Philosophy in Review

Tae-Yeoun Keum, "Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought."

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Generally, in the history of philosophical thought Plato is usually regarded not only as the founder of philosophical idealism, but also as a strongly rational thinker. Nonetheless, within the vast Platonic production preponderant is the presence of myths, many of them created by Plato himself to better illustrate the theoretical content of his main theses. An aspect that divides many scholars and interpreters of Platonic thought is marked precisely by the myth. Simplifying a lot, we can say that on the one hand there are thinkers who—albeit from radically different perspectives—see in Platonic myths a limitation of philosophical thought. For example, Hegel considered Plato's myths as an aesthetic embellishment, while Popper considered them incompatible with the tradition of critical rationalism. On the other hand, there are thinkers who were either explicitly inspired by Platonic myths—as in the case of Thomas More and Francis Bacon—or who instead highlighted the philosophical importance of myth, which proved decisive for the foundation of a rational discourse, as well as for politics. It is thanks to Tae-Yeoun Keum and Christopher Tower to have re-evaluated the Platonic aspects connected to myth, showing how the latter turns out to be essential for rational political thought. In this recent volume *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* the author examines the influence exerted by Platonic myths not only within philosophical thought but—more specifically—within political thought.

As the author makes clear from the introduction to the volume, there are two quite distinct ideas of myth present in the discussion around the latter: 'The first meaning, we might call *deep myths*, to refer to the broad conceptual collection formed around the elusive frameworks we find embedded in the background of contemporary culture. The second, by contrast, we might call *literary myths*, to indicate the traditional narrative genre of fantastic tales' (7). Starting from such a distinction, Keum formulates three questions to explain the relationship that exists between Platonic myths and their foundational status in the Western philosophical tradition. (1) How can we interpret the Platonic legacy in light of the myths Plato himself wrote? (2) What lessons can we elicit from the Platonic legacy about myths in political thought? (3) What kind of relationship exists between 'literary myths' and 'deep myths'? The author addresses these issues starting with the first part of the volume, entitled 'Political and Philosophical Boundaries,' where chapter one illustrates the question of nature and myth in Plato's *Republic*. Two famous myths present in Plato's *Republic* are the myth of Metals and the myth of Er. Both myths, as is well known, received strong philosophical criticism from Karl Popper and Julia Annas. Since metals are hereditary, it follows, according to Popper, that these metals are nothing more than racial characteristics. As for the myth of Er, Julia Annas sees in its use by Plato a kind of failure of philosophy to use only rational arguments: 'the long and the careful philosophical argument spanning the breadth of the *Republic* ought to have sufficed on its own to carry out its central task – a defense of justice and the just life – so that capping it off with a myth seems to undermine what had come before. To not only accept the myth as necessary, but to give it the last word, suggests a kind of failure on the part of philosophy to communicate on its own terms with its audience' (37). However, Keum points out that what Popper and Annas criticize only takes into account one aspect of what Plato represents through myth. In fact, Plato addresses the problem of education and knowledge in the famous myth of the cave. As is well known, the sensible person resembles a slave chained in the depths of a cave, able to observe only the wall in front of them. Behind them, there is a fire that projects the forms of what happens behind the slave, unaware of everything because they are unable to turn around. What the slave can see in front is not the light,

but only what it reflects, that is, the shadows of the objects. The allegory of the cave should be understood precisely as a symbolic expression of the development of knowledge, denoting not a simple reflection of a reality already given, but instead a modelling of it through the pure λόγος, with which we climb laboriously to the steep ideal structures to capture the essential and invariant elements, and then return to the fertile bathos of experience by virtue of a process of descent or concretization. In the myth of the cave, in fact, we find not only the theory of education present in Plato's *Republic*, but also his articulated theory of knowledge, which although expressed using the language of myth, is nevertheless structured by a solid rational framework. Even in the case of the myth of Er it is possible to find the same pedagogical feature found in the myth of the cave. As is known, Er was a hero killed in battle, but who returns to life telling what they had seen in the afterlife. From this point of view, it is possible to read the myth of Er 'as a myth about these same topics – of education and of testing for its effects' (53).

In chapter two, Keum analyzes the founding myths of a utopian nature of Thomas More and Francis Bacon. Both authors wrote works clearly inspired by Plato's *Republic*; More wrote *Utopia* (1516) while Bacon wrote *New Atlantis* (1626). Before analyzing the utopian works of More and Bacon in detail, Keum traces a historical overview of the different receptions of Platonic myths. The first tradition the author analyzes is the skeptical one, where the myths 'appear to have taken only a relatively marginal role for understanding his thought' (74). The other tradition is the Neoplatonic one associated above all with Plotinus. As Keum puts it, 'Plotinus's gloss on Platonic metaphysics had the accidental effect of rendering it more easily compatible with religious trends in late antiquity, but also with monotheistic traditions in Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. This association would in turn prove to be critical to the survival of Plato in late antiquity and beyond' (75). However, in the perspectives of More and Bacon there is a significant departure from the Neoplatonic positions, where the myth is seen as a 'medium capable of helping stabilize politics around a particular status quo' (85).

In chapter three, entitled 'An Enlightenment Fable: Leibniz and the Boundaries of Reason,' Keum considers the problem of myth within the writings of the German philosopher Leibniz, usually thought of as a strict rationalist. Yet in the final part of the *Theodicy* Leibniz ends precisely with a myth, in which he on the one hand takes up the structure of the dialogue *De libero arbitrio* of the Italian humanist Lorenzo Valla, and on the other hand provides a continuation where Valla's dialogue stops. It must be said that here we discuss the limits of reason and Leibniz stands against Pierre Bayle, who considered reason as limited by faith. Valla's dialogue is characterized by a conversation between Apollo and the tyrant Sextus Tarquinius: 'Sextus has come to Apollo for a prophecy regarding his own fate, and Apollo responds by revealing to him the sin that he is destined to commit in the future, and the consequent life of exile and suffering that awaits him. Sextus protests, pointing to the gifts and sacrifices he has brought for the deity, and asks for a better prophecy. To this, Apollo answers that he merely foretells the future, and that Sextus's fate and his sins are his owns: if Sextus has any objections, he should instead be making his complaint to Jupiter and to the Fates' (109). This is how Valla's dialogue ends, but Leibniz continues the story by modifying it, in what constitutes the second part of the so-called 'Petite Fable.' Leibniz continues the story as follows, 'Sextus goes to Jupiter with his complaints after all. Jupiter ends up offering Sextus a choice: if he agrees to give up his crown in Rome, the Fates will grant him a different future. Sextus rejects the offer and returns to Rome, resigning himself to his doomed fate' (109). Theodore had witnessed the scene and asks Jupiter why this is so, and Jupiter tells him to go to Athena, who will give him the answers he seeks. Going to Athens he is asked to fall asleep and while dreaming he finds himself in an unknown place with a beautiful palace. At that point Athena comes to the scene and shows Theodorus not only what

happens, but everything that is possible. Of all possible worlds God has chosen the best. At that point Theodore realizes that Sextus's fate could only be the current one and therefore Theodorus continues his activity as a servant of his God. What is the relationship between Leibniz's strict rationalism and the use of this myth in the final part of his *Theodicy*? According to Keum, Leibniz 'deploys the myth as a deliberate, philosophical solution to the problems generated by his own commitment to rationalism' (107). During the Enlightenment, however, myth was considered as a mode of thought not based on reason and therefore philosophy was seen as a progressive departure from ancient forms of superstition and backwardness. Nonetheless, as Keum writes, 'modern culture was not immune to slipping back into the same tendencies that once gave rise to those grotesque stories and beliefs pervading unenlightened societies' (115).

Part Two, 'Myth and Modernity,' which opens with chapter four, entitled 'The New Mythology of German Idealism,' begins with an analysis of a famous text generally attributed to Hegel entitled *Oldest Systematic Program* (1796-1797). This writing—or rather fragment—hints at a 'new mythology,' and in the course of analyzing this, Keum argues that 'the new mythology of German Idealism was conceived as a solution to a novel problem in modern politics.… Through the lens of their unique brand of Platonism, the German Idealists believed that the choice between rationality and poetry could be resolved in mythology' (151). Keum analyzes the main theses held by the German idealists, who were decidedly marked by aesthetic inclinations. For example, Schlegel in his *Speech on Mythology* considered mythology as a solution to overcome the crisis in which modern poetry found itself. We also have the powerful reflection of Schelling, who saw in the medium of mythology 'a path to opening up knowledge to the qualities that he associated with poetry' (166). All these aspects are well summarized by what Keum calls the 'Platonism of the new mythology,' according to which 'a new mythology was necessary precisely because conscious reason alone was inadequate to the task of accessing this highest ideal' (172). Obviously, the ideal sought by the German Idealists was to provide a unity holding together the diversity of the world.

The last chapter, the fifth, is entitled 'The Demon of the City: Cassirer on Myth and Plato,' and analyzes in detail the way Cassirer deals with the problem of myth both in his *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* and in the last work written by the German philosopher, *The Myth of the State* (published posthumously in 1946). In the background of Cassirer's analysis there is Plato, whom he considers the greatest philosopher of antiquity, as well as the founder of philosophical idealism. While in the general structure of the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, mythical thought still had its own autonomy—even if a hint of rationalization of myth was already present in the third volume of Cassirer's masterpiece—on the other hand, in the ethical-political reflection of the *Myth of the State*, the analyses carried out there seem at least to reduce the function of mythical thought. The irruption of myth in the modern world brings to the surface something that was thought to be lost in the abysses of the past. For this reason, myth, in its reappearance in history, takes on the connotations of a disturbing guest, the spokesman of a threat to the survival of human rationality itself. This occurs when the rational forces fail and therefore cease to exercise their custody and vigilance. Nonetheless, Cassirer considered Plato as the avowed enemy of myth, as the one who through philosophy tried to overcome the mythical way of thinking. On the other hand, Plato himself was a forger of myths and often used them in his dialogues to express his philosophical theses. How to resolve this apparent contradiction?

In the *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* Cassirer does not diminish in any way the importance of mythical thought, while in the *Myth of the State*, Cassirer considerably reduces its importance. On the other hand, Cassirer considers theoretical thought superior to mythical thought, and this is due to the fact that Cassirer – although far from considering myth as a simple ornament – ends up adopting

the Hegelian processual scheme of the *Aufhebung*, where mythical thought carries out its function in the stages of the process of the spirit and then leaves the field to theoretical thought. Cassirer attributes a fundamental function to myth, as it is seen as a way of conferring meaning to reality; however, Cassirer in *The Myth of the State* evaluates political myth negatively. This is because with the totalitarianisms of the twentieth century there is a strange mixture of myth and political thought, where the totalitarian state assumes the role of the only court, thus replacing that of reason. In fact, Cassirer wonders how it is possible that in a refined culture such as ours, this singular union between myth and politics has occurred. This is because even in the most highly developed phases of social life there are sometimes ideal conditions for the resurgence of myth, as in the case of the Weimar Republic. The latter, in fact, had not been able to cope with the problem of inflation and imminent economic collapse, so it seemed that normal resources had been exhausted. This was precisely the natural terrain on which political myths could flourish, and in which they found ample nourishment. The return of the myth induces Cassirer not only to revise his positions, but also to take a more cautious attitude toward it, since our culture – and this lesson had been imparted to him by Hitler's totalitarianism, which forced him to emigrate – does not rest on solid foundations at all, but rather on a volcano ready to unleash its irrational fury when the forces of logos prove unprepared for such landslides. Myth—a permanent feature of human nature— patiently waits behind the scenes, ready to reappear in renewed forms. This, of course, should not lead readers to see in Cassirer a critic of myth; what he criticizes is only the political use of myth. After all, the myths as used by Plato not only had a deep philosophical value but were not used in any way for the achievement of political goals or to subjugate the masses.

In conclusion, this speculatively rich volume by Keum provides a comprehensive and original survey of the Platonic legacy in not only political, but also philosophical, thought. Keum has shown that 'what is distinctive about Platonic tradition that I have sought to recover is its embrace of the potential that myth could itself be turned into a form of philosophical discourse, for incorporating into philosophical writing alongside argumentative reasoning' (225).

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