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THE MYTH OF THE LAST JUDGMENT IN THE *GORGIAS*

ALESSANDRA FUSSI

I

AT THE END OF A VERY LONG DISCUSSION with interlocutors who grow angrier and angrier with him, Socrates tells a story about the judgment of souls in the afterlife. He addresses the myth to Callicles, his final interlocutor, in the explicitly stated belief that the young man will not take it any more seriously than he would take a bunch of old wives' tales.¹ Socrates' prophecy about Callicles' response is likely to be correct. What is surprising, however, is that it also turns out to describe well the reaction of many readers of the dialogue. Plato scholars pay no attention whatsoever to the myth, at most devoting a few pages to Plato's sources. Does he rely on Orphic sources, or is he closer to the Pythagoreans? Once such problems are addressed, the myth is summarily dismissed.

I find this myth very interesting. In it, Socrates describes a transformation of the human condition with respect to death. We learn that foreknowledge of death, which the mortals possessed in the age of Kronos, had been transformed by Zeus into the awareness of an unpredictable death. Correlatively, what is to count as a proper judgment of the soul receives a new definition. I want to discuss how issues such as awareness of death, truth and appearance, and surface and depth are subtly interwoven in the myth and raise fundamental questions about what it is to know the soul.

Socrates' myth begins at 523a4 and ends at 524a8. At 524a9 Socrates says that this is what he heard and believes to be true. He adds: "and from these stories, on my reckoning, we must draw some such moral as this." Socrates' considerations on the myth are much longer than the myth itself. While the myth describes the passage from the

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¹Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Walter R. M. Lamb (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1925), 527a5–b3.

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time of Kronos to that of Zeus, Socrates' considerations concern the judgment of the soul after the event in the time of Zeus. The myth tells a story and is mainly concerned with events. Socrates' considerations illustrate the consequences of these events for mankind. I will first analyze the myth and then turn to Socrates' discussion.

II

The myth concerns the final judgment of the dead in the afterlife, which determines who is to be sent to Tartarus and who to the Isles of the Blessed. According to Socrates, when Zeus took over his reign from his father, Kronos, he decided to put an end to the injustice that had characterized judgments in that age. Fairly often those who had wicked souls and had lived an unjust life ended up being sent to the Isles of the Blessed, while those who had lived a just and holy life were sent to Tartarus. According to Zeus, there were two reasons for these mistakes. First, human beings knew in advance when their last day would come. Second, the judges who decided the fate of the living were themselves still alive.

The first reason given by Zeus, foreknowledge of death, made it possible for mortals to prepare for their last trial well in advance. The second, the fact of being judged while still living and by living judges, made it especially easy for those who had wicked souls to rely on appearance as the best means of self-defense: "many who have wicked souls are clad in fair bodies and ancestry and wealth, and at their judgment appear many witnesses to testify that their lives have been just."²

In response Zeus takes three measures. First, Prometheus is ordered to deprive the mortals of any foreknowledge of their last day. Second, the last judgment must occur when the mortals are stripped bare of all things, thus not on their last day of life, but after they are dead. Third, the judges are supposed to be dead as well. The ornament provided by the body of the mortals, which in the age of Kronos prevented a direct look into their souls, is taken away from them. Correlatively, the eyes and ears of the judges, liable to be charmed by the impressive theater of wealth, ancestry, and witnesses brought

² *Gorgias* 523c5–9.

about by the wicked, are eliminated. A human soul, divested of all impediments and bereft of its body, is put in absolute proximity to the naked soul of the judge, itself stripped of the clothing provided by the living body. Zeus appoints as judges his own sons: two from Asia, Minos and Rhadamanthus, and one from Europe, Aeacus. Once dead, Rhadamanthus will judge the dead souls from Asia, Aeacus those from Europe, while Minos will have the privilege of a final judgment if the other two are at a loss about anything.

The ancient commentator Olympiodorus differentiates the three eschatological myths of the *Phaedo*, the *Republic*, and the *Gorgias* as follows: “there [that is, in the *Phaedo*] he is discoursing about the places [of correction], while in the *Republic* about the judged, and here [that is, in the *Gorgias*] about the judges who render the verdict.”³ However, the myth of the *Gorgias* can hardly be said to focus on the judges only. Actually, an important aspect of the myth is that it brings to light the interdependence of judging and being judged. To a certain kind of divine judgment in the age of Kronos there corresponds a specific attitude of the mortals under judgment. Correlatively, the age of Zeus transforms both sides of the judgment by setting specific requirements both for the newly appointed judges and for the mortals under trial. In this sense, the myth describes the development of humanity as well as that of the gods. This, however, creates a problem with respect to the authority of the divine over the human realm. Human laws can receive a divine sanction insofar as divine laws are not touched by transience and convention. When we consider divine ordinances from the point of view of their albeit mythical history, the distance between the divine and the human is dramatically lessened and the former’s authority over the latter can be questioned.

Actually, at 523a6–b4 Socrates points out that the time of Kronos and that of Zeus are unified by a law that runs throughout the two ages, unmodified by the events just mentioned. This law, which holds among the gods, concerns mankind. It prescribes that every man who has spent a just and pious life departs after death to the Isles of the Blessed, dwells there in all happiness, and is exempt from evil.

³ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato’s “Gorgias,”* translated with full notes by Robin Jackson, Kimon Lycos, and Harold Tarrant (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), lecture 46, section 9 (subsequent references will be given as 46.9, for example). On the three eschatological myths see Julia Annas, “Plato’s Myths of Judgment,” *Phronesis* 27 (1982): 119–43.

Whoever has lived unjustly and impiously goes to Tartarus, a place of requital and penance. The law covers both human and divine duties. As Olympiodorus points out, someone lives justly (δικαίως) in relation to his fellow human beings. He lives piously (ὀσίως) insofar as he discharges his duties toward the gods.⁴

Socrates says that this law was operative during Kronos' time, and that "still to this day" it holds among the gods (ἤν οὖν νόμος ὅδε περὶ ἀνθρώπων ἐπὶ Κρόνου, καὶ αἰεὶ καὶ νῦν ἔτι ἔστιν ἐν θεοῖς). This particular law, as opposed to others, survived two ages of divine rule. It is not said to be eternal or altogether timeless. However, since it not only regulates mankind's fate in the afterlife but does so by binding together the divine and the human, it is significantly contrasted with laws which can undergo change. Socrates does not say who promulgated it. Dodds maintains that ἐν θεοῖς "marks the law as a divine ordinance."⁵ Since the context tells us that Zeus is going to change the laws he inherited from Kronos, this interpretation lends itself to the objection that divine ordinances are as subject to change as human laws. From the mutability of human laws someone like Callicles can draw the conclusion that they are but mere conventions, and are therefore not authoritative at all. The authority of a law cannot be entirely rooted in its being promulgated by gods because, as their all too human struggles indicate, gods may want different things at different times. *Mutatis mutandis*, here we face the same problem highlighted in the *Euthyphro*: either divine laws are good because they are promulgated by gods, or divine laws, although promulgated by gods, owe their goodness to something independent of the gods' will. Hence even gods must bow before something higher than their mere will.

Olympiodorus seems to be aware of the problem. He uses this passage to play down the role that the myth ascribes to the development from one kind of divine rule to the other. He writes: "it has been said frequently that of the divine realm one says neither 'was' nor 'will be', since 'was' has gone by and no longer exists, and 'will be' is incomplete and does not yet exist. But it is not possible to conceive of either of these in the divine realm. So neither 'was' nor 'will be' is said of it, but always 'is'. It is because Plato introduces this subject in the

⁴ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* 47.9.

⁵ Eric R. Dodds, *Plato. Gorgias. A Revised Text with Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 377.

form of a myth that he says 'was', to give the myth a setting. But since the myth is not poetic but philosophical, he also introduces 'always is'.⁶

One would expect this comment to introduce the usual Neoplatonic reading of philosophical myths as metaphysical or theological allegories. However, Olympiodorus' move in this case is surprising and illuminating. He does not stress permanence over transience just to save Plato from the charge of subjecting the divine realm to the imperfection of time. Instead of reading the age of Kronos and the age of Zeus as expressions of eternal metaphysical truths, he reads the two mythical ages as representatives of two permanent human possibilities. According to Olympiodorus, the age of Kronos and the age of Zeus are not successive stages: they represent two modalities of judgment always available to humans. Kronos and Zeus do not project us in a world beyond the world: rather, they help us understand what we do when we judge others in this world. The possibilities they represent are human, not divine, and permanent, not just contingent upon history.⁷

Let us consider the two modalities of judgment exemplified in the myth. The age of Kronos is characterized by a specific attitude toward death and, correlatively, by a specific understanding of judgment. Zeus discovers that neither human beings nor their judges know how to separate what is interior to the human being from what is exterior, since judgments are made on the basis of external, bodily attributes. Death, the separation of body and soul, is irrelevant in the time of Kronos. Nature follows its own course, separating body and soul at death, and it will continue to do so after Zeus' intervention. Yet neither Kronos' judges nor the mortals under trial act as if death and its symbolic function, separation, had any bearing on judging and being judged. It

⁶ Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* 47.8. Along the same lines is Terence Irwin's note to 523a: "'There was this rule, (*nomos*)'. Socrates replies to Callicles' attack on *nomos* as merely the result of weak people's conspiring against nature; the *nomos* endorsing justice and rejecting injustice is both eternal and natural, recognized by the gods"; Plato, *Gorgias*, translated with notes by Terence Irwin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 242.

⁷ "The myth says that long ago the judges were [clothed] in bodies, but now are naked, and that long ago the judgments were bad, but now are good. Note the distinction, but observe that it does make it *as a story*, since in reality, as I shall demonstrate, there are always naked judges and always embodied ones, and there are always bad judgments and always excellent ones"; Olympiodorus, *Commentary on Plato's Gorgias* 48.1.

would be tempting to read the age of Kronos as a golden age, a childhood of humanity in which the mortals are spared any knowledge of death. They live in a joyful condition of plenitude, experience a perfect unity of body and soul, and therefore anticipate their last judgment as taking place “with clothes on.” The horror of the separation of body and soul has not yet shattered their condition. However, according to Socrates, the mortals in the age of Kronos are not ignorant of death. Actually, they know more about it than their progeny in the age of Zeus will be allowed to know. They have foreknowledge of death, and not just, as the mortals in the age of Zeus, awareness of an unpredictable death. If they know the day in which they are supposed to die, they probably conceive of death as a terrifying event. Precisely for this reason they try to muster their witnesses, so that their judges may be deceived.

Fear of death is not necessarily the same as awareness of death. Fear is the emotional anticipation of events that can strike us while we are living: we fear earthquakes, sicknesses, and so on. However, death is not just one such event. I experience earthquakes, while I do not experience my own death, since experience entails my being present after the event. I am afraid of earthquakes because I know that death can strike me unexpectedly. An earthquake can be anticipated in my mind as an experience I will remember. However, fear tells me that behind what appears to be a possible, determinate experience of mine lurks the possibility of the end of all experience. Death is unpredictable and faceless: it is the indeterminateness hidden behind all the determinate events of my life. In this respect Socrates’ description of the age of Kronos suggests that if death is feared as just one of many events, then what is really terrible, namely the loss of all experience in the sudden separation of body and soul, is denied by the mortals and fantasized as something they can control. The age of Kronos knows death, but denies its meaning by interpreting death as just one of many objects of fear. This is why the mortals in the age of Kronos treat their last trial as if it were like any other earthly trial.

By taking away foreknowledge of death, Zeus allows the mortals to become aware of the fundamental quality of death: unexpectedness. Although we can see other human beings being born, grow, mature, and reach old age, death is not really the natural completion of our life since it does not have to wait for us to grow old. It is indifferent to our being physically or mentally mature. It is not just an ab-

stract possibility for human beings in general but my own possibility. Awareness of death in the age of Zeus goes together with awareness of separation. In the face of death I am alone: all my appendages—body, wealth, ancestry, witnesses—cannot protect me.

In the age of Kronos death may be feared, but, as the myth indicates, several aspects of death are thereby made irrelevant. The age of Zeus tells me that death is unexpected. In the face of death I am powerless, since I cannot prevent my body from decaying, and I am alone. In the age of Kronos death is a terrible event, yet still an event of life. I will be judged while my body and soul have not yet undergone separation. I am not really alone: my witnesses cover me up, protect me from sight. I am mingled with others, who are in charge of saying who I am. Even during my last judgment I do not speak in my own voice. In the eyes of my judges I am what others say I am.

Socrates intends to indicate with this myth that his interlocutors in the dialogue are still members of the age of Kronos. Consider the beginning of the dialogue. Socrates arrives unexpectedly and late, when Gorgias, surrounded by all his followers, is applauded for the fine rhetorical display he has just performed. The famous rhetorician says that nobody has asked him anything new in many years.⁸ He claims he has an answer to whatever questions one may ask. However, Socrates will refute Gorgias, seemingly by asking him unexpected questions. The metaphor of being covered by clothes (the verbs employed are ἀπέχω, ἀμφιέννυμι, and προκαλύπτω), which pervades the myth, echoes Socrates' invitation to Gorgias at 460a: "by Zeus, as you promised just now, draw aside the veil (ἀποκαλύψας) and tell us what the power of rhetoric really is."

In the myth the witnesses who come to help those on trial clearly refer the reader back to Socrates' criticism of rhetoric at 471e3–472d2.⁹ In that passage, Socrates claims that Polus is trying to refute him rhetorically, as if he were in a law court, by producing many reputable witnesses for the statements he wants to make. But, Socrates maintains, "this sort of refutation is quite worthless for getting at the truth."¹⁰ In the law courts someone may be crushed by false witnesses who appear to be of some worth, and still be innocent. Besides

⁸ *Gorgias* 448a1–3.

⁹ See also *Gorgias* 475e–476a.

¹⁰ *Gorgias* 471e9.

criticizing the procedures of Athenian law courts, Socrates, in the myth as well as in the exchange with Polus, questions Polus' attitude: he is fundamentally uninterested in truth because he relies completely on the reputation and number of his witnesses, who protect him from any serious questioning. When Socrates says that the agreement of just one person would be sufficient proof of truth for him, he is not merely restricting the number of sufficient witnesses. This would be absurd, since the consent of someone who has no inkling of truth would hardly be of help. Rather, he is criticizing the parasitic attitude of a mind that needs witnesses first and foremost and, for this very reason, cannot think by itself.

A simple way to characterize the difference between the two attitudes is to consider that for Socrates thinking requires awareness that truth is independent of the mind. The thinker knows that truth owes its being neither to the thinker nor to a collection of thinkers (the many reputable witnesses). While the thinker is nourished by truth, truth would in no way be affected by the destruction of all thinkers. The search for truth presupposes that we accept this asymmetrical relation. The myth suggests that the recognition of our powerlessness with respect to death, and the admission that death is beyond our control, opens us up to truth because it removes the fundamental emotional obstacle to truth: our denial of the unexpected. In other words, those trapped in the age of Kronos are prey to appearance, always dependent on others, and fundamentally hostile to authentic questioning because truth, like death, is beyond their control, and they do all they can to deny it. Gorgias and Polus are still the members of the age of Kronos insofar as they replace the search for truth with the exclusive adherence to appearance.

We may wonder why Socrates associates his interlocutors' endorsement of appearance with the assertion of omnipotence typical of the age of Kronos. Let us consider the difference between truth and appearance with respect to the thinker. While truth is essentially indifferent to the existence of the thinker, the destruction of all thinkers would obviously entail the destruction of appearance as well. Appearance is always for a thinker. From a subjective standpoint, while truth is totally indifferent to me, and is a reminder of my mortality, appearance glorifies my existence, no matter whether I am a mere spectator or a producer of images for the gratification of others. Of course I can manipulate appearance, while I cannot manipulate truth. Both

as a spectator and as a producer of appearance I can assert my own existence over against the indifference of truth and the unpredictability of death. It is for this reason—ultimately an emotional reason—that appearance can lose its natural connection with truth and exercise its spell. By promising each other freedom from the external power of truth, spectators and producers of appearance are constantly gratifying each other, thereby reassuring and exalting the sense of their own existence. As Socrates suggests, for someone like Polus this has become the exclusive mode of thinking; he can no longer tell the difference between answering a question and giving a eulogy.¹¹ For the dwellers of the age of Kronos, as well as for their representatives in the dialogue, life is shaped by the dream that appearance makes us masters of our own lives. With respect to this dream, human beings are witnesses among witnesses in a world they can shape at their will.¹²

Of course Socrates is not claiming that we can do without witnesses, but their function in the philosophical search for truth is not constitutive of truth, as it is in the case of Gorgias and Polus. Socrates claims that witnesses should assist us in the independent search for a truth we deem separate from each of us. This entails a separation of our mind from that of others and a movement from what appears to be

¹¹ *Gorgias* 448e–49a.

¹² See Wilfred R. Bion, *Attention and Interpretation: A Scientific Approach to Insight in Psychoanalysis and Groups* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1970), 97–105. Bion analyzes the relationship that holds between thinker and truth on the one hand and thinker and lie on the other. He makes a similar point when he claims that “the difference between a true thought and a lie consists in the fact that a thinker is logically necessary for the lie but not for the true thought. Nobody need think the true thought: it awaits the advent of the thinker who achieves significance through the true thought. The lie and the thinker are inseparable. The thinker is of no consequence to the truth, but the truth is logically necessary to the thinker. His significance depends on whether or not he will entertain the thought, but the thought remains unaltered. In contrast, the lie gains existence by virtue of the epistemologically prior existence of the liar. The only thoughts to which a thinker is absolutely essential are lies. . . . The need for each individual to claim his contribution to the thought as unique and essential differentiates the emotional climate from that in which the inevitability of the thought and the unimportance of the individual who harbors it do not gratify the narcissism of the individual and therefore lack emotional appeal. Work that corroborates the discovery of others has a lack of appeal. Even if it requires a thinker it does not require a *particular* thinker and in this resembles truths—thoughts that require no thinker”; 102–5.

true to what is true in itself. In this process we may be often proven wrong. Socrates also suggests that the solitude of thinking is replaced by Polus, and similarly by all those who belong to the age of Kronos, with the reciprocal gratification provided by being the members of a group. Since truth is replaced by appearance, witnesses of what appears to be the case are all one needs: because there are witnesses, there is truth. And since truth has no independent status, persuasion is everything. To express this in yet another way, people in the age of Kronos are, literally, full of themselves. Foreknowledge of death allows them to live in the illusion that nothing can be surprising, nothing can strike them unexpectedly. They can do everything, they can answer all questions. Nor are their judges going to surprise them: never having died, still belonging to the age of Kronos, they are likely to ratify the mortals' understanding of themselves.

Let us now consider what humans lose and what they gain from the changes introduced by Zeus. When foreknowledge is taken away, everything is not lost. Human beings still know something; they are not made completely ignorant by their loss. What they know, however, is that their death will strike them unexpectedly (*ἐξαίφνης*). At that point they will be separated from all they have on earth: fair bodies, wealth, noble ancestry. If I realize that at some unpredictable point in my life all that I have will be taken away, my perception of myself is not likely to be that of an undifferentiated unity. I am still one with my body; yet I know that my body is somehow different from me. Knowledge that I am going to die insinuates separation within my perception of my own wholeness. I begin to perceive that I have a soul, that my soul is not the same as my body, that other people have souls too, and that what they appear to be is not necessarily what they are. My own interiority becomes a mystery to me. How can I be one, and still be many?¹³ What is interiority, after all? Is it the true unity upon which I can rely when saying "this is me!" once and for all? Not really, since even this unity seems to give way to multiplicity as soon as I inspect it: am I my reason, my desires, my inclinations, or all of them together? Am I a natural being or rather the result of my nature plus all that I do during my life? Is it my soul that I am, or is it my soul that I have?¹⁴ If I cling to my body and to all its worldly extensions in order to preserve my unity, my judges will prove me wrong. They are supposed to look at my very soul with their very souls. Witnesses are no longer the artificial extensions of my own self. What I lack, they

cannot give me back completely. I lose my dependency on witnesses when I lose foreknowledge of death. I begin to think by myself.

Human beings are now open to truth. At the same time, however, Zeus' mention of Prometheus suggests something more than that. If human beings feel that they are incomplete animals, if they truly realize that they are naked, their capacity to think goes together with their awareness that they need to take care of themselves. They lose a feeling of omnipotence while gaining a feeling of their own power. Zeus claims that Prometheus "has already been given word" to take away foreknowledge from human beings. Commentators have rightly been struck by this report. As was well known to Plato's contemporaries, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* gives quite a different version of the event. Not only did "the tyrant of Heaven," as Prometheus calls Zeus,¹⁵ never order him to do this, but when Prometheus, on his own

¹³ Even in the *Parmenides*, which looks most abstract and dry, we can find an echo of what it is for the soul to have or lose unity. See, for example, *Parmenides* 164c9–5, where the others than one, if the one is not, will appear unified if considered in groups, but then each one of them, even the smallest bit, will dissolve into an infinite fragmentation when considered by itself, as can happen to the object of a dream. As to the *Gorgias*, the question of the unity of the soul is expressed most enigmatically at 482b8–c3: "It would be better for me that my lyre or a chorus I directed should be out of tune and loud with discord, and that multitudes of men should disagree with me, rather than I, being one, should be out of harmony with myself and contradict me (μάλλον ἢ ἓνα ὄντα ἐμὲ ἑμαυτῷ ἀσύμφωνον εἶναι καὶ ἐναντία λέγειν)." Hannah Arendt observes that this statement is highly paradoxical: "Socrates talks of being one and therefore not being able to risk getting out of harmony with himself. But nothing that is identical with itself, truly and absolutely One, as A is A, can be either in or out of harmony with itself; you always need at least two tones to produce a harmonious sound"; Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 185. She maintains that Socrates discovers the essence of thought in this being two-in-one. "But again," she continues, "it is not the thinking activity that constitutes the unity, unifies the two-in-one; on the contrary, the two-in-one become One again when the outside world intrudes upon the thinker and cuts short the thinking process. . . . Thinking, existentially speaking, is a solitary but not a lonely business; solitude is that human situation in which I keep myself company. Loneliness comes about when I am alone without being able to split up into the two-in-one, without being able to keep myself company"; *The Life of the Mind*, 185.

¹⁴ At *Gorgias* 479b8–10 Socrates speaks of "how much more wretched than lack of health in the body it is to live together with a soul (ψυχῆ συνοικεῖν) that is not healthy, but corrupt, unjust and unholy." At 523c5–6 Zeus speaks of "many who have wicked souls (ψυχὰς πονεράς ἔχοντες)." At 523e, as Dodds notes, "the soul to be judged has become the person to be judged, owing to the interposition of ἐκάστου"; Dodds, *Gorgias*, 378.

¹⁵ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, 224: "ὁ τῶν θεῶν τύραννος."

initiative, deprives the mortals of the foreknowledge of their appointed death and gives them fire, he is heavily punished by Zeus. He goes against Zeus to help the mortals. The chorus asks him: "Of what sort was the medicine (φάρμακον) you did find for this illness?" Prometheus answers: "I caused blind hopes to dwell within their breasts."¹⁶ Is it not strange that the two gifts Prometheus bestows on the mortals almost look to be opposites? Fire evokes light, while blindness evokes obscurity. The human condition, the way it is transformed by Aeschylus' Prometheus, comes to be marked by two contradictory, yet inescapable aspects. What is lost in foreknowledge is gained in hope. Fire gives a meaning to life in that it illuminates it against a background of obscurity. Besides bringing light, fire brings warmth to the naked animal and preserves it from nature's indifference or utter hostility. In Socrates' myth Zeus does not mention blind hopes. Yet what he says is contained *in nuce* in Aeschylus' Prometheus: the self-understanding of human incompleteness, in its inextricable mixture of knowledge and ignorance, allows for knowledge of the soul and right judgment.

However, Socrates' Zeus does not act out of love for mortals. His actions seem rather dictated by his role as ruler: he wants his realm to function differently from and better than his father's. Here we need to understand a peculiarity of Socrates' myth which I have not yet considered. If we look at the myth as a whole, we can see that Socrates modifies in three ways the tradition to which, at the same time, he appeals. He says that Zeus and his brothers "received" the realm from their father and then divided it among themselves. In doing this he appeals to Homer's authority, but he entirely drops any mention of Zeus' violent struggle with his father. He ignores *Iliad* 14.203, not to mention Hesiod, *Theogony* 629. On the other hand, when he speaks of Prometheus, the reader cannot but be reminded of Zeus' violent overthrowing of Kronos, which is spoken of at length in Aeschylus' *Prometheus' Bound*. If we then consider the passage from the *Iliad* which Socrates actually quotes,¹⁷ we can see that Poseidon mentions the division of Kronos' realm among his sons in the context of a violent struggle with Zeus, who is threatening to attack and destroy him unless he submits to his will. In sum, Socrates evokes violence in the

¹⁶ *Prometheus Bound*, 251–2.

¹⁷ *Iliad* 15.187.

reader's mind on three occasions without directly referring to it. The tradition Socrates evokes tells us that Zeus did not receive his realm from his father but seized it violently. It reports that the brothers who divided Kronos' realm among themselves are far from reconciled as being equal in rank. Prometheus, in turn, is said by Aeschylus to have acted against Zeus' will and not at all in obedience to his orders.

What can we make out of these oblique indications? We are told of actions that break with a tradition, and as a result of all these actions separation is placed at the core of the mortals' self-understanding. The myth evokes, and yet does not explicitly dwell on, the shadow that haunts separation: violence. This is a trivial truth if we consider it in political terms. Revolutions are exemplary instances of separation. An older age is brought to its conclusion while a new age is brought to life. The transition from one age to another can be taken to symbolize the mixture of negation and assertion which is entailed by any beginning. It is obvious to anybody who seriously considers revolution that the kind of negation it involves takes the form of violence. Reason alone, or even reason associated with persuasion, is not enough to generate a new political order. However, Plato, who is a revolutionary thinker, rarely refers openly to the violence that would be necessary to bring about the new order which he apparently advocates as utterly just. In the myth of last judgment Plato is not advocating political revolution. Yet he indicates that what holds true for revolutions also holds true for human thinking. If Zeus had been the son Kronos had wanted him to be, he would never have fought against his father. Hence he would never have become king of the gods.

We know that Kronos would devour his own children. This is a violent enough behavior. Yet it is a violence of a kind different from that employed by Zeus. By devouring his children Kronos subtracts both himself and them from time. Devouring is a most elementary way to eliminate separation. If we move from the concrete level of the myth to its symbolic function, we can imagine an archaic state of mind that works precisely in this way. Whatever the mind generates threatens its completeness. Nothing can be allowed to begin, nothing can really be surprising. No process is linear: Kronos moves in a perfect cycle of generation and destruction. Before they are strong enough to rebel, his children are attracted back to him and swallowed. Kronos' truth is not only that human beings are unable to escape nature's circularity, but also that they are merely natural beings. Zeus' truth is

that human beings are something more (or, from another perspective, something less) than just natural beings. Zeus' fight with his father institutes separation. Zeus asserts himself at the same time as he negates his total dependency on Kronos. Aeschylus' Prometheus does something similar with Zeus. Plato does something similar with the literary and philosophical tradition which precedes him. In sum, we can say that the myth speaks of the mixture of affirmation and negation necessary to the human mind in order for thinking to be possible. In thinking, the mind separates itself from chthonic forces and acquires freedom.

Separation from the continuity and circularity of nature, as we have seen, is made possible by our acceptance of the unexpectedness of death. In the age of Kronos we are never alone, we think we can control our last trial and manipulate our judges. In the age of Zeus we are aware that we cannot control death. It will strike us unexpectedly, isolate us from others, and shatter whatever set identity we may have gained through our intercourse with social conventions. If we are open to the unexpected we know that we are not omnipotent and, more generally, we know that we do not know. Solitude, openness to the unexpected, awareness of the human limitations are the characteristics of philosophy exemplified by Socrates in Plato's dialogues. The myth tells us that these characteristics are not just mere idiosyncrasies of Socrates: they are the result of a revolution that changes the human condition as well as its own self-understanding. However, one problem remains. We have seen that, according to Zeus, correct judgment of the soul requires the souls of the mortals to be deprived of their witnesses as well as of all bodily appendages. Is Socrates suggesting that Zeus' sons, Rhadamanthus, Aeacus, and Minos, are to be the afterlife substitutes of earthly witnesses? What does Socrates mean by correct judgment of the soul? Is he conceiving a trial in which the essence of the soul can be grasped once and for all? These questions lead us beyond the myth to Socrates' discussion of it.

III

After claiming that this is what he has heard and believes to be true, Socrates proceeds to explain what consequences he draws from the story. His reflections dwell on a more abstract level, and in this

sense we can say that he offers an interpretation of the myth. He moves from a mythical past (presented as a story he heard from someone else) toward a mythical present (told in his own voice). He assumes that Zeus' decisions have now become law and tells us what the new appointed judges, having already gone through their own death, actually do when they judge the dead.

Socrates' discussion of the myth begins with the observation that when a man dies, soul and body are disconnected from each other.¹⁸ When they are disconnected, "each of them keeps its own condition very much as it was when the man was alive, the body having its own nature, with its treatments and experiences all manifest upon it."¹⁹ At death the same will be true of the soul: "when a man's soul is stripped bare of the body, all its natural gifts, and the experiences added to that soul as the result of its various pursuits, are manifest in it."²⁰ When the souls arrive before Rhadamanthus, who is in charge of judging the souls from Asia, he will set them in front of him and examine them without knowing to whom they belonged in life. While beholding with his soul the soul of the Great King, Rhadamanthus does not know that it belongs to the Great King: "whenever the judge Rhadamanthus has to deal with such a one, he knows nothing else of him at all, neither who he is nor of what descent, but only that he is a wicked person."²¹

How is this possible? How can the soul present to the judge the signs of past actions, which are thus visible upon it, if these actions cannot be identified as the actions of the Great King? Death seems to work as an equalizer: every soul is naked, vulnerable, unable to hide itself from sight. Does this imply that whatever one happens to be in life—a doctor, a slave, a king, a sophist, a philosopher—is inessential when one really wants to know the soul? In this case the condition of being naked would indicate a complete severance of the true nature of humans from the histories of their lives. Is it not during a life that one becomes a doctor instead of, say, a rogue or a king? And is not what one becomes the result of the interplay between one's natural gifts and volitions and the many determinations brought about by the world where one lives? If one's social condition counts for nothing in the true judgment of the soul, then life on earth is reduced to mere

¹⁸ *Gorgias* 524b2–4.

¹⁹ *Gorgias* 524b5–9.

²⁰ *Gorgias* 524d5–8.

²¹ *Gorgias* 526b5–8.

illusion. Appearance points to nothing, it means nothing: what one is, is defined by nature.

If we look more closely at the text we can see that Socrates' presentation of Zeus' decision is ambiguous. True, Rhadamanthus does not know that the Great King is the Great King when he sees his soul. However, Socrates also says that Rhadamanthus, once dead, is put in charge of judging the souls of people from Asia, while Aeacus will try those from Europe, and Minos will have the privilege of final decisions when the other two are in doubt. However naked, the souls who present themselves still maintain a characteristic which does not belong to nature. They are tried by different judges on the basis of their different places of origin. What the Great King did in Asia may be seen in a different light from the same actions performed by someone who lived in Europe. Culture and custom play a role in judgment; they are not as easily disposable as clothes that can be stripped away from one's soul. If the latter were the case, it would hardly be comprehensible how Socrates could have Zeus assert that the soul of the dead manifests not only its natural gifts (τά τε τῆς φύσεως), but also the experiences (τὰ παθήματα) added to that soul as the result of its various actions (ἅ διὰ τὴν ἐπιτήδεισιν ἐκάστου πράγματος ἔσχεν).

The problem, however, remains. As we have seen, Zeus declares that the trials are being judged badly because the living are still in charge of judging the living. Being alive means to have one's soul covered by clothes. Among the clothes Zeus lists are fair bodies, ancestry, and wealth.²² Along with all their kinship, those to be tried need to leave on earth all of that ornament.²³ This reference to ornament becomes puzzling in this new perspective. Is it a particular kind of ornament (fair bodies, ancestry, wealth), or is it ornament altogether that precludes knowledge of the soul's condition? By requiring both the judges and those to be judged to be naked, does Socrates imply that truth is reachable only on the condition that it be deprived of any ornament? If this is so, is it always clear where the limit lies between the "naked truth" and the ornaments of which it can be bereft?²⁴ If an-

²² *Gorgias* 523c6–7.

²³ *Gorgias* 523e7: "πάντα ἐκείνον τὸν κόσμον."

²⁴ Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigmen zu einer Metapherologie*, in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, vol. 6 (Bonn: Bouvier und Co., 1960) analyzes several occurrences of the metaphor of the "naked truth" in the history of philosophy. However, he does not take into account Plato's *Gorgias*.

cestry plays the role of an ornament, in what sense do we have to understand that one's ethnic or geographic origin are not to be counted as ornaments? It seems to me that a clear-cut separation between truth and ornament cannot be reached. Human beings, precisely because left naked by nature, make themselves what they are. We may think that they express their own nature in the choices they make and in the way they carry them out. This does not mean, however, that their nature can be disrobed of everything as a body from its clothes. In the attempt to divest a soul of all its clothing one is faced with an infinite regress. What one is likely to reach is not nature but rather a continuously recurring mixture of nature with something else.

Let us look more closely at Socrates' image and ask again: how can the soul of the Great King visibly present the signs of past actions, if these actions cannot be identified as the actions of the Great King? We can notice first that Socrates does not say that Rhadamanthus will see the Great King's past actions. What Rhadamanthus is allowed to see is the condition of his soul and, in the form of wounds and scars, the effects that past actions had on the King's soul. The assumption here is that a bad action hurts the soul and appears as a scar on it. This condition is visible to the eye of the mind insofar as the judge is allowed to abstract from the fact that it is the soul of a king that he is beholding and not, say, that of a layman. Rhadamanthus, who knows the customs of Asia, needs to be free from them in order to see in what ways justice expresses itself through custom or else fails to do so.

Socrates is not proposing here a reform of earthly trials, which would necessarily involve judging actions, not souls. On the other hand, his final judgment of souls is not to be confused with any Christian kind of final judgment. While the Christian God is omniscient, Rhadamanthus and his brothers are not. First of all, Rhadamanthus is a mortal and not a god. He comes from Asia, and before becoming a judge, he has to go through his own death. Second, he does not know who the Great King is. The condition of the latter's soul will come into view against an unknown background. Third, he is subject to doubt and error with respect to what he is supposed to discover. Zeus decides to have Minos sit as a supervisor in case his two brothers are in doubt.²⁵

²⁵ *Gorgias* 524a6–8: “Μίνω δὲ πρεσβεῖα δώσω ἐπιδιακρίνειν, εἴαν ἀπορῆτόν τι τῷ ἑτέρῳ, ἵνα ὡς δικαιοσύνη ἢ κρῖσις ἢ περὶ τῆς πορείας τοῖς ἀνθρώποις.” See also *Gorgias* 526c7–d2.

In sum, the myth would be of little use if Socrates wanted to tell Callicles how legal justice on earth might be improved. It would be extremely defective if it were meant to portray unfailing divine justice as opposed to earthly justice. On the other hand, it is quite meaningful if we take it as depicting a modality of knowledge which, given certain conditions, is both possible and desirable on earth. What Socrates' image amounts to, it seems to me, is the fact that a human soul is put face to face with another human soul. Socrates is thereby conveying to Callicles several points:

1. It is possible to have access to the condition of another's soul.
2. It makes sense to speak of the soul's health.
3. This condition is accessible to the mind's eye.
4. This is possible provided that one is able to abstract from aspects, such as power, wealth, and ancestry, that may act as a second skin and cover the wounded and deformed surface of certain souls.
5. A reliable knowledge of the soul is possible when the second skin does not act as a barrier not only to the soul that one is trying to see but also for the mind of the knower.
6. The soul has surface and depth.
7. Our knowledge is fallible.

Notice that points 4 and 5 restate in psychological terms aspects that I pointed out above as problematic. That which I just called "second skin" is nothing but the "kosmos," the ornament of which we spoke above. Only here it is not a matter of distinguishing between what is per se essential and what is accidental in the constitution of a soul. The soul is not taken as an object to be observed from without. "Ornament" indicates a psychological aspect that can be understood, provided that one accepts the reality of the internal world. It already requires access to one's personal mental life as well as to that of others.

Let us look at this issue a little more closely. Socrates points out that those who have political power are very likely to use it badly.²⁶ We can think that this is true not only because political power gives one a free hand but also because it allows one's injustice to remain hidden from public view. Social conventions may lead one to lose

²⁶ *Gorgias* 525d1–526a1.

sight of what justice is. They allow for a confusion between the internal world of a human being (the condition of his soul) and the face he will show in public. Socrates is not saying that there should be no difference between the internal world and the way it appears to others. Rather, he suggests that two possibilities are open. The first possibility is analogous to the way in which the body manifests its internal condition on its surface. The second is analogous to the way cosmetics or clothes disguise the surface of the body and make it difficult to see on the surface of the body a manifestation of its interior state. It is in this second instance, and not in the first, that the movement from surface to depth tends to be checked. In the first case the surface of a soul points toward depth, and depth, albeit manifested on the surface, remains distinguished from it. In the second case surface acts like a barrier to depth, and, we can suspect, in fact invites the identification of whatever is visible with the human being as a whole. Let us consider the example of the king. The king has power. His power can be of such a kind that it allows one to see that the king is something else besides being a king. Being a king, in this case, is one of the many determinations of a human being who is not identified with his social function. If the king wants us to identify him with his social function, he will act as if everything he does were everything he is. Everything he does is a display. In this case we are not faced with a surface that allows for depth. We are faced, rather, with a surface that substitutes for depth.

In order to have access to the soul of the Great King, Rhadamanthus must be able to abstract from his social mask. A social mask may act like a barrier to one's internal world. It works as a second skin with which one can identify oneself. Socrates' image of the Great King's soul as disproportional, ugly, and covered with wounds and scars suggests why certain human beings may resort to a second skin. The surface of their soul is wounded: their skin does not act as a container of their interiority. A healthy skin functions both as a limit between interiority and the external world and as a bridge between the two realms. It manifests the interior to the exterior and allows the exterior to be internalized. These two functions are, in turn, dependent upon the skin's capacity to protect the interior from any potentially destructive external aggression and to contain the interior by maintaining it within its boundaries.²⁷ A wounded skin is similar to a

²⁷ See Didier Anzieu, *Le Moi-peau* (Paris: Bordas, 1985).

perforated container. The interior risks being lost to the external world. The external world, in turn, presents a threat, a danger, insofar as the possibility of invasion and destruction from without is permanent.

I am developing Socrates' image of the wounded skin of the Great King in order to show what I believe to be Socrates' point. We need to remember that Socrates is telling Callicles this story at the end of a dialogue which turns out not to be a dialogue at all. Socrates has been talking to people who are attached to their social masks to such an extent that any talk of interiority has been devoid of any significance for them. During the whole conversation shame has been of the utmost importance for Socrates' interlocutors. One generally assumes that shame, often associated with blushing, reveals a previously hidden aspect of one's personality. In the case of Socrates' interlocutors, on the contrary, shame has acted to obscure their true intentions. Rather than being refuted on grounds of their convictions, Socrates' interlocutors have put forth a mask and have let him deal with it. Any attempt to overcome this predicament has failed. At the end of the dialogue, Socrates offers Callicles a mirror. The insistence on true judgment of the soul may be read as a last attempt to let Callicles see what he has been unable to see throughout the dialogue.

To summarize, Socrates' example of the Great King, divested of all his power and prevented from bringing to his last trial his many earthly witnesses, conveys the following points: knowledge of the soul requires abstraction from one's social mask. A social mask may cover a wounded soul. A wounded soul will be likely to be horrified by any attempt on the part of another to get to see its actual condition. It will interpret any attempt to perceive its wounded surface as a threatening invasion of its interiority. This kind of person will do anything to prevent this surface from being seen as a surface with depth. To express this in yet another way, what Rhadamanthus is supposed to do is to detach the soul he is inspecting from its artificial extensions: its witnesses.

As I hope I have already made clear, it is not the case that witnesses, fair bodies, wealth, and ancestry are supposed to play no role in human life. Yet if all these things are substitutes for identity, then the soul becomes disproportional, crooked, and ugly. It is not free, it cannot think, it is always at the mercy of some powerful master. In

the conversation with Socrates, Gorgias had stressed the overwhelming power of rhetoric, which supposedly makes the citizens free from any limitations imposed by knowledge. In the dialogue with Polus and Callicles, Socrates had questioned this alleged freedom: rhetoric, like cooking, is constantly trying to gratify others by serving their whims. In the myth, Socrates' criticism goes deeper, because it shows that Gorgianic rhetoric is rooted in a distorted and distorting understanding of appearance. Rather than being solely in our hands qua producers of appearance, social masks belong to the viewers—the witnesses of the myth. Not only are we forced to please them and share their opinions, but, more deeply, we constantly depend on them for our self-understanding, hence for our identity.

Rhadamanthus and his brothers, as we said, are no gods. Yet they can do something that Kronos' judges could not. When they behold the soul of someone, they can perceive disproportion and ugliness. In other words, knowing another soul is not just a matter of *techne*. Health of soul manifests itself as beauty. Sickness and evil strike the judge's soul with the unpleasant vision of ugliness. Far from being just an accidental addition to truth, Socrates makes the perception of beauty the privileged medium for the true condition of the soul to manifest itself. Truth is the proper nourishment of the soul; it makes the soul look straight and beautiful to the judge.²⁸ Lack of proper nourishment impoverishes the soul: to the eyes of its judges the malnourished soul appears distorted and stained by falsehood.

When Rhadamanthus perceives that the soul of the Great King or of some other prince or potentate is in such a horrible condition, "he sends him away to Tartarus, first setting a mark on him (ἐπισημηνάμενος) to show whether he deems it a curable or an incurable case."²⁹ Once separated from the body, the soul is not absolutely transparent. If the mark indicating its fate is placed by the judges on it (as the prefix ἐπί in ἐπισημηνάμενος indicates), then knowing a soul does not mean depriving it of interiority. On the contrary, even when

²⁸ *Gorgias* 525a: a soul that has not been nourished by truth (ἄνευ ἀληθείας τετράφθαι) has nothing straight (οὐδὲν εὐθουῶ).

²⁹ *Gorgias* 526b8–10. See *Republic* 614c7 for the σημεῖα attached to the souls by their judges in afterlife.

face to face with its last judge, the soul has surface insofar as it preserves depth.³⁰

Again, this does not sound to me like an extraordinary achievement on the part of Zeus' judges. Does Socrates do something very different when he tells Callicles that his soul is at the mercy of his two lovers, Demus, the son of Pirlampes, and the Athenian Demos? Is he not perceiving how the same passion he experiences, *eros*, takes a different shape in Callicles' soul, making it disproportional, unbalanced, and slavish? We can notice, in this context, that while throughout the dialogue Socrates stresses the value of justice and moderation, his concluding words to Callicles hint at Callicles' fundamental problem: "for it is disgraceful (αἰσχρός) that men in such a condition as we now appear to be in should put on a swaggering, important air when we never continue to be of the same mind upon the same questions, and those the greatest of all—we are so sadly uneducated (εἰς τοσοῦτον ἦκομεν ἀπαιδευσίας)."³¹ Socrates includes himself in his peroration, but it is not difficult to perceive that he is addressing Callicles' arrogance. We can say that Plato has Socrates place a mark on Callicles' soul. Yet what Socrates perceives as ugly (αἰσχρός), Callicles per-

³⁰ Seth Benardete makes a similar point when he observes that the expressions ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ (524d5) is parallel to ἐν τῷ σώματι (524c6). He says: "ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ must mean 'on the soul', as ἐν τῷ σώματι means 'on the body'. The soul, then, must have an inside, and the scars on the soul must be on the outside, for if they were inside the soul they would be invisible even if the body was removed." I do not understand why, according to Benardete, from this it follows that "the scars would then have to be symptoms of the internal condition of the soul, which do not allow for certain inferences unless the patient of the injustice were the reader of the signs"; Seth Benardete, *The Rhetoric of Morality and Philosophy: Plato's Gorgias and Phaedrus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 100.

³¹ *Gorgias* 527d7–e2. Terence Irwin observes: "Questions about education, *paideia*, have arisen periodically. Socrates insisted on justice and *paideia* as necessary conditions for happiness at 470e. Callicles claimed at 485a to value philosophy as part of *paideia*, implying that it was fit only for a young man; Socrates remarked that most Athenians would think Callicles adequately educated, 487b. Now Socrates concludes that someone who cannot reach reasoned and defensible convictions about these questions has no claim to real *paideia* at all, so that philosophical study for an adult is not as foolish as Callicles supposed"; see the notes in Irwin's translation of the *Gorgias*, 249. In light of these considerations we can see that Socrates' constant stress on punishment and coercion cannot be the full story about healing sick souls. Granted that punishment may heal injustice, which is a questionable enough claim, punishment cannot contribute to *paideia*, which is as indispensable to happiness as is justice, according to Socrates.

ceives as manly. It is left to the sensitivity of the reader to decide who is closer to the truth.

IV

Socrates' story cannot be easily dismissed as an old wives' tale. Yet one can say that it raises more questions than it answers. For example, when we attempted to draw a clear distinction between the essential and accidental attributes of the soul and, correlatively, between naked truth and ornament, we faced an infinite regress. I suspect we would be equally disappointed if we tried to understand the exact ontological status of the soul and asked how it is to be distinguished from the body. Infinite regress, however, is not unique to this myth. Consider the winged chariot in the *Phaedrus* or the image of the soul in book 9 of the *Republic*: in both cases a man consists of three parts, one of which is a man.

Plato is full of myths about the soul, yet nowhere does he say that there may be an idea of the soul.³² He is not a careless writer or a confused thinker. His dialogues suggest over and over again that knowledge of the soul is possible provided we understand that it is open-ended and fallible. I take this to be a virtue, not a weakness. Once we accept this limitation, we can see that the myth of the *Gorgias* brings about many results. By portraying the passage from the age of Kronos to that of Zeus, it indicates a development of human experience that makes the understanding of the unexpectedness of death the turning point in the access we have to our interiority as well as to that of others. It provides enough material to think about truth as the proper nourishment of the soul, and at the same time indicates that certain human beings can live their lives without ever allowing that truth is independent of their minds. It suggests a close relationship between

³² One exception in *Phaedrus* 246a4–8: “Concerning the immortality of the soul this is enough; but about its form (περὶ δὲ τῆς ἰδέας αὐτῆς) we must speak in the following manner. To tell what it really is would be a matter for utterly superhuman and long discourse, but it is within human power to describe it briefly in a figure; let us therefore speak in that way.” Is Socrates employing the word “idea” here in the Platonic technical sense? There are reasons to doubt it. In any event the passage suggests that human access to the soul is not by ideas but by figures, images; in other words, by poetic intuition.

truth and beauty on the one hand, and untruth and ugliness on the other. It also tells us that those trapped in the age of Kronos replace awareness of human impotence toward death with control; paradoxically enough, their denial of impotence never really allows hope—Prometheus' gift—to flourish in their hands.³³

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