

The Myths of Plato

Translated with Introductory and Other Observations

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Xerox: vii - xii, 4-5, 6-7, 14-15, 20-23, 34-37, 40-45.

Brief quotes:

- 19 Dante (?) on various meanings: In exitu Israel de Aegypto....
libera: the exodus led by Moses
allegoria: our redemption by Christ
moral: conversion from state of sin to state of grace
anagogic: from servitude to corruption in this life to eternal glory
- 33 ... the essential charm of Poetry... lies in its power of inducing
... that mode of Transcendental Feeling, which is experienced as
a solemn sense of the overshadowing presence of "That which was,
and is, and ever shall be."
But the dream-consciousness induced in the patient by the imagery
and melody of the Poet lasts only for a moment. The effect of
even the most sustained Poetry is a succession of occasional
lapses into the state of dream-consciousness, each one of which
occurs suddenly and lasts but for a moment, in the midst of an other-
wise continuous waking consciousness which is concerned, in a
matter-of-fact way, with "what the poem is about," and "how the
poet manages his theme," and a hundred other things. It is
at the moment of waking from one of these lapses into the dream-
world that the solemn sense of the immediate presence of "That which
was, and is, and ever shall be" is experienced -- in the moment
when one sees, in the world of wide-awake consciousness, the
image, or hears the melody, which one saw or heard only a moment
ago -- or was it not ages ago? -- in the dream-world:--
- 34 Un punto solo m' è maggior letargo,
Che venticinque secoli alla impresa,
Che fe' Nettuno ammirar l' ombra d' Argo. (see xerox)
- 49 Myth, not argumentative conversation, is rightly chosen by Plato
as the vehicle of exposition when he deals with the a priori
conditions of conduct and knowledge, whether they be ideals or
faculties.
- 49 But Soul, Cosmos as the completed system of the Good, and God
are not particular objects presented, along /50/ with other
particular objects in sensible experience. This the Scientific

50 Understanding fails to grasp. When it tries to deal with them -- and it is ready enough to make the venture -- it must needs envisage them, more suo, as though they were particular objects which could be brought under its categories in sensible experience. Then the question arises, "Where are they?" And the answer comes sooner or later, "They are nowhere to be found." Thus "science" chills the "sweet hope" in which man lives, by bringing the natural expression of it into discredit.

This, I take it, is Plato's reason for employing Myth, rather than the language and method of "science," when he wishes to set forth the a priori as it expresses itself in Ideals.

51 The idea of the separate individuality or personality of the Self is not more essential to the moral consciousness than the idea of the separate individuality or personality of God is to the religious consciousness; and in the religious consciousness, at any rate, both of /52/ these ideas are involved -- an individual Self stands in a personal relation to another individual, God.

53 Anyone who reads the Metaphysics, De Anima, and Ethics in connection will be struck by the way in which the logician gives up, apparently without scruple, the idea of a Personal God, and the correlate idea of the Personal Immortality of the Soul.

It may help us to make out what Plato hopes for from presenting these correlate ideas, in Myth, to the adult readers of his Dialogues, if we recall what he lays down in the second book of the Republic about the religious instruction of young children, on which all mental and moral education, according to him, is to be founded.

54 The education of children, he tells us, is not to begin with instruction in "facts" or "truths." It is not to begin, as we might say, with the elementary truths of science and facts /54/ of common life as learned in the primer. Young children cannot yet understand what is true in fact. We must begin then with what is false in fact -- with fictions, with stories. Their only faculty is that of being interested in stories. Hence it is all important to have good stories to tell them -- to invent myths with a good tendency. They are to be told what is literally false in order that they may get hold of what is spiritually true -- the great fundamental truth that God is "beneficent" and "truthful" -- both adjectives applicable to a person; and a finite person for they are to believe that he is the author only of what is good.

54 In one sentence -- "The Lie in the Soul" -- the spirit of pessimism
55 in conduct and /55/ scepticism in science -- will bring to naught
all those who have not believed, in their childhood, that God is
a Person, good and true.

[Most led by sense and imagination will retain childhood belief;
[for those that do not, represent it in myth]

But why represent it? That the continuity of their lives may
be brought home to them -- that they may be led to sympathise
with what they were and, sympathising, to realise that what
they are now -- is due to what they were, It is because the
continuity of life is lost sight of, that religious conviction
and scientific thought are brought into opposition. The
scientific thinker, looking back over his life, is apt to divide
it sharply into the time during which he believed what is not
true and the time during which he has known the truth.
Thus to fail in sympathy with his own childhood, and with the happy
condition of the majority of men and women, and with the feelings
which may yet return to comfort him when the hour of death draws ~~xx~~
near, betokens, Plato would say, a serious flaw in a man's
philosophy of life. The man abstracts the present time from its
setting in his whole life. He plucks from its stem the "knowledge
of truth," and thinks that it still lives. The "knowledge of
truth" Plato would tell us, doesnot come except to the man whose
character has been formed and understadning guided, in childhood
and youth, by unquestioning faith in the goodness and truthfulness
of a Personal God. And this faith he must reverence all his life
/56/ through, looking back to his childhood and forward to his
death.

57 ... the logical understanding will always keep reminding them
that "in truth" (though perhaps not in practice) the doctrines
of science and the convictions of the religious consciousness
are "incompatible"; and it is here, I take it, ... that Plato
hopes for good from Myth, as from some great Ritual at which
thinkers may assist and feel that there are mysteries which the
scientific understanding cannot fathom.

57 But thex scientific understanding cannot be allowed to criticise
its own foundation -- that which all faculties of the living man,
the scientific understanding itself included, take for granted --
"that it is good to go on living the human life into which I
have been born; and that it is worth while employing my ~~x~~ faculties

- 57 con'd carefully in the conduct of my life for they do not deceive me.
- 59 The scientific understanding... is apt... to flatter itself that it is the measure of all things -- that what to it is inconceivable is impossible. It cannot conceive the Part ruling the Whole; therefore it says that the proposition "the World is ruled by a Personal God" is not true.
[[Plato's two answers. First]]
"Life wuld come to naught if we acted as if the scientific understanding were right in denying the existence of a Personal God."....
Plato's other answer goes deeper. It consists in showing that the Whole, or all-embracing Good cannot be grasped scientifically, but must be seen imperfectly in a simillitude....
But the Good is not an object presented to knowledge. It is the condition of knowledge.
- 60 The conception of "Whole" or "universe" which the logical understanding professes to have, and minipulates in its proof of the non-existence of a Personal God, is not a "conception" at all. The understanding cannot conceive the Universe as finished Whole. Its "whole" is always also a part of something indefinitely greater.
- 73 Of course, I do not deny that passages may be found in which the Ideas of Soul, Cosmos, and God are treated by Plato, without Mythology, as having objects to be determined under the scientific categories of Cause and Substance -- e. g. in Phaedrus, 245 E, and Phaedo, 105 C, we seem to have /74/ serious scientific argument for the immortality of the Soul-- indeed, it would be astonishing if there were no such passages, for the distinction between Category and Idea, as understood by Kant, is not explicit in Plato's mind; but I submit that such passages fade into insignificance by the side of the great Myths.