats represented by myth took the form of a spirited effort to identify and avoid all thinking that were not grounded firmly in knowledge. Through constant and active criticism, philosophical projects ought, as much as possible, to avoid regarding anything of reality through that state of passivity that lets errors of reasoning stand and grow into larger absurdities.³²² If the myths from the ancients and from other cultures told a cautionary tale about the dangers of slipping into such an uncritical mode of thinking, they suggested an explicit link between such stories and a more abstract constellation of beliefs, world views, and narratives about the world that are not founded in reasons. If there was a moral that

³²² Gay, *The Enlightenment*, I:145-6.

philosophers could take away from studying myths, it was this: in order for reason's activities to be progressive rather than regressive, reason must be conceived in such a way that its endeavors avoid running up against that passive mode of thought that permits the causes of myth to endure, latent, in the modern mindset.

The place of Plato in the new philosophy

While the opposition between myths and the language of philosophy could not have been more pronounced in the intellectual climate of the Enlightenment, there existed, nonetheless, a conspicuous precedent for the writing of myths in philosophy, though one that demanded some qualification.

Plato's myths were known to seventeenth-century readers as part of a cultural, and in particular aesthetic, background they inherited from the ripples of Renaissance humanism and medieval scholasticism.³²³ A general audience schooled in humanist rhetoric would have been acquainted with some of the more prominent images from Plato's myths; and the myths themselves fell into a recognizable genre, made familiar through the better-known example of the Dream of Scipio concluding Cicero's *Republic*. Modeled after the Myth of Er concluding Plato's *Republic*, the Dream of Scipio was preserved in a fifth-century commentary by the Roman Neoplatonist Macrobius, and for centuries it served as an authoritative text on cosmology, and otherwise exercised continuous and significant influence throughout medieval and Renaissance thought, even through long periods in which interest in Plato himself

³²³ For an overview of the status of Platonism in sixteenth and seventeenth century French aesthetics, see Nicholas Cronk, *The Classical Sublime: French Neoclassicism and the Language of Literature* (Charlottesville, VA: Rookwood Press, 2002), 31-50.

suffered.³²⁴ Much like Plato himself, the genre of Platonic myth – that is, myths written into a work of philosophy in imitation of the models found in Plato’s dialogues – was a form that remained in cultural consciousness in a largely filtered state: the genre was familiar even to an audience that wasn’t actively reading Plato, and was embedded into the cultural vocabulary of Leibniz’s early education when even the ornamental use of myth in philosophical writing was falling out of fashion.³²⁵

However, Enlightenment efforts toward theological and philosophical purification often bode ill for the status of Plato. First, a climate of criticism condemning the blind respect for antiquity meant that Plato, who was associated with tradition and the ungrounded authority of the ancients, was also regarded with suspicion.

The desire to break away from the influence of Plato and other symbolic figures from antiquity, in favor of grounding intellectual culture in modern foundations, resonated in particular with an interpretation of Plato’s legacy as a kind of deformed theology.³²⁶ Pitted

³²⁴ Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. William Harris Stahl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1952). See also, for instance, Juan Luis Vives’ sixteenth century commentary on the Dream of Scipio, which presumes the readers’ familiarity with Macrobius’ commentary. Juan Luis Vives, *Somnium et Vigilia in Somnium Scipionis: Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. Edward V. George (Greenwood, SC: Attic Press, 1989). The extent to which the Dream of Scipio was a fixture of European cultural vocabulary may be gauged by the decision, on the part of the fifteen-year-old Mozart, to use it as the source material for a one-act opera (K 126).

There is much scholarship aimed at dispelling the commonplace narrative that Plato was largely lost in the middle ages, but it nonetheless bears remembering that, even after the recovery of Plato’s dialogues in the sixteenth century, these developments were not being reflected in Renaissance university curricula, where education in philosophy remained Aristotelian in focus. Sarah Hutton, “Introduction” to *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 18. On Plato in the middle ages through the renaissance, see Klibansky, *Plato’s Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: The Warburg Institute, 1950).

³²⁵ However, Leibniz’s encounter with Plato during his education in Leipzig was more than casual. See Christia Mercer, “The Young Leibniz and His Teachers,” in *The Young Leibniz and His Philosophy (1646-76)*, ed. Stuart C. Brown (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1999), 19-40.

³²⁶ There exists an older tradition of attributing the broad term, “Platonism,” to any sort of theology accused of having been led astray by pagan philosophy. Trinitarianism, for instance, was a frequent target of the accusation of being Platonist in a pejorative sense. The term was also used synonymously with pagan superstition, as understood

directly against an older, humanist reverence of Plato as a philosopher inspired by a Christian divinity,³²⁷ this interpretation suggested that a longstanding tradition of applying Neoplatonic frameworks to interpret Christian doctrine in fact constituted the very contamination of religion.

In the influential *Le Platonisme Devoilé* (1700), the Huguenot pastor Matthieu Souverain articulated a specific version of Bayle's enduring contempt for Greek philosophy, as represented by Plato and Aristotle.³²⁸ Souverain condemned the "deprav'd Platonism" that had introduced extraneous embellishments and complications to an apostolic faith that ought to be simple rather than complex.³²⁹ In Souverain's characterization, Platonism was, in particular,

Absurd as the Theology of the Poets, and as unpolish'd as the
Religion of the most superstitious vulgar.³³⁰

A popular argument for the removal of Platonist corruptions from theology, then, explicitly associated Plato's legacy with the absurdity and unpolished vulgarity of a poetic theology, or a superstitious religion – in other words, with those very qualities that Enlightenment readers of myths had found so objectionable about such stories. It did not help that Plato's own philosophical writings were riddled with myths and other literary flourishes. As

in contrast to Christian religion. See Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 15-6.

³²⁷ Tigerstedt, *The Decline and Fall of the Neoplatonic Interpretation of Plato*, 25; Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Renaissance Platonism," in *Facets of the Renaissance*, ed. W. H. Werkmeister (Los Angeles, CA: University of Southern California Press, 1959), 87-107.

³²⁸ As a Huguenot refugee in England, Souverain came to be linked with two figures with whom Leibniz either corresponded or sought to correspond. Souverain at one point sought employment under Edward Clarke, the father of Samuel Clarke; and though those efforts came to be known to Locke, who appears to have taken an interest in his work. See John Marshall, "Locke, Socinianism, 'Socinianism', and Unitarianism," in *English Philosophy in the Age of Locke*, ed. Michael Alexander Stewart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 111-82, at 126.

For Bayle and Souverain see Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 30.

³²⁹ Ctd. in Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 18.

³³⁰ Mattieu Souverain, *Platonism Unveiled*, English translation (n.p., 1700), 71; ctd. In Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, 30.

early as 1667, a pamphlet issued against the Cambridge Platonists had denounced “Plato and his Followers” specifically for having

communicated their Notions by Emblems, Fables, Symbols, Parables, heaps of Metaphors, Allegories, and all sorts of Mystical Representations (as is vulgarly known). All of which upon the account of their Obscurity and Ambiguity are apparently the unfittest signes in the world to expresse ... Philosophical Notions and the discoveries of the Natures of things.”³³¹

The complaint against the “Obscurity and Ambiguity” of Plato’s myths was a philosophical one: they were unsuitable modes of expressing philosophical notions and scientific discoveries, to the extent that both were better served by clarity and precision. Even those readers who were more favorably disposed toward Plato himself, whose philosophy they believed had been distorted by his Neoplatonic followers, identified Plato’s use of myth and poetic language as the source of the misunderstandings that had led to the gradual transformation of Plato’s true philosophy into a obscure and mystical Platonism.

As both theology and philosophy were being held to new standards of rigor, then, the Platonic tradition was being associated with myth at two levels: its critics saw it as a pagan theology that had grafted itself onto the true Christian religion, and the indulgence, on the parts of both Plato and his Neoplatonic interpreters, of myths and other imprecise forms of expression was deemed deficient against the new ideals of philosophical clarity. Amidst these criticisms, the only viable way to salvage Plato’s reputation in the eyes of his Enlightenment critics was to emphasize the Socratic spirit valorized in Plato’s early dialogues, which seemed to choose skepticism and criticism over credulous belief in the content of contemporary Greek myths.

³³¹ Samuel Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie, Being a Letter Written to his much Honoured Friend Mr. Nath. Bisbie*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1667), 71; ctd. in Robert Edward Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 102-3.

Voltaire, for instance, would come to praise Plato's portrayal of Socrates for "proving that the moon was not a goddess, and that Mercury was not a god."³³²

Not until the mid-eighteenth century, a generation after Leibniz, would a more homogeneously favorable verdict on Plato begin to crystallize. This would be a view that combined a Voltairean admiration of Socratic skepticism, with an appreciation, no doubt aided by Leibniz himself, for the rational content of Plato's theory of Ideas. But the terms of the debate had been set: interpreters of the Platonic tradition now had to determine if Plato stood for the absurd and mystical distractions, reminiscent of the vulgarity and obscurity of myths, that had come to infiltrate both religion and philosophy; or they had to determine whether Plato himself served as the original proponent of a Socratic skepticism specifically targeted at the exposure of ancient Greek mythology in favor of proof-based thinking. As the latter interpretation began to accrue currency, it would come to set the stage for a Plato worthy of celebration only insofar as he was understood to be the founder of a rational and critical enterprise of philosophy divorced from myth.

In turn, the shifting debates around the status of Plato represent his implication in the soul-searching of an age. The questions around which Plato's modern reputation was being decided go to show that, as the leading figures of Enlightenment thought endeavored to reinvent philosophy for their times, they were in some part defining their efforts against myths and what they represented. The philosophical ideals they constructed opposed myth as a mode of

³³² Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, trans. Peter Gay (New York: Basic Books, 1962); "On Religion," in *The Rise of Modern Mythology*, ed. Burton Feldman and Robert D. Richardson, 155. Voltaire, however, rejected metaphysics of all kinds, and hence his estimation of Plato ultimately fell on the side of disapproval. Gay, *The Enlightenment*, I:135.

expression, and with it, the insufficiently critical reasoning believed to be responsible for them, and both were unambiguously unwelcome in the philosophical projects of modernity.

Leibniz and the Platonic tradition: myth as an imperfect placeholder for more perfect knowledge

Unlike many of his contemporaries, who were eager to slough off the authority of the ancients, Leibniz affiliated himself with a small group of intellectuals who were committed to the selective and purposeful revival of ancient texts. For this group he translated abridged versions of the *Phaedo* and the *Theatetus* into Latin, and lobbied for the translation of additional Platonic dialogues into French.³³³ In particular, Leibniz disagreed with Plato's modern detractors in believing that both Plato's philosophy and the language in which he presented it had ultimately made positive contributions to Christian religion as he understood it – that is, as a religion perfectly compatible with rationality.

He articulated his position most clearly in his Vienna lecture of 1714, “On the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology,” which begins with a comparison of Greek philosophy with the belief systems manifest in pagan mythology.³³⁴ Leibniz's argument was that Greek and in

³³³ Stuart Brown, “Leibniz and Berkeley: Platonic Metaphysics and ‘The Mechanical Philosophy,’” in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008), 239-53, at 245-46.

Theodorus in the *Petite Fable* is quite possibly named after the Theodorus in the *Theaetetus*; see, for instance, the sentiment expressed by Socrates regarding the existence of evil in the mortal world at *Theaet.* 176a.

³³⁴ The centrality of this short lecture to the coherence of Leibniz's thought, in particular the Platonic foundations of his monadology, has been argued by Patrick Riley, who published it for the first time in his *Leibniz: Political Writings*. He continued to reflect on the significance of the lecture through the end of his life; one of the last papers he penned presents “On the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology” as the crucial component completing a “Vienna Trinity” containing the more famous “Monadologie” and the “Principles of Nature and Grace Based on Reason.” Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Political Writings*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 225-235; Patrick Riley, “An Unpublished Lecture by Leibniz on the Greeks as Founders of

particular Plato's philosophy, like many of the religious beliefs alluded to in pagan myths, contained the seeds of a true natural religion – such as a basic belief in the immortality of the soul, or in the goodness of God – which had been in turn revealed to the relevant cultures by prophets and other vehicles of divine providence. However, Leibniz went on to argue, it had taken someone like Plato to develop both a rational system of ideas as well a rigorous language of argumentation in order to inquire into the nature of God with greater subtlety. This way, knowledge of the divine was no longer dependent on the accident of revelation, but Plato's efforts had equipped humankind, not only to know God and the eternal verities, but to know them better, through “outstanding arguments” and “certain proofs” that brought on “a greater subtlety of thinking.”³³⁵ It was thus that the Greeks – by whom Leibniz largely meant Plato – could be understood to be the founders of a “rational theology” and a “sacred philosophy” that rendered faith continuous with reason.³³⁶

By presenting Plato's philosophical system as a critical addition to the rational tools at our disposal for the pursuit of theological knowledge, Leibniz rejected the thought that Plato's philosophy represented a pagan corruption of Christian doctrine, and similarly disassociated it from the mythic overtones of pagan religion. In so doing he was effectively defending the Neoplatonist appreciation for Plato's systematic metaphysics against the new climate of criticism and the suspicion of systems, whose central proponents would see value in Plato only to the

Rational Theology: Its Relation to His ‘Universal Jurisprudence,’” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 2 (1976): 205-16; Patrick Riley, “Leibniz’ ‘Monadologie’ 1714-2014,” *The Leibniz Review* 24 (2014): 1-27.

I am grateful to Professor Riley's memory for persistently pressing this text upon me from the day of our first conversations on Leibniz, and for sharing with me an early manuscript of “Leibniz’ ‘Monadologie’ 1714-2014.”

³³⁵ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “On the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology,” in *Political Writings*, ed. Patrick Riley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 240.

³³⁶ Leibniz, “On the Greeks,” 240.

extent that they admired his depiction of Socratic skepticism. At the same time, Leibniz viewed the core of Plato's philosophy to be a metaphysical system that liberated the human pursuit of knowledge from its dependence on divine revelation, and unequivocally rejected the Neoplatonist celebration of a divinely inspired Plato, which he found obscure and mystifying.³³⁷

Leibniz's approval of the method and language of Plato's philosophy followed a similar logic. He applauded Plato's lucid efforts to "pursue exact definitions" of concepts in his philosophical arguments, and faulted his Neoplatonist followers for "throwing themselves upon" the "hyperbolic" expressions of Plato's myths, and, in fixating on them, causing them to be "weighed down by new illusions."³³⁸ By advocating an interpretation of Plato that emphasized the rationality of his metaphysics and argumentation, Leibniz made two pivotal contributions to the modern study of Plato: he pushed for a reconstruction of Plato's philosophy as a coherent system of ideas, and in turn, argued for the need to read Plato's philosophy separately from "Platonism," in particular by reading his dialogues in the original rather than through the mystical distortions of Neoplatonist commentary and paraphrase.³³⁹

³³⁷ Brown, "Leibniz and Berkeley," 248.

³³⁸ "Ficinus et Patricius sont ensuivi Platon, mais mal, à mon avis, parce qu'ils se son jettés sur les pensées hyperboliques, et ont abandonné ce qui estoit plus simple et en même temps plus solide. F ne parles partout que d'ideées, d'âmes du monde, de nombres mystiques et choses semblables, au lieu de poursuivre les exactes définitions que Platon tâche de donner des notions." Leibniz, Letter to Foucher, 1686, in *Die Philosophische Schriften*, ed. C.I. Gerhardt, 7 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1875): I, 380; ctd. in Kiblansky, *Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 50.

"[W]eighed down by new illusions" from the following: "Non sine admiratione vanitatis humanae notavi Platonicos posteriores quae magister egregia, docta et solida dixit de virtutibus et iustitia, de re publica, definiendi ac dividendi arte, de scientia veritatum aeternarum, de notitiis menti nostrae innatis dissimulare, quae vero illi excidere ambigua aut hyperbolica, cum forte genio indulsit et poetam agere potuit, de anima mundi, de ideis subsistentibus extra res ... a praeclaris illis discipulis avidè arripi, in peius detorquieri et multis novis somniis onerari." Leibniz, *Characteristica universalis*, fragment, in *Die Philosophische Schriften*, ed. C.I. Gerhardt, VII:147; ctd. in Kiblansky, *Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 50.

³³⁹ Kiblansky, *Plato's Parmenides in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, 50.

But for all the praise that Leibniz reserved for Plato's rational accomplishments against the traditional focus in Platonic scholarship on revelation and mysticism, his assessment doesn't amount to a wholesale rejection of myth as a discursive medium. Rather, although Leibniz emphasized the rational character of Plato's philosophy as a way of detaching it from the mythological associations surrounding the reputation of Platonism, his account of Plato's rationality also happens to offer a partial redemption of myth more generally. If Leibniz's stated intention in "On the Greeks as Founders of Rational Theology" was to differentiate the "true theology" of the Greeks from the "superstitious, mythological and idolatrous" religion of the "barbarians" – his solution ends up placing the respective contributions of Platonic philosophy and pagan mythology to human knowledge on the same comparative scale.³⁴⁰ Under this scheme of comparison, pagan mythology is clearly inferior to Platonic philosophy on a number of dimensions, but both can ultimately be ways of arriving at certain divine truths. Leibniz goes through several pagan myths to show that Plato owed to those cultures more or less all that he had gotten right about theology; but where "the wise men in Eastern peoples were accustomed to images" and "were content" to teach just these general truths as a matter of dogma, Plato had refined a philosophical method and rational language that opened up a way of attaining exact knowledge that had been unavailable through the imprecision of images and myth, and "more distinctly expressed" that which otherwise could only been "described rather obscurely."³⁴¹

Compared, then, to the language of logical argumentation that Plato invented, the flaws of myth are that it is only equipped to offer vague outlines of wisdom, and that, rather than open up avenues for more detailed investigation, it leads people to be "accustomed" to and passively

³⁴⁰ Leibniz, "On the Greeks," 235.

³⁴¹ Leibniz, "On the Greeks," 239-40.

“content” with incomplete knowledge. But to the extent that myth and logical argumentation are illuminated by, and reach for, the same truths, both fall on an epistemic spectrum, progressing from less to more complete forms of knowledge, that spans the metaphysical gap between the human and the divine.

It is possible for myth, then, to be subsumed into one of the key lessons that Leibniz took away from Plato’s system of ideas: that perfect knowledge is an ideal toward which humans strive imperfectly.³⁴² The divine perspective, as Leibniz conceives of it, might be that perfect state of knowledge that we might eventually reach, if only our time were infinite, through a progressive shedding of our less precise modes and languages of knowing for more precise ones. However, to the extent that we are finite creatures, our approach toward that ideal will always be an ongoing, incomplete process. As we have seen, so long as we are human and not divine, we will always depend on having any number of stopping places for reason, in order to give meaning and direction to the projects that reason does pursue actively. And just as the condition of being human necessitates in Leibniz’s philosophy a place for this passive mode of reasoning, the language of myth, too, comes to be a necessary part of the range of forms that knowledge can take over the trajectory of its progress: as a medium that functions as a placeholder that

³⁴² One of the cornerstones of Leibniz’ Platonism is his embrace of what Christia Mercer calls the “creaturely inferiority complex”: the thought that “every product of the supreme being contains all the attributes which constitute the divine essence though the product instantiates each of those attributes in a manner inferior to the way in which they exist in the supreme being,” and that the multiplicity of the created world is a product of the diversity of modes and degrees in which creatures participate in the divine. Christia Mercer, “The Platonism at the Core of Leibniz’s Philosophy,” in *Platonism at the Origins of Modernity: Studies on Platonism and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Hedley and Sarah Hutton (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer, 2008), 225-38, at 228; Christia Mercer, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. 173-205, 243-254.

See also Patrick Riley’s discussion of the role of perfection in Leibniz’s philosophy in Riley, “Introduction” to *Leibniz: Political Writings*, 17-19; and Riley, *Leibniz’ Universal Jurisprudence*, 21.

corresponds to those places where reason comes to a pause, and which provisionally articulates that which cannot yet be investigated in more complete detail.

From this follows that myth, as a discursive medium, can be acceptable in philosophy if its capacity to express and to stabilize provisional knowledge is bound to operate within certain constraints. The philosopher cannot forget its place on the epistemic spectrum as a fundamentally incomplete form of articulating knowledge, and as such, even in embracing it, must assume an orientation of being ready to supplant either its content or form with more perfect knowledge – regardless of how likely it is that such knowledge might be acquired in human lifetimes.

Reasoning in an Intelligible world

If borrowing from the genre of myth, as Leibniz does to conspicuous effect in the *Petite Fable*, is not a philosophically insignificant gesture in the way of a rhetorical ornament to the main argument, and if Leibniz's Enlightenment contemporaries were correct to associate myth with serious epistemic threats to the progress of modern philosophy and culture, then both the *Petite Fable* and the principles contained in it should come across as highly suspect.

For Bayle and for Fontenelle, the myths of unenlightened cultures had been the products of recognizably human errors of reasoning that have been permitted, by a mindset insufficiently critical or rigorous to catch those errors, to slip into world views and breed until they devolve into nonsense. Similarly, the myth with which Leibniz ends the *Theodicy* may speak to a

regressive moment: one in which an unfortunate starting point in Leibniz's philosophy, like one of the false principles Bayle diagnosed to be at the root of myth, leads its tenacious author to pursue his lost cause to bizarre conclusions that lend themselves so easily to the borrowed mythical language of the *Petite Fable*. On this reading, it is no accident that the final expression of the Theodicy, a philosophy that came to attract such ridicule by the heroes and heirs of the Enlightenment, takes the form of an extravagant myth. And, if this is the case, the *Petite Fable* is only useful to us philosophically as an inadvertent warning sign: as the proverbial smoke to the intellectual laxity that gave rise to it, by which its status as a myth alerts us to the deeper fissures within Leibniz's philosophy – and perhaps, in turn, to the folly of a philosopher so in love with the promise of his false start that he, instead of recognizing his own error, allowed its trajectory to spiral, unchecked, to its final, fantastical form of expression.

In order to take up this symptomatic reading of the *Petite Fable*, as a myth reflecting faulty philosophical foundations drawn out uncritically, it remains to return to the essential point of departure for Leibniz's Theodicy: namely, an unlimited concept of reason capable of knowing matters of faith, as opposed to a limited concept that is not. By revisiting these two conceptions of reason, dramatized in the debate between Bayle and Leibniz, and in trying to understand why it was that Leibniz had come to take the position he did, these next pages will locate what it is about the Theodicy that might be particularly amendable to expression in the form of a myth – whether it indeed a misguided starting point extended without a sufficiently critical outlook toward its own premises, or whether the source of the mythic expression lies in something else altogether.

Two pathologies of reason

Prominent throughout Bayle's remarks on the nature and goals of reason are two related themes that can help to explain why it was that he was so intent on separating the realms of reason and faith, and why Leibniz was so intent on uniting them. The first is his concern, so conspicuous in his attacks on superstition, "vain imaginings," and beliefs held merely for the sake of tradition, that it was because people were lazy in their use of critical reason that they were inclined to nourish poorly thought-out ideas in degenerative directions reminiscent of mythical world views. The inertia that kept an otherwise healthy reason from examining such thoughts more carefully, in turn, ran against the tide of his enlightened times, and obstructed the continued progress of mankind.³⁴³ Implicit in his diagnosis, that a lazy and uncritical reason seemed to be at the root of cultural stagnation, was also the prescription for a conversely active reason, the increased use of which would help sort knowledge from misguided beliefs and assumptions that are held for no good reasons. This formed the most basic foundation of Bayle's answer to the question of reason's boundaries, which was also a premise to which Leibniz was fully committed: in order for philosophy to be genuinely progressive, reason first had to be active, assertive, and, within the bounds of its designated sphere, indiscriminating in the objects of its critical scrutiny.

But if Bayle called upon a relentlessly active reason to ward off the pathologies of a lazy reason, this solution did not come without its own set of problems. A second theme that runs through Bayle's work is a skepticism that extended at times to a skepticism of reason itself. He

³⁴³ Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet*, 141; Haydn Mason, "Optimism, Progress, and Philosophical History," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 195-217, at 206.

considered reason to have the paradoxical powers of “a guide that leads one astray.” Philosophy, for him,

can be compared to some powders that are so corrosive that, after they have eaten away the infected flesh of a wound, they then devour the living flesh, rot the bones, and penetrate to the very marrow. Philosophy at first refutes errors. But if it is not stopped at this point, it goes on to attack truths. *And when it is left on its own, it goes so far that it no longer knows where it is and can find no stopping place.*³⁴⁴

Bayle compares philosophy to a strong medical powder used to treat wounds: it will burn through infections, but if used indiscriminately, it will do the same to living tissue. Reason, then, is essentially caustic in its nature, and poses a danger to itself when left to refute and attack whatever is near. Designating separate realms for reason and for faith protects not only religious dogma from its corrosive powers, but sets a “stopping place” for reason so that it doesn’t lead itself astray.

Bayle’s limited conception of reason, then, can be read as a response to two pathological forms of reason: a remedy to the drawbacks of the remedy to a different set of problems. The dual threat of an atrophied reason through insufficient use, on the one hand, and of a freewheeling and self-defeating reason, on the other, was a problem that troubled Leibniz as well. What accounts for their radically divergent positions on the question of reason’s boundaries was that Leibniz believed limiting the realm of reason would resurrects the pathologies of a lazy reason. For Leibniz, reason could only be genuinely active, rather than lazy or passive, when there exist no constraints on what is and is not within its purview of understanding.

³⁴⁴ Pierre Bayle, *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, trans. Pierre Des Maizeaux (London: Knapton et. al., 1736), entry “Uriel Acosta,” remark G; ctd. in Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 288; emphasis mine.

It was not that Leibniz was unaware or unconcerned for the problems of a restless reason in need of guidance. The subject of the *Essays on Theodicy* – the relationship between human freedom, the origin of evil, and the course of events in the world that seem to arise as though by a divinely determined necessity – is famously introduced as a “labyrint[h] where our reason very often goes astray.”³⁴⁵ But if his Theodicy, and the attendant rejection of Bayle’s solution, was the result of his engagement with that labyrinth, it was because the opposite threat had seemed more urgent.

For Leibniz, it was a sluggish reason that was already causing problems for faith, rather than its corrosive counterpart. Cordoning off matters of faith from those of reason does not result in the freedom of reason from the shackles of religious dogma, as later champions of the Enlightenment might have maintained, but does a disservice to both faith and to reason. The opposition of the two in the “admirable Dictionary of M. Bayle” is, according to Leibniz’ characterization, “where M. Bayle wishes to silence reason after having made it speak too loud: which he calls the triumph of faith.”³⁴⁶

³⁴⁵ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 53 [Preface]. The topic is one of two such labyrinths, the other being the subject of the *Monadologie*. Leibniz returns to this image several times, at Leibniz, *Theodicy* 89 [§24-25], 336 [§352], 345 [§367]. The image of world as a labyrinth that befalls reason to navigate is a trope that can be found in Bacon and Descartes. See Karsten Harries, “Descartes and the Labyrinth of the World,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 6, no. 3 (1998): 307-330.

³⁴⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy* 63 [Preface].

The separation of faith and reason: two deficient orientations toward fate

Leibniz draws a fundamental connection between faith that is separated from reason, and the concept of a “Lazy Reason” that had preoccupied the “the ancients.”³⁴⁷ Lazy reason is the result of a particular attitude toward events that relinquishes human freedom and responsibility, and abandons itself to fatalism. Those who hold this attitude do not question the circumstances in which they find themselves or their future trajectories, because they do not question the will of the divinities or supernatural forces that had brought about these events. Instead, they “will be inclined to evade the difficulty of consideration and abandon themselves to fate or to inclination, as if reason should not be employed except in easy cases.”³⁴⁸ When one refuses, in other words, to think hard and rationally about the course of events in the world, that mindset of indifference has a tendency to slide into all spheres of life, to detrimental consequences.

Leibniz assigns to this uncritical attitude the unfortunate name, “*Fatum Mahometanum*, fate after the Turkish fashion ... owing to their use of such reasoning as that just recorded,”³⁴⁹ but his point is that most Christians are guilty of “reason in the Turkish fashion” in their dealings, and “will employ the lazy reason, derived from the idea of inevitable fate, to relieve oneself of the need to reason properly.”³⁵⁰ The consequences for faith is that lazy reasoners, whether Christian or pagan, ancient or modern, engage only in the “outward forms of the

³⁴⁷ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 54 [Preface]. “The ancients” probably refers to Cicero; see Cicero, *On Fate*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb classical library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), XII. The *ignava ratio* is a longstanding problem in the philosophical tradition: see also Kant’s remarks in Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A773/B801; A689/B717.

³⁴⁸ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 55 [Preface].

³⁴⁹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 54 [Preface].

³⁵⁰ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 55 [Preface]. Possessors of a more sinister variant of lazy reason are also compared to “the pagans of old, who ascribed to the gods the cause of their crimes, as if a divinity drove them to evil.” Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 57 [Preface].

expression of their religion” diagnosed in the first sentences of the *Theodicy*: in ceremonial practices that only “resemble” virtuous action, and in doctrines or “formularies of belief” that are “like shadows of the truth.”³⁵¹ Against the hollow state of religion and morality in his own time, Leibniz prescribes a more affirmative vision of faith, and insists that “when virtue is reasonable, when it is related to God, who is the supreme reason of things, it is founded on knowledge.”³⁵² Faith that is not grounded in reason falls short of true faith and virtue, just as it erodes at our freedom to reason about the world around us.

Conversely for Leibniz, reason that is not grounded in faith is similarly deficient. What Leibniz calls *Fatum Stoicum* seems to be a way of reasoning that manages to remain active despite subscribing to a weakened form of the same fatalism motivating the *Fatum Mahometanum*. In his characterization of Stoic philosophy, the course of events in the world and the forces behind them are not beyond the domain of reason, but the Stoic who actively reasons about such things does not do so out of faith in a meaningfully ordered universe. Rather, the world, seen through Stoic eyes, runs on an opaque determinism, such that after a certain point, it no longer makes sense to ask difficult questions about why things are the way they are. This is not because Leibniz disregards efforts within Stoic thought to grapple with religious questions,³⁵³ but because its gods are thought to be fundamentally inscrutable, if not despotic and thereby, in his estimation, “unworthy of veneration.”³⁵⁴ Accordingly, the status of reason in *Fatum Stoicum*

³⁵¹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 49 [Preface].

³⁵² Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 52 [Preface].

³⁵³ i.e. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 263 [§217], 342 [§363].

³⁵⁴ Jonathan Israel’s description of despotic notions of god in the philosophies of Leibniz’s contemporaries, particularly in Bayle. Jonathan Israel, “Leibniz’s Theodicy as a Critique of Spinoza and Bayle - and Blueprint for the Philosophy Wars of the 18th Century,” in *New Essays on Leibniz’s Theodicy*, ed. Larry M. Jorgensen and Samuel Newlands: 233-244, at 235.

is not particular to Stoic philosophy, but is an underlying condition of all approaches to philosophy that are not predicated on the idea of a rational god.

If the *Fatum Mahometanum* consists in a reason that is lazy because of a kind of blind faith, the *Fatum Stoicum* amounts to a reason that is active in spite of it. As far as fatalisms go, Leibniz considers this defiantly active form of reason unequivocally preferable to the alternative, and he reserves admiration for its ability to inspire, in the place of helplessness, “tranquillity in regard to events, through the consideration of necessity, which renders our anxieties and our vexations needless.”³⁵⁵ This tranquility, however, is ultimately deceptive. As long as the happenings that befall humans are understood to be arbitrary rather than rational, even the best efforts of philosophers to make active use of their reason would be “confining” them to a world view built around the “alleged necessity” of events. As such, any tranquility one might feel toward a world driven by arbitrariness and mere necessity would in truth be “a forced patience.”³⁵⁶ Reason that lacks faith in the coherence of the world is doomed to be incomplete in its endeavors: it is a reason that manages to resist laziness, but ultimately is not free.

Separating faith and reason, then, renders reason lazy in the worst case, and, even in the best case, imposes limits on reason’s freedom. Leibniz saw his Theodicy as the rational ground that faith requires, and the rational content of faith that will give meaning to reason’s activities. The problem of lazy reason, as he conceived it, is resolved rather than aggravated in his system, in which faith and reason are continuous. Unlike in the *Fatum Mahometanum*, matters of faith are arrived at rationally, not believed blindly or performed in empty gestures; and because no

The corresponding thought in Leibniz, that an arbitrary and despotic god is “unfitted to be loved and unworthy of being loved,” can be found at *Theodicy* 127 [I.§6], and also at Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 53, 59 [Preface], 95 [§37].

³⁵⁵ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 54 [Preface].

³⁵⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 54 [Preface].

area of knowledge is beyond its domain, reason accordingly lacks dogmatic hiding places in which to breed lazy habits. Also unlike the *Fatum Stoicum*, Leibniz' system grants reason a genuinely constructive role rather than one resigned to merely defending its projects against the opacity of arbitrary world events. The difference between the Theodicy and the *Fatum Stoicum* can be conceived as a difference between "joy and patience: for their tranquillity was founded only on necessity, while ours must rest upon the perfection and beauty of things, upon our own happiness."³⁵⁷ Through "acquaintance with true principles," the Theodicy grounds the activities of reason in an emancipatory world view.³⁵⁸ In turn, reason can only assume its true form when its freedom is unrestricted, and all matters of knowledge fall within its comprehensive reach.

The intelligible universe

For Leibniz, then, lifting the barrier between the realms of reason and faith is the only genuine way to ensure that reason does not slip into that pathological form that Bayle had presented as a problem of laziness. Much more uncertain, however, is the Theodicy's relation to the opposite problem of reason that had concerned Bayle. For Bayle, the separation of faith and reason had been necessary because reason required what he called a stopping place; without such restraints, there was no telling what an essentially corrosive form of reason would attack, including itself. At first glance, Leibniz's decision, against Bayle, to grant reason a boundless empire of knowable things may appear straightforwardly emancipatory. But it is not without its own problems. For what would it really mean for reason to know no limits? In a fully

³⁵⁷ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 282-3 [§254].

³⁵⁸ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 282 [§254].

intelligible universe, where the objects of reason are infinite, human reason seems to come out empowered and weak at the same time. Only an equivalently infinite reason – that is, God – would be able to comprehend all of it at once. But cast against the vast world of possible knowledge, the finitude of human reason comes to be all the more pronounced. If the universe and its infinite possibilities are like a terribly long book, Leibniz asks us to celebrate the knowledge that the book can be read at all, but also to reconcile ourselves to the fact that we can read only a small part of it during our lifetimes, and must consequently be all the more prudent in the ways we choose to direct our finite reason.

Insisting on the perfect intelligibility of the universe pushes Leibniz to take up some difficult positions on the relationship between reason and its world. Leibniz can be said to reside in what Hans Blumenberg calls “a meaning-driven world,” in which “every event must in principle be open to examination regarding its ‘why’ and ‘whither’ – even if it does not willingly provide such information.”³⁵⁹ The smallest details of the universe have been thought through by a perfectly rational creator, and as such, a reason exists behind everything in it, from each strand of hair on our heads, to the imperceptible circumstances that factor into the decision to place a particular foot before the other as we pass through a door.³⁶⁰ However, not all these reasons and explanations are immediately available to us. These matters are in many cases merely a question of having the patience to apply the sufficient level of scrutiny to that which is in need of explication. Too often are our intellectual endeavors misled simply because we jump too quickly

³⁵⁹ Blumenberg, *Care Crosses the River*, 54.

³⁶⁰ The example of the hair on our heads occurs at Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 55 [Preface]; that of placing one foot before another at Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 143 [I.§31].

to incomplete answers: we're bound to arrive at the rational explanation to any occurrence in the world, if only we are persistent and rigorous in our efforts.³⁶¹

But at other times, certain matters of knowledge are in fact beyond rational comprehension. These "truths" that are "above reason," rather than against it, include God's miracles and the so-called mysteries of religion, in whose ranks Leibniz counts the miracle of Creation itself, and the order of the created universe.³⁶² But Leibniz is not particularly bothered by the existence of things in reason's supposed realm that cannot be fully comprehended, and points out that "[t]here are a thousand objects in Nature in which we understand something, but which we do not therefore necessarily comprehend." Light, for instance, can be understood to a significant extent through existing ideas, experiments and demonstrations, but total comprehension of the nature of light is beyond us.³⁶³ Leibniz remains, in other words, adamantly committed to reason's capacity to know the world, even as he admits to the presence of matters in nature and theology alike, of which reason is condemned, at best, to partial knowledge. Even in such cases, he insists, reason can know something, and ought to continue its pursuit for a greater, however imperfect, understanding of the universe. "Albeit our mind is finite and cannot comprehend the infinite," he offers, "of the infinite nevertheless it has proofs whose strength or weakness it comprehends."³⁶⁴ For Leibniz, every aspect of the rationally ordered universe can be known to some extent: if not entirely, at least partially and indirectly.

³⁶¹ i.e. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 92 [§31], 109 [§65], 117 [§77].

³⁶² The "truths" that are "above reason" in this way are listed at Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 88 [§23].

³⁶³ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 114 [§73].

³⁶⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 112 [§69].

The revenge of restless reason: the need for a third orientation toward fate

Leibniz had attempted to distance his conception of reason and its powers from the pathologies that had troubled Bayle. However, a familiar problem resurfaces when a finite human reason is left to confront an infinitely knowable world, and in its every crevice, an infinite number of questions waiting to be taken up for examination. If, for Leibniz, the unknown can always be better known through reason's attempts, human reason potentially bears responsibility for every question in the universe it chooses and chooses not to investigate. Among the infinite conundrums yet remaining in the rationally ordered world, which ought a finite reason to take up now? It is here, in Leibniz's insistence on situating an infinite universe under the purview of a finite human reason, that the second of Bayle's problems creeps back in.

Leibniz had rejected Bayle's conception of reason as essentially destructive,³⁶⁵ emphasizing that even as it takes down a view held to be knowledge, it then ultimately builds support for the opposite view.³⁶⁶ But even in its essentially constructive form, Leibniz's conception of reason ends up, if not corrosive, restless and easily disoriented. Reason, as Leibniz defines it, is the "linking together of truths,"³⁶⁷ but truths are often arrived at through a tortuous process full of detours and frustrations. He speaks of the practicality of protecting persons of feeble faith from the potentially "poisonous" effects of rational disputation, and, in cases when such protection is impossible, of the importance of providing an "antidote," in the

³⁶⁵ "M. Bayle also thinks that human reason is a source of destruction and not of edification ... that it is a runner who knows not where to stop, and who, like another Penelope, herself destroys her own work." Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 99 [§46].

³⁶⁶ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 119 [§80].

³⁶⁷ Leibniz opens the Preliminary Dissertation of the *Theodicy* with this definition, and repeats it throughout the work. Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 73 [§8].

form of rational answers, to the destabilization of beliefs by reason.³⁶⁸ It seems to Leibniz “a general defect of humanity” that reason is impatient with its own course. Incomplete knowledge is unsatisfying, and people would more readily muddy the matter with sophistry, “to make the most of their wit and learning,” than continue on the search for “naked truth.” In so doing, reason loses sight of its purpose and gets caught up in chasing minutiae. In this sense, Leibniz observes, “we take pleasure in going astray.”³⁶⁹

Like Bayle, then, Leibniz thinks reason can lead itself astray. But more damningly, it is especially in Leibniz’s expansive account of reason’s realm, that reason is vulnerable to losing its way. The problem of reason’s waywardness, for Bayle, had been one of reason continuing on with its work beyond what would be constructive, like a runner who would run past his mark unless he is told where to stop.³⁷⁰ A modified version of the same problem emerges in Leibniz’s philosophy, in which reason’s finite resources might easily be spent on explicating the rational rules underlying every phenomenon it confronts, or worse, on struggling for small advances on questions ultimately beyond total comprehension. Here, reason risks being like a particularly myopic runner, making his way through a vast labyrinth by trying every corner and dead end at random. The larger the labyrinth, and the more limited the runner’s time and stamina, the more difficulty he will have finding his way. In Leibniz’s philosophy, the threat of a disoriented and restless reason is likewise exacerbated as a result of the gap between the infinity of knowable things in the universe, and the finitude of human reason.

³⁶⁸ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 97 [§40].

³⁶⁹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 92 [§§30-31].

³⁷⁰ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 99 [§46]. The reference is at Pierre Bayle, “Réponse Aux Questions D’un Provincial,” in *Corpus Bayle - Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Antony McKenna and Gianluca Mori (Paris: Classiques Garnier Numérique, 2012): III: 419–1014, 708.

This is a problem that Leibniz cannot adequately answer except by introducing into the Theodicy a passive and uncritical element that serves as a counterpart to Bayle's solution to reason's disorientation. A boundary imposed between the respective realms of faith and reason had served Bayle as a "stopping place" to prevent reason from losing its way. Because Leibniz is committed to the continuity of reason's domain, he cannot set such definitive limits on the freedom of reason. But by insisting on the intelligibility of the created world and while also admitting to the finitude of human rationality, Leibniz's Theodicy effectively ends up having to draw a boundary of sorts, albeit a much more fluid and provisional one, between the theoretically intelligible and the practically knowable. This is a boundary between what demands the immediate exercise of our reason, and what can be bracketed off for the time being. The Theodicy makes such deferral possible under the faith that, to the extent that it belongs in our best of all possible universes, chosen by a perfectly wise deity, an unknown thing can be trusted to make sense, even though we may not be able to comprehend it for some time. This Leibniz calls the *Fatum Christianum*:

It is as if one said to men: Do your duty and be content with that which shall come of it, not only because you cannot resist divine providence, or the nature of things (which may suffice for tranquillity, but not for contentment), but also because you have to do with a good master.³⁷¹

Leibniz only uses the term once in the *Essays on Theodicy*, but it is clear that he equates the establishment of a Christian attitude toward fate with the primary project of the Theodicy. The *Fatum Christianum* is conceived in contradistinction to all other positions on fate – that is, those encompassed by the *Fatum Mahometanum* and the *Fatum Stoicum* – that uphold an effective separation between reason and faith. But although it grounds itself on the convergence

³⁷¹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 55 [Preface].

of faith and reason, the *Fatum Christianum* is like the *Fatum Mahometanum* and the *Fatum Stoicum* in that it retains an uncritical and fatalistic view toward the course of events in the world – namely, the deference of the unknown and the senseless to a deity who knows and comprehends them in our stead. This means that the Theodicy has both an active and a passive aspect. The active aspect consists in an emancipatory view of reason's relationship to the world, and submits for rational exploration the entirety of the created universe and the questions to be found in it. The passive aspect of the Theodicy, by contrast, permits a finite human reason not to pursue knowledge of these things at once. It seeks to absolve human rationality of the infinite scope of responsibilities it bears in Leibniz's system, in which reason inhabits a perfectly intelligible universe, and is therefore called to account for all that which remains unknown in it.

If Bayle imposed a boundary between a realm of knowledge for the active use of reason, and a realm from which reason was to hold back, Leibniz can be said to resort to a similar solution. On one side of the Theodicy, the side that presumes reason's capacity to succeed in understanding all that it takes up for investigation, reason thrives unhampered, in an active mode. However, on the other side of the Theodicy, that aligned with the spirit of the *Fatum Christianum*, to have knowledge of the rational nature of God and his creations is a good-enough understanding of the world. And here it becomes permissible, for the time being, for reason to come to rest on the issues it has yet to fully grasp. In excusing what we don't know in terms what we do – that even the greatest and most urgent mysteries of our reality obey the rational design of a perfectly wise god – the Theodicy effectively draws a boundary beyond which an essentially active reason can assume a passive and uncritical mode.

Reason's stopping places

The status of reason on the passive side of that boundary may, however, give a rationalist pause. After all, Leibniz's refusal to delimit the domain of reason had been a way of protecting reason from laziness, and a total rejection of Bayle's solution to the same set of problems. But the passivity of the *Fatum Christianum* itself seems to consist in an evasion of thinking. Faith in the divine, according to Leibniz,

advances beyond the intellect, and takes possession of the will and of the heart, to make us act with zeal and joyfully as the law of God commands. *Then we have no further need to think of reasons or to pause over the difficulties of argument which the mind may anticipate.*³⁷²

This, for Leibniz, is reason's stopping place, beyond which the need to keep working at difficult questions is removed. If a primary aim of the Theodicy is to restore to reason an unbounded freedom to know the world, it would seem a contradiction to Leibniz's vision to allow for rational laxity on any number of difficult matters deemed beyond, though not against, reason. It had been on very similar grounds that Leibniz had rejected Bayle's separation of faith and reason, and all orientations toward fate that failed to reconcile the two domains. Reason, for Leibniz, inevitably suffers when there exists a boundary in the province of knowledge beyond which it is permissible not to reason.

In particular, the atrophy of reason's active and critical function entails giving in to the indulgence of those very superstitions that Bayle fought so hard to expel from our patterns of thinking. Laziness of thought is responsible for a number of contemporary behaviors Leibniz lists with disapproval: the "superstitious" work of fortune-tellers, belief in the philosopher's

³⁷² Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 91 [§29]; emphasis mine.

stone, and any tendency to seek “short cuts to the attainment of happiness without trouble.”³⁷³ Moreover, when people inhabit a cognitive state that makes them vulnerable to such conduct, this has significant moral consequences. It encourages them to relinquish responsibility for their actions, in the manner of “the pagans of old, who ascribed to the gods the cause of their crimes, as if a divinity drove them to do evil.”³⁷⁴ That is, those who are idle or passive in their use of reason are like primitive peoples of antiquity who, at the expense of their own moral agency, dwelled in a world circumscribed by myth. And, by Leibniz’s own reasoning, the admission of a passive and uncritical aspect to the Theodicy would appear to invite the same dangers.

If an uncritical orientation toward the world gravitates toward myth, then Leibniz’s Theodicy, which has such a passive component, can be said to contain those same impulses that drive people to turn to myths. These are unreflective impulses that, in fostering a general reluctance to question the status quo, eventually tend toward a fatalistic belief that the destiny of the moral agent is governed by external forces that are ultimately beyond rational comprehension. Both the generation of myths and belief in them can be conceived as responses to that desire, on the one hand, to away with the need to reason on certain matters and, on the other, to relinquish one’s fate to the unknown. And by committing itself to the *Fatum Christianum*, Leibniz’s philosophy creates spaces within reason’s domain for an uncritical mode of thought for which myth carries inherent psychological appeal.

At the same time, such potentially myth-prone spaces are also the result of an endeavor to preserve the integrity of reason: the passive component of the Theodicy functions as a necessary corrective to problems arising from a rationalist premise. That rationalist premise – namely, the

³⁷³ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 56 [Preface].

³⁷⁴ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 57 [Preface].

unboundedness of reason's realm – was something Bayle had given up on preserving, but to which Leibniz was very wedded. Accordingly, if Bayle and Leibniz had each in his own way prescribed stopping places for reason to serve as a corrective to its waywardness, their solutions differ in one crucial respect. Whereas Bayle sets a precise boundary on what subjects ought to fall within and without the purview of reason, Leibniz makes no such commitment. Rather, for Leibniz, it is permissible for human reason to come to rest on just as many matters as it is free to pursue. Furthermore, any such abandonment of an inquiry is treated as provisional, as though progress toward a more perfect understanding of the issue could be resumed anytime. Contained in every intellectual pursuit is an infinity of further questions of which human reason can practically only answer so many, but, because these infinities are held together by the justice of a supremely rational god, knowledge is both stable and buildable. Boundaries between the things that do and do not demand the active use of reason are provisional, and the provisional status of these boundaries in Leibniz's system is at once troubling and redemptive. Troubling, because when no hard metric exists for determining when to cease investigation of a matter, there will always be a danger of postponing thought prematurely and indefinitely. But it is also an alternative to permanently shuttering off entire realms of knowledge from reason's access, and, in that sense, redeems his project. For Leibniz, reason's stopping places can be moved, like temporary barricades, as human knowledge incrementally works toward a state of perfection idealized by the divine perspective.

If the Theodicy makes provisions for the suspension of critical reason, and with it, the ushering in of impulses that give rise to myth, these provisions are also a placeholder for future knowledge, and is therefore subject to philosophical qualification. Given the practical limitations of human inquiry, deferment of rational activity comes to be necessary at some point

on all matters of knowledge, but on no subject can the need for further reasoning be permanently foreclosed. Accordingly, any expression of the impulse for myth in the *Theodicy* would also have to reflect these reservations. That is, whenever reason assumes a passive mode and submits to sweeping stories unearned by logical argument, such leaps in thinking would have to be interpreted alongside a certain awareness of their own epistemic status, as interim markers of what has yet to be known. Put a different way, the *Theodicy* contains a paradoxical tension that requires reason's activities to run two ways, and this paradox in turn calls for a mode of expression that allows it to be accepted and experienced as a tension. This is a tension between the *Theodicy*'s suggestion that the entirety of our intelligible universe demands exploration by reason, and the simultaneous concession to the necessity of checking reason from leading itself astray in the capillaries of the unknown.

It is against the background of this tension, and the need for its expression, that the *Petite Fable* comes to conclude the *Theodicy*. Read in these terms, the *Petite Fable* takes on new significance as the instantiation of a distinct form of philosophical discourse. As a narrative that takes on the characteristics of the kinds of myths associated with passive or idle reasoning about the unknown, the *Petite Fable* has the effect of both acknowledging and giving voice to the paradoxical mythic impulse contained within Leibniz's philosophical system. The tropes and conventions of myth become useful for these purposes because one of the ways in which myth, as a form of discourse, distinguishes itself from logical argumentation or even most varieties of fiction is that it does not answer to the rules of logic or, for that matter, of plausibility. Consequently, myth presents tensions and contradictions in a way that allows them to stand unresolved. At the same time, the *Petite Fable* is a philosophical myth, in that it tries to lend expression to the philosophical concerns delimiting those regions of passivity in reason's

domain. The story depicted in the Petite Fable is a response to a philosophical problem concerning what it means to reason in an intelligible universe. And, as such, it is a profession of faith in the coherence of human knowledge and the capacity of rational activity to build on itself. By telling such a story about the nature of reason and its objects, and by doing so in a myth, Leibniz testifies to an important insight about the relationship between world and reason: that being able to take for granted the ultimate intelligibility and goodness of the things that are not yet known is a precondition for reason to operate freely in reality without being led astray.

The Petite Fable as a Philosophical Myth in the Platonic Tradition

*From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.*

— Wallace Stevens, from *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*

We could suppose, as detractors of the Theodicy often do, that there exists, among the possible universes that God could choose to create, a universe that is better than ours. Then, we might find ourselves blaming the negligence of a god who ought to have had both the omnipotence and omniscience to create a world with far less evil and suffering than that

contained in the world to which we are condemned.³⁷⁵ But if we were to also suppose that nothing in the idea of this superior universe mandates that we ourselves exist in it – would we then prefer this alternate universe to be the one that God creates over our own? What if this universe lacked not only our own existence, but all of the things and creatures of our world, that we could not even begin to fathom what it means to have knowledge of that superior universe?

The point is that there is an infinite number of such exercises in speculation, in which we might add or subtract any number of elements to or from the world we inhabit, but real knowledge of any one of these non-existing universes is closed to us. And so long as that is the case, we might be hard pressed to find a point of reference, outside of our own world, by which to judge one of these universes less arbitrary than another. At stake here is a number of interrelated tensions that run through Leibniz's philosophy: the limitations of the human perspective, as opposed to the limitlessness of the divine; the vision of a universe in which our activities have meaning, as opposed to that of a universe indifferent to our existence; the familiarity of the particular objects of our knowledge, as opposed to the difficulty of the faith that our knowledge of these particulars invariably adds up to a more coherent, more perfect understanding of the world.

At the same time, these are questions that the *Petite Fable* raises, to paradoxical effect, even as it asserts the flat truth of a Theodicy that denies even the possibility that these two universes – the superior universe and the universe we know and inhabit – might not be one and the same. And in raising them, the *Petite Fable* ends up doing something better suited to the literary resources of myth than that of logical argumentation, whereby it presents a normative

³⁷⁵ See Hans Jonas' claim that the most palatable solution that does not assign blame to god is also one that relinquishes the concept of divine omnipotence. Hans Jonas, "The Concept of God after Auschwitz," *The Journal of Religion* 67, no. 1 (1987): 1–13.

claim about the world and, without exactly opening it up for further scrutiny, nonetheless qualifies it in a way that invites recognition of its contingent status.

The foregoing sections have seen Leibniz and Bayle come to divergent answers to a common question, of configuring reason's boundaries in a way that makes it conducive to progress and growth. The myths of unenlightened cultures had taught the philosophers of their time that the guarantor of rational progress was a reason that was active and critical, purified of the passive and uncritical permissiveness that seemed to be at the heart of myth's flawed world views. But even though Leibniz begins from this premise, his efforts to preserve the active nature of reason show that, to the extent that we philosophize from a human rather than a divine standpoint, it is impossible not to run up against uncritically held beliefs in our philosophical endeavors. As such, Leibniz's philosophical system has to permit, in the form of the *Fatum Christianum*, room for a passive, non-critical, and delegating mode of reasoning – that is, the kind of thinking that Enlightenment thinkers took to be essentially mythic, and which we, as inheritors of that legacy, make central to our concept of myth.

At this point it may still be tempting to conceive of the mythic medium of the *Petite Fable* as confirmation of the Theodicy's essential backwardness, its misguided attachment to an idea that ultimately seems to have fallen on the wrong side of the course of philosophical progress. Such a line of interpretation, however, does not give sufficient weight to the function of the passive *Fatum Christianum* as a solution to the problems of reason, one that is intended to help preserve the active nature of reason in philosophy. Nor does it do justice to the related discovery, of the impossibility of avoiding any number of stopping places for reason so long as one is fully committed to its capacity to know everything in its domain; or to the care that

Leibniz takes to ensure that theological justifications for these stopping places are not permanent substitutes for actual knowledge.

These qualifications point to the likelihood of a Leibniz who was far more deliberate in the construction of the Petite Fable, and whose reason for writing it as a myth was neither a matter of rhetorical ornamentation nor an unreflective extension of a moment of argumentative weakness, but philosophically justified. Like the symptomatic reading of the Petite Fable, this interpretation of the myth takes its particular literary form to be significant from a philosophical standpoint, and in turn links that form to the expression of content that does not lend itself easily to critical scrutiny. However, this philosophical reading of the Petite Fable also suggests that the myth is, at the same time, deployed more self-consciously on the part of its author, who has to ensure that his appropriation of the genre of myth is compatible with the active form of reason that the *Fatum Christianum* is intended to protect. And, in particular, his myth must avoid the grave danger of perpetuating a narrative about the order of things that snowballs, grows in authority, and eventually stagnates into something no one thinks to challenge. As such, the Petite Fable is a specifically philosophical myth, which asserts the Theodicy in such a way that simultaneously shows how acceptance of its principles has to be both provisional and necessary.

The provisionality and necessity of the Theodicy

The decision to end the *Theodicy* with the Petite Fable is an unmistakable homage to the Myth of Er at the end of Plato's *Republic*: it is a myth about the afterlife and the construction of the cosmos, and a myth that serves as the conclusion to a philosophical treatise on justice with a

conspicuously Hellenizing title.³⁷⁶ In appealing to the Myth of Er this way, it also follows in the footsteps of the aforementioned Dream of Scipio from Cicero's *Republic*, which, like the other two myths, narrates a dream vision of the cosmos beyond mortal existence, and treats such themes as the greater harmony of the cosmos and its implications for the nature of our earthly duties.³⁷⁷

But now we are better positioned to appreciate the significance of Leibniz's tribute to these ancient models. Leibniz's efforts, in the *Petite Fable*, to preserve the most recognizable features of both Plato's myth and its most famous adaptation suggest that he embraced the writing of a certain kind of myth to be a distinct element of the Platonic tradition as he understood it. No doubt, in aligning the *Petite Fable* with these established myths in the philosophical canon, Leibniz intended to indicate to his readers that his was a myth written on a specifically philosophical register – that, in the way ordinary myths that might derive their content from an existing body of mythological material, his own myth had been constructed from vocabulary and themes taken from a well-known corpus of philosophical literature. In turn, Leibniz's attempt to reinvigorate a philosophical tradition of myth-writing speaks to a dynamic

³⁷⁶ Leibniz had also written, likely in the early 1690s, an unusual essay known to us as "Leibniz's Philosopher's Dream," which narrates a reverie that tracks very closely the Allegory of the Cave. I thank Paul Lodge for introducing me to this fascinating piece. The manuscript, which is forthcoming in the Akademie-Edition (Reihe VI: "Philosophische Schriften," Bd. 5), can be found in Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Die Leibniz-Handschriften*, ed. Eduard Bodemann (Hannover und Leipzig: Niedersächsische Landesbibliothek, 1895), LH IV 8 Bl. 51-52. Donald Rutherford's English translation can be found on his website: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Leibniz's Philosophical Dream," trans. Donald Rutherford, 2014, <http://philosophyfaculty.ucsd.edu/faculty/rutherford/Leibniz/translations/Dream.pdf>.

See also Paul Lodge's discussion of the "Philosopher's Dream" in Lodge, "Theodicy, Metaphysics, and Metaphilosophy in Leibniz," 43ff.

³⁷⁷ For a comparative discussion of the Dream of Scipio and the Myth of Er, see Georg Luck, "Studia Divina in Vita Humana: On Cicero's 'Dream of Scipio' and Its Place in Graeco-Roman Philosophy," *The Harvard Theological Review* 49, no. 4 (1956): 207-18, at 208-210. A more thorough treatment of the Dream of Scipio, as it relates to both the *Republic* as a whole and to Cicero's Platonism, can be found in Jed W. Atkins, *Cicero on Politics and the Limits of Reason: The Republic and Laws* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 47-80.

vision of the potential of the genre and convention of philosophical myth. Just as Leibniz took liberties to refashion Valla's original allegory into the Petite Fable in its final form, he was also updating the Myth of Er for a new philosophy that was continuous with theology, and was, in so doing, attesting to the capacity of such philosophical myths to be reinvented for new philosophical ends.

In particular, what Leibniz effectively ends up preserving in the Petite Fable is the philosophical function of the Platonic myth, as a medium that, on the one hand, furthers particular normative claims with the unconditioned inscrutability of traditional myths, while, on the other, calls attention to the contingent epistemic status of those very claims. As such, it is possible to see how, even as the Petite Fable functions as an illustrative restatement of the *Fatum Christianum*, aspects of its literary construction work to advertise the provisionality of all claims to normative authority.

The most prominent instance of this effect can be found in the choice to break up Sextus' inquiry into a relay of appeals made to different gods – Apollo, Jupiter, and finally Pallas Athena – so that the answer of each subsequent deity effectively writes over that of the one that came before. At one level, the order of the sequence reserves a place of primacy to Pallas – wisdom – whose final response to Sextus' complaint ends up supplanting even that of Jupiter, who is diminished to a largely passive role in the myth. At the same time, the revisionary nature of the entire process suggests caution against taking any answer, even that of a god, as the final word on the matter.

This lesson is recapitulated in the climax of the myth, when Pallas guides Theodorus into the hall at the top of the Palace of Fates, which contains the best of all possible worlds: there, the overwhelming beauty of that world leads Theodorus to be “entranced in ecstasy” to the point of

temporarily losing consciousness, and having to be revived by the goddess.³⁷⁸ By denying that final beatific vision of the best possible universe, not only to the reader, but even to the fictional character dreaming about it, the myth adds an additional layer of contingency to the Theodicy's normative claim regarding the absolute harmony of the created world.

But the literary construction of the Petite Fable also offers a deeper lesson about that normative absolute to which Leibniz's philosophy must provisionally commit itself. A curious twist in the Petite Fable is that Jupiter grants Sextus the option to change his doomed fate, on the condition that he relinquishes his political power. It is a moment that recalls the climax of the Myth of Er, in which the souls who have made the thousand-year journey of the afterlife are tasked to choose the fates of their next lives, and an insufficiently philosophical soul finds himself unable to resist the temptation to choose the life of the tyrant.³⁷⁹ In the Petite Fable, a Sextus who agrees to the proposal exists in any number of alternative futures in an infinite number of alternative worlds, several of which the myth describes in detail, in which he avoids the miserable end fated to him. However, the actual Sextus of our own world cannot bring himself to give up his crown, and turns down Jupiter's offer in full knowledge of the consequences that await him.

At first blush, getting Sextus to knowingly choose his own downfall in the story seems an unconvincing effort on Leibniz's part to absolve Jupiter from the sin and the suffering in Sextus' lot. But what is more compelling about this moment in the myth is the moral psychology driving

³⁷⁸ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 372 [§416].

³⁷⁹ Incidentally, the figure of the tyrant is also a motif in the Dream of Scipio. See *Rep.* X. 615c, 619b-c; Cicero, *De Re Publica*, trans. Clinton Walker Keyes, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), 283.

Sextus' decision to reject the possible universes containing versions of himself that bear an increasingly thin resemblance to his own identity.³⁸⁰

The limitations that a thick notion of personal identity can bear on an individual's moral choices have a parallel at the level of the universe as well. Where much of the hostility towards the Theodicy is rooted in the objection that better universes than ours are certainly possible because we can imagine them, the lessons of Sextus' choice offers something of a rejoinder: that, given a choice between a wholly alien world and one mired in problems and concerns that are relevant to us, we, like Sextus, might be incapacitated to pick the former, even we could see that is the superior choice from a higher, disinterested standpoint.

In turn, this moment in the myth tells us that the story motivating the Petite Fable – that a divinity chose to create the best of all possible worlds – has as much to do with the rational bounds of God's creative power as with the limited imaginative horizons of the human condition. Though we may think in the abstract that there are aspects of reality we can do without, they are in fact, by however long a chain of relations, tied to the coherent identity of the world, so that “[i]f Jupiter had placed here a Sextus happy at Corinth or King in Thrace, it would be no longer this world.”³⁸¹ And just as Sextus cannot bring himself to choose a universe containing a sinless but unrecognizable version of himself, there is a truth in insisting that the world that we prefer among all possibilities is the only one we are in a position to recognize as our own.

³⁸⁰ Hence, particular evils like Sextus' sin, though freely committed, are not matters that can be easily reduced to isolated choices, but are intricately bound up in a tangle of other, often larger and dearer choices deeply anchored in the actor's sense of identity.

The claim that the theme of individual identity lies at the heart of the Petite Fable has also been posed in Peter Fenves, “Continuing the Fiction: From Leibniz' ‘Petite Fable’ to Kafka's ‘In Der Strafkolonie,’” *Modern Language Notes* 116, no. 3 (2001): 502-20.

³⁸¹ Leibniz, *Theodicy*, 372 [§416].

In turn, when philosophy commits itself to a narrative about the rationality of the created universe, this is a story that is being told from a human rather than a divine perspective, and it is we who are actively choosing our world. By pointing to the ways in which the very structure of meaning is conditioned by human particularity, the *Petite Fable* shows how the divine justice to which Leibniz surrenders our active reason is a truth that is necessary rather than absolute. Leibniz's philosophical myth, then, offers both an affirmation of the *Fatum Christianum* as well as an insight into the contingent needs that necessitate it. As such, the *Petite Fable* is to be read, not as a symptom of an uncritical mythic impulse, but rather as a diagnosis of its epistemic, and in turn, human, condition.

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The Theodicy had been Leibniz's answer to the question of how reason's borders ought to be conceived, so that philosophy could be progressive and not stagnant or regressive. We have seen how Leibniz had structured the *Petite Fable* so that each half of the myth corresponded to one of two conceptions of reason ultimately at stake in the question, and how, in the half representing his own, unlimited conception of reason's boundaries, he'd taken great pains to transform his source material into a proper myth exhibiting the characteristic literary excesses of the genre.

We have also seen how Leibniz's Enlightenment interlocutors had located the essence of myths in an uncritical orientation towards knowledge, and had thereby linked myth's underlying essence to a threat of regression that called for the purification of philosophy into its active and critical function. But if philosophy were to aspire to banish from its realm the form of uncritical passivity thought characteristic of the genre of myth, Leibniz tells us that this is an impossible dream. When one commits to preserving both the active nature of human rationality and its

freedom to pursue all matters of knowledge, philosophy must necessarily make allowances for reason to assume a passive and uncritical role on any number of matters of inquiry, knowledge of which it is then forced to delegate to a superior, divine rationality. The Petite Fable can be read as a diagnostic expression of these concerns – in particular, one that distinguishes itself from ordinary myth by following in a Platonic tradition of philosophical myth-writing.

It would be nearly half a century after the publication of the *Theodicy*, and three-quarters of a century after the appearance of the Great Comet that occasioned Bayle's first attacks on superstition, that the Great Lisbon Earthquake would come to shake the philosophical-theological world, and put a definitive end to the reign of Theodicy. In Voltaire's 'Poem on the Lisbon Disaster' (1756), Bayle comes out as "the greatest master of the art of reasoning that ever wrote,"³⁸² whereas Leibniz is attacked as a dispenser of ridiculous lessons:

From Leibnitz learn we not by what unseen
Bonds, in this best of all imagined worlds,
Endless disorder, chaos of distress,
Must mix our little pleasures thus with pain;
Nor why the guiltless suffer all this woe
In common with the most abhorrent guilt.
'Tis mockery to tell me all is well.³⁸³

To point out that Voltaire's attack misses many things would be unhelpfully inadequate, but the real sting of the insult may have been Voltaire's oversight of the sheer extent to which Leibniz struggled to rescue reason from blind faith in the determined order. The *Theodicy* was Leibniz's best effort to define the boundaries of philosophy in such a way that it is entirely free to reason about all matters, including matters of faith, without losing its way amidst all its

³⁸² Voltaire, Author's Preface to 'The Lisbon Earthquake,' in *The Works of Voltaire: The Lisbon Earthquake, and Other Poems*, ed. Tobias Smollett and John Morley, trans. William F. Fleming (Akron, OH: Werner, 1904), XXXVI: 57, 7.

³⁸³ Voltaire, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster," in *A Treatise on Toleration and Other Essays*, trans. Joseph McCabe (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994), 17, 6.

potential objects of examination. The *Petite Fable*, in particular, served both as an articulation of the central principles of the *Theodicy*, as well as of its role in determining the shifting borders of reason's immediate empire. The myth placed faith in human reason, but also forgave it for being fragile and finite against the infinity of the knowable universe and its possibilities, with its comets and its earthquakes, and the invisible forces that move the earth and stars.

Part 2

Myth and Modernity

The New Mythology of German Idealism

MYTH AS A SHARED VOCABULARY FOR RECONCILING
SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND INDIVIDUAL CREATIVITY

There is a story told about the origins of German Idealism. In the famous story, an obscure, “slightly discolored” manuscript of two pages is dug out of the archives by a young academic at work on his first book.³⁸⁴ Then the young academic (none other than Franz Rosenzweig) declares that the author of the manuscript was not who everyone thought he was (none other than Hegel), and that finding its true author would mean locating the source of the radical ideas motivating the first known attempt to articulate the project of Idealism.³⁸⁵ For Rosenzweig had recognized in these two pages the program for a complete system of philosophy

³⁸⁴ Benjamin Pollock, “Franz Rosenzweig’s ‘Oldest System-Program’,” *New German Critique* 111, vol. 37, no. 3 (Fall 2010): 59-95, 59.

³⁸⁵ Franz Rosenzweig, “Das Älteste Systemprogramm Des Deutschen Idealismus,” in Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Mensch Und Sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Reinhold Mayer and Annemarie Mayer, 6 vols. (Dordrecht: Springer, 1984), III: 109–54.

For a selection of contributions to the still-ongoing debate regarding the authorship of the manuscript, see Otto Pöggeler, “Hegel, Der Verfasser Des Ältesten Systemprogramms Des Deutschen Idealismus,” in *Mythologie Der Vernunft: Hegels “Ältestes Systemprogramm Des Deutschen Idealismus,”* ed. Christoph Jamme and Helmut Schneider (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 126–42; Erhart Förster, ““To lend wings to physics once again’: Hölderlin and the ‘Oldest System-Programme of German Idealism’,” in *European Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 2 (1995): 174-198; and Frank-Peter Hansen, *‘Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus’: Rezeptionsgeschichte und Interpretation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989).

and the beginning of the Idealist movement. He called it “The Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism.”

The fragmentary proposals comprising the *Oldest Systematic Program* (1796/7) famously culminate in the call for a radical “new mythology” that may unite humanity in universal freedom and equality.³⁸⁶ In the subsequent years leading up to the turn of the century, that call was emphatically renewed by that strand of Idealism commonly branded German Romanticism, whose protagonists made the program for a new mythology their main preoccupation.³⁸⁷ Yet despite Rosenzweig’s conviction that the foundations of German Idealism were contained in the *Oldest Systematic Program*, the appeal to mythology in the document’s remarkable conclusion tends to get sidelined in most scholarship on German Idealism.

Two temptations flank this vacuum of neglect in philosophy and political theory. The first is the temptation to regard the project for the new mythology as part of an apolitical, purely literary movement. The other, opposite temptation is to read the project instead as a philosophically bereft antecedent to the totalitarian politics of the Third Reich.

There are good reasons to be drawn to either camp. Writing on the new mythology was scattered and opaque, and their authors were often better known, both during and after their lifetimes, for their literary achievements. Their devotion to aesthetic freedom often suggested a

³⁸⁶ “wir müssen eine neue Mythologie haben.” English translations of passages from the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism* are from *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997): 1-5.

³⁸⁷ Dieter Sturma, “Politics and the New Mythology: the turn to Late Romanticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 219-238, 224.

Drawing stricter boundaries between German Romanticism and German Idealism is not part of my argument, but for a better sense of their difference, one might consult Karl Ameriks, “Introduction: Interpreting German Idealism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 1-17, 11; and Manfred Frank, “*Unendliche Annäherung*”: *die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997).

quietist and reclusive, if not altogether anarchic, outlook on politics. At the same time, their writings easily invite association with a uniquely German intellectual tradition of thinking about mythology in terms of national identity.³⁸⁸ Herder's early injunction for a "new use of mythology" comes hand-in-hand with his famous invention of the *Volk*, and the thesis that mythology was the original repository of a people's creative genius found an enthusiastic reception amidst a long and rich line of admirers.³⁸⁹ As a symptom of the unique energy of a people, myth came to express a common national identity (as Carl Schmitt posited in his critique of fragmented democratic institutions³⁹⁰), to be resuscitated for the modern stage with its modern conditions (as Wagner endeavored in his operas³⁹¹) – or myth was the stuff of the lost Dionysian, whose unlikely rebirth might have brought unity and vitality to a barren culture (as Nietzsche

³⁸⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Nazi Myth," trans. Brian Holmes, *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 2 (1990): 291–312, esp. 297–299, where the authors present mythology as a problem of identity by turning to Plato's condemnation of myth in the *Republic* for its mimetic qualities. On myth and identity, see Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 227–245. For the more popular argument that German Romanticism marked the beginning of a specific, ethno-cultural brand of nationalism, see Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2001), esp. 41–2.

The idea that German culture was uniquely preoccupied with myth has been posed, for instance, by Thomas Mann, who suggested that German dedication to the "pure humanity of the mythical age" defined "the essential and characteristic national distinction" between Germany and the West. "With the appreciation of this difference," he offers, "the intricate old question: 'What is German?' perhaps finds its tersest answer." Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 201; ctd. in George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

For a contrast between the German approach to mythology and those of England and France during the enlightenment era, see Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, esp. 294.

³⁸⁹ Johann Gottfried Herder, "On the Modern Use of Mythology," in *Selected early works, 1764–1767*, ed. Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges and trans. Ernest A. Menze with Michael Palma (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992): 215–234; see also Herder, "Fragment of an Essay on Mythology."

³⁹⁰ Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988); see also Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, 227–235.

³⁹¹ Richard Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama*, ed. Albert Harry Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, trans. H. Ashton Ellis (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), 85–92, 124–154, 187–199. See also Roger Scruton, "Man and Superman," *The Guardian*, April 11, 2003.

lamented in his early writings³⁹²). And when the mythmakers of the Third Reich paid a terrifying tribute to this legacy, the entire trajectory of German thought on mythology seemed uncomfortably suggestive of crude nationalism, not least of all the German Idealists' prophetic call for a new mythology for a new world order.³⁹³

The new mythology of German Idealism was certainly foundational to a specifically German discourse on mythology, as to a politics that placed special import on the unity and cohesion of a community. And it was undeniably and unapologetically an aesthetic endeavor. But to consider the project for the new mythology alternately as an anti-philosophical political movement, or as an anti-political aesthetic movement, misses the depth and centrality of political questions to the German Idealists' writings on the new mythology, the coherence of their efforts to answer them, as well as their debt to a longstanding philosophical tradition.

This chapter argues that the new mythology of German Idealism emerges as a solution to a novel political problem. The proponents of the new mythology identified a gap in politics that amounted to a choice between the cohesion of a community and the spiritual freedom of its individual members, which they in turn mapped onto a choice between an ethic founded on rationality and an ethic of poetry. Through the lens of their unique brand of Platonism, the German Idealists believed that the choice between rationality and poetry could be resolved in mythology. They felt similarly about politics: through a new mythology, they proposed, politics

³⁹² Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 109-111. See also Cristiano Grottanelli, "Nietzsche and Myth," *History of Religions* 37, no. 1: 3-20.

³⁹³ For the dark shadow that Nazism has cast on the reputation of German Idealism and German Romanticism in particular, see, for example, Peter Viereck, *Metapolitics: From Wagner and the German Romantics to Hitler*, expanded ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1998); and Georg Lukács, *The Destruction of Reason*, trans. Peter Palmer (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1981).

need not sacrifice community or individualism to the other – and the possibility of their reconciliation is what gives the new mythology its novelty.

The Old Mythology

The Oldest Systematic Program: the novelty of the new mythology

The call for the new mythology at the end of the *Oldest Systematic Program* is prefaced by an odd disclaimer: the disputed author's strikingly self-conscious insistence that he is the first to have thought of such a proposal.

I will speak of an idea here that, as far as I know, has still not occurred to anyone else. We must have a new mythology...³⁹⁴

What exactly was so new about the new mythology? Mythology was hardly a new concept to post-enlightenment Europe, nor was modern interest in possible and potential functions of mythology.³⁹⁵ But before the proposal for a specifically *new* mythology, mythology had been understood as a relic of the past, associated primarily with ancient Greek mythology.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 5.

³⁹⁵ See Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*.

³⁹⁶ Daniel Greineder also depicts the project of the new mythology as oxymoronic, based on the assertion that mythology is by definition something taken from antiquity. Daniel Greineder, *From the Past to the Future: The Role of Mythology from Winckelmann to the Early Schelling* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), 125-127.

The period of German Idealism coincides with the peak of Hellenism, or the onset of what has been coined in the popular imagination as “the tyranny of Greece over Germany.”³⁹⁷ Catapulted into fashion by the aesthetic writings of Johann Joachim Winckelmann in the mid-1700s,³⁹⁸ glimpses of ancient Greek culture, intimated through the remnants of their art, presented an idealized way of life for a German population that found itself increasingly restless in modernity. The progress of science had brought about technological breakthroughs, industrialization and rapid urbanization, but also estrangement from nature, displacement and psychological fragmentation. Through eighteenth-century eyes, the Greeks had led an enviably idyllic existence. The serene poses and expressions of Greek sculpture, conveying the inner composure of their subjects, recalled the calmness of the sea.³⁹⁹ The beauty of Greek art reflected the beauty of the Greek soul and the beautiful world in which it dwelled. There, life was emotionally coherent, at one with its natural environment, and unified by “noble simplicity and quiet greatness.”⁴⁰⁰ Mythology entered eighteenth-century discourse primarily in association with the mythic themes expressed in Greek art, and in the context of a general admiration for antiquity.

³⁹⁷ E.M. Butler, *The Tyranny of Greece over Germany: A Study of the Influence Exercised by Greek Art and Poetry over the Great German Writers of the Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Constanze Güthenke, *Placing Modern Greece: The Dynamics of Romantic Hellenism, 1770-1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); see also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988), 10-11; G.L. Hall, “Hellenism in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” in *The Classical Journal* 51, no. 1 (1955): 35-41.

³⁹⁸ Katherine Harloe, *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity: History and Aesthetics in the Age of Altertumswissenschaft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁹⁹ J.J. Winckelmann, *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*, in *Winckelmanns Werke*, ed. C.L. Fernow (Dresden: Walther, 1808), I: 33-34.

⁴⁰⁰ “edle Einfalt und stille Grösse,” Ibid.

The proponents of the new mythology in German Idealism were the immediate heirs to this Hellenism. Ancient Greece provided a foil for the inadequacies of modern existence, and stood in particular for a lost aesthetic disposition toward the world. If Greek art was particularly beautiful, it was because their art was in itself a way of life. The Greeks interacted with their environment through imagination and artistic creation, which accounted for the exceptional harmony of their products: each work of art was part and parcel of a coherent world view. In this framework, poetry was imbued with a new significance among the arts. Eighteenth-century Hellenists had much to make of the root of the word, *poiesis*, or the act of making or creating. Reality was something processed, not given, and for Herder, the development of a poetic language was famously tied to a people's cognition of their environment and the formation of their unique way of thinking.⁴⁰¹ Herder's conviction that poetry represented a purer form of language, drawn more directly from the original wellspring of creativity, echoed that of Hamann, his teacher, who spoke of poetry as the mother tongue of mankind.⁴⁰²

The privileged status of poetry was especially welcomed by the proponents of the new mythology at the end of the century. The author of the *Oldest Systematic Program* singles out poetry to "become at the end what it was in the beginning – the teacher of humanity."⁴⁰³ As it had been for Hamann and Herder, poetry here is designated as a primeval way of forming knowledge on which humanity had depended from its very beginning. Restoring "a higher

⁴⁰¹ Herder, "Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache," in *Sämtliche Werke*, V.

⁴⁰² Johann Georg Hamann, *Kreuzzüge des Philologen*, in *Hamann's Schriften*, ed. Friedrich von Roth, 8 vols. (Berlin: Reimer, 1821): II: 103–342, 258; Herder, "Dithyrambische Rhapsodie über die Rhapsodie kabbalistischer Prose," in *Werke*, I :30-32, 31.

⁴⁰³ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

dignity”⁴⁰⁴ to poetry is imperative in the same way that future thought cannot fail to acknowledge the creative power of the individual subject. The *Oldest Systematic Program* outlines “an ethics” that begins with “the representation of *myself* as an absolute free being,” from whose creative activity “a whole world comes forth from nothing – the only true and thinkable creation from nothing.” If the world, and knowledge of that world, is to be constituted so as to “satisfy the creative spirit as ours is or should be,”⁴⁰⁵ it is poetry that “alone will outlive all other sciences and arts.”⁴⁰⁶ For the proponents of the new mythology, poetry – that particular excellence of the Greeks – was not so much a genre as it was a mode of creativity. It was synonymous with the expression of the special relationship between an individual and his world, and as such, conveyed spiritual wholeness, spontaneity and emotional immediacy.

In addition, poetry was all that remained in the fringes of modernity of the original creative spirit of the ancients. The production of good poetry was important, because the quality of a society’s poetry said something about the health of its culture. But for all its importance and power, modern poetry was badly in need of resuscitation, and played too marginal a part in contemporary society to have any hand in its transformation. Rather, the modern way of life was dictated not by poetry, but by rationality. The triumph of reason that came with the enlightenment pervaded all aspects of modernity, from the bureaucratization of political institutions, the division of labor and the ubiquity of machinery in the workplace, to the premium on rigor and specialization in intellectual life. In particular, political society itself had become unthinkable without the rule of rational laws.

⁴⁰⁴ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

⁴⁰⁵ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 3.

⁴⁰⁶ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

Insofar as the very possibility of political community rested on rational foundations, proponents of the new mythology drew a strict parallel between the opposition of poetry and rationality and the relationship of the individual to his community. While enlightenment rationality celebrated, on the one hand, the power of the autonomous individual to reason for himself,⁴⁰⁷ it also confined the product of that reasoning to a standard of objectivity: after the model of mathematics or scientific thinking, universal agreement on matters of knowledge was not only possible, but expected. Intellectual conformism lacking an aesthetic dimension is mocked in the *Oldest Systematic Program* as characteristic of “philosophers of the letter [*Buchstabenphilosophen*]” entirely dependent on “charts and indices.”⁴⁰⁸ The political consequence of neglecting the freedom of the individual subject – treating “free human beings as if they were cogs in a machine” – is what the *Program* denounces as “the whole miserable apparatus of state, constitution, government and legislation.”⁴⁰⁹ The state, it concludes, must be abolished. A rational conception of political community organized around the uniform application of laws made no room for the subjective, and as such, excluded the diverse content of creative individuality that poetry sought to celebrate. If rationality, then, ensured a modern understanding of political community, poetry, by contrast, prioritized the individual – and emphasizing one implied sacrificing the other.

The *Oldest Systematic Program* begins with a radical condemnation of the rationally organized state, and ends with the call for a new mythology. The connection between problem of the modern state and the solution of mythology is easy to miss in the two-page document, and

⁴⁰⁷ Immanuel Kant, “An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?,” in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 11–22.

⁴⁰⁸ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

⁴⁰⁹ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

better illuminated in light of other treatments of the new mythology that followed in subsequent years. Underlying the *Program*'s proposal of mythology, however, is a perceived opposition between political community and the creative freedom of its individual members, and the motivation to overcome it. As would other authors involved in the project for the new mythology, the author of the *Program* effectively imports mythology from its ancient context to answer a modern question, of whether and why a rationally organized political community, in the form of the state, seems incompatible with the freedom of the creative or poetic individual. A more explicit formulation of the question might be: given these oppositions between rationality and poetry, community and individual, is it possible to have a poetic community?

Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poesy*: myth as the midpoint of a poetic community

Three years after the dating of the *Oldest Systematic Program*, Friedrich Schlegel posed this very question in the opening line of his *Dialogue on Poesy* (1799), a fictional dialogue in four parts, one of which is devoted to a discussion of a new mythology. "Poetry" – it begins – "befriends and bonds all those who love it with indissoluble ties."⁴¹⁰ What is remarkable about the bond forged by poetry, Schlegel proposes, is not simply that it brings people together, but that it brings disparate people together. Reason, on the other hand, "is unitary and the same in everyone; but just as each person has his own nature and his own love, so too does he carry his own poesy inside himself."⁴¹¹ The unique power of poetry is its capacity to bond without

⁴¹⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy (1799)," in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. and trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 180-195, 180.

⁴¹¹ Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," 180.

regulating – a power that reason lacks. The love of poetry connects individuals without in any way compromising their individuality, such that every lover of poetry can and should expand “the expression of his own unique poesy” by coming into contact with the unique poetries of others.⁴¹² Its propagation does not rely on the apparatuses of rationality – “reasonable speeches and teachings [*vernünftige Reden und Lehren*],” much less “punitive laws [*strafende Gesetze*]”⁴¹³ – and in fact, “[t]he deadening power of generalization” has a destructive effect on its very nature.⁴¹⁴

Yet the poetic bond Schlegel deems “indissoluble” in the opening of the dialogue is yet insufficient for the establishment and maintenance of a functioning community in the modern age. The “Speech on Mythology,” the second section of the dialogue, introduces mythology in the framework of a crisis in the state of modern poetry. The modern poet works alone, creating each work anew from scratch. His words aim at something transcendent but ultimately speak to the darkness; they do not inspire the spirit of love that in turn inspires new creations from other potential poets; consequently, “the power of enthusiasm continue[s] to be splintered *even* in poesy” until it “finally fall[s] silent, alone, when it has fought itself weary against the hostile element.”⁴¹⁵ Poetry remains tethered to the individual, its power to bond and befriend stunted by the modern climate.

⁴¹² Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 181.

⁴¹³ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 181.

⁴¹⁴ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 181.

⁴¹⁵ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 182. Emphasis mine. The characterization of modern poetry as the product of isolated individuals, rather than that of a coherent culture, is articulated in the 1797 essay, “On the Study of Greek Poetry.” Friedrich Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler et al., 33 vols. (Paderborn: F. Schöningh, 1967): II: 205-367.

If modern poetry alone could not sustain a poetic community, the solution lies in a new, modern mythology – and this is the thesis of the “Speech on Mythology.” The character Ludoviko, who delivers the speech, diagnoses what is missing in modern poetry by looking to the excellence of the ancient model. “Our poesy,” he laments,

lacks a midpoint as mythology was for the poetry of the ancients,
and modern poetic art’s inferiority to classical poetic art can be
summarized in the words: we have no mythology.⁴¹⁶

The poetry of the ancients owes its exceptional virtue to their mythology, which is what Schlegel identifies as a “midpoint” (*Mittelpunkt*) for poetry. A midpoint is located where individuals and their poetry converge to communicate. A poet expands his own poetry, as well as the society formed around it, “if he has found the midpoint through communication with those who have also found it another way, from another direction.”⁴¹⁷ Ancient poetry might have had such a midpoint in the sense that its subject matter was unified by a common canonical vocabulary of themes and motifs, and Ludoviko goes as far as to characterize ancient poetry as “a single, indivisible, completed poem.”⁴¹⁸

But both mythology and its status as a midpoint hold a deeper significance for Schlegel. A common mythology might help poets write better poetry, but only insofar as that poetry is the product of the community in which it thrives.⁴¹⁹ As the opening line of the dialogue reminds us,

⁴¹⁶ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 182; *KA* II: 312. In Fragment 85 of his *Ideas*, Schlegel also locates the “core, the center of poetry” in mythology and “in the mysteries of the ancients.” Friedrich Schlegel, “Ideas,” in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. Frederick Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 125-140, §85.

⁴¹⁷ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 181.

⁴¹⁸ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 183.

⁴¹⁹ This goes against the more common view that Schlegel conceived of the utility of mythology in terms of the quality of poetry, i.e. in Greineder, *From the Past to the Present*.

Schlegel's concern with poetry is first and foremost with its capacity to bring people together. What impressed Schlegel about ancient poetry was that it could be described as the work of a coherent culture with a communal mythology; diverse poets not only drew from mythology but also contributed to it, such that mythology, "the fair band of community, which linked men and gods," found expression in joyous festivities of "poetry, song, dance and sociability."⁴²⁰ Just as it is unnatural for the poet, "a sociable being," to be isolated from others,⁴²¹ poetry is most fully itself when it expresses the individual, but is not confined to the individual. Its power to forge human relationships must be allowed to flourish, as it had in antiquity through mythology, or its intrinsic diversity will warp into the atomism it suffers in modernity.

Hence mythology is that midpoint which holds together the poetry of an age and the community formed around it in ways that reason specifically does not. Whereas the laws of reason threaten generalization and uniformity over the creative spirit, mythology unifies without compromising the diverse individuality of both poetry and its poets. In this way, mythology is not only a midpoint between the poetry of individuals, but between the uniformity of reason and the diversity of poetry. Between "the sublation of the course and the laws of reasonably thinking reason" and "the beginning of all poesy," claims Ludoviko, falls the intermediate stage of "our transportation again into the beautiful confusion of fantasy, the original chaos of human nature for which I have yet to know a more beautiful symbol than the colorful swarm of the ancient gods."⁴²² The ancient ideal presented for Schlegel the possibility of a genuinely poetic community for the modern era. Through the proposal of a new mythology, Schlegel sought to

⁴²⁰ Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, 377. Translation mine.

⁴²¹ Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," 181.

⁴²² Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," 186-7.

navigate a midpoint between individual and community, poetry and rationality, in a vision that amounted to a community of creative individuals as had once existed in antiquity.

Breaking the Ancient Mold

The impossibility of return

If the content and goals of mythology were understood after an ancient model, it remains unclear as to what a new mythology would entail, or how its resurrection in modern culture was to situate itself in relation to the more impressive past. Certainly this was a popular dilemma of the mid- and late eighteenth century. Winckelmann's singular esteem of the Greek aesthetic standard had led him to hold up the entirety of Greek culture as a paradigm for imitation. The application of Winckelmann's view to mythological discourse translated into a bizarre position, best articulated in a parenthetical remark in Christian Adolf Klotz in his *Epistolae Homericae* (1764): "to what extent can we, and must we, imitate mythology?" The question was picked up by Herder in 1767 to guide an essay calling for "a new use of mythology."⁴²³ Herder's answer was one of muted enthusiasm. Mythology in its extant form – that is, ancient Greek mythology – was to be an object of study, but not for the sake of blind imitation, but so as to harness a certain

⁴²³ Herder, "On the Modern Use of Mythology," 215; see also Herder, "Fragment of an Essay on Mythology."

creative spirit for modernity so that “we may become inventors ourselves.”⁴²⁴ That was the suitable new use of mythology.

Three decades later, a commitment to spontaneity and originality bound the champions of the new mythology to a similar position on the inadequacy of merely imitating ancient mythology in modern times. If their aim was to revive the vitality of the ancient imagination, blindly copying a cultural product rather than its source would have defeated the purpose entirely. An alternate, more tangible solution might have been the importation of themes and motifs from ancient mythology into modern literature. Goethe and Schiller, are prominent examples of this approach. Both were devoted Hellenists who wrote extensively in their philosophical writings about the need to appreciate and revive a more naïve, spontaneous and immediate way of interacting with one’s environment, in particular with nature, after the manner of the Greeks; both incorporated classical mythical elements in their poetry.⁴²⁵

Yet there is something anemic about an account of the treatment of modern mythology as consisting of the appropriation of elements taken from ancient mythology. The incompleteness of such a project is painstakingly self-diagnosed in *Hyperion*, Hölderin’s only novel, published in two parts between 1797-1799, and the most famous specimen of Hellenism in the period of German Idealism. A poet poignantly described to have “clung to Hellenism with all his unbalanced soul,”⁴²⁶ Hölderlin liberally saturated his novel with Greek mythological allusions, divinities and sacred places. But the eighteenth century Greek setting of the novel is also riddled

⁴²⁴ Herder, “On the Modern Use of Mythology,” 228.

⁴²⁵ Christopher Jamme, “Portraying Myth More Convincingly: Critical Approaches to Myth in the Classical and Romantic Periods,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 12, no. 1 (2004): 29–45, 36-7; Greineder, *From the Past to the Future*, 83-124.

⁴²⁶ Hall, “Hellenism in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” 39.

with an intense, paralyzing nostalgia: the gods that once roamed the land have now fled.

Hyperion's deep admiration of the splendid past is accompanied by a desire to be free of it. He demands, alternately, that the unity of the Greek world must be recreated in our own age; at others he believes that the ruins of the past must be destroyed completely before a new world order can be created.⁴²⁷

The death of Diotima, Hyperion's love interest, represents the death of the possibilities of ancient Greek ideals and the kind of perfect unity of man, society and nature that Hölderlin and his friends had hoped to bring about through mythology. It is only appropriate that the letter on Diotima's death is directly followed by the letter that suddenly takes Hyperion away from Greece to Germany.⁴²⁸ Hence when Hyperion mourns his beloved, he also mourns the modern condition of restlessness in which he now finds himself, in which he laments he "would be a stranger on earth, and no god would link [him] to the past anymore."⁴²⁹ Hyperion is especially fixated on the assurance that Diotima died a "beautiful death."⁴³⁰ In the wake of the premature death of an ancient ideal, those left behind in modernity simply has it harder:

To ward off flies, that is our work in the future; and to gnaw at the things of the world as children gnaw at the dried iris root, that is our joy in the end. To grow old among youthful people seems to me a pleasure, but to grow old where all is old seems to me worse than all else.⁴³¹

⁴²⁷ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Hyperion, or, The Hermit in Greece*, trans. Ross Benjamin (Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2008), 150.

⁴²⁸ Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 206.

⁴²⁹ Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 202-3.

⁴³⁰ Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 203.

⁴³¹ Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 201.

In having arrived too late to the scene of history, modernity has been deprived of the chance to die the beautiful deaths of ancient lore. It is instead forced to cope with its own inheritance. If the new mythology is something that must be rejuvenated from the ruins of the past, the medium itself must first find a way to break free of the authoritative grip of past examples. In addition to the promise of unity in diversity, the new mythology must also provide a sense of unity with history and with one's own time. The new mythology has to speak to the present age and help its audience understand it.

Those authors who were part of the ongoing dialogue on the place of mythology in modernity agreed, against the dictum for imitation propelled by Winckelmann's reverence for antiquity, that not only is imitation insufficient, Greek mythology can't simply be imported into modernity to serve the purpose it had in antiquity. This left the proponents of the new mythology in a bind: they wanted an ancient Greek mythology that was neither ancient nor Greek; a mythology that did for the modern world what it did for the ancients. "Why should it not become again as it once was? Obviously, in a different way," goes Schlegel's immediate response to the virtues of ancient mythology. "And why not in a more beautiful, greater way?"⁴³² Crucial to their conception of the new mythology was a justification of its relevance for modern times: it had to escape regress into an already done and bygone mythology. Thus entailed in the new mythology was not just the bonds to unify a community of diverse poetic individuals, but also a way of anchoring that community in a harmonious relationship with their modern era. This meant that the German Idealists' thoughts on the new mythology were tied up in the more abstract territory of their philosophical systems at large, especially their philosophy of history.

⁴³² Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," 183.

The imminent path to a modern mythology

In the *Dialogue on Poesy*, Schlegel prophesies through his mouthpiece, Ludoviko, his conviction that the new mythology was just around the horizon.⁴³³ Modernity was “close to attaining” the mythology that was lacking in the current culture, “or rather,” Ludoviko second-guesses, “it is time that we try earnestly to take part in producing one.”⁴³⁴ The difference between the attainment of a mythology and the earnest production of one is a crucial distinction that sets apart the new mythology from its ancient predecessor. Schlegel’s “new mythology will approach us from an entirely different direction than the old one.”⁴³⁵ There is a sense in Schlegel’s characterization of the “old” mythology, that it was not so much created as stumbled upon. The Greeks had an effortlessly natural relationship with their mythology, a product of “the first blossom of youthful fantasy immediately joined and accreted to the nearest and most animated part of the sensual world.” The new mythology, by contrast, is to be an active creation, “the most artificial of all artworks,” and “formed from the deepest depth of the spirit.” In order to “be a new bed and vessel for the ancient, eternal well-spring of poesy,” it must consciously tap into the unconscious wellspring of creativity.⁴³⁶

That Schlegel imagined a conscious endeavor to harness the unconscious in the artificial production of a new mythology reflects the general optimism of German Idealism about the progress of knowledge in the post-Kantian landscape. This meant that, their admiration for the

⁴³³ Greineder believes Ludoviko’s faith is in fact ironic and that Schlegel believes the new mythology to be an impossible project. Greineder, *From the Past to the Future*.

⁴³⁴ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 183.

⁴³⁵ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 183.

⁴³⁶ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 183.

Greek way of life notwithstanding, they forecasted continual progress in the future of humanity. The triumph of idealism in the wake of Kant, in particular, consisted of a long-awaited convergence of philosophy and modern science, in which the autonomy of the thinking subject could be reconciled with the causal necessity underpinning our experience of reality. German Idealism celebrated this starting point. The *Dialogue on Poesy* identifies idealism as “the great phenomenon of the age”⁴³⁷ and singles out physics as an example of a science in which “idealism itself actually already erupted before physics was touched by the magic wand of philosophy.”⁴³⁸ But the German Idealists felt that the Kantian system was also incomplete, and took it upon themselves to expand it as they saw necessary. If Kant had made coherent the world of the conscious, thinking subject, it remained to extend its coherence beyond the limits of conscious thinking: a natural world with its own independent reality (and not merely an object of contemplation),⁴³⁹ a unified vision of humanity and its trajectory (and not merely an aggregation of discrete individual units and their actions), and above all, aesthetic experiences. In store in the immediate future of philosophy was the completion of the system Kant had only begun to build. Hence Schlegel’s claim to the imminence of the new mythology is grounded in the idea that the new mythology is a natural consequence of idealism.⁴⁴⁰

Unlike the old mythology, whose magnificence had never been intended by its unwitting creators, the new mythology was to be the active creation of conscious, thinking minds stepping beyond their own limits. If the new mythology was to be informed by the spirit of its own age, it

⁴³⁷ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 183.

⁴³⁸ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 184.

⁴³⁹ Frederick Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), viii.

⁴⁴⁰ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 184.

could not undo the progress of philosophy by trying to recreate the unique path that the Greeks took to arrive at their mythology. Schlegel looks less to the ancients than he does to modern philosophy and the birth of idealism for a model of how a new mythology might come about. And by incorporating the achievements of modern philosophy and science,⁴⁴¹ the new mythology will be arrived at through idealism, and in doing so will surpass the old mythology by virtue of its modernity. In “such an age of rejuvenation” the new mythology will connect humanity to both the past and the future: “Gray antiquity will come back to life,” Schlegel writes, “and the most distant future of human culture will make itself known by means of omens.”⁴⁴²

Mythology and Schelling’s philosophy of history

The historical particularity of mythology is most pronounced in the thought of F.W.J. Schelling, who was not only a “philosophical Proteus” whose philosophy spanned the breadth of German Idealism,⁴⁴³ but also a protean figure at the center of the corresponding social webs spanning the breadth of Germany. As a precocious teenager, he roomed with Hölderlin and Hegel at the Tübingen seminary, the third of a formidable trio of candidates to whom the disputed authorship of the *Oldest Systematic Program* is alternately attributed. He soon found his way into the social circles of the Schlegel brothers in Jena, in particular that of Caroline Schlegel – the wife of Friedrich Schlegel’s brother, August Wilhelm – whom Schelling himself

⁴⁴¹ Hamann, *Kreuzzüge des Philologen*, in *Schriften*, II : 280.

⁴⁴² Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 184.

⁴⁴³ The charge leveled against Schelling of being the Proteus of German Idealism is attributed to Hegel; ctd. in Bruce Matthews, *Schelling’s Organic Form of Philosophy: Life as the Schema of Freedom* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011), 218.

married later. At least according to one interpretation, the characters of the *Dialogue on Poesy* are thinly veiled avatars for the core members of the Jena Romantics, with, for instance, Caroline and Dorothea Schlegel represented in the two female roles, Amalia and Camilla, and Ludoviko from the “Speech on Mythology” impersonating Schelling.⁴⁴⁴

Many of the views that Schlegel attributes to Ludoviko do gesture toward the philosophy articulated in Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), published within a year of the publication of the *Dialogue on Poesy*. Both Ludoviko’s and Schelling’s conceptions of the new mythology are based on an admiration for the unity that the ancient example lent to Greek society and culture, accompanied by the conviction that the way to arrive at the new mythology is through a distinctly modern, and pointedly philosophical, route in idealism. Schelling found Greek mythology particularly impressive for both “the harmony whereby everything is united into one great whole” as well as the lack of “any comprehensive intentionality” in its creation.⁴⁴⁵ The latter quality is important, even in modernity, because the unintended or unconscious is what comprises the “poetry in art,” which alone can take its audience beyond the limits of the artist’s conscious intentions and the rules and skills by which he executes them. Rather, the apparatuses of consciousness can be taught and learned, whereas poetry is a “free gift of nature.”⁴⁴⁶ As such,

⁴⁴⁴ Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 88-89.

⁴⁴⁵ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 255, substituting Heath’s translation of *Absichtlichkeit* as “forethought” for “intentionality”; Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *System des Transzendentalen Idealismus*, ed. Horst D. Brandt and Peter Müller (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1992), 291.

⁴⁴⁶ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 224; emphasis original.

the activity of the conscious mind alone is not the realm of innovation, and knowledge that is not open to poetry risks stagnation.⁴⁴⁷

In Schelling's system, the emergence of what is consciously known from what is unconsciously discovered forms a broad arc spanning the history of philosophy. For Schelling, unconscious, poetic knowledge is like a vast ocean. History might bring it into consciousness by breaking it up, like so many rivulets, into the bounded disciplines of science, but knowledge is also destined to be made whole again:

Philosophy was born and nourished by poetry in the infancy of knowledge, and with it all those sciences it has guided toward perfection. We may thus expect them, on completion, to flow back like so many individual streams into the universal ocean of poetry from which they took their source. Nor is it in general difficult to say what the medium for this return of science to poetry will be; for in mythology such a medium [*Mittelglied*] existed ...⁴⁴⁸

Schelling presents poetry and the sciences as two states of human knowledge on opposite poles of its history, and mythology as an intermediary stage between them. Where poetry stands in for as a final state of knowing in which all of humanity will eventually find itself, mythology is the medium through which knowledge passes from poetry to science and back. In this way Schelling also conceived of mythology as a kind of midpoint (*Mittelglied*) between poetry and scientific rationality, and the new mythology as a way to future poetry.

Both the emphasis and scale of Schelling's ambition for a new mythology are different from Schlegel's. Unlike the account presented in the *Dialogue on Poesy*, Schelling's call for a new mythology is far less interested in the communities localized around individual poets as it is

⁴⁴⁷ Bruce Matthews aptly describes the threat as one of philosophy being trapped in a "prison of its own success." Matthews, *Schelling's Organic Form of Philosophy*, 4.

⁴⁴⁸ Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 232.

in a temporally conceived stage of culture characterized by poetry. As such, the poetic community that Schlegel's mythology concerns expands to the level of humanity in Schelling's conception. In turn, the collective aim of that community also shifts, from drawing together the preexisting creativity of poetic individuals to build on each other, to delivering them all to a higher epoch in the history of knowledge.

But on this trajectory of human history, Schelling locates modernity at the peak of scientific knowledge, and in need of mythology to advance to its eventual, poetic destination. Schelling's new mythology, like that of Schlegel and the *Oldest Systematic Program*, is what comes after conscious reason expands beyond its own limitations. Common to the works that contributed to the project for the new mythology in German Idealism is the conviction that a new mythology for modern times could not simply imitate or import ancient mythology, but had to be the result of a conscious, philosophical, and interdisciplinary endeavor. There is a symmetry to be noticed here between the conceptions of the new mythology as a cultural bond for a poetic community, and as a more holistic mode of knowledge occupied by that community: the poetic community combines the coherence of a rationally organized community with the spiritual freedom that poetry offers to individuals, while the mode of knowledge is arrived at when conscious rationality reaches the unconscious shores of poetry.

The faith that mythology had the unique capacity to broker the marriage of rationality and poetry presumes, of course, that mythology entailed a way of thinking that was compatible both with poetry and with rationality. One crucial aspect of the conception of the new mythology as such a midpoint between rationality and poetry is that the result was not a compromise between two modes but an addition to each. Mythology entailed an expanded conception of both poetry and reason. As Schlegel posits in the *Dialogue on Poesy*, poetry could become more genuinely

poetic through mythology. An equivalent claim could be made for the relationship between mythology and rationality. The proponents of the new mythology believed that a political community would be a superior community if, through mythology, it made room for the creative individuality, or poetry, of each member. Likewise they believed that knowledge itself, conventionally the province of individual reason, would always prove inadequate unless it were to be enhanced by mythology. This particular conception of the nature and capacity of rationality, in turn, came from German Idealism's particular debt to Platonism.

Plato and the Mythology of Reason

The call for the new mythology articulated in the *Oldest Systematic Program* is specifically for a "mythology of reason." According to the logic of the document, mythology is capable of being "of reason" so long as it is mythology "in the service of the ideas."⁴⁴⁹ These ideas, in turn, interconnect in a comprehensive system of ethics, whose coherence depends on

the idea that unites all others, the idea of beauty, taking the word in a higher Platonic sense.⁴⁵⁰

The argument reveals a particular assumption about the nature of mythology. It must first have the capacity to contain reason, and it must also be able to participate in a Platonic system of ideas. That is, the possibility of a mythology of reason in the service of the ideas

⁴⁴⁹ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

⁴⁵⁰ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

requires that these ideas are understood through a Platonic lens, and, insofar as ideas are the objects of both mythology and reason, that Platonism also affects how we are to think of their relationship. When all ideas fall subordinate to one highest Idea of Beauty, the scope of reason that may access that ideal must be radically expanded, such that “the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act since it comprises all ideas.”⁴⁵¹ The aesthetic transformation of reason, with which the philosopher comes to “possess just as much aesthetic power as the poet,” comes conversely with the demand for a rationalization of aesthetics in a mythology of reason.⁴⁵²

It was the first major appeal to Plato in German Idealism.⁴⁵³ In the wake of Winckelmann and the *Graecomania* he had stirred in Germany, classical studies were quickly on the rise. The foundations for a largely Biblical tradition of systematic and rigorous scholarship lent themselves easily to application to Greek material.⁴⁵⁴ With increased demand for well-edited and accurate texts in the original Greek, eighteenth century Germany witnessed the publication of several important editions of Plato’s works.⁴⁵⁵ Notable among them included widely popular Greek editions of select dialogues, carefully edited and released between 1758 and 1779 by Johann Friedrich Fischer, a philologist and a former roommate of Gotthold Ephraim

⁴⁵¹ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

⁴⁵² *Oldest Systematic Program*, 4.

⁴⁵³ Rüdiger Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

⁴⁵⁴ Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 20. Exemplary and influential works of classical scholarship of this kind might be F.A. Wolf’s *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795) and *Darstellung der Altertumswissenschaft* (1807).

⁴⁵⁵ Frank B. Evans, “Platonic Scholarship in Eighteenth-Century England,” *Modern Philology* 41, no. 2 (1943): 103-110; see also Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 68.

Lessing at Leipzig⁴⁵⁶; as well as a twelve-volume *Complete Works* by the Bipont Society (1781-1787) as part of a 50-volume collection of Greek and Latin classics⁴⁵⁷ – the first publication of the entire corpus in the somewhat more portable and easily affordable octavo form.⁴⁵⁸

For the devoted Hellenists among the German Idealists, this meant that for the first time, they had direct and easy access to Plato's texts, rather than what had been filtered through Neoplatonist and Christian traditions.⁴⁵⁹ Schelling and Hölderlin were both avid readers of Plato in the original Greek during their university studies at the Tübinger Stift. While between 1793 and 1794 Hölderlin abandoned himself to a literary diet consisting mainly of "Kant and the Greeks," among whom Plato figured prominently,⁴⁶⁰ Schelling embarked upon a deep study of the Platonic dialogues, producing in particular some short reflections based loosely on the *Ion*

⁴⁵⁶ *Axiochus*, ed. J.F. Fischer (Leipzig: Langenheimer, 1758); *Platonis Euthyphro, Apologia Socratis, Crito, Phaedo*, ed. J.F. Fischer (Leipzig: Schwickert, 1759); *Platonis Cratylus et Theaetetus*, ed. J.F. Fischer (Leipzig: Langenheimer, 1770); *Platonis Sophista, Politicus, Parmenides*, ed. J.F. Fischer (Leipzig: Langenheimer, 1774); *Platonis Philebus et Symposium*, ed. J.F. Fischer (Leipzig: Langenheimer, 1776); *Platonis Euthyphro, Apologia Socratis, Crito, Phaedo, Cratylus, Theaetetus, Sophista, Politicus, Parmenides, Philebus et Symposium* (Leipzig: Langenheimer, 1779).

The Fischer editions are found in the personal library of Søren Kierkegaard, who attended Schelling's 1842 Berlin lectures. Jon Steward and Katalin Nun, eds., *Kierkegaard and the Greek World*, 2 vols. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), I: 147.

⁴⁵⁷ *Platonis quae extant*, ed. F.C. Exter and J.V. Embse (Zweibrücken: Bipont, 1781-1787). Schelling drew on the Bipont edition of the *Timaeus* (1786) for his commentary; the Bipont books are also found in Herder's personal library.

⁴⁵⁸ Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *An Introduction to the Knowledge of Rare and Valuable Editions of the Greek and Latin Classics; including the Scriptorum de re Rustica, Greek Romances, and Lexicons and Grammars: To which is added a complete Index Analyticus: The whole preceded by an Account of Polyglot Bibles, and the Best Editions of the Greek Septuagint and Testament* (London: W. Dwyer, 1804), 296.

⁴⁵⁹ Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 6.

⁴⁶⁰ Beiser, *German Idealism*, 382.

(1792)⁴⁶¹ and an extended commentary on the *Timaeus* (1794),⁴⁶² both preserved in his notebooks.⁴⁶³ Around the same time, Friedrich Schlegel devoted himself to the study of Greek, having gone through the complete works of Plato in the original Greek by 1788.⁴⁶⁴ By 1799, he had determined the need for a German translation of Plato's complete works and had begun corresponding with Friedrich Schleiermacher about the project – what would eventually become the most celebrated contribution of German Idealism to the history of Platonic reception.⁴⁶⁵

A rational Platonism of Ideas and a poetic Platonism of enthusiasm

Among the translations and new editions of Plato that preceded Schleiermacher's magnum opus, however, two might be worth mentioning as a way of thinking about two major channels of Platonism that contributed to the intellectual background to German Idealism. The first is a loose translation of the *Phaedo* by Moses Mendelssohn, though perhaps the work might be more accurately described as an adaptation.⁴⁶⁶ Mendelssohn explicitly intended to write

⁴⁶¹ Part of Schelling's *Berliner Teilnachlaß* at the Akademie-Archive der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin; discussed in Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 11-15.

⁴⁶² Also part of the *Berliner Teilnachlaß*, published as Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, "*Timaeus*" (1794), (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1994). K.J. Windischmann, who produced a German translation of the *Timaeus* in 1804, dedicated it to Schelling as a way of acknowledging his "rediscover[y] of the true and most ancient physics" in the *Timaeus*. Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 17.

⁴⁶³ On Schelling's early writings on Plato, see Michael Franz, *Schellings Tübinger Platon-Studien* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 153-282. For evidence of Schelling's engagement with Plato before his studies in Tübingen, see Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 7.

⁴⁶⁴ Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, X:179-180, ctd. in Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 68-9.

⁴⁶⁵ Julia A. Lamm, "Schleiermacher as Plato Scholar," *The Journal of Religion* 80, no. 2 (2000): 206-239, 210.

⁴⁶⁶ Moses Mendelssohn, *Phädon, oder, über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, ed. Dominique Bourel (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1979).

Phaedo, or on the Immortality of the Soul (1767) – in the words of his English translator – “in imitation of the Phædon of Plato” so as to recast Socrates “as a philosopher of the eighteenth century.”⁴⁶⁷ An instant success, the work was received warmly by Kant, who shared Mendelssohn’s interest in the *Phaedo*, though not the ability to read it in Greek. Two of the major features of the *Phaedo* must have made an impression on Kant: an argument for the rejection of the senses, as well as a sustained theory of the Forms. Although Kant took issue with Plato for “abandon[ing] the world of the senses” and “dar[ing] to go beyond it on the wings of the ideas, in the empty space of pure understanding,”⁴⁶⁸ he remained thoroughly impressed by Plato’s invention of the concept of the Idea as an object of human reason.⁴⁶⁹

What Kant’s take on Plato left for those German Idealists who called for a new mythology in the service of a Platonic Idea was a stake in Ideas themselves. “Platonis philosophia genuinus est Idealismus,” Schlegel once avowed – *Plato’s philosophy is genuine Idealism*.⁴⁷⁰ Ideas transcend the bounds of all possible experience, but are nonetheless real to the human mind, and can be accessed only through reason. Thus for Kant’s heirs, paying homage to Plato’s Ideas meant contributing to what was for the most part a rational legacy. Just as Mendelssohn found it appropriate to update Socrates’ arguments in the *Phaedo* to “offer those arguments which a man like Socrates, who were desirous of founding his belief upon found

⁴⁶⁷ Moses Mendelssohn, *Phædon; or, the Death of Socrates*, trans. Charles Cullen (London: J. Cooper, 1789), 6.

⁴⁶⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 129 [A5 / B9].

⁴⁶⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 395 [B369].

⁴⁷⁰ Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, XVIII: xxxvi, ctd. in Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 70.

reason, would find, at the present day,”⁴⁷¹ Kant felt he understood Plato’s Ideas better than Plato himself did, “since he may not have determined his concept sufficiently and hence sometimes spoke, or even thought, contrary to his own intention.”⁴⁷² The reception of *Phaedo* and its theory of the Forms reveals that Plato stood for a continuous tradition of knowledge so thoroughly rational that it was a project to be improved by any rational agent in a position to reason better.

The second work to mention here is an edition of the *Symposium* by Friedrich August Wolf (1782), the father of modern philology.⁴⁷³ If Moses Mendelssohn’s translation of *Phaedo* belonged to a Platonic legacy focused on the Ideas and their relationship to reason, Wolf’s *Symposium* marked a milestone in the history of a different strand of Platonism that emphasized Plato’s thoughts on love and beauty – the topics treated in the *Symposium* – and the poetic mind inspired by such things. Whereas Mendelssohn’s interest in the *Phaedo* was obviously motivated more by his own philosophical agenda than in any desire to preserve the original text, Wolf’s edition of the *Symposium* was a work of careful philological scholarship, with a Greek text and extensive annotations in German, as well as a lengthy introduction. The work jumpstarted his career as a philologist before he moved on to his studies of Homer, for which he is better remembered today. Noting the “florid style” of the *Symposium*,⁴⁷⁴ Wolf’s intent was to

⁴⁷¹ Mendelssohn, *Phædon*, trans. Charles Cullen, 6. The eschatological myth at the end of the *Phaedo* is pointedly excised from Mendelssohn’s version.

⁴⁷² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 396 [B369].

⁴⁷³ Plato, *Platōnos Symposion. Platons Gastmahl: ein Dialog*, ed. Friedrich August Wolf (Leipzig: Schwickert, 1782).

⁴⁷⁴ “der blühenden Schreibart.” Wolf, ed., *Platons Gastmahl*, vi.

pay as much attention to the language of Plato's text as might be due, "for example, to the Latin poet Virgil."⁴⁷⁵

Treating Plato as one would a poet would not have been an alien concept to a tradition of Platonism stemming from the Cambridge School – for whom the Renaissance Florentine focus on the *Symposium* were a vital influence – and preserved in Shaftesbury's writings on enthusiasm.⁴⁷⁶ According to this tradition, eagerly received by the champions of the new mythology, enthusiasm was associated with divine inspiration that possessed the individual poet.⁴⁷⁷ Wolf describes the dialogues as "offerings" that Plato asked of his "philosophical Muse."⁴⁷⁸ In contrast to Mendelssohn and Kant's rational disregard for both the language of Plato's text as well as those ideas deemed inaccurate in light of modern advances in knowledge, a Platonism of enthusiasm emphasizes the poetics of Plato's writing as well as the individuality of the person of Plato himself as someone who was uniquely inspired by a divine source.

The Platonism of the new mythology

The achievement of the program for a new mythology of reason was combining the two threads of Platonism to which German Idealism was heir. A rational tradition based on Plato's

⁴⁷⁵ "Wann können wir hoffen, einen platon oder aristotles so bearbeitet zu sehen, wie es zum beispiel unter den lateinischen dichtern virgil ist?" Wolf, ed., *Platons Gastmahl*, v.

⁴⁷⁶ Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism* 4; Ernst Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*, trans. James P. Pettergrove (Edinburgh: Nelson, 1953).

⁴⁷⁷ See *Ion* 533d-534e.

⁴⁷⁸ "... die *Gesetze*, die wahrscheinlich das letzte Opfer war, das Platon im höhern Alter seiner philosophischen Muse brachte..." Wolf, ed., *Platons Gastmahl*, vi. See also Wolf's discussion of the nature of the rhapsode in Friedrich August Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer* (1795), trans. Anthony Grafton, Glenn W. Most, and James E. G. Zetzel (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

ideas and a poetic tradition of Platonic enthusiasm came together in a conception of mythology that stressed its capacity to lend expression to higher ideas and truths about the nature of the cosmos, as well as the limits of conscious reason to do the same.

The program for the new mythology was first and foremost part of a system unified by a higher, Platonic idea of beauty. Its proponents believed in the coherence and unity of reality as experienced by the freely thinking subject. In a Platonic vein, they subscribed to the possibility that a single absolute, highest Idea might provide this unity holding together the diversity of the world. A mythology of reason had to express something of this highest Idea. Schelling defines the “character of the true Mythology” as “that which is of the universal, of the infinite,”⁴⁷⁹ just as Schlegel assigned to the new mythology the task of expressing “something originary and inimitable, which is absolutely indissoluble, which after all transformation still allows the old nature and power to shine through.”⁴⁸⁰ The unity with which the new mythology promises to hold together diverse individuals is now put to a stricter standard. That unity cannot be a provisional juxtaposition of non-clashing parts, but a coherent system derived from some conception of a higher unifying idea. This was the goal of the new mythology, and as such, mythology itself could not exist without the ideal of the highest.

At the same time, a new mythology was a necessity precisely because reason alone was inadequate to the task of accessing the highest; coming into contact with the Ideas could by no means be so straightforward. In this way the proponents of the new mythology were sympathetic to a poetic tradition of Platonism, in that they relied on what is revealed to the inspired poet to

⁴⁷⁹ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophie der Kunst*, in *Sämmtliche Werke: 1802-1803*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling, (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J.G. Cotta, 1859), 353–736, V: 413. See Sturma, “Politics and the New Mythology,” 228.

⁴⁸⁰ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 186.

provide truths that could not be reached through rational activity. Schelling, for instance, emphasizes in his interpretation of Plato that “in general in the entire investigation of the Platonic theory of ideas, one must keep it always in mind that Plato speaks of them always as ideas of a divine understanding.” That is, Plato was a thoroughly “divine” figure, after the enthusiastic tradition of Platonism in which the poet was inspired, as though by a divinity, of his privileged insight. That divine connection to the ideas is “possible in human understanding only through an intellectual communion of man with the origin of all beings.”⁴⁸¹ The limits of what conscious thought can grasp could by no means exhaust the scope of human knowledge. That original poetic ocean of knowledge to which Schelling’s new mythology leads reemerges as a kind of “feeling, longing, the glorious mother of knowledge,” whose movement is to be compared to “an undulating, surging sea, similar to Plato’s matter.”⁴⁸² Aesthetic sensibilities made us intuitively aware of ideas that could not yet be articulated in the language of reason. Imagination, emotion, and the sensory faculties not only provided valuable ways of knowing, but the intuitions they might awaken in us were far more immediate than what we might think up in the abstract.

It is into these rich resources of cognition that mythology taps. Like Schelling, who characterizes mythology as “sensualized truth”⁴⁸³ or “sensuous philosophy,”⁴⁸⁴ Schlegel

⁴⁸¹ Schelling, *Timaeus* (1794), 37; I borrow the translation from Sallis, John. “Secluded Nature: The Point of Schelling’s Renscription of the *Timaeus*.” *Pli* 8 (1999): 71–85, 77–8.

⁴⁸² Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Philosophische Untersuchungen über das Wesen der menschlichen Freiheit und die damit zusammenhängenden Gegenstände in Sämmtliche Werke: 1805*, ed. Karl Friedrich August Schelling (Stuttgart and Augsburg: J.G. Cotta, 1860), 331–417, VII: 360. I borrow the translation from Sallis, “Secluded Nature,” 74.

⁴⁸³ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, *Aus Schellings Leben in Briefen*, ed. G. L. Plitt, 3 vols. (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1869): I: 37; ctd. in Matthews, *Schelling’s Organic Form of Philosophy*, 10.

⁴⁸⁴ The reference is to “the mythology of the Greeks.” Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 14.

subscribes to the potential of what he calls the “naïve profundity” of mythology.⁴⁸⁵ Mythology presented for Schlegel “one great advantage”:

What otherwise eternally flees consciousness can be seen here sensually-spiritually and held fast, as is the soul in its surrounding body through which it shines in our eye and speaks to our ear.”⁴⁸⁶

The language of mythology appeals to our sensual and spiritual faculties, which greatly expands the modes in which we receive ideas beyond the boundaries of what can be known through conscious thought. Just as knowledge of the soul is possible through the material in which it is embodied, otherwise inaccessible ideas can speak through sensual images. The highest idea, in particular, lies beyond the reach of the conscious mind, such that any hope of access to it is gained only with the recruitment of a sensual-spiritual faculty to augment rational knowledge.⁴⁸⁷ Schlegel identifies these alternative paths to knowledge as “actually the point” of mythology: “because of the highest, we do not depend so entirely on our mind alone.”⁴⁸⁸

The Platonism of the new mythology, then, consists of a desire to attain a new understanding of the world through the medium of mythology, which could navigate both the appeal of a rational world view organized around a coherent system of ideas, as well as the poetic longing to transcend what can be known through rational thought. What it emphasized was the possibility of progress towards an ideal by means of gradual and asymptotic approximation. The new mythology promised to lend unity to poetry precisely because it would

⁴⁸⁵ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 186.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁸⁷ Beiser argues for the appreciation of “the deeper current of rationalism within *Frühromantik*, and more specifically its profound debt to the Platonic tradition” in that “the Platonic legacy of *Frühromantik* shows that its aestheticism was itself a form of rationalism.” Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 59-60.

⁴⁸⁸ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 186.

contain in it the highest unifying Idea of beauty. But it would also preserve the diversity inherent to poetry – which comes through in the aggregate approximations of that ideal, through spontaneous, idiosyncratic experimentation on the parts of individual poets. The proponents of the new mythology believed that the modern separation of rationality and poetry could be remedied because their unique Platonism had done just that: their conception of the new mythology took its structure from an interpretation of Plato's philosophy that emphasized the rationality of Ideas as much as the poetic transcendence necessary for accessing them.

Lessons from Plato's Myths

The choice of mythology as the special medium for the convergence of rationality and poetry becomes clearer with an examination of how the proponents of the new mythology read Plato's own myths. As had been the tradition of enthusiastic Platonism, they were keenly aware of the literary virtues of Plato's writing, and the appreciation of the form in which Plato chose to express his ideas remains one of the most significant and lasting contributions to Platonic scholarship from the period of German Idealism. Plato's myths struck the authors involved in the project for the new mythology as entirely consistent with their interpretation of his philosophy at large. That is, the myths blended stylistically with what they took to be a thoroughly poetic philosophy, helped communicate sensual insights beyond the scope of what might be articulated in the language of conscious reason, and above all conveyed a commitment to the highest, unifying Idea of beauty.

It was partly Plato's use of myth that had delegitimized his philosophy in the previous century. The Enlightenment had seen a strong anti-Platonic movement, motivated by the desire

to shake off imprecise, poetic language in favor of a philosophy grounded in scientific thinking.⁴⁸⁹ Well into the nineteenth century, admirers of Plato would still feel the need to defend his myths from their Enlightenment critics. In his celebrated 1804 introduction to his translations of Plato,⁴⁹⁰ Friedrich Schleiermacher goes through great pains to show that the myths do not take away from the logical arguments of Plato's philosophy. He insists that the myths in Plato's writing serve to reinforce what is argued in the other mode. What "is anticipated mythically," he observes, "more often than not appears later in its scientific form."⁴⁹¹

Schleiermacher's remark does not quite do justice to his pivotal role in the establishment of Plato as a "philosophical artist,"⁴⁹² or the efforts taken in his Introduction to emphasize the overall coherence of Plato's *oeuvre*, both within and across individual dialogues, such that together they formed an organic unity, like a living body.⁴⁹³ Or, it is perhaps all the more astonishing that one in such a singularly authoritative position to speak about Plato's poetic style would still have to validate his myths by the metric of his "scientific" arguments.⁴⁹⁴ It was an

⁴⁸⁹ Robert Edward Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), 102-105; see also Parker, *A Free and Impartial Censure of the Platonick Philosophie*, 71.

⁴⁹⁰ Gadamer singles out Schleiermacher's introduction as a masterpiece of hermeneutic thought. Hans-George Gadamer, "Schleiermacher als Platoniker," in *Kleine Schriften*, vol. 3 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1972): 374-383, ctd. in Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 39.

See also Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1969) and Kristin Gjesdal, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009): 173-5.

⁴⁹¹ "... es ware im Ganzen mit der hier vorgeschlagenen Folge derselbe Fall, indem nach dieser nicht selten mythisch antizipiert wird, was erst später in seiner wissenschaftlichen Gestalt erscheint." Friedrich Schleiermacher, "Einleitung," in Platon, *Werke*, trans. Friedrich Schleiermacher, vol. I.1 (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984): 5-38, 35.

⁴⁹² Schleiermacher, "Einleitung," 7.

⁴⁹³ Schleiermacher, "Einleitung," 7. See also *Phaedr.* 263c, and Lamm, "Schleiermacher as Plato Scholar," 224.

⁴⁹⁴ Schleiermacher's remark may betray a larger conception of the function Plato's myths: the comment might also present Plato's myths as anticipating ideas to which the logical arguments often, but not always, catch up.

age in which, as Schleiermacher's comment reveals, myths functioned in philosophical writing as at best complementary – if not redundant – to the language of reason. The use of myth had been either ornamental or allegorical – merely more pleasant modes of ingesting perfectly rational ideas, or stories capable of being broken down rationally into intelligible units of thought.

By contrast, a decade before Schleiermacher's Introduction, the proponents of the new mythology resisted the contemporary pressure to isolate and explain Plato's myths rationally. Schlegel, a onetime (and ultimately unreliable) collaborator on Schleiermacher's translations,⁴⁹⁵ lauded Plato's "already thoroughly poetic form" in which "representation and its perfection and beauty are not means, but rather an end in themselves,"⁴⁹⁶ and featured the Platonic dialogues in an earlier essay on Greek poetry because he couldn't quite decide if they were "poetical philosophemes or philosophical poems."⁴⁹⁷ Schelling casually referred to Plato as "the poetic philosopher."⁴⁹⁸ Both authors wrote Platonic dialogues. The *Dialogue on Poesy*, which consists of a sequence of speeches on a common theme, with the interludes between speeches filled with

Schleiermacher's attachment to the organic unity of the Platonic corpus as a whole even led him to suggest that the "individual Platonic myths are developed and formed out of one, Platonic Grundmythos." Lamm, "Schleiermacher as Plato Scholar," 226n.

"Ja wer erst tiefer in das Studium des Platon eindringt, dem wird die allmähliche Entwicklung und Ausbildung der Platonischen Mythen aus Einem Grundmythos ... am deutlichsten wahrnehmen läßt." Schleiermacher, "Einleitung," 35.

⁴⁹⁵ Lamm, "Schleiermacher as Plato Scholar."

⁴⁹⁶ Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," 190.

⁴⁹⁷ Schlegel, *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie*, I:332, ctd. in Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 32.

⁴⁹⁸ Schelling, *Timaeus*, 13.100, ctd. in Werner Beierwaltes, "The Legacy of Neoplatonism in F.W.J. Schelling's Thought," trans. Peter Adamson, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 10, no. 4 (2002): 393–428, 279, n48.

dialogue, is self-consciously modeled after the *Symposium*,⁴⁹⁹ whereas Schelling's *Bruno* (1802) and the posthumously published *Clara* (1861) are also written in the dialogue form.⁵⁰⁰ Against the background of their admiration for Plato's writing, Plato's myths were not a stylistic aberration. Rather, what myths they do treat get an unusually literal reading at the hands of both Schlegel and Schelling. The greater part of *On Diotima* (1795), Schlegel's essay on the central figure from the *Symposium* who delivers the myth on the origin and nature of Love, is devoted to speculation on the person of Diotima on the assumption that she was a historical figure; Schelling's commentary on the *Timaeus* from his student days at the Tübinger Stift treats the "likely myth [*eikôs muthos*]"⁵⁰¹ of the *Timaeus* no differently from the dense ontological discussions of the *Philebus*. For both authors, Plato's myths were simply an extension both of Plato's poetry and of his philosophy, the boundaries of which ought to be similarly collapsed in future knowledge.

What stands out in Schlegel's and Schelling's respective treatments of Plato, however, is the consistency with which they applied their understanding of the structure of the new mythology to Plato's myths. The highest form of mythology was to contain the highest idea, which, though perfectly rational, could not be articulated rationally. Plato's myths were not exempt from the representative function they attributed to mythology, and as such, they were

⁴⁹⁹ It has also been pointed out that the *Dialogue on Poesy* is also a remembered dialogue, a remembered dialogue, mimicking the densely layered narrative structure of the *Symposium*. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*.

⁵⁰⁰ Writing Platonic dialogues was not novel to German Idealists and their immediate predecessors. Besides the aforementioned "translation" of the *Phaedo* by Moses Mendelssohn, an influential dialogue was *Simon, ou des facultés de l'âme* (1787), by Frans Hemsterhuis, the Dutch Platonist. The dialogue recasts Socrates and Diotima from the *Symposium*, and its achievement of bringing Diotima's name "back to life in the most beautiful manner" was highly regarded by Schlegel. Friedrich Schlegel, "On Diotima (1795)," in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 400-419, 401.

⁵⁰¹ *Tim.* 29d.

thought to correspond to specific ideas contained in them. The significance of Diotima for Schlegel, for instance, is in her capacity to personify the higher ideals of beauty and wisdom in one coherent and tangible figure who is somehow greater than the sum of her parts.⁵⁰² For all the effort Schlegel exerts into joining in on the “antiquarian trifle” of historical speculation on Diotima’s person,⁵⁰³ *On Diotima* builds up to the conclusion that the importance of Diotima hinges on her status as a representative figure, rather than a historical one. Plato’s mythic achievement in having created her is in having “immortalized a woman” who “simultaneously satisfied both his tender feeling and the high ideas of reason.”⁵⁰⁴ She is, as he reiterates elsewhere, “a necessary idea for Socratic philosophy.”⁵⁰⁵ Similarly, what one commentator calls Schelling’s “cosmological use of myth”⁵⁰⁶ consists in reading the creation myth of the *Timaeus* as perfectly aligned with Plato’s vision of an ordered and coherent cosmos, and as an expression of “the *Idea* of the world.”⁵⁰⁷

⁵⁰² The central figure of Socrates’ speech in the dialogue, Diotima delivers both a myth on the origin and parentage of love, as well as a speech likening the discovery of beauty to an ascent up a ladder, with a multiplicity of beautiful things at the lower rungs and idea of Beauty itself at the highest. (*Symp.* 211c-d.) Both these lessons are particularly resonant for the proponents of the new mythology: Diotima’s ladder anticipates the Romantic belief in a highest unifying idea of beauty that is consistent with an appreciation of the diversity of all beautiful things in which that absolute idea is manifested, while the myth representing love as a child of Resource and Poverty echoes the structure of the new mythology as the union of two ideas producing a third mediating concept. (For an extreme effort at building a complete schematism from mediating concepts, see Friedrich Schlegel, “Philosophical Lectures: Transcendental Philosophy (excerpts) Jena, 1800-1801,” in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*: 140-158.) Hölderlin’s reinvention of Diotima as Hyperion’s love interest only speaks to the significance of her impact among the German Romantics.

⁵⁰³ Friedrich Schlegel, “On Diotima (1795),” in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997): 400-419, 401.

⁵⁰⁴ Schlegel, “On Diotima,” 419.

⁵⁰⁵ Friedrich Schlegel, “Philosophical fragments from the Philosophical Apprenticeship (excerpts),” in Beiser, ed., *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*: 159-168. (Second Epoch I, §123)

⁵⁰⁶ Bubner, *The Innovations of Idealism*, 31, see also 18.

⁵⁰⁷ Schelling, *Timaeus*, 38.29, ctd. in Beierwaltes, “The Legacy of Neoplatonism,” 271.

Schlegel and Schelling described these myths as “images” of the ideas they contained. Diotima’s myths on love consolidate in a single figure who “represents an image of perfected humanity,”⁵⁰⁸ whereas a cosmos exists in the *Timaeus* myth as “an image of the ideal world.”⁵⁰⁹ In Plato’s philosophy, an image is the material imprint of an idea: the Forms impress upon the human understanding as physical objects cast shadows.⁵¹⁰ The positing of an ideal in a myth – of humanity, or of the world – leaves behind an image in our psyche, the combination of whose intellectual and sensual faculties can, through that image, reconstruct the idea in it. This reconstruction is a creative act. As much as the ideas expressed in the myths are understood to be somehow dynamic – the person of Diotima, the cosmos as an “ensouled living thing”⁵¹¹ – the agent doing the reconstructing also interacts dynamically with them, inevitably rediscovering those ideas in his own way, in his own manifestations. An idea of the inner unity of the cosmos can also reflect the unity of an individual soul participating in its motions, and an idea of human perfection the virtues of yet imperfect persons.

For this reason, the authors involved in the project for the new mythology were invested in the relationship between image and its effect on one’s soul, between *Bild* and *Bildung*. *Bildung* is a notoriously difficult word to translate, and the term was loaded with special significance at the height of German Idealism. Its root, *Bild*, which of course means “image,” or “picture,” draws the meaning of the term closer to formation than to education – that is, the formation or shaping of a soul. An idea, impressed as an image upon the psyche, may be seen as

⁵⁰⁸ Schlegel, “On Diotima,” 419.

⁵⁰⁹ Schelling, *Timaeus* 29.18ff; ctd. in Beierwaltes, “The Legacy of Neoplatonism,” 277.

⁵¹⁰ See *Rep.* VI. 509d-513e.

⁵¹¹ Schelling, *Timaeus* 29.18ff; ctd. in Beierwaltes, “The Legacy of Neoplatonism,” 277.

the beginning of *Bildung* as it is internalized in an individual as an ideal to approximate in the ongoing cultivation of his own self and his surroundings. If myths have the capacity to contain images of ideas, a quality that Schlegel and Schelling credited to Plato's myths, the new mythology had the potent capacity to guide the formation of its subjects. At the same time, as with the subjects of any process that can be properly described as *Bildung*, the subjects of a mythology containing the highest ideas are the agents of their own self-formation. Interaction with the highest ideas presented in mythology is a creative and active process that can enhance, rather than undermine, the subject's freedom to think and judge for himself. For the same reason, it becomes of particular significance that the highest idea unifying all ideas is a Platonic idea of beauty. If, as the *Oldest Systematic Program* proposes, the new mythology is to help in the construction of a world for "free, self-conscious being[s],"⁵¹² the idea governing that world has to be one that maximizes the agency of its subjects. Beauty is that idea that communicates with the creative faculty of each individual; what makes humans "capable of understanding the beauty of a poem," according to Schlegel, is that "a part of the poet, a spark of his creative spirit, lives in us as well and never ceases to glow with a mysterious force deep beneath the ashes of self-made unreason."⁵¹³ Access to the higher ideas, and through them, to the highest idea of beauty, stimulates the part of us that makes us poets and creators, and it is, for the proponents of the new mythology, our creativity that makes us free.

From the standpoint of the project for the new mythology, Plato's myths imparted an important lesson about the nature and potential function of mythology in relation to philosophy. Stylistically undifferentiated from the rest of his writing, the myths were part of Plato's perfectly

⁵¹² *Oldest Systematic Program*, 3.

⁵¹³ Schlegel, "Dialogue on Poesy," 181.

poetic philosophy, and accordingly served to represent specific ideas in it that could not be adequately captured in the language of rational thought. In turn, they lent insight into the role a mythology unified by the highest idea of beauty might play in a special kind of individual enlightenment: they granted privileged access to rational ideas in a way that preserved the autonomy of the poetic spirit. The Platonism of the new mythology, then, brokers the marriage of rational ideas and poetic freedom in the enlightenment of the individual. But how mythology was to bring an entire community to a corresponding state of knowledge, like the phases of human knowledge envisioned in Schelling's system, is separate question. To answer it, the champions of the new mythology would have to step beyond the Platonic tradition, and extend it.

Mythology and the Enlightened Community

We recall that the proclamation for the new mythology at the end of the *Oldest Systematic Program* had been accompanied by a confident assertion of its own novelty. Although the function of the new mythology had been inspired by the perceived effect that ancient Greek mythology had had on Greek culture, the new mythology was to be emphatically modern – an outgrowth and continuation of the accomplishments of modern philosophy, that is, a mythology of reason. The alleged newness of the new mythology, then, is worth revisiting in light of the revival of Plato in German Idealism, when the rediscovery of Plato's myths indicated the existence of clear precedents of myths of reason that were at once rational and poetic. Given their conspicuous fascination both with the concept of mythology as well with Plato's

achievements as a poetic philosopher, how could the proponents of the new mythology have insisted, with such certainty, that their project was so new?

The remainder of this chapter will argue that the novelty that its pioneers saw in the new mythology lay not so much in a Platonically inflected reconciliation of poetry and rationality, but in the political application of such a reconciliation. As we have seen, the project for the new mythology had hinged on the premise of a modern predicament entailing the separation of poetry and rationality, and the corresponding separation of the creative individual from a society bound by bureaucratic and legal institutions. After the model of ancient mythology, a new mythology would forge an alternative, voluntary bond between creative individuals in a poetic community. But that mythology would be arrived at, not by seeking to replicate the ancient example, but through an extension of modern philosophy and science, and specifically of Idealism, whereby conscious reason transcends its own boundaries into the unconscious realm of poetry. The poetic augmentation of reason in mythology was possible through a certain Platonic world view that combined a rational metaphysics with a poetic epistemology, in which access to the highest ideas of reason depended on poetic channels as well as the rational. This also meant that the spiritual freedom that poetry assured an individual required more than a freedom from inhibition, but that its content was informed by higher Platonic ideas, especially that of beauty. Through its interaction with the higher ideas contained in mythology, the soul formed and cultivated its own enlightenment. Yet this Platonic expansion of rationality and poetry takes place in the psyche of the individual philosopher-poet. How does the content of mythological enlightenment transfer at a political level, concerning not just the individual but the entire poetic community that the new mythology was to bring together? For the champions of the new mythology, Plato had failed to extend the mythological resolution of rationality and poetry to the scale of politics.

The philosophers and the people: the limits of Plato's political vision

The *Oldest Systematic Program* makes an assumption about the nature of society that should be familiar to readers of Plato's *Republic*.⁵¹⁴ The *Republic* had drawn a "mutually illuminating" analogy between the city and the individual soul: a part of the soul had a corresponding demographic in the larger society that shared its most defining characteristic.⁵¹⁵ The *Oldest Systematic Program* likewise begins with the assumption that "the philosophers" and "the people" are separate by virtue of their respective natures: the philosophers are rational, and the people sensuous.⁵¹⁶ Yet the separation between the rational and the sensuous, in the intellectual classes of society as well as in the faculties of the soul, was something that the new mythology sought to bridge. In the *Oldest Systematic Program*, the new mythology had to be a mythology of reason in order to speak to both philosophers and non-philosophers, and accordingly to both the rational and sensuous parts of each person:

Before we make ideas aesthetic, i.e. mythological, they will have no interest for the people. Conversely, before mythology is rational, the philosopher must be ashamed of it. Hence finally the enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands: mythology must become philosophical to make people rational, and philosophy must become mythological to make philosophers sensuous.⁵¹⁷

⁵¹⁴ That the proponents of the new mythology were familiar with the *Republic* is obvious, though they often chose to focus their praise on particular details: having women and property in common, or on the philosopher-king's reluctance to rule. For the communality of women and property, see Friedrich Schlegel, *On Diotima*. For the reluctant philosopher-king, see Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas*, §54; Second Epoch I, §771; "Philosophical fragments from the Philosophical Apprenticeship (excerpts)," in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*: 159-168. Schelling also questions the authenticity of the *Timaeus* against the "highly moral spirit of the more genuine Platonic works" like the *Republic*. Schelling, *Timaeus*, 6.36ff, trans. and ctd. in Beierwaltes, "The Legacy of Neoplatonism," 276.

⁵¹⁵ Julia Annas, "Politics in Plato's *Republic*: His and Ours," *Apeiron* 33, no. 4. For the city-soul analogy, see *Rep.* 434d-5e.

⁵¹⁶ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 5.

⁵¹⁷ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 5.

As in the Platonic analogy between the city and the soul, the *Program* proposes that political harmony bears a parallel relationship to psychic harmony: handshakes between the two intellectual classes accompanies the rationalization of the non-philosophical and the sensualizing of the philosophical. And the *Program* shares with the more subtle insight in Plato's treatment of myth that a certain kind of mythology has the capacity to "make" people one way or another – more rational, or more sensual. It follows a Platonic way of thinking about mythology insofar as it conceptualizes the new mythology as a force for wide-scale social change that began with the reformation of the nature of individual citizens.

But in the political vision of the *Oldest Systematic Program's* proposal for a new mythology, the ideal relationship between the faculties and corresponding classes of society is one of equality rather than hierarchy. That Plato singles out the philosophical class to rule over the others as the rational part reigns in the soul, seemed to undermine the potential of Plato's own thought. Plato represented a genuine poet-philosopher for the proponents of the new mythology, and the most exemplary embodiment of their belief that both rational and aesthetic powers had to come together in the soul of an individual who had true insight into the ideas. Hence the new mythology aimed not only to make people rational, but insisted that the philosophers had something to gain from being made more sensual as well. For Plato to have acknowledged the accessory role that the non-rational parts of the soul play in the psyche of the philosopher, but then to have extrapolated from the more holistic constitution of this lover of wisdom a purely rational function in society, would have seemed incongruous for the proponents of the new mythology. Equal balance between the rational and non-rational functions in the individual as well as in society offered a simpler and more consistent solution. The soul of the true philosopher, as the proponents of the new mythology saw it, was also poetic.

From the standpoint of the new mythology, Plato's separation of the philosophical from the non-philosophical classes suggests an admission of the limitations of mythology in its capacity to shape human nature. For Plato, an intellectual nature might reveal itself at the end of a mythic education, but he took for granted that human nature, while malleable, was ultimately limited in its capacity to be changed by political mythology. Not everyone was equipped to be a true lover of wisdom at the highest degree. Plato's assumption that non-philosophical people must necessarily exist, betrays a certain pessimism about what mythology can and cannot do in politics: mythology can only do so much to a soul's constitution, and failure to achieve the ideal balance in most cases was to be expected, and ultimately inevitable.

The proponents of the new mythology thought differently. For the author of the *Oldest Systematic Program*, the existence of two separate intellectual classes in society was more abnormal than inevitable. Philosophers and non-philosophers in society owed their separate existence to an unnatural imbalance in their psychological development, whereby only one of two faculties in the souls of each, rational and sensual, had been cultivated at the expense of the other. The true ailment of modern society, following a diagnosis Friedrich Schiller made just two years before the *Program*, consisted in "whole classes of men, developing but one part of their potentialities."⁵¹⁸ A man would be just as much "at odds with himself" from the barbaric destruction of feelings by rationality as from the savage rule of feelings without the guidance of rational principles – two pathological tendencies that exhibited themselves at two opposite ends of modern society.⁵¹⁹ The new mythology seeks to heal both pathologies by finding an equal

⁵¹⁸ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*, trans. and ed. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 32-33 [VI.3].

⁵¹⁹ Schiller, *Aesthetic Education of Man*, 20-21 [IV. 6]; 25-7 [V.4-5].

balance of rational and sensual powers in the soul of every individual, and thereby making poetic philosophers of them all. The mythology of the *Oldest Systematic Program* insists upon the goal of the “equal development of all powers, of each individual as well as all individuals.”⁵²⁰

Wholeness of character, which would result from reconciling the midpoint of rationality and poetry within the soul of each individual, would also lead to the equivalent collapse in class divisions at the societal level.

German Idealism’s disagreement with Plato on the limits of mythology eventually manifests in a sharp divergence from Plato in its outlook on the eventual direction of politics. Politics trickled downstream for Plato from more noble origins, and much of the work of politics was in the preservation of its philosophical beginning. The project for the new mythology, by contrast, was premised on the hope of infinite progress. Through it, the bonds between individuals would be strengthened, while the creative activity of those individuals would further the advancement of human knowledge. As the seat of individual innovation, poetry played a crucial part in the progressive vision of politics upheld by the new mythology. That Plato banishes the poets from his *Republic* despite his own use of poetic devices may now be a commonplace observation,⁵²¹ but it presented for his German Idealist readers a more urgent problem that required resolution. If the poetic Plato, as they understood him, had presented a case for needing the aesthetic faculties beyond reason to access the highest ideas, a politics that left no place for the poetic was inadequate to his ultimate vision.⁵²² At the same time, the happy

⁵²⁰ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 5.

⁵²¹ Beiser reads the Romantic emphasis on art as a “reversal of Plato’s infamous doctrine in the *Republic*.” Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 48.

⁵²² From the German Idealist perspective, Plato’s banishment of the poets may have seemed a sad necessity arising from his general pessimism regarding human nature, and with it his relative pessimism regarding the capacity of mythology to change it.

combination of poetry and reason in a creative mind touched by the higher ideas had to be an option made available to more people, not just the philosopher-poets. Political progress, to be championed by the new mythology, was directed toward the universal enlightenment of all individuals in the community. Plato's choice to order his politics around preserving the status quo, rather than extending the gifts of philosophy to the entire city, meant that the proponents of the new mythology perceived in both Plato's political philosophy and his treatment of mythology an incomplete project.

The social expansion of the new mythology of reason

The desired balance between the faculties of the soul and the corresponding balance between the divisions of society had to be instituted together as much as possible. Cultivating the spirit of the poet-philosopher without extending the content of his enlightenment to the rest of society was inadequate to the political goals of the new mythology, but introducing political equality to a people that lacked the corresponding equality in their souls was disastrous. Looming in the background of the political vision of the new mythology was the realization that the ideals of the French revolution had caught "a generation unprepared."⁵²³ The works that explicitly called for a new mythology were written during a period of remarkable productivity in German Idealism, which coincided with the years in which the French Revolution unraveled into the reign of terror. The disappointment experienced by their authors at the outcome of the revolution was matched only by their initial enthusiasm, which mutated into a residual sense of anticipation saturating their work – the conviction that a purposeful and progressive history was

⁵²³ Schiller, *Aesthetic Education of Man*, 25.

unfolding just around the horizon, though its monumental content had yet to be revealed.⁵²⁴ The project for the new mythology was in many ways an attempt to diagnose and remedy what had gone wrong. If the French Revolution had failed to live up to its promise, the fault lay not so much with the principles of *liberté*, *fraternité* and *égalité*, as with the fact that the people were not ready for them; they did not yet know how to be free. Revolution had brought about a new political order without the accompanying reform in human nature. The purpose of the new mythology was to attempt reform on both frontiers, at the level of the individual as well as that of the collective, fostering the equal development of rational and poetic faculties within the souls of every member of an equal community.⁵²⁵

Ensuring both kinds of equality, on the other hand, meant actually having people act as poet-philosophers in an equal setting. A mythology of reason handed down from one poet or philosopher to the rest of his community ultimately served this purpose no better than ancient examples of mythology did for modernity. On this dimension the divine Plato exhausted his usefulness to the new mythology: the poetic inspiration that touched a philosopher of his kind somehow had to touch an entire people as well. Plato had shown a way of writing poetic philosophy and myths of reason, but he was, in the end, one individual. Instead, the proponents of the new mythology agreed that all the members of the community affected by the new mythology would also be its authors. Schelling describes the new mythology as “the creation, not of some individual author, but of a new race, personifying, as it were, one single poet”⁵²⁶; for

⁵²⁴ Sturma, “Politics and the New Mythology,” 225.

⁵²⁵ Political reform as a choice between revolution and education is a dominant trope in Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education of Man* and in Hölderlin’s *Hyperion*.

⁵²⁶ “... eine neue Mythologie, welche nicht Erfindung des einzelnen Dichters, sondern eines neuen, nur *einen* Dichter gleichsam vorstennenden Geschlechts sein kann...,” Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, 233; Schelling, *System Des Transzendentalen Idealismus*, 300.

Schlegel, it is the midpoint in the poetry of all individuals in a poetic community, and for the author of the *Oldest Systematic Program*, the “last and greatest work of humanity.”⁵²⁷ Hence equality functioned as a governing principle in the new mythology, not only within and between individuals, but also across the authorship of the mythology. The new mythology would then be a continuously growing work in which all its participants, as co-authors, had equal standing, and through the writing of which its authors encountered the highest idea of beauty and cultivated their creative spirit. The mythological enlightenment of the individual philosopher-poet, then, is extended to the entire community as it writes its own mythology.

In the meantime, against the disconcerting durability of the modern bureaucratic state, those authors who dreamt of a communal mythology made brave efforts to implement in their own lives the ideal of a collaborative poetic community with a common center. Schlegel’s conception of the new mythology as a shared “midpoint” between poets takes as its model a community of artists, bound by a common poetry, and spreading their message organically outwards. Like the young Schelling, who had seen in his circle of friends at Tübingen a “league of free spirits” (*Bund freier Geister*) working toward social change,⁵²⁸ the Jena-based Schlegel often alluded to an “alliance,” “league,” “eternal union,” or “Hansa” of artists.⁵²⁹

These literary groups were always careful to ensure that the communality of their association was reflected in both the nature of their writing and its process. If its members subscribed to the proposal that the new mythology was not only something needed, but something that had to be produced, it made sense that they might begin looking for Schlegel’s

⁵²⁷ *Oldest Systematic Program*, 5.

⁵²⁸ Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke*, I: 341.

⁵²⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas*, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, §§ 32, 49, and 142, respectively.

mythological midpoint in literary collaboration. Echoing the language of the claims about the organic or poetic state, the new mythology shared the same organic – largely botanical – metaphors with the Romantic literary process. Schlegel describes mythology as a “bed” for the flowers of poetry and the seeds of their inspiration.⁵³⁰ The seeds of metaphor also accompanied the inspired efforts among Schlegel’s circles in Jena for poetic communication and collaboration. Novalis, who novel prominently featured a “blue flower” that was soon adapted as a symbol of the Romantic movement,⁵³¹ contributed a collection of aphoristic fragments entitled “Pollen [Blüthenstaub]” to the first issue of the *Athenaeum*, the founding journal of Romanticism begun and edited by the Schlegel brothers. He describes the fragments as “a literary sowing of the fields” in anticipation of the imminent discovery of a new art of writing books.⁵³² What art he had in mind is unclear, but the seeds he sowed in the literary form of the fragment were a clear statement of the hope of building communities through their creative activities. He and Schlegel conceived of the genre of fragment-writing as an ultimately collaborative project – a harmonious and organic juxtaposition of anonymous fragments written by different authors.⁵³³ Indeed, Friedrich Schlegel, in editing *Pollen* for the *Athenaeum*, did not shy from altering Novalis’ text and adding his own contributions. More significant is their vision of their work as an essentially procreative art: their poetry would create poetry in turn, and draw these emerging poets into their inner circles.

⁵³⁰ Schlegel, “Dialogue on Poesy,” 183.

⁵³¹ Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, ed. Ursula Ritzenhoff (Stuttgart: P. Reclam, 1988).

⁵³² “The art of writing books is still to be discovered. But it is on the verge of being discovered. Fragments of this kind are a literary sowing of the fields. Of course, there may be many sterile seeds in them. Nevertheless, if only a few would blossom!” Novalis, *Pollen*, in Beiser, ed., *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*: 7-31, 31 [§114].

⁵³³ See Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *The Literary Absolute*, 40-46, esp. 45.

It is difficult not to draw a parallel between these literary motivations and the plan for the new mythology. For these key figures of German Idealism, producing the new mythology and waiting for its arrival seemed part of the same process: they had to first sow the modest seeds of their ideas and literary examples, then hope that what sprouts, if anything, will eventually grow together to reveal the unity of their modern culture. But their ideas always ran ahead of their actual achievements. Their years of collaboration peaked between 1796 and 1801, then their literary community fell apart. Novalis died of tuberculosis at the age of 28. Friedrich Schlegel moved to Paris, his brother August to Berlin, leaving the newly divorced Caroline Schlegel to marry Schelling away from Jena. The wedding was the last time Schelling saw his old roommate from Tübingen, Hölderlin, who had already begun to lose his mind. As the giants of German Idealism each went their own ways, so did their respective interests in the project for the new mythology.

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The bonds between poetry and poets afforded by Schlegel's conception of the new mythology had emerged as an alternative to the rational institutions defining the modern bureaucratic state. But the new mythology, its advocates agreed, also had to be a mythology of reason that grew out of the achievements of what had hitherto been a predominantly rational philosophy, and which was to open access to the higher Platonic ideas of reason that had not been within reach before. The politics of the new mythology straddles the dual aim of building a coherent community and fostering the development of the individual in it. It sought not only to make better communities, or to make better poet-philosophers, but to create better communities of poet-philosophers approaching the ideal together.

One way of reading the account of the new mythology in German Idealism is that it is a very faithful and thorough interpretation of Plato pushed to its limits, which insists on the holistic fulfillment of both the city and the individual. Plato has been criticized for forcing the philosophers to descend back into the cave from their true home in the upper realm of the Forms. Through its conception of the new mythology, German Idealism had hoped to realize Plato's own impossible dream of bringing everyone out of the cave together.

Chapter 5

The Demon of the City: Cassirer on Myth and Plato

MYTH AS AN UNLIKELY RESOURCE FOR
MITIGATING THE PATHOLOGIES OF MYTH

The previous chapter had examined how the central figures of German Idealism had perceived the need for a new mythology for the modern era to fulfill a new political vision. A century and a half later, the heirs of German Idealism looked on with horror as modern Europe fell into the grips of a new breed of political myth.

The rise of fascism in the twentieth century is unthinkable without its distinctive reliance on the propagation of narratives about racial hierarchies, the destiny of chosen peoples, and kingdoms that were to last a thousand years.⁵³⁴ They appealed to national mythological traditions, like the images and legends of classical Rome in Mussolini's Italy,⁵³⁵ or evoked

⁵³⁴ The millennialist Third Reich purported to realize the Kingdom of the Holy Spirit on earth; *The Myth of the Twentieth Century*, Alfred Rosenberg's notorious pseudo-history of the Aryan race, stressed and celebrated its own mythic overtones. Arthur Moeller van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich*, ed. Hans Schwarz (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1931); Alfred Rosenberg, *Der Mythos des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (München: Hoheneichen-verlag, 1935); see also Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); George L. Mosse, *Nazi Culture: Intellectual, Cultural and Social Life in the Third Reich* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 93-128.

⁵³⁵ Guido Bonsaver, "Culture and Intellectuals," in *The Oxford Handbook of Fascism*, ed. R.J.B. Bosworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010): 109-26, 113-115; Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 90-118; Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, trans. Keith Botsford (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

symbols laden with mystical overtones, like the runic symbols that made their way into Nazi iconography.⁵³⁶ Such narratives, and the symbols and rituals that came with them, were political phenomena that contemporary commentators readily associated with the category of myth.

For many theorists who did this, what was most striking about the “modern political myths”⁵³⁷ was their overt anti-rationalism in an age of unparalleled advances in knowledge. Their rejection of the rule of reason in politics and their appeal to extreme passions, the priority they placed on collective experiences over those of the individual, and the complex system of ceremonial rites that enforced them – all seemed radically out of place in the scientifically advanced societies of modern Europe; and they seemed to have much more in common with the world views expressed in the myths of tribal societies in the Amazon, Africa, Australia and Polynesia, which had fascinated the first generation of modern anthropologists at the turn of the twentieth century. As such, the fascist recourse to the use of myth in politics was bitterly regarded as a “barbaric” and “tribal” betrayal of modern civilization.⁵³⁸

⁵³⁶ Bernard Mees, “Hitler and *Germanentum*,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, no. 2 (2004): 255–70, 255; Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism: Secret Aryan Cults and Their Influence on Nazi Ideology: The Ariosophists of Austria and Germany, 1890-1935* (New York: New York University Press, 1992).

⁵³⁷ The phrase is Ernst Cassirer’s, likely adapting it from Sorel’s coinage of the term, “political myth.” Throughout *The Myth of the State*, Cassirer also refers to the phenomenon as “the myth of the twentieth century,” a more obvious reference to the work of the same title by Alfred Rosenberg. Ernst Cassirer, “Judaism and the New Political Myths,” *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7 (1944): 150-26; Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*; see also Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*.

⁵³⁸ The motivating puzzle driving Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the question of “why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.” The authors point to twentieth-century racial ideology as a “regression to nature as mere violence” and the integration of the individual into a “barbaric collective,” just as they seem especially perturbed by “the barbaric drumming” accompanying the rituals of fascism – or, “imitations of magical practices” led by the Führer. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv, 138 and 152; see also, in the Editor’s Afterword, 232.

Karl Popper consistently describes nationalism as an appeal to “our tribal instincts” and a “myth ... an irrational, a romantic and Utopian dream, a dream of naturalism and of tribal collectivism.” Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, II: 252 and 254.

The identification of these new political phenomena with myth suggested, on the one hand, that the creation of new mythologies for a modern age was in fact possible. Myths were not merely a relic of the past, nor a characteristic feature of remote, tribal societies on the brink of extinction. Myths also ceased to be harmless, fanciful stories, but proved to have powerful political purchase, and could even drive political action of tremendous scales and stakes. On the other hand, these newfangled myths seemed to stand as a self-evident argument against allowing room for myth to play a role of any kind in modern politics. Even before the world could begin to comprehend the enormity of the atrocities committed in their name, the resort to such myths already seemed to be a wholesale rejection of the very idea that politics ought to be guided by reason. If the horrors of fascism were to be the costs of admitting myth into modern politics, they seemed to supply an unambiguous warning that myth ought to have no business in modernity after all.

Hence, in the time that had passed since the writing of the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*, the political theoretical response to the question of modern myth had shifted entirely. If myth had represented, for the proponents of the new mythology in German Idealism, a hopeful, if farfetched, solution to the afflictions of modernity, twentieth-century interest in myth was driven largely by theorists committed to combating what they took to be its very real presence in modern political life.

Ernst Cassirer, the foremost philosopher of myth in the first half of the twentieth century, was one such theorist defending the view that modern political thought could not afford a place for myth. This chapter will show that this position, however, is complicated by Cassirer's portrait of Plato and the legacy for which he stands. This is a portrait of Plato who epitomizes the rational overcoming of myth in the political thought of the western tradition, but who is,

simultaneously, the author of a set of myths that Cassirer goes through great lengths to celebrate. Cassirer's insistence on claiming Plato for the modern philosophical tradition suggests a deeper ambivalence in his argument against myth. In defending both the philosophical significance of Plato's myths, and the centrality of Plato to the philosophical struggle against myth, Cassirer opens up a space in his philosophy of culture for recognizing a specifically Platonic approach to reconciling myth with a progressive vision of philosophy and politics.

Myth in the Twentieth Century

Cassirer's magnum opus, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1923-1929), offers a theory of myth that places it in a special relationship with philosophy. By isolating myth as an independent "modality" of knowledge,⁵³⁹ the theory takes myth's contributions to the formation of knowledge as both unique and constructive, at once separate from and parallel to other ways of knowing like language, art, or science. Myth is simply one of these different approaches to mediating and understanding reality, or what he calls a "symbolic form."

Take, for instance, how the same natural phenomenon of the changing of seasons might be understood differently in scientific and in mythic modes of interpretation. Where modern science might rely on a causal explanation appealing to the relative position of the earth in orbit around the sun, the same phenomenon might be depicted in various myths as the arrival of a

⁵³⁹ Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 2: Mythical Thought*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1955), 60.

figure that personifies some aspect of the season itself – a goddess whose presence allows the crops to grow, a migratory animal whose sojourns are linked to the shedding of the leaves of trees. Cassirer’s point is that the difference between the scientific and mythic accounts is not a difference between reason and unreason, but a difference, in this case, stemming from entirely different conceptions of what constitutes causation in the first place.⁵⁴⁰ In mythical thought, a single, undifferentiated occasion stands in for the entire chain of visible and invisible events comprising the scientific account, such that any one part of the phenomenon serves as an explanation for the whole: “for the mythical view, it is the swallow that *makes* the summer.”⁵⁴¹ A story that makes such a claim may seem fantastic, but its internal logic is not unreasonable, but coherent in its own way.

Furthermore, much like science itself, myth is motivated by the same basic human desire to make meaningful sense of the world. Against views that condemn myth to be fundamentally unphilosophical, Cassirer aligns the function of myth with a philosophical task of organizing human experience in meaningful ways. Because mythic approaches to understanding reality obey a logic coherent only to myth, Cassirer’s account could assert myth’s difference from other approaches to knowledge, notably empirical science, without dismissing its philosophic content.

⁵⁴⁰ Modern empirical science accepts causation as a principle. In Cassirer’s account of mythic thinking, causation is much less a principle than it is a kind of magic potency. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I: 96-7.

Cassirer provides more extensive mythic treatments of the other Kantian pure forms of intuition, time and space. *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 71-151. For a helpful and succinct summary, see Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger, Cassirer, Davos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 234-37.

⁵⁴¹ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 45.

At the same time, philosophy, according to Cassirer, is that which ultimately breaks free of myth.⁵⁴² Though a crucial mode in which man begins to apprehend the world, myth ultimately remains a rudimentary, primal form of culture at the bottom rung of “a definite systemic gradation” tying together the various spheres of knowledge.⁵⁴³ As human knowledge evolves, it must also discard its mythic foundations and trade them for more sophisticated modes of thought. As such, Cassirer equates the history of philosophy with a continuous struggle against myth – a struggle dramatized in his final work, *The Myth of the State* (1946). Completed days before his death and published by his friends at Yale the following year, *The Myth of the State* was Cassirer’s only full-length work of political theory, as well as his final statement on the subject of myth. It is only in this book that Cassirer fully confronts the possibility of modern myths, and, in so doing, finds himself taking on a far more critical stance toward myth than ever before.⁵⁴⁴ The author of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* would have been reluctant to speak of myth as irrational, because modern standards of rationality simply fell outside the scope of myth. Myth obeyed its own norms and laws; it was not myth’s function to be rational in that way.⁵⁴⁵ Yet *The Myth of the State* emphatically celebrates the progressive triumph of modern

⁵⁴² This is most explicit in the final volume of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, in which Cassirer conceives of philosophy as a “concept” that “attains its full power and purity only where the world view expressed in linguistic and mythical concepts is abandoned, where it is in principle overcome”: “To achieve its own maturity, philosophy must above all come to grips with the linguistic and mythical worlds and place itself in dialectic opposition to them ... This act of separation marks philosophy’s hour of birth.” Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Vol. 3: *The Phenomenology of Knowledge*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 16, 27.

⁵⁴³ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 26.

⁵⁴⁴ Many of the themes of *The Myth of the State* are anticipated in Cassirer’s work during the War, for example, the essays collected in Ernst Cassirer, *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer, 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

⁵⁴⁵ This is one of the major aspects in which Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms branches off in a different direction from that of the neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School with which he is associated. If the latter had looked to an idealist conception of a universal reason as providing unity to the diversity of culture, Cassirer shifts that task away from a unified faculty of reason, to faculty for symbolic expression. John Michael Krois, *Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987); Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the*

rationality over its mythic origins, and laments the reversal of that trajectory in contemporary politics.⁵⁴⁶ In this light, the reemergence of myth in the twentieth century places Cassirer in a position to condemn myth on a much grander scale: regress to mythic ways of thinking threatens the unraveling of the accomplishments of reason.⁵⁴⁷

As such, *The Myth of the State* calls on all the resources of our higher cognitive faculties to combat the resurgence of myth in modern life. This, in turn, constitutes an unequivocal stance on the question of the place of myth in political thought: Ernst Cassirer, the philosopher of culture who worked tirelessly to underscore myth's inner coherence and complexity, ultimately passed the verdict that modern political thinking cannot afford to tolerate the presence of myth in its midst. But only one part of this verdict, as we shall see, is concerned with the status of myth as a regressive force in modernity – an account of myth that synthesizes certain prevailing paradigms in the various traditions of myth scholarship of the day. The other component of Cassirer's argument, stemming from his unique diagnoses of both myth and of modernity, shows the conditions of modern culture to be particularly vulnerable to generating the most pernicious chimera of myth mixed up with the apparatuses of modern rationality. Both are reasons for demanding the rejection of myth from politics, but the second, in particular, will come into

Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), 99-110; Edward Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer: The Last Philosopher of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 23-51; Sebastian Luft, *The Space of Culture: Towards a Neo-Kantian Philosophy of Culture (Cohen, Natorp, and Cassirer)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁵⁴⁶ As Edward Skidelsky notes, it is striking that Cassirer treats Nazi ideology and propaganda very obliquely, not as events specific to their geopolitical context, but as a mythic phenomena with more general, abstract features. Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 223. For the suggestion that this is deliberately intended to reflect Cassirer's perception of modern myth as a general and persistent threat to contemporary culture, see Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 225-26.

⁵⁴⁷ On the turn in Cassirer's position on myth between the 1920s and 1940s, see Ursula Renz, "From Philosophy to Criticism of Myth: Cassirer's Concept of Myth," *Synthese* 179, no. 1 (2011): 135-52.

special tension against his interpretation of Plato and his legacy in the western intellectual tradition.

Myth and culture: Aby Warburg

Cassirer's account of myth – at once a distinct and constructive way of knowing, as well as a properly pre-modern sphere of thought that urgently demanded replacement with more sophisticated forms – was unique in providing a philosophical synthesis of prevailing ideas about myth from burgeoning contemporary interest in the social sciences, notably in anthropology and psychology, rather than from the literary traditions extending the projects of Romanticism.

However, it bears noting that the overall shape of Cassirer's synthesis has a humanistic aspect; and it shared striking resemblances, in particular, with the vision of culture held by the art historian Aby Warburg, a close friend and the founder of the Warburg Library of Cultural Sciences in Hamburg, where Cassirer was an enthusiastic affiliate.⁵⁴⁸ Like Cassirer, Warburg had a deeply sympathetic appreciation for the ways in which human cultures – be they the cultures of classical Greece, the Italian Renaissance, or the indigenous American tribes he encountered during his travels in America – encoded meaning in symbols that manifested in religious rites, ceremonial performances, and iconic motifs in the visual arts.

Two features of Cassirer's approach to myth are worth highlighting in the context of his close association with Aby Warburg and the Warburg Library. The first is the primacy of culture as a subject demanding deep philosophical engagement, and, within it, the singling out of myth

⁵⁴⁸ For a portrait of Cassirer in the context of his time in Hamburg and his interdisciplinary intellectual circles there, see Emily J. Levine, *Dreamland of Humanists: Warburg, Cassirer, Panofsky, and the Hamburg School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

as a distinct form of culture, so fundamental to human culture and so singular in its internal logic that Cassirer saw fit to devote one of the three volumes of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* to it.⁵⁴⁹ Warburg's extensive collection of ethnographic materials – curated with special attention to such themes as pagan religions, magic, folklore – would have affirmed and deepened Cassirer's conviction that the study of culture was not complete without the study of myth.

A second point of overlap between Cassirer's and Warburg's thought is a shared conception of culture that combines, on the one hand, an appreciation for the plurality of forms that human culture can take, with, on the other hand, a hierarchical organizing principle that took certain forms of cultural expression to be more sophisticated and developed than others.⁵⁵⁰ Both these sensibilities were on display in the famously unorthodox layout of the Warburg Library, which organized its collection into four themes – “image,” “word,” “orientation” and “action” – and distributed it over the four floors of the building in an ascending order, so that patrons would move from the sensuous and expressionistic to the more abstract aspects of culture as they made their way through the different levels.⁵⁵¹ The image of culture presented in the Warburg Library resonated with Cassirer's own.⁵⁵² In order to do justice to its diversity, its various spheres warranted separation and study on their own unique terms; at the same time, these spheres were

⁵⁴⁹ Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 94; Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 133-4.

⁵⁵⁰ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 19-22; Jürgen Habermas, “The Liberating Power of Symbols: Ernst Cassirer's Humanistic Legacy and the Warburg Library,” in *The Liberating Power of Symbols: Philosophical Essays*, trans. Peter Dews (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001): 1-29.

⁵⁵¹ “Indeed, the entire structure of Cassirer's multi-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* might be seen as providing a formal conceptual apparatus or transcendental groundwork to the Warburg Library's empirical collection.” Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 20.

⁵⁵² Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: xviii.

connected by an evolutionary logic by which more refined and rigorous forms of cultural expression come to supersede that which is rudimentary and crude.

If there was a broadly humanistic appeal to Cassirer's efforts to integrate his theory of myth into a general theory of human culture, his insistence on drawing out the nuanced relationship between myth and modernity translated into a number of key departures from the prevailing approaches to myth in the social sciences, in particular in anthropology and in psychoanalysis. He rejects, for instance, the premise, common to early twentieth century anthropological studies of indigenous mythologies, that an impassable distance separated the way of thinking characteristic to myth from the cognitive processes of the modern mind, such that it might be possible to study myth from a privileged position of scientific remove. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* he is intent on demonstrating the coherence and independence of the mythic mode of thinking as ground of culture – much like science itself, without being a primitive version of it. In *The Myth of the State* he goes one step further to suggest that this mode of thinking remains latent even in a modern culture dominated by more sophisticated forms of thought, so that, when appropriated, it can produce the kinds of modern myths that plagued twentieth century politics. At the same time, he also rejects dominant treatments of myth in psychoanalysis, which accepted that there remain latent traces of myth in the modern mind, but either pathologized them or elevated them to the status of universal timelessness. Even in its modern manifestation, myth, for Cassirer, must be understood without undermining either of its most essential characteristics – as an independent and necessary modality of knowledge, and as a way of representing reality that is rendered obsolete at the onset of the higher cultural forms.

Myth in anthropology: Tylor, Frazer, Lévy-Bruhl

The pioneers of the relatively young discipline of anthropology had set out, among other things, to establish a science for the study of myth. This specifically scientific ambition of the project resulted in two accidental features common to studies of myth from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

The first was the treatment of myth as a distinct phenomenon with universal features: it was both possible and instructive to compare myths collected from different peoples and eras against each other. These classic comparative studies – carrying titles like *How Natives Think*,⁵⁵³ *Primitive Mentality*,⁵⁵⁴ *Myth in Primitive Psychology*,⁵⁵⁵ and *Primitive Culture*⁵⁵⁶ – approached myths as the cultural artifacts of a distinctly “primitive” or “savage” way of thinking, into which they sought to gain insight.⁵⁵⁷ Cassirer is admittedly cautious about the seemingly “arbitrary” and “incongruous” search for “any bond that connects the most barbaric rites with the world of Homer – [...] the orgiastic cults of savage tribes, the magic practices of the shamans of Asia, the

⁵⁵³ This is the title of the English translation of Lévy-Bruhl’s seminal and notorious study, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (1910). See Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985 [1926]).

⁵⁵⁴ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *Primitive mentality* [Mentalité primitive], trans. Lilian A. Clare (London: Allen & Unwin, 1923).

⁵⁵⁵ Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology*.

⁵⁵⁶ Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 2 vols. (London: J. Murray, 1920).

⁵⁵⁷ The investigation of a distinct “primitive” psychology was one goal of the early studies of the school of thought that came to be known as comparative mythology; another – fallen out of scientific favor by the early twentieth century – was the search for an original “Ur-myth” from which all existing myths might have been derived. A version of the latter approach saw a revival in Joseph Campbell’s popular work on hero narratives in the 1950s through 1980s. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949); Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God*, 4 vols. (New York: Viking Press, 1959-1968); “Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth,” Bill Moyers and Joseph Campbell, Public Broadcasting Service, June 21-26, 1998.

delirious whirl of the dancing dervishes with the calmness and the speculative depth of the religion of the Upanishads.”⁵⁵⁸ Nonetheless he shares the basic position of the early anthropologists that “the motives of mythical thought and mythical imagination are in a sense always the same.”⁵⁵⁹ For all the variety of the world’s myths, Cassirer joins this scientific effort to locate a common mythic consciousness unifying them. Put another way: for Cassirer, as for the early pioneers of the anthropological treatments of myth, there is a presumption of an essential relationship that links myths, as a narrated genre of oral fiction, to a particular way of thinking about reality that acquired the designation of being “mythic.”

More problematic for Cassirer, however, was a second feature of the scientific vision motivating the anthropological approach to myth. Landmark studies of myth from this period endeavored to treat myth as a scientific object – that is, as an external phenomenon removed from the objective standpoint of the scientific observer. If a common primitive consciousness was responsible for all myths in all their diversity, that primitive mentality was also something entirely foreign to the mind of its civilized observer. As such, early anthropological accounts of myth consistently defined myth in relation to modern scientific thought. There were two ways of conceptualizing this relation: in the first, endorsed by an earlier generation of anthropologists, myth was a rudimentary form of science stuck at a level of rigor and accuracy that civilization had long outgrown. In response, a subsequent school of thought posed the more radical view that myth and science represented entirely separate realms of thought. For the former camp, myth belonged to a bygone age safely removed from modernity; for the latter, to an alien world separate from our own.

⁵⁵⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 37.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

The leading precedent in the former approach to myth was set by E.B. Tylor, whose *Primitive Culture* (1871) proposed a study of the evolution of culture “with especial consideration of the civilization of the lower tribes as related to the civilization of the higher nations.”⁵⁶⁰ The contrast between the “lower” and “higher” stages of civilization aligned neatly with an opposition between myth and scientific explanation. For Tylor, myth was essentially a crude and inaccurate form of “scientific speculation,” born out of “[m]an’s craving to know the causes at work in each event he witnesses, the reasons why each state of things he surveys is such as it is and no other.”⁵⁶¹ Tylor’s account of myth, as a primitive attempt at science from a lower stage of culture, provided the general framework for James Frazer’s encyclopedic masterpiece, *The Golden Bough* (1890-1915).⁵⁶² Like Tylor, Frazer collapsed, as much as possible, the qualitative distinction between myth and science, and considered the difference between them to be largely a matter of degree in rigor.⁵⁶³ At the same time, Frazer expanded upon both Tylor’s conception of myth’s function as well as the discrete stages of culture through which knowledge passes from myth to science, savagery to civilization. Under Frazer’s augmented scheme, myth endeavored not only to explain worldly phenomena, but, through magical rituals it often legitimized, sought to effect desired outcomes in the environment as well.

⁵⁶⁰ Tylor, *Primitive Culture* I: 1.

⁵⁶¹ Tylor, *Primitive Culture* I: 368-9; see also Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 9-10.

⁵⁶² *The Golden Bough* was published in three separate editions over twenty-five years, acquiring more volumes each time. James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Comparative Religion*, 1st ed., 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1890); James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 2nd rev. ed., 3 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1900); James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd rev. ed., 12 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1906-1915).

⁵⁶³ e.g. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 306-7; see also Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 8.

It also fell into a more concretely demarcated theory of cultural evolution, separated out into the famous tripartite stages of magic, religion and science.⁵⁶⁴

Against Tylor's and Frazer's view of myth as an inferior science, later studies of myth in the early twentieth century sought to further separate science from myth. For Tylor's and Frazer's successors in the discipline, the processes of thinking underlying myth differed from those of science, not only in degree but also in kind. Lucien Lévy-Bruhl took a notoriously extreme position in *How Natives Think* (1910), rejecting Tylor's and Frazer's claims to a rational basis of comparison between "the mental processes of 'primitives' " and "those which we are accustomed to describe in men of our own type."⁵⁶⁵ As such, myth lacked both the rational content and motivation of scientific thought, but was instead the product of an entirely "pre-logical" mind that "perceive[d] nothing in the same way as we do."⁵⁶⁶ Perceived from this standpoint, reality itself was imbued with magic, and myth sought not to explain or explicate the world but to commune with it at an emotional, rather than an intellectual, level.⁵⁶⁷

Cassirer's philosophy of myth owes to its anthropological forbearers a set of assumptions that fall somewhere between the positions taken by Tylor, Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl. He joins Tylor's and Frazer's efforts to dispel a popular view of myth as "motiveless fancy,"⁵⁶⁸ but not their impulse to judge its contents by the standards of scientific thought.⁵⁶⁹ Myth, for Cassirer, is

⁵⁶⁴ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged ed., 824-5.

⁵⁶⁵ Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, 14.

⁵⁶⁶ Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, 43, see also Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 11.

⁵⁶⁷ Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, 45. Bronislaw Malinowski also belongs to the camp of anthropologists who responded to Tylor and Frazer by rejecting the view of myth as inferior scientific explanation. However, his understanding of both "primitive psychology" and the function of myth in it diverged greatly from Lévy-Bruhl's.

⁵⁶⁸ Tylor, *Primitive Culture* I:415. See also Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, abridged ed., 306-7.

⁵⁶⁹ Cassirer is as critical of the temptation to dismiss myth as an inferior science as he is skeptical of any claim that denies the superior achievements of modern science and thought. "According to [Frazer]'s theory," he writes

motivated by the same drive towards knowledge as science, but does not merely consist in brave but mistaken explanations of phenomena to which science provides better answers. In recognizing that myth commands “its own mode of reality,”⁵⁷⁰ Cassirer aligns himself to a large extent with Lévy-Bruhl’s critique of the equation of mythic and scientific thinking, as well as with his thesis that viewing the world through the lens of myth results in a different perception of reality altogether. To wedge myth into the mold of science would be to deny the rich emotional content particular to myth. But far from being the “pre-logical” entity of Lévy-Bruhl’s depiction, the mind responsible for myth “never lacks a definite logical structure.”⁵⁷¹ Myth is hence, on the one hand, directed toward a kind of knowledge of the world in the manner of scientific inquiry, but also, on the other hand, a mode of thought apart from science. It is akin to science in form but not in content.

Between the conceptions of myth posed by Tylor and Frazer on one side, and by Lévy-Bruhl on the other, Cassirer sees a methodological, rather than a substantive, disagreement, which he in turn entrusts Kant to arbitrate. According to Kant, scientists and scholars were of two kinds. There were those who emphasized the common features in phenomena, and those drawn to the differences – or, people driven by the principle of “homogeneity,” and those by that of “specification.” Tylor and Frazer is of the former mold when it comes to myth, and Lévy-Bruhl the latter. Cassirer’s point is that the two approaches represent “no real contradiction,” but merely “the different interests of reason which cause different modes of thought.” The diversity

incredulously, “a man who performs a magic rite does not differ, in principle, from a scientist who in his laboratory makes a physical or chemical experiment.” Tylor is guilty of the same fault: “If we accept Tylor’s description we must say that between the crudest forms of animism and the most advanced and sophisticated philosophical or theological systems there is only a difference of degree.” Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 8 and 10.

⁵⁷⁰ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 4.

⁵⁷¹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 14.

of the modes in which scholars operate can be misleading since, “[i]n reality, reason has one interest only, and the conflict of its maxims arises only from a difference and mutual limitation of the methods.”⁵⁷² A philosophy of myth need not have to choose between recognizing, on the one hand, the diversity of myth from other ways of knowing, and, on the other, the unity of knowledge itself.

Yet in refusing to make that choice, Cassirer also discards the special standing of the scientific viewpoint assumed in the anthropological studies of myth. In making myth an object of scientific investigation, the early anthropologists had regarded it from a privileged and authoritative vantage point safely removed from the phenomenon they were studying. But because Cassirer insists on both the separation of myth from science as well as the unity of human knowledge, he cannot, like Tylor or Frazer, evaluate myth from the opposite end of a spectrum of scientific advancement; nor can he, like Lévy-Bruhl, deny any common rational ground between myth and science. Instead, he recognizes that scientific methods bring their own interests and limitations to an otherwise unitary and objective world. It is in this way the form of science resembles that of myth. Like Lévy-Bruhl, Cassirer believes reality, as grasped by myth, is but “a world of mere representations,” but denies that any other approach, including science, can claim a more direct, purer way of access to it: “but in its content, its mere *material*,” he continues, “the world of knowledge is nothing else.”⁵⁷³ The world is always mediated by the form in which we present it to ourselves, in science as in mythic thinking. This condition, by which humans rely on such intermediate systems of representation to interpret reality,⁵⁷⁴ makes

⁵⁷² Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 11.

⁵⁷³ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II:14; see also I: 76.

⁵⁷⁴ “In what we call the objective reality of things we are thus confronted with a world of self-created signs and images.” Ernst Cassirer, “Der Begriff der Symbolischen Form im Aufbau der Geisteswissenschaften,” in *Vorträge*

us “symbolic animals” in command of a number of discrete but interrelated “symbolic forms.” Deciphering their relationship is the task of a philosophy of culture.⁵⁷⁵

In Cassirer’s philosophy, the symbolic forms of myth and science interact within an evolutionary framework whereby, over the course of history, human knowledge and culture come to depend increasingly less on the lower forms and increasingly more on the higher forms. Eventually, modernity replaces the emotionally charged, expressive order of myth for the formal abstraction of science.⁵⁷⁶ On this developmentalist outlook, Cassirer’s understanding of the relationship between myth, science and modernity does not look to differ greatly from that of the early anthropological accounts of myth. Following Tylor’s initial move to view myth as diametrically opposed to modern science, it was simply a given in early anthropological thought that science belonged to the moderns in the same way that myth had belonged to their ancestors and now, to their latter-day “primitive” counterparts in the non-Western world. In particular, Cassirer’s belief that myth is transcended in religion then eventually in science, bears a close resemblance to the phases of cultural progress identified in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*.⁵⁷⁷

Absent in Cassirer’s narrative of progress, however, is the simple separation of myth from modernity found in the foundational texts of anthropology. While Tylor, Frazer and Lévy-

der Bibliothek Warburg, 1921/1922 (Leipzig: B.G. Eubner, 1923), 15; trans. and ctd. in Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 41.

⁵⁷⁵ As such, the pluralism of the various symbolic forms is bound together by a holistic understanding of philosophy’s task. The “philosophical critique of knowledge” has to “follow the special sciences and survey them as a whole,” in the interest of heralding “a universal philosophy of the cultural sciences.” Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I: 77-78.

⁵⁷⁶ For helpful and concise explanations of the hierarchical structure of the symbolic forms, see Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 104, and Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 14-16. On the topic, see also Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*, 100-110.

⁵⁷⁷ Cassirer also acknowledges the three phases of cultural development in Comte’s positivistic philosophy. *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 236-7.

Bruhl were quick to assume that modern society had permanently outgrown myth, the lower symbolic forms in Cassirer's philosophy underlie the higher forms, standing as a kind of sedimentary substratum to the modern advancements built on its foundations.⁵⁷⁸ "We are always living on volcanic soil," he writes of modern politics. Myth is "always there, lurking in the dark and waiting for its hour and opportunity."⁵⁷⁹ As such, Cassirer takes care not to adopt the language of "us and them" that pervades so much of early twentieth century anthropological work. Moreover, in subsuming myth deep beneath the forms of thought that dominate modern existence, Cassirer makes room in his philosophy for a possibility that did not occur to the anthropologists: that of the presence of myth in modernity.⁵⁸⁰ At moments of cultural crises, "the battle which theoretical knowledge thinks it has won for good will keep breaking out afresh. The foe which knowledge has seeming defeated forever crops up within its own midst."⁵⁸¹

Myth in psychoanalysis: Freud and Jung

In the recognition that myth remains latent in modern life, Cassirer's philosophy may be considered a kind of bridge between the anthropological and psychoanalytic approaches to myth in the early twentieth century. Freud had notably turned to myth in *Totem and Taboo* (1913) to

⁵⁷⁸ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 243-5, 248, 251; Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 297-8.

⁵⁷⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 280.

⁵⁸⁰ More as a consequence of the political events of his day than anything else, Malinowski comes close to providing an exception. See Bronisław Malinowski, "An Anthropological Analysis of War," in *American Journal of Sociology* 46 no. 4 (1941): 521-550, esp. 543-550.

⁵⁸¹ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: xvii.

illuminate the mental life of the neurotic patient in modern society.⁵⁸² Myth functioned for Freud, as it did for the anthropologists, as an artifact of the primitive or savage mind.⁵⁸³ However, he also observed a structural resemblance between the mind of the savage, who aligns his sexual conduct with the totemic belief systems sustained by the myths of his tribal community, and the mind of the adolescent child, who grapples with his own incestuous desires in the process of growing up. It was “probable,” he concluded, that “the totemic system was a product of the conditions involved in the Œdipus complex”⁵⁸⁴; if the neurotic was an adult trapped in the psychosexual traumas of childhood, he was also in some sense a modern individual who had failed to shake off his unconscious savage mentality. For Freud, myths not only lent expression to forbidden, savage desires, but their continuing appeal to modern audiences – our ready and immediate identification, for example, with the myth of Oedipus – was testament to how those same desires prevail in the modern condition. Whatever psychological force at work in myth, then, was also latent in the private lives of modern individuals.

If Freud had correctly broadened the horizon of myth, Cassirer nonetheless faults him for ultimately mischaracterizing its nature. When Freud “stood at the sickbed of myth with the same attitude and the same feelings as at the couch of an ordinary patient,”⁵⁸⁵ he erred in treating it as a pathology, much like any one of the many dismissive theories of myth that fail to recognize its

⁵⁸² Freud, *Totem and Taboo*.

⁵⁸³ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 3.

⁵⁸⁴ Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 164.

⁵⁸⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 29.

intellectual content.⁵⁸⁶ Cassirer is especially put off by Freud's sexualization of myth, which he believes to be a propensity for "intellectual reduction,"⁵⁸⁷ and plays down the suggestive traces of Freud's influence on his own thought.⁵⁸⁸

Cassirer's refusal to diagnose myth alongside mental illness might in some respect bring his account closer to the work of Freud's disciple, C.G. Jung, who had brought the study of myth to the forefront of psychoanalysis by proposing that archetypal patterns and symbols, which recur across myths of different cultures, form an unchanging, unconscious substrate to our collective experience of reality.⁵⁸⁹ But Cassirer, who never mentions Jung by name, is even more resistant to the quest in "psychologism" to find archetypes standing behind the various motifs and narrative elements of myths.⁵⁹⁰ Whereas Cassirer finds fault with Freud for failing to consider myth a mode of knowledge, he would have felt Jung had overreached the capacity of myth in the other direction, and had failed to acknowledge the comparative sophistication of the higher forms of culture that evolved dialectically over time. If myth persisted in modernity as a pathology for Freud, and as the concrete manifestations of a timeless and universal ground for all human experience for Jung, Cassirer rejects both of these characterizations in diagnosing the

⁵⁸⁶ Cassirer critiques prevailing theories of myth in modern linguistics – for instance, in Max Müller – for a similar tendency to pathologize their subject as "a mere disease." *The Myth of the State*, 22; see also 16-22.

⁵⁸⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944), 75; see also Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 33, 35-6.

⁵⁸⁸ Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 262n79; Krois, *Cassirer*, 83-4.

⁵⁸⁹ e.g. Jung, *The Essential Jung*, 91, 118-122, 122-124, 125-7, 274. Paul Bishop brings attention to some of the common elements in the thought of Cassirer and of Jung in Paul Bishop, "Speaking of Symbols: Affinities between Cassirer's and Jung's Theories of Language," in *Symbolic Forms and Cultural Studies*, ed. Cyrus Hamlin and John Michael Krois (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004): 127-156.

⁵⁹⁰ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II: 11-14. Cassirer continuously criticizes psychoanalysis and all other contemporary approaches to myth for focusing not on the form, but on the content of myths, which he believes to be arbitrary.

problem of myth's modern presence. Instead he insists that, even in confronting its modern form, the scholar of myth ought not to lose sight of its status as one of several symbolic forms through which human culture progresses dialectically through time: it is a legitimate form of thought, but also one that requires hierarchical differentiation against other such forms that belong more properly to modernity.

The problem of modern myth

What, then, is it about myth's modern presence that Cassirer finds so troubling?

The easy, albeit partial, answer is that the animation of the mythic forces latent in modern life signifies a regressive turn in the trajectory of human culture. This much is suggested by Cassirer's selective synthesis of certain paradigms from the traditions of classical anthropology and psychoanalysis: from the former, the expectation that the advancement of culture consists in the abandonment of myth; and in the latter, the recognition of myth's latent influence in the minds of modern individuals. On this view, Cassirer's diagnosis of the resurgence of myth in contemporary politics may bear resemblances to Freud's later insights in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), where he suggested that the inner drama of the psyche also plays out on the scale of civilization; the neurotic individual had a counterpart in an unhealthy society.⁵⁹¹ If, at the psychic level, the myths of totemic societies expressed an adolescent obsession with incest, modern myths that grip entire nations would signify a wholesale regression of civilization itself to the degenerate passions of its violent, savage past.

⁵⁹¹ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, e.g. 104, 110. See also his remarks on religion at 36.

However, Cassirer's characterization of the myths of twentieth-century politics goes beyond a concern for cultural regression.⁵⁹² In the critique of "the modern political myths" at the end of *The Myth of the State*, he suggests that it is not merely the case that myth is a comparatively less developed mode of knowledge than those that dominate modern life, but that the conditions of modernity itself are not equipped to be compatible with myth. It is a subtle insight, external to the various intellectual traditions synthesized in the broad contours of Cassirer's portrait of myth. In what amounts to a verdict, not only on myth, but on the peculiarities of modern culture, Cassirer observes that the effects of modernity on the human psyche are irreversibly transformative, so that traditional myths by themselves cannot satisfy the cognitive and psychological needs of the collective modern mind.⁵⁹³ Instead, it makes demands for rational justifications even in the moment that it succumbs to the newfangled myths of the twentieth century. "Civilized man" being what he is, "[i]n order to believe he must find some 'reasons' for his belief; he must form a 'theory' to justify his creeds." Modern political myths are thus characterized by "a rational justification for certain conceptions that, in their origin and tendency, were anything but rational."⁵⁹⁴ This means, in particular, that these myths are not merely the handiwork of propagandists and political entrepreneurs, but there are contemporary *philosophers* complicit in the machinery of modern myth.⁵⁹⁵

⁵⁹² Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 94-5; Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 307-310; Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 224-26.

⁵⁹³ "The personification of a collective wish cannot be satisfied in the same way by a great civilized nation as by a savage tribe." Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 280.

⁵⁹⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 280-81.

⁵⁹⁵ The culprits singled out at the end of *The Myth of the State* are Oswald Spengler and Martin Heidegger. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 289-293. On Cassirer's naming Heidegger in this role, see Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 309-311.

The result is that the myths generated in modern times are not pure myths, but are mixed up with the dressings of modern rationality.⁵⁹⁶ This “strange combination,” which Cassirer identifies as “one of the most striking features of our political myths,” is not just unsettling but catastrophic for modernity itself.⁵⁹⁷ First, modern myths, unlike traditional myths, have access to the force wielded by the entire technical apparatus of modern scientific thought, so that it is all the more difficult for their spell to be broken with the conventional tools of reason. These myths not only have their own “technique,” but modern, scientific, and rational trappings are precisely what sustains them.⁵⁹⁸ Second, they erode at a formal boundary that, for Cassirer, is crucial to the self-definition of modernity, and grant to the modern creators of myths an undifferentiated, double power, “as both a homo magus and a homo faber,” simultaneously occupying both the age of myth and the age of technics.⁵⁹⁹ At one level, this means that the modern politician, freely switching between the two roles, is not constrained by the norms of either mode. At another level, the modern citizen, subjected to the new status quo, is left unprepared to recognize myth when confronted with it. Finally, myth, in this incarnation, is not so much a mode of knowledge as it is deployed cynically for some instrumental purpose. Against theorists inclined to pathologize it, Cassirer’s work repeatedly emphasizes that myth is, in its essence, an original and spontaneous creation on the part of humans endeavoring to understand their world. But the modern myths of the twentieth century, by contrast, lack this earnest motivation, and are instead “artificial things fabricated by very skillful and cunning artisans,” manufactured *en masse* “in the

⁵⁹⁶ Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 307-308; Skidelsky, *Ernst Cassirer*, 95-6; Habermas, “The Liberating Power of Symbols,” 25-6; Luft, *The Space of Culture*, 224-25.

⁵⁹⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 282.

⁵⁹⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 277.

⁵⁹⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 281-82.

same sense and according to the same methods as any other modern weapon – as machine guns or airplanes.”⁶⁰⁰

Cassirer’s analysis of the modern political myths offers a novel, more urgent reason – different from those suggested in the anthropological or psychoanalytic literature – for the position that myth of any kind cannot be tolerated in modern political thinking. Far from being a safely insulated object of scientific inquiry, myth, in Cassirer’s account, now proves capable of co-opting the language and tools of scientific rationality. This characterization of modern myth also drifts from the psychoanalytic diagnoses that alternately associate myth with a repressed (Freud) or archaic (Jung) unconscious. The modern myths Cassirer attacks are no longer “the result of an unconscious activity” but are consciously and deliberately “made according to plan.”⁶⁰¹

These are not insignificant shifts. To object to the reemergence of myth in modern times because it is regressive, seems to suggest that the event is at worst a pause in the trajectory of human progress, and that western civilization could be put back on its progressive track using the same scientific resources and methods that had helped end its reliance on myths the first time around. Cassirer’s more pointed critique, however, suggests that modern political thought cannot afford a place for myth because these very resources may themselves become tainted when myth and the trappings of modern reason come together in the paradoxical, vicious combinations described at the end of *The Myth of the State*. But in particular, placing their chimeric nature at the center of his criticism of modern myth also presents a conspicuous problem in Cassirer’s interpretation of Plato and the legacy for which he stands.

⁶⁰⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 282.

⁶⁰¹ Ibid.

Cassirer's Plato

Plato occupies a place of foundational importance in Cassirer's account of the struggle against myth that has, throughout its history, defined the purpose and trajectory of philosophy. Cassirer's Plato is, in other words, a quintessential defender of the position that the ideals of philosophy and of philosophically informed politics coincide with the continual endeavor to remove myths and their underlying remnants from our world.

At first glance, the fact that Plato wrote myths might not seem particularly incongruous with either Cassirer's argument against myth in political thought, or with his celebratory portrait of Plato and his legacy in these very terms. To the extent that Cassirer depicts the philosophical struggle against myth as a historical unfolding, Plato's indulgence in myths might be excused in light of the pre-modern time he inhabited: he might have taken the first transitional steps toward setting the project of philosophy into motion, while still living in the all-pervasive influence of the myths from which he endeavored to break away.⁶⁰²

However, Plato, in Cassirer's thought, stands in for much more than a historical moment. Rather, he consistently serves as a touchstone for characterizing the endeavors of philosophy and of political thought in their purest forms, and, in particular, an embodiment of the first recognizably modern way of practicing them. He is depicted as an exact and rational figure whose achievements appear to have much more in common with the methods of modern philosophy than those of his predecessors. *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* opens with the

⁶⁰² See Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, III: 16.

assessment that, “[c]ompared with the sharpness of Plato’s question and the rigor of his approach, all earlier speculation paled to tales or myths about being,” so that Plato marks a breaking point, not just in the history of philosophy, but in its normative character: “[i]t was now time to abandon these mythical, cosmological explanations for the true, dialectical explanations of being.”⁶⁰³ Moreover, there is something about Plato’s efforts that renders them truer to the task of philosophy than even those of most thinkers who came after him. Had philosophy remained faithful to this original spirit, Cassirer suggests at the end of *The Myth of the State*, it would have been better equipped to prevent the regrettable reemergence of myth in the twentieth century. Notably, “the classical example of Plato alone” should suffice to show that this essentially philosophic movement was not determined by historical contingencies, but had always required philosophers to “think beyond and against their times.”⁶⁰⁴

More conspicuously, Cassirer’s critique of modern myth had, as the preceding section has shown, emphasized how catastrophic it is for elements of myth and of modern rationality to mix together as they do in the phenomenon of modern myth. Against this assessment, the interspersing of the languages of myth and of logical argumentation in Plato’s philosophy should make him a particularly problematic figurehead for Cassirer’s vision of a philosophy and politics committed to the rejection of myth. If it is the recruitment of the devices of rationality that lends modern myths their distinctive malevolence, it is unclear how Plato’s philosophical myths can be exempted from this charge. What is it that distinguishes Plato from the ideologues of fascism, so that the latter are mythmakers equipped with the arsenal of modern reason, while Plato remains a philosopher who wrote myths – all the while leading the philosophical struggle against them?

⁶⁰³ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I: 74.

⁶⁰⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 296.

Certainly the contemporary resonance of this convergence of myth and rationalism in Plato's philosophy was not lost on Cassirer's contemporary, Karl Popper.⁶⁰⁵ If Cassirer sees in Plato's work the purest model of philosophy's battle against myth, Plato represented for Popper the beginning of totalitarian myth-making. His well-known indictment of Plato as the first and greatest enemy of the open society looked to the *Republic* and the model of the "arrested state" it had irreversibly released into the stream of western thought.⁶⁰⁶ In particular, he maintained that the alleged beauty of Plato's *kallipolis* could only be sustained by violent repression and deceit that culminate in Plato's "greatest propaganda lie," the Myth of Metals.⁶⁰⁷ The resort to myth was a betrayal of the intellectualist principles for which Plato's mentor – Socrates – lived and died, and its total application to all aspects of life in the city was an abuse of the boundary between science and non-science. In a choice invective, Popper posed that "[t]he modern myth

⁶⁰⁵ Cassirer's and Popper's drastically different evaluations of Plato are particularly striking in light of the parallel trajectories of their careers. Like Cassirer, Popper was a philosopher of science, and a Jewish émigré who had fled the rise of National Socialism in Europe. In the popular imagination, both are perhaps best remembered today for their confrontations with other iconic philosophers that later became the stuff of academic lore – Cassirer with Heidegger at Davos in 1929; Popper with Wittgenstein at the Cambridge Moral Sciences Club in 1946. Cassirer began work on *The Myth of the State* in the winter of 1943–1944, of which an eponymous selection was published in July 1944 in *Fortune* magazine. By then, Popper had completed *The Open Society and its Enemies* and was looking for a publisher. In April 1945, Cassirer died, and Routledge published *The Open Society and its Enemies* that November. The posthumous publication of *The Myth of the State* followed in 1946. *The Open Society and its Enemies* and *The Myth of the State* were both products of each man's long, undoubtedly personal reflections on the irrationality that took hold of Europe during the Second World War. Both looked for the roots of that irrationality in the entirety of western thought and its history, and yet each offered a radically different explanation in which Plato, of course, played a very different role.

On the notorious encounter between Popper and Wittgenstein, see, e.g. David Edmonds and John Eidinow, *Wittgenstein's Poker: The Story of a Ten-Minute Argument between Two Great Philosophers* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001); on Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos see Gordon, *Continental Divide*; Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*.

On the history of the composition and publication of *The Myth of the State* see Charles W. Hendel, Preface to *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I: viii–xiv, xi; see also Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 301.

⁶⁰⁶ Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, vol. 1.

⁶⁰⁷ Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, I: 122ff.

of Blood and Soil,” the twin determinants of race in Nazi ideology, had “its exact counterpart in Plato’s Myth of the Earthborn.”⁶⁰⁸

If Popper’s verdict on Plato and his legacy could not be more different from Cassirer’s, their disagreement is all the more striking because they agreed in so many different respects on the history and proper trajectory of philosophy and political thought. Both cleave to an account of the western intellectual tradition that is in large part a legacy stemming from foundations laid by Plato; both conceive of progress in the spheres of philosophy and politics in terms of a liberation from myth.

As such, Popper’s Plato represents a conclusion available to, but evaded by, Cassirer as he navigates the tension between these commitments and the fact of Plato’s myths. He does not even attempt to ignore or downplay the role of the myths in Plato’s philosophy, as others have done in their efforts to either defend or to criticize an unambiguously rationalist Plato.⁶⁰⁹ Instead Cassirer speaks of the uniquely “powerful imagination” that enabled Plato to become “one of the greatest myth makers in human history,” that “we cannot think of Platonic philosophy without thinking of the Platonic myths.”⁶¹⁰ He indicates awareness of the apparent paradox that “the same thinker who admitted mythical concepts and mythical language so easily into his metaphysics and his natural philosophy” was also “the professed enemy of myth” in the spheres of politics and ethics.⁶¹¹ And in the face of seeming contradiction he goes on to celebrate Plato’s myths with unusual ardor, going as far as to place them at the center of his philosophy and

⁶⁰⁸ Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, II: 61. “Myth of the Earthborn” is Popper’s name for the Myth of Metals.

⁶⁰⁹ e.g. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

⁶¹⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 77.

⁶¹¹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 72.

political thought. His treatment of the Myth of Er, in particular, demonstrates the extent to which Cassirer is wedded to defending the philosophical value of Plato's myths, even if, as we shall see, this involves qualifying the argument he presents elsewhere against the toleration of myth in political thought.

The Myth of Er in *The Myth of the State*

The Myth of Er at the end of the *Republic* holds special significance for Cassirer. He identifies it as the site of a decisive turning point in the history of philosophy and in particular in the history of political theory's struggle against myth: it is in this myth, Cassirer argues, that Plato introduces to ethical and political thought a vital claim to the primacy of freedom in man's encounter with the world.

The argument is one that relies, on the one hand, on the setup of a pun on the word "eudaimonia," and, on the other, on leveling a microscopic degree of focus on a very particular moment in the Myth of Er. Cassirer begins by presenting Plato as the inheritor of what he calls a Socratic definition of happiness as the highest aim of every human soul. The Greek word for happiness, he goes on to explain, is *eudaimonia*, which he translates – literally and idiosyncratically – as the possession of a good demon.⁶¹² This setup in place, Cassirer turns to the climax of the Myth of Er, in which souls that are about to be reincarnated not only choose the pattern of their next lives, but – as Cassirer is eager to point out – also choose a demon that acts

⁶¹² This is, of course, the etymology of the word, though the word would have been so commonplace that its meaning in everyday use would have been somewhat distanced from its original etymology.

both as a guardian and personification of that chosen life.⁶¹³ The significance of the moment for the trajectory of political thought is that, in uniquely depicting individuals souls as having a choice over their own demons rather than the other way around, Plato effectively inaugurates a new ethic centered around an assumption of individual agency and responsibility.⁶¹⁴ If the highest aim in life is happiness, understood to consist in the possession of a good demon, and if it is also the case, as it is in Plato's myth, that individuals choose their own demons, then it follows that the supreme ends of life are within our grasp, and whether or not we attain them is a matter of the choices we make, rather than a matter left to chance.

But for Cassirer, the significance of this moment in the Myth of Er is not only that it placed a new premium on individual freedom in ethical thinking, but that this turning point amounts in particular to a repudiation of an essential element of myth. Cassirer draws a broad association between demons and the myths in which they tend to appear, and suggests that, to the extent that demons are recurring characters in these stories, the relationship they have with humans captures the essence of what constitutes a mythical orientation toward the world. He proposes that "[i]n mythical thought man is possessed by a good or evil demon", and that it is likewise true of mythical thought more generally that it is animated by the presumption that humans are "under the iron grip of a superhuman, divine, or demonic force."⁶¹⁵ As such, the decision, on Plato's part, to depict humans exercising a freedom of choice over their own

⁶¹³ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 75; see also *Rep X*, 617d-e; as well as Adam's commentary: Adam ed., *The Republic of Plato*, 617e28.

⁶¹⁴ Cassirer's reading of the passage is very close to Adam's; it may be the case that Adam is his source for this line of thought. Halliwell, for instance, does not connect the choosing of a daimon to the notion of eudaimonia in any way; and in particular does not read the moment as one unequivocally celebrating the freedom to choose one's fate, but rather one that emphasizes the complexity of the nature of choice, as an interplay between freedom and constraints. Halliwell ed., *Republic 10*, 184; see also 191.

⁶¹⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 75.

demons in the Myth of Er, effectively inverts a quintessentially mythic trope in order to assert a way of conceiving of man's relationship to his environment that is diametrically opposed to that presupposed in myths. Hence, in that moment in the Myth of Er, "a mythic motive is turned into its very contrary."⁶¹⁶

In turn, from this same moment in the Myth of Er, Cassirer also draws what he identifies as the most central and valuable principle of Plato's political theory: namely, the rejection of myth from the sphere of politics. The "great revolutionary principle of Plato's *Republic*," for Cassirer, is that "not only the individual man but also the state has to choose its demon," and that "only by choosing a good demon can a state secure its eudaimonia, its real happiness."⁶¹⁷ This entails applying to politics the same lesson of the Myth of Er for the life of the individual, and ensuring that the common welfare of the state is not left to mere chance, but to the kind of rigorous and principled exercise of rationality required of free moral agents made responsible for their own destinies. The distinction, it seems, is one that captures the stakes motivating the greater project of *The Myth of the State*: insofar as he credits Plato with the creation of the "rational theory of the state,"⁶¹⁸ Cassirer is committed to making a hard distinction between a politics driven by rational ideals, and a politics that falls victim to myths like the ones he saw in fascist ideology and propaganda. It is in the name of that commitment that Cassirer affirms the banishment of the poets from the *kallipolis* in the *Republic*, which he takes to be a rejection, on Plato's part, not of "poetry in itself, but the myth-making function."⁶¹⁹ To tolerate myths of any

⁶¹⁶ Ibid.

⁶¹⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 76.

⁶¹⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 71.

⁶¹⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 67; see also 71-4, and the discussion directly following the analysis of the Myth of Er at 77.

kind in politics, Cassirer insists, is to come down on the wrong side of “the choice between an ethical and a mythical conception of the state.”⁶²⁰

It is a strange, idiosyncratic reading of the Myth of Er. For one, it is strange to fixate so much, and draw out such broad and consequential claims, from what appears to be a relatively minor detail in the Myth of Er. While it would be uncontroversial to locate the climax of the Myth of Er in the souls’ choosing the patterns of their next lives, and while the myth presents the selection of a demon as being somehow related to that choice, the exact relationship between these two choices is not immediately clear, and Cassirer could be faulted for being too quick to conflate them. Moreover, it is also strange to read the choice that individual souls have over their demons as an unequivocal claim about the agency of the individual over his own fate, when so much of the eschatological landscape of the myth would appear to complicate, if not undermine, such a claim. In the Myth of Er, the choosing of life patterns takes place before the spindle of Necessity and the three traditional goddesses of Fate, and the souls’ choice of lives is constrained by a number of other factors built into the eschatological apparatus: what patterns are available among the choices to begin with; what lot an individual soul has drawn, which determines the order in which he chooses; the biases each soul brings to the site, formed through his individual experiences in both his former life and the thousand-year journey of the afterlife.⁶²¹

⁶²⁰ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 72.

⁶²¹ Many readers favor a reading of the myth where the fate of the soul ultimately hangs on a combination of the influences of individual choice and external contingencies: for example, in Ferrari, “Glaucón’s Reward, Philosophy’s Debt: The Myth of Er.” In addition to these details internal to the Myth of Er itself, it is also worth noting that, in the eschatological landscape of the *Phaedo* myth, the demon leads the soul to the place of judgment at arrival. *Phaedo* 113d.

Cassirer may have had special reasons for singling out the demons in the Myth of Er in the way that he did. In addition to the significance he attributes to demons as being somehow emblematic figures of mythical representations, and central to the etymology of *eudaimonia*, Cassirer must have also had on his mind the resonance of the demon famously possessed by Socrates, which is said to have acted as a kind of conscience for the philosopher, or a non-didactic embodiment of a higher calling towards an ethical ideal.⁶²² But the glaring dissonance in Cassirer's reading of the Myth of Er is that he appears to be rejecting myth in the very same breath with which he celebrates Plato's myths. It is in a myth of Plato's own creation that Cassirer derives both of the following things: a paradigmatic claim for the necessity of rejecting myth from the political sphere, and an image of Plato as a champion of that endeavor. And what's more, contained in Cassirer's enthusiastic embrace of the myth is an obvious admiration for its literary form. It is clear from the weight that his reading gives to specific, symbolically charged moments in the narrative and fictional landscape of the myth that, for Cassirer, the Myth of Er would not have carried the same philosophical force if it were presented any other way; it had to be written as a myth.

The Enuma Elish

There is another way in which the Myth of Er is significant to Cassirer. Cassirer himself concludes *The Myth of the State* by retelling an ancient Babylonian myth. The Enuma Elish is a myth about the creation of the world: a god slays a great serpentine monster, and uses its limbs and parts to form the heavens and the earth, the constellation and planets, humanity itself; he

⁶²² *Ap.* 31c-d; see also, e.g. *Euthyd.* 273a; *Euthyph.* 3b.

creates order from the forces of chaos. The other dragons allied with the serpent he subdues and binds.⁶²³

The story might be read, Cassirer suggests, as an allegory for the status of myth in our world. Modern civilization is the result of a combat against and triumph over myth, and we must continue these struggles lest the monstrous force of myth rise again from its state of subjugation. The final lines of Cassirer's final book are a stern warning against slackening that vigilance: though "the mythical monsters" were defeated and used for the creation of a new world order, "they still survive in this universe.

The powers of myth were checked and subdued by superior forces. As long as these forces, intellectual, ethical, and artistic, are in full strength, myth is tamed and subdued. But once they begin to lose their strength chaos is come again. Mythical thought then starts to rise anew to pervade the whole of man's cultural and social life.⁶²⁴

The striking decision to use a myth to conclude a book dedicated to the criticism of myth was not lost on readers.⁶²⁵ But an ending that may appear to sound a note of aporia and gloom – does it mean to suggest philosophy will never truly overcome myth? – is also one that reiterates the lessons of Plato's example. Even when one sets aside his obvious admiration for the Myth of Er, it is impossible to imagine that Cassirer, the great intellectual historian, might have been unaware of the historical resonance of concluding one's great political theoretical treatise with a

⁶²³ See Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and other Cultures*, 14; Jean Pierre Vernant, *Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, trans. Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 345.

⁶²⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 298.

⁶²⁵ e.g. Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 312. The myth in question is, moreover, an especially fraught choice. Not only does Cassirer turn to one of the most ancient myths known to us, but he also tells a creation myth – as though the progress of human culture had barely moved civilization forward in time since the creation of the world.

myth.⁶²⁶ The ending of *The Myth of the State* falls into a sequence of well-known philosophical myths written in emulation of the Myth of Er: this sequence includes the Dream of Scipio at the end of Cicero's *Republic*, as well as the Petite Fable at the end of the *Theodicy*, whose author was one of Cassirer's great heroes, and the subject of his first book.⁶²⁷

More significantly, the features that Cassirer had found most admirable in the Myth of Er resurface in his rendering of the Enuma Elish. The latter is, first and foremost, a philosophical call to arms against the forces of myth in culture. In particular, Cassirer places the emphasis of that struggle on an ethical ideal of freedom, and an understanding of a disorderly cosmos as capable of being shaped by agency. If a soul choosing his own demon in the Myth of Er breaks the spell of fatalism, Marduk, the anthropomorphic god of the Enuma Elish, chooses the shape of his own world as he reassembles the monster he has slain, and imposes his own rule upon the dragons he has defeated. But, like his reading of the Myth of Er, Cassirer's Enuma Elish also asserts this ideal by using figures that are in some way quintessentially mythic – monsters, dragons, demons – to make a self-conscious statement on the status of myth itself.

⁶²⁶ It bears pointing out that the German title of Plato's *Republic* is *Der Staat* – or, “The State” – adding another layer of resonance to the observation that Cassirer's *The Myth of the State* ends with a myth.

⁶²⁷ Leibniz, according to Cassirer, is the “true originator and founder of the philosophy of the Enlightenment.” Ernst Cassirer, “Leibniz, Freiherr von, Gottfried Wilhelm (1646-1716),” ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman and Alvin Saunders Johnson, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Macmillan, 1930-1935): IX: 399-402, 402.

See Ernst Cassirer, *Leibniz' System in seinen wissenschaftlichen Grundlagen*, ed. Marcel Simon, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 1 (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1998); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trans. Fritz C. A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1951); see also Gregory B. Moynahan, *Ernst Cassirer and the Critical Science of Germany, 1899-1919* (London: Anthem Press, 2013), 83-120.

A compromise on myth

Both Cassirer's reading of the Myth of Er, as well as his own tribute to it at the end of *The Myth of the State*, seem to indicate that he finds nothing that is particularly problematic about the use of myth as a literary device in philosophical writing. This might be an innocuous position to assume – if not, on the one hand, for the strong stance that his political theory takes against myth, and, on the other, for the unusually pointed insistence on the unique significance, evidenced in these cases, of the form of myth *as myth* in conveying certain philosophical ideas.

In Cassirer's thought, as we recall, those formal qualities of myth that are characteristic to the traditional narrated genre are essentially tied to a particular mode of consciousness, or what he calls mythical thought, in such a way that nothing of myth can be admissible to his vision of politics: to permit the devices of myth to intermix with the achievements of modern rationality would be to introduce unprecedented dangers to the very foundations of our culture, and to risk toppling the entire system. Myth – he explains, in a justification for the banishment of myth from Plato's *Republic* – is characteristically “unbridled and immoderate”; it cannot be tolerated in the political and ethical sphere because it “exceeds and defies all limits.”⁶²⁸ But Cassirer's treatment of the Myth of Er, as well his more general remarks about Plato's myths, make the mythic representation of these stories indispensable to the philosophical argument itself. Here, Cassirer presents these philosophical myths not only as being congruent with, but as in fact advancing, a vision of political theory committed to combating the influence of myth.

This suggests that, when Cassirer carves out an exceptional place for the literary use of myth in philosophy, his stance on myth also becomes far more ambivalent than what is otherwise his stated position. Effectively, the example of Plato's myths drives a wedge between two of his

⁶²⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 77.

other claims – the rejection of myth from political thought, and the portrait of Plato as a paradigmatic champion of that cause – and, in defending the genre of the Platonic myth, he softens his commitment to the former of these positions. He ends up, in essence, splitting his conception of myth into parts that are acceptable and parts that are not; under certain conditions, the borrowing of the resources of myth in philosophy can even be salutary. He maintains, on the one hand, that “[t]he famous Platonic myths” belong unambiguously to the genre of myth, just like the traditional stories they sought to imitate. On the other hand, he also insists that Plato nonetheless created his myths “in an entirely free spirit,” directing them according to “the purposes of dialectical and ethical thought. “Genuine myth,” he continues,

does not possess this philosophical freedom, for the images in which it lives are not *known* as images.⁶²⁹

Why Myth at All?

What does Cassirer mean when he singles out Plato’s myths this way? What difference does it make when a myth’s images are known as images? Even if Cassirer can defend the distinction as a coherent and meaningful way of setting apart Plato’s myths from all other myths, his efforts raise the more puzzling question of why he goes through such lengths to make such a distinction in the first place. Why does he find it important to embrace Plato’s myth as myths, so that the use that Plato makes of myth in his philosophical writing is not merely an excusable

⁶²⁹ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 47, emphasis original.

indulgence, but specifically commendable in the way he adapts literary resources particular to the mythic genre?

In order to understand what it is about myth that Cassirer seeks to preserve in its Platonic incarnations, we need a fuller account of the quality of philosophical freedom that Cassirer attributes to Plato's myths. This Platonic account, in turn, grants a place for myth in his political theory that retains, nonetheless, a progressive and dynamic vision of modern culture and its trajectory.

Innovation and stabilization in the symbolic forms

In Cassirer's philosophy of culture, each of the symbolic forms is caught in a tension between two opposing intellectual inclinations. On the one hand, human intellectual activity is propelled by a spontaneous drive for creative expression, and the symbolic forms are the various modes in which such expression is sought.⁶³⁰ This expressive drive is an innovative force that continually strives to stretch the boundaries of knowledge beyond the confines of familiar structures of understanding.⁶³¹ On the other hand, the products of this expansive process also "have a life of their own" that comes to be at odds with the purely creative impulse. While man constantly creates new constructs of meaning relating himself to his world, he also seeks, at the same time, to "stabilize and propagate his works."⁶³² As such, the forms of human expression

⁶³⁰ The relationship bet the symbolic forms and this central unity of meaning has been described as having a 'centrifugal' structure. Krois, *Cassirer*, 78-82; Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*, 101.

⁶³¹ See Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 63-4.

⁶³² Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 224.

also have a tendency to preserve themselves into stasis, long outlasting the individual circumstances in which they arise. Both of these opposing inclinations govern the dynamics of how all of the various symbolic forms grow, develop, and interlock into a unified system of knowledge:

In all human activities we find a fundamental polarity, which may be described in various ways. We may speak of a tension between stabilization and evolution, between a tendency that leads to fixed and stable forms of life and another tendency to break up this rigid scheme. Man is torn between these two tendencies, one of which seeks to preserve old forms whereas the other strives to produce new ones. There is a ceaseless struggle between tradition and innovation, between reproductive and creative forces. This dualism is to be found in all the domains of cultural life.⁶³³

There are a number of consequences for Cassirer's position on myth that follow from this. First, it sheds light on a crucial point of difference that sets apart Cassirer's understanding of the relationship between myth and philosophical knowledge from accounts like that of Popper. Myth was Popper's name for a "dogmatic attitude" that stood in contrast to the "critical attitude" particular to science, and scientific knowledge progressed from myth insofar as beliefs previously held true made themselves available to refutation.⁶³⁴ While scientific myths were possible in the form of dogmatically held axioms or conjectures about scientific content, they could never pass for scientific knowledge unless their dogmatic character were to give way to critical awareness; this was the way Popper defined science. For Cassirer, by contrast, the opposition between dogma and criticism does not map quite so neatly onto that between myth and science. Dogma is not exclusively the province of myth, just as a certain discerning attitude

⁶³³ Ibid.

⁶³⁴ Popper granted that the former was "clearly related to the tendency to verify our laws and schemata by seeking to apply them and to confirm them." The difference was that dogma held on to those laws and schemata "to the point of neglecting refutations, whereas the critical attitude is one of readiness to change them – to test them; to refute them; to falsify them, if possible." Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 50.

toward the provisionality of knowledge is not the exclusive purview of science; rather, insofar as both myth and science are symbolic forms, they are both caught in the dialectical tension between the two tendencies of the intellect. The pathological temptation of the human spirit “to be imprisoned in its own creations” is hence found not only “in the images of myth” but also “in the intellectual symbols of cognition.”⁶³⁵ When need be, philosophy must be ready to be critical of the achievements even of modern science; and one of Cassirer’s sharpest rebukes, anticipating a focal rallying point of the Frankfurt school, is levied at a purely technical rationality that results from a pathological reliance on the tools of science without this critical capacity.⁶³⁶

This also means that, in Cassirer’s account, the dialectic governing the progress of knowledge from myth to science is far more complex. Precisely because the substantive content of myth and science are not commensurate – as had been assumed by Popper and anthropologists like Tylor – they do not quite exist on the same continuum of knowledge in which converting the former into the latter is a matter of criticism and refutation. Rather, in insisting on the distinctiveness of myth and science as separate modalities of knowledge, each pulled in its own way by the two drives, Cassirer implies that innovation that resists cultural inertia may look very different from one symbolic form to another. The overcoming of a myth, for instance, would not take the form of falsification and counterexample, as is common practice in the advancement of scientific knowledge, but would instead require a kind of disruption internal to the mode of myth itself, a breakthrough that pushes mythic conventions from within.

⁶³⁵ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I: 113.

⁶³⁶ On the crucial differences between Cassirer and the Frankfurt School on this point, see Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 308-9.

Second, what makes myth a less progressive symbolic form than its more sophisticated counterparts is not because it is synonymous with the preservationist tendency, but that it is disproportionately inclined towards it. While all forms of knowledge and expression, according to Cassirer, are caught in tension between the tendency toward stabilization and that toward novelty, they are not equally drawn to either pole, and the proportion by which the counterbalancing forces govern each symbolic form in large part determines its character and “its particular physiognomy.”⁶³⁷ In myth, that proportion is heavily skewed toward the preservationist tendency at the expense of the innovative impulse.

The reason for this appears to stem from myth’s incapacity for abstraction, a feature that Cassirer isolates as one of myth’s defining characteristics. Unlike science, which can occupy an abstract, disinterested plane from which it can take reality as an object of inquiry, myth commands an undifferentiated empire of intense, immediate impressions of the world, where it “is simply overpowered by the object.”⁶³⁸ It tells stories in which magical forces, demons, idols, and other fantastic elements, originally fabricated by the mythic mind as a means of interpreting reality, easily take on the valence of inevitability. Where the fantastic and the natural are mixed together indistinguishably – any ordinary tree in a myth could very well turn out at any point to be sacred, embody a spirit, carry magical powers, or share its health and fate with a particular hero or the entire cosmos – taboos and rituals upheld by myths can come to dictate life in the same way natural necessity does. If myth is initially motivated by a drive to create new ways of conferring meaning onto a raw reality that is merely given, that creative process is slowed by the

⁶³⁷ Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, 224.

⁶³⁸ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II:74. Ursula Renz offers the alternative diagnosis that myth is incapable of recognizing pluralism. Renz, “From Philosophy to Criticism of Myth.”

medium's characteristic attachment to particular things in the absence of definition, to a concrete immediacy without abstraction. As such, it is too quick to stabilize around its own creations, which "once again resum[e] the form of the given."⁶³⁹

Third, what Cassirer takes to be the task of philosophy is geared not so much at resisting the stabilizing impulse, as at navigating the tension between the two tendencies as they manifest in all of the symbolic forms. For Cassirer, the conservative tendency to preserve and to reproduce old forms is not in and of itself condemnable. It is, at the very least, an unavoidable facet of the "dialectic of bondage and liberation" that "the human spirit experiences with its own self-made image worlds."⁶⁴⁰ More significantly, the creative expansion of knowledge requires relatively stable forms to rework and foundations on which to build; a tissue of old knowledge must be comfortably taken for granted in order for new inventions to break out of the established mold, withstand or be transformed by the scrutiny of criticism.⁶⁴¹ The need to understand the aims of philosophy as a balanced navigation of the two tendencies is always a pressing demand, because there is, in fact, an inevitable proportionality between the struggle for innovation and the threat of stagnation: "[t]he more richly and energetically the human spirit engages in its formative activity," Cassirer writes, "the farther this activity seems to remove it from the primal source of its own being."⁶⁴² The preservationist tendency inevitably accompanies even our most

⁶³⁹ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II:24.

⁶⁴⁰ Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, II:25.

⁶⁴¹ Karl Popper might have recognized in this dialectic something akin to the relationship of dependency he perceived between the dogmatic and critical attitudes characteristic of myth and science, respectively: "the critical attitude is not so much opposed to the dogmatic attitude as super-imposed upon it ... A critical attitude needs for its raw material, as it were, theories or beliefs which are held more or less dogmatically." Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, 50.

⁶⁴² Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, I: 113; Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols," 25.

innovative symbolic expressions, that it takes a discerning art to know what acts are those that consolidate and build progressively on existing cultural forms, and those that replicate them insipidly.

Platonic dialectic and Platonic myth

The art of discernment capable of navigating the delicate line between stabilizing and innovative tendencies within symbolic forms, and in turn, between the diversity of the symbolic forms and the unity of human knowledge, is the art that Cassirer calls “dialectic,” after its meaning in Plato’s philosophy. It consists of a kind of systematic demarcation, by which parts that make up a whole are put in their proper places. Cassirer believes this organizational endeavor underlies all legitimate efforts toward knowledge, including myth: tying together the various ways of knowing, however undeveloped or rudimentary the form, is “the same capability of analysis and synthesis, of discernment and unification, that, according to Plato, constitute and characterize the dialectic art.”⁶⁴³ Dialectic, so understood, can mark out and delimit discrete realms in which existing forms might stabilize and flourish on its own terms, without stymying the growth of knowledge more generally. Cassirer’s stake in Platonic dialectic is hence an answer to his ambition to establish a philosophy of culture that can lend unity to the diversity of the symbolic forms. Our intellectual creations grow in opposite directions, toward stability and the familiar as well as toward dissolution and novelty, and this tension is present, not across the spectrum of knowledge but within each of its modes, in myth and in science. Dialectic steers philosophy through this dynamic, allowing the forms of knowledge and culture to settle without

⁶⁴³ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 14.

stagnating; it is a way of partaking in the plurality of forms of thought, while also determining the limits of each mode.

It is, in particular, a way of practicing philosophy that requires great vigilance, one that requires philosophers to resist, when necessary, the metastasizing of the most abstract and sophisticated parts of their own systems. In Cassirer's portrait of Plato, the Theory of Forms presents at once a monumental achievement in the philosophical struggle against myth, as well as a great temptation toward the danger of intellectual stagnation, to which myth is particularly vulnerable. On the one hand, the abstraction of the Forms introduce "a higher standard ... that of the 'Idea of Good'," by which the myths of Plato's *kallipolis* are to be "brought under a strict discipline."⁶⁴⁴ On the other hand, the "perfect beauty" of the Form of the Good is also a seductive ideal that inspires in Plato a "deep yearning for the *unio mystica*, for a complete union between the human soul and God."⁶⁴⁵ Indeed some of Plato's followers – Cassirer names Plotinus and other philosophers associated with the Neoplatonic tradition – have fallen into the "mystic" trap suggested by this central element of Plato's philosophy. But Plato himself, Cassirer insists, never gives in to that passion.

Plato admits no mystical ecstasy by which the human soul by which the human soul and reach an immediate union with God. The highest aim, the knowledge of the idea of the Good ... cannot be seen in a sudden rapture of the human mind. In order to see and understand the philosopher must choose 'the longer way.' The mystical mind in Plato was checked both by his logical and by his political mind.⁶⁴⁶

⁶⁴⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 67.

⁶⁴⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 65.

⁶⁴⁶ Ibid.

Plato's restraint, for Cassirer, is a product of the commitment to balance that constitutes his dialectical practice: the capacity to simultaneously assert a philosophical framework for interpreting reality, and to refrain from pursuing it beyond its limits. In Plato's work, this tension is "never resolved," and the unresolved nature of the struggle is precisely what characterizes philosophy.⁶⁴⁷

Furthermore, the kind of resistance to intellectual calcification demanded by the balance of dialectic may take surprising forms, and it may partake in the resources of the plurality of symbolic expression. Cassirer's deep appreciation for Plato's myths is hence inseparable from his account of Platonic dialectic. On this reading, Plato's myths function as a creative means of breaking up the inert pull of familiar frameworks, both in his philosophy as well as in mythical convention, all the while without losing sight of the whole, incomplete expanse of human knowledge, or of the particular limits of its constituent parts.

At one level, the measured quality of self-awareness that Cassirer claims for Plato's myths is what makes them, despite their hybrid character, radically different from the political myths of the twentieth century, which lack that sense of limitation. Plato is invoked approvingly throughout the diagnostic discussion of modern myth concluding *The Myth of the State*, underscoring Cassirer's efforts to distinguish the former from the propagators of the latter, and, plausibly, preparing his readers for the philosophical myth he appends at the very end of the work. He returns to the Myth of Er once again in an ostensible move to observe that it has essential identifying features in common with both traditional myths and their contemporary counterparts – in this case, the philosophy of Oswald Spengler – but pulls back quickly to emphasize that, the myth's attention to the images of Fate notwithstanding, it is exceptional all

⁶⁴⁷ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 64.

the same. “This is a Platonic myth,” he insists, “and Plato always makes a sharp distinction between mythical and philosophical thought. But in some of our modern philosophers this distinction seems to be completely effaced.”⁶⁴⁸

But at another level, Platonic myth, as a genre of philosophical myth-writing, is not merely excusable in light of its observance of limits; it is a distinct achievement of philosophical dialectic precisely because it employs its own mythic features to break new ground in philosophical expression. Cassirer’s reading of the Myth of Er had located its philosophical force in Plato’s inversion of the characteristically mythic figure of the demon, so that it asserted an ethical ideal entirely opposed to that which routinely finds reinforcement in myths. And undoubtedly a similar intention grounds his own decision to adapt a Babylonian creation myth into a somber call to arms against the influence of myth latent in modern culture. He expresses appreciation elsewhere for such moments of reappropriation, whereby elements of mythic convention are directed towards ends other than that to which myth usually defaults. For instance, he praises the allegorical use of Greco-Roman mythological characters in Lorenzo Valla’s *Dialogue on Free Will* – in the scene that will provide the source material for Leibniz’s *Petite Fable* – as a moment in which “[a]ncient myth ... receives a new role” and “becomes the vehicle of logical thought.”⁶⁴⁹ These are moments of innovation that endeavor to test the possibilities of what myths can accomplish, and Cassirer celebrates them because they testify to the creative and dynamic capacity of our symbolic forms of expression to transform themselves from within. They suggest, in particular, the hope that the most durable elements in myth, the ones that are not undone by individual instances of criticism or refutation, might be mitigated

⁶⁴⁸ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 291.

⁶⁴⁹ Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 80.

more effectively with unexpected forms of expression incorporating resources taken from myth itself.⁶⁵⁰

Myth, tradition, and philosophy

Cassirer leaves many questions unanswered when he insists on drawing a fundamental distinction between myth at large and the Platonic genre of myth. He provides little guidance, for instance, on how one might properly recognize myths that are motivated by the spirit of freedom he attributes to Plato's myths, and be certain of their distinctive status apart from myths that, like the modern political myths, are deployed deliberately toward an instrumental end, but still end up binding its authors in the vicious logic of mythical thought. Further complicating such problems of differentiation are the seemingly contradictory claims Cassirer appears to suggest throughout his investigations, that myth inherently resists boundaries and limitations, and is inherently impossible to bring fully under control.⁶⁵¹ Moreover, an essential quality that, for Cassirer, sets apart Plato's myths is that they reinvent mythical conventions in innovative and often unexpected ways, and this makes it particularly difficult to translate into concrete, formal prescriptions the general principles he suggests for separating acceptable and unacceptable categories of philosophical myth .

⁶⁵⁰ For the suggestion that Cassirer imagined a role for religion as a more promising force than scientific reason for taming the modern influence of myth, see Gordon, *Continental Divide*, 317-22; Habermas, "The Liberating Power of Symbols," 26; Skidelsky, 233-235.

⁶⁵¹ See Renz, "From Philosophy to Criticism of Myth," 144-147 and 150-151. A similar line of thought is explored in Carl Schmitt's analysis of the mythical symbol of the leviathan in Hobbes' political thought, in which Schmitt suggests that elements taken from myth necessarily resist rational control, and elude the intentions of the authors who attempt to appropriate them for their own purposes. Schmitt, *The Leviathan in the State Theory of Thomas Hobbes*.

It may be the case that Cassirer had not fully worked through all of the potential contradictions that arise from defending all three of the positions he holds on myth and on Plato. And between his strong indictment of myth, his celebratory portrait of Plato as an emblematic champion of a demythologized philosophy, and his embrace of Plato's myths, he may be accused of having chosen the wrong position on which to compromise. But in reconstructing the progressive capacity of Plato's myths within a theory of myth that is otherwise staunchly opposed to it, Cassirer underscores the incomplete character of the project of modernity: namely, that we inhabit a stage of culture in which, at least for the time being, dense, figurative modes of thought that do not give in to criticism and scrutiny will continue to have purchase in our political and cultural life; and that, so long as this is the case, the literary resources of myth can be incorporated into a dynamic philosophical language seeking to tackle those elusive frameworks of meaning. And in insisting on the foundational importance of Plato for the western philosophical tradition, he suggests that the identity of modern philosophy is more fragile than we think, and that philosophy, too, relies on founding narratives like the one that Plato represents for us when we try to supply accounts of what philosophy is, where it is now, and how it got there.

In turn, the narrative Cassirer advances of the western intellectual tradition stemming from Plato is not one that tracks the legacy of his myths, but it is one that continually reaffirms the ethic of philosophical freedom that had made Plato's myths coherent to him. Throughout his studies of intellectual history Cassirer remains steadfastly bound to the ideal of man's progressive self-liberation, from the efforts of the Cambridge Platonists to build on that which they found most worthy of preserving in ancient wisdom, to the commitment on the part of the

philosophers of the Enlightenment to the freedom and autonomy of the individual mind.⁶⁵² But his celebratory embrace of the progressivist ideal is not so much about rejecting what does not fit, as it is first about understanding on their own terms those forces and tendencies – mythic or otherwise – that require transcending. He invokes Bacon as a guide, not only for a model of knowledge held to the standards of scientific inquiry, but for the spirit with which he insisted that the understanding of nature must come before its conquest; his work on Leibniz depicts a pioneer who not only dreamed that knowledge might one day be articulated in a universal scientific language, but also took as a central principle of his philosophy that the human mind at thought is, first and foremost, creative and spontaneous in its continual efforts to perfect itself.⁶⁵³ Even the proponents of the new mythology in German Idealism, whom he charges with having “drunk from the magic cup of myth” and paving an inadvertent path to the political myths of his time, did so out of deference toward a view of cultural flourishing centered around the ideal of universal freedom.⁶⁵⁴

These historical portraits, in turn, capture Cassirer grappling with a more expansive conception of the role of philosophy in human culture, as an endeavor constantly required to reinvent the forms and modes it inhabits, even as it works toward the same unchanging goals. As he calls on philosophers to stay true, in whatever way they see fit, to the “intellectual and moral courage” of Plato to break out of the default postures of one’s own time, Platonic myth also turns into a reminder of the capacity of philosophy to find solutions to its own problems in

⁶⁵² Cassirer, *The Platonic Renaissance in England*; Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*.

⁶⁵³ For Cassirer’s remarks on Bacon, see Cassirer, *Myth of the State*, 294; on Leibniz, see Cassirer, *Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, 124-5; see also Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways*, 107-110.

⁶⁵⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 5, 183-6.

unexpected places.⁶⁵⁵ In that limited and cautious regard, Cassirer looks to the resources of philosophical myth as a disruptive antidote to the danger latent in all legitimate efforts toward making sense of our world – that of falling too hard for one’s own intellectual creations, that idolatry of images that constitutes the ultimate Platonic sin.

⁶⁵⁵ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, 296.

Conclusion

How should theorists understand the legacy of Plato in political thought and its history?

This dissertation has sought to show that the tradition of philosophy whose beginnings are attributed to Plato is a tradition that goes beyond the reputation it often enjoys in the popular imagination, as well as in accounts that political theorists supply about the identity and trajectory of their discipline. It is, in particular, a tradition that complicates a prevalent portrait of Plato as a figurehead for a movement that pits the category of myth against that of philosophy, and in turn, as a tangle of opaque and irrational forces whose influence must be removed from the sphere of politics.

The authors in this study took Plato's myths to be philosophically significant. They studied them with a careful scrutiny reflective of that premise, imitating them in their own philosophical and political writings, or aspiring to reinvent them anew, and they did so in conjunction with broader reflections on the relationship between myth, critical reason, and the nature and aims of politics. This means that, on their interpretation, Plato's myths represented a genre that was not only a constructive form of philosophical expression that uniquely complemented logical argumentation, but also a dynamic genre that accommodated perpetual reworking and reevaluation. They attributed this kind of meaning to Plato's myths because they embraced the hypothesis that the literary features particular to the genre of myth were essentially

related to a deeper narrative process at work in the way humans frame and structure their world views. In turn, those dense and opaque stories we tacitly tell about ourselves and our world were, for these authors, an unavoidable facet of philosophy and political life, and they believed it imperative to engage with this thought rather than deny it. The possibilities they saw in the mythic genre for telling and retelling our stories testify to that conviction and that hope.

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Are there myths today – that our understanding of modern political phenomena would stand to gain from a study of the idea of myth, viewed through the lens of a particular intellectual tradition anchored to Plato?

In the broadest sense, the answer is yes. When we speak casually of myths in everyday situations, we are ever aware that the widespread assumptions and beliefs that inform our world views are full of stray falsehoods and misconceptions, tall tales and superstitions, ranging from the innocuous to the annoying, which demand debunking by facts and further scrutiny. But especially in times of polarization and political uncertainty, there is mounting concern around the endurance of such poorly grounded tropes in our thinking and their continued circulation in our social environment, as observers fear the ramifications of a political climate in which facts and reasoned arguments have lost their power to persuade. And in this respect we could say that, within the range of phenomena that attract the designation of myth today, some of the recurring features shared between them are entrenched much more deeply into our way of life than we might think, and that they, in turn, are a powerful influence on contemporary politics and culture.

At the same time, there is also a narrow sense in which we could say that myths, properly speaking, are of very little consequence in our world today – and that they do not exist in the same form or with the same force they might have in pre-industrialized societies. When we

struggle to pin down what a myth is, the most limited and specific concepts at hand will lead us to the idea of a narrated genre of traditional tale, which draws on a rich, fantastical symbolic vocabulary of recognizable cultural resonance. Today, stories, motifs and elements taken from this genre might move us aesthetically, but the effect they have on us is insulated from the norms and expectations guiding our understanding of our environment and how we carry ourselves in it.

But here we also have to be careful. The two different statuses of myth in contemporary life, corresponding to the two different notions bounding our definition of it, can tempt us into concluding simply that these are entirely separate phenomena; that one sense of myth bears no relation to the other. This could very well turn out to be true. However, to presume this flippantly would be to risk losing sight of the entire history of the concept of myth, and, in particular, to summarily dismiss the theoretical tradition built around it, which, for all its diversity, is premised on a common assumption that the narrated genre of myth can tell us something about the thick, figurative foundations of culture that elude more rigorous forms of scrutiny.

On the other hand, we might also be tempted to assume, with many of these same theorists of myth, that myth's dual status in contemporary life is the product of a very specific relationship, in which one of the two senses in which we talk about myth today is essentially construed to be a vestige of the other. On this familiar model of myth, as a mode of thought and expression caught in a transitional phase, the displacement of narrated myths from the discursive and epistemic centers of contemporary culture suggests the possibility that their rough counterparts in modernity could also be phased out through rigorous and persistent analysis. This, too, might also be true to some extent, though the enduring force of unreasoned narratives

and ideas in present-day politics and society warns us, at the very least, that the process of casting them off for good will be neither swift nor straightforward.

The mythic tradition sustained by the authors studied here reminds us not to take such relationships for granted. It entreats us not to be careless in conflating the spectrum of meanings that can be contained by the category of myth, and to be aware of the distinction between the broad and narrow senses of the concept whenever we try to link them together; to think beyond the easy or conventional accounts, and to be open to alternative ways of thinking about their relationship. Instead, this tradition teaches us to be sensitive to the nuanced ways in which an author might connect the narrated genre of myth to a more global and deeply rooted aspect of political thinking – be it the central political concepts from which we draw our identity as individuals and as a community, the shared creative vocabulary that bonds individuals together, or the undemonstrable stories to which philosophy must commit for its activities to hold meaning.

Relatedly, the richness of these connections makes a case for the study of myth as a distinct theoretical category. To the extent that contemporary political theorists pay attention to myth, they tend to subsume it under broad categories like ideology or religion,⁶⁵⁶ or they treat it as a foil for philosophy, primitive and dangerous, as the temptation of irrationality from which we must fight to disentangle our thinking.⁶⁵⁷ Myth, and in particular the history of theorizing about myth, certainly shares substantial overlaps with these spheres, but it would be a mistake to collapse the significance of myth into any of these topics. For one, it would lead us to overlook

⁶⁵⁶ For instance, in the so-called secularization debates, where myth is invoked heavily, but only as a variant of religion.

⁶⁵⁷ For instance, in the adamantly critical view of myth held by the Frankfurt school and its intellectual heirs.

many of the qualities that are distinct to the constellation of experiences and phenomena that thinkers have tried to conceptualize using the category of myth.

Above all, the authors in this study compel us to acknowledge that this is a category that can be both consequential and constructive for political thought. Prevailing assumptions in political theory often bias us towards thinking otherwise on either or both counts. On the first, we might be inclined to think that there is nothing of consequence in the content of myth that isn't better off distilled into a more analytic form, or that the power of myth is limited to its rhetorical efficacy. But as we have seen, the extraordinary narrative force, symbolic density, and cultural resonance that have drawn audiences and readers to myth have an irreducible grip on our imaginative horizons – qualities that cannot be translated without loss into a more conventionally rational medium. At the same time, this capacity attributed to myth, for accessing and shaping our image of the world and its possibilities, is also an intimately philosophical power, rather than an aspect of a rhetorical tool that, in the best case, philosophers might use to persuade the unphilosophical. Even in philosophy, let alone in our politics, our culture and in everyday existence, we rely on such deeply lodged frameworks to orient us and to give meaning to our activities, and myth presents the possibility of better identifying, understanding, and even transforming them where other philosophical means come up short.

A second temptation is the tendency to accept that myth can and often does wield great force in politics and culture, but to assume that it invariably does so in profoundly unsavory ways. This may be because the most prominent examples in history of public storytelling that have attracted the label of myth have involved abuses of its power, usually entailing a deception from above to below; and also because myth is often conceived to be a static medium, predisposed to suppress novelty or progress in favor of conservation, and individual expression

for that of the collective. But we have also seen how myth has stood for much more than its default stereotypes, and sometimes even for the opposites of such qualities. We need not be naive about myth's potential for misuse, or the tensions it can present to some of the most essential components of our political and philosophical ideals. But our study has also found in it a dynamic and flexible medium, able to accommodate paradox and plurality of meaning, to posit claims with exceptional authority while simultaneously signaling the provisionality of those epistemic commitments.

This returns us to the question of the status of myth today. If we look for exact counterparts in our society of the mythological tradition to which Plato was responding, or the literary genre and cultural artifact that fascinated his heirs, we will be frustrated in our search. But Plato's philosophical myths, and their continual reinterpretation and reinvention by his readers, remind us that, even in the relatively niche domain of philosophical writing, the genre of myth can assert itself as a medium of fluctuating forms and meanings. It should not surprise us, then, that myth in our world does not look the same: the recognizable stories, motifs and symbols that we have inherited might be secluded to a more limited sphere; and the narratives of significance that might, in a different cultural context, be expressed mythically, might be articulated today in more scattered and less identifiable forms in our own heterogeneous culture.

What does seem to remain constant, however, is that we draw significance, in our everyday lives as well as in times of overwhelming confusion, from certain narrative frameworks for making sense of the world, which, in turn, lend themselves easily to the kinds of metaphorically rich, symbolically fraught expressive structures we find in myths. They can variously equip individuals and communities with momentum and meaning to social

movements,⁶⁵⁸ alternative accounts to the narratives of those in power,⁶⁵⁹ cultural continuity to weather extreme events of abrupt change,⁶⁶⁰ or simply the imaginative resources to help us find ourselves at home in our environment and in our time.⁶⁶¹ Whether and to what extent these diverse functions can be constructively brought under the same heading is a question that might not be answered definitively, but, in having raised it, the authors in Plato's mythic tradition ask us to take it seriously. In using the genre of myth as a theoretical proxy for exploring the place of these elusive forces in our lives, they deserve credit for their prescient recognition of both the richness and the fragility of the narrative dimensions underwriting human experiences.

⁶⁵⁸ Francesca Polletta, *It Was like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

⁶⁵⁹ Richard Delgado, "Storytelling For Oppositionists And Others: A Plea For Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* 87 (1989): 2411–41.

⁶⁶⁰ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶⁶¹ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*.

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