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The Myth as a Theory of Human Action: Perspectives From Plato and Sorel

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For us, moderns, a myth is *only* a myth because we can no longer connect that time with the time of history as we write it, employing the critical method, not can we connect the mythical places with our geographic space. This is why the myth can no longer be an explanation; to exclude it etiological intention is the theme of all necessary demythologization. But in losing its explanatory pretensions the myth reveals its exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding, which we shall later call its symbolic function—that is to say, its power of discovering and revealing the bond between man and what he considers sacred.

PAUL RICOEUR, *The Symbolism of Evil*

The myth, lie, symbol and metaphor have been constant sources of philosophical inquiry since Osiris and Isis first cohabited near the fertile valley of the Nile delta. The purpose of this paper will be to examine Plato and Georges Sorel as two staunch advocates of myth. And, in doing so, investigate their use of myth in their distinct political philosophies. Within this context, the first responsibility of any inquiry is to begin with a cursory review of the way each author used the myth.

For Plato there were two types of myths or lies: a lie of the soul and a mere lie in words. The differentiation is that the former is an unknowing lie while the latter is a conscious lie. A lie of the soul comes from ignorance, not from knowledge, and should be condemned because it is used without an understanding of its possible consequences. The mere lie in words is a myth created to protect or educate fellow men who do not have the capability to understand abstractions. This appears to be Plato's purpose in developing the guardian class who must use myth because they "possess a coherent body of abstract knowledge concerning the source of human unity—which they cannot explain in full detail."¹ In fact the argument has been made that the *Republic* itself is a myth because its purpose is not to praise a certain type of

¹ John Wild, *Plato's Modern Enemies and the Theory of Natural Law*, Chicago, 1968, p. 52.

community, but rather to urge the validity of a principle; that "politics is a vain business unless it is subordinated to an understanding of the good for man." I. M. Crombie continues by stating "A myth then, of the kind to which the eschatological myths of the *Georgias*, *Phaedo* and *Republic* belong, is a story such that, if the story were true, that would be an implementation of certain principles."²

Sorel concretized the myth in what he termed the general strike. The general strike had to remain as potential in a dialectical context with the actual to maintain its viability as a threat. In other words, the general strike had to be real enough for all men to believe in it yet could not be actualized without losing its effectiveness. Sorel perceived three levels of strikes:

- (1) The proletarian general strike—it is the strike of the proletarian workers to overthrow the capitalist society.
- (2) The political general strike—it is related to the goals of socialists in parliament and government.
- (3) The economic strike—improvement of the status of laborers.³

Sorel was indifferent to the economic strike because it did not enter the political realm and tended to erode the potential threat of the political and proletarian strikes. Violence, as a conscious rather than a passive activity, was conceived of as a potential tool. Violence could not be feared by the workers because the capitalists would then view the threat of the massive strike as a mere ploy. The purpose of the myth for Sorel was to establish the worker as the actual source of socialism in society through the threat of the general strike.

The purpose behind this cursory introduction to Plato's and Sorel's conceptions of the myth is to lay the foundation for an examination of the meaning of the myth in political philosophy. Susan Langer has created a typology of the myth in which:

The myth is characterized by its serious nature, *the entrance into the public realm*, and the appearance of universal symbols. The concern of the myth is not utopian or wise distortion of the world, but serious envisagement of its fundamental truths; moral orientation, not escape.⁴

² I. M. Crombie, *An Examination of Plato's Doctrines*, London, 1966, vol. I, p. 153.

³ Irving Horowitz, *Radicalism and the Revolt Against Reason*, Carbondale, Ill., 1968, p. 85n.

⁴ John G. Gunnell, *Political Philosophy and Time*, Middletown, Conn., 1968, p. 29.

This paradigm appears to be a bit stagnant so, in addition to the above three criteria, the concept of praxis will be appended to it. The reasoning behind adding a praxical dimension to the myth will be explored below.

Many philosophers feel the myth is totally alien to what modern man understands as a fairy story or fictional tale. Cassier (*Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) justifies the use of the myth as a heuristic device which attempts to interpret the universe rather than a pragmatic fiction which is dismissed when measured against standards of truth. "The myth (is) a form of symbolization with a truth and meaning of its own for the mythic mind as a stage in the differentiation or evolution of consciousness."⁵ The importance of this argument is that the myth is purposeful and has a specific function in political thought.

Authors, such as Levi-Strauss, Cassier and Ortega y Gasset, have dealt with the concept of myth. But none, at least from my own perspective, have ever tried to explicate the question of why political myth is necessary for "conscious" political activity. This paper will peripherally explore the concept of political activity in terms of its relationships with the myth. But, why pick on Susan Langer? The problem with Langer is that she is so close to an excellent explication of myth that just missing she destroys the concept. The argument which will be advanced in this paper is that her framework for analyzing myth is stagnant. That is, stagnant in the biological sense of an 'unmoving, unliving body'. It appears that she totally leaves out human motivation—in terms of praxis. She worries about constructing theory, as morality, without its consequences or interrelationships with human activity.

We must construct the morality of a new age, a new world, and that means a new morality. This cannot be done by adopting some simple new idea and making an 'ism' of it—humanism, existentialism, Freudianism—and setting up a few general principles by which all familiar ethical rules are henceforth to be measured. It can only be done by analyzing and perhaps redefining not only obvious ethical aspects of life, but the nature of life itself, and individual life, and mentality, society and many other subjects.⁶

It appears that Langer has posed two poor alternatives which are not mutually exclusive. This paper will attempt to show a way to go beyond this dilemma by viewing myth in Plato and Sorel from a modified typology. What follows is that attempt.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29.

⁶ Susan K. Langer, *Philosophical Sketches*, N. Y., 1964, p. 151.

Langer's first criterion for myth is its serious nature. For both Plato and Sorel the myth was an instrument from which one could understand and communicate concepts which could not be easily understood. For Plato the myth was used as a device to communicate complex abstractions to the common man. Thus, allowing all men to have at least the understanding of political abstractions to allow them to live "justly" in the polis. "In Plato the myth retains the seriousness of its 'truth' but is at the same time consciously an imaginative play," writes Gunnell,

As the creative mind gains mastery over the symbols of the myth, as with the tragic poets, the myth becomes the medium for expressing the new freedom of the psyche . . . What to the adult appears to be play is seriousness from the perspective of the child. The difference between the creative man and the child or those living in the cultural myth is the consciousness not the seriousness that he had as a child at play. From Plato to Heidegger the myth stands at the portal of being.⁷

In a real sense Plato creates a dialectical unity between fiction and reality through his use of the myth while at the same time allowing the absolutely free development of the psyche without pedantic tutoring. The synthesis of these two mediums, the abstract and the real, within the myth establishes the seriousness of Plato's effort to give an understanding of the forms to all classes of the polis.

Sorel demands that the myth be taken seriously because it is the key to his political theory. The myth is not utopian for Sorel. The myth elicits action while a utopia is limited to an intellectual process. "Myths lead men to prepare themselves for a battle to destroy what exists," writes Richard Humphrey, "the utopia has always had the effect of directing men's energies toward reforms that could be effected by taking the system piecemeal."⁸ The purpose of the myth is to lead men into direct action in the public realm. Therefore, consciousness, which comes through the myth, leads to political action and change.

The second characteristic of the myth in Langer's typology is the entrance into the public realm. This public realm is important because it brings the myth into the political dimension and allows the myth to act in the character of the exemplar for public action. In other words, the myth gives all men a limited understanding of their role in the public sphere and how to best actualize that role. The "myth, like political philosophy," suggests Gunnell,

⁷ Gunnell, pp. 147-148.

⁸ Richard Humphrey, *Georges Sorel*, Cambridge, Mass., 1951, pp. 173-174.

provided a vision of the origin or source of order and carried with it a perscription for ordering existence from the point of this ground upwards . . .

The myth provided a theoretical bridge between human order and the order of nature, and this integration of society and the cosmos was predicated on the lack of symbolic differentiation between the two spheres. Social existence is experienced as a cosmic analogue and reality is a function of the initiation of a celestial archetype.⁹

The function of the myth can now be seen as providing a link between the form and the real for Plato, while for Sorel the myth, as a general strike, establishes a coherent understanding of the abstract concept of socialism.

Specifically for Plato the myth is used when he can no longer use mysticism or first form logic to explain his ideas. Through the use of myths he enters the public realm because the myth requires the reader to play an important part in the act of communication. "It also gives a fair indicator that the matter under discussion is seen as vitally important to Plato himself," Robinson points out,

For the myths tend to be about man and the divine, conduct in this world and bliss or punishment in another, free will and destiny, birth and death: ideas in a word, which *engage* man, and form the well springs of action.¹⁰

This is why the myths play such a vital role in the *Republic*. Plato realized that it did not matter who the author of the myth was or what his intention was, because the myth would be unconsciously taken as an exemplar of action; this is especially true if the myth portrayed the action as good or honorable. Plato states this point clearly in the *Republic*:

First, as it seems, we must supervise the makers of tales; and if they make a fine tale, it must be approved, but if it's not it must be rejected. We'll persuade nurses and mothers to tell the approved tales to their children and to shape their souls with tales more than their bodies with hands.¹¹

The myth becomes the omphalos of the *Republic* because the mere lie in words is the source of its existence. Man can only exist in community

⁹ Gunnell, pp. 30-31.

¹⁰ T. M. Robinson, *Plato's Psychology*, Toronto, 1970, p. 60.

¹¹ Allan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato*, N. Y., 1968, pp. 55, 377c.

if the reality of his situation is communicated in terms with which he can cope. This is why it is so very important to have absolute control over the myth makers, even if all the myths are not believed by everyone. The importance of this noble lie is that it is persuasive and comes into being due to specific need within the political realm.¹² At this point the lie enters public space and becomes political, therefore supporting Langer's contention, at least for Plato, that the myth enters the public realm.

The myth for Sorel provides the opportunity for a radical, i.e., in the same sense as the German *grund*, entry of socialism into the public realm. The sole purpose of the potential general strike is to allow the worker to feel that he can accomplish effective political action, and in this way the myth of Sorel works much like the Platonic myth. Sorel's myth creates a noetic foundation of action which is dialectical because it relies on the interpenetration of the intellect and of the real world. "Sorel's conception of the term 'myth' is entirely a dynamic one;" asserts Humphrey,

unlike utopian ideals, it is not affected by criticism of detail or even by the apparent failure of its believers to attain their aspirations . . . These myths may never be fulfilled, but they provide, nonetheless, an indispensable incentive to action.¹³

Phrased in a different way, Sorel created the myth as a Platonic form of political action where the general strike was always the unattainable goal for which the proletariat must constantly reach. *Reflections on Violence* can thus be interpreted as a myth in much the same way that I. M. Crombie evaluates the *Republic* as myth: It was absolutely necessary to the success of socialistic syndicalism to have Sorel create the mythical image of the general strike and political violence because it made these actions viable alternatives for the workers and real to the bourgeois. There is now justification for stating that Sorel's strike must dramatically enter the public realm before it becomes myth. In other words, Sorel's myth cannot remain as pure intellectual activity.

The appearance of universal symbols is Langer's last criterion for the myth. This last section of her typology can be divided into two distinct properties: that of ontology, in this case time, and psychology, or the relation between the symbol and the mind. Time is placed within an ontological state because myth is by definition timeless and exists in *athanasia* (from the Greek *a thanatos* or the negative of death). There-

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 93 * 414c.

¹³ Humphrey, p. 171.

fore, time itself becomes the myth's source of being, manifesting itself as primordial time qua universal symbols. "Time in the myth is not really time at all, but the eternal present of primordial time," writes Gunnell,

which is, in effect, 'articulated atemporality' or 'intemporal time' . . . 'a moment without duration as certain mystics and philosophers conceive of eternity.' Primordial time is the time of cosmic creation, and the events narrated in the myth are continually made present and serve as archetypes which give meaning to experience.¹⁴ Plato treats the *Republic* as a myth, without the limitations of time.

The myth allows the human mind to freely create using his lie in mere words as both a myth and a model. This independence of human action is essential for both Plato and Sorel because the human dignity found in the independence of right or moral choice is the foundation of their politics. "And we should treat such tales as spells to pronounce over ourselves," writes Plato, "as in fact has been my own purpose all this while in telling my long story."¹⁵ By pronouncing¹⁶ Plato uses a pedagogical device to allow one to reflect on the applicability of the myth to the specific situation. In this sense all myths for Plato are timeless precisely because they are metaphors for timely action, that is, a human being can understand the need to apply myth in his own historical time. Phrased differently, the myths transcend time by relating an implicit knowledge of actual experience within them.

Sorel agrees with Plato as to his universal conception of the myth. Plato used the lie in mere words to transcend the arguments of the orators, and Sorel used the myth of the general strike to negate the affect of the Marxist phenomena of scientific socialism. "Myth is needed to overcome the probabilistic world of scientific fact," suggests Horowitz, "Ideology, the conscious representation of class interests, is the basis of social practice."¹⁷ Their ability to stimulate activity is the supreme measure of the worth of ideologies."¹⁸ The universal symbolism within

¹⁴ Gunnell, p. 25.

¹⁵ John Rist, *Eros and Psyche*, Toronto, 1964, p. 11.

¹⁶ Pronounce comes from the Greek and Latin sources of *pro nunciare* or before announcing. It also has the connotation of a public or official declaration of decision. It seems what Plato is telling us "by treating such tales as spells to pronounce over ourselves" is that one should measure the fit of the myth before pre-dictating action. This allows man a pre-action cognition, thus radicalizing for Plato the human freedom of choice.

¹⁷ *Pratiquer* in the French can be translated as both practice and praxis; it would seem that the translator used an unfortunate choice of words because "social praxis" would seem to be a much more applicable and appropriate concept in this context.

¹⁸ Horowitz, p. 133.

mythology allowed Sorel to coterminously create a theory of history and a command to human action. In this manner Sorel was free to use his observations to criticize other socialist thinkers without endangering socialism. *The Decomposition of Marxism* is his most scathing work on other socialist thought. His main critique of Marx appears to be Marx's failure to create a more provocative myth than the communist state.¹⁹

One of the major functions of the myth is its ability to create a human timeliness with regard to its moral dictates. In fact, "the connection between political philosophy and fabrication is evident;" writes Gunnell, "it is the desire to create something that would transcend the instability of action performed in time."²⁰ From here Gunnell's argument falls apart because he tries to separate "knowing" and "doing". As C. S. Kirk put it: "dubious comparisons between verbal and action symbols had better be left on one side, as had 'adjustive responses,' which, if they exist in any sense, provide only a small proportion of the total reasons for making, telling, and listening to myths."²¹ Myth is a natural extension of political philosophy and allows the philosopher a mode of communication without the limitations of pure understanding or intellect in the Kantian sense. Thus, the intellect is transcended through praxis which seems to be an essential ingredient of myth; and it will be explored as such below.

The second characteristic of the universal symbol is its psychology or the relationship between symbolic forms and human perception. To understand Plato's psychology one must first comprehend what Plato meant by philosophy: Philosophy had four distinct functions for Plato:

- (1) protreptic, introducing the student to philosophy . . .
- (2) the criticism of sophistry and ungrounded speculative opinion;
- (3) dialectic, the process of arriving at exact definitions which lay bare the formal structure of the world as a whole; and
- (4) mythical speculation . . ., concerning the nature of the supreme principle and the ultimate destiny of the soul.²²

From this definition it can be easily perceived that Plato saw the myth, and symbolism deriving from the myth, as essential to philosophical inquiry. Symbolism is a very important concept for Plato because it allows him to draw the distinction between myth and allegory. He does not condemn allegory as nonsense but rather sees it as less important than myth. J. A. Stewart has written that "Allegory is dogma in picture

¹⁹ Horowitz, pp. 207-255.

²⁰ Gunnell, p. 142.

²¹ C. S. Kirk, *Myth*, London, 1970, p. 25.

²² John Wild, *Plato's Theory of Man*, Cambridge, Mass., 1946, p. 94.

writing, but myth is not dogma and does not convey dogma."²³ The point is that symbolism in the myth is in no way dogmatic, instead it is prescriptive. In this way the myth only establishes parameters of action, allowing freedom of human will which is essential to Plato's concept of the polis.

Sorel's four major works, *Reflections on Violence*, *The Illusions of Progress*, *Materials of a Theory of the Proletariat*, and *The Decomposition of Marxism* reflect an over-arching concern for the psychological aspects of the myth. Symbols within the myth, e.g. proletariat, were designed to anchor the myth to reality. "Bergson's psychology provided a foundation to Sorel's myth of the general strike," writes Horowitz,

since images, unlike the mystique, were a human creation and not something found in the spirit of society. Bergson's human being was manipulatable and plastic, 'an object destined to move other objects.' Man becomes 'a centre of action' rather than a centre of cognition.²⁴

The essential point is that the idea of malleability of the human spirit must precede any notion of the effectiveness of the myth. Because man is plastic, the myth can create moral imperatives while still leaving optional action, or human freedom, a real possibility. This is why a stark distinction is made by Sorel between the propaganda lie, as in the totalitarian state, and the myth. "Sorel did not suggest that myths be created and imposed on a guileless proletariat by their overlords;" suggests Humphrey, "rather he sought to recognize appropriate images of conflict and movement already in existence so that they might be made to function in the process of heroic action springing from the workers themselves."²⁵ The purpose of the myth is not brain washing or even argumentation, but rather it is directed toward revelation. The truth, which is abstract and difficult to understand for the common man, is revealed through the symbolism of the myth. It can be easily understood now why Sorel used the symbol of the general strike as the foundation of his myth; the strike was a real and concrete mechanism which the workers, and citizenry in general were familiar with from their contemporary labor situation. The general strike was realistic because it was an amplified version of a previously experienced phenomenon. In this way Sorel tied the symbolism within the general strike to a basic understanding of the abstract concept of socialism. Or in the words of Sorel:

²³ Rist, p. 9.

²⁴ Horowitz, p. 52.

²⁵ Humphrey, p. 29.

We have seen that the idea of the Syndicalist general strike contains within itself the whole of proletarian Socialism; not only are all its real elements found therein, but they are moreover grouped in the same way as in social struggles, and their movements are exactly those proper to their nature. It would be impossible to find any image which could be contrasted with the proletarian conception of it as represented by the general strike.²⁶

Langer's typology of the myth as discussed above, does appear to be descriptive of the myth itself. However, her characteristics seem to be in stasis or without movement; which is totally alien to the myth of Plato or Sorel. Praxis within the myth would appear to be the ideal category to add because it would create a dynamic level for Langer's delineation of the myth. The praxical concept is intimately related to Plato and Sorel, if not all makers of political myths because the purpose of the myth is to take understanding out of the intellectual realm and move it into the dimension of action.

The praxical mood is reflected in the Platonic dialogues because all of the myths are concerned with a dialectical mode which combines thought with action or a transcendental focus between form and reality.²⁷ Plato uses the myth as a vehicle to communicate his concept of moral action, and moral action cannot be separated from thought. Right thought for the Greeks cannot be described from right action—there simply is no distinction between "can" and "will". Therefore, for Plato if a man thought moral thoughts he could not help but act upon them. "Since the world constitutes being-in-becoming (for Plato), it is not the ultimate reality," writes John Gunnell,

and the types of knowledge and accounts belonging to it are also not ultimate; the forms are apprehended by intellection while of the world there is only true belief or trust . . . the dialogue attempts not only to give an account of the construction of the universe but to tell about 'the gods and the generation of the universe' and to render the truth of the creation and describe how things in the world strive toward the good and have come to possess rational order. This is possible only through myth which is neither intellection nor opinion.²⁸

The gist of this quotation is that the myth, because it is praxical, obtains a certainty which is impossible through normal intellect or opinion. It is objective because it gives opinion which can be understood without

²⁶ Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, N. Y., 1912, p. 177.

²⁷ Wild, *Plato's Theory of Man*, pp. 205-206.

²⁸ Gunnell, p. 188.

reason and outlines moral imperatives which are accepted due to a radical freedom which holds the responsibility of right action; in the sense that the myth is free because it responds to the particular value systems.

Sorel's praxis comes from a basic understanding of Marx's thought and a vehement rejection of the bastardization of praxis in the Marxist thought of his day. Myth is an interpretation of reality because "the myth is an expression of will," explains Humphrey, "and the ends are significant not in themselves but only because action is governed by them *as if* they were a true representation of reality."²⁹ But within this reality man is again only free in action, "and the sterility of modern civilization, the impotence of man, is due to a lack of forms or myths suitable for the expression of the common will."³⁰ The myth brings the praxical elements to man where he can unite his will and his action; and this is why Sorel sees man free only within a societal myth.

Praxis, as a dimension of the myth, allows man to escape from the aesthetic values and to use the aesthetic in a material way:

Le jugement moral est, le plus souvent, mêlé à des jugements esthétiques; il ne saurait l'ailleurs exister sans ceux-ci, car il pré-suppose que toute activité a été provoquée par une détermination raisonnée.³¹

Sorel used his irrationalism to establish a praxical, active radicalism which was based on "the superiority of the myth of projective impressions over critical judgment."³²

The problem with which both Sorel and Plato are trying to deal is how do we make men act politically in their own interests? The myth becomes the key to this motivation because it tells men how to become politically heroic. It is Camus who brings the romantic movement of the nineteenth century into focus by illuminating the grandeur of the spirit of rebellion—it makes liberty synonymous with rebellion.³³ However, Plato, in a more limited form, saw it as the attempt to give the attributes of the gods to common men. This heresy is *the* necessary political step. It is the move to take religiosity out of the heavens and give it to man. It is man who acts politically and the myth is the vehicle which convinces him that he can act. For Sorel, heroism takes the form of collective action. It is the myth which allows workers to stand together and cope with the concept of the general strike. Heroism is the

²⁹ Humphrey, p. 11.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³¹ Georges Sorel, *Matériaux d'une Théorie du Proletariat*, Paris, 1929, p. 195.

³² Horowitz, p. 2.

³³ Cf. Albert Camus, *The Rebel*, N. Y., 1956, pp. 140-148.

essential psychological element of the myth because man is always afraid of the liberty an activity can afford him. The uncertainty of liberty is the same uncertainty involved in death—the infinitude of possibility. The myth must fill that void or else no political movement can take place.

Plato believed that each individual had the ability to cope with liberty by making him become heroic, radical, in terms of his own interests. Sorel did not have that sort of confidence in the individual, and, following in the tradition of Rousseau's general will, found the possibility of liberty most promising in terms of collective action. But, the idea of heroism is essential in the myths of both authors. The ability to convince the common man to become uncommon is the essence of revolution. And Plato and Sorel found it the essential element into the transformation of the "common" state to the rule of the philosopher king or socialism. This is an aspect of political myth which is avoided by most philosophers dealing with myth. Yet it is the crux of the political myth, because the political myth must go beyond rhetoric and into activity.

Both Plato and Georges Sorel used the myth as a device to communicate and reify political idea for the common man. The point of this paper was to show that there are four distinct dimensions of the myth, based on Susan Langer's original typology of three, in which the writings of Plato and Sorel can be analyzed. Admittedly, this paper is far too brief to go into the full depth required to analyze each of the authors. But, it is a demonstration as to the value of such an inquiry. The praxical category is especially important because it takes into account human action which both of the authors perceived as manifest. Although Plato and Sorel used the myth for different purposes, it appears that they used it in the same way. Plato was attempting to instill morality and Sorel was trying to incite revolution. But both were striving to obtain a theoretical base to human freedom.

This revision of Langer's original typology presents an interesting question: Do all political myths have a praxical dimension? If this question can be affectively answered it would radically change philosophical thinking about such authors as Fredrich Nietzsche and Rousseau. However, this is far beyond the scope of this paper. What has been demonstrated is that both Plato and Sorel used the myth as a method for communication and they also understood the myth in the same way, i.e., as a political device. The myth becomes a radical form of empiricism, giving both a theory of history and an ethical mode. In the myths of Plato and Sorel understanding comes neither from pedantics nor force, but rather from myth.