Summer 1968

Myth and Transcendence in Plato

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Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.5840/thought196843220

http://doi.org/10.5840/thought196843220

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Plato’s myths are carefully chosen, beautifully executed and fully justified masterpieces of philosophical discourse—necessary elements of the “Phaedrus” and the other middle dialogues.

MYTH AND TRANSCENDENCE IN PLATO

SISTER M. JOHN GREGORY

Plato is undoubtedly the greatest myth-maker in the history of philosophy and perhaps, with the exception of Dante, the greatest myth-maker in all of history. But Plato’s myths present problems which Dante’s Divina Commedia does not, for myth is certainly a legitimate element in poetry and the Divina Commedia, whatever its philosophical or theological significance, is, first and foremost, poetry. The dialogues of Plato, however, whatever their poetic valence (and it is admittedly great), are first and foremost philosophical discourse. Although scholars disagree profoundly on the meaning of the Platonic myths, they agree that these myths are not literary devices or stylis-
tic ornaments. The myths are integral to Platonic philosophy and, for this reason, the problems they present must be studied if Plato is to be understood.

The first problem with the Platonic myths is to understand their role in Plato's philosophy. The second problem is to justify the use of myth or poetry in a philosophical work, a justification that can only be achieved by showing that they are not only integral to the works in which they occur but specially suited to the philosophical task at hand. A third problem, peculiar to Plato, arises from the fact that he explicitly repudiated both the content and the written or dramatic method of presentation of poetry in general and myth in particular. How, then, even granting that poetic myth is a legitimate philosophical device (which has not been established), can one justify Plato's use of written myth to convey his thought?

This article will attempt first to suggest a resolution of the last-mentioned difficulty. Then, having shown that Plato's use of myth is consistent with his own philosophical principles and method, it will attempt to handle the first two problems by analyzing a middle-period myth (from the Phaedrus) in the context of a theory of myth in relation to Plato's doctrine of the transcendent. The analysis will attempt to set forth and support the thesis that the myths are, for Plato, a philosophical method peculiarly well adapted for achieving the twofold objective of the dialogues in which they occur. The analysis of the Phaedrus myth will be followed by brief summary sketches of the other three myths of the middle period designed to show that the Phaedrus myth is not an isolated case but a particularly clear example of poetry—but only in others.”

Kaufmann holds that Plato gave

I. THE PROBLEM OF MYTH IN PLATO

Numerous passages in Plato are devoted to his attack upon poetry in general and myth in particular. This attack is twofold. Plato objects first and most strongly to the content of such literature. He objects secondly to the method of its presentation, whether this be dramatic presentation which fosters ill-regulated emotion or written presentation which, being static and imitative, is ill suited to teach the truth. Plato himself, however, used poetic myth in his dialogues and, although he did not present his teaching on the stage he did present it in writing. It has been suggested that Plato's practice was grossly
inconsistent with his theory in respect to poetry. Walter Kaufmann, in his analysis of the poetry paradox in Plato, calls him "the myth-intoxicated protagonist of reason... who recognized the dangers of poetry—but only in others."1 Kaufmann holds that Plato gave deliberate assent to Socrates' criticism of any but the dialectical approach to knowledge but that Socrates' attitude "did not permanently satisfy the mind of Plato. His bent was too mystical and speculative, or in one word, too poetical."2 Kaufmann considers Plato, like Nietzsche, a victim of his own poetic genius. He says that Plato's irresistible poetic inspiration drove him to write, despite the example of Socrates,3 and to write precisely the type of thing that Socrates proscribed. Plato, he says, rivaled the very poets he condemned "not only in his comprehensive visions and in the overall design of many dialogues, but also in the continual abandonment of any pretense of rational inquiry for the sake of what is frankly admitted to be myth. Whether these myths draw freely on ancient lore or are invented on the spur of the moment, it was surely not reason that fashioned them, nor the lust for truth, but the poetic impulse."4 Furthermore, says Kaufmann, Plato defeats the very purpose of his dialogues when "with his beautiful images,... [he] puts the critical sense to sleep."5

This position, which is shared by other critics of Plato, seems, upon careful reading of Plato's own words about poetry and writing, to be superficial. First, it seems highly unlikely that Plato was unaware of what he was doing in his use of poetry or in his use of writing. The classical strife between poetry and philosophy among the Greeks was in an advanced stage by the time Plato began to write. The crux of the strife was the subject of the attributes of the gods,6 a subject to which Plato devoted considerable attention and effort. Philosophers, notably Xenophanes, Anaxagoras, the sophists, and Democritus, for various reasons and with various results, had taken strong stands against the myths. And the "Homeridae" had advanced equally strong claims that the poetry of Homer was the
quintessence of moral and religious teaching. It seems hardly possible that Plato could have been unconscious of the conflict or insensitive to the relation of his own work to it. James Adam says, in fact, that “it is precisely in Plato, who more than any other Greek author unites the poet and the philosopher, that this hostility to Greek poetry is most marked.” Perhaps, however, he suggests a basic reason for the type of misunderstanding represented by Kaufmann when he observes that the works of Plato have suffered more at the hands of professional allegorizers than any other work except the Pentateuch. But the fact that Plato’s works have been illegitimately “poetized” is not Plato’s fault and indicates no weakness in his works themselves. It certainly does not suggest that Plato was unaware of the philosophy-poetry conflict or that, swept along by poetic inspiration, he wrote poetry without being aware that he was writing it or that he was writing it into his philosophical works. If Plato wrote poetry in his philosophical works he did it on purpose.

Secondly, Plato nowhere violates his own expressed position in regard to either poetry or writing. Plato objected to poetry in general and to myths in particular for two reasons: they were untrue and they were conducive to immorality. Most of the myths and tragedies were untrue because they presented the gods as indifferent to men or as immoral and inconstant. Furthermore, since myths, especially those of Homer and Hesiod, were almost the sole content of orthodox theology, and the tragedies, especially those of Aeschylus, were almost the sole vehicles of moral teaching in Plato’s day, these untrue doctrines of the gods were, in his opinion, powerful incentives to immorality. That Plato considered the myths untrue is plain. He says that the story that the gods stole from one another “is a tale with neither truth nor semblance of truth about it.” Homer and

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7 Ibid., pp. 1-2, 11-12.
8 Ibid., p. 3.
9 Ibid., p. 15.
11 Adam, op. cit., pp. 7-8.
Hesiod, says Plato, “composed false stories which they told and still tell mankind” (Rep. II, 377d). In particular, Plato regarded Hesiod’s account of the gory feud of Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus as “the greatest lie” (Rep. II, 377e). Such stories he also refers to as “errors” and “follies” (Rep. II, 379d), and as “perverse imaginations” (Critias, 109b). The reason for his position is simple and clear. Plato, by dialectic, had “proved . . . that for evil to arise from gods is an impossibility” (Rep. III, 391d, e). Therefore, what he says of Asclepius, son of Apollo, who reportedly took a bribe, is true for all gods and children of gods: “If he was the son of a god he was not avaricious . . . and if he was greedy of gain he was not the son of a god” (Rep. III, 408c). Evil and divinity, Plato maintains, are strict contradictions.

Not only were these stories false, but, according to Plato, they were encouragements to personal and social immorality. They encouraged impiety toward parents (Euthyphro, 6b; Laws X, 886c,d), contention and greediness among citizens (Critias, 109b), rapes and atrocities of all kinds (Rep. III, 391d) because, by referring to the myths, one who did such things could maintain that he did “no deed of shame, but an act such as is done by the very gods themselves” (Laws XII, 941b). Therefore, “even if they were true” (which they are not), such stories must not be told in the model state (Rep. II, 378a, b).

This twofold objection to the literature of Greece, however, cannot be made to support the position that Plato rejected all myth and poetry. Plato was indifferent to myths that were not doctrinally objectionable or morally debilitating. He says, “we may dismiss the primitive stories without more ado; let them be told in any way heaven pleases” (Laws X, 886d). In answer to Phaedrus’ question about whether he believed the myth of Boreas seizing Orithyia, Plato, through the mouth of Socrates as usual, says that he has no time for the pseudo-scientific myth-smashing of the contemporary atheists and he certainly cannot verify the accounts. “Consequently I don’t bother about such things, but accept the current beliefs about them” (Phaedrus, 229c-230a).

Furthermore, Plato held that true myths were the result of a “divine subsequent references to the writings of Plato will be indicated by dialogue and number given in parentheses immediately after the quotation in the text of the paper.
madness” (Phaedrus, 265a) or inspiration by the Muses. Such myths were substantially true. Socrates says to Phaedrus about the myth of that dialogue, which he calls “a mythical hymn of praise,” that by it “we attained some degree of truth, though we may well have sometimes gone astray—the blend resulting in a discourse which had some claim to plausibility” (Phaedrus, 265 b,c). Not only were some myths true but some were conducive to morality and to be encouraged as we read in the Republic: “And the stories on the accepted list we will induce nurses and mothers to tell to the children and so shape their souls by these stories” (II, 377c). It seems then, that Plato, in telling myths which, as will be shown below, he believed to be substantially true and morally elevating, did not in practice repudiate his theoretical objections to myth, for he was not using the type of myth to which he objected.

For analogous reasons it must also be denied that Plato contradicted himself on the subject of writing. It is scarcely possible that Plato would not have seen a blatant inconsistency between his prohibition of writing in the Seventh Letter and his written dialogues or between the admonition at the close of the Thirteenth Letter and the doctrine of the Seventh Letter if such an inconsistency existed. How could he have written, “Preserve this letter, either itself or a memorandum of it” (Let. XIII, 363e), if he conceded no function to written works? But even if this closing admonition with its immediately preceding injunction to attend to the subject matter of his written communications were an inadvertent contradiction, the long passage in Letter VII (341, c-e) in which he maintains, “I have certainly composed no work in regard to it [his philosophy] nor shall I ever do so in future, for there is no way of putting it in words like other studies,” cannot be explained as an oversight. Either Plato did not have even normal intelligence or else he did not intend to proscribe the type of writing which his dialogues are. History inclines one against the former opinion.

Plato objected to writing for two reasons, closely analogous to his reasons for rejecting false myth. He objected to writing because it was not true, or at least was so far from the truth as to do more

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14 The problem of truth in Platonic myths will be taken up at the end of Part IIa.
16 Ibid., p. 66.
harm than good. And he objected to its effects on the readers. First, Plato maintained that ordinary writing is in the same category as painting, namely, at least three removes from the Forms which it represents.\footnote{Rexine, op. cit., p. 53.} According to Plato the Forms are known by the philosopher whose characteristic artifact is the word-picture. This word-picture in the mind is the most direct representation of the Forms and is expressed in philosophical discourse. The craftsman, in producing a material thing, also imitates the Forms, but not as well. The artist, who imitates the material thing which is an imitation of the Form, is so far removed from the truth that the representation is faint at best.\footnote{See David Gallup, "Image and Reality in Plato's Republic," Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie, 47 (1965), 123 for an interesting diagram of Plato's theory of representation.} And one who studies the painting or written work is producing in his own mind an even foggier representation. Thus Plato's lack of esteem for the imitative artist, whether painter or poet. However, not all artistic writers, according to Plato, are imitative in the pejorative sense. In the \textit{Phaedrus} the poet is presented as one under divine inspiration (265a). In the same dialogue, when Plato gives the rank of various reincarnation patterns, he places the "follower of the Muses," that is, the poet, in the first category with the philosopher and "the poet or other imitative artist" in the sixth (238d,e). It would seem, then, that for Plato there is imitative and nonimitative writing. He rejects only that writing which is, as he tells Phaedrus, "truly analogous to painting." Such pieces, like paintings, "seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on telling you just the same thing forever" (275d). Such writing is the kind that Phaedrus unwisely extolled in the speech of Lysias, thereby exciting Socrates to a blasphemous speech against the god of Love. Those, however, who write under the direct inspiration of the Muses are under a most direct influence of the Forms. Plato, in his myths, is in this latter category. As for his dialogues, they are not imitations of anything. They are the word-picture of the philosopher, the truest possible representations of the Forms, set down on paper.

Furthermore, Plato's works do not violate his principles regarding
the effects of written works on the readers. Philosophy, says Plato, must come about in a person through long “attendance on instruction in the subject itself and . . . close companionship” from which “suddenly, like a blaze kindled by a leaping spark, it is generated in the soul and at once becomes self-sustaining” (Let. VII, 341d). If it comes through written explanation it will fall into the wrong hands (Phaedrus, 275e) and “excite in some an unjustified contempt . . . in others certain lofty and vain hopes, as if they had acquired some awesome lore” (Let. VII, 342a). This will happen, he goes on to explain, because of the imitative nature of writing which is far removed from the truth. However, Plato’s own dialogues, of which his myths are part, are not imitative treatises open to misinterpretation by his readers. They are dialogues in which the reader is a participant. If the reader participates, philosophy will be born in him in much the same way it would be in one who sat at the feet of Socrates. If the reader cannot or does not participate he will not have any more idea what is being said than a nonattentive interlocutor at a Socratic dialogue, for the dialogues of Plato do not instruct; they suggest the direction of the truth and turn the attention of the student toward it. Hence, there is no danger that the nonparticipant reader will suffer the ill effects of reading an imitative philosophical treatise.

It would seem, in conclusion, that whatever other objections may be lodged against the myths of Plato he cannot be condemned out of his own mouth. He repudiated myths that were false and morally degrading and produced myths that were substantially true and morally elevating. He condemned writing as a method of conveying philosophy because it was imitative and open to misunderstanding and abuse by the unintelligent or the unvirtuous. He wrote dialogues which were not imitative but fresh as the spoken word, true to the word-picture in the mind of the philosopher and which would either kindle the spark of philosophy in participant readers or be completely lost on the inattentive and hence immune from misunderstanding and abuse.

II. MYTH AND TRANSCENDENCE

Having justified Plato’s use of myth from the point of view of its consistency with his own doctrine and method, we turn to the
more difficult task of investigating the myth as a genuinely philosophical method for dealing with the transcendent. First, we will discuss myth itself in an attempt to set forth its peculiar potentialities for transcendental discourse; second, we will discuss the transcendent in Plato in an attempt to show the peculiar aptitude of his doctrine for mythical explanation.

A. Myth as Philosophical Method

Myth has played an important part in every known civilization. Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in mythography and such a confusing proliferation of theories and interpretations that it is seemingly impossible to find any commonly accepted definition, classification, theory of origin, or theory of use in regard to myth. Nevertheless, it is necessary to attempt some synthesis on the subject in order to make any judgment about the role of myth in Plato.

The origin of myth is shrouded in the mystery of the dawn of human consciousness but it seems to be basically the approach of man to a world with which he is in vital continuity, which is not an “it” but a “thou,” which is, in short, living and active. In nature, myth is generally considered to be poetic but there is no consensus about whether it is the poetry of ritual, the poetic history of some important personage, the poetic stage in the development of rational thought, poetic folklore, or simply a poetry which beautifies the inadequacies of primitive science. The function of myth may be to entertain, to explain, or to tackle eschatological problems. More important for our purposes than the origin, nature, or function of myth is the form of myth and its subject matter. Walter Ong has a very provocative theory of myth which suggests that it is a form of expression which exploits the potential coefficient in finite being through the economy of indirection. What he means by this is that a finite being “is not self-contained, not pure act, but is faced outward

21 Weisinger, op. cit.
to other things—ultimately to God."\textsuperscript{23} This "facing outward" is the coefficient of potentiality in things, a dimension of reality which cannot be dealt with in the direct language of philosophy and science by which we express the explicit truth of the actual insofar as it is actual, but whose implicit truth can be hinted at through the indirect language of symbol and image.\textsuperscript{24} That in man's experience which is most "potential" is his relation with the transcendent and this perhaps suggests why myth has been most often and most profoundly associated (as it is in Plato) with the transcendent. The "economy of indirection" which hints at implicit truth is symbolic, metaphorical, pictorial, imaginative. However, none of these adjectives suggests that the myth-maker is talking in representations. Mythical formulations do not simply stand for the truth; they express the truth.\textsuperscript{25} Perhaps from these few background notions it will be possible to piece together a minimum description of the form and content of myth with which to approach Plato's work.\textsuperscript{26}

First, let us say what myth is not. Almost all modern authorities agree that myth is not simply a story or an inaccurate account of natural phenomena.\textsuperscript{27} Neither is it an allegory although allegory functions occasionally as "incidental material" within a myth.\textsuperscript{28} Allegory is an illustrative image rendering pictorially results which have been obtained by argument.\textsuperscript{29} It is, therefore, in the line of abstraction, of direct expression of explicit truth.\textsuperscript{30} Further, myth is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 136-137. Ong opposes myth to philosophy but the very reason he gives for the opposition seems to me to be the reason why Plato used myth for philosophical purposes, namely, that the philosophical truths which he treated in myth were susceptible only of an indirect approach.
\item \textsuperscript{26} The background for the following paragraph is derived from Frankfort, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 8; Ingo Hermann, \textit{Encounters with the New Testament}, trans. Raymond Meyerpeter (New York, 1964), p. 29; Mircea Eliade, \textit{Images and Symbols} (New York, 1961), pp. 11, 15; and from general references on mythology.
\item \textsuperscript{27} Thrall and Hibbard, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 299.
\item \textsuperscript{28} Stewart, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 28.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ong, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 139.
\end{itemize}
not a parable or fable because it has no meaning or moral other than itself. Myths cannot and should not be interpreted in the way parables are and such interpretation is one of the chief injustices that has been done to the works of Plato throughout the centuries.

Myth can be defined, tentatively, as a "tissue of symbolism clothing a mystery." Symbol, metaphor, and analogy are the basic constituents of the myth-form. Symbols are presentational without being abstractive. They are translucent to the reality they present, partaking of what they render present. Metaphor is a kind of verbal symbol which is particularly well adapted to the economy of indirection which is characteristic of myth. Analogy, which is simply an extended metaphor, is likewise an important element in the mythical form. Myths are usually, but not necessarily, narrative in form. Historical referents, use of authority (for example, Homeric quotations in Plato's myths), and the incorporation of details of contemporary science (for example, the suspension theory of the earth’s placement in the Phaedo myth) are techniques in the mythical form used to enhance its credibility but, like narration, are not essential to it. In short, what is essential to the mythical form is poetic symbolism.

In regard to the content of myth, namely, mystery, the picture is infinitely more difficult to delineate and much more important. Basically, myth is concerned with the transcendent, with what John Stewart calls the "a priori elements in man’s experience" or what Clifton Collins calls simply "the unseen realities transcending all mortal experience." At risk of grossly oversimplifying man’s richest experiences, one could say that man has a twofold relation with the infinite, cognitive and mystical. Man seeks to know that which is beyond him and to participate in it. Myth is concerned with both aspects of the relation.

Man comes to know the transcendent ultimately only through some kind of revelation, either supernatural revelation such as that given to Diotima as recounted in the Symposium or the natural ex-

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31 Stewart, op. cit., p. 39.
33 Ong, op. cit., p. 139.
34 Stewart, op. cit., p. 213.
PHILOSOPHY EXPERIENCE OF STANDING “AS A FINITUDE IN THE MIDST OF AN INFINITE COSMOS . . . [WITH WHICH] HE HAS SIMULTANEOUS RELATIONS OF CONJUNCTION AND DISCONTINUITY.” 36 Socrates seemed to have been absorbed in some such encounter with the transcendent just before entering the banquet chamber of Agathon in the Symposium. Myth is both a means of thinking about what is grasped in the transcendental experience and a method of expressing it. Plato acknowledges his use of myth as a tool of thought in several places. A notable example from the Laws is the Athenian’s answer to the question on the nature of the supremely good soul: “Let us beware of creating a darkness at noonday for ourselves by gazing, so to say, direct at the sun as we give our answer, as though we could hope to attain adequate vision and perception of wisdom with mortal eyes. It will be the safer course to turn our gaze on an image of the object of our quest” (X, 897d). Sometimes the myth-image can function as a kind of model or paradigm of reality with which to think about that reality. 37 In whatever way the myth is used the thinker selects the symbols of the myth rationally according to their appropriateness. The principle of appropriateness is both rational and affective, 38 rational because the mind sees that the symbol is somehow what one is thinking about and affective because it is a feeling-response to reality as a value rather than a logical or scientific response. 39

But thinking about the transcendent is not the totality of the cognitive relation, for the thinker must also communicate his grasp of the world beyond. Myth is a method of expressing symbolically what one has grasped. It is not an abandonment of thought (as Kaufmann suggested) but it is thought in a different key. The reader feels

. . . when . . . Socrates or another great interlocutor opens his mouth in Myth, that the movement of the Philosophic Drama is not arrested, but is being sustained, at a crisis, on another plane. The Myth bursts in upon the Dialogue with a revelation of something new and strange; the narrow, matter-of-fact, workaday experience, which the argumentative conversation puts in evidence,

36 Hathorn, op. cit., p. 29.
is suddenly flooded, as it were, and transfused by the inrush of a vast experience, as from another world—“Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”

Knowing the transcendent and communicating one’s grasp still does not exhaust man’s relation to the other. There is a longing to participate. Myth, among primitive peoples, is often the catechesis of ritual, the verbal dimension of initiation. Plato’s interest in the Forms extends far beyond a desire to know about them. He is motivated by “the desire of the mystic to unite himself with the eternal” as well as to bring all the members of the state to a participation in the Good. But for Plato myth functioned differently from the way it did for the votaries of the Mysteries. For them the rites were the means of salvation and myth explained and made present for mind and emotion what was being accomplished sacramentally by the ritual. For Plato the myth itself, as we shall see, is the means of salvation because contemplation of the Forms is the primary mode of participation rather than any rite of initiation, and it is precisely by and in myth that one contemplates that which is not of this world.

The content of myth, then, is seen to be a cognitive and mystical relation to the transcendent. The revelation of the Absolute is penetrated more and more profoundly by means of imaginative cognition or “mythical thinking” and communicated in the myth form. The Absolute is reached mystically through myth-irradiated ritual or mythopoeic contemplation.

Stewart develops these basic notions on the content of myth in their application to the Platonic myths at great length in the Introduction to The Myths of Plato. He defines “transcendental feeling” as the “solemn sense of the immediate presence of ‘That which was, and is, and ever shall be’” experienced in a kind of waking dream that transports us to a world where time is not, just long enough to create the impression, at the moment of “waking,” that the things of this world are images of that other world. The myth itself “regulates” the transcendental feeling, helps the “waking dreamer” to organize the content of his experience, and then affords him a suitable vehicle

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40 Ibid., p. 25.
41 Thomas, op. cit., p. 9.
42 Stewart, op. cit., p. 14. (This reference is to the Introduction by Levy.)
43 Ibid., pp. 46-79.
for setting it forth and inducing in the hearer or reader the same
transcendental feeling. This seems a very clear analysis of Plato's
use of myth, particularly in the middle dialogues in which he gathers
his interlocutors up into a veritable waking dream that transports
them into the upper world, makes them witnesses of judgment and
reincarnation, and returns them to the present with a certitude that
that which they have experienced in myth is truly there and more
real than the fleeting shadows of this lower world. 44

The final question regarding myth, and crucial one when myth is
an integral part of philosophy, is that of its truth-value. The question
arises because myth is frequently difficult to interpret 45 and, at least
in Plato, occurs so frequently in the context of tentative conclusions 46
that it seems to be almost a function of intellectual insecurity. But
this intellectual insecurity is not doubt. It is the coupling of adamant
conviction with a sense of intellectual weakness before the mystery
of transcendence. Myths are not in the order of demonstration but of
faith. They set forth the content of revelation, not of empirical re­
search. They are religious, not scientific. Myths are Plato's way of
discussing the "Truth which he believes and feels, but cannot pre­
cisely [sic] define." 47 But there is no question about the truth of the
myths in the mind of Plato. To him they are on a par with science in
truth-value, 48 although the truth is of a different order. The only real
question is one of facticity and this question is really irrelevant
for the "facts" of the myths are strictly unverifiable, and even if
they could be verified such verification would add nothing to the
myth. In fact, verification would probably detract by destroying
the dreamlike quality by which the myth induces and sustains
the contact with the transcendent as well as by obviating any

44 Kaufmann contends that Plato's philosophy was frequently only a meditation on and
explication of his poetic experiences (p. 247). He considers this a philosophical weak­
ness (p. 213) due to a poetic strength. But I think Stewart's explanation of the myth
as the regulator of transcendental feeling accounts for Plato's philosophical reflections
on his poetry just as well as Kaufmann's theory and does less violence to the dialogues
themselves.

45 Thomas, op. cit., p. 13.

46 James Kern Feibleman, Religious Platonism; The Influence of Religion on Plato

47 Collins, op. cit., p. 131.

48 Solmsen, op. cit., p. 146. (This reference occurs in footnote 1.)
need for revelation. Verifiable realities are not transcendent. Plato himself tells us all that is relevant when he calls the myths "likely accounts" (Timaeus, 290) and tells us that "This or something very like it is true" (Phaedo, 114d). In other words, the details of a myth are not to be taken literally but the myth is to be taken seriously precisely because it is true.

By way of summary of this complicated matter let us accept George Whalley's description of myth given in Poetic Process for it seems to include all the elements of myth relevant to Platonic myth:

[Myth] is a direct metaphysical statement beyond science. It embodies in an articulated structure of symbol or narrative a vision of reality. It is a condensed account of man's Being and attempts to represent reality with structural fidelity, to indicate at a single stroke the salient and fundamental relations which for a man constitute reality. . . . Myth is not an obscure, oblique, or elaborate way of expressing reality—it is the only way. Myth has as its purpose, its source and end, revelation; myth is not make-believe but the most direct and positive assertion of belief that man can discover. 50

B. The Transcendent in Plato

Before investigating the dialogues of the middle period to see how myth is there used as a method of dealing with the transcendent it will be helpful to state briefly, in nonsymbolic terms, what the transcendent embraces in Platonic philosophy. Plato's entire theory of the transcendent seems to be a function of his "struggle to uphold the validity of knowledge, with its corollary of the existence of a real and stable object to be known. . . ."51 It is not surprising, then, that the principal occupants of Plato's transcendent world are the Forms, the stable objects of knowledge. Plato also speaks of gods, of God, of the cosmos, of the human soul, and of that which is real in material things as transcendental.

The Forms are the most clearly delineated elements in Plato's world of the transcendent. They are "absolute, separate, simple, eternal, immutable, intelligible objects independent both of the mind which knows them and of the actualities which are their copies."52

The Forms are universals, impersonal and static, and are superior

49 Thomas, op. cit., p. 11.
50 Quoted by Weisinger, op. cit., p. 200.
52 Feibleman, op. cit., p. 27.
to the gods who are particular, personal, and dynamic. The Forms are formal causes, the gods, efficient causes, so to speak. It is hard to reconcile Plato’s attribution of static impersonality to the Forms with the fact that, while he reverences the gods, he loves only the Forms. The Forms constitute, together, a hierarchical system with mathematical objects at the base and the Good at the summit where it stands in a relation to the other Forms analogous to that of the sun to the sensible world (Rep. VI, 509). The true task of philosophy is to define each of the Forms, to grasp their interrelations, and eventually to comprehend the entire system, a comprehension which is eternal life.

The remainder of Plato’s transcendent scheme is less clear. Whatever is real is so because of its relation to the Forms. Exactly what relation to the Forms gods, things, the world, and the soul enjoy presents a problem. First, although Plato speaks of gods and of God, it is not clear whether he was a polytheist or a monotheist. Friedrich Solmsen has a good point when he says that Plato’s equation of goodness, oneness, and divinity, if carried to its logical conclusion, would have led Plato to monotheism but there is no evidence that Plato carried it to its conclusion. Actually, it seems that Plato, like the other Greeks of his time, simply was not concerned with the number of gods, although he was deeply interested in the nature of divinity. At any rate, the gods were souls who actually existed, were intelligent, efficient, and purposeful causes of the world and morally good guardians of men. God, on the other hand, in many contexts seems to be equated with the Demiurge of the Timaeus or the Cause of the Mixture in the Philebus who, as supreme Mind, fashions cosmos out of chaos according to the model of the Forms. This God is presented as supremely Good. The equation of God and

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57 Thomas, op. cit., p. 4.
58 Solmsen, op. cit., p. 70.
59 Guthrie, op. cit., p. 351.
60 Rexine, op. cit., pp. 28-29. See also Thomas, op. cit., p. 19.
62 Thomas, op. cit., p. 3.
Good presents problems, however, because Good is the supreme Form and, according to the *Republic*, transcends being,\(^63\) whereas the minds or gods are beings inferior to the Forms. It would seem that God must be either the supreme Mind or the supreme Form but not both. André Festugièrè suggests the even more complicated idea that God is not only supreme Form or Good but that this Good is the soul of the Cosmos\(^64\) while Adam suggests that the supreme god or Mind is the world-soul for Plato, as intimated in Anaxagoras, Heraclitus, and Socrates.\(^65\) In other words, it is not clear whether God is the supreme Form according to which all else is fashioned, the supreme Mind who fashions all, or the world-soul which realizes both Good and Intellect in the cosmos. Whatever the word “God” means, however, it or he is transcendent, either completely transcendent as Good or Demiurge, or transcendent-immanent as world-soul.

There is no doubt that, according to Plato, the world is besouled and that the soul of the world is living, intelligent, and morally good. Strangely enough, although these are personal attributes, Plato does not seem to have regarded the world-soul as a personal being.\(^66\) This perhaps helps to account for the confusion discussed above. The world-soul is Formlike in its impersonality and Godlike in its intelligence and moral goodness.

The knottiest question of all is the relation between the Forms and the particulars which participate in them or imitate them. Platonic scholars never tire of speculating on this problem and conflicting interpretations are numerous. One thing is accepted by all and that is that whatever relation things have to Forms, Forms remain completely separate and transcendent for the Forms are not only universals in which particulars somehow participate but they are also ideals or norms which particulars only approximate.\(^67\) John Rist’s article entitled “The Immanence and Transcendence of the Platonic Form” is a fascinating attempt to show that the Forms, while remaining transcendent, are yet truly immanent in some way, giving reality to particulars which, although ontologically defective, are

\(^{63}\) André Marie-Jean Festugièrè, O.P., *Personal Religion Among the Greeks* (Los Angeles, 1954), p. 44.


\(^{65}\) Adam, *op. cit.*, p. 371.


nevertheless real and really what they are. At any rate, the world of things is not nonbeing to Plato; it is a mixture of being and nonbeing about which we can have only opinion, but which is an important stepping stone to the world of true being in which it shares.

The final, and for our purposes, most important element in the transcendent realm of Plato is the human soul. The soul, according to Plato, is a composite of immortal reason, and mortal higher and lower appetite. In its highest part it is naturally immortal, ungenerated and incorruptible, and dwelt before its incarnation in the company of the gods in the upper world where it enjoyed, at least intermittently, the vision of the Forms. Owing to a fall for which it is responsible it is incarnated and lives in this world for a time in order to be purified and thus readied for a reintegration with the upper world. This purification, which comes about through philosophy-religion, normally requires several lifetimes, but issues eventually for the good man in a return to the life of blessed immortality among the gods in contemplation of the Forms. The dialogues which we are about to analyze are specially concerned with the nature, history, destiny, and activity of the soul and Plato’s entire treatment of the transcendent will be seen, as it were, through the prism of the soul. Therefore, further elucidation at this point is unnecessary.

III. MYTH AND TRANSCENDENCE IN THE “PHAEDRUS”

Having shown in Part I that Plato’s use of myth is consistent with his own principles, and having explicated in Part II the form, content, and objective of myth as a method of relating to the transcendent and reviewed Plato’s notions of the transcendent, we turn now to the central thesis of this paper: that the Phaedrus myth (which is typical of the myths of the middle dialogues) is a method of dealing with the transcendent which is more suitable for achieving Plato’s philosophical objectives than purely dialectical discourse and is, therefore, fully justified. The method for supporting this thesis will be, first, to show that the section of the dialogue which is being treated is truly mythical in form; second, to show that the subjects with which the section deals are transcendents in Plato’s frame of reference; third, to show that Plato’s objective in treating the subjects is the same as that which we have seen to be the objective of myth, namely,

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61 Rist, op. cit.
the establishment of cognitive and participational relation with the transcendental. If this third point can be established, then it should follow that myth, in this case, is not simply an arbitrary device of Plato’s style but a justified choice of means to his end.

In *Phaedrus*, (246a-257a) we find the master-myth of Plato’s works, a myth dealing “with everything that can be dealt with by a myth”. It begins in an atmosphere of religious awe and with strong hints that what is to be said is prophetic. Socrates has just given a speech exalting nonlove over love when he is suddenly conscious of his “familiar divine sign. All at once,” he says, “I seemed to hear a voice, forbidding me to leave the spot until I had made atonement for some offense to heaven” (242c). The offense, of course, was his speech against the god of love. Socrates then announces to Phaedrus, “I am a seer,” and proceeds to recall that an ancient mode of purification after a false or blasphemous discourse was to tell a true “tale.” Socrates, then, will anticipate punishment by telling such a purificatory tale (243a, b). Thus, the discourse on love begins in an encounter with the divine in which, as we have seen, all myth takes its rise. Socrates, a prophet, overcome by the transcendental feeling of “awe of Love himself” (243d) sets out to hymn the god, sweeping his young listener, Phaedrus, with him into the realm of the divine.

The myth proper follows immediately upon a Platonic proof for the immortality of the soul from its self-motion (245c-246a). This latter is clearly a deliberate preparation for the myth. That it is meant to be a demonstration is evident from its deductive formulation as well as from Plato’s conclusion: “if this last assertion is correct, namely that ‘that which moves itself’ is precisely identifiable with soul, it must follow that soul is not born and does not die” (246a). In the next sentence there is a shift from the demonstrative mode of dialectic to the mythical mode of symbolic indirection. The next question, says Plato, is the nature of the soul and “What manner of thing it is would be a long tale to tell, and most assuredly a god alone could tell it, but what it resembles, that a man might tell in briefer compass. Let this, therefore, be our manner of discourse. Let it be likened to the union of powers in a team of winged steeds,” etc. (246b). To be noted are the reference not to proof but to a “tale”; not to that which man can lay hold on by reason but to that which

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69 Stewart, op. cit., p. 299.
“assuredly a god alone could tell,” that is, to that which must be revealed; not to what the nature of the soul is but to “what it resembles”; not to what must follow but to what it can “be likened to.” Evidently, Plato intends to treat the problem of the nature of the soul by symbolical rather than by dialectical methods.

That what follows is truly a myth can be seen from the plethora of mythical elements which occurs throughout the long passage. The account is narrative, its unity being sustained by the complex allegory of the soul-chariot. Number symbolism is prominent in this myth, especially in the nine-leveled hierarchy of reincarnation patterns (248d, e) which is reminiscent of the numerical representation of the superiority of the philosopher over the tyrant in the Republic (587d, e). The philosopher is 729 (cube of nine) times happier than the tyrant. This number symbolism is closely related to the astronomical eschatology of the Phaedrus myth which is traceable, no doubt, to the Pythagorean Orphics in whom number symbolism is so prominent.70 Another mythical touch is the casual reference to Homer (252c) which is not, in this case, an appeal to authority but an indirect indication that Plato intends his own myth to replace Homer’s for he says of Homer’s version, “You may believe that or not, as you please; at all events the cause and the nature of the lover’s experience are in fact what I have said.” Finally, in concluding the myth, Plato says, through Socrates, “some of its language . . . was perforce poetical” (257a). These few examples suffice to indicate that the passage we are considering is indeed a myth.

The reason for this mythical treatment, as Plato himself says, is that the topics to be treated are beyond the scope of rational demonstration and actually require to be revealed. In other words, the topics are transcendent. Phaedrus and Socrates set out to determine the nature of the soul, that in man which transcends the mortal body and which originally “had wings” whose natural property “is to raise that which is heavy and carry it aloft to the region where the gods dwell” and which “more than any other bodily part . . . shares in the divine nature, which is fair, wise, and good” (246e). This leads immediately to a description of the celestial paradise, the “geographical location” of the world of transcendence, if one may so speak.

70 Ibid., pp. 310-313.
Of that place beyond the heavens none of our earthly poets has yet sung, and none shall sing worthily. But this is the manner of it, for assuredly we must be bold to speak what is true. above all when our discourse is upon truth. It is there that true being dwells, without color or shape, that cannot be touched: reason alone, the soul's pilot, can behold it and all true knowledge is knowledge thereof (247d).

This passage shows clearly the relation of myth to transcendence. The upper world is a subject for poetry and in a sense is even beyond the power of poetry. Nevertheless, it is truth, not fantasy, which the poet sings and it is the truth about a spiritual realm which is the sole object of true knowledge.

In the upper world dwell gods and pre-existent souls whose mode of life Plato mythically explores through symbol and metaphor. In these regions Truth is their food (248c) and the gods lead the souls of the mortals to pasture in Truth (248a). But, alas, not all souls can sustain this life and their fall is recounted in symbol as the inability of the winged charioteer to control his evil steed. Necessity, executor of the sentence of incarnation, is mythically personified and the levels of reincarnation are set forth in symbolic numbers. The punitive incarnations are followed by thousand-year intervals of purification presided over by personified Justice. Then follow new incarnations whose patterns are freely chosen by mortals but governed by Necessity. All of these transcendentals are presented in the mythical lottery scene that takes place just before the journey to the waters of forgetfulness whence the souls will embark upon their new lives on earth. The task set before the reincarnated soul is to purify herself completely through philosophy (248a-249d). The rest of the myth describes in symbolic language the role of love in the philosophical task. What is really being treated is the dynamic of the soul in this life, its purification through recollection particularly facilitated by the beautiful which awakens in the soul love or the desire for the Forms. The myth accounts for temperament as the trace of the god-guardian in the memory of the fallen soul, for attraction in love as the likeness in the beloved to the god-guardian, for the agonies of love’s longing as the sprouting and growth of the new wings of the soul, and for the love itself as a seeking of the god perceived in the beloved (250-257). It should be clear that the topics treated in this myth, namely, the nature of the soul and of the gods, the pre-existent
life of the soul, the geography of heaven, the Forms of Truth, the trial and fall of the soul, the role of necessity and free choice in the birth of the mortal, the spiritual growth of the mortal through purification by recollection, the relation of the soul to the gods, and the place of love in the journey of the soul to its reward, are all transcendent, that is, beyond empirical investigation.

What, we must now ask, was the objective of Plato in treating mythically of these transcendent topics? There are two reasons, clearly stated by Plato through the mouth of Socrates. The first has already been mentioned, namely, the cognitive purpose of coming to a deeper understanding of those things which only a god could reveal. The second is given at the end of the myth where Socrates exhorts Phaedrus to true love which leads to “that blessing great and glorious” which he has been describing; prays for himself that the god of love “not take from me the lover’s talent wherewith thou has blessed me”; and prays for Lysias that the god “turn him toward the love of wisdom. . . . Then will his loving disciple here [Phaedrus] no longer halt between two opinions, as now he does, but live for Love in singleness of purpose with the aid of philosophical discourse” (257a, b). Bearing in mind the peculiarity we noted above in Plato’s approach to participation in the divine, we can see that this passage is important. Plato, unlike the votaries of the Mysteries, did not believe that the transcendent was reached through ritual initiation but through philosophical contemplation of the Truth which is a function of recollection and its consequent dialectic inspired by the love which is stimulated by beauty. (An indication of this attitude is found in the fact that Plato ranked philosophers, lovers, and followers of the Muses first and Mystery-priests fifth in his list of reincarnation patterns. The only men below the Mystery-priests were imitative artists and craftsmen, sophists and demagogues, and tyrants, for none of whom Plato had much respect.) In other words, for Plato the cognitive and the mystical or participative function of myth are really one and the same, for participation is by way of true knowledge which is salvific. Religion for Plato means just what philosophy does, assimilation to God.\(^{71}\) This assimilation consists in imitating the gods through virtue (which is identical with knowledge) and contemplating the Forms (which is likewise identical with

\(^{71}\) Adam, op. cit., p. 18.
In short, the objective of the myth was knowledge of the transcendent for the purpose of participation. But such knowledge, as Plato says at the beginning of the myth, is not attainable except through the symbolic mode of the myth. Therefore, myth is a necessary element of the *Phaedrus* in dealing with the transcendent and achieving the object that Plato had in mind.

There is a clear hint that Plato thought that he had achieved his objective, or at least that the myth was suitable to its achievement, in the words with which Phaedrus responds to the myth: “If that be for our good, Socrates, I join in your prayer for it. And I have this long while been filled with admiration for your speech as a far finer achievement than the one you made before” (257c). Phaedrus has been moved to the love of wisdom.

**CONCLUSION**

It would be interesting, at this point, to analyze the other myths of the middle dialogues, namely the myth of Diotima in the *Symposium* (202d-212a), the myth of Er in the *Republic* (X, 614b-621d), and the myth of the upper world in the *Phaedo* (107c-114c). However, since the detailed analysis of these myths would be overly repetitious it seems better to summarize them briefly in order to indicate that Plato’s myths in general (not only the *Phaedrus* myth) are integral parts of his philosophy, fully justified by their suitability to his task. Therefore, by way of conclusion, we shall glance briefly at these myths, indicating those elements of mythical form which are outstanding and which are more prominent here than in the *Phaedrus*, the transcendental subject matter with which they deal, and the objective which Plato seemed to have in mind in using them.

The outstanding characteristics of the mythical form in the *Symposium* are its non-narrative character and its emphasis on revelation, brought directly to Socrates by the priestess Diotima (201d). The subject matter of the myth is the role of love in the pursuit of wisdom, which as we have seen, was an important theme of the *Phaedrus* myth. The subject is treated in some depth and the beautiful description of the mystical ascent of love to the ultimate vision of beauty which confers immortality (210b-212a) is the outstanding feature of the myth. That this matter is transcendental is obvious for the

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mystical ascent is certainly not open to any discursive form of investigation. The soaringly beautiful passage on love and beauty that the remembering of the doctrine of Diotima calls forth from Socrates as well as the spellbound attention and enthusiastic applause of his listeners bear witness to the transcendental feeling which the myth generated and regulated.

The myth of the upper world in the *Phaedo* and the myth of Er in the *Republic* are quite similar to each other in form and content. The outstanding feature of the form of the *Phaedo* myth is the long and beautiful analogy (beginning 109a) which sets forth the proportion: the upper world is to our world as our world is to the submarine world. The myth of Er makes special use of traditional mythological lore. Both myths feature a terrestrial eschatology, much personification, and intricately interconnected image patterns such as the world-description in the *Phaedo* (110c-113c) and the judgment scene at the Spindle of Necessity in the *Republic* (616b-620e). Both myths are concerned with the continuity between this life and the next and its necessary corollary of moral responsibility. The *Phaedo* is more concerned with the care of the soul in this life which is necessary to insure happiness in the next (107c), whereas the *Republic* is more concerned with the interrelation of free will and necessity (617e) in the purificatory reincarnations. Both succeed in establishing the transcendental feeling which is the matrix of understanding and of intellectual participation which are Plato's objectives in setting these great transcendental themes in a mythical framework (e.g. *Rep.* X, 621c).

In the course of this article we have tried to show that the Platonic myths of the middle dialogues, especially the *Phaedrus* myth, are fully justified as integral parts of Plato's philosophy because they successfully achieve his objective of dealing meaningfully with the transcendent. We have shown this by investigating the peculiar potentialities of myth and exposing Plato's exploitation of these for his philosophical purposes. The conclusion we have drawn is that, not only are the myths not inadvertent inconsistencies resulting from an uncontrollable poetic impetus, but that they are carefully chosen, beautifully executed, and fully justified masterpieces of philosophical discourse.