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Myth and Philosophy in Plato's Phaedrus.

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This book sets out to tackle some of the most vexing questions pertaining to one of the most challenging and perplexing of Plato's dialogues, the *Phaedrus*. The prime focus is declared to be the relationship between myth and philosophy and the role of the myths in the *Phaedrus* in particular; but in the course of confronting these issues, Werner ranges widely across a host of subjects, including the nature of the soul, *erōs*, *psychagōgia*, rhetoric, the unity of the *Phaedrus*, the critique of writing, and self-knowledge. In the course of a brisk and helpful introduction that contains an overview of the differences and similarities between traditional Greek myth and Plato's own myths, the cultural context of Plato's myths, and the questions and concerns that emerge from Plato's choice to incorporate myths into his philosophical writing, Werner declares that he will adjudicate between three well-established views of Platonic myth: (1) a 'dogmatic' view that maintains that the myths convey truths that can be uncovered by appropriate exegesis; (2) a 'yogic' view that maintains that Plato uses myths to convey truths that in some sense lie beyond logical or propositional discourse; and (3) a 'debunking' view that maintains that the myths do not convey truths at all, since on Plato's own terms they are fundamentally incapable of doing so – rather, they perform different functions. Werner attacks views (1) and (2) and develops a version of (3) that stresses the positive and sophisticated role that myth plays in the dialogue. Werner makes a very impressive case for the cogency of this position by analysing systematically all the myths in the *Phaedrus* firmly in the context of the dialogue itself.

Each individual myth receives detailed examination. There are three chapters dedicated to the famous *Palinode*, as one would expect, but perhaps the most radical results emerge from Werner's readings of the myths of Boreas, the cicadas, and Theuth, which receive a chapter each. As well as subjecting each to an incisive analysis given their place in the dialogue's narrative, Werner draws connections between the various myths and in the penultimate chapter uses these connections to shed light on the structural unity of the dialogue as a whole. A concluding chapter draws together the major findings in crisp and efficient fashion. The quality of argument and exposition is very high throughout and there is much detail to chew over. Indeed, the real value of the book lies in the sensitive close readings and critical discussions of the text, which shed light on key aspects of Plato's philosophical practice and conception of philosophy itself.

Werner draws attention to the motif of soul-leading or *psychagōgia* that pervades the dialogue, and he develops a compelling account of myth's role in this. Werner stresses that for Plato, since the soul is a complex multi-faceted entity, it requires a genuinely holistic engagement if it is to be led to philosophy; dialectic alone will not suffice. To use the imagery in the *Palinode*, it is not enough to focus on the charioteer; the horses too must be engaged appropriately. Myth, Werner argues, is a mode of discourse that engages the white horse, *thumos*, the spirited part of the soul. He stresses that myth is not only an effective mode of discourse for those who are not philosophers, who require some other mode of engagement to that offered by dialectic; it is effective for everyone, given the tripartite nature of the human soul. This is the

really interesting point, as one can easily be convinced that myth (and indeed rhetoric) could be a useful staging post on the way to the true philosophical life – a persuasive mode of discourse helping the development of true beliefs or appropriate behaviour, though not knowledge itself. It is much more interesting to assert that myths retain their importance in the case of philosophers too. Thus, Plato can be seen as employing an integrated method of doing philosophy or soul-leading where various aspects of discourse (rhetoric, myth, dialectic) each have their appropriate place. Werner's argument for all this is compelling.

Nonetheless, for Werner it remains the case that Plato's myths do not convey truths and might in fact be dangerously misleading if not interpreted properly. Thus, myth has a fine line to tread: it cannot be so persuasive and seductive as to be accepted uncritically by the person lacking knowledge, but it cannot convey nonsense either. Myths are to be taken seriously, but not fetishized. So how does Plato deal with such worries?

Happily, Werner finds internal evidence in the text to help answer these questions. Looking at the myth of Boreas near the beginning of the dialogue, he highlights Socrates' own rejection of allegorical interpretations of myth. Warnings about the dangers of seduction appear in the myth of the cicadas. And so Werner demonstrates that the risks of mythic discourse are highlighted through the myths themselves. But are they effectively overcome? Ultimately this depends on the individual, who at this stage has to engage in some critical reflection. This in turn illustrates how the myths act as useful prompts for philosophical reflection because of their dangers (seduction) and limitations (they do not and indeed cannot convey the truth). One should ultimately be dissatisfied with what the myths convey (although not the questions that they address such as the nature of the human soul), even while being totally engaged and even enraptured by them, and at that moment one moves on to true philosophical dialectic and the pursuit of philosophy; those content with the myths themselves fail in being led to the philosophical life. This process is mirrored by the structure of the *Phaedrus* itself: the myth of the cicadas also serves to direct attention to philosophical dialectic, discussed in the second half of the dialogue.

This concern with the strengths and limitations of various modes of discourse, Werner stresses, is a preoccupation of the dialogue as a whole. We see rhetoric, myth, and philosophical dialectic all subjected to close scrutiny. The dialogue's final myth, that of Theuth and Thamus, raises problems with writing and an uncritical reliance on the written text, which are similar to the concerns about submitting to the authority of myths. This myth suggests the superiority of doing philosophy orally in face-to-face fashion and draws attention to the limitations of all written modes of discourse, including the *Phaedrus* itself. Indeed, Werner stresses that, for Plato, it is actually impossible for incarnate souls to achieve *noēsis* via any linguistic means, including philosophical dialectic. At this point, even speaking to one another appears problematic. This is a very striking conclusion, tempered only a little by the nuanced comments about the superiority of dialectic (it is not as far removed from the truth as myth and so marks some degree of progress). At this point, a number of awkward questions emerge concerning Plato's conception of philosophy and philosophical practice, which could have been discussed further. Werner does force the reader to take such concerns seriously, and by doing so one becomes much more attuned to the challenges the *Phaedrus* throws at the reader and the ways in which it invites us to embark on an independent process of self-examination.

There is no question that this study is a major contribution to our appreciation of the *Phaedrus*, and there are some very helpful concluding remarks that all readers of Plato could well heed. To take but one example: ‘It turns out, then, that we cannot ask the question “What is the *Phaedrus* about?” without simultaneously asking the question “How does Plato stress what it is about?”’ (267). It would seem that this advice could be applied more widely; somewhat disappointingly, however, throughout the book Werner is loath to commit himself to anything beyond the *Phaedrus* itself. He makes a strong internal case for his reading of the myths in the *Phaedrus*, but one feels that Plato’s practice in the other dialogues is relevant, especially if we are seeking to get fully to grips with the nature of Plato’s literary and philosophical practice. It would be interesting to determine the extent to which the results of Werner’s reading of the *Phaedrus* hold good for the great concluding myths in the *Republic*, *Gorgias*, and *Phaedo*, for instance. In any case, Werner has opened up what promise to be fruitful avenues for further study.

In sum, much of this fine book covers more or less familiar territory, but the discussion is always fresh, clear, helpful, sophisticated, and detailed. As well as appealing to experts, it succeeds in orientating the newcomer quickly with many key debates and controversies surrounding the *Phaedrus*. At times, the central claims about the truth-value of the myths are somewhat laboured, although the evidence amassed in their support is impressive. Indeed, any scholar seeking to maintain an alternative view on Plato’s myths in the *Phaedrus* will need to address the very strong challenge posed by this book. The book’s greatest value lies in the penetrating close analysis of the text itself: there are some real highlights and Werner’s readings will be of much help not only to students of the *Phaedrus*, but to all scholars interested in Plato’s literary and philosophical practice.

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