

Return to Mythos: Re-Calling Ancient Connections Between Myth and Philosophy

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Abstract

Through a mythographic interpretation that is prompted by Ancient Philosophy's relationship with Ancient Greek's mythical sphere, this paper attempts to show that although Philosophy defined and legitimized itself as a discipline by turning away from its beginnings in *mythos*, its process of enlightenment—its path to wisdom—nevertheless retained the mythical structure of the initiation ritual which imbued the *hero's* journey. Through this, philosophy has identified itself as primarily a masculine enterprise, precluding women who are not *archetypal* heroes, but are, instead, helpers and guides in different guises who assist and lead the heroes to reach their destination or achieve their purpose. Furthermore, and unsurprisingly, it precluded other forms of wisdom-seeking that are based on mythical narratives and cultural practices which are closer to the feminine *archetype*. Thus, there is the perennial issue of whether there are indigenous philosophies that express metaphysics and epistemologies, simply because their form differs from what has been founded in the Western tradition, following its roots in Ancient Greece. But if Philosophy is to remain true to its professed love of wisdom, it must acknowledge, appreciate, and derive wisdom from all kinds of human experiences and expressions that could contribute to one's enlightenment.

Keywords: ancient philosophy, mythos, mystery rites, hero journey, women in philosophy, indigenous philosophy

Philosophy's arena and those on the margins

The mythical is often dismissed from the philosophical arena because it is perceived as purely imaginative, illogical and lacking the objectivity that defines the rational quest of philosophy. The mythical sees the world as a subject, and a divine one at that. On the other hand, philosophy generally sees the world as an object to be examined, pronouncements on which could be accepted or rejected through systematic argumentation. Yet, it cannot be denied that the beginnings of philosophy were closely tied to the last vestiges of myths in Ancient Greece.¹

A mythographic interpretation of this traverse from *mythos* to *logos* shows that although philosophy defined and legitimized itself as a discipline by turning away from its beginnings in *mythos*, its process of enlightenment—its path to wisdom—nevertheless retained the mythical *structure* of the initiation ritual. Moreover, the early philosophers identified themselves as heroes seeking wisdom, and patterned their search for knowledge after the archetypal *hero's* journey. Philosophy, therefore became a masculine enterprise, precluding not just the mythical which survived in modern day indigenous cultures, but also the feminine which embodied wisdom in the mythical past. Thus, the never-ending question of whether there are indigenous philosophies and whether women could really fit in the discipline of philosophy. Philosophy, as a discipline, has set its boundaries to exclude these two.

Philosophy, however, is originally the “love of wisdom,” and as such, did not put a limit on the object of its contemplation. Philosophy is curious about *all things*. Therefore, if it is to remain true to its professed love of wisdom, it must acknowledge, appreciate, and also be open to deriving wisdom from all kinds of human experiences and expressions that could bring one to the sought-after enlightenment. This is because by turning away from its origins in myth, as Korab-Karpowicz writes, philosophy has missed out on “an intensely rich experience of life.”²

¹ J. W. Korab-Karpowicz, “Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science” in *Philosophy Today* (2002): 209-211.

² Korab-Karpowicz, “Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science,” 209.

Philosophy's Initiation

“[I]f oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds.”³ This pronouncement, found in Fragment 15 of *Xenophanes*, is one of the strongest polemics against myths that philosophers in Ancient Greece employed as they gave birth to the then new philosophical enterprise. The path they chose toward the “scientific” ridiculed the old poetic ways of Homer and Hesiod, placing *truth* on the side of the abstract and universal, accessed only through a detached, objective manner of observation⁴ —the so-called “triumph of logos over mythos.” Despite this deliberate attack on myths, however, the relationship between the developing discipline of philosophy and myths remained, even though only in a tensive way.⁵

In Plato, for example, the explicit denunciation of poetry in the myths of Homer and Hesiod in Book X of *The Republic* justifies the exclusion of artists from the ideal state. The “poetic tribe” is shown to be mere “imitators” of things but “do not lay hold on truth....[they know] nothing of reality but only the appearance....Mimetic art, then, is an inferior thing cohabiting with an inferior and engendering inferior offspring.” The interlocutors further justify the banishment of the artists saying that “there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy

³ John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 3rd Edition (London: A&C Black, 1920/Elibron Classics Series, Adamant Media Corporation), 115.

⁴ Helmut Wautischer, “Pathways to Knowledge,” in *Tribal Epistemologies* (Aldershot and Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998).

⁵ See Francis MacDonald Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: Studies in the Origins of Western Speculations* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co./London: Edward Arnold, 1912), for a classic discussion of the evolution of Philosophy from mythology. For more recent scholarship on this topic, see Svetla Slaveva-Griffin, “Philosophy and Myth: a Review of Recent Scholarship” in *The European Legacy*, 2007. See also scholarship on the Derveni Papyrus that links early Greek Philosophers and the mystery rites (Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian) e.g. Gábor Betegh, *The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation*, (Cambridge University Press, 2004), reviewed in Patricia Curd, “The Derveni Papyrus: Cosmology, Theology and Interpretation,” in *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, 16 September, 2006) (<https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/the-derveni-papyrus-cosmology-theology-and-interpretation/>)

and poetry.”⁶ This enmity between poetry and philosophy is emphasized because the two use the same material of communication. If philosophers were to gain higher authority to discredit the influence of the great poets, Homer and Hesiod, they had to present theirs as *different* and *better* than those of the said poets.⁷ Despite these criticisms of the mythic poets and their myths, early Greek philosophers could not help but invoke them in their treatises in different ways. The Pythagoreans, for instance, practiced their version of Orphism in which Pythagoras was the Daemon, a remnant of a more ancient religion revolving around the myth of Dionysus.⁸ Plato, and even Aristotle, for instance, were quite conscious of the many sacred rites that were based on and revolved around specific myths, and referred to them several times in their respective works.⁹

The Eleusinian Mysteries, in particular, were most popular at this time, and are now considered to be some of the oldest Mysteries in the Ancient World performed and participated in for about two thousand years, from 1450 BCE to 392 CE.¹⁰ The rites were ‘considered essential to the survival of humanity, and it was said that “the life of the Greeks [would be] unlivable, if they were prevented from properly observing the most sacred Mysteries...”¹¹ Shrouded in secrecy, no one really knows the actual ritual that went on in the temple caves. But the

⁶ Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes, Vols. 5 & 6*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1969), Sections 600-607.

⁷ Glenn W. Most, “The Poetics of Early Greek Philosophy” in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, ed. A.A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999/Cambridge Companion Online, 2006), 332-34.

⁸ See Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: Studies in the Origins of Western Speculations*; Bianca M. Dinkelaar, “Plato and the Language of Mysteries Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues” in *Mnemosyne: A Journal of Classical Studies*, 2020.

⁹ Alberto Bernabé, “Aristotle and the Mysteries” in *Greek Philosophy and the Mystery Cults*, ed. María José Martín-Velasco and María José García Blanco (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 27-42; Mara Lynn Keller, “The Ritual Path to Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries” in *Rosicrucian Digest*, 2009; Bianca M. Dinkelaar, “Plato and the Language of Mysteries Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues” in *Mnemosyne: A Journal of Classical Studies*, 2020.

¹⁰ Keller, “The Ritual Path to Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 28.

¹¹ Keller, “The Ritual Path to Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries,” 29 (see source in Zosimos, *Historia Nova* IV.3.3, ed. Ludwig Mendelssohn (Leipzig, 1887); and Carl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, [1967] 1977), 11-12; see also Bernabé, “Aristotle and the Mysteries.”

Mysteries are said to be reenactments of the myth of Demeter, goddess of the grain, which symbolically narrates the rhythmic cycle of nature in her separation from and reunion with her daughter, Persephone (Kore). Bearing the motif of journeying through the netherworld, of death and rebirth, this myth is a paradigm for the process of spiritual and/or psychological rebirth. In other words, it is a myth of enlightenment.

The ritual took several days, with the initiates undergoing physical and spiritual purifications, often marked as different parts of the Mysteries (the Lesser and the Greater Mysteries or the sequential parts of the Greater Mysteries). The initiates were sworn into silence, partly as part of the process—a speech fasting—but largely because it was forbidden, on pain of death, to reveal the Mysteries to the uninitiated.¹² To the uninitiated, the revelation would be mere words and would not have been able to effect the change that the actual ritual would have triggered in them. The dread of the news could even destroy the mind and the life of one who encounters it unprepared.¹³

Nevertheless, early philosophers were able to secularize¹⁴ the ritual and adopted it as the paradigm of philosophical enlightenment. Aristotle, demystifying the Mysteries, compared the catharsis brought about by the drama in the theater and the experience of the initiate in the rites. He saw the lack of ritual preparations in the former, but differentiated the latter from the philosophical endeavor.¹⁵ Plato's Parable of the Cave in *The Republic*, on the other hand, mimics the rites in the progression of the prisoner's enlightenment from the cave to the outside world. "[T]he Cave...is thought by some to refer to a cave at the sanctuary of Eleusis which was associated with the underworld deities, where perhaps the initiates were led before ascending to the bright

¹² Dinkelaar, "Plato and the Language of Mysteries Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues;" Keller, "The Ritual Path to Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries."

¹³ Rudolf Steiner, *Occult Mysteries of Antiquity and Christianity as Mystical Fact*, trans. E.A. Fronner, Gabrielle Hess and Peter Kandler (New York: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1961), 55-56.

¹⁴ Andre Laks, in "Between Religion and Philosophy: The Function of Allegory in the "Derveni Papyrus" in *Phronesis*, 1997, 38. Laks reads the Derveni Papyrus as the author's way of "religious secularization."

¹⁵ Bernabé, "Aristotle and the Mysteries."

light of the Telesterion.”¹⁶ More obviously, in Plato’s *Symposium*, the whole dialogue is patterned after the Eleusinian ritual process itself, tracing the path to Beauty from the baser form of love for the body to the highest form of love for Beauty as such.¹⁷ It is also here that Socrates admits that he was led to such an enlightenment in the Mysteries by the priestess Diotima.¹⁸ Through this and similar practices, the secret rites became public, but while doing away with the mythical content of the said rites, philosophy retained the mythical *structure* of the Mysteries. The process of initiation was replaced by dialectics and philosophy allied itself with science, espousing a methodology of rationality that set narrow parameters, despite the overall claim that philosophy is thinking about *all* things in the process of seeking wisdom.¹⁹

By replacing myth, philosophy has transformed the revelation of wisdom in myth to the *pursuit* of wisdom. It has transformed the devotional character of the mystic—the divinely-inspired knower—into an affective one, making the seekers *lovers* of Wisdom, the Goddess Sophia.²⁰ However, as it will hopefully be made apparent, this specifically philosophical means of wisdom-seeking is exclusively masculine because the secularized mythical structure that philosophy retained is, in fact, a hero quest.

¹⁶ Dinkelaar, “Plato and the Language of Mysteries Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues,” 55. (See source in Kevin Clinton, *Myth and Cult*. (Stockholm: Astrom, 1992), 16-19; Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: Studies in the Origins of Western Speculations*, 227; Mary Ann Farrell, “Plato’s Use of Eleusinian Mystery Motifs,” Dissertation (University of Texas at Austin, 1999), 96-97. <https://philpapers.org/archive/FARPUO.pdf>1999.

¹⁷ Dinkelaar, “Plato and the Language of Mysteries Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues; Keller, “The Ritual Path to Initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries;” Steiner, *Occult Mysteries of Antiquity and Christianity as Mystical Fact*; Bernabe, “Aristotle and the Mysteries.”

¹⁸ Dinkelaar, “Plato and the Language of Mysteries Orphic/Pythagorean and Eleusinian Motifs and Register in Ten Dialogues,” 50; Steiner, *Occult Mysteries of Antiquity and Christianity as Mystical Fact*, Chapter 4. See also discussion in Leni dlR. Garcia, “Un-gendering Philosophy: Seeking the Lost Androgyny” in *Ideya*, 2007.

¹⁹ See Helmut Wautischer, in “Pathways to Knowledge” and Korab-Karpowicz, “Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science.”

²⁰ Korab-Karpowicz, “Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science,” 214.

The Hero's Quest for Sophia

Although the Ancient Mystery Rites admitted both men and women, the process of initiation remains *archetypally*²¹ male, as a hero quest. The offerings, sacrifices, and all other procedures involved were in honor of the Goddesses (e.g., Kore/Persephone, Demeter)²² and were undergone by those who sought to be imbued with her wisdom: the heroes. Mythologist Joseph Campbell mapped out the journey of the hero in several stages that can be summarized under three major phases: responding to a call to adventure, going through an extreme ordeal, and returning.²³ The first phase comes in varying forms but they are all quests for something of significance like a treasure, a cure for illness, an object of power, or an object that bestows immortality. Heeding the call to adventure, the hero leaves his home, which could be his family, his tribe, or his kingdom. He is tested along the way and has to overcome many obstacles before fulfilling his quest, but he finds guides—all sorts of helpers—who nudge him along and become instrumental in his overcoming of his supreme ordeal. He succeeds and finds rewards which he brings back to his people who proclaim him a hero. The rewards, however, are not always or not only material in nature. Oftentimes, the hero fails in his material quest but brings home

²¹ The term “archetypal” is used here to mean (Jungian) mythical archetypes, defined by motifs that are common among major myths all over the world. One could say, for example, that anyone could be a hero and I will not disagree. But *archetypally*, this is less likely to be so, with “hero” being defined by a specific set of actions and circumstances that an individual as a character in myths has to undergo. This is not to claim, however, that there are no significant nuances to be observed when myths from different cultures are compared.

²² Even when Dionysos was the honoree of the Mystery Rite, for example, in the Villa of Mystery outside of Pompeii, the Dionysiac cults were primarily for women. The maenads, followers of Dionysos, were women. And Dionysos himself has often been identified with the feminine principle. His strangeness and estrangement from the gods that dwell on Mt. Olympus, his association with chaos and frenzy, puts him under the feminine, rather than the masculine archetype. See Diedra L. Clay, “Dionysus: The Face of the Feminine Archetypal Principle” in *This Thing of Darkness: Shedding Light on Evil*, ed. Claudio V. Zanini and Lima Bhuiyan (Leiden, Boston, Paderborn, Singapore, Beijing: Brill, 2016); see also Victoria Hearnshaw, “The Dionysiac Cycle in the Villa of Mysteries: A Re-reading in *Mediterranean Archaeology*, 1999, and Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Clifton P. Fadiman (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1995).

²³ Joseph Campbell. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. (Novato, California: New World Library, 2008).

a renewed sense of self and a realization that becomes beneficial not only to himself but to all in his society.²⁴

Let us compare this to Rudolf Steiner's description of the philosophical initiation process that happens in the Platonic dialogues, where Socrates leads the listeners to "absorb his thoughts";...search within themselves for something in their own inner experiences through which they can say "yes" to his ideas. They put forward the objections that spring to their minds...[and at the end find] something in themselves which they did not possess before."²⁵ Socrates calls the wisdom-seekers to an intellectual adventure. They fight and overcome the difficulties of accepting his ideas. Finally, they realize the truth which is the prize that they "take home." The philosophical quest is a hero-quest.

Among well known hero epics, none carries the title of a female character: Odysseus, Achilles, Herakles, Hector, Aeneas, Cuchullain, Gilgamesh, Sigurd, Beowulf, Arthur, Tristan, Rama, Maui, Lam-Ang, Labaw Donggon, Mwindo, Gassire, Quetzalcoatl, Arjuna, Krishna, Yi, Hiawatha.²⁶ The few women described in mythology as heroines are so only through their connections with the actual heroes. For instance, Branwen of King Matholwch, sister to the Irish Bran; the suicide Hero, priestess of Aphrodite and lover of Leander; Iole, the other woman in Herakles' life who caused his death as well; Isolde, wife of Tristan; Penelope, wife of Odysseus. Not heroes in their own right, their deeds are also hardly heroic in the archetypal sense. It is no wonder that Campbell himself was a little hard-pressed to respond to the question of why "heroes" are always in the masculine form. He explained that "[w]omen are set inexorably on the heroic path through childbirth and

²⁴ A very good example of this is the story of Gilgamesh. He failed to achieve immortality, having fallen asleep in one of his tests, and lost the flower that could prolong his youth to a snake in the river as he was washing himself in preparation for his return to his kingdom. But he realized that being a good and compassionate king would better serve him than actual immortality because people would remember his deeds long after he was gone. The hero's reward is more importantly the release of his self from egotism and toward the path of compassion.

²⁵ Steiner, *Occult Mysteries of Antiquity and Christianity as Mystical Fact*, 93.

²⁶ see Donna Rosenberg, *World Mythology*. (Lincolnwood/Chicago, Illinois: NTC Publishing Group, 1994).

the challenge of maternity.”²⁷ In other words, they are mothers who give birth to heroes.

In Athens of antiquity, only as *hetairae* (female companions) or as *auletrides* (dancers/musicians)—descendants of the holy prostitutes—were women able to insert themselves in these circles.²⁸ It is therefore not surprising that apart from Diotima, women were absent from the Ancient Greek philosophical circles. The Goddess Sophia was sought by the *philosophos*. Lovers of wisdom are therefore men who undergo the *heroic* journey of the philosophical quest²⁹ which, by the way, remains open-ended because they do not quite become what they seek. They seek, on and on, but cannot become wisdom itself or they put an end to their own quest, nullifying their being lovers of wisdom. In short, they do not become woman, who is the mythical embodiment of wisdom (Sophia). Since only the *male* can be real heroes, there is no place for women in the discipline.

Archetypally, then, women are never heroes. They figure in myths as goddesses, mothers, wives, sisters, priestesses, guides, wise old women, healers, enchantresses, daughters, and other roles that either assist the hero in his quest or throw him off the path to delay or to test him. But ultimately, they are all there to enable the hero to complete his higher, Divine-inspired task, even if that means a failure on the level of his personal sphere.³⁰ Even etymologically, the term “hero” refers to *men* who were slain as a sacrifice to the Goddess Hera.³¹ Women need not go through the heroic quest because they already possess what the heroes seek. Their wisdom is whole and present, needing no processing. As Campbell realizes, boys require an elaborate initiation into manhood, while womanhood “happens” to girls with

²⁷ Anne Valley-Fox, “Preface,” in Sam Keen and Anne Valley-Fox, *Your Mythic Journey*. (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1989), xx.

²⁸ Vern L. Bullough, *The History of Prostitution* (New York: University Books, 1964). See also, Sofia A. Souli, *The Love Life of the Ancient Greeks* (Athens: Editions Michael’s Toubis S.A, 1997).

²⁹ Garcia, “Un-gendering Philosophy: Seeking the Lost Androgyny,” 18.

³⁰ For a more detailed discussion of representative hero myths, please see Leni dLR. Garcia, “Why Are There No Women-Heroes? Philosophy, Myths, and Women” in *Asia Pacific Social Science Review*, July - December, 2002.

³¹ Barbara Walker, *The Women’s Encyclopedia of myths and secrets*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1983), 399.

their first menstruation. "Nature does it to her." Her transformation is immediate and all at once.³²

A study attempting to map out the path of "heroines" in cross-cultural comparisons of some of the world's folktales revealed that not only are female protagonists underrepresented in stories, their "journey" is also very different from the male's. They are unlikely candidates for physical heroism and they are described as being passive, that is, they do not normally pursue a goal or take action to solve their problems. They are, however, epitomes of compassion especially toward those whom they consider family.³³ The study suggested a different definition of heroism, but it simply goes to show that, again, there are no women *archetypal* heroes. The fact that the early philosophers transformed the revelation of wisdom in myth into the philosophical quest *for* wisdom,³⁴ women, who embodied wisdom itself were disqualified from being questors.

Mythical Narratives and Indigenous Philosophies

Through the same route that put women outside the sphere of the properly philosophical, mythical and mystical traditions that claim instantaneous enlightenment or *non-rational*³⁵ paths to enlightenment also came to be regarded with suspicion. Archetypally, these paths are identified with the feminine. They are too close to the mythos that philosophy endeavored to overcome in its early days. They employ an attitude that is *engaged* in the world, different from the "attitude of a rational, disinterested observer [and of] a self-interested hedonist which can both be attributed to the modern individual"³⁶

³² Campbell, *The Power of Myth (with Bill Moyers)* (New York: Anchor Doubleday, 1990), 55.

³³ Jonathan Gottschall, "The Heroine with a Thousand Faces: Universal Trends in the Characterization of Female Folk Tale Protagonists" in *Evolutionary Psychology*, January 1, 2005.

³⁴ Korab-Karpowicz, "Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science,"

³⁵ Supra-rational, intuitive, meditative, etc., not requiring dialectics or logic that is based on the principle of non-contradiction.

³⁶ Korab-Karpowicz, "Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science," 210.

Contemporary scholars now show, however, that myths permeate human reality and are one of the most fundamental aspects of human development. Campbell, for instance, reflects on the building of the Pyramids in the ancient times and of the grand cathedrals in the Middle Ages, or even the asceticism that makes the present-day Hindu bear with starvation rather than kill an animal for food. These show that the human concern for the afterlife supersedes economic or physical concerns. There is a need to transcend mortality. Myth, by keeping together the community into which one is born and to which one has contributed, is the way to ensure one's continuity beyond physical death.³⁷

Phenomenologist Paul Ricoeur explains that this is because myths provide origin stories which stabilize communities that are threatened by crises—Jaspers' boundary situations³⁸—which question their identity.³⁹

It is only when it is threatened with destruction from without or from within, that a society is compelled to return to the very roots of its identity: to that mythical nucleus which ultimately grounds and determines it. The solution to the immediate crisis no longer a purely political or technical matter but demands that we ask ourselves the ultimate questions concerning our origins and ends: where do we come from? Where do we go? In this way, we become aware of our basic capacities and reasons for surviving for being and continuing to be what we are.⁴⁰

As myths provide a thread through which the continuity of societies can be traced, societies in turn keep the myths alive for

³⁷ Joseph Campbell, *Myths to Live By: How we re-create ancient legends in our daily lives to release human potential*. (New York, Toronto, London, Sydney, Auckland: Bantam Books, 1988), 19-21.

³⁸ For example, war, suffering, guilt, etc. See Gert Malan, "Ricoeur on Myth and Demythologizing," in *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* (2016): 3.

³⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.)

⁴⁰ Paul Ricoeur and Richard Kearney, "Myth as Bearers of Possible Worlds," in *The Crane Bag* (1978): 114.

interpretation and reinterpretation.⁴¹ The critical thought that Ricoeur says is required for such interpretation⁴² further returns philosophy to myth. He says,

...[I]f we took the relation of myth and logos in the Greek experience we could say that myth had been absorbed by the logos but never completely so, for *the claim of the logos to rule over mythos is itself a mythical claim*. Myth is thereby reinfected into the logos and gives a mythical dimension to reason itself. Thus the critical appropriation of myth becomes also a revival of myth.⁴³ [emphasis supplied]

Joseph Bierlein, following the same existential framework in Ricoeur's works, makes a case for the similarities between the concerns addressed by Philosophy and myths in *Living Myths*: "our finitude; our estrangement from God or the numinous; our process of becoming and transcendence; the paradox of freedom and the burden of human choice; our existence as relational beings; our identity and our place in the vast cosmos."⁴⁴ As Ricoeur insists, "Myth is already logos, but it still has to be taken up into philosophic discourse."⁴⁵ Myths are symbols, and "symbols...are expressions that communicate meaning."⁴⁶ It is through a critical reflection on them that they reveal their capacity to make meaning.⁴⁷

In *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, Paul Radin shows that the discrimination against non-canonical philosophizing stems from the common mistake of using the kind of philosophy that developed in the

⁴¹ See also Malan, "Ricoeur on Myth and Demythologizing."

⁴² Ricoeur calls this "demythologization," but does not mean by this the revelation of myths as false stories. On the contrary, demythologizing is required for the modern individual to rediscover myths as symbols that continue to infuse life, rejecting the literal interpretation of myth as mere explanations for things. "We are no longer primitive, living at the immediate level of myth....Myth will always be with us, but we must always approach it critically." in Ricoeur and Kearney, "Myth as Bearers of Possible Worlds," in *The Crane Bag*, 1974, 114. See also Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 5.

⁴³ Ricoeur and Kearney, "Myth as Bearers of Possible Worlds," 115.

⁴⁴ Joseph Bierlein, *Living Myths: How Myths Give Meaning to Human Existence* (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), 3.

⁴⁵ Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁷ Malan, "Ricoeur on Myth and Demythologizing," 5.

West as a standard against which to judge other forms of thinking. Usually, he says, when we ask if a certain text or mode of thinking is philosophical, we

.... really mean by philosophy a very special thing, namely the integrated philosophical systems which began in Western Europe with Plato and Aristotle. Naturally this cannot be found among primitive peoples. Nor can it be found in India or China. Yet clearly these two countries produced substantial philosophies, although many historians of philosophy admit this rather grudgingly. The development of formal integrated philosophical systems is however only one form which the evolution of philosophy has taken. All the problems with which it is concerned can be adequately formulated without ever being integrated into a system. This should never be forgotten.⁴⁸

Like Ricoeur, Radin claims that “primitive” philosophical views on life, death, the world beyond, good and evil, are encased in aphorisms that have roots in indigenous stories which are *symbolic*. It is only through the understanding of these symbols that one can understand them.⁴⁹ They can be “properly” philosophical if translated into the jargon of (Western) Philosophy.⁵⁰ Korab-Karpowicz echoes this when he reasons that while “myths...are often founded upon an original experience that reaches beyond the sensorial and rational, we can still maintain that they are not illogical” and can be subjected to rational analysis and logical interpretations.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1985), xxv-vi.

⁴⁹ Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 208.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 152-169.

⁵¹ Korab-Karpowicz, “Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science,” 211-13. “An analysis of many myths would show that actions of gods and heroes often presuppose a keen analysis of given circumstances and are based on rational decisions.” He says further that only very superficial interpretations will portray myths as irrational. The pre-philosophical rationalizing of myths in Hesiod, however, already contributed to the decline of the mythical in Ancient Greece, worsened by the method of inquiry chosen by the early philosophers.

For instance, the Samoans have a saying, “Has come again the offering of Mosopili which was too late,” which can only be made clear if the story of Mosopili is told. Despite learning that his sister was sick, Mosopili kept on postponing his visit to her. It was not until she died that he dropped all of his concerns and ran to where his sister’s body was. His show of love was now useless, an offering that came too late.⁵² Several Filipino adages give the same import: “*Aanhin pa ang damo kung patay na ang kabayo?*” (Tagalog) [Of what use is grass if the horse is already dead?]⁵³ Another is “*Unu pa in pus tumabang, bang indi’ na kalagihan?*” (Tausug) [What is the use of helping when it is already too late?]. Still another is “*Ulahi ra ang pagdagan, konmahuman na ang ulan.*” (Bohol)[Too late to run, when the rain is done.]⁵⁴

The saying, “It is only the people of Neiafu who disparage the *to-elau* (the northeast trade wind)” can only be understood through the Polynesian story of two cripples from Neiafu. They complained against the northeast trade winds because, unlike the west wind, these winds would not cause the coconuts to drop prematurely from the trees when they blew. The proverb is an admonishment about people who are too lazy to work for what they need.⁵⁵ This brings to mind the many Juan Tamad stories in Filipino folk literature. In one of these “numbskull” stories, it is said that Juan found himself very hungry one day. The guava tree he came across was in fruition. Too lazy to climb the tree, however, he simply stayed underneath it to wait for the fruit to fall.⁵⁶

As Radin observes, the symbolisms in these indigenous pieces of wisdom-seeking are typical of Eastern traditions which are rooted in mystical/mythical narratives⁵⁷ with which the archetypal feminine is associated. One need only recall the Puranas and the Vedic texts of Hindu India, the sutras of Buddhism, the teachings of the Ancient

⁵² Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 163.

⁵³ Damiana Eugenio, *The Proverbs*. (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2002), 243.

⁵⁴ Eugenio, *The Proverbs*, 308.

⁵⁵ Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 161-62.

⁵⁶ See Rene O. Villanueva, *Juan Tamad (Lazy Juan)*. (Quezon City: Lampara Books, 2002).

⁵⁷ Radin, however, objects to the overemphasis on mysticism when describing the primitive view. He says that it is not any more mystical than other traditions, like the Chinese and the Japanese, or even the Europeans, although the latter do not utilize it as much as the Easterners do. See Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 208-212.

Chinese Literati, and the seemingly nonsensical parables of Daoism⁵⁸, to see how stories may drive home a piece of wisdom as well as a formal treatise. Confucius, for instance, invoked the virtues of the mythical emperors and taught the path of benevolence through stories exchanged with his disciples, very much like the conversations between Socrates and his followers in the dialogues of Plato. He taught that wisdom is something one learns as she goes through life,

When I was fifteen I set my heart on learning. At thirty I took my stand. At forty I was without confusion. At fifty I knew the command of Tian. At sixty I heard it with a compliant ear. At seventy I follow the desires of my heart and do not overstep the bounds.⁵⁹

Lao Zi, on the other hand, says,

Know the masculine,
But keep to the feminine:
And become a watershed to the world.
If you embrace the world
The Tao will never leave you
And you become as a little child.

.....
Know the honorable
But do not shun the disgraced:
Embracing the world as it is.
If you embrace the world with compassion,
Then your virtue will return you to the uncarved block.⁶⁰

While Confucian wisdom encourages engagement with the world, Lao Zi envisions the world as whole and recommends *embracing*

⁵⁸ Specifically, the stories from *The Zhuangzi* which are almost always about a mythical creature. See Zhuangzi, *Zhuangzi: The Inner Chapters*, trans. Robert Eno (2019) <http://hdl.handle.net/2022/23427>.

⁵⁹ Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Robert Eno (2015) [http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_\(Eno-2015\).pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~p374/Analects_of_Confucius_(Eno-2015).pdf).

⁶⁰ Lao Zi, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. J. H. McDonald (Qigong vacations.org, 2017.) <https://www.unl.edu/prodmgr/NRT/Tao%20Te%20Ching%20-%20trans.%20by%20J.H.%20McDonald.pdf>, Chapter 28.

it to be one with the all-encompassing *Dao*. Close to this are the parables in the Chandogya Upanishad, where the ultimate reality, *Brahman*, is described thus: “He is the truth. He is the subtle essence of all. He is the Self. And that...THAT ART THOU.”⁶¹ Here, engagement is more directly fulfilled through one’s identification with reality itself—the world is a subject; it is whole; it is my Self.

Here we can see what Ricoeur notes about symbolic language—that it is “essentially *bound*,” that is, it cannot be removed from its embeddedness in a particular cultural myth, and therefore will not give in to any kind of formalism: “*It is the absolute inverse of absolute formalism.*”⁶² [emphasis supplied] The West, on the other hand, can afford to be formalist for, as Orientalist Heinrich Zimmer observes, “...Western thought has become completely exoteric” losing the ritual requirements of learning that Plato and other Ancient philosophers, because of their proximity to the sphere of mythical consciousness, were still able to impose on seekers of wisdom⁶³ until they lost sight of it in the process of further demythification.

The examples above show Radin’s point in saying that “the personal envisaging of life by those individuals who in any group are concerned with and interested in formulating their attitude toward God, toward man [sic], and toward society [makes them] the philosophers, the sages, and the moralists.”⁶⁴ In the same vein, existentialist Karl Jaspers champions the many forms of philosophizing. He argues that the kind of certainty that philosophy seeks is different from the objective kind sought by science. Philosophy aims at “an inner certainty” in which one’s whole being participates. It is concerned with one’s humanity, reaching out toward “a truth which, *wherever it is manifested, moves us more deeply than any scientific knowledge.*” The impulse to philosophize, Jaspers shows, is *inherent in everyone* and is always present⁶⁵ [emphasis supplied]. Given this, expecting a uniform

⁶¹ Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: Mentor Book/New American Library, 1975), 69.

⁶² Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, 17.

⁶³ Zimmer, Heinrich, *Philosophies of India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 47.

⁶⁴ Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*, 169.

⁶⁵ Karl Jaspers, *Way to wisdom: an Introduction to Philosophy* (Ralph Manheim, Trans. Connecticut: The Yale University Press, 1966), 7.

method and expression of philosophizing proves detrimental to the goal of philosophy. While wisdom is a pan-human concern, the manner of seeking it is affected, even defined, by the seeker's situatedness in space, time and the culture that surrounds and identifies her. Even philosophy itself, as Ricoeur points out, "is Greek by birth. Its intention and its pretension of universality are "situated." The philosopher does not speak from nowhere, but from the depths of his Greek memory, from which rises the question:...what is being?" And this question has defined the rest that followed in the development of Western philosophy.⁶⁶

Return to origins

The origin of philosophy in mythos seems to inevitably keep philosophy and mythos within overlapping spheres. Philosophy's demythification project, because it has retained the ritual structure of enlightenment, puts mythos in close connection with it even only as a suppressed undercurrent that continues to influence it, one way or another.⁶⁷

The demythification of philosophy, however, has two rather unfortunate effects: first, by adopting the specifically heroic pattern of enlightenment and replacing the sacred ritual with pure dialectics, philosophy has excluded women and the feminine from the philosophical enterprise; and second, by proclaiming the absolute triumph of logos over mythos, transforming the revelation of wisdom through the feminine into the heroic quest for wisdom, it has closed its doors to different (non-Western) pathways to wisdom, thereby relegating indigenous worldviews outside the philosophical arena. But by precluding feminine and indigenous experiences, philosophy has shrunk its "proper" philosophical domain and now runs the risk of contradicting its professed love of wisdom. As Helmut Wautischer writes,

...objectifying methodologies cannot account for qualitative experiences while introspective methodologies collapse under the scrutiny of noetic intrusion. If there is any

⁶⁶ Ricoeur, *The symbolism of Evil*, 21.

⁶⁷ This is in the sense that even the denial of mythos or the defining of philosophy as opposed to it is still an influence.

relevance to multicultural, feminist, and even postmodern philosophies, then it can only lie in the recognition of respect for multiplicity of viewpoints. It is exactly this respect that requires the acceptance of many disparate claims for truth as sincere results gained from a panoply of methodological origins.⁶⁸

Wautischer acknowledges that the difficulty here is in validating claims for truth using a methodology that is incommensurable to the methodologies (or lack of systematic ones) where these claims came from. But exploration, rather than exclusion, might be the better response to this problem.⁶⁹ Contemporary philosophers that challenge the assumption that logos completely took over mythos, like Ricoeur or those that define philosophy in a way that is reminiscent of the function of myths, like Jaspers, offer promising alternatives to the insistence that philosophy be objective and rational in only a singular way. In any case, the fact that such a demand comes from a particular culture with its own biases—Ancient Greek culture, developing into what has now become the representative Western culture—weakens philosophy’s claim to objectivity.

Opening philosophy to these modes of thinking and being will definitely change the philosophical terrain. Some might even argue that giving in will kill philosophy itself—exposing what Ricoeur referred to as the myth of logos’ triumph over mythos. But by continuing to exclude other ways to wisdom, doesn’t philosophy put itself at death’s door, its love of wisdom limited by self-imposed parameters? As Korab-Karpowicz declares, philosophy has to be rethought. It has to rekindle its original love of wisdom and rekindle the excitement it once had, in the beginning.⁷⁰ An old mentor puts it aptly, “Too often we forget that knowledge is not just a “job,” it is a long, long story....[P]hilosophers must be storytellers who openly share and interpret stories.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Wautischer, in “Pathways to Knowledge,” in *Tribal Epistemologies*, 4-5.

⁶⁹ Wautischer, in “Pathways to Knowledge,” in *Tribal Epistemologies*, 5.

⁷⁰ Korab-Karpowicz, “Rethinking Philosophy: A Reflection on Philosophy, Myth, and Science,” 215-16.

⁷¹ Brian Douglas Elwood, “Transmythic Visions in Cross-Cultural Philosophy” in *Sophia: Journal of Philosophy*, 1996-97, 42.

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