Frontispiece. Reverse of medal of Passeri, from I. P. Tomasinus,
Illustrium virorum elogia, Padua, 1630 (photo: Warburg Institute)

PLATO'S MYTHS

EDITED BY

CATALIN PARTENIE

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Contents

better at decision-making than we are now. For it is shameful for us, in what seems to be our current condition, to go ahead and give ourselves airs as if we amounted to anything, when our views never stay the same about the same things – things which are, moreover, of the greatest importance, so profound is our lack of education. Let us then follow, as our leader, the account which has now been made evident to us, and which indicates to us that this is the best way of life, practising both justice and the rest of virtue in life and death alike. Let us follow it, and invite everyone else to do so. And let us not follow that account which you trust in and invite me to follow, because it's worthless, Callicles.

Tale, theology and teleology in the Phaedo

Gábor Betegh

Speaking about myth in the *Phaedo*, one is naturally inclined to think first about the great eschatological *muthos* with which Socrates crowns his discussion of the immortality of the soul. Yet the *Phaedo* contains other myths as well, starting with the story of Theseus' journey to Crete, which Phaedo tells to Echecrates to explain the origin of the Athenian embassy to Delos that caused the delay in Socrates' execution (58a–b). The myth of Theseus slaying the Minotaur and saving the seven youths and seven maidens already indicates the power of such legendary stories, and how they can affect the life and death of individuals – including that of Socrates. But the *muthos* I shall focus on in this chapter is the seemingly much less remarkable little tale Socrates casually mentions at the very beginning of his discussion with his friends; this is the fable, told in one sentence, that Socrates thinks Aesop would have told had he thought about a particular subject matter.[1] What I shall try to show is that the way Socrates sketches this fable reveals his expectations about how a talented teller of tales would

[1] A note on the terminology I shall use is in order. It has often been remarked that the semantic field of the Greek word *muthos* is not the same as that of the English word 'myth' and its equivalents in modern languages. In most, but not all, passages discussed in this paper, I am inclined to translate *muthos* as 'tale', 'fable' or 'story'. One reason for it is that in the cases we shall consider it is an important fact about the narrative that it was created by the artistic imagination of an individual known to the audience, even when he may use elements taken from other, possibly traditional, sources. As opposed to this, standard definitions of myth by, e.g., Kirk and Burkert emphasize the traditional and collective nature of myths. That myths are *traditional* stories is reaffirmed also in Burkert 1999, 87. On the other hand, I don't think that *muthos* can be translated as 'tale' in the case of the 'eschatological myth' of the *Phaedo*, for tales, as I understand the word, are narratives with a plot unfolding from the actions and interactions of the protagonists of the story. The eschatological myth of the *Phaedo*, by contrast, is a description of the structure of the cosmos and the earth, and that of the passages of the souls, without involving a story-line. In this sense the word 'tale' in my title can already be taken as an indication that my main focus will not be the 'eschatological myth'.

formulate such narratives. I shall argue that this narrative pattern approved by Socrates assumes, among other things, certain theological conceptions in the presentation of divine characters. Finally, I shall suggest that Socrates' ideas about how a good fable of this particular type should run mould in important ways his expectations about Anaxagoras' book and can thus help to explain Socrates' eventual frustration.

AESOP'S *MUTHOS*

The opening sentences of Socrates' last discussion with his friends immediately bring us to the question of the mythical mode of presentation and his attitude to it. He has just been freed from his fetters, and now enjoys the feeling of life coming back to his limbs. This experience leads him to a brief analysis of the relationship between pleasure and pain:

What a curious thing, my friends, he said, what people call pleasant seems to be; what an amazing relationship it has to what is considered to be its opposite, pain. They are unwilling both to come to us at the same time, but if we pursue one of them and catch it, we are pretty much compelled to catch the other as well, as if these two were joined at a single tip. (60b3–c1)[2]

The status and function of this statement is not without problems. It is sometimes thought to be a first approximation of the theory of opposites expounded more fully in the cyclical and final arguments. Others have maintained that the necessary conjunction of pleasure and pain characterizes the earthly human condition Socrates is about to leave behind.[3] Yet this brief introductory passage is notable from the point of view of our present topic for other reasons. For Socrates continues by saying that if Aesop had appreciated this remarkable connection between pleasure and pain, he would have composed a fable (*muthos*):

And it seems to me, he [Socrates] said, that if Aesop had thought of it, he would have told a fable that the god wanted to reconcile their dispute, but when he could not, he attached the tip of their heads together, and this is why if one of them comes to someone, the other as well will later visit the same person. (60c1–5)

In this passage we have thus side by side the primary statement by Socrates and then a mythical expression of the same idea. The juxtaposition of the two versions indicates, first, that an imaginative fable can express an idea

---

[2] Translations in this paper, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.
[3] For a concise statement of this interpretation, see D. Frede 1999, 13–14. Problematic aspects of the account of the relationship between pleasure and pain are well expounded by Gallop 1975, 76–8.

that is approved of, and is indeed formulated by, Socrates. More importantly, it also points to what Socrates expects from a creative fable – i.e., a narrative that is the product of imaginative artistic creation, as opposed to being inherited from tradition – with respect to structure and content. The passage furthermore can give us an idea about the way such a fable can connect to a more literal exposition of the same idea. Let us pause then and take a closer look at this fable telescoped into one sentence and how it is related to Socrates' original formulation.[4]

The formal bond between the original formulation and the fable in this case is the simile by which Socrates ends his own version. Socrates says that pleasure and pain are connected *as if* (*hōsper*) their extremities (*koruphē*) were attached to each other, by which he apparently means that where the feeling of pleasure ends, pain starts, and *vice versa*. The fable unwraps this image and creates a little narrative around it. The narrative can moreover build on and develop the personifying tendencies that are present already in Socrates' version, and turn the opposites (*enantia*) of pleasure and pain into warring or quarrelling parties (*polemounta*).[5] Once pleasure and pain have become personified agents, the word *koruphē* can refer to their 'heads' or 'crowns'. Thus far there is no rupture between the two formulations, but the one seamlessly connects to the other.

The most conspicuous formal difference between the two versions is that Socrates in his version gives a descriptive analysis of the relationship between pleasure and pain, whereas the tale introduces the temporal dimension and concentrates on the events that led to this state of affairs. The tale posits an initial stage by negating that feature of the current situation on which the descriptive account focuses: there was a time when pleasure and pain were not as yet attached to each other. The narrative explains how and for what reasons we arrive at the current state of affairs from this initial 'not-yet'.[6]

With respect to the content, the most important extra element of the fable is the introduction of a divine agent, completely absent from Socrates' own formulation. In the figure of the unnamed god the fable identifies the causal origin of the emergence of the current state of affairs from the initial situation. The unnamed divinity realized the shortcomings of the initial situation, i.e., that there is a constant animosity between pleasure and pain,

---

[4] In view of the immense literature on the *Phaedo*, I was able to find surprisingly little on Aesop in the *Phaedo*. For a recent paper, see Chvatík 2005. For another recent study, see Schauer and Merkle 1992. More generally, see Desclos 1997 and 2000.
[5] Cf. Rowe 1993, 119 *ad* 60c3.
[6] Cf. Burkert 1999, 92 *passim* on the 'Not Yet' as the typical beginning of cosmogonic myths.

and tried to find a solution. His first intention was to achieve the best possible outcome in the form of a total reconciliation between the warring parties ('the god wanted to reconcile their dispute'). Yet even a divinity has to confront certain limiting conditions; even he is unable to alter the fact that pleasure and pain are, by their very natures, opposites. This is why the divinity must find an alternative solution. The skeletal formulation of the fable does not state explicitly the advantages of the solution the god ultimately opts for. It is not altogether clear whether it is a form of punishment or is an alternative means to stop the war, or a mixture of the two – the presentation, however, unambiguously suggests that it is considered to be the second best overall solution, which is the best practicable solution. The story ends with a description of the current situation ('if one of them comes to someone, the other as well will later visit the same person') corresponding to Socrates' original descriptive account. The fable, however, attaches explanatory power to the events it recounts, as is indicated by the words 'and this is why' or 'for this reason' (*kai dia tauta*, 60c4) that connect the narrative to the description of the current situation. The present situation is thus explained as the result of the purposeful activity of the divine agent in order to find a solution to a problem inherent in the assumed initial situation.

ARISTOPHANES' SPEECH

When Socrates sketches the outlines of a story that, as he says, Aesop would have told, he applies a certain narrative pattern he finds characteristic of such fables. This is the way someone talented in creating stories would conceive a narrative. This assumption is confirmed when we examine the narrative structure of a representative group of mythical stories, or fables, told in the dialogues which, on a conservative chronology, were written relatively close to the composition of the *Phaedo*. Take, for example, the myth Aristophanes tells in the *Symposium* (189d–193d). The first part of the story (189d–191d) recounts the events that lead to the current state of affairs. At the first stage Eros, the central topic of the speech, has no function as yet. This assumed initial situation is moreover defective in so far as the then existing three-gendered spherical humans are so strong and arrogant that they jeopardize the rule of gods and the order of the world. The gods don't know what to do. Zeus then enters the scene, analyzes the situation, calculates the available means and comes up with the plan of halving the whole-natured humans. As this first operation does not issue in optimal results, in so far as the halved human beings prove to be unfit for life, Zeus introduces some additional fine-tuning by slightly reorganizing human

anatomy. The divine agent's decisions and actions aim at the best possible solution to the problems inherent in the initial situation considering the interest of gods, and of a stable world order, and, secondly, taking into consideration the needs of human beings. The second part of Aristophanes' account (191d–193a) provides a description of the current situation. It explains how we can understand the behaviour of people and the differences in their sexual orientations from the events that led to this state of affairs. Zeus, whose decisions and actions brought about the current state of affairs, does not appear in this descriptive account at all.

At one point of her conversation with Socrates, Diotima refers to what the participants of the feast heard from Aristophanes and formulates some objections to it. 'There is indeed a certain *logos*, she said, according to which the lovers are those who are seeking their other halves, but according to my *logos* etc.' (205d–e). It may be asked whether what Diotima had in mind is the whole fable told by Aristophanes. His profession, the way he tells the story and the reaction of the other participants make such a scenario quite improbable. This point does not of course rule out the possibility that in conceiving the story, Aristophanes was creatively combining and rearranging elements he took from elsewhere. As it happens, we can even know that the major source of Aristophanes' story was Empedocles' zoogony.[7] Aristophanes took from Empedocles not only the image of 'whole-natured' humans (cf. esp. Empedocles B62 DK), that they were split into halves by divine agency, that we are *sumbola* of the original complete humans (*Smp.* 191d4, cf. Arist. *GA* 722b11, introducing Empedocles B63 DK), but also that either further splitting (*Smp.* 190d4–6 and 193a–7; cf. Empedocles B20 DK) or reunification (*Smp.* 192d3–e4; reunification will be the natural outcome of the return of Love in Empedocles) may follow in the future.

More important from our present point of view, our acquaintance with the Empedoclean background of Aristophanes' speech may help us in appreciating those points that the Platonic Aristophanes introduced. For no matter how fragmentary and controversial the Empedoclean evidence is, we can identify with a fair degree of confidence the major points at which the Platonic Aristophanes' narrative took another course. First of all, Empedocles' zoogony is part of a cycle, where there is no sign of a cycle in Aristophanes' fable. Much more important, I believe, are the differences in the roles and characterizations of the respective divine agents responsible for the splitting. In Empedocles, the halving of the whole-natured humans is done by Strife, one of the pair of cosmic forces. In doing that, Strife does

---

[7] O'Brien 2002, with a critical overview of the earlier literature.

not seem to have any specific purpose or aim, apart from carrying out his overall objective of division. When he splits humans, Strife acts quasi-mechanically, and does what he does with anything else created by the unifying activity of the opposite cosmic force, Love. As opposed to this, Zeus in Aristophanes' story reacts to a concrete conflict situation caused by the excessive power and the resulting over-confidence of the spherical humans; a situation that caused trouble for the gods and the overall order of the world, and that the other gods could not solve. Zeus then analyzes the situation and comes up with a plan. Aristophanes' language emphasizes Zeus' intellectual effort and the creativity of his plan: 'At last, after great effort, Zeus had an idea. "I think I have a plan (*mēchanē*)," he said' (190c6–7, trans. Nehamas and Woodruff). And when he finds that this solution creates major difficulties for humans, he takes pity on them, does some further thinking and planning, and comes up with another contrivance (191b5–6; the word used is once again *mēchanē*). So just as in the fable Aesop would have composed, but in contradistinction to Empedocles' narrative, the divine agent in Aristophanes' speech responds to a conflict situation and the course of action he takes is the result of planning and calculation, taking into account the practicability of different solutions and the interests of the different parties involved.

PROTAGORAS' TALE AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MYTH OF THE *GORGIAS*

In the *Phaedo*, we have seen the juxtaposition of the descriptive account and the fable speaking about the origins. We encounter the theme of the parallelism and complementarity of a fable and a descriptive account (*logos*) in the *Protagoras* as well. When Protagoras is asked to demonstrate that virtue is teachable, he says that he can fulfil this task by telling either a *logos* or a fable. We can presume that, even if the fable and the *logos* were not thematically co-extensive and equivalent in their presuppositions and implications, both would express in two different expository modes the same overall view that Protagoras holds on the matter. When he is given free hand to choose, he opts for telling a fable because, as he says, it is the 'more elegant' (*chariesteros*) format and delivers a tale of origins (320c8–324d1). He recounts how the different living beings were created by the gods, how Epimetheus assumed the task of allotting the different species with different faculties for getting food and protection, how he failed to equip human beings with any such provisions, and how humans, facing extinction, were compensated by Prometheus who furnished them with the

different technical arts and fire he stole from the gods. We then learn that the human species was still in danger, because people were unable to co-operate with each other. To solve this problem, Zeus had to intervene and allot some measure of social skills (*politikē technē*, 322b8) of 'shame' and 'justice' to each human being.

For a question concerning a state of affairs – whether or not virtue is teachable – the first answer is thus given in the form of a fanciful narrative that relates the way this state of affairs came about. In construing the story, Protagoras starts with an initial stage, when human beings were still in the making, and they did not possess virtues and arts as yet. He then explains how the current state of affairs emerged through a series of events in which divine agents had to face and solve a series of problems in order to come up with a balanced and maintainable situation.

In a second move, Protagoras adds a *logos* (324d2–328c2) in which he formulates a reply to Socrates' objection that virtuous men in societies known to us are unable to teach virtue to their sons. This discourse is continuous with the fable in so far as it takes for granted and builds on the outcome of the narrative. Yet, even if it clearly assumes the fable, the *logos* does not mention either the events recounted in the narrative or the divine agents who are responsible for the ensuing state of affairs.[8]

As opposed to the versatility of Protagoras, Socrates claims in the *Phaedo* that he is only able to give a *logos*; he is not a *muthologos* who could produce mythical narratives (61b3–5). When he comes up with the skeleton of a fable about pleasure and pain, he says that this is what someone like Aesop would have composed had he thought about the matter. One may suspect here a touch of irony, for the sketch of the fable is his, and one can be fairly sure that Socrates would be able to fill it in with some colourful details. Yet the fact remains that Socrates claims himself completely unable to invent such narratives. What strongly suggests that he indeed means it is that he does not attempt to invent a fable even when he assumes that he might be under a sacred obligation to do so (*Phd.* 60d–61b) – and this is not something Socrates would take lightly. There is no place for irony in such a context. Considering himself unable to compose a fable, the most he can do is to work on and put into verse a story that he takes from the *muthologos* Aesop. That he uses a story by Aesop for such purposes is, by the way, further

[8] On the relationship between the fable and the *logos*, see the detailed and instructive analysis in Morgan 2000, 138–47 with which I am in broad agreement. I would not follow her, however, in maintaining that 'the *logos* will hold *only if* we presuppose the myth' (her emphasis). The myth could have had alternatives.

strong confirmation that he appreciates Aesop's talent. So when he presents a tale that 'Aesop would have composed', he takes that tale to be a good tale.

The topic of what kind of accounts Socrates produces himself and what he receives from others turns up explicitly in the eschatological myth of the *Gorgias* as well. In the final passages of that dialogue, Socrates wraps up his frustrating discussion with Callicles by telling a story. Callicles may well find this story an old wives' tale, unworthy of serious consideration, but Socrates himself has full trust in its truth. The story told by Socrates falls into two parts. For the first part Socrates does not claim any credit: this is what he heard but believes to be true (*ha egō akēkoōs pisteuō alēthē einai*, 524a8–b1 – note, however, that *alētheia* is subordinated to *pisteuō*, which certainly qualifies the truth claim). This part provides a genetic account by explaining how the present system of afterlife judgements came into effect (523a–524a). We first hear about the previous system under the reign of Cronos that involved living judges passing judgements on people still living. Then we learn how Zeus realized the shortcomings of that regime and replaced it with the current, improved system in which both the judges and the judged are naked souls of the dead. The second part of the account (524a–527a), which Socrates explicitly claims to be his own addition, is complementary to the first part. It does not say anything about the origins, the cause and the events that led to the current system, but simply takes over the end product of the genetic account, and analyzes its functioning. Remarkably, Socrates' own account does not even mention Zeus, the originator of the current system – just as the god who joined the heads of pleasure and pain together does not need to be mentioned in the descriptive analysis of the way pleasure and pain are related to each other, Prometheus and Zeus do not figure in Protagoras' second account about the way virtue is taught, and Zeus does not appear in the second part of Aristophanes' speech. In harmony with what he says in the *Phaedo* about his incapacity to create fables, Socrates in the *Gorgias* takes the narrative about the origins of the present system from an unnamed source; but because he believes the narrative to be true, he takes its end product and develops it into a descriptive account about the way the current system of post-mortem judgements works.

THE NARRATIVE PATTERN

From this admittedly restricted, but hopefully representative, pool of fables a narrative pattern emerges:

(1) The narrative posits an initial state of affairs. At this stage the *explanandum* is not as yet present, and the situation is in some ways defective.

In the *Phaedo* the problem to be solved is the war between pleasure and pain, in the *Gorgias* it is the unjust regime of judgements under the reign of Cronos. In the *Symposium* it is the arrogance of the original human race, whereas in the *Protagoras* it is redoubled: first, humans lack any skills as a result of the blunder of Epimetheus, and then they get to the verge of total extinction in the absence of co-operative skills.

(2) A divine agent enters the scene with the intention and the power to rectify the defectiveness of the situation.

The unnamed god in the *Phaedo*, Zeus in the *Symposium* and the *Gorgias*, first Prometheus, then Zeus in the *Protagoras*.

(3) The divine agent analyzes the situation, takes into account the limiting conditions and works out the best practicable solution.

In the *Phaedo*, the limiting condition consists in the impossibility of reconciling the warring parties. In the *Symposium*, Zeus has to find a solution that makes humans weaker, but does not involve their extinction or make their existence impossible. In the *Gorgias*, Zeus ends the presentation of his reforms by stating his overall objective: 'so that the judgement about people's journey be *as just as possible.*' In the *Protagoras*, as the original stock of skills is empty, Prometheus has to find a substitute, but he cannot give virtue to humans. Zeus cannot redo the whole allotment of skills, but has to amend the already existing situation.

(4) The narrative ends with a functional description of the current state of affairs. In this description the divine agent is not mentioned, but the narrative is taken as explanatory to the current situation.

What I am suggesting is *not*, of course, that Socrates, or Plato, would recognize as *muthos* only those narratives that are in conformity with this pattern.[9] The suggestion is merely that the Socrates of the *Phaedo* is familiar with this narrative pattern, and when he sets up the skeleton of a fable as someone more talented in these matters would have created it, he clearly employs this scheme. The brief survey of fables in other dialogues shows that (Plato's) Socrates could indeed be familiar with narratives corresponding to this pattern. Socrates, on the other hand, repeatedly declares himself unable to compose such fables. More precisely, he is unable to provide the first three steps of the narrative, but once he receives and accepts the genetic

---

[9] What Plato would and would not call a *muthos* is a notoriously complex question, and one that probably cannot receive a single answer. For a recent contribution with references to the earlier literature, see Morgan 2000, ch. 6. She admits that 'genetic myths' may constitute the most important subclass, but warns against defining Platonic myth exclusively on the basis of this group (p. 161). See also Murray 1999.

account from someone else, he can connect to it and expand the systematic or functional analysis of step 4, as he does in the *Gorgias*.

The narrative pattern I have outlined above resembles in important ways the format of the broad stock of aetiological myths, i.e., narratives that identify the origin and the first occurrence of a given phenomenon of the speaker's present in events of some undefined past time involving divine agents. The phenomena thus explained range from different species of plants and animals, natural phenomena, cities, customs, cult places and ritual practices.[10] There is one conspicuous difference, however. In the traditional aetiological myths, the motivation of the divine agent is often, although not always, far from noble – selfishness, will to power, a hurt feeling of pride, jealousy, vengeance for refused love, or mere caprice. In the fables we have just considered, the divinities are fundamentally benevolent agents who act rationally for the best results.

Note that the good intentions of the divine characters are not called into question even in those cases when they are the sources of further problems. So even the Titan Epimetheus tried to proceed with caution to avoid the extinction of the different species (321a). That he left humans without appropriate faculties is not a sign of his lack of good will, but stems from the fact that his intellectual capacities were not quite up to the task (321b). This fact, by the way, is reflected already in his name. As opposed to his brother Prometheus, 'The-One-Who-Thinks-Ahead', Epimetheus is 'The-One-Who-Thinks-Afterwards'.

Similarly, there is no suggestion in the story of the *Gorgias* that the inadequacies of the previous system of judgements resulted from Cronos' carelessness or lack of good intentions towards humans. On the contrary, he applied the same rules to gods and humans; it is another question that such an egalitarian approach does not appreciate the important differences between divine and human beings. This is what Zeus had to realize and take into account when working out the new regime once Pluto and the administrators of the Isles of the Blessed drew his attention to the inadequate results of Cronos' system. It is true that in Aristophanes' myth Zeus first acts solely in the interest of the gods. As Aristophanes makes explicit, the gods decided to preserve humanity only because they wanted to enjoy the sacrifices and services they received from them (190c). Yet at a later stage Zeus' pity and benevolence become manifest. He had pity (*eleēsas*, 191b5) on the halved humans for their sufferings and this is why he contrived how humans could have sex with their other halves. All in all, these fables do not

[10] For a brief overview, see *Der Neue Pauly s.v.* 'Aitiologie'.

---

attribute the morally objectionable traits and motives to the gods we often find in traditional myths; these gods do not fight with each other, show no trace of jealousy, selfishness or irresponsible caprice. Their motivations, generally speaking and on the whole, are noble: they want to bring conflicts to an end, install just regimes of judgements, create a balanced relationship between different species, protect humans – at the very least, they feel pity for them. The theological assumptions of these narratives may receive Socrates' approval in so far as they are, broadly speaking, consistent with his fundamental beliefs about the nature of the divine.

Correspondingly, these narratives are immune from the criticism of traditional stories voiced in *Republic* Book II.[11] Socrates' principal objection to the fables told by 'Homer, Hesiod and the other poets' is that they are false in so far as they represent the gods and heroes incorrectly; this is the greatest falsehood, because it provides a false image about the most important things (377d–e). Traditional stories are false because they represent the gods as warring with each other, committing the most serious crimes, raping, chaining, beating, and hurting one another (378a–d). The stories we have considered above are clearly innocent in this respect.

We do not even hear Zeus saying a bad word about Cronos when he discovers that his father installed a system that turned out to be unjust. Similarly, although Protagoras does not leave out the traditional detail that Prometheus *stole* fire from Hephaestus and the arts from Athena in the interest of people, this part of the story receives little attention. Even more conspicuously, the story of Prometheus' punishment is practically absent from Protagoras' speech. All he tells his audience is that 'Prometheus, *as they say* (*hēiper legetai*), was later charged for the theft he committed because of Epimetheus' (322a). The interpolated 'as they say', or 'as the story goes', is an indication that Protagoras wants to dissociate himself from this part of the narrative. Moreover, even here we only hear that Prometheus has to go through a process that administers justice (*dikē metēlthen*), and not about Zeus' cruel and torturous revenge, so emphatic in poetic and pictorial representations of the myth.

In *Republic* II the criticism of traditional stories is followed by constructive recommendations, or rather rules, the poets will be required to follow. Agreeing with Socrates' condemnation of the blasphemous representations of gods, Adeimantus now wants to hear from Socrates some positive

[11] I have learned the most on this important and very complex text, and on other issues central for this paper, from Gill 1993 esp. section IV and Burnyeat 1999b, lecture II. See also Murray 1999 and Johansen 2004, ch. 2.

examples to replace traditional narratives. But Socrates, once again, refuses to formulate such stories. He and Adeimantus are not poets there, but founders of the city. It is not up to them but to the poets to compose stories (*muthologein*); what the founders of the city should do is to set up patterns (*tupoi*) on the basis of which the poets should construct their stories (378e–379a).[12] There comes a series of deductions starting from the premise that 'the god is really good' and ending with the law that the poets should say that 'what the god does is good and just and those who are punished by him benefit from it' (380a).[13] Quite clearly, the stories we have considered are not merely not subject to Socrates' criticism, but are also in conformity with his most important positive prescription. The narrative pattern I have outlined is fully in line with Socrates' first *tupos* in the *Republic*.

The further *tupoi* formulated by Socrates are less relevant for us, and I can only provide a cursory treatment of them now. First, Socrates shows that it is alien to the nature of the divine to manifest itself in all kinds of forms, to transform itself, to take guises and deceive humans by sorcery or in any other way. If so, declares the second law or pattern, the poets must not describe the gods as doing anything involving deceit or metamorphosis (380c–383a). It is clear that none of the gods in the fables we have examined do any such thing. The third pattern or law says that the stories should not picture Hades as a dreadful place for those who lived a just life (386a–387c). From the stock of fables we have considered, only the *Gorgias* is relevant here, which sets exactly the positive example. The fourth *tupos*, which rules that heroes should be pictured as worthy role models (387c–391a) is not applicable to the stories that are important for us now. Finally, the fifth pattern states that the narratives should not show just people suffering and unjust people leading a pleasant and happy life. In the fables considered above, two cases are to the point. First, in Aristophanes' speech the arrogant and aggressive whole-natured humans cannot long continue with their practices before Zeus finds the punishment they deserve. Second, we have that phase of Protagoras' speech when people have not as yet received the social virtues of decency and justice from Zeus. Surely, people's lives without justice are not pictured there as pleasant and happy. Quite the contrary, the lack of these virtues endangers the survival of the whole

---

[12] It is true of course that at a later stage Socrates does venture to tell just such a tale, the famous 'myth of metals', an example of noble lies (*R.* III 414d–415d). His reluctance to tell the fable may be an indication of his lack of practice in such matters, and Glaucon's far from enthusiastic reaction can be taken as recognition that it is really not the type of discourse in which Socrates is at home.

[13] The singular 'god' (*theos*) in these passages surely applies to all divine beings. Some translators (e.g. Grube and Reeve) alternate between the singular and the plural.

species – this is why the benevolent Zeus had to intervene. To sum up: the comparison between the representations of divine beings and humans in the group of fables we have considered and the patterns or laws Socrates draws for the poets in the *Republic* fully justifies the claim that Socrates can approve the general theological assumptions of these fables. It also shows that the myth Aesop would have composed would not be blacklisted in Socrates' city.

EXPLANANDA AND EXPLANATIONS

At this point it is important to make a distinction between the messages of the fables, in other words, the theses about the state of affairs they end with, on the one hand, and the broad theological assumptions they use in the presentation of their divine characters.[14] So Socrates in the *Symposium* will obviously side with Diotima's views, while Diotima, as we have seen, explicitly criticizes the *logos* that corresponds to the description of the state of affairs in which Aristophanes' fable issues.[15] The fact that Diotima, Socrates and Plato find the account that Aristophanes' story expresses unsatisfactory (i.e., that the function of Eros is merely to urge us to seek our earthly other halves) does not mean that Diotima, Socrates and Plato could not approve of the way the story presents Zeus. Their disagreement about the role and function of Eros notwithstanding, they could concur with the theological assumptions implicit in Aristophanes' story. They would all agree that Zeus is a rational agent, who cares for human beings, and who would therefore proceed in this manner when faced with such a conflict situation. This aspect of Aristophanes' story becomes even more manifest when we contrast it with the way Empedocles, its main source, characterizes the divine agent or agents responsible for the splitting of human beings as 'wicked spirits of dissension' (*kakēsi diatmēthent' Eridessi*, B20.4 DK, trans. O'Brien).

Mutatis mutandis the same applies to Protagoras' myth as well. Socrates, at least at that point of the dialogue, clearly disagrees with Protagoras on the

---

[14] Note that the message of the 'myth of metals' is distinct from its theological assumptions. On the one hand the story is clearly compatible with the *tupoi* formulated earlier. On the other hand, the theses that the citizens should defend their land by any means, that there are three social classes, and that their offspring generally but not always belong in the same class, can in no way be simply derived from the *tupoi*.

[15] Watson 1985, 35–9 argues, to my mind convincingly, that, despite the criticism voiced by Diotima, Aristophanes' tale in the *Symposium* is to be seen as a valuable contribution. It is superior to the physiologico-medical explanation in its underlying assumptions, and is to be taken as a step leading up to Diotima's view. Diotima's reaction can in fact be seen as recognition of the fact that her own theory takes up certain aspects of Aristophanes' story. On this point, see also O'Brien 2002.

question of the teachability and nature of virtue; yet he can agree with Protagoras that Zeus would intervene in such a way in the interest of human beings when faced with such a situation, and he could also agree with Protagoras that life would be impossible without some measure of the social virtues.[16] At this point an argument *ex silentio* also seems to have some force. Had Socrates (and Plato) found the presentations of the divine agents of these stories unacceptable, he surely would have protested, as he protested against the way the more traditional myths told by the poets presented the gods.[17] And Plato would not have inserted these fanciful and entertaining narratives into his dialogues without a word of warning had he not found their broad theological assumptions acceptable.

We could put the point in more general terms. The respective myths of Protagoras and Aristophanes construct genetic explanations to specific *explananda*. The fundamental problem with these explanations, however, is that their *explananda* are not true. They try to construct a formally valid explanation to something that is not the case. They act like an Aristotelian biologist who is busy constructing a bona fide teleological explanation, but does not get the phenomenon, the biological fact, to be explained right in the first place. Indeed, we can make the same point by referring to the explanatory model Socrates is requiring in the *Phaedo* itself. He says that he would expect from the cosmologist that he *first* states whether the earth is flat or spherical and *then* gives the reason why this shape is for the good (97d–e).[18] Protagoras and Aristophanes get the first step wrong: they are mistaken in establishing the fact, but they are then using the correct explanatory principles to provide an explanation for the 'fact' as they established it. Or, to use contemporary language, if one accepts that myths in general can provide explanations, these myths can be taken as *potential explanations* as philosophers of science use this term: they have all the required formal features of a genuine explanation without however being true.

Furthermore, Protagoras and Aristophanes at least implicitly use the correct 'covering law', i.e., that the god is a rational agent who aims at the best outcome. Yet, it is probably not by mere chance that the other story-tellers

[16] Interestingly, Havelock 1957, 88–94, as quoted by Morgan 2000, 136, n. 4, claims that the divine apparatus of the myth is entirely Plato's invention, and has nothing to do with Protagoras. The current tendency is rather to accept that most of Protagoras' 'Great Speech' is authentic if not in word, at least in content. See Schiappa 1991, 146–8. It is a different, but not unrelated, question how the presence and presentation of gods in the fable is related to Protagoras' proclaimed agnosticism about the gods. For Kerferd 1981, 168, it is simply not a problem because Protagoras is telling a myth. It seems to me that the question is a little more difficult.

[17] Apart from the *R.* II considered above, see also *Euthphr.* 6b–c.

[18] Lennox 1985, 200 with n. 15 correctly emphasizes the importance of this ordering.

leave the motivations of their divine characters largely implicit, whereas Socrates puts the point clearly and explicitly when he makes Zeus say in the *Gorgias* that the objective of his reform is: 'that the judgement about people's journey be as just as possible' (*hina hōs dikaiotatē hē krisis ēi peri tēs poreias anthrōpois*, 524a7).

SOCRATES ON THE GODS

The theological convictions expressed in the presentation of gods as rational and benevolent agents appear in both Plato's early dialogues and in Xenophon's presentation of Socrates. Indeed, this is one of the few beliefs that Plato's early dialogues positively attribute to Socrates. In the *Euthyphro*, which remains aporetic on the question of piety and on other related issues, Plato makes Socrates say the following:

But tell me what advantage is there for the gods from the gifts they have from us? For what they [i.e., the gods] give, is clear for all; for there is no good for us that they do not give. (14e10–15a2)

This claim in itself is, of course, not sufficient to establish that the gods give exclusively good things to us and it does not specify the range of good things we receive from the gods. In particular, it does not state whether we should count among these good things those that we do not possess as individuals, but share as a species. This theological view reappears in the strikingly teleological passages of Xenophon's *Memorabilia* 1.4.[19] In this chapter, Xenophon describes how Socrates tried to correct the impious attitude of a certain Aristodemus who refused to honour the gods by sacrifices and mocked others who performed their religious duties. Socrates argued against Aristodemus that the gods deserve all the praise and awe because they are the sources of all the good for human beings and other animals. Socrates then enumerates a long list of anatomical and physiological features that he takes to be unquestionable signs of the benevolent planning of a divine creator. How marvellously useful and well-designed the sense organs are, functional and protected from harm! Look, how wonderfully the arrangement of the teeth is adapted to biting, cutting and grinding! And so forth. The underlying idea is highly reminiscent of the myth told by Protagoras in so far as Socrates also treats

[19] For the view that the theological core of Xenophon's account represents Socrates' own views, see McPherran 1996, 279–91. The point is argued most recently by Sedley 2005, 464–8, who refers also to Viano 2001 to which I had no access.

natural endowments, faculties and self-protective instincts of the different species as results of divine allotment. There is an important difference, however: in Socrates' description there is no first titanic blunder to the disadvantage of humans. Indeed, Socrates intends to show that far from receiving the leftover skills, arts, virtues, and means for survival, when already on the verge of extinction, humans are equipped with the best overall anatomy as well. Moreover, although it is not elaborated in this chapter in any further detail, Socrates also indicates that the gods not only create living beings and endow them with different faculties, but they also arrange cosmic masses of the world as a whole (1.4.13 and 17).

Socrates thus argues in the *Memorabilia* that there is a providential divinity who loves all living beings, but above all humans, and who is the artificer of this cosmic order. This much is fully consistent with the theological views the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues holds, i.e. that 'there is no good for us that the gods do not give'. Yet it clearly goes much further than what we read in the *early* Platonic dialogues, where we may be inclined to understand the divine gifts of goods more restrictively, and apply it to our individual good fortunes, strength, health etc. In the *Memorabilia* it is clear that we should extend it to all the natural endowments and faculties humans as a species have. And we should extend it further to all the good or beneficial endowments and faculties other species possess, and all the good, beneficial and beautiful features the cosmos can offer.

Now this account apparently presupposes some original act of divine agency by which the divinity fashioned the cosmos into this beautiful order and then created the various living beings, and equipped them with all those faculties and endowments they now have. It also presupposes some original situation in which the cosmos had not as yet had these features and living beings had not as yet had all these endowments. Yet Socrates in the *Memorabilia* remains totally silent on all this. What we get is the theological assumption that all this good must come from a benevolent divinity, without a story positing an original state of 'not-yet', followed by an account of the limiting conditions within which the god acted in order to achieve the best overall practicable result.[20] Xenophon's Socrates thus remains consistent with the Socrates of the *Phaedo* and other Platonic dialogues who insists that he is unable to produce such genetic aetiological narratives.

---

[20] McPherran 1996, 280–2 and Sedley 2005, 464–5 emphasize that Socrates does not give a scientific or naturalistic account of how the divinity has created all this good for us. What I would add is that he does not give *any* account of it.

ANAXAGORAS

The narrative pattern I have outlined above is thus a combination of traditional aetiological fables that explain states of affairs by reference to divine actions and a theology that treats gods as fundamentally benevolent and rational divine beings who try to find the best solution to problems and to defective states of affairs. This narrative pattern, on the other hand, contains the germs of an explanatory form that we call teleology. More precisely, it prefigures a specific type of teleological explanation, which explains states of affairs as resulting from conscious, rational and goal-directed actions of an agent aiming at the best result. This type of teleological explanation is often referred to as Platonic teleology. This explanatory form discloses the goodness and rationality of a state of affairs by setting out the rational choices and practical reasoning of the agent who is responsible for the state of affairs and who always aims for the best. Such an agency-centred teleological explanation concentrates on and formalizes the motives of the agent, and, furthermore, the way in which the rational agent analyzes the situation and calculates with the available means to find the best overall applicable solution. This explanatory form finds its first and most celebrated exposition in the later part of the *Phaedo* and is then developed into a cosmological narrative in the *Timaeus*. What I shall try to show in the rest of this chapter is that Socrates' opening words about the relationship between pleasure and pain, and the different ways to describe that relationship, have an important bearing on the interpretation of the final third of the *Phaedo*, including Socrates' intellectual autobiography and his criticism of Anaxagoras.

In response to Cebes' objection that the soul may survive a number of bodies but may still ultimately perish, Socrates points out that this question leads immediately to the more general problem of the 'reasons of coming-to-be and perishing': how and why an object or a state of affairs comes to be and how and why it then ceases to be (95e–96a). Socrates is visibly somewhat reluctant to embark upon this subject; as we shall soon understand, the topic has been a major source of frustration for him. He begins his famed intellectual autobiography by telling how in his youth he plunged into 'inquiry into nature' because it promised to provide answers to questions pertaining to becoming and perishing. Socrates tried to solve a number of such problems himself, but his attempts invariably ended in utter failure. Eventually, he realized that he is simply not the right person for this type of explanation. As he says, 'I ended up judging myself to be naturally wholly unsuited (*aphuēs*) for this kind of inquiry' (96c1–2). His

failure is thus not a question of lack of information, diligence or practice, but the result of some sort of natural incapacity. So once again, we find Socrates proclaiming himself unable to provide a certain type of account. It is not entirely clear how his declared incapacity to formulate naturalistic explanations is related to his incapacity to compose imaginative narratives (61b5). It may be that they are two aspects of some general lack of ability to formulate genetic accounts. I am, however, more inclined to think that the two are mostly independent of each other.[21]

At this point Socrates learned about Anaxagoras' book, and once he learned about it, he got very excited, for he thought that Anaxagoras would provide an account of the kind he himself was unable to come up with. The way Socrates describes his excitement on learning that Anaxagoras máde Mind responsible for everything makes clear that Socrates had immediately realized – or at least hoped – that Anaxagoras' account would be something different from 'inquiry into nature'. Thus Socrates' hopes were not that Anaxagoras would provide the naturalistic account he, Socrates, was 'naturally unsuited for'.[22] He entertained such high expectations, I suggest, because he had good reasons to believe that Anaxagoras would give an explanatory account that was in conformity with the narrative pattern of myths Socrates was used to and approved, but was unable to produce himself. When he heard that the main protagonist of Anaxagoras' book is a cosmic Mind, and that this Mind is the cause of, or is responsible for, everything in the current arrangement of the world, Socrates could justifiably expect that Mind would fulfil the same functional role as Zeus in the myth of the *Gorgias* and in Aristophanes' fable, Prometheus and Zeus in Protagoras' myth, and the unnamed god in the fable Aesop would have composed about the relationship between pleasure and pain.

Indeed, the most important respect in which Anaxagoras' account differs from the 'inquiry into nature' type as practised by Socrates is the same respect in which Aesop's tale differs from Socrates' description: it introduces a powerful divine agent supposedly responsible for the explanandum.[23]

---

[21] It would be worthwhile to examine in detail the different forms of discourses Socrates proclaims himself unable to produce in different dialogues, and how, among other things, it relates to his famous disavowal of knowledge.

[22] 'The radical discontinuity' between the Anaxagorean passage and what comes before and after that in the search for the causes of becoming and perishing is emphasized by Lennox 1985, 197–200.

[23] Whether or not Socrates' expectations that Mind will function as the divine characters of theologically correct tales meet Anaxagoras' own conception of Mind is another question. Modern interpreters disagree on the question whether or not Anaxagoras wanted to present Mind as a god. (For different views, see, Deichgräber 1933, 347–53; Jaeger 1947, 160–71 and Gerson 1990, 28–32 on the one hand, and Cleve 1943 and Sider 1981, 96 on the other.) Note that Socrates' expectations are legitimate even

Socrates could thus expect that in so far as Anaxagoras maintains that Mind arranged the whole cosmos and everything in it, he would surely explain how in the case of each and every thing, Mind realized the shortcomings of some initial situation of 'not-yet' and devised how to obtain the best results in view of certain limiting conditions and calculating with the available means. In so far as this story describes how the main structural elements of the cosmos were put into place, the events described necessarily lie outside the scope of direct human experience.[24] For the Platonic Socrates, as presumably for many of his contemporaries, the most natural form of discourse to describe divine actions that lie outside the scope of possible human experience is *muthos*.[25] That Socrates expected to read such a type of narrative in Anaxagoras' book in no way suggests that he thought he would read merely some entertaining piece of fiction. In so far as such a story expresses some important truth about the divine agent and the world in general, by correctly establishing the facts and applying the appropriate explanatory principles, it should be taken with complete seriousness. If Anaxagoras' narrative meets these conditions, we can 'believe it to be true' – as Socrates 'believed to be true' the story about Zeus installing the present system of afterlife judgements in the *Gorgias* – even if we cannot ever be sure that the events did happen in the way the narrative presents them.

As we have seen, the best result as the goal of the divine agent was present, albeit largely implicitly, in the fables we considered. But in the case of Anaxagoras, Socrates could have even higher expectations because of the name Anaxagoras had given to the cosmic agent of his story: Anaxagoras' name-giving suggests a higher level of theological consciousness and a higher

---

if Anaxagoras wanted to *replace* traditional deities with Mind. In any case, most ancient interpreters of Anaxagoras took the Mind to be a god (see 59A48 DK) and most of those who were influenced by the Anaxagorean concept of a cosmic Mind explicitly called their respective Minds 'God'.

[24] As David Sedley has pointed out to me, it may be objected that Socrates phrases his expectations in the present tense, so that Mind *is* the cause and *directs* and *arranges* everything, whereas on the interpretation I offer they should be in the past. I don't think that this point is fatal to my suggestion. First, the famous first words of Anaxagoras' own text clearly indicate that what we should expect is a narrative that at least starts with a state of 'not-yet' in the distant past: 'All things were together'. Second, Socrates specifically speaks about the shape and position of the earth, and the shapes, positions and movements of the heavenly bodies (97e–98a) as phenomena that Anaxagoras should have explained by reference to the teleological actions of Mind – but these cosmogonical actions must have taken place in the past. The present tense formulations on the other hand may refer to the fact that, according to Anaxagoras, the *diakosmēsis* is an ongoing process, because the vortex continues to grow and extend its effect to larger and larger parts of the surrounding mass of still indistinct mixture. So Mind still continues to arrange everything, even if the relevant structural parts of the cosmos (earth, sun, etc.) have already taken shape.

[25] Cf. *R.* 414b. On the point that *muthos* is the appropriate format for things that lie outside the scope of possible human experience, see Gill 1993, 59. See also Rowe 1999 and Johansen 2004, ch. 2.

level of explicitness in the explanation. On the basis of his convictions about the strong ties between what is rational and what is good, Socrates could expect that Anaxagoras in naming his divine agent 'Mind' would make the motivations of this agent much more explicit than Aesop, Aristophanes or Protagoras. Socrates could legitimately expect that Anaxagoras will say explicitly that Mind arranged everything in view of the best.

But Anaxagoras failed to make adequate use of the otherwise appropriate cosmic agent he introduced, and thereby frustrated Socrates' anticipations:

I never thought that he who maintained that those things were arranged by mind would adduce any other cause for them than that these things are in the best way as they are. (98a7–9)

Anaxagoras' procedure is startling and disappointing because he first introduced an agent endowed with supreme intelligence and power, and then he left it to remain idle. It is as if Aesop were to introduce a divine agent, emphasize the rationality of this agent, and state that the relationship between pleasure and pain was fixed by this agent, but then continue the story by giving a physiological explanation in terms of the different material components of the body that produce pleasure and pain. The frustrated Socrates now abandons both the 'inquiry into nature' type of explanation and the teleological explanation and sets on his famous 'second sailing' introducing the Forms as causes.

Note that Socrates' intellectual autobiography itself is a narrative that describes how the present state of affairs, i.e., Socrates' holding a specific causal theory came about.[26] Remarkably, this narrative is also in conformity with the general narrative pattern as outlined above. It starts with an initial stage in which Socrates does not as yet know the causes of becoming and perishing. Then in his search for the causes Socrates has to confront important limiting conditions including the intrinsic limitations of the 'inquiry into nature' project, his own natural inability to create such an account, and that there is no one around who could provide what would be the best overall solution, a teleological account. So Socrates settles for a second-best solution, the best available, practicable solution for him. The narrative, moreover, has explanatory force because it explains the reasons why Socrates eventually opts for this solution, and it provides important information about the status of the theory. What we see here is that the description of rational human goal-directed agency is modelled on the narrative pattern of tales that speak about the deeds of gods in the

---

[26] I am developing here a point suggested by Stephen Menn in discussion.

appropriate manner. One may object at this point that it is just the other way around: the stories about the gods are modelled on or are projections of human action. After all, this is why we say that the gods in these stories are anthropomorphic. Yet, I would insist, Plato thinks that these stories should function as patterns and the gods in them be role models that we ought to emulate in our own actions. And this is exactly what Socrates as a rational human agent is doing. Socrates thus cannot compose such stories about gods, but he can speak about human action, and primarily his own actions, in these terms. This is also why he illustrates and explains his disappointment with the Anaxagorean account, and the difference between genuine and bogus causes, by reference to his own rational, goal-directed actions: why he is sitting in the prison. Yet, being able to explain human action in teleological terms does not make Socrates able to give a teleological account of the broad structure of the cosmos and other natural phenomena. It is significant that after having heard the unsatisfactory account by Anaxagoras, Socrates does not even try to amend it or to come up with a better version. This, I assume, is a result of the fact that, as he states in the Aesop passage, he had already realized that he was incapable of producing such narratives. Because of his incapacity, Socrates had no hope of ever coming up with a suitable alternative by himself. Even more remarkably, he does not expect to discover the appropriate account by himself even in the superior epistemological conditions of the afterlife, when, as he believes, his body will no longer disturb his soul in its quest for knowledge. All Socrates could do was to continue to hope that he would find the right teacher (99c6–8). He could still entertain such hopes because he was convinced that he would soon be in the company of wise men and gods in Hades (63b–c). It would be in that company, if anywhere, that he would find someone to teach him how a divine agent fashioned everything for the best.[27]

---

[27] Commentators and translators have sometimes found it puzzling that Socrates still has hopes to find an appropriate teacher although he is just about to die. Gallop, for example, transforms the forward-looking conditional into a past conditional: 'Now I should most gladly have become anyone's pupil.' Sedley 1990, 359 notes that Socrates' remark is 'hardly of great dramatic appropriateness' and that this fact shows that here Plato addresses us directly in his own authorial voice, announcing the plan of a future dialogue, the one he eventually realizes as the *Timaeus*. But in view of Socrates' eschatological convictions expressed in both his 'apology' and the final myth, Socrates is fully justified at least in hoping that his disincarnate soul will still be able to acquire knowledge by itself and that he will be able to hold discussions with others who are wiser than anyone he met in his incarnate life. When Sedley takes up the point in a subsequent paper (Sedley 1995, 7, n. 3), he explicitly dismisses the possibility of such encounters on the basis of two considerations. (1) He admits that in 63b–c Socrates says that 'Be assured that, as it is, I expect to join the company of good men' but finds the qualification more important: 'This last I would not altogether insist on'. Socrates however goes on to say that 'but if I insist on anything at all in these matters, it is that I shall come to good gods who are

But what about the great eschatological *muthos* of the *Phaedo*, then? From the start of the dialogue, Socrates often refers to the departures and journeys of souls to Hades or simply 'to another place'.[28] After having presented a series of dialectical arguments for the immortality of the soul, Socrates finally gives flesh to these references by describing 'the other places', and the passage of the souls to those places, in an account that he repeatedly calls a *muthos*.[29] Sandwiched between the description of the journey of the souls, the way they are judged, purged, punished and rewarded (107d–108c and 113d–114c), Socrates gives an account of the cosmos in general, and a long and detailed description of the intricately layered structure of the earth in particular.[30] As David Sedley has shown in a seminal paper, the way Socrates describes the cosmos – the place and form of the earth, its geography, the motions of the heavenly bodies, etc. – can be considered as a reply to the questions Socrates asked of the cosmologists in so far as the description clearly indicates why it is good that the cosmos and its main structural elements are as they are (Sedley 1990). Even if Socrates does not make it explicit, all these features of the cosmos in general and the earth in particular are good in so far as they are conducive to the ethical advancement of souls. If the description thus contains teleological answers to the main cosmological questions, or at least indicates the directions in which the answers should be formulated, are we not obliged to acknowledge that Socrates did not after all need to wait for the afterlife to meet an appropriate teacher? Perhaps Socrates did not quite appreciate the teleological import of the

very good masters' (trans. Grube). Why could not such a good god teach Socrates what he longs for so much? At 111b8–c1 Socrates explicitly says that the gods communicate in multiple ways, including divine utterances (*phēmē*), with the virtuous men who live on the upper surface of the earth. Moreover, even if he does not insist on it, in so far as Socrates expects to join the company of good men, he can at least entertain the hope that he will find a teacher among them. And that much is enough for such an interpretation of 99c. (2) Sedley's second point is that 'the closing myth leaves no place for such personal encounters'. I cannot find any indication in the description of the life on the surface of the earth at 111a–c that would exclude such encounters. It is, however, even more probable that Socrates will take the path of those who have been 'sufficiently purified by philosophy' (114c3) and therefore are granted an even better, totally disincarnate existence. Socrates tells next to nothing about their way of being, but I cannot see why this form of existence should exclude exchanging ideas. It seems to me that if Socrates holds it to be a good form of existence, it should include discussion and further philosophical advancement even for those who have already sufficiently practised philosophy. That it is possible to interpret Socrates' words within the dramatic and eschatological framework of the dialogue, as I suggest, is on the other hand still perfectly compatible with Sedley's suggestion that by the same words Plato also announces the plan of a future dialogue, which will be realized as the *Timaeus*.

[28] Cf., e.g., 61d–e; 63b; 67b7–c1; 72a; 80d–e. I survey these passages and their connection to the final *muthos* in Betegh 2006, section 5.
[29] 110b1, 114d7. For the reason why I don't think we can translate *muthos* as 'tale' or 'fable' at this place, see n. 1 above.
[30] For an instructive structural analysis of the 'myth', see Pradeau 1996.

muthos he was relating.[31] But, then, why did he favour this account over any other? It seems to me that even if he did not make it explicit, he preferred this specific description of the cosmos and the earth because he was well aware of its teleological nature. The reason why he thought that it still did not fit the bill, I suggest, is that this account corresponds only to step 4 of the narrative structure.[32] As such, it only takes the end-product of a genetic account without explaining from what defective initial conditions, in virtue of what reasoning and calculations and facing what limiting conditions, a divine agent produced this arrangement. A complete teleological explanation, for Plato, needs to refer to agency and the practical reasoning of the agent, but such an agent, the producer of the good cosmic arrangement, is missing from the final *muthos*. In conformity with step 4 of the other narratives we have considered, Socrates does not mention in his eschatologico-cosmological account the rational and benevolent agent who created this good cosmic structure. Remember that Anaxagoras' account was treated incipiently as a promising attempt to provide an answer to the more general question about the cause or causes of becoming and perishing exactly because he introduced a rational agent responsible for the cosmic arrangement – something that is clearly absent from the myth. For these reasons, the myth cannot be an alternative to what Socrates expected to hear from Anaxagoras. Socrates was right in claiming that he still had to wait for someone else to provide him with such a narrative.

THE *TIMAEUS*

The epilogue to our story naturally comes from the *Timaeus*. Socrates in that dialogue expresses once again his incapacity to compose and present a certain type of discourse – narratives that depict the city and its citizens in action (19d) – but receives with much enthusiasm the cosmological narrative presented by Timaeus. Timaeus' account is endorsed by Socrates and can function as a complement to Socrates' own speech in so far as it provides a story about the origins of that state of affairs that Socrates takes for granted. This is why Critias can say 'Then I am to follow, taking over from him [sc. Timaeus] mankind, whose origin he has described, and from you [sc. Socrates] a portion of them who have received a supremely good training' (*Ti.* 27a7–9 trans. Cornford).

[31] So Sedley 2007, 93–5.
[32] It is most obviously parallel to step 4 of the *Gorgias* myth – that step which Socrates claims to be his own addition.

The overall narrative pattern of Timaeus' story about the way the present world order came about clearly corresponds in each of its points to the pattern suggested above. The first stage is the pre-cosmic chaos, a defective state, in which the *explananda*, the cosmos and its inhabitants are not there 'as yet'. Timaeus' main innovation is the introduction of a rational and benevolent divine agent presented as the causal origin of the present world order.[33] The divine agent calculates with the available means and the limiting conditions and comes up with the best possible practicable solution. At last, Timaeus is explicit about the characterization and motivations of the divine protagonist of his story, when he clearly states that the divinity is good, and wants everything to be good and nothing bad (29e–30a). The explanation takes the form of setting out the motivations and the successive stages of the practical reasoning of the divine agent. There are, of course, new elements as well. Most importantly, the divine agent is described as a craftsman, and as all good craftsmen, he works after an eternal model. Moreover, Timaeus is outstandingly knowledgeable in mathematical and natural sciences (*Ti.* 27a), so he can successfully integrate these spheres of knowledge into his myth; most importantly, this is why he can correctly, or at least with more probability, state the facts to be explained. This we could not expect from people like Aesop, Aristophanes or Protagoras. But, in an important respect, Timaeus on this occasion acts like them: he is producing an imaginative narrative about the acts of a divine agent, a muthos which is to be taken seriously.[34] We are not surprised that he describes his narrative as both a *logos* and a *muthos* – as we should not be surprised that what Socrates expects to read but does not find in Anaxagoras' book is also a *muthos* that can be taken seriously.

[33] The way the theme of a cosmic divine Mind runs through the *oeuvre* of Plato from the *Phaedo* to the *Timaeus* is analyzed in great detail by Menn 1995.

[34] This characterization of Timaeus' speech is, I think, fully in line with Burnyeat's understanding of *eikōs muthos* in this volume. Previous sections of my paper are also complementary to Burnyeat's interpretation because they establish, on the basis of other dialogues, a set of criteria Plato expects from appropriate mythical narratives. Timaeus' narrative can be characterized as an *eikōs muthos*, in the sense of 'appropriate' or 'reasonable' myth, because it fulfils these criteria and thus lives up to the normative requirements set by Plato.

CHAPTER 4

Fraternité, inégalité, la parole de Dieu: *Plato's authoritarian myth of political legitimation*

Malcolm Schofield

THE PHOENICIAN MYTH

The Noble Lie of the *Republic* (414b–415d) is presented to the reader as a myth (415a). It is really two myths, or a myth in two parts: a 'Phoenician' theme (414c), on which Socrates then plays a no less important Hesiodic variation (cf. 546e). The Phoenician element is Plato's rewriting of the story of how Cadmus sowed a field with dragon's teeth, and how from the earth there then sprang up a race of armed men: the 'earthborn' or 'Spartoi' (the sown ones). These Cadmus set fighting among each other by throwing a stone into their midst. But five survived, and these helped him build Cadmea, the citadel of what was to become Thebes in Boeotia, whose aristocracy claimed them as ancestors.[1]

The story is a thoroughly Greek tale, a foundation myth presumably used to explain and legitimate the status of the established Theban landed elite. Cadmus, however, was by birth Phoenician: an immigrant to Greece from the city of Tyre. This is what allows Plato to indicate the model for his own myth by the designation 'Phoenician'. The *point* of calling it Phoenician is presumably something different: to suggest that there is something not entirely Greek about the story – that is (I take it) something not readily compatible with civilization. The suggestion is then reinforced by Socrates' confession that although – according to the poets – there have been many places where the indigenous peoples have sprung from the earth in this kind of way (the Athenians themselves had their own local version of just such a myth of origins),[2] it is not the sort of thing that has happened in their own

[1] The basic sources for the myth of the Spartoi are Apollodorus, *Library* 3.4.1 and Hyginus, *Fabulae* 178–9: both compilations of perhaps the second century AD. Pausanias (of the same period) also knows the story: *Description of Greece* 8.11.8, 9.5.3, 9.10.1. But it is of much earlier origin, as can be inferred not only from Plato's use of it but, e.g., from Pherecydes fr. 22 [Jacoby], Aeschylus, *Seven against Thebes* 474, Euripides, *Phoenician Women* 931–46.

[2] See Loraux 1993, ch.1.