Critical Exchange

Plato and the mythic tradition in political thought

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The role of the word 'myth' in contemporary political discourse appears to be fairly straightforward: to call something a 'myth' (e.g., 'the Lost Cause,' 'the steal,' 'the stab in the back,' 'the fallen cherry tree,' 'racial superiority,' 'computer chips in vaccines,' 'There was so much love at that [January 6th] rally') is usually to call it a

falsehood. Hence, the umbrage taken when 'liberty, equality, and freedom' are sometimes described as myths. Today, no one wants their fundamental beliefs 'reduced' to mere myths. Of course, there are exceptions. We occasionally use the word 'mythic' to mean exceptional or legendary. But in general, our ordinary language of politics resembles the language of modern science in which the notion of myth is used to describe a falsehood or a lie that may be usefully deployed to persuade but is deceitful nonetheless. Whenever 'myth' appears in ordinary politics, so does the odor of mendacity.

In contrast, the idea of myth and its connection to western political philosophy are complex and elusive. On the one hand, as David Lay Williams notes in his contribution to this exchange, there is a tradition of political thought that follows the same trajectory of our ordinary political language, emulating the scientific view that associates myths with idols and falsehoods. In fact, there is a view of the history of political thought which suggests that modernity itself is defined by the closure of myths, if one understands that closure as the disenchantment of the world. Within the modern, let us say, rationalist view of political philosophy, stories may sometimes be employed to illustrate a particular point through 'thought experiments' (like trolley cars) or 'hypothetical situations' (such as Rawls's original position), but they are not seen as myths by those who employ them. Rather, they view them as tools to be used, altered, or discarded in the service of a logical argument. Within this tradition, there is a high wall of separation between justification and 'myth.' For example, John Rawls argues that the authority of principles as well as political and economic institutions should be publicly justifiable. The appeal should be to what is reasonable. As the peasant 'Dennis' of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* proclaims in response to King Arthur's appeal to the myth of the Lady of the Lake, 'Strange women, lying in ponds, distributing swords is no basis for a system of government.'

On the other hand, what could be called the rationalist or scientific take on myth is far from the only understanding of the relationship between myth and political philosophy. Taking a page from Robert A. Segal's *A Very Short Introduction to Myth* (2015), one can argue that there are as many relationships between political philosophy and myth as Segal finds between myth and philosophy more generally: that myth is part of political philosophy, that myth *is* political philosophy, that myth grows out of political philosophy, that political philosophy grows out of myth, that myth and political philosophy are independent of each other but serve the same function, and that myth and political philosophy are independent of each other and serve different functions (Segal, 2015, p. 30). For example, it is not implausible to argue that western political philosophy itself grows out of myth. On this account, reading or hearing Thucydides, Herodotus, and Sophocles can get the philosophical juices flowing if they raise dissatisfactions with one's own religious or traditional norms and ways of being. But it is the ever-inquisitive, *mythic* Socrates that gets the political philosophy ball rolling in the west. Plato's dialogues are just the ticket for considering, challenging, reaffirming, or discarding our political relationships as

well as certifying what may well be true. Paradoxically, the character of Socrates, in Plato's stories, leads us to a way of talking and thinking that appears to place a premium on rationality. The myth of Socrates, as so many undergraduates come to understand, gets us to question the world around us. Whether any particular dialogue actually happened is beside the point; however interesting it may be to a scholar of the period.

If western political philosophy grew out of the myth of Socrates, is it forever tied to myth or can it kick it away? If the former, in what way is myth needed in political philosophy? If the latter, does rationality by itself provide a key to the universe that opens all doors and, perhaps, allows the human mastery of its processes? An affirmative answer to the last question brings us back to a rationalist approach to political philosophy in which all the subsequent heavy lifting must be done through the use of rational argumentation, effectively abandoning the need for myth. This approach is sometimes read back into Plato such that his use of myth as well as the mythic character of the dialogues are ignored. On this retelling, myths, stories, and poetry are seen as having been tossed into the gutters of thought from the very beginning of western political philosophy. At most, they were pleasant distractions from the real work of thinking.

It is into this context that Tae-Yeoun Keum's *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* (Harvard University Press, 2020b) enters. On Keum's account, Plato never kicked away the ladder of myth and, just an importantly, neither did those modern thinkers who used and admired Plato. The recovery of this mythic tradition is a rethinking of Plato and his reception in the modern world. It is also meant to reassert a role for myth by disrupting the vision of political philosophy as thoroughly rationalistic. In the alternatives cribbed from Segal above, Keum argues that myth is part of political philosophy (as much as the rationalist tradition may deny it) and that myth can grow out of the engagement of political philosophy. However, Keum does not argue that all of political philosophy is myth. Rational argumentation still has a place. The question arises, however, whether myth serves the same or a different function.

Rebecca LeMoine suggests that myth and political philosophy are independent of each other but may serve the same function. She wonders whether myth, with its focus on the emotional and its appeal to our appetites, can complement philosophy, which is conducted on the register of reason and cognition. On this account, myth is necessary for Plato, because it moves us toward the truth in a different sort of way than what philosophy offers. For LeMoine, it is possible that philosophy and myth may converge in the pursuit of truth. For Jill Frank, David Lay Williams, and Jacob Abolafia, it is possible that myth may allow us to grasp and understand things that cannot be grasped and understood through straightforward philosophical discourse. Williams suggests that myths can outstrip the logic of philosophical arguments. Quoting Keum, Abolafia suggests that myth can tap into 'certain deep, unconditional frameworks' associated with the human condition (2020b, p. 31). It is

a tool that can accomplish things that *logos*, understood as rationality, cannot achieve. In contrast to those who dismiss myths or see them as no more than 'philosophy lite,' Frank suggests that perhaps the arguments of philosophers are for people who cannot follow myths.

All the participants in this exchange share a belief, against the rationalist model, that myth has a function in political philosophy. But what, precisely, is that function? What does myth allow us to see or experience? Does it permit us to inhabit a world of unconditional understanding or does it provide insights that should always be understood as provisional and shifting? Neoplatonists argued that the Platonic educational process that may rely on myths and stories eventually opened up the student to a hidden reality that was itself stable, foundational, true, and inhabitable. Plato's distinctions between appearance and reality and between opinion and knowledge are prominent in this world-revealing character of myth. In contrast, Keum's reading of Plato suggests that myths impress upon us the provisional character of our conclusions: moving us forward as we rethink what we once thought was true. For LeMoine, the possibility for revision that Keum seeks in myth is part and parcel of philosophical discourse. She writes, 'underlying even the most sacred of philosophical truths is the keen awareness of human fallibility, of the need to remember to approach ourselves and our capacity for wisdom in a spirit of play.' The rationalist model of philosophy does not only get myth wrong, it also gets philosophy wrong.

Frank welcomes Keum's disruptive interpretation of myths. In her view, Keum's account has the potential to destabilize any understanding of human nature as extra-cultural and/or extra-political. If carried forward, such a view could, for example, de-solidify the conventional interpretation of *The Republic* in which Socrates appears to claim that everyone, by nature, has one and no more than one art. A somewhat different view of these matters is presented in Ernst Cassirer's view of myth as both a disruptive and a stabilizing force in Plato. In her insightful discussion, Keum argues that for Cassirer, if there is a bias in the effects of myth, it is one toward stabilization (Keum, 2020b, p. 217). However, she notes, Cassirer's philosophical task is not to close down that tendency toward preservation, but rather navigate 'the tension between the two tendencies [disruption and stabilization] as they manifest in all of the symbolic forms' (Keum, 2020b, p. 218).

Keum's analysis of Cassirer's use of Plato is part of her claim that we need to reconsider the role of myth in modern thought. For both Keum and Williams, this rethinking of the history of political thought is not meant to reveal a mere countercurrent, but a whole tradition of Platonic thought that has been largely ignored. Within this tradition, modern political philosophy needs myth, but it encompasses different streams of thought. Keum and Abolafia argue that for the German idealists, myths and poetry play a role in negotiating the relationship between philosophy and hierarchy and establishing a place for equality. But how firmly is that place established through the use of myths? For Abolafia, the idealist

myth of national identity that supports equality is based on a conditional and contingent understanding of identity. Egalitarianism needs myths, but those myths are not unlocking a foundational or unconditional truth.

Alternatively, Abolafia argues that for the Straussians, myth also is needed in order to negotiate the relationship between philosophy and hierarchy, but here it is used to legitimize the natural differences between individuals and justify the necessity of telling stories to different people. Using myths to fix social stations and their duties taps into a deeper reality for the Straussians and establishes a place not for equality but for the philosophical pursuit of truth. To use myth in the service of equality would be to deflate the erotic desire to pursue that truth. For in a regime of full equality, one thing becomes as good as the next, and philosophy's fruits are a dime a dozen. In this stream of the Platonic tradition, myth is useful in helping philosophers glimpse deeper truths. What is seen is neither the sort of stable inhabitable world the Neoplatonists thought possible nor a set of conditional, background conventions but an unconditional insight that is part and parcel of the human condition. Williams' mention of religion and Abolafia's discussion of Nietzsche are both apropos to this discussion.

If the cave of ordinary political discourse is fascinated with the image of myth as a falsehood, and shining a philosophical light on the subject (as our commentators have done) reveals a more complex understanding of myth, is that new understanding useful for the cave dwellers? In the myth of the cave, of course, new-fangled philosophical understandings are nothing but trouble, particularly for the philosopher. Nevertheless, Keum's account of Cassirer may provide a useful insight into our current political discourse. Cassirer recognized that rationalism does not banish myth in politics but merely provides another way for myths to appear in politics. Gone may be the idea of strange women in ponds handing out swords. Instead, purveyors of myths now coopt the language and tools of scientific rationality to dress up their myths. One could argue that it is this 'vicious' (2020b, p. 205) combination of myth and scientific rationality that has been used in debates over race in the 19th and 20th centuries and climate change and vaccines in the 21st century. Yet, despite being deeply troubled by the role of myth, Cassirer still recognized that myths could be motivated by a spirit of freedom as well. It is this nuance and complexity that characterizes not merely the mythic tradition of political thought but perhaps the mythic impulse of contemporary politics.

P.E. Digeser

Persuading the whole person: On philosophy's need for myth

In a well-known passage in Book X of Plato's *Republic*, the character Socrates references an ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry. 'But,' he continues, 'if poetry directed towards pleasure and imitation can proclaim any reason (τινα ἔχοι

λόγον εἰπεῖν), as to its need to exist in a well-ordered polity, we would gladly admit it...' (607c). In asking poetry to don the language of philosophy, *logos*, Socrates' request might seem to strip poetry—and, accordingly, the myths that often constitute it—of legitimacy as a discursive expression of truth. After all, to gain admittance into the *kallipolis*, poetry must cease telling tales for the moment and instead adopt the form of logical argumentation. Such a request would seem to grant philosophic discourse preeminence; a myth about the value of poetry would not suffice.

Yet as Tae-Yeoun Keum points out in her stimulating new book, *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*, Plato ends the *Republic* by giving myth, not philosophy, the last word through the telling of the myth of Er (2020b, p. 37). Though we might be tempted to dismiss this and all other Platonic myths as merely ornamental features of his dialogs or, at best, last-ditch efforts to communicate enigmatic truths to the unphilosophical, Keum insists upon taking the myths seriously. The question animating her book is how Platonic myths might be 'complementary, rather than antithetical, to the kind of critical reasoning that we tend to celebrate as a defining feature of philosophical activity, including philosophically informed politics' (2020b, p. 27).

As Keum explains, modern scholars often regard myth or storytelling as a culturally 'backward' form of expression. Seen as an emotive and, therefore, irrational medium, myth evokes fears of collectivist thinking and mob behavior. From a political standpoint, myth, thus, 'carries associations that are anti-democratic' and even conjures images of fascist propaganda (2020b, p. 15). Many modern thinkers would, therefore, prefer that myth disappear altogether. They worry about drawing attention to and thereby halting or reversing what they perceive as myth's natural decline and replacement with superior, reason-based forms of discourse. In their view, philosophical efforts to dismantle myths generally backfire, for in 'wear[ing] fantasy so prominently on their surface, they do not readily invite critical scrutiny; rather, it would seem beside the point to take apart such tales using the rules of logic and facts' (2020b, p. 8). Within this anti-myth modernization narrative, Plato is alternatively celebrated as the hero who liberated philosophy from myth or, conversely, demeaned as the totalitarian thinker who inaugurated an elitist politics built on the manipulative use of public myths.

In reanimating the 'mythic Plato,' a Plato for whom myth is not antithetical to but rather a helpmate of philosophy, Keum's book supplies a well-grounded and timely corrective to the widespread contemporary assumption of Plato's purely rationalist legacy. In doing so, she builds on pathbreaking work on the role of poetical forms of discourse in Platonic political thought (e.g., Frank, 2018; McCoy, 2020; Monoson, 2000). Moreover, her book offers compelling evidence to counter the now well-questioned view of Plato as an authoritarian. But what is especially intriguing about Keum's approach is that, after providing a taste of her understanding of Platonic myth through an original analysis of Plato's *Republic*, she then illuminates a variety of treatments of Platonic myth that corroborate her central thesis of Plato as a

'mythic' thinker. While differing in important ways, the receptions of Plato that she examines all share a common appreciation for Plato's use of myth. Through chapters on Thomas More and Francis Bacon, Gottfried Leibniz, the German idealists, and Ernst Cassirer, Keum recovers different versions of Plato's mythic legacy throughout the history of political thought. This historical work successfully emphasizes that the relationship between myth and philosophy need not be adversarial. Rather, myth can shore up the truth-seeking mission of philosophy—especially, perhaps, when philosophy itself falls short.

It is on Keum's own interpretation of Plato that I would like to focus, however. Following an insightful introduction to the core problems driving her inquiry, Keum turns (in chapter 2) to Plato's *Republic* to demonstrate what a more convincing reading of Plato's myths might look like. Her interpretation focuses on three myths: the myth of the metals, the allegory of the cave, and the myth of Er. Each myth, she argues, depicts the experience of 'awakening' from a subterranean, dream-like state. By studying these myths together, a new motivation for Plato's use of myth comes to light: the genre's capacity to 'ossify concepts in ways that resist critical engagement' and 'simultaneously alert us to the provisionality of such understandings and open up the possibility of revising them' (2020b, p. 41). For example, Plato's Allegory of the Cave presents a conception of the nature one should aspire toward by embracing philosophical education. A true grasp of the possibilities and limitations of this conception can only, Keum suggests, come once the transformation has been made, necessitating the revised model of education later put forth in the myth of Er. Thus, she concludes, 'while myths can help mold certain deeply entrenched frameworks in our worldviews, these same frameworks can be further reworked by other, subsequent myths' (2020b, p. 41). It is a testament to Plato's brilliance that he recognizes how the genre of myth affords a unique opportunity for exploring how our understandings of ourselves and the world around us evolve.

According to Keum, Plato views mythic writing as philosophically useful because the genre of myth is uniquely capable of conveying ideas authoritatively while at the same time containing the possibility of later revision—a power that she explicitly maintains is 'absent in rational argumentation' (2020b, p. 41). I wonder, though, if this is an accurate assessment of philosophical discourse. After all, at multiple points across Plato's dialogs, it is stressed that the truths repeatedly discovered through dialectic reasoning ought to be held to, yet may be revised if a superior argument arises (see, for example, *Phaedo* 100b-102a; *Crito* 46b-d). Socrates even insists he would rather die than cease telling others such truths as that virtue does not come from money (*Apology* 29c-30c). While he is surely willing to submit such ideas to examination, in expressing his readiness to die for ideas discovered through philosophical inquiry, Socrates implies that philosophy can at times equal myth in its authoritativeness and resistance to critical engagement. With respect to certain claims or within certain contexts, at least, it would seem as beside the point to take apart a philosophical argument as it would to take apart a myth. This is true of

scientific conclusions as well. The fact that the earth is round is one of the most definitive of truths; though a good scientist would recognize the need to be open to the possibility of revising their understanding in light of compelling counterevidence, this fact is routinely accepted without question.

Platonic philosophy has, thus, often been referred to as 'serious play.' The truths discovered through dialectical reasoning are meant to be taken seriously, as sincere guides for our lives. If through repeated demonstration we discover one of these truths, we ought to be willing to risk our lives to keep professing and living in accordance with it. And yet, underlying even the most sacred of philosophical truths is the keen awareness of human fallibility, of the need to remember to approach ourselves and our capacity for wisdom in a spirit of play. This all suggests that Plato conceives of *logos* as sufficiently firm yet capable of alteration. Why, then, would Plato need myth to fulfill this function? Philosophic argument, in other words, seems to possess the very characteristics for which Keum hails mythic discourse. Philosophers can remain content to accept certain premises almost as a matter of faith, all while holding open the possibility of future reassessment of these ideas.

Perhaps the issue pivots on the nature of the authoritativeness of each genre of writing. A common trope running throughout Plato's *Republic* is that poetry and myth appeal to the appetites, whereas philosophy and argument speak to the rational part within us all. Unlike the mathematical precision that gives a philosophical argument its credibility, myth's authority as a source of 'truth' derives from how it makes us feel, an intuitive sense of correctness—what modern day comedian Stephen Colbert refers to as 'truthiness.' Keum's account of the value of myth in Platonic political thought speaks to this distinction: 'the respite from critical thinking that myth permits is part of the point, not something to be apologized for' (2020b, p. 67). I wonder if the value of myth lies, then, more in its ability to speak to us on a different register. Does Plato ultimately embrace myth because he seeks to turn the whole soul toward the truth, and knows that this entails persuading the appetitive part along with the rational part? I am interested, in essence, in whether Keum sees Plato's use of myth as an admission that philosophy alone (or myth alone) cannot sway the many different parts that comprise the human being. Is each genre authoritative in different, complementary ways? And, if so, could this be a way to make sense of Plato's use of myth as a counterpart to, rather than an underminer of, argument? There may be distinct manners in which philosophy and myth navigate the tension between stability and provisionality, each of which is valuable in its own right.

This brings me to a final set of questions. While Keum's admirable book contributes many striking ideas to contemporary discussions of the role of myth in political theory, one idea in particular caught my attention (as a political theorist who has argued for Plato's friendliness toward cultural diversity). This is the notion, elaborated in the book's conclusion, that engagement with myth can enhance political theory by 'point[ing] us toward a more inclusive politics that brings

together a greater diversity of perspectives' (2020b, p. 236). In line with her interpretation of the myth of Er as advocating an education that involves a gradual widening of perspectives (2020b, p. 59), as well as her overall approach of engaging the interpretations of other scholars throughout the history of political thought, Keum's conclusion about the value of studying myth implies that true philosophical education entails encountering diverse vantage points. The study of myth is coherent with philosophizing, then, insofar as myth grants philosophers insight into a unique worldview.

Here, I would like to contemplate more deeply the role that diverse forms of discourse, such as myth, play in political theory, as well as the political consequences of Plato's use of myth. My question revolves around the ultimate motivation for bringing together a greater diversity of perspectives. Is Plato's goal, in Keum's view, simply to foster tolerance and inclusivity or to promote the attainment of truth? These goals may lead us to very different political arrangements. I'm thinking, specifically, of the discussion of democracy in Book 8 of Plato's *Republic*. On one hand, Socrates infers that the best soul/city is most likely to arise within a democracy because only democracy provides individuals with a 'market-place' of possible lives from which to choose, implying the importance of freedom to judge for oneself. On the other hand, he paints a disparaging picture of the equalization of all pleasures and ways of life in the eyes of the *demos*—a message that is arguably reiterated in the myth of Er.

I wonder what Keum makes of this, especially from the standpoint of the role of myth in political theory. If, in Plato's view, there are better and worse ways of life, it would seem that there are also better and worse modes of discourse. So is the ultimate point of encountering myth to reach the conclusion that philosophy, and the philosophical way of life, is superior? Or is there any indication that, say, studying Homeric myth can add something positive to our understanding of how to live meaningful individual and collective lives? Put differently, what perspective does myth bring that philosophical argument misses? Again, I wonder if the power of myth lies in its capacity to tap into a part of the human experience that philosophy would at times like to ignore, but that is as much 'us' as is our sense of reason.

Rebecca LeMoine

The Republic's education myths

In *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*, Tae-Yeoun Keum offers a close reading of the famous myths of Plato's *Republic*—the myth of the metals, the allegory of the cave, and the myth of Er—in their own right. Keum also reads the three myths together around what she calls a 'literary observation,' which is that the myths share a common plot. The plot 'recalls the experience of being delivered from a state of dreaming, underground, to wake up into a new reality aboveground'

(2020b, p. 40). In each of the myths, Keum writes, 'the story about dreaming and waking,' or what she more frequently refers to as sleeping and waking, 'comes to mark a transitional juncture in the educational curriculum of the *kallipolis* [the *Republic*'s ideal city or city in speech], in which citizens who have undergone a certain education are then tested for the qualities of a philosophic nature' (2020b, p. 40).

Keum's observation about the myths sharing a common plot about education is important and illuminating, as is her claim that at stake in each of the three myths 'is the question of how the natures of individuals ought to be reconceptualized following a transformative event' (2020b, p. 42). By reading the myths in this way, separately and together, Keum reinforces an interpretation, broadly shared across the scholarship, that the myths 'posit an authoritative understanding of the nature of individuals' (2020b, p. 41). She also, however, breaks valuable new ground by demonstrating that the *Republic*'s myths call that very same authoritative understanding into question. To Keum, the *Republic*'s myths turn out to be not only *about* education and its transformational capacities but also educative in their own right—educative, that is, about the power and possibilities of myth itself.

This double move of the *Republic*'s myths applies to the nature of individuals: nature, as noted, is both posited as given *and* denaturalized. The double move works, too, Keum shows, with respect to institutional frameworks that can 'come to be perceived as natural' by revealing that these are rather 'founded on shiftier ground than they project themselves to be' (2020b, pp. 51–52). In short, if the *Republic*'s myths represent 'culture as nature' (2020b, p. 46), they also bring to light how nature is a product of culture, and, as such, subject to transformation by education (2020b, p. 53).

In other words, the *Republic*'s myths help us to see how myths can 'ossify concepts' and 'resist critical engagement' (2020b, p. 41), while alerting 'us to the provisionality' of those selfsame ossified understandings and thereby 'open up the possibility of revising them' (2020b, p. 41). The dialog's myths, thus, work not to adorn, distract from, or simplify the *Republic*'s philosophical thought, as some scholars have argued, but rather to enhance and complete the dialog's philosophy (2020b, p. 39).

The argument that the *Republic*'s myths depict both the pre-culture of individual nature as well as the enculturation of natures, and that they thereby both underwrite and destabilize fixed understandings of nature is compelling. It is so compelling that it prompts me to wonder how this dual mythic depiction may redound on other appearances of nature in the *Republic*. For, outside of the mythic context, nature, at least at first glance, appears to work primarily as a source of fixed and stable differentiation. Here I am thinking of the one-man:one-art principle of justice, introduced in *Republic* 2, that maintains that 'each one person has to do the one thing that properly belongs to him by nature' (370b), and its return in *Republic* 5 to underwrite the difference in nature between, say, carpenters and doctors (454d). I

am thinking, too, of what appears as a fixed and stable differentiation on the basis of nature between who is and is not a true philosopher in *Republic* 6 (487a, 490c). Might the mythic problematization of one-sided understandings of nature speak to these moments in the *Republic* as well? And if it can, might it open the door to a more radical reconsideration of the political philosophy of the *Republic* as a whole?

The argument that the myths both are about education and perform an education, and that Socrates' interlocutors are among the intended addressees of this performance (2020b, p. 51), is compelling as well. Even as they are the intended targets of the myths' education, however, Glaucon and Adeimantus do not, for their part, come across as terribly receptive to it, and specifically not to the myths' education about nature being itself a product of education. Both brothers— Adeimantus is Socrates' interlocutor in the case of the one-man:one-art principle in *Republic* 2, Glaucon is Socrates' interlocutor in the example about nature in *Republic* 5, and both brothers are Socrates' interlocutors in *Republic* 6—seem substantially more amenable instead to the idea of nature's inbornness, fixity, and stability. At least, they are presented as receptive to that argument (370b; 454d; 487a-b) when it appears, as just noted, extra-mythically, in what are sometimes referred to as the dialog's 'philosopher's arguments.'

Why might the brothers be more receptive to the philosopher's arguments than they are to the dualities of the dialog's myths? Keum demonstrates that the dialog's myths are at least as demanding as its philosophical arguments. Maybe more. And the dialog itself brings to light that the brothers are not always keen to do hard 'soul-turning' (518b–519b) work: Glaucon repeatedly remarks on the challenges of the kind of study Socrates adumbrates (435c, 511c, 530c, 531c, d, 532d), and opts (435d), as does Adeimantus (504b–c), for the 'shorter path.' What if, against the scholarly claim that Plato's myths are for people who cannot understand the dialog's philosophy, it is rather the *Republic*'s so-called philosopher's arguments that are for people unable or unwilling to make sense of its myths?

If there is anything to this, then it may turn out that the *Republic*'s myths do more than function, as Keum writes, 'alongside' (2020b, p. 27) or as 'complementary' (2020b, p. 27) to the dialog's philosophy. They may function, rather, as a key site of the *Republic*'s philosophy. And if that's the case, then Keum's arguments about the myths of the *Republic* may do even more than she already suggests to lay ground for the rich modern and contemporary scholarship on myth and/in political theory.

All of this leads me to a question about the language Keum uses to describe what she sees as the myths' common plot. Each telling of a myth, she writes, is 'about waking up aboveground'; those who are underground in all three myths she calls 'asleep' (2020b, pp. 42, 45), in 'a subterranean slumber' (2020b, pp. 49, also 42, 43, 48). I'm not sure about the fit of this language with the myths themselves: in the myth of the metals, the city's inhabitants are described not as asleep but, as Keum notes (2020b, p. 45), as being actively molded and fashioned when they are under the soil (414d–e); with its shackled prisoners watching the shadows, listening to the

sounds and echoes of the people parading up and down the wall behind them, and chattering amongst themselves (515a–b), the cave of the cave allegory seems to be the opposite of 'sleepy' (2020b, p. 49); likewise, the myth of Er describes those awaiting reincarnation in active terms, as lamenting and weeping or celebrating, choosing lots, and the like (615a, 617e–620d).

Sleep *is* mentioned in the myth of Er, unlike in the myth of metals and the allegory of the cave: after those who have chosen their new lives drink from the river of Lethe, Socrates describes them as falling asleep and forgetting everything they have undergone (621b). Socrates' account is based on the reporting of Er, who, having neither drunk from the river nor having forgotten anything, seems, as the relevant target of the transformational education in this instance, to be specifically excepted from sleeping (621b).

Similarly, in regard to Keum's language of 'awakening' (2020b, pp. 42, 47, 51): in the myth of the metals, the underground dwellers are described not as waking up but as being made to 'spring up' by the earth (414e); the one who emerges from the cave does not do so upon awakening from sleep but is rather 'forced,' as Keum notes (2020b, p. 47), compelled or dragged up and out (515c–516a); as Keum mentions, too (2020b, p. 52), Socrates describes Er not as waking up on his funeral pyre but as coming back to life (614b).

Socrates' language here seems important, for whereas sleeping and waking figure a kind of binary—where being asleep seems to betoken a lack of education, as Socrates suggests of the slumbering Athenians in the *Apology* (30e–31a), and being awake is to be enlightened—the myths, as Keum so persuasively demonstrates, depict the transformational capacities of education, and in so doing, trouble any bright lines between being or not being educated. As Keum notes, in the myth of the metals, the underground dwellers *are* being educated when they're under the earth.

If the myths represent nature as not only fixed and stable but also as encultured by education, then it is to be expected that education will be happening whenever and wherever natures are being formed by culture and its institutions, whether that's under and by the earth or aboveground, whether inside or outside of the cave, whether one is dead or alive, whether for better or for worse.

Jill Frank

Mythic and extra-rational persuasion in modern and late-modern thought

One of the most uncomfortable moments for any defender of Rousseau's political thought comes in defending his use of the lawgiver, who, he insists, is 'unable to use force or reason' and must, therefore, 'have recourse to an authority of a different order, something that can constrain without violence and persuade without convincing.' In this spirit, Rousseau directs a great lawgiver to put 'his decisions

into the mouth of the immortals, so that those whom human prudence cannot shake can make the gods speak or be believed when he announces that he is their interpreter' (2018, pp. 236–237). The classic 'conceptual problem' in Rousseau's appeal to such measures is that by abandoning rational persuasion as the means of convincing citizens to embrace their laws, he has undermined the very will of the citizens themselves—and in doing so, has undermined the very legitimacy of the state. As Patrick Riley once put it, once Rousseau appeals to the lawgiver's storytelling, 'consent is something less than real consent, since it is based on an irrational device' (Riley, 1982, p. 117).

Riley's critique of Rousseau is powerfully reasoned and a serious objection to a political philosophy grounded in reason—a fair mode of criticism to a philosopher who is significantly attached to the Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason. It was in many respects the goals of Enlightenment philosophy to move beyond the fictions and fables employed by ancient and medieval thinkers—stories that seemed to disrespect the reasoning capacity of citizens in an increasingly democratic age. As Tae-Yeoun Keum acknowledges in her brilliant new book, the reliance on myth and fables 'boded ill for the status of Plato' (2020b, p. 122), who had founded the tradition of employing such devices amidst an otherwise highly rational philosophic project. While there were still vibrant pockets of Platonist philosophers in early modern Europe, the rationalist strain was increasingly powerful and surely a central component of its *Zeitgeist*. As such, Keum notes, early modern thinkers, such as Matthieu Souverain, characterized Platonism as 'Absurd as the Theology of the Poets, and as unpolish'd as the Religion of the most superstitious vulgar' (2020b, p. 122). Just as mathematics was replacing Scripture in the new science of Kepler, Galileo, and Newton, so, too, the moral and political sciences needed to distance themselves from the fables and myths that were central to the storytelling of the Ancients.

This powerfully scientific and secularizing trend of modern philosophy is what makes Keum's chapters on myth in early modern philosophy so compelling. Among other fascinating observations, she draws attention to countercurrents of this modernizing intellectual culture that demand attention. This is because, as Keum suggests, for these thinkers, 'we are not so much condemned to myth as we have a need for it' (2020b, p. 31)—that there are important lessons that can be effectively conveyed in no other way.

Keum treats three early modern thinkers in two chapters: More, Bacon, and Leibniz. More and Bacon constitute chapter 2. She notes that these two thinkers both had Plato very much in mind in constructing their respective utopias and employed Platonic-style myths as part of a 'preservationist enterprise' (2020b, p. 85)—myths deployed to inspire a sense that their institutions would be 'worthy of maintenance' (2020b, p. 86). In particular, both More and Bacon used myths to resist (ironically perhaps) the Platonic doctrine that even the best political institutions are fated to degenerate. As such, for Keum, 'More's and Bacon's founding myths uphold an

ideal vision of political stasis' (2020b, p. 90), perhaps of special appeal in an age of political upheaval. This includes the preservation of an intellectual aristocracy that would be key in the stability of the larger political regime. In making her argument, Keum does not fail to observe just how off the mark Horkheimer and Adorno were in depicting Bacon to be 'the prototypical embodiment of the Enlightenment struggle to escape myth' (2020b, p. 96). While Bacon's idols of the mind were very much intended to promote rational modern inquiry, at the same time he insists that myth has the capacity 'to clear and throw light upon' the same. This is one reason, for example, that Bacon's writing is full of similes and metaphors, such as his story of the bees in the *New Organon*. For Bacon and More, myth can be a powerful tool for communicating truths that are difficult to convey in any other way.

Keum's second chapter on the moderns focuses exclusively on the German philosopher, scientist, and mathematician, Gottlieb Wilhelm Leibniz. If anything, Leibniz is an even more surprising candidate for participation in a 'mythic tradition' than Bacon, given his role in inventing calculus and the rigorous logic that would ground the contemporary analytic philosophical tradition. Yet careful readers of Leibniz have long known that he was a deep admirer of Plato (e.g., Mercer, 2001; Riley, 1996), so perhaps this should not be surprising after all. To be sure, his deployment of myth was much more limited than that found in More and Bacon— largely restricted to the concluding paragraphs of his *Theodicy* in a section known as his 'Petite Fable.' As Keum skillfully outlines, Leibniz builds on Lorenzo Valla's fable that depicts a conversation between Apollo and Sextus Tarquinius, in which Apollo informs Tarquinius of the horrible crimes that he is about to commit and of his inability to do otherwise, resigning him to his fate. Yet Leibniz chooses to push the fable further, with Tarquinas appealing his fate to the god Jupiter, who offers him a choice: 'if he agrees to give up his crown in Rome, the Fates will grant him a different future' (2020b, p. 109). As Keum notes, after some deliberation, Tarquinius declines the offer, still accepting his fate. When the high priest and witness to this encounter, Theodorus, asks why Tarquinius was not simply granted a sinless life, he is directed to the palace of the Fates, in which he learns that Tarquinius's life, robustly sinful, was nevertheless an essential part of the best of all possible worlds— that Tarquinius's sins were responsible for the establishment of a great and noble republic that would not have come about without them. Among other insights, Keum depicts the first and the second halves of this fable as working out a dispute between Bayle and Leibniz, in which Leibniz challenges Bayle's doctrine that reason can only lead to destructive skepticism. But for Leibniz, reason could be employed to acquire genuine knowledge of a beautiful universe. Leibniz's conception of modernity was not to surrender to the limits of our reason, but rather to live in a 'meaning-driven world,' in which 'a reason exists behind everything in it' (2020b, p. 133). This conception of the world, as depicted in the Petite Fable, embraces a view of the future in which knowledge could continue to

expand and humanity could progress along with it. Thus, for Leibniz, fables and myths could play a central role in modernity, rather than stand in its opposition.

Keum is not shy about acknowledging the dangers associated with myths, especially over the past century, such as 'Nazi ideologues … [who] present their propaganda as a form of myth' (2020b, p. 234) or in approaching them 'in the interest of easily the communication of difficult or otherwise unpalatable philosophical messages to a nonphilosophic audience' (2020b, p. 225). For her, myth need not be associated with either of these outcomes, but rather can advance the philosophic project where syllogisms and rigorously reasoned logic simply are not up to the task. In many ways, Keum's appeal to the virtues of the mythic tradition echoes T.K. Seung's appeal to what he calls the 'poetic tradition' of western philosophy, which he also attributes to Plato and which stands in opposition to the modern quest of philosophers to express their idea in a fashion akin to natural science (Seung, 2007). For Seung, some of the most important philosophic conceptions, including Plato's theory of the forms, could not be articulated through dialectic or argumentation but only conveyed through similes and allegories. He finds similar efforts in the works of Dante, Goethe, and Nietzsche, who found poetic expression to be a far more vibrant and effective mode of communicating philosophical ideas and perfected a philosophical method we would do well to recover in the twenty-first century. Keum finds Plato's mythic tradition to be a powerful but largely untapped resource in contemporary philosophy, with the capacity to 'tap into a deeper figurative process in the way humans frame and structure their worldviews' (2020b, p. 225).

Keum's arguments are insightful, forceful, beautifully crafted, and brimming with valuable advice to political philosophers who would do well to listen to her, insofar as too many academic philosophers and political theorists have allowed themselves, as Seung has argued, to be 'smothered by the envy of science' (Seung, 2007, p. 67).

While I find myself amazed and sometimes even moved by Keum's arguments, I want to raise a couple of questions. She attempts in to draw a sharp line between the Platonic mythic tradition and other modes of non-syllogistic persuasion, such as religion. But I'm wondering if Plato himself would draw such lines. Consider, for example, how Plato drew on such resources in his dialogs. One such resource was music, which was central to his theory of education insofar as 'rhythm and harmony permeate the inner-most element of the soul, affect it more powerful than anything else, and bring it grace, such education makes one graceful if one is properly trained, and the opposite if not' (Plato, 2004, 401d). Or consider, perhaps more controversially, Plato's insistence on incorporating religion into and even mandating it for Magnesia in Book 10 of the *Laws*. It can be argued that these elements of Plato are just as much a part of his philosophy as are the myths that Keum describes. I suppose what I want to know is whether or not she regards these as elements of Plato's mythic tendencies, working in tandem with the myths, or at odds with Plato's use of myths.

Further, along these lines, if religion—even in a thin sense—might be regarded as a component of the mythic tradition, then perhaps we ought to revisit Keum's claim that Habermas is at odds with it (2020b, p. 228). I pose this question because, even as the first several decades of his career suggested a philosopher rigorously committed to the method of sobering reasoning, his post-secular turn suggests that religion might well be a necessary component of generating consensus and inspiring performance of civic duties (Habermas, 2007, 2010)—along the lines of what Keum attributes to the power of the mythic tradition to 'equip individuals and communities with momentum and meaning' helpful in maintaining social orders (2020b, p. 239). And if this is true of Habermas, it would certainly be true of Rousseau's lawgiver, in his appeal to the constitution's divine origins.

The point of these questions, really, amounts to this: where do we draw the lines between myth and these other modes of appealing to readers and citizens. And are there important reasons to draw the lines at all? Or should we perhaps follow Plato's model of marshaling all the available modes of persuasion?

David Lay Williams

Hierarchy, context, and the future of myth in modernity

In the middle of the last century, Carl Schmitt attacked what he called 'the myth of the closure of any political theology' (Schmitt, 2008). In *Plato and the Mythic Tradition*, Tae-Yeoun Keum works to correct what we might call a wider 'myth of the closure of philosophical myth.' Against rationalists and positivists who would judge philosophical arguments purely propositionally, and against genealogists in the tradition of the Frankfurt School who doubt that there is, or ever has been, a difference between myth and Enlightenment, Keum presents us with a history of philosophical myth that is both philosophical—that is, concerned with reasons—and mythical—that is, irreducibly tied to its literary form. Keum insists that this hybrid way of doing philosophy not only persisted across the post-classical period, but that it remains very much with us today.

Keum's, however, is not the only possible approach to the study of philosophical myth. The following brief intervention will compare her way of reading the history of myth and philosophy with the approaches of two other more or less widely practiced methods of doing the history of political thought today. After this comparison, I will raise an additional philosophical challenge to the idea that myth is still possible for contemporary theorists (or, if you will, provide one more argument for the 'closure' of myth). I will limit the discussion to the role of myth in German idealism, although this is only one of several periods in the history of the Platonic tradition of myth making so richly explored by Keum. But even given this constraint, I hope to both draw out the distinctness of Keum's way of writing the

history of political thought and to raise some questions, in the context of this critical exchange, as to the future of myth for political theory.

At the heart of Keum's *Plato and the Mythic Tradition* is a challenge to the marginalization of myth in the history of political thought. This challenge is developed through close readings of particular political-theoretical myths, each of which exists in dialogue with Plato. The authors in this Platonic tradition pose a challenge to the contemporary dismissal of myth because 'to varying degrees, they felt that our reliance, in social and political life, on certain deep, unconditioned frameworks was an inevitable consequence of the human condition' (2020b, p. 28). According to this view, myth is a useful and constructive intellectual tool that accomplishes things otherwise unavailable to other tools, as even as stolid a de-mythifier as Ernst Cassirer seems to have acknowledged. In short, philosophy has a 'need' for myth (Keum, 2020b, p. 31). Keum identifies this as a 'symbolic need' having to do with our 'shared imaginative frameworks.' It is the nature of this need that will be the first point of contention.

The question of a recurring need for myth across the corpus of post-Platonic political thought immediately calls to mind one of the only political-theoretical methodologies to consistently take the mythical aspects of Platonic texts (and Platonistic texts) as seriously as Keum does: the method of close reading often identified with the thought of Leo Strauss. Strauss' approach is often caricatured (and perhaps sometimes practiced) as what Keum calls the 'cynical' use of myth— that mythical tools are used by philosophers in order to cement their own place within society by means of political theory. But as Keum herself notes, Strauss himself was really most interested in the need philosophy has to say different things to different people, or, perhaps, the same things in different ways.

Strauss and Keum agree about a key point: the need for myth. Keum's idea of need is broadly structuralist and egalitarian—it is about a general human need. Strauss' theory of the necessity of myth, however, is sociological and unegalitarian —that philosophers, as a profession, tend to observe society in terms of hierarchies. This hierarchical tendency reflects the social reality within which philosophers live but also determines how they write. They write to be understood, but by different people in different ways. When the myth of the metals in Plato's *Republic* is told to the guardians, for instance, the need it fulfills is the need for conditioning watchers who will not be watched. When the myth of Er in the same dialogue is told to a gentleman, the need it fills is that of defending correct behavior to one who lives '*aneu philosophias*' (without philosophy). Different myths are structured differently for different audiences and may even require different normative assumptions (that humans are born into autochthonous citizen families, for instance, or that they are reincarnated as other humans, or even as animals). For Strauss, the inconsistency of myth and reason, and of myths with one another, is not evidence of the instability of the philosophical project but rather philosophy's formal solution to the diversity of human listeners. Philosophy's 'need' for myth takes on a different meaning.

One of the clearest test cases for the nature of the relationship between hierarchy and myth can be found in the work of the German idealists. As Keum puts it, the problem faced by the poets and philosophers of German idealism was whether 'given the choice that modernity presented between rational community and poetic individuality, [it is] possible to have a poetic community' (2020b, p. 156). Schiller, Hölderlin, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher turned to myth because of its unique power as a poetic source that could create interpersonal bonds. This new mythology represents a break with traditional mythology in an important sense. Keum cites the words of the *Oldest Systematic Program of German Idealism*: 'the enlightened and unenlightened must shake hands' (2020b, p. 181). In the new, modern form of myth, traditional hierarchies of philosophical interpretation will be overcome once and for all. This is, as Keum notes, an explicitly egalitarian, and explicitly revolutionary project. But it puts one in mind, again, of Strauss' observation about what he calls 'the art of philosophical writing.' According to Strauss, the writers of the earlier German Enlightenment, at least up to Lessing, agreed that all ancient philosophers made hierarchical distinctions in their writing. Strauss explicitly identifies Schleiermacher's Plato interpretation, which Keum cites as evidence of German idealist Platonism, as a decisive moment in the *reversal* of this consensus (Strauss, 1952, p. 28). The aim of Schleiermacher was to provide one Plato for everyone. For Strauss, the egalitarianism of the new idealist mythmakers is a sort of performative contradiction—philosophical myth is definitionally non-egalitarian, and once it tries to become egalitarian, it will no longer be myth. (It may perhaps become ideology, a myth that even the tellers believe to be true). Social and political egalitarianism obviate the possibility of philosophical myth.

One need not be a Straussian in order to find the 'need' for philosophical myth in German idealism to be ambiguous. If Strauss agrees with Keum about the literary importance of myth, but thinks that this importance fundamentally declines under conditions of philosophical and sociological egalitarianism, contextualist scholars of the history of political thought might disagree with Keum from an earlier point. Keum does not want to reduce the use of literary myth to a dependence on the sorts of political ideologies and background narratives that are sometimes casually referred to as 'myths' and that she classifies as 'deep myth.' A contextual approach, however, might reasonably insist that it precisely *can* 'be enough to take it as given that deep myths and literary myths are necessarily related in such a way that they can be posed as a single problem' (2020b, p. 25). Indeed, perhaps an adequate understanding of the context of the first generation of German idealists would push the reader to do just that.

The contextualist challenge here could plausibly focus on the conditions for the possibility of a 'need' for political myth in German idealism. When the *Denker und Dichter* of the Tübingen circle were thinking about poetic myth as a foundation for national renewal and about the poetic nation as an egalitarian alternative to the bureaucratic state, there were at least two contextual mythic forms mediating their

attempts. The first was the 'deep myth' of the French revolution (*liberté*, *egalité*, *fraternité*) discussed by Keum. The second is potentially even more salient, because it is both a deep myth and itself a form of literary myth: the 'rediscovered' national poems of Ossian. Ossianic poetry had a profound effect on Germany, and on Goethe and Schiller in particular. Even Hölderlin's hymns may owe as much to the sort of proto-romantic ideas of autochthony popularized by Ossian as they do to the tyranny of Greece over Germany (Gaskill, 2008; Schmidt, 2003). This is not to dispute the most important claim of *Plato and the Mythic Tradition*'s reading of the German idealists, that the particular fusing of the rational and the poetic is a Platonic move. But once again, the condition of the possibility of the turn to Plato here is apparently an extra-Platonic conception of national myth, and the priority of the nation *vis a vis* the state as fomented by proto-Romantic movements like Ossianism. The deep myth of national identity may be logically prior to the literary myth of the 'poetic' state.

In addition to these two methodological challenges, which insist that the philosophical 'need' for myth is actually a matter of social hierarchy or contingent historical context rather than human need, German philosophy itself gave birth to what I take to be another important philosophical challenge to the contemporary possibility of myth. This challenge, in the figure of Friedrich Nietzsche, is present at the margins of Keum's recent work but is largely excluded, perhaps unjustly, from the reception story within it. I think that there is good reason to include Nietzsche within the Platonic tradition of myth and philosophy. While Nietzsche was certainly a critic of Plato, he also wrote approvingly that Plato understood the value of an 'honest lie' (Nietzsche, 2017, III.19). And if Nietzsche chided Plato for making his myths the handmaidens of rational philosophy, are Nietzsche's own carefully crafted images, say, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, themselves devoid of rational content? Nietzsche, in this sense, was Plato's devoted follower. More directly, Nietzsche's work was one of the most successful examples of the new German mythology prophesied by Platonizing German idealism. From his early infatuation with the national-romantic myths of Wagner to his mature attempts to create a new mythology around the figure of Zarathustra, Nietzsche was, in a sense, the historical continuation of the pattern prophesied by Schiller and Hölderlin.

If Nietzsche should be thought of as part of the Platonic mythic tradition, he also provided a powerful argument (in mythical form, naturally) precisely for the 'closure' of philosophical myth. This argument comes from one of Nietzsche's most successful mythemes, 'the death of god.' The 'death of god' does not only herald the end of Christianity but also the demise of the rational Platonic mythology from which Nietzsche thinks Christianity emerged. The consequences of Nietzsche's argument for literary myth were taken up by Walter Benjamin in his *Trauerspielbuch* (Benjamin, 1985). Unlike the later Frankfurt School critiques of enlightenment as myth against which Keum argues, Benjamin's point is more ambivalent and elegiac. According to Benjamin, certain types of literary myth (like tragedy) are simply no longer possible after the death of god. Instead of the catharsis promised by tragic

myth, all that is available are the ambivalent narrative forms exemplified by *Trauerspiel*. If Nietzsche is optimistic about the possibilities of new, healthy mythology, Benjamin is more measured about what sort of myth is possible once God is dead. Rather than writing his own philosophical myth, Benjamin beats a retreat to the pose of the academic critic.

This adoption and subversion of philosophical myth in Nietzsche and Benjamin raises important questions about the 'modernization' thesis that Keum claims underlies 'the closure of myth.' Modernization is not only an abstract process; it is driven by concrete social factors. One of the reasons that the disenchantment of the world can happen is because God has died. To put it less imagistically, ways of approaching stories, the structures of authority, and stories about the structure of authority have changed irrevocably. Nietzsche's myth of 'the death of god,' as Benjamin understood, itself undermines the possibility of myth, or at least of the sort of socially useful tragedy that Nietzsche himself admired. Literary myth is now only possible in attenuated (and philosophically frustrating) literary forms like *Trauerspiel.*

This Benjaminian-Nietzschean line of critique not only suggests a concrete explanation for why the philosophical 'need' for rational literary myths is no longer what it was but also raises the issue of the distinction between myth and tragedy in and for political philosophy. The latter has been the subject of constant discussion in political theory over the last few years (*inter alia* in Euben, 1990 or Honig, 2013), while the former, thanks substantially to *Plato and the Mythic Tradition*, is only just now beginning to get its due. Tae-Yeoun Keum's work both invites us to remember that tragedy is just one of the many forms of *muthos* that philosophers have taken up since the early modern period and spurs us to think about what literary myths, including tragedies, can and cannot accomplish in the political theory of the twenty-first century.

Jacob Abolafia

Delineating the conceptual boundaries of myth: Plato and beyond

The contributions to this exchange represent an exceptionally fruitful discussion of the questions I hoped to raise in *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought*. I am honored—as any author at the receiving end of the foregoing remarks would be —by the particular care and thoughtfulness with which the contributors have challenged me to deepen my arguments, and I am grateful for the opportunity to clarify my thinking on the place of myth in political theory.

A theme that recurs throughout the exchange is the question of how political theorists ought to delineate the conceptual boundaries of myth. Rebecca LeMoine interrogates the relationship between myth and philosophy by asking what distinctive philosophical resources myth offers that more conventional forms of

philosophical presentation do not. Together with Jill Frank, she inquires into the nature of Plato's myths and how they function within the context of his philosophical writings, while Jacob Abolafia reflects on the conditions under which philosophy can be said to have a need for myth. David Lay Williams asks after the complicated relationship between myth and other concepts, like religion, that have traditionally been associated with it. Although I cannot respond to all of the nuanced points that have been raised in their rich remarks, I hope the ensuing response can provide a modest starting point for investigating a set of difficult and provocative questions that, together, open new pathways into the study of political myth.

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

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

In myth, however, I believe these qualities come together in a distinctively paradoxical way. As many theorists of myth have suggested before me, the authoritativeness that mythic claims command often stems from telling just-so stories about certain, especially deep-seated and foundational, aspects of our world views that do not often come up for critical examination (Bennett, 1980, p. 167; Flood, 1996; Lincoln, 1989; Sorel, 1999, pp. 21, 29; Tudor, 1972). At stake here are not abstract principles, but dense and figurative forms of thinking that frame our lived perception of reality. Such elusive imaginative frameworks have long been associated with the category of myth, but few modern theorists, with the notable exception of Hans Blumenberg and his adherents, have appreciated their capacity to be reworked by new myths (Blumenberg, 1990; Bottici, 2007). Taking both these things seriously requires straddling what Jill Frank has characterized in her contribution as a 'mythic duality.' In the case of the *Republic*, for instance, I have argued that Plato uses myths to repeatedly reframe a thick understanding of

nature as a source of normativity. With each telling of a myth about nature and education, Plato appeals to the idea that nature is a fixed essence within each individual *while simultaneously* suggesting that nature is, in fact, fluid and subject to the effects of education.

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

My reading of Plato is admittedly more invested in bringing out the extent to which Plato's conception of philosophy, and the reasoning parts of both the soul and of the city, are more closely intertwined than commonly acknowledged with mythic ways of framing our world views. Accordingly, I have often found myself downplaying the hierarchical distinctions that Plato draws between the various parts of the soul and the city. At least where the thought processes of individuals are concerned, however, I believe that philosophers are, for Plato, just as affected by the stuff of myth as their compatriots and fellow human beings. This may very well be the case because, as LeMoine suggests, myth speaks more directly to those parts of the soul that deal in vivid images, fantasies, and other figurative forms of thinking that work in tandem with abstract reasoning to guide and orient our understanding of the world. What I am trying to resist, however, is the line of thinking that designates myth as an inferior and purely emotional medium, used only to persuade audiences of ideas that have already been worked out beforehand in a more conventionally rational mode. In that regard, I also resist the temptation to map myth and argumentative discourse onto the kinds of neat hierarchical distinctions we see in Plato's metaphysics. As Jill Frank (2018) reminds us, Plato uses many different literary devices in his dialogues for different purposes. Myth is simply one of those devices, and the one I have chosen to focus on in my project. I am also fully in agreement with LeMoine's undertaking in her own *Plato's Caves* of disclosing the

importance of Plato's theory of culture to his political thought (2020). As a theorist of culture, Plato, as I read him, understood that the cultural background to politics was a space shaped by the exchange not only of arguments but of the entire array of diverse forms that ideas can take.

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

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

It is important, in each myth, that a prior understanding of the content of nature is summarily dismissed in favor of a new conceptualization, ushering in a new sense of reality that is discontinuous with what had come before. This is the part of the myths' work that I have described as distinctively authoritative, which is just as important as the part that reminds audiences of the ultimate provisionality of such authoritative understandings. The *kallipolis* is structured around the fixed images of individual nature that come out at the other end of these conceptual reshufflings. For the practical purposes of running the *kallipolis*, the guardians will have to resort to

treating the natures of citizens *as though* they were fixed essences along the lines of how they are depicted in the earlier two myths. Plato's readers, however, will also walk away with a view of nature that is far more malleable, and unstable, than such depictions let on (Keum, 2020a).

This brings us to Frank's helpful—and provocative—suggestion that reading Platonic myths well, in all their nuance and complexity, may very well turn out to be much more demanding on their audiences than grasping the philosophical arguments. As I hope I have made clear in the foregoing discussion, Plato requires his readers to inhabit a paradoxical, and potentially unsettling, mindset as they take in the contradictory ideas about nature presented in the myths of the *Republic*. In her work, Frank (2018, p. 9) has memorably characterized Plato as a writer who teaches his readers how to read, and I very much take these myths to be one such instance where Plato challenges us to be active rather than passive readers. I do not wish to downplay that the experience of reading Plato's myths can often be easier than reading the arguments: they are memorable and vivid, and they naturally invite creative interpretations. And it also bears emphasizing that none of the protagonists of my book—the authors of the Platonic mythic tradition—read the *Republic*'s myths in the idiosyncratic way I do. But I believe both Plato and his successors in this tradition intuited the importance of acknowledging that being a better consumer of myths entailed extra work that was, if not more difficult than the formulation of arguments, different and innovative.

If LeMoine and Frank both raise questions regarding the relationship between myth and argumentative forms of philosophy, David Lay Williams pushes for clarification of the conceptual boundaries between myth and a number of categories that have traditionally been associated with it. In his thoughtful contribution to this exchange, he compares the Platonic mythic tradition at the center of my book to Seung's work on a 'poetic tradition' of Western philosophy (2007). He likewise points to the close affinity in Plato's political works between myth and music, and between myth and religion. Williams's point is that the separation I draw in my book between myth and 'other modes of non-syllogistic persuasion' may ultimately be too artificial. This has important consequences. If myth is in fact inseparable from these categories, Williams suggests, the contemporary critics of myth invoked in my book may very well be far more open to it than I acknowledge—notably Jürgen Habermas, who has spent the last several decades giving sustained philosophical attention to sacred sources of meaning persisting in modern culture and politics.

One of my central aims in writing *Plato and the Mythic Tradition in Political Thought* was to make a case for recognizing myth as a distinct category of study, separate from some of the headings it has traditionally been swept under. In pursuing this project, I may be guilty of having sidelined the complex ways in which myth interacts with cultural forms like music, poetry, religion, or—an example that features prominently in Jacob Abolafia's contribution—tragedy. In the cultural context in which Plato was writing, myth existed as part of an oral tradition of

inherited tales about the gods, but it simultaneously provided the subject matter for a great deal of art, including tragedy, poetry and lyric, as well as the visual arts. These spheres do not overlap in the same way in the landscape of modern culture. Nonetheless the resources of the arts often continue to work in tandem with myth to the extent that they amplify and otherwise lend expression, usually in more fleshed-out forms, to preexisting myths. Crucially, this process can also result in creative, at times subversive, reinterpretations.

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

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

In so doing, they offer a much-needed counterweight to a dominant theoretical framework for understanding myth and its possibilities in sacred terms. Here, the case of Jürgen Habermas is instructive. Many of the values central to Plato and the mythic tradition are also ideas that Habermas champions: a heightened appreciation for the deep cultural frameworks operating in the background of our world views, and the need to engage and reshape those frameworks in alignment with our ideals. But even Habermas's late 'turn' to religion (Harrington, 2007) has failed to yield a

more meaningfully nuanced conceptualization of myth than that presented in his early work, precisely because he has resisted thinking of myth independently from religion. Rather, myth appears to have consistently figured in his thought—from as early as *Towards a Reconstruction of Historical Materialism* (Habermas, [1976] 1979) to the recent *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (*This Too a History of Philosophy* [Habermas, 2019])—as a kind of primeval prelude to the ethical wellspring of religion.

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

Abolafia notes that the mythological vision of the early German Idealists, in particular, proves to be an especially fruitful test case for the range of possible understandings of the philosophical need for myth. After all, the author of the *Oldest Systematic Program*, the document that announces the early German Idealist project for the new mythology, is explicit in drawing hierarchical differences between philosophers and non-philosophers, if only for the purposes of expressing a desire for these distances to be bridged. Strauss, on Abolafia's reading, viewed German Idealism as a moment heralding the advent of egalitarianism, and with it, the end of the need for philosophers to tell myths to their non-philosophic fellow citizens. In the German Idealist vision for the new mythology, however, that order appears to be reversed. Its central theorists regarded the new mythology as precisely the medium that helps bring about a more egalitarian society, not the other way around. Moreover, rather than obviate the need for myth, the new egalitarianism would install mythology as a new common philosophical language for all the citizenry. The German Idealist understanding of the new mythology is a pretty idiosyncratic take and, as Abolafia rightly notes, conditioned by a number of historical factors specific to Germany at the turn of the eighteenth century (Beiser, 2002; Manuel, 1959; Pinkard, 2002). However, this vision still captures an important theme for the Platonic mythic tradition, whose authors sketched out a nuanced relationship between myth and philosophy that goes beyond instrumental rhetoric. In so doing, they sought to collapse what often emerges in Straussian accounts of myth as an ironic distance between philosophers and the audiences to their myths.

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

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

<div align="right">Tae-Yeoun Keum</div>

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