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Plato and the Re-formation of Myth in Greek Society

Myth was a form of truth for early Greek society. This initial conception of myth was not only considered a representation of art and poetry but also a form of culture and a source of knowledge. In this paper, I'll argue that Plato's attempt to reform the conception of myth was directed to represent more aspects of reality and at the same time promote understanding of its causality. Moreover, Plato's reform included a reevaluation of the role of myth to prevent its usage in justification of good and evil, and transfer the moral responsibility of human action from the gods to humans themselves. Plato's attempt shall not be taken as a suppression of the myth-making ability but as a natural step towards an ongoing cultural revolution of his times.

First, Plato's concern about the function of myth began with his account of the ideal state in his dialogue *Republic*. According to Cassirer, Plato's theory of the state highlights two main challenges that needed to be addressed in order to conceptualize the ideal state, namely, the mythical thought related to the power of tradition, and the conception of justice as the will to power (Cassirer, 88-89).

On the one hand, mythical thought in early Greek civilization had been the backbone in both individual and social development from the origin myth in Hesiod's *Theogony* to the tragedy of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Plato acknowledges the importance of mythical thought in Greek society and its development, but also foresees that it can become a problem if it's understood only as a dogmatic tradition without further understanding. For instance, if mythical gods are only a projection of human life, then it is expected that their nature must be dynamic, and can be reformulated as needed. However, if their conception becomes just a traditional value, then their existence at some point may become unquestionable and blindly accepted. Cassirer identifies this aspect in Plato's thought: "For what man sees in the gods is only a projection of his own life and vice versa" (Cassirer, 78).

On the other hand, the conception of justice as the will of the gods is also a concern for Plato. If the gods were shaped empirically as a projection of human life, then these gods will always fall short to the ideal concept of justice. Moreover, having a mythical conception of justice will be detrimental for further cultural developments since it will be based only on tradition, and can be accepted as dogmatic impositions without real understanding. This is why Plato proposes to redefine justice as a principle of harmony governing both the individual and the state as a whole. Cassirer identifies this aspect in Plato's thought by pointing out that "we have to make a choice between an ethical and a mythical conception of the state" (Cassirer, 85).

That said, I think that Plato's concerns about the function of mythical thought in Greek society was justified since his attempt to conceptualize the ideal state involved understanding the basis of how knowledge is acquired both at the individual and collective level. Mythical thought, in the end, reflects only the empirical world since it is based on a projection of human life within the context of Greek tradition. Plato, as a speculative thinker, didn't restrict his attempts to acquire knowledge from the empirical world but also attempted to conceptualize the ideal.

Why was Plato so concerned with knowledge acquisition in the state? This is indeed a question that leads us to Plato's metaphysics. In his dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato attempts to understand what knowledge is and what the avenues are to acquire it. An initial definition proposes that knowledge is simply perception, which essentially indicates that whatever we perceive through the senses can be considered knowledge. A second definition proposes that knowledge is not simply perception but requires a true judgment, in other words, having a belief on the perceived object that can be asserted. A third definition proposes that knowledge is true judgment with *logos*, in other words, a true judgment with full understanding of their causes. In my interpretation of *Theaetetus*, there is no definitive answer on what counts as knowledge and it is probably one of the many attempts of Plato to speculate and challenge the existing definitions of a concept. Something that it is clear, though, is that Plato did not think that knowledge could be reduced purely in terms of perception of the empirical world. Knowledge for Plato seems to require not only perception and a true belief, but also some sort of understanding of causality of the perceived object.

Despite not finding a definitive answer on what counts as knowledge in *Theaetetus*, I think that Heraclitus' influence is coming to play on Plato's thinking in this speculative attempt. Hatab's analysis on Heraclitus proposes that "even though the *logos* is a conceptual account and

not a myth, its meaning can be understood as a depersonalized generalization of certain fundamental aspects of mythical sense” (Hatab, 175). This depersonalized generalization view of myth is a key aspect that is reflected in Plato’s thinking about the knowledge acquisition process, and in the ideal state requires a transition from *mythos* to *logos*. Overall, Plato’s main purpose was oriented towards raising the bar on how knowledge is acquired in order to apply this view on the ideal state.

Second, there are two key aspects that Plato proposes to reorient the function of mythical thought. In the first place, Plato proposes to use myth not only to present aspects of reality but also to build understanding of their causes. In the second place, Plato proposes to use myth not only to justify human behaviors but also to transfer the responsibility of human action from the gods to humans themselves. Cassirer also acknowledges this transition, and claims that “in mythical thought man is possessed by a good and evil demon; in Plato’s theory man chooses his demon.” (Cassirer, 91).

Let us now consider some of the main differences that can be used to characterize traditional Greek myth and Plato’s reformulation of myth. On the one hand, Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex* is a tragedy in which the central theme is violence, and every character is portrayed to display it to some degree—for example, the king Laius getting rid of his newborn son; Oedipus killing the old man in his chariot; and Tiresias initially refusing to fulfill his role as a prophet and telling the truth about Oedipus origins (Girard, 70). On the other hand, while not quite a myth, the allegory of the cave by Plato is a treatise on education where the central theme is the different facets to perceive reality, and how they can affect our understanding and knowledge acquisition process. Moreover, Plato emphasizes that the ability to learn must be already present in the soul, and the decision to pursue higher levels of knowledge lies within the individual willing to stay or exit the cave (*Republic*, 70).

In spite of the advantage in thematic choice in Plato’s allegory, Sophocles’ play *Oedipus Rex* attempts to present violence and fate as some alienated elements in the human condition, above and beyond their understanding. His intention is not to understand the source of violence or the participation of the oracle and the gods; rather, he aims to portray one of the most tragic endings that can happen to a man. No matter what Oedipus decides, his tragic fate is bound to happen. In addition, there seems to be an underlying assumption that fate is something outside the realm of human understanding; it seems to be a concept belonging to the gods, and therefore

the responsibility rests only on them. Any attempt to challenge their authority will result in a tragic ending like Oedipus. By contrast, Plato's allegory of the cave attempts to show the different kinds of reality that humans can experience, and how their ability to choose between them lies within humans themselves. Plato favors a conception of reality wherein *logos* is the main component for knowledge acquisition since it is closer to his vision of the highest form of knowledge, the Good.

Plato's concern of traditional Greek myth didn't necessarily represent a hard censorship of the poets. Instead, his intention was to raise the bar on how myth was used to represent cultural values with regard to divine nature, and to create better awareness on the differences between an allegorical and literal interpretation of myth. This is portrayed in the following fragment of his dialogue with Adeimantus: "A child cannot distinguish the allegorical sense from the literal, and the ideas he takes in at that age are likely to become indelibly fixed" (*Republic*, 42). Also, for Plato, the divine nature if it really existed had to be necessarily placed in a higher level than human nature; otherwise, it is just an idealized version of human nature. This is why Plato was so suspicious of the countless battles among the Greek gods since their sources of conflict were no different than those of humans. Therefore, there seems to be no consistent reason to place those gods above humanity. Certainly, Plato did think that there was a divine nature with more reality than the Greek gods and the task of the poets is to promote that reality in the state as presented in the following fragment of his dialogue with Adeimantus: "A poet, whether he is writing epic, lyric, or drama, surely ought always to represent the divine nature as it really is." (*Republic*, 42).

Let us consider why Plato may have considered that if myth was left unchecked it could lead to a degenerate state. According to Hatab, "Greek myth and poetry were not merely forms of literature or art. They were originally a form of culture, a view of the world, a source of education" (Hatab, 255). In other words, Greek myth may have been initially a way to represent the human condition but its adoption as a tradition began to shape the cultural values in Greek society and became the main influence on their view of the world and the boundaries for knowledge acquisition. Plato understood that this phenomenon was happening at the state level but it will eventually reach the individual level and knowledge will be equated with tradition. Having an immutable set of beliefs grounded purely on tradition and passed over generations can

lead to a tyrannical form of government where the ruler's commandments become unquestioned and far from being understood.

In addition, let us consider why Nietzsche's interpretation of the Platonic ideal is far from charitable. He claimed that "Plato is a coward before reality, consequently he flees into the ideal" (Nietzsche, 559). For Plato the ideal was the preferred way to understand reality but that does not mean that the empirical world must be avoided at all costs. In fact, Plato's theory of the forms recognizes that empirical reality always participates in their ideal representation and that is how we can have some common ground to exchange ideas referring to similar concepts. Furthermore, Plato was aware of the key role that the senses play when experiencing reality and this is presented in his dialogue by saying "And we are agreed also that we have not, nor could we have, obtained the idea of equality except from sight or touch or some other sense; the same is true of all the senses" (*Phaedo*, 22). Still, I think Plato's critique of the senses was not to deny what they present to us and escape into the ideal. Instead, Plato tried to show the fallibility of sense perception and their strong influence for knowledge acquisition. Moreover, Nietzsche accused Plato that the motivation for his philosophy was considered as an overly moralistic attempt that led to a decadence of Greek philosophy: "The moralism of the Greek philosophers from Plato on is pathologically conditioned; so is their esteem of dialectics. Reason-virtue-happiness, that means merely that one must imitate Socrates and counter the dark appetites with a permanent daylight—the daylight of reason" (Nietzsche, 479).

My reply to Nietzsche's critique is that humans are moral agents by nature and Plato was no exception. Morality, in the end, can be reduced to the power of tradition and culture, and this was in fact Plato's main concern in the ideal state; therefore, he had to give a moralistic account and not just focus on metaphysics but also on virtue and happiness since those elements have strong influence in the state as a whole.

That said, an initial objection to Plato's concern about myth is that his approach can be still considered dogmatic since he seems to be favoring *logos* over *mythos*. Indeed, this is a fair point, but this can be interpreted as one way to challenge the status quo of myth, namely, an attempt to speculate about the existing ways to acquire knowledge through myth and understand its limitations compared to the acquisition of knowledge through *logos*. Moreover, there is no way to propose a model for the ideal state without being considered dogmatic. Even if we

propose anarchy as the ideal model, we are still being dogmatic to impose anarchy as the ideal model.

A second objection to Plato's concern about myth is that his approach to favor *logos* over *mythos* relies on the existence of some immutable way to measure truth. I believe this is a common misconception of Plato's metaphysics that even Cassirer fell prey to by saying that Plato's theory of knowledge insisted that "facts are variable and accidental; truth is necessary and immutable" (Cassirer, 82). However, he still acknowledged that there is an ongoing tension in Plato's thought to go above and beyond the empirical world and at the same time to stay in it to understand it rationally (Cassirer, 75). I think that the reason Plato did not think truth was immutable is implicitly portrayed in all his dialogues because none of them ends with a definitive answer on some concept. Plato's dialogues usually start by posing questions about the status quo of some concepts like justice, knowledge, and virtue, among others. He then proceeds to challenge them by pointing out the possible flaws either in the theory itself or in the interpretation of the interlocutor. Finally, the dialogue ends abruptly without a definitive answer but with a conclusion that the exercise of dialectics is beneficial in the process of knowledge acquisition.

The desire of knowledge remains as a desire as long as we don't have complete knowledge of an object. If we ever have that knowledge as an immutable truth then the desire of knowledge will be gone. This is another way to understand the tension in Plato's thought because, even though he aims at an immutable truth, that is, the "form", he acknowledges that our search for knowledge begins in the empirical world. How can we reach an immutable state of knowledge if we begin in a constantly changing empirical world? Plato was aware of this contradiction but still insisted that the preferable method of acquiring knowledge is by aiming at the immutable, eternal, unchanging world. In other words, the preferable method of acquiring knowledge is by favoring the type of myths that promote better understanding of causality, not just representation.

To sum up, I have laid out the main reasons for Plato's concern about the function of myth in the state, namely, the mythical thought related to the power of tradition, and the conception of justice as the will to power. I have described two key aspects in Plato's proposal to reformulate the function of mythical thought: First, reorient the use of myth not only to represent reality but also to enhance understanding of their causes. Second, avoid using myth to justify the

intervention of the gods in good and evil, and transfer the moral responsibility of those actions to humans themselves. I have also evaluated Plato's considerations that if myth is left unchecked, it could lead to a degenerate state. Indeed, myth was so fundamental in Greek society that it shaped their cultural values, and its equation with knowledge was often detrimental for further cultural developments. Furthermore, I have presented two main objections against Plato's evaluation of mythical thought. The first objection was that Plato's approach could be considered dogmatic since he was favoring *logos* over *mythos* as the primary source of knowledge for his conception of the ideal state. This objection was granted since it will be a similar case if one favors *mythos* over *logos*. The second objection is that Plato's approach to rationalize myth relies on the existence of a necessary and immutable way to assess the truth. This objection was partially refuted by drawing a conclusion from Plato's dialogues. There seem to be no definitive answers to the questions of justice, knowledge, and virtue. Instead, there is an ongoing tension in Plato's thought to surpass the empirical world but at the same time to stay in it to understand it rationally. Finally, I have presented an alternative interpretation of the Platonic form of knowledge through myth. The desire of knowledge remains as a desire as long as we do not have complete knowledge of an object; if we ever have that knowledge as an immutable truth then the desire itself will be gone. Still, for Plato, the preferable method of acquiring knowledge is by aiming at the immutable, eternal, unchanging world; in other words, to promote understanding of their first causes.

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