Delineating the conceptual boundaries of myth: Plato and beyond

Tae-Yeoun Keum

The contributions to this Exchange represent an exceptionally fruitful discussion of the questions I hoped to raise in *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*. I am honored – as any author at the receiving end of the foregoing remarks would be – by the particular care and thoughtfulness with which the contributors have challenged me to deepen my arguments, and I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify my thinking on the place of myth in political theory. For lending their insights on a topic that has occupied me for a long time, I wish to thank all the contributors, and especially David Lay Williams, Paige Digeser, and the Critical Exchange editor for making this discussion possible.

A theme that recurs throughout the Exchange is the question of how political theorists ought to delineate the conceptual boundaries of myth. Rebecca LeMoine interrogates the relationship between myth and philosophy by asking what distinctive philosophical resources myth offers that more conventional forms of philosophical presentation do not. Together with Jill Frank, she inquires into the nature of Plato's myths and how they function within the context of his philosophical writings, while Jacob Abolafia reflects on the conditions under which philosophy can be said to have a need for myth. David Lay Williams asks after the complicated relationship between myth and other concepts, like religion, that have traditionally been associated with it. Although I cannot respond to all of the nuanced points that have been raised in their rich remarks, I hope the ensuing response can provide a modest starting point for investigating a set of difficult and provocative questions that, together, open new pathways into the study of political myth.

*

In her incisive contribution to the Exchange, Rebecca LeMoine takes issue with a central argument of *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*: the claim that myth offers unique resources for thinking that are absent from the modes of inquiry and presentation that are conventionally associated with philosophy, especially argumentative discourse. In the context of my reading of the myths in Plato's *Republic*, in particular, this claim boils down to the suggestion that these myths allow Plato to convey certain ideas in a mode that is at once authoritative and provisional. LeMoine points out that a kind of authoritativeness and openness to later revision are qualities we already find in traditional accounts of philosophy and, moreover, in Plato's own descriptions of dialectic.

LeMoine is entirely right in singling out the provisional quality of being open to revision as a characteristic feature of philosophical practices structured around argumentative reason. Indeed, it is an important component of Karl Popper's (1962) influential definition of scientific – and philosophical – knowledge as being capable of being critically examined and, depending on the result of that examination, replaced with alternatives. She is also right, though this observation might echo the philosophical calling card of a rather different tradition, in exposing the extent to which argumentative philosophy can inspire an intense, impassioned commitment to its truths – more so than people like Popper might give it credit for.

In myth, however, I believe these qualities come together in a distinctively paradoxical way. As many theorists of myth have suggested before me, the authoritativeness that mythic claims command often stem from telling just-so stories about certain, especially deep-seated and foundational, aspects of our world views that do not often come up for critical examination (Bennett 1980: 167; Flood 1996; Lincoln 1989; Sorel 1999: 21, 29;

Tutor 1972). At stake here are not abstract principles, but dense and figurative forms of thinking that frame our lived perception of reality. Such elusive imaginative frameworks have long been associated with the category of myth, but few modern theorists, with the notable exception of Hans Blumenberg and his adherents, have appreciated their capacity to be reworked by new myths (Blumenberg 1990; Bottici 2007). Taking both these things seriously requires straddling what Jill Frank has characterized in her contribution to this Exchange as a "mythic duality." In the case of the *Republic*, for instance, I have argued that Plato uses myths to repeatedly reframe a thick understanding of nature as a source of normativity. With each telling of a myth about nature and education, Plato appeals to the idea that nature is a fixed essence within each individual *while simultaneously* suggesting that nature is in fact fluid and subject to the effects of education.

Of course, there remains the broader, thornier question of whether there are in fact distinct frameworks of thinking in the background of our world views that are accessible by myths but permanently closed to argumentative or critical reason. This question is far more endemic to debates within twentieth-century continental philosophy than it is natural to Plato. However, Plato – as well as the other protagonists of my book – appear to have erred on the side of at least entertaining some version of that possibility. Certainly, they believed that myth was an especially well-suited medium for engaging an assortment of deeper, more figurative strands of our political and philosophical imaginations. This, I hope, also helps to address two of LeMoine's other questions concerning the function and place of myth in Plato's political thought. First, LeMoine suggests that one reason Plato might opt to use myth – especially if it is the case that it doesn't offer any novel resources that are unavailable to argumentative forms of philosophy – is that he understands different kinds of discourse to be appropriate to different parts of the soul. Relatedly, LeMoine also asks for a fuller account of whether Plato draws hierarchical distinctions between better and worse forms of discourse, in much the same way he does so between better and worse political arrangements and ways of leading one's life.

My reading of Plato is admittedly more invested in bringing out the extent to which Plato's conception of philosophy, and the reasoning parts of both the soul and of the city, are more closely intertwined than commonly acknowledged on mythic ways of framing our world views. Accordingly, I've often found myself downplaying the hierarchical distinctions that Plato draws between the various parts of the soul and the city. At least where the thought processes of individuals are concerned, however, I believe that philosophers are, for Plato, just as affected by the stuff of myth as their compatriots and fellow human beings are. This may very well be the case because, as LeMoine suggests, myth speaks more directly to those parts of the soul that deal in vivid images, fantasies, and other figurative forms of thinking that work in tandem with abstract reasoning to guide and orient our understanding of the world. What I am trying to resist, however, is the line of thinking that designates myth as an inferior and purely emotional medium, used only to persuade audiences of ideas that have already been worked out beforehand in a more conventionally rational mode. In that regard, I also resist the temptation to map myth and argumentative discourse onto the kinds of neat hierarchical distinctions we see in Plato's metaphysics. As Jill Frank (2018) reminds us, Plato uses many different literary devices in his dialogues for different purposes – myth is simply one of those literary devices, and the one I've chosen to focus on in my project. I am also fully in agreement with LeMoine's undertaking in her own *Plato's Caves* of disclosing the importance of Plato's theory of culture to his political thought (2020). As a theorist of culture, Plato, as I read him, understood that the cultural background to politics was a space shaped by the exchange, not only of arguments, but of the entire array of diverse forms that ideas can take.

Jill Frank is more willing than LeMoine to accept my claim that the myths of the *Republic* offer a distinctively authoritative yet provisional means of reinscribing the concepts that are taken for granted in culture and society. Nonetheless, she also sees the need for a more fine-grained defense of this particular interpretation of Plato's text. For instance, she questions my insistence on using the language of sleeping and waking to establish the connection between the three major myths of the *Republic*, especially when Plato does not in fact use words derived from or otherwise related to "sleep" in the passages in question. The choice of language here is important, in particular, because it can risk painting a misleading picture of the process of education as a strict binary – so that a student might be considered either educated or uneducated in much the same way a person is either sleeping or awake at any given point in time. Similarly, Frank also points to a potential incongruity between the myths' complex and paradoxical representation of nature, and the more one-sided treatment of the same concept elsewhere throughout the *Republic*.

I appreciate Frank's commitment to careful and accurate readings of Plato's text, and especially his word choices. This is a broader methodological commitment that I believe I share with both Frank and LeMoine. Nonetheless I would still like to stand by my representation of the three major myths of the *Republic* as stories of sleeping and waking. At one level, I take Plato to be playing with a number of preexisting tropes at the nexus of Greek mythology, literature, and religious thought – which he incorporates into his own rhetoric elsewhere – that singled out sleep as a special state of being: as a site of supernatural dreams, as a pause from living (Dodds 1973: 102-134; Harris 2009; Wohl 2020). Here it may make sense to turn exclusively to the language of dreaming, which Frank finds more suitable, to describe the plot structure common to the *Republic*'s myths. But at another level, I think the contrast between sleeping and waking helps bring out a parallel contrast between reality and unreality, which I believe Plato intended to make a major feature of the three analogous myths. If my description of these myths appears to impose a misleading binary on an otherwise continuous and messy process of education, it is because this is part of the myths' intended effect.

It is important, in each myth, that a prior understanding of the content of nature is summarily dismissed in favor of a new conceptualization, ushering in a new sense of reality that is discontinuous with what had come before. This is the part of the myth's work that I've described as distinctively authoritative, which is just as important as the part that reminds audiences of the ultimate provisionality of such authoritative understandings. The *kallipolis* is structured around the fixed images of individual nature that come out at the other end of these conceptual reshufflings. For the practical purposes of running the *kallipolis*, the guardians will have to resort to treating the natures of citizens *as though* they were fixed essences along the lines of how they are depicted in the earlier two myths. Plato's readers, however, will also walk away with a view of nature that is far malleable, and unstable, than such depictions let on.[1]

This brings us to Frank's helpful – and provocative – suggestion that reading Platonic myths well, in all their nuance and complexity, may very well turn out to be much more demanding on their audiences than grasping the philosophical arguments. As I hope I've made clear in the foregoing discussion, Plato requires his readers to inhabit a paradoxical, and potentially unsettling, mindset as they take in the contradictory ideas about nature presented in the myths of the *Republic*. In her work, Frank (2018: 9) has memorably characterized Plato as a writer who teaches his readers how to read, and I very much take these myths to be one such instance where Plato challenges us to be active rather than passive

[1] I have elsewhere tried to give a more detailed account of the shifting understandings of nature in the *Republic* at these mythic junctures (Keum 2020a).

readers. I do not wish to downplay the ways in which the experience of reading Plato's myths can often be easier than reading the arguments: they are memorable and vivid, and they naturally invite creative interpretations. And it also bears emphasizing that none of the protagonists of my book – the authors of the Platonic mythic tradition – read the *Republic* myths in the idiosyncratic way I do. But I believe both Plato and his successors in this tradition intuited the importance of acknowledging that being a better consumer of myths entailed extra work that was, if not more difficult than the formulation of arguments, different and innovative.

If LeMoine and Frank both raise questions regarding the relationship between myth and argumentative forms of philosophy, David Lay Williams pushes for clarification on the conceptual boundaries between myth and a number of categories that have traditionally been associated with it. In his thoughtful contribution to this Exchange, he compares the Platonic mythic tradition at the center of my book to T.K. Seung's work on a "poetic tradition" of Western philosophy (2007). He likewise points to the close affinity in Plato's political works between myth and music, and between myth and religion. Williams's point is that the separation I draw in my book between myth and "other modes of non-syllogistic persuasion" may ultimately be too artificial. This has important consequences. If myth is in fact inseparable from these categories, William suggests, the contemporary critics of myth invoked in my book may very well be far more open to it than I acknowledge – notably Jürgen Habermas, who has spent the last several decades giving sustained philosophical attention to sacred sources of meaning persisting in modern culture and politics.

One of my central aims in writing *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* was to make a case for recognizing myth as a distinct category of study, separate from some of the headings it has traditionally been swept under. In pursuing this project, I may be guilty of having sidelined the complex ways in which myth interacts with cultural forms like music, poetry, religion, or – an example that features prominently in Jacob Abolafia's contribution – tragedy. In the cultural context in which Plato was writing, myth existed as part of an oral tradition of inherited tales about the gods, but it simultaneously also provided the subject matter for a great deal of art, including tragedy, poetry and lyric, as well as the visual arts. These spheres do not overlap in the same way in the landscape of modern culture.[2] Nonetheless the resources of the arts often continue to work in tandem with myth to the extent that they amplify and otherwise lend expression, usually in more fleshed-out forms, to preexisting myths. Crucially, this process can also result in creative, at times subversive, reinterpretations.

Plato and his successors in the mythic tradition, however, were engaged in a far more specific project: the invention and development of a distinct genre of philosophical myth writing. For this purpose, several of the protagonists of my book appropriated the inherited tropes of oral mythological traditions to tell mythic stories of their own invention, which they wrote down and integrated into larger philosophical works that were otherwise composed in a very different style. For all of the authors in this tradition, Plato's myths were a paradigmatic reference point. And especially for the more modern thinkers among them, myth, in contradistinction to other literary art forms, carried a particular set of theoretical valences that they were trying to capture through the act of philosophical myth-writing. These idiosyncratic features, in turn, help distinguish the Platonic mythic tradition from a more general poetic tradition in philosophy, even though the two share similar ideas about the efficacy of certain,

[2] The relative centrality of myth to the Greek arts did, however, provide the inspiration for the early German Idealists' vision for a new mythology for the modern age.

more figurative forms of expression in reaching philosophical insights that may otherwise be closed to argumentative reason.

Delineating the boundary between myth and religion is a more complicated matter, especially in the context of discussions of secularization or political theology, where the concept of religion is itself treated as an expansive and evolving category. When religion is construed in the broadest possible manner, it can be tempting to think of it in terms of a comprehensive heading that more or less encompasses myth. However, in *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*, I have adopted what I believe to be a largely secular approach to myth, notwithstanding the undeniable importance of religious ideas to authors like Leibniz and Schelling. Through their philosophical engagement with myth, Plato and his successors disclose features of it that are not typically associated with religion: the capacity of myths to influence our world views even when they are not the objects of earnest belief; their access to deep-seated aspects of our imaginations that – while foundational – are not necessarily religious in content; the creative and often playful relationship that individuals can have with them.

In so doing, they offer a much-needed counterweight to a dominant theoretical framework for understanding myth and its possibilities in sacred terms. Here, the case of Jürgen Habermas is instructive. Many of the values central to Plato and the mythic tradition are also ideas that Habermas champions: a heightened appreciation for the deep cultural frameworks operating in the background of our world views, and the need to engage and reshape those frameworks in alignment with our ideals. But even Habermas's late "turn" to religion (Harrington 2007) has failed to yield a more meaningfully nuanced conceptualization of myth than that presented in his early work, precisely because he has resisted thinking of myth independently from religion. Rather, myth appears to have consistently figured in his thought – from as early as *Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* (Habermas 1976) to the recent *This Too a History of Human Knowledge* (Habermas 2019) – as a kind of primeval prelude to the ethical wellspring of religion.

Finally, Jacob Abolafia's rich and challenging remarks interrogate my suggestion in *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* that philosophy may very well have an enduring need for myth. He points to two methodological traditions, distinct from the tradition I have reconstructed in my book, that offer two alternative visions of what it might mean for philosophy to need myth. For Leo Strauss and the tradition associated with him, philosophy's need for myth is contingent on there being diverse audiences to philosophy – a diversity that often manifests in hierarchical differences. For adherents of what Abolafia terms the "contextualist" approach to the history of political thought, calls for the literary need for myth in philosophy emerge against the backdrop of new mythic ideas – say, deeper, elusive myths about national identity – that have entered cultural imaginaries in specific historical contexts.

Abolafia notes that the mythological vision of the early German Idealists, in particular, proves to be an especially fruitful test case for the range of possible understandings of the philosophical need for myth. After all, the author of the Oldest Systematic Program, the document that announces the early German Idealist project for the new mythology, is explicit in drawing hierarchical differences between philosophers and non-philosophers, if only for the purposes of expressing a desire for these distances to be bridged. Strauss, on Abolafia's reading, viewed German Idealism as a moment heralding the advent of egalitarianism, and with it, the end of the need for philosophers to tell myths to their non-philosophic fellow citizens. In the German Idealist vision for the new mythology, however, that order appears to be reversed. Its central theorists regarded the new mythology as precisely the medium that helps bring about a more egalitarian society, not the other way

around. Moreover, rather than obviate the need for myth, the new egalitarianism would install mythology as a new common philosophical language for all the citizenry. The German Idealist understanding of the new mythology is a pretty idiosyncratic take and, as Abolafia rightly notes, conditioned by a number of historical factors specific to Germany at the turn of the eighteenth century (Beiser 2002; Manuel 1959; Pinkard 2002). However, this vision still captures an important theme for the Platonic mythic tradition, whose authors sketched out a nuanced relationship between myth and philosophy that goes beyond instrumental rhetoric. In so doing, they sought to collapse what often emerges in Straussian accounts of myth as an ironic distance between philosophers and the audiences to their myths.

*

Where, then, does this leave us? Taking his cue from Nietzsche and from Benjamin, Abolafia reminds us that it remains an open question as to whether new forms of philosophical myth can thrive in a contemporary context. His ambivalence, in turn, comes from a similar place as the important challenge he raises concerning the theoretical distinction that I have drawn between "deep" and "literary" myths. This is a distinction that I anticipate many contemporary scholars of myth may also find artificial, and it may very well be the case that its usefulness may be limited to the context of the particular tradition I have sought to recover in my book – although, as Abolafia implies, there can be broader and narrower ways of policing the boundaries even of this tradition of philosophical myth-making.

All the same, I believe there is valuable conceptual clarity to be gained from thinking of the literary genre of myth apart from the things it has been made to stand for. To begin, it allows us to appreciate the historical contingency of how the genre came to act as a proxy for a potentially disproportionate array of elusive cultural phenomena. This may end up prompting future scholars of myth to reevaluate the category altogether as they come up with finer frameworks of classification, especially for many undertheorized phenomena in contemporary politics that are currently being construed in mythic terms. But in many of these cases, scholars of myth will also find themselves drawing renewed emphasis on the specifically narrative, symbolically fraught, and otherwise figurative character of the forces that shape and reshape our thinking.

Bibliography

Beiser, F. 2002. German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781-1801. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bennett, W. L. 1980. 'Myth, Ritual, and Political Control'. *Journal of Communication* 30: 166–79.

Blumenberg, H. 1990. *Work on Myth*, trans. R. M. Wallace. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Bottici, C. 2007. *A Philosophy of Political Myth*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dodds, E. 1973. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Flood, C. 1996. *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction*. New York: Garland.

Frank, J. 2018. *Poetic Justice: Rereading Plato's* Republic. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Habermas, J. 1979. 'Toward a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism,' in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, trans. T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon: 130-177.

Habermas, J. 2019. *Auch Eine Geschichte der Philosophie*, 2 vols. Berlin: Suhrkamp.

Harrington, A. 2007. 'Habermas's Theological Turn?' *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 37 (1): 45–61.

Harris, W. 2009. *Dreams and Experience in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Keum, T. 2020a. 'Plato's Myth of Er and the Reconfiguration of Nature'. *American Political Science Review* 114 (1): 54-67.

LeMoine, R. 2020. *Plato's Caves: The Liberating Sting of Cultural Diversity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, B. 1989. *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual, and Classification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Manuel, F. 1959. The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Pinkard, T. 2002. German Philosophy, 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Popper, K. 1962. *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*. New York: Basic Books.

Seung. T. K. 'The Battle of Science and Poetry for the Soul of Philosophy', in *The Cultural Background of Western Philosophy*. Seoul: Korean Academic Research Council.

Sorel, G. 1999. *Reflections on Violence*, trans. J. Jennings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tudor, H. 1972. *Political Myth*. New York: Praeger.

Wohl, V. 2020. 'The Sleep of Reason: Sleep and the Philosophical Soul in Ancient Greece'. *Classical Antiquity* 39 (1): 126-51.