

Myth in Philosophy

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David Nowakowski

david@merlinccc.org

What is (a) Myth?

- Myth, fable, etc.
- Sallustius: A myth never was, but always is.
 - “These things never took place at any particular time, because they subsist eternally. And intellect contemplates all things as subsisting together, but discourse considers this thing as first, and that as second...”
- Cosmogogenesis.
 - From time, back to eternity.
 - All at once, at every moment.
- Gods (and semi-divine heroes, etc.).
 - Proclus: “Whatever is first according to nature.”
 - Whatever comes to be “down here,” must have a source “up there” which always is.

Approaching Myth

- Sallustius’ prerequisites:
 - Being prudent and good.
 - Well-informed from childhood.
 - “Common conceptions”:
 - Every God is good, impassive, and free from change.
- Contemporary considerations:
 - Immersion in a coherent worldview/culture ...
 - ... with its attendant body of practice.
- Proclus: two types of myth:
 - For the education of youth.
 - “Filled with divine mania.”
- Multiple levels of meaning and interpretation:
 - Theological.
 - Cosmological.
 - Psychological (having to do with the soul, *psychē*).
 - Material.

A Few Interpretive Principles

- Multiple layers all at once.
- Division & unification.
- Apparent absurdity as an invitation.
- The “likeness of dissimilars.”
- *How universal are these principles?*

Some Examples

- The Judgement of Paris, in Homer’s *Iliad*.
- Others?

Some Helpful Texts

Text 1: Proclus, *The Theology of Plato*, book I, chapter 3 (trans. Taylor).

All those who have ever touched upon theology, have called those things that are things first according to nature, “Gods.” And they have said that the theological science is concerned with these.

And some, indeed, have considered a corporeal [=bodily] essence, as that alone which has any existence, and have placed in a secondary rank with respect to essence, all the genera of incorporeal natures, considering the principles of things as having a corporeal form, and evincing that the habit in us by which we know these, is corporeal. But others, suspending indeed all bodies from incorporeal natures, and defining the first hyparxis to be in soul, and the powers of soul, call (as it appears to me) the best of souls, Gods; and denominate the science which proceeds as far as to these, and which knows these, theology. But such as produce the multitude of souls from another more ancient principle, and establish intellect as the leader of wholes, these assert that the best end is a union of the soul with intellect, and consider the intellectual form of life as the most honourable of all things. They doubtless too consider theology, and the discussion of intellectual essence, as one and the same. All these, therefore, as I have said, call the first and most self-sufficient principles of things, Gods, and the science respecting these, theology. ... Plato, however, proceeds to another principle entirely exempt from intellect, more incorporeal and ineffable...



Text 2: Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, chapter 1 (trans. Nock, slightly modified).

Those who would learn about the Gods need to have been well educated from childhood and must not be bred up among foolish ideas; they must also be good and prudent by nature, in order that they may have something in common with the subject. Further, they must be acquainted with universal opinions [a.k.a., “common conceptions”], by which I mean those in which all men, if rightly questioned, would concur; such opinions are that every God is good and impassive and unchangeable (since whatever changes, changes for better or for worse; if for worse, it becomes bad, if for the better, it proves to have been bad in the first place).



Text 3: Porphyry, *On the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs* (trans. Taylor).

Nor is it proper to believe that interpretations of this kind are forced, and are nothing more than the conjectures of ingenious men: but when we consider the great wisdom of antiquity, and how much Homer excelled in prudence and in every kind of virtue, we ought not to doubt but that he has secretly represented the images of divine things under the concealments of fable. For it is not possible that this whole exposition [of the Cave, as Porphyry has just explained it] could be devised, unless from certain established truths, an occasion of fiction had been given.



Text 4: Sallustius, *On the Gods and the World*, chapter 4 (trans. Nock, slightly modified).

They tell that at the banquet of the gods, Eris [i.e., Strife, Discord] threw a golden apple and the goddesses, vying with one another for its possession, were sent by Zeus to Paris to be judged; Paris thought Aphrodite beautiful, and gave her the apple. Here the banquet signifies the supramundane powers of the Gods, and that is why they are together, the golden apple signifies the world, which, as it is made of opposites, is rightly said to be thrown by Eris, and as the various gods give various gifts to the world they are thought to vie with one another for the possession of the apple; further, the soul that lives in accordance with sense-perception (for that is Paris), seeing beauty alone and not the other powers in the universe, says that the apple is Aphrodite's.



Text 5: Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, essay 6 (trans. Baltzly et al., heavily modified following Taylor).

It is not right to consider that there was really strife among the Goddesses when they were subject to the judgement of a barbarian man. One ought rather to think that there is a choice of ways of life, which Plato speaks about on many occasions, subject to the Gods who serve as guardians of souls. And Plato himself teaches this clearly in the *Phaedrus*, saying that the kingly life belongs to Hera, the philosophical life to Zeus, and the life governed by love to Aphrodite. Therefore when souls, according to their own judgement, choose certain ones of the lives that are offered to them by the universe, and reject others, then the myths, by transferring to the Gods themselves the characteristics of the lives, say that it is the guardians of the variation in forms among them who are judged by those selecting lives.

According to this same manner of speaking, Paris is said to have been appointed judge of Athene and Hera and Aphrodite, these being the three lives that were held out before him, but he chose the erotic life, and this too not with prudence, but running after the beauty of visible things and pursuing the mere image of intelligible beauty. One who is truly dedicated to love employs intellect and prudence as his guiding principles, and in company with these contemplates both the true beauty and the visible beauty, and is not less under the influence of Athene than of Aphrodite. However, one who passionately pursues the erotic form of life by itself is cut off from those things that are truly beautiful and good, and because of his foolishness and greed, leaps after the image of the beautiful, and lies fallen upon it, and does not reach the balanced perfection belonging to the erotic life. So then the one who is perfectly dedicated to love, and is studious of Aphrodite, is led upwards to the divine beauty itself, looking past the things which are beautiful in sense-perception. But since there are also Aphrodisian daimones governing the beauty that is manifest to the senses and that has its existence in matter, for this reason even the man who follows only the image is said to obtain the assistance of Aphrodite.

Additional Readings & Resources

Plato offers his famous (infamous?) critique of the Homeric poets in books II and III of the *Republic*. There are dozens of translations of Plato's text, any of them should be fine. Best of all: choose two different translations, and compare them.



Responding to the concerns raised by Socrates in those two books of the *Republic*, Proclus makes the critical distinction between the two types of myth in Essay 6 of his commentary on the *Republic*. In that same essay, he also offers a long exegesis of important and challenging passages from Homer, from which we can learn quite a lot about how to read a myth in the Platonic manner. There are two sources for this material that I'm personally familiar with:

- Thomas Taylor translates more than half of this, as the "Introduction to Books 2 and 3" in his translation of the *Republic*.
 - A scan of the original 1804 publication is available online. It's free, but it preserves all the weirdness of early 19th-century typography (like the *s* character that looks almost like an *f*, etc.), and lacks various other modern conventions: <https://archive.org/details/PlatoThomasTaylor/page/n269/mode/2up> .
 - Taylor's translation has also been reprinted in a modern edition by the Prometheus Trust, as *The Works of Plato*, volume 1 (which is volume IX in their Thomas Taylor Series). This edition has modern typography throughout, along with marginal numbers to cross-reference with the standard editions (and most modern translations) of Plato and Proclus. The relevant material is on pages 246–303.
- Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, volume 1, trans. Baltzly, Finamore, and Miles (Cambridge, 2018). This contains essay 6 in its entirety. Skip the translators' introductions (both to the volume as a whole, and to the individual essays) and go straight to Proclus' text.

There are also some other translations of Essay 6, but I can't speak to their merits (or lack thereof), since I've not consulted them personally.



For Sallustius' essay *On the Gods and the World*, we again have several choices. Here are three readily available translations. Note that there's some variation in the way each translator renders the title (and even Sallustius' name, sometimes merely as "Sallust"), but they're all the same work.

- Sallustius, *Concerning the Gods and the Universe*, trans. Arthur Darby Nock, 1966 (original edition 1926, so theoretically in the public domain). Skip the introduction (which is longer than Sallustius' text itself!) and go straight to the main text. Nock's entire book can be read online at: <https://archive.org/details/sallustiusconcer0000sall/mode/2up>
For a downloadable PDF of just the text itself, without Nock's commentary, go here: https://amissio.net/lib/sallustius_concerning_the_gods_and_the_universe_us.pdf

- Thomas Taylor’s translation is in his *Collected Writings on the Gods and the World* (Thomas Taylor Series volume IV) from the Prometheus Trust, pages 4–25, again with modern typography. A PDF of the original 1793 edition is online: https://www.google.com/books/edition/Sallust_on_the_Gods_and_the_World/-dIIAAAAQAAJ
- Finally, we have a translation by Gilbert Murray (orig. 1925), whose understanding of the material did not rise to the level of Nock and Taylor: <https://sacred-texts.com/cla/fsgr/fsgr10.htm>



Taylor’s translation of Porphyry’s essay *On the Homeric Cave of the Nymphs*, appears in *Select Works of Porphyry* (Thomas Taylor Series volume II), pages 145–167.



With all of these older translations, there are some vagaries that reflect their time and place:

- There will be some unfamiliar terms, whose meanings have changed, or which have dropped out of use entirely. For this, simply consult a good dictionary!
- Some of these translators also preferred Latin-derived words and names over those from Greek. Especially relevant for our topic, this means that the Greek term *mythos* and its cognates will appear as “fable,” “fabulous,” etc., rather than the more natural “myth,” “mythic,” “mythological,” etc.
- Thomas Taylor also replaces the names of the Greek Gods with Roman/Latin deities, as was (unfortunately) the common practice in his day, ignoring the good advice given by the Platonic teacher Iamblichus in the 3rd century: “Change not the foreign names!”



Finally, I can recommend a few resources by modern (still living!) scholars and practitioners who are firmly situated within the Platonic tradition:

- Tim Addey’s book *The Unfolding Wings: The Way of Perfection in the Platonic Tradition* (Prometheus Trust, 2nd ed., 2011) has an excellent chapter on myth, which draws very directly on Sallustius and others whose work we’ve briefly considered in the workshop.
- Drawing on the work of Olympiodorus, one of the last Platonic teachers in 6th-century Alexandria, Edward P. Butler offers some helpful guidance in his article “The Theological Interpretation of Myth,” originally published in the academic journal *The Pomegranate* (2005), and reprinted in his collection *Essays on a Polytheistic Philosophy of Religion* (2012). Dr. Butler also has a Youtube talk and discussion covering closely related material; while the main audience is the modern Hindu community, the insights are more widely applicable: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rgaAXH6gyPk>

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