

## *Why Am I Writing This Paper?*

The ideas of myth and logos pervade Plato's *Phaedrus*. Logos is understood as defining one's terms for the sake of clarity. This, of course, would not be needed if one never communicated with anyone else. Thus, this need to define one's terms arises in some form of discourse between two or more individuals. This discourse may be oral communication between speaker and audience, or it may be written interaction between author and reader. The key is that logos arises out of a need for clarity implicit in any linguistic communication. Linguistic communication involves words, and words involve ambiguity (see sections 263A and 266A). Logos is an attempt to expunge this lack of clarity. Myth, in turn, is a story. Insofar as it is a story, myth may or may not reflect Truth. Generally, and especially in the case of platonic dialogue, myth is intended to give a plausible explanation of a given problem, yet never does more than this—give a *plausible* or *possible* explanation.

The *Phaedrus* is intriguing because its main topic is a matter of dispute amongst platonic scholars. In my opinion, the *Phaedrus* reveals Plato's epistemological stance—that of a skeptic—through an examination of the limits of logos, both its written and spoken limitations. Along the way, Plato introduces myth as an attempt to “fill in the gaps” of our limited knowledge. It seems that Plato believes that knowledge is forever limited because we cannot understand the nature of the world as a whole. We can attempt to talk about such and such, say the soul, by defining what we mean by the term, indubitably incorporating other terms and concepts along the way. However, it seems that we are forever stuck in this process of defining what we mean by words (logos), especially ambiguous words like good, justice, and soul (263A). As Socrates points out,

“doesn’t each one of us go in a different direction” (263A)? Now, what is the reason for this difference in direction? As alluded to earlier, we are limited by our ignorance and lack of knowledge of the world as a whole. “Do you think, then, that it is possible to reach a serious understanding of the nature of the soul without understanding the nature of the world as a whole” (270C)?

Thus, we arrive at the epistemological failure. We cannot explain the world. Logos fails, ultimately, in any of its attempts. It aims to get clearer on a particular issue/concept, but can only do so by resorting to other issues/concepts. Logos becomes stuck within its own process of dealing with particulars, one at a time, and fails because it can’t get outside the box and see the “big picture.” Enter myth. Given our condition, what can we do but tell a nice story and pass the time away? And Socrates does just this. After defining the soul as self-moving, he goes on to tell a long, sophisticated, and, in my opinion, fanciful story about the world as a whole.

It is important not to read too much into the myth. After all it’s just a story. Granted, some stories are better than others, but, ultimately, all stories, by nature, distort the truth. Hence, myth is not without its faults. A myth is good insofar as it resembles reality, but, because we are not gods, this reality isn’t very clear. Consequently, not only will our ability to create good myth be limited, our ability to *judge* good myth is itself limited. It is, after all, **just a story!** Furthermore, knowledge is concerned with particulars as well as the whole that these particulars comprise. Therefore, because it gives a glimpse at the whole picture and ignores the particulars, myth is also limited because of its far-sightedness and lack of concern for particulars in the “here and now.” In a sense, it lacks logos.

Plato appeals to myth only after logos fails to get at the fundamental certainty that lies at the heart of our desire to know. Socrates tells Phaedrus that the soul is “self-moving,” and, therefore, immortal. Here, he defines the term. Yet, the reader, along with Phaedrus, *must* be left unsatisfied. What can that, that the soul is self-moving and immortal, mean? And why? Why is there a self-moving, immortal something? Logos might attempt to answer the first question (what does that mean), but is then stuck in an infinite regress (not really an answer at all; this is the fundamental problem in epistemology). Logos can’t even consider the second question (why), because it is part of the picture itself and an answer to the question requires an external perspective (must step out of the box and paint the picture). Thus, Socrates tells Phaedrus, “to describe what the soul actually is would require a very long account, altogether a task for a god in every way” (246A). Human logos simply can’t give a complete account of the soul or, more generally, anything at all. Alternatively, we can make up a complete account based on the limited knowledge that is provided by logos. “To say what it [complete account of the soul] is *like* is humanly possible and takes less time” (246A; my italics).

Moving forward, I can only ask what we’re doing reading the *Phaedrus* in a philosophy class. Philosophy attempts to make sense of the world primarily by the dialectical method. A gangster is trigger-happy; a philosopher is distinction-happy. We compile, divide, classify, and manipulate facts given to us in and by experience. We do so by dialectic. Insofar as we seek to communicate our composition and division to others, we rely on logos. “By ‘yadayada’ I mean ‘boohoo’” “When I divide the soul into 17 parts, I do so because...” We obsessively explain ourselves within the process of logos we’re stuck in. Logos is essential to the discipline of philosophy.

Does philosophy really getting us anywhere? Is this “logic-chopping” satisfying that insatiable desire to know? Plato says “no.” It cannot. What we really desire, in a sense, is to complete a task “altogether a task for a god in every way.” What we want is “perfect logos;” a complete account of everything in the world. But, we didn’t paint the picture. Nevertheless, we still have the implicit desire to have just such an account. By nature, all men desire to know as Aristotle rightly points out. However, Plato seemed to have recollected even more. All men desire to know *what men cannot know*.

So what do we and every other platonic scholar do? We read Plato as if there is some knowledge to be gained by doing so. And, we miss the target altogether. Plato’s “philosophy” isn’t philosophy, it’s *just a story!* At best, it’s a plausible account served up to sooth our thirst for the unquenchable. This is what he himself tells us. Yet we read him philosophically. We dissect what he says, linking this with that, taking what he says *philosophically* and as “truth-claims.” “You must know what the decision is about [in this case, Plato’s intention when writing], or else you are bound to miss your target altogether” (273C).

Plato tells us how his story is to be read (namely, as story/myth), yet we write philosophy papers, books, and theses on his work. It would make sense to write a philosophy paper on Plato if, and only if, his portrait of philosophy/logos/dialectic is properly displayed as inadequate. Yes, I realize Plato/Socrates claims to be a lover of philosophy and dialectic. And, to a certain extent, one can’t help but do philosophy and dialectic—it’s imbedded in our nature. But, ironically, Plato hints at the ultimate futility of this methodology in all his work. It’s “altogether a task for a god in every way” (246A). And, this is just like Plato. He plays with the reader, refusing to commit to any

consistent something that the reader is able to grasp on to. Now, **why** would he do this? Perhaps because he recognizes that this is precisely the predicament. Plato's philosophy is that philosophy is too strong of a commitment and doomed to failure because it forgets the only truth (the only epistemological stance available): "the only thing I know is that I know nothing at all."

Undoubtedly, few will with my extreme interpretation of Plato. But, this is how I *read* him. Why are there so many conflicting readings of Plato? Hmm...perhaps because this is the nature of discourse, especially *written* discourse. In discourse, we rely on logos (words/concepts/ideas) to get clear on what we are thinking/meaning. But, remember, we only get clear about words with other words, and that can be a sticky situation. Inevitably, "doesn't each one of us go in a different direction," or aren't we at least unsure what direction others are going?

Now, this poses a problem in both verbal and written discourse. However, as Socrates points out, it is even more problematic in written discourse. When giving a speech, or just talking with someone else in general, the "author" of the thoughts can be interrupted and asked to clarify what he means. On the other hand, written discourse provides no such allowance, and, consequently, it becomes all the more susceptible to misinterpretation and "communication breakdown." Could this be responsible for my breakdown? I can't ask Plato what he means, and neither can you, so I guess we'll never *know*—how ironic is that?

What we do know is that Plato clearly despises written discourse. "No discourse worth serious attention has ever been written in verse or prose" (277E). Please read this last sentence one more time. Now tell me, have Plato's dialogues received serious

attention? Has any other “philosopher” ever been the subject of more essays, books, and theses?

Well, now the question has been begged. Why does Plato write? Personally, I think Plato might have been a sort of existentialist at heart (talk about possibilities for interpretation!). Perhaps he recognized the underlying absurdity of the human condition. Here we are with this annoying desire to know that which we can’t know—can it get anymore absurd? Further, I think he probably witnessed even more absurdity in thinkers around him who began professing particular philosophies and epistemological stances. I think the one particular aspect of Plato’s writing that might not be meant *ironically* is the confession of Socrates’ ignorance. The real irony emerges when Socrates says all sorts of this’ and that’s in the dialogues, and everyone buys into what he says, as if he really is *wise* and not *merely seeking wisdom*! The following passage is worth quoting:

So. Well, then: our playful amusement regarding discourse is complete. Now you go and tell Lysias that we came to the spring which is sacred to the Nymphs and heard words charging us to deliver a message to Lysias and anyone else who composes speeches...anyone else who has composed poetry either spoken or sung...anyone else who writes political documents that he calls laws: If any one of you has composed these things with a knowledge of the truth...then you must be called by a name derived not from these writings but rather from those things that you are seriously pursuing.

Ph. What name, then, would you give such a man?

So. To call him wise, Phaedrus, seems to me too much, and proper only for a god. To call him wisdom’s lover—a philosopher—or something similar would

fit him better and be more seemly. (278B-278D)

At best, we are *merely lovers of wisdom*, or *philosophers*, but we are never wise per se.

We are in love with something we can never have. Isn't it ironic?

In such an absurd condition, what is one to do? Duh. Playfully amuse ourselves. What would be more amusing than to dupe lovers of wisdom and philosophers who think something can actually be accomplished (that some knowledge may be ascertained) or, worse yet, think they've already accomplished something (acquired knowledge). Life's butt a joke. And we're all the butt for reading so much into Plato. We don't even get the joke. Plato is a philosopher only inasmuch as it is human nature to be so. Really, Plato dismisses the obsessions of the philosopher for what they are, absurd, and attempts to get some kind of satisfaction out of life through amusement and pleasure. Or, so the story goes. Why am I writing this paper?

On the other hand, take a man who thinks that a written discourse on any subject can only be a great amusement...Such a man, Phaedrus, would be just what you and I both would pray to become. (277E-278B)

Just joking...