

## MYTH AND ILLUSION: PLATO'S REPUBLIC

Calling all who pretend to be philosophers! Calling all who pretend to be philosophers! All who think this description applies to them should report to the Acropolis for their unemployment benefit, which will be at the rate of two minas plus two seed-cakes per head. And anyone who can show a long beard will be eligible for a supplementary allowance of dried figs. No need to bring any modesty, fairness, or self-control. They're not essential, if you don't happen to have any. But every applicant must produce at least five syllogisms, for according to the regulations you can't be Wise without them.<sup>1</sup>

Plato's Republic can be classified as a tragedy, but in terms of the "Bacchae" which role does Socrates play? Is he Pentheus or the Young Stranger, or a little of both? Pentheus combats the irrational or demoniac but the Young Stranger is a philosophical revolutionary who destroys the conventional mythology and morality. There is after all a darkness in the Cave, a modern romantic obsession with horror, wherein lies the tragedy, the reversal of fortune, the hamartia, or tragic flaw, and the sparagmos of not only the Philosopher King but of Philosophy itself. Plato recognizes that the world of myth and belief can have a devastating effect upon the "truths" of the philosopher and that the philosopher stands at best only an even chance in influencing public opinion.

The public is all too ready to treat philosophers and their myths as "aluminum pillars fit for sparrows" as Dostoyevsky reports the meeting at Virginsky's in The Possessed. The anti-intellectual and anti-philosophic trend is hardly a novelty if we are to credit Lucian of Samosata's brilliant dialogues, "The Slave Auction" and "Fishing for Phonies." Even Socrates himself is knocked down at the bargain basement price of two obols, and Philosophy herself has to be coopted to judge the merits of all the conflicting schools and theories. Certainly the reputation of the classical philosophers in antiquity was <sup>by</sup> no means as sound as modern historians of philosophy would have us believe. They worship a profoundly romantic, intellectual mythology of the golden age of democracy and philosophy in Schiller's phrase "wie ganz anders, anders war es da." Yet it was Diogenes of Sinope who cynically commented: "All Plato's lectures are worthless," and we find Cato musing that the Athenians tolerated Socrates as long as they did. Diogenes Laertius in his Lives of the Philosophers finds not only frequent eccentricities but frequent associations with the odd or marvellous. Zeno descends to the dead while Anaxagoras reports dwellings on the moon, for that matter Heraclides assures us that a man dropped from the moon. Empedocles, while not proving his immortality on Etna, was busy "arresting the violence of the unwearied winds." Let's throw him into a volcano," Lucian's satire aptly proposes, for Empedocles makes the hybris of classical tragedy look venial indeed. He tries to be god, and he fails. Meanwhile Epimonidas reputedly slept for fifty-seven years, awakening like the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus or Rip Van Winkle to discover a considerably changed world. Without a doubt the classical philosophers themselves were the subjects of much myth-making and tale-telling to the extent that Proclus happily admitted that he preferred Socrates' daimonion to his Idea, which is, of course, rank heresy for a neo-Platonist, who is supposed to prefer the rational to the irrational.<sup>2</sup>

According to Diogenes Laertius, whose lives pass back and forth across the boundaries of myth and fact, and who can really trust him, Plato "seemed to some too fond of myth." He himself was the subject of a mythology which included the belief that he possessed

a "third eye," but his real greatness in political mythology lies in his ability to create masterful illusions. Even such a simple statement runs counter to the received notion that Plato's greatness lies in his dialectic method and his application of rationality and logic. From the "Phaedrus" to the "Cratylus" and the "Timaeus" Plato utilizes myths for educational purposes. Plato, however, is not only a philosopher but also a political theorist. J. A. Stewart in The Myths of Plato has collected and explored the Platonic myths, but most Platonic scholars neglect both their irrational and their political dimension. Even Stewart devotes only a single page to the "myth of the metals," the "royal lie," which legitimizes the Republic.<sup>3</sup>

The illusions or myths in the Republic include the "allegory of the cave," the "myth of the metals," the "myth of Er," and the symbolic figures of the unjust man and the shipwreck. Pervading all, however, is Plato's greatest creation, the myth of Socrates.<sup>4</sup>

The Platonic myths in turn relate to illusions of democracy, equality, freedom, and justice, which alternate strangely between "false majoritarian belief" and "absolute truth" in the Platonic philosophy. Plato also rejects the traditional mythology of classical Greece, the lying, quarrelling Homeric gods, as unfit for the education of the youth. Paideia requires mythos but with a purged content. Plato simultaneously rejects the prevailing power-oriented view of the sophists who attempt to demythologize the classical gods by getting back to their true nature.<sup>5</sup>

While Plato appeals to reason, he places a number of severe belief demands upon the average citizen. A philosopher may be convinced that justice is a division of labor. He may be convinced that it is better to suffer evil than to do it. He may persuade himself that being punished for a crime is preferable to going unpunished. He may agree that an ideally just society requires a community of wives and property although Aristotle criticises this part of the Republic. To the average citizen all of these Platonic propositions must be accepted as articles of faith, fundamental truths beyond question. Such belief demands are bound to create tension in an ideal system.

Plato, of course, does not care that much about majoritarian beliefs and average citizens, although he does respect Protagoras. He is an aristocrat. In the story of the shipwreck, he bluntly indicates the need for a trained captain and the anarchy which can result from democratic navigations. For Plato democracy is a veritable "emporium of constitutions," creating an illusion of freedom in the form of license or enslavement to the appetites. Plato dislikes "democratic man," one of the reasons that he has been so persistently rejected in the American tradition.

Likewise in the autocthonous "myth of the metals" Plato says: 'We will tell all men that they are earth-born brothers.' Thus he manipulates the illusion of equality, being born from the same soil, to gain obedience to the state. Having initiated his system with an equalitarian illusion, he immediately turns to the myth itself, which divides men according to their natures of gold, silver, and iron. He tells the classes that the first injunction prohibits miscegenation. In both lamist Tibet and Inca Peru a similar myth of social establishment was used in which human nature related to the three metals. There are in fact many primitive parallels to Plato's myths, which suggest that Plato has a deep insight into human psychology.

The passages which elaborate the myth of the metals admit that the system may not be perfect and that occasionally iron-natured parents may produce a golden natured child or vice versa. Of course, there is no mechanism for discovering the natural gold among the dross. It seems doubtful also that the demotion of Junior Guardian to classes in remedial Greek is going to go unchallenged. Unless you believe that Senior Guardian is not going to meddle with the records, the system is not workable. Plato tacitly asks for such beliefs. The absence of a mechanism for upward mobility and the probable resistance to downward mobility are part of the traditional critique of Plato.

In the "Laches," where he treats courage, Plato slips in a small but revealing comment, which translated into the terms of the myth of the metals means that golden-natured parents do not even usually produce golden-natured offspring. Look at the children of Pericles and Themistocles. Plato knows that eugenics does not work well, yet he purports to construct his system on golden natures. Why? He certainly does not want imperfection in a perfect system because that argues change. Why? I think

because he wants to flatter the Athenian aristocracy into accepting the philosopher king program by telling them that their golden-natured progeny shall inherit the earth. Plato does believe in his own myth to a certain extent, but he is far more Machiavellian, far more realistic, than hitherto noted if he is practicing this kind of deception. This is the real "Noble Lie."

A similar process occurs in the "allegory of the cave" in which the people exist in a world of shadows and illusions. They mistake the shadows for reality. For Plato this is the world of majoritarian belief, which can never be the final determinant of morality. Plato recounts how one individual is liberated and emerges from the cave into a vision of ecstasy in which he perceives the idea of justice and the Idea (Form) Itself. He then has to be forced back down to tell the truth to his fellow men, who do not appreciate either the truth or the telling and ungratefully lynch him. Such in fact is the fate of many well-meaning reformers. More the pity that Savonarola did not take Plato to heart.

There is something, however, profoundly wrong at the point at which the philosopher contemplates the Sun. He should either recognize his self-limitations as man or as philosopher, now coming to the sad revelation of self-knowledge through suffering, or he should desire to be at-one with the Form, thus committing an act of hybris by wanting to be God. In either case he should be perfectly miserable, and Plato is supposed to be interested in happiness. Aristotle felt that the guardians were very likely to transfer their misery to the rest of mankind. The idea that the philosopher has to be forced to return marks a classic hamartia, or tragic flaw, in his nature, just as the somewhat sudden reversal of his fortunes, out of the shadows, contemplate the Good, back to martyrdom, has the makings of a classical tragedy. Plato must be painfully aware of his hero's problems. Proclus comments "that Plato would have been turned out of his own republic as a poet and as a jester; that his underworld is not less terrifying than Homer's, against which he protests; that he borrows some of his own myths from Homer as well as from the Orphics; that if we take everything literally he is full of contradictions . . ." and so the indictment continues." <sup>6</sup>

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Of those "Orphic" myths the "myth of Er" with which Plato concludes the Republic is most perplexing. Stewart rightly parallels the three ways, Tartarus, Heaven, and Lethe to that of Thomas the Rhymer:

Light down, light down now, true Thomas,  
And lean your head upon my knee;  
Abide, and rest a little space,  
And I will show you ferlies three.

Oh see ye not yon narrow road,  
So thick beset wi' thorns and briars?  
That is the path of righteousness,  
Though after it but few inquires.

And see not ye that braid, braid road,  
That lies across the lily leven?  
That is the path of wickedness,  
Though some call it the road to Heaven.

And see not ye that bonny road,  
That winds about the fernie brae?  
That is the road to fair Elf-land  
Where thou and I this night maun gae.<sup>7</sup>

And on through "mirk, mirk nicht." Er has a somewhat easier time of it in his visit to the underworld in which he observes the punishment of the unjust and the famous lottery of the souls. "Heaven is blameless; the blame is his who chooses." This passage supposedly reconciles human freedom with fate and law. All of the souls except for Er drink of the waters of Lethe, the River of Forgetfulness, and Er returns to his funeral pyre to relate his experiences. Elsewhere in the Republic man is not free. He is not free to "do his own thing" as in a democracy. He is not free to select any vocation to which he is minimally suited. In fact the identification and performance of proper function becomes the essence of justice. Neither are we defining freedom as perfect service. Why then does Er alone not drink the waters of Lethe, simply because if the others did not, they might remember that they are not free at all, a sentiment not too far from Irenaeus. They are like Oedipus whose tragedy lies in an unwillingness to accept his fate and his insistence upon maintaining the illusion of freedom. In the "myth of Er," Plato recognizes something that it has taken B.F. Skinner to deny, that freedom is a necessary and sustaining human illusion. Even if "untrue" in the physical sense, it is useful in the moral sense. If people can be made

to believe that they are free, they are likely to be easier to control. Skinner, of course, denies both the utility of freedom and of its illusion while ending up in the somewhat contradictory position of freeing men from their freedom.

What has happened to the Platonic myth? Where is the philosopher who used reason and truth and dialectic to prevail over his sophistic opponents? with Lucian of Samosata "Calling all who would be philosophers, calling all who would be philosophers" to the Acropolis to receive true judgments. Plato uses the illusion of equality in the myth of the metals, an illusion of freedom in the myth of Er, an illusion of duty in the Allegory of the Cave, and we suspect an illusion of justice throughout the Republic, not to mention an illusion of reason. He appears to tell the "true believers" one thing while intending quite something else for the initiates. In the "image of the unjust man," that hybrid of man, lion, and monster, "closed in real man," he reinforces his elaborately constructed notion that justice lies in fulfilling the function to which the individual is best suited. (Livy in his History of Rome (II:xxxii) reports that the argument of the revolt of the belly against the body helped persuade the plebians to put up their arms.) Never mind that Socrates has offhandedly dismissed the definition of justice as "giving every man his due," which is much more in keeping with the Western legal tradition. Plato allows "his Socrates" to do things like that, and it is annoying. Plato does not prove in the Republic that justice is a division of labor, he makes us believe in it in spite of ourselves. In this sense he creates an illusion of justice, not necessarily untrue but only partially true. Admire the mastery of the illusion for what it is.

The illusions, or are they spells? which Plato casts are among the most powerful in Western thought, but the greatest is the illusion of Socrates himself, "our Socrates." Plato was not alone in using Socrates as a mythological vehicle, for Aristippus and Diogenes were hedonistically and cynically creating their own versions as was Antisthenes. Xenophon was creating a Socrates which some critics have suggested was more Xenophonic than anything else. Indeed they raise doubts that Xenophon was as closely associated with Socrates as he leads us to believe since Polycrates in the Categoria, which lists all of Socrates' crimes and those of his followers, neglects Xenophon.<sup>8</sup>

What a masterpiece to convert the Xantippe-nagged man, sordus et vetus, the second-rate stone-cutter who heard voices, this public nuisance, this gadfly, into a model for philosophers. Next he will indeed have them eating lentils and figs before lecture. The "Socrates myth" was well-glossed in classical times, and Cato indeed wondered why the Athenians had not done him in earlier. Lucian knocked him down at a bargain price of two obols, higher it is true than his opponents. Because the historical material for mythmaking is so unlikely, Plato's myth is that much greater, perhaps it is that Egyptian influence, the ability to make gods from anything in the kitchen garden. Now there is no doubt that Socrates was a character within a character, a multidimensional man, like those Russian dolls. There is no doubt but that Plato was profoundly influenced by him even if he was only in his twenties at the time of the trial. Justus of Tiberias reported that Plato jumped up to say a few words at the trial and was shut up, which was the prudent thing to do, just as was Aristotle's leaving Athens during the Macedonian crisis before it elected to commit a second great crime against philosophy.

At times Socrates seems so wilful, so absurd, refusing the defense speech of Lysias, demanding the prytaneum, or social welfare, as his appropriate penalty, refusing to escape from prison. Is there no common sense, no reason, in the man? One can feel the exasperation the average Athenian businessman must have felt with Socrates. Family values indeed. And why does he not expose Anytus and Meletus for the fakers that they are after they accuse him. Even his little voice, the daimonion, abandons him. Anytus had sponsored the Edict of Oblivion of Euclides giving an amnesty to political offenders prior to 403 B.C. Anytus could not charge him with the real political crimes, which Socrates indeed did commit, the failure to arrest Leon and the failure to take a vote at the trial of the Arginusae admirals at which Socrates was presiding. Socrates was, according to Plato, always given to ripping away the veil of appearances and getting to the truth. Why not now, at the trial? Even a polis-sized malignancy should have resulted in acquittal. Was the truth of the real charges too damning?

Instead of unmasking his political persecutors Socrates delivers his inspirational apostrophe on the laws after his conviction. The laws have nurtured me, educated, protected me and my family. Obedience to the laws is like obedience to my parents;



it is the first act of a rational man. Look closely at the illusionist, for Plato has created another one, this time in keeping with the Socratic irony. Over-rigorous enforcement of the laws destroys the spirit of the laws. The laws destroy themselves by this absurd verdict. While preaching obedience, the result is subversion, which is exactly what Socrates was charged with anyway, but what an arch-sophism. The Platonic myth transforms guilt into innocence, a technique which Plato roundly condemns in Gorgias and the sophist rhetoricians.

Mythological philosophers are sometimes more amazing than real ones. We will even see the traditions from the Iskandernama that Aristotle practiced witchcraft to win Alexander's battles and also mixed up powerful potions for him, one of which may have been a little too powerful. If the power of Plato's myths and illusions is recognized, Plato Mythmaker becomes a totally different individual from Plato Philosopher. He becomes a great dramatist. Plato recognizes that myths, not necessarily false per se, convey a different order of truth. It is in this ability to recognize the utility of myth, which he shares with Kautilya, as well as his ability to understand the fundamental of philosophical method as a means to truth, that Plato's genius really lies.

Both the theoretical and mythological issues of Plato's Republic are very much present in our modern world. A recent exhibit of photography of the Zapatistas in Chiapas included a myth recounted by one of the leaders, Subcommandante Marcos. He told how in the beginning language was important to men and gods. The gods took three words and tossed them to man on a polished black stone (obsidian, the smoking mirror?). Each time they came back or reflected in the wrong way, and ever since man has not been able to get them quite straight; hence presumably the need for revolution. The words were EQUALITY, DEMOCRACY, and JUSTICE. An error made in the original communication between gods and men is a common world-distributed myth theme. It frequently ushers death into the world. The nineteenth century wrote of mythology as a "disease of language," but in politics it is the same words which cause the same problems be it in the Athens of Plato and Aristotle or the Chiapas of Subcommandante Marcos. In both cases the solution or resolution is sought in a mythological form, what becomes in Aristotle a true poetics of poliics.

NOTES:

1. Lucian of Samosata, Satirical Sketches, Paul Turner, trans., (1961), p. 187.
2. Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers (1925)
3. J.A. Stewart, The Myths of Plato (1960).
4. Plato, Dialogues, Benjamin Jowett, ed., (1910); The Republic, F.M. Cornford, ed., 1991 (1945).; Cf. Euben, Greek Tragedy and Political Theory, p.11, Hans George Gadamer, "Plato and the Poets; it is almost tempting to see the Philosopher King trapped in a quantum quandry; the more he knows about himself, the less he knows about society; the more he knows about society and himself, the less he knows about God. After the act of hybris outside the Cave, he must be forced to return and must resort to myth-making in an attempt to establish a position.
5. Werner Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture (1943-45) Cf. Euben, op. cit., pp. 222-52; Arlene Saxenhouse, "Myths and the Origins of Cities: Reflections on the Autochthony Theme in Euripides."
6. Proclus, The Platonic Theology (1985-86); Thomas Whittaker, The Neo-Platonists, A Study in the History of Hellenism, 2nd ed., with a supplement on the Commentaries of Proclus, (1918), pp. 296-97.
7. Cited by Stewart, op. cit., p. 144.
8. Richard Louis Levin, The Question of Socrates (1961); Sir Ernest Barker, Great Political Theory: Plato and His Predecessors (1918), Ibid., The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle (1959).