

# The Gods of the Platonic Tradition

## Session 2 – The Gods and Myth

Myths therefore imitate the gods, according to effable and ineffable, unapparent and apparent, wise and ignorant; and this likewise extends to the goodness of the gods; for as the gods impart the goods of sensible natures in common to all things, but the goods resulting from intelligibles to the wise alone, so myths assert to all men that there are gods; but who they are, and of what kind, they alone manifest to such as are capable of so exalted a knowledge.

Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, chapter 3

Throughout the Platonic dialogues, the Gods are referred to with profound veneration and although most modern scholars acknowledge this, most also claim that Plato did not believe in the traditional Gods of Greece. They take as evidence passages from the *Euthyphro* and the *Republic* in which Socrates disputes the validity of the traditional *myths* of the Gods (obviously a very different issue): in the second and third books of the *Republic* Socrates says he would ban from his imaginary city the poetical tellers of myth – such as Homer and Hesiod – because their tales seem to portray the Gods as immoral and deceptive. Here is a part of what he says about why he worries about such poets:

1 "When one, in his composition, gives ill representations of the nature of Gods and heroes: as a painter drawing a picture in no respect resembling what he wished to paint. . . . First of all, with reference to that greatest lie, and matters of the greatest importance, he did not lie handsomely, who told how Ouranos did what Hesiod says he did; and then again how Kronos punished him, and what Kronos did, and what he suffered from his son [Zeus]: For though these things were true, yet I should not imagine they ought to be so plainly told to the unwise and the young, but ought much rather to be concealed. But if there were a necessity to tell them, they should be heard in secrecy, by as few as possible; after they had sacrificed not a hog, but some great and difficult sacrifice, that thus the fewest possible might chance to hear them." (Republic II, 378a)

We might note that the hog was the sacrifice made by the uninitiated when presenting themselves to the mystery sanctuary at Eleusis for admittance: what exactly is the "great and difficult" sacrifice we can only speculate – but we might also note that in the *Phaedo* Socrates likens the hard path of the philosophic life and study to the initiations in the mysteries. Whatever the exact interpretation we put on this passage, we can be absolutely clear that Plato is concerned about the misunderstanding of these myths because he believes in the Gods, and also believes that it is important that we conceive them to be as they truly are. Socrates expands on the problem of Homeric myths a little later, when he says: ". . . and all those battles of the Gods which Homer has composed, must not be admitted into the city; whether they be composed in the way of allegory, or without allegory; for the young person is not able to judge what is allegory and what is not: but whatever opinions he receives at such an age are with difficulty washed away, and are generally immoveable. On these accounts, one would imagine, that, of all things, we should endeavour that what they are first to hear be composed in the most handsome manner for exciting them to virtue."

Now we are unlikely to take the literal meaning of the myths as a guide for our own actions – our modern culture now has other stories it perhaps takes too literally – nevertheless since the philosophical understanding the Gods has now almost dropped out of sight, the fact that the mythological presentation of the Gods has survived with astonishing vitality into the modern era means that we need to readjust our thinking about what myths are telling us. As Proclus says in his *Commentary on the Republic*:<sup>1</sup>

2 "It seems to me that the grim, monstrous, and the unnatural in poetic fictions moves the listener in every way to a search for the truth, and draws him toward the secret knowledge; it does not allow him, as would be the case with something that possessed a surface probability, to remain with the thoughts placed before him. It compels him, instead, to enter into the interior of the myths and to busy himself with the thought which has been concealed, out of sight by the makers of myth and to ponder what kinds of natures and what great powers they introduced into the meaning of the myths and communicated to posterity by means of symbols such as these. Thus since myths of this sort arouse in those of the best natural disposition a longing for the doctrine hidden within them, and through their superficial monstrosity inspire the truth rooted in their deepest recesses, and at the same time prevent the profane who have no business with that truth from reaching it . . ."

Perhaps an example is what is required here. One of the complaints of Socrates in the *Republic* was that the Gods are depicted as contending against one another; an example of this is the story of the Judgment of Paris. A banquet of the Gods at the marriage of Peleus (a mortal king) and Thetis (an immortal nymph) was progressing when Eris (her name means *discord*) appeared despite not having been invited. She threw a golden apple from the garden of the Hesperides amongst the guests, saying as she did so, "For the fairest!" Three Goddesses claimed the prize – Hera, Athene and Aphrodite – appealing to Zeus for judgment, but he sent the three to Paris, a prince of Troy, in order that he choose which was the fairest. With Hermes as their guide, the three candidates bathed in the spring of Ida, then confronted Paris on Mount Ida in the climactic moment that is the crux of the tale. After failing to judge their beauty with their clothing on, the three goddesses stripped naked to convince Paris of their worthiness. While Paris inspected them, each attempted with her powers to bribe him; Hera offered to make him king of Europe and Asia, Athena offered wisdom, and Aphrodite, who had the Charites and the Horai to enhance her charms with flowers and song, offered the world's most beautiful woman – Helen, queen of Sparta. Paris, as we all know, chose Aphrodite and, stealing the queen away to Troy, thus caused the terrible 10 year war between the Greeks and the Trojans. (The marriage of Peleus and Thetis was a troubled one, and only one child was born to them – the golden Achilles, warrior extraordinary who eventually dies in the very war caused by that rash choice.) There seems to be so much wrong with the story (even in an age before the me-too movement!): what do the Platonist interpreters think is its hidden truths? Here's what Proclus says about it:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Proclus *On the Republic* book 6, 1 (Kroll 85, 17 ff)

<sup>2</sup> Proclus *On the Republic* book 6, 1 (Kroll 108, 1 ff)

3 "As for the famous judgment of the goddesses that the myths say was performed by Paris, following the ancient account, it is not to be believed that there was truly strife among the goddesses themselves and that they were judged by a [particular] barbarian. Rather, this is to be interpreted as meaning that the choices of lives – to which Plato testifies in many passages – are likewise carried out under the watchful eye of the gods who supervise souls.

Plato himself indeed clearly teaches the same thing in the *Phaedrus*, saying that the regal life belongs to Hera, the philosophical to Zeus, and the erotic to Aphrodite.<sup>3</sup> Thus souls, when many kinds of lives are offered them out of the universe, accept some and reject others, following their own judgment, while the myths, transferring to the gods themselves the specific qualities of the lives, say that those who preside over the variation in them, form by form, are "judged" by those choosing the lives.

This is the sense in which Paris is said to have been made the judge of Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite: three lives were offered him, and he chose the erotic, not after due thought, but rushing after the beauty of the world of appearances and pursuing the phantom of the beauty grasped by the mind. He whose life is truly devoted to Eros sets intelligence and wisdom before him and contemplates the true and the apparent beauty through these and has no less to do with Athena than with Aphrodite. But he who pursues only the erotic form of life, in and for itself and through the passions, departs from true beauty and goodness and out of stupidity and greed leaps upon the phantom of the beautiful and lies there on it, failing to attain that balanced perfection commensurate with the erotic. The truly erotic individual, who is the concern of Aphrodite, is drawn up to the divine beauty itself, looking beyond the beauties of the senses, but since there are Aphrodisian daemons presiding over the beauty that is visible and has its existence in matter, for this reason, of course, even he who pursues the phantom is said to have Aphrodite as his helper."

And Sallust offers this brief note in his chapter on myth and philosophical interpretations:<sup>4</sup>

4 "For in this myth the banquet denotes the super-mundane powers of the gods; and on this account they subsist in conjunction with each other: but the golden apple denotes the world, which, on account of its composition from contrary natures, is not improperly said to be thrown by Discord, or strife. But again, since different gifts are imparted to the world by different gods, they *appear* to contest with each other for the apple. And a soul living according to sense, (for this is Paris) not perceiving other powers in the universe, asserts that the contended apple subsists alone through the beauty of Aphrodite."

In our first session we explored the metaphysical and theological nature of the Gods – how they were all directly rooted in the One or the Good, which constitutes the First and ineffable Principle of All; and that as such the Gods are simply unities but can be distinguished from the One because they present to the universe distinct and particular onenesses from which all differences we see about us flow. Myths allow us to see how these primal characteristics work their way out into manifestation, each setting up

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<sup>3</sup> *Phaedrus* 252e-253e, 265b

<sup>4</sup> *On the Gods and the World*, chapter 4.

numerous relationships with each other as they are unfolded. But if we are to put ourselves back into the thought world of the ancient Platonists we, like them, must hold onto the simple and unitive goodness of the Gods even as we explore the outworking of their powers. Here is our last reading from Proclus on the Republic:

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". . . just as the gods themselves, separate from everything else, are one with the Good, and nothing inferior reaches them, but they are utterly pure and undefiled, pre-existing in a single category, a single uniform class, so, in the same way, it is appropriate for discourse about them to refer to them in exceptional words, words full of intellect and capable of depicting in terms of their own class their ineffable transcendence. Moreover, in mystical contemplation of the gods one must purify the conceptions in the soul of all fantasies bound to matter and get rid of all thoughts that are foreign and surge up from their source below in the irrational and consider everything else trivial beside the undefiled transcendence of the gods, trusting only in right reason and in those visions into the truth about them that transcend intellect. Let no one tell us things about the gods that can appropriately be said about men as well, nor set out to attribute the experiences of the irrationality that is caught up in matter to that which transcends in simplicity the intelligence, the intellective substance, and the life of the intellect: these symbols will never bear any resemblance to the being of the gods. Thus the myths, unless they are entirely to miss the truth concerning reality, must in some way reflect those things they undertake to hide from contemplation by means of their visible screens."

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One final but very important concept might well be considered here: the fact that in this tradition the Gods are transcendentally unitive and almost beyond knowing, and yet unfold themselves through all the various layers of reality bestowing on even the lowest level, the material, images of their inherent characteristics. Modern commentators on Plato and his tradition sometimes claim that it is dualistic – that its emphasis on the world of eternal forms over and above the world of temporal material manifestation means that it has split reality into two forever separate levels. But this is to misunderstand how very non-dualistic Plato really is: firstly because he insists that the material things of the physical world are shaped by the forms (and that therefore although distinct they cannot be entirely separate) and secondly because he understands the human soul as being an intermediary between the two states. The soul is both eternal and temporal, able both to contact the immaterial world through intellect, and the physical world through the senses.

But a third and more mysterious way in which Plato and this tradition heals the split between the eternal and the temporal is this profound doctrine of the Gods: it is because the Gods are neither eternal nor temporal in their own natures that they are able to penetrate all levels from the highest to the lowest. A God or Goddess is able to be present in a stone or a herb or animal, and in an idea and in an intellect; but none of these limits the infinite reach of his or her divinity. Each divinity is present in his or her myths – that is why the fables survive the barren periods when humans neglect the philosophy of the Gods – and yet the myth does not imprison the divinity, but simply calls the hearer back into his or her presence.