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The Wise Men: Notes on Plato's *Phaedrus*

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Abstract

On Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates, in his Second Speech (243e9-257b6), decides to make a demonstration [ἀπόδειξις] that the madness of love was given to us by gods for our happiness. This consists in finding the truth about human nature of the soul [ψυχῆςφύσεως], both divine and human. We take this demonstration as an object of our analysis, specifically the passage 245c, where Socrates will affirm that demonstration will be only credible by the wise men (*sophoi*) and incredible by skilled (*deinoi*). This work aims to clarify what kind of distinction is that made by Socrates and why only the wise men can believe in such a demonstration.

Subject Areas

Philosophy

Keywords

Plato, *Phaedrus*, Nature of the Soul, Myth, Ancient Philosophy

The *Phaedrus* is a dialogue of Plato in which the characters Socrates and Phaedrus dialogue around the discourse and the love, characterizing in which constitutes the amorous discourse. After the speech of Lysias presented by Phaedrus, Socrates will make two speeches about love. It will be in his second speech that we will address this work. We are going to analyze specifically the passage 245c, where Socrates will affirm that demonstration will be only credible by the wise men (*sophoi*) and incredible by the skilled (*deinoi*). This work aims to clarify what kind of distinction is made by Socrates and why only the wise men can belive in such a demonstration [1].

Early in his second speech, Socrates aims to demonstrate the nature of the soul and says that this statement will be unconvincing to skilled, but only convincing the wise [ἡ δὴ ἀπόδειξις ἔσται δεινοῖς μὲν ἄπιστος, σοφοῖς δὲ πιστή] (*Phaedrus*, 245c)[1]. In this passage we come across two important questions to be

[1]For *Phaedrus*, I use Burnet edition (1901).

clarified:

A) Does this demonstration include both the proof and the myth that follows?

B) To whom does Plato refer when he uses the words *δεινοι* and *σοφοι*?

The nature of the soul is central to both the argument of immortality and to the myth of the winged pair. It will be precisely to speak of such a nature that Socrates will use both the logical and the mythological narrative. The first consists in through premises and conclusion to prove the immortality of the soul. Such premises would be: 1) the soul is what moves itself; 2) that which moves itself is the principle of movement; 3) that which is principle is wholly immortal; 4) the soul is entirely immortal. The mythological narrative will be used when Socrates, not wishing to extend himself too much in divine subjects, will explain by an image what becomes the nature of the soul, such being that of a winged pair with a coachman and two horses.

According to Professor Richard Bett [2], the demonstration that the madness of the lover is duly inspired encompasses both myth and proof, each being appropriated in different circumstances[2]. This seems to us to be adequate, since both the proof and the myth follow from the demonstration, which ends up answering our questioning A. This fact is due to the formulation of both narratives to be about soul and complementary to each other: the first says what she is and the second one says what she is like.

Concerning question B, we have a somewhat larger problem due to Plato's lack of clarity in the definition of terms, which creates a difficulty in understanding the passage. Below we will put some topics in order to expose such difficulty:

i) at passage 229c, are the σοφοί that appear as ἄπιστοι.

ii) in passage 229d, Socrates attributes to man δεινός ἐπίπονος and οὐ πάνυ εὐτυχής as being capable of not believing in myths and seeking for them a rational explanation.

iii) in passage 235b, mention is made of παλαοὶ σοφοί, as if referring to some kind of ancient wisdom.

In both (i) and (ii), σοφός and δεινός seem to be used as synonyms to characterize a species of man who, by showing signs of wisdom [σοφιζόμενος], seeks to explain the myth in a rational way, giving them an interpretation allegorical we will here turn to such passages in an attempt to separate the above terms, otherwise we will have a problem of meaning of the terms. Early in the dialogue Phaedrus will ask Socrates if he persuades the Orithyia abduction myth is true [ὦ Σώκρατες, σὺ τοῦτο τὸ μυθολόγημα πείθῃ ἀληθὲς εἶναι;] (*Phaedrus*, 229c). In what Socrates will characterize the allegorical interpretation of the myth as

[2]For larger details see note 3, p. 2 of Bett'sarticle (1986), where This one like this putsit: "This contrast should not be taken to imply que the proof is more important than the myth, or que the myth is not" real philosophy". In this connection, it is interesting that Plato uses the word ἀπόδειξις (245c1,4; cf.ἀποδεικτέον, b7) to refer simply to the proof of immortality, but to entire ensuing discussion; the "demonstration" is of the fact that the madness of the lover is divinely inspired, and is encompasses the myth as well as the proof. In Plato's view, then, myth and proof are equally valid ways of showing things though of course, each may be appropriate in different circumstances.

ἄγροικος σοφία (*Phaedrus*, 229 e), a kind of rustic wisdom, which skilled and unbelieving men [ἀπιστῶν] spend their time trying to find a suitable explanation for the myth, and will say they do not have time for these things, for "not yet I was able, as the Delphic inscription says, to know myself" [οὐ δύναμαί πω κατὰ τὸ Δελφικὸν γράμμα γνῶναι ἐμαυτόν] (*Phaedrus*, 229). With this speech, Socrates establishes the difference between the true *sophos*, the one who accepts and believes in the myths as a way of knowing himself to the being led by them, and the *deinos* as being that unbeliever, who understands nothing of the myths and seeks interpret them without truly understanding them. This, in our view, makes the first use of Socrates of the word σοφοί in 229c, an irony to those who are disbelievers of the myths, these being probably the sophists and others who have used the myths allegorically.

According to Tate [3], it is more likely that the allegorical interpretation gradually developed with the more conscious growth of a use of a mythical language to express religious and philosophical speculations[3]. In the fifth century BC, Socrates' century, the allegorical method was already fully developed, both by philosophers, sophists and other thinkers of the time. They used mythical traditions for their own benefit, affirming their own ideas through an interpretation of the myths of the poets. It was claimed, therefore, that there was behind the myth a hidden meaning [ὑπόνοια] that could lead to its true interpretation [4].

In the *Republic* [5], Plato in dealing with education [παιδεία], will say there are two kinds of discourse, one true and the other false [λόγων δὲ διττὸν εἶδος τὸ μὲν ἀληθές, ψεῦδος δ' ἕτερον] (*Republic*, 376e)[4]. Both will be taught, but first the *logospseudo*: which is nothing more than myths that will be taught to children[5]. Having exposed the two species of *logos*, Socrates will expose a third species of *logos*, this third species being the myth, which thus will be defined by him: "somehow in the whole, false [ψεῦδος], although it contains some truth [ἀληθῆ]" (*Republic*, 377a). We understand here that myth is not the enunciation of the false[6] properly, since the very falsity and the truth are part of its structure and in itself are confused. The myth has its own significant world, where such classifications are not found. According to Edelstein, despite the myth for Plato to be like a fable built by the will, it is not an antithesis of reason (Edelstein,

[3]According to TATE (1927), Pherecydes of Syros seems to have been one of the first to use Homer for his own purposes, giving an allegorical sense to the poet's myths.

[4]For *Republic*, I use Slings edition (2003).

[5]We here reproduce the dialogue of Socrates with his interlocutor in the *Republic*, for the purpose of clarifying this course, 377a: Παιδευτέον δ' ἐν ἀμγοτέροις, πρότερον δ' ἐντοῖς ψευδέσιν; Ού μανθάνω, ἔφη, πῶς λέγεις. Ού μανθάνεις, ἦν δ' ἐγώ, ὅτι πρῶτον τοῖς παιδίοις μύθους λέγομεν; τοῦτο δέ που ὡς τὸ ὅλον εἰπεῖν ψεῦδος, ἔνι δὲ καὶ ἀληθῆ. πρότερον δὲ μύθοις πρὸς τὰ παιδία ἢ γυμνασίοις χρώμεθα.

[6]For defend the thesis in what the myth do not is the annunciate of false we use the studies in Edelstein (1949, p. 469): "To be sure it is inherent in the nature of human understanding that truth and falsehood are forever closely inter woven" [6]; and especially Veyne (1987), where he puts it: "Myth and *logos* do not oppose themselves as error and truth" (p.13-14); "[...] the mythical tradition conveys an authentic nucleus which, over the centuries, has been surrounded by legends; it is only these legends that put problems, but not the nucleus" (p.27); "The myth was a *tertiumquid*, neither true nor false" (p. 45); "Conclusion: we have beforehand the certainty that even the most naive myth has a fund of truth" (pp. 87-88) [7].

1949, p. 466). That is, in its function, myth is not opposed to *logos*. According to Luc Brisson, "Plato wants to place the *logos* in the place of the *myths*, but he must take into account the second to give a foundation to the first and ensure its effectiveness" [8].

The myth is linked to the principle [ἀρχή] and also to the function [ἔργον], because it is according to these that mold [τύποι] the discourse to the soul [ψυχή] of children apply. If the myths are good, then they will have good opinions [δόξαι], otherwise, they will be wrong. Therefore, one should watch over the authors of myths [μυθοποιοί] and select the beautiful myths, refusing the bad ones (*Republic*, 377a-c). Who is new is not able to distinguish what is allegorical from what is not [ὁ γὰρ νέος οὐχ οἷός τε κρίνειν ὅτι τε ὑπόνοια καὶ ὁ μή], but the opinion [δόξα] learned at such an age is usually indelible and unalterable [δυσέκνιπτά τε καὶ ἀμετάστατα]. Therefore, the earliest myths they hear should be composed as beautifully as possible, oriented to virtue [ἃ πρῶτα ακοῦουσιν ὅτι κάλλιστα μεμυθολογημένα πρὸς ἀρετὴν ἀκούειν] (*Republic*, 378d-e).

Already in (iii), after Phaedrus commended the speech of Lysias, saying that no one would be able to say more and better [μηδέν' <ἄν> ποτε δύνασθαι εἰπεῖν ἄλλα πλείω καὶ πλείονος ἄξια], Socrates answered:

> Τοῦτο ἐγώ σοι οὐκέτι οἷός τ' ἔσομαι πιθέσθαι· παλαιοὶ γὰρ καὶ σοφοὶ ἄνδρες τε καὶ γυναῖκες περὶ αὐτῶν εἰρηκότες καὶ γεγραφότες ἐξελέγξουσί με, ἐάν σοι χαριζόμενος συγχωρῶ.
> This is an issue where it is impossible to agree with you. The ancient sages, men and women who spoke and wrote on the subject, would refute me if, to please, I agreed with you. (*Phaedrus,* 235b)

Here, παλαοὶ σοφοί perhaps it is a reference to the ancient poets like Anacreon and Sappho, as Socrates seems to indicate below in 235c, but it may also be an irony on his part to insert a new subject. It is common, at least in Plato's dialogues, for Socrates to bring in the figure of an ancient sage to enter new ideas. If it were, Socrates would be himself included among the sages, without needing to say it. In the case indicated, these ancient sages are inserted to counter the previous view of wisdom criticized by Socrates (*Phaedrus*, 229c-230a) in defining them as *deinoi* and not as *sophoi*.

In passage 245c, Socrates seems to draw a clear distinction between δεινός and σοφός. The first as being unbeliever of any kind of demonstration, be it logical or mythical, and the second as a believer of these types of demonstration. Socrates seems to point out in the first group a certain kind of skepticism at the time about matters concerning the nature of the soul. Let us observe that what Socrates intends to do with his demonstration is part of a rite of initiation, in which the considered sages begin those who are still new. In this case, they must both be believers [πιστοί] of such initiatory rites. In this way, we can perceive a distinction between the way Socrates speaks of the *sophoi* in the *Phaedrus*.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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